

University of Wales Trinity Saint David

MBA International Business

LCMB7035 Dissertation

Research Proposal

From Legal Dispute to Cultural Relevance: An Analysis of Aldi UK's Reactive Social Media Marketing During the Colin and Cuthbert Caterpillar Cake Dispute

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1. Introduction

1.1 Event and business context

Social media gives brands an opportunity to respond rapidly when a public event creates attention, humour or controversy. Gensler *et al.* (2013) describe it as an environment in which firm-generated and public brand stories interact. A timely response can therefore shape how a brand is understood in a particular cultural moment.

The Colin and Cuthbert Caterpillar Cake dispute provides a bounded UK grocery-retail setting for examining this issue. In April 2021, Marks and Spencer commenced proceedings concerning Aldi's Cuthbert cake. Aldi UK then developed the #FreeCuthbert response, which was reported in marketing trade coverage as a reactive social-media campaign and was subsequently connected to a charity initiative (The Drum, 2021; Marketing Week, 2021). The legal dispute is relevant only as the event that generated the marketing response. This research will not decide the legal merits of the case, repeat unverified legal assertions, or treat publicity as evidence of commercial success.

The case is professionally relevant to MBA International Business and marketing. International businesses must often balance a common identity with locally meaningful communication. The standardisation-adaptation literature cautions against assuming that one approach travels unchanged across contexts (Theodosiou and Leonidou, 2003). This event-based study considers how reactive communication may use a locally intelligible cultural reference, challenger tone and recognisable personality without requiring internal company information.

1.2 Research problem and gap

Existing social-media marketing research explains that creative content choices and post characteristics can be associated with observable audience response (Ashley and Tuten, 2015; de Vries, Gensler and Leeflang, 2012). It also shows that engagement is multidimensional, rather than a single figure that automatically proves a relationship with the brand (Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie, 2014). Separate research explains humour as a potentially useful advertising device, while warning that its value and risks depend on the context and message (Eisend, 2011). Yu *et al.* (2022), for example, examine humour in a negative-feedback context, but their findings do not establish what occurred in the Aldi case.

What is less clear is how a consumer brand constructs cultural relevance through a time-bounded response to a legally sensitive event. Publicity alone does not explain how the message works, and a reaction count cannot show whether it relies on humour, narrative, personification or a challenger position. A close analysis can keep the claims proportionate to the evidence.

The proposed study addresses that gap through a qualitative-dominant mixed analysis of Aldi UK's public, dispute-related communication between April and July 2021. Manual thematic analysis will be the principal method. Basic descriptive counts will map the corpus by post type, timing, coded theme frequency and visible engagement indicators where these can be recovered reliably. These counts will describe the available material; they will not be used to make causal, statistical or consumer-behaviour claims. The design is appropriate because it combines a manageable, transparent evidence base with a marketing-focused interpretation of how reactive communication gains cultural relevance. Specifically, the study fills the gap by producing an original, event-level account of how humour, narrative, brand personality and local cultural references operated together within Aldi UK's reactive communication, while also evaluating the strategic constraints of this approach for international challenger brands.

1.3 Aim, objectives and research questions

Aim

To analyse how Aldi UK used reactive social media marketing during the Colin and Cuthbert Caterpillar Cake dispute and evaluate what this communication reveals about cultural relevance, challenger-brand positioning and responsible reactive marketing in the UK grocery context.

Objectives

1. To map Aldi UK's publicly accessible dispute-related social-media communication using basic descriptive indicators of post type, timing, coded theme frequency and visible engagement where historically available.
2. To identify how humour, narrative, brand personality and cultural references were used within Aldi UK's reactive communication.
3. To compare Aldi UK's communication with the framing of the campaign in credible contemporaneous marketing, media and legal-professional coverage.

4. To evaluate the strategic opportunities and reputational or legal constraints that the case suggests for international challenger brands using reactive marketing in the UK.

Research questions

1. What patterns in post type, timing, coded theme frequency and visible engagement indicators characterised Aldi UK's publicly accessible reactive social-media communication during the dispute?
2. How did humour, narrative, brand personality and cultural references construct Aldi UK's reactive marketing message?
3. How did contemporaneous marketing, media and legal-professional coverage frame the campaign's cultural relevance and challenger-brand positioning?
4. What strategic opportunities and reputational or legal constraints does the case suggest for international challenger brands using reactive marketing in the UK?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social-media brand stories and observable response

Gensler *et al.* (2013) argue that brands in social media are shaped through an interaction between company narratives and the wider public conversation. This is helpful because the unit of analysis is a set of brand-owned responses occurring alongside media attention and a public legal dispute. The study will focus on Aldi UK's messages and credible external framing, not individual audience replies.

Ashley and Tuten (2015) identify a range of creative strategies in branded social content, including emotional, functional and interactive appeals. Their work supports careful attention to form, tone and creative execution. de Vries, Gensler and Leeflang (2012) further show that content characteristics and popularity indicators can be examined separately. This supports the proposed descriptive strand: post characteristics, timing and visible indicators can be logged without treating them as direct measures of loyalty or performance.

Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie (2014) conceptualise consumer brand engagement as cognitive, emotional and behavioural. Historical likes, reposts or other visible indicators may show activity, but cannot stand in for engagement as a full psychological or relational construct. Traceable indicators will be descriptive context only; unavailable data will not be estimated.

2.2 Humour, narrative and brand personality

Eisend (2011) and Yu *et al.* (2022) agree that humour can influence how marketing communication is received, but they differ in scope and certainty. Eisend's meta-analysis presents humour as condition-dependent: it may support persuasion while also distracting from central information. Yu *et al.* focus more narrowly on negative feedback in social media and report a mitigating effect in their particular research setting. Taken together, these studies justify examining humour as a strategic response device, but Eisend's broader caution prevents Yu *et al.*'s context-specific result from being treated as evidence that humour is inherently effective or that it caused any Aldi outcome.

Aaker (1997) approaches communication from a different angle, offering dimensions for interpreting personality cues rather than explaining humour or real-time response. This complements the humour literature because a joke can also signal a brand character, yet it creates an important analytical distinction: humorous

execution is not equivalent to a stable brand personality. Narrative will therefore be examined through the sequence in which Cuthbert is given a character, a problem and a possible resolution, while Aaker's framework will be used only to interpret personality cues in the bounded corpus, not to measure Aldi's overall brand personality.

2.3 Cultural relevance and international marketing adaptation

Holt (2004) and Theodosiou and Leonidou (2003) both imply that market context matters, but they explain relevance at different levels. Holt treats brands as participants in cultural meanings, tensions and stories, whereas Theodosiou and Leonidou synthesise the strategic tension between standardisation and adaptation in international marketing. Holt therefore helps explain why a familiar retail symbol or topical story might become culturally intelligible; Theodosiou and Leonidou help assess whether such locally grounded communication represents adaptation within a wider international brand strategy.

The two perspectives are complementary rather than interchangeable. Holt's cultural-branding account gives greater weight to meaning and narrative, while the standardisation-adaptation literature is concerned with strategic fit across markets. Neither directly explains a rapid social-media response to a legally sensitive event. The present study connects these debates by examining cultural relevance as a locally recognisable UK marketplace construction evidenced in Aldi UK's material and credible contemporary coverage. Its international-business contribution is therefore an assessment of locally grounded challenger positioning, not a cross-national comparison or a claim that one event establishes a universal adaptation rule.

2.4 Reactive marketing in a reputationally sensitive setting

Coombs (2007) gives greater weight to reputational protection and response appropriateness than the creative-content literature. This creates a productive tension with Ashley and Tuten (2015), who direct attention towards creative appeals, and with Yu *et al.* (2022), who identify a possible benefit of humour in a negative-feedback setting. From a creative perspective, a bold response may improve salience or interaction; from a reputation perspective, the same response may be unsuitable if it escalates conflict, trivialises the issue or appears inconsistent with

stakeholder expectations. Coombs' framework is nevertheless applied cautiously because the caterpillar dispute was not a conventional operational crisis.

Across these studies, researchers broadly agree that message characteristics and context shape communication outcomes, but they reach different conclusions about what deserves priority: creative engagement, humorous mitigation, cultural meaning, local adaptation or reputational fit. The literature therefore produces four linked analytical ideas: the form of the public social-media message; its humour, narrative and personality cues; its cultural relevance and challenger positioning; and the opportunities or constraints associated with reactive communication. These ideas will sensitise the analysis without predetermining its themes. The study's contribution will be an event-level account of how these perspectives converge or conflict within a UK grocery marketing case, supported by a transparent public-source audit trail.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research philosophy, approach and design

The study adopts a pragmatic philosophy because the questions require communication interpretation and a modest descriptive corpus map. It uses an abductive approach: theory-informed prompts guide initial coding, while final themes remain responsive to the material. The design is a qualitative-dominant mixed embedded single-case study, with brand-owned content and credible contemporary coverage as the two evidence strands.

The event window will run from April to July 2021, covering the public dispute, the #FreeCuthbert response and its charity-linked continuation reported in the contemporary trade press (The Drum, 2021; Marketing Week, 2021). This bounded period prevents the project from becoming a general history of Aldi UK or the UK grocery sector.

3.2 Data sources, sampling and boundaries

Data collection will begin only after ethics approval. The corpus will include publicly accessible Aldi UK corporate posts, official campaign material and selected contemporary external coverage. A brand post will be included only when it is attributable to Aldi UK, falls within the event window and has a stable public URL, archive, reliable contemporaneous reproduction or traceable screenshot. Each item will be logged with its source, date, format, platform, access route and inclusion reason. No private, login-only or otherwise restricted material will be collected.

External sources will be selected when credible, contemporaneous and relevant to the campaign's public framing. Trade publications provide campaign context, while legal-professional sources give limited dispute context without determining legal merit. The evidence log will distinguish corporate, trade, media and academic sources so that they are not treated as equivalent.

The study will not collect personal data, audience comments, usernames, profile details, direct messages, screenshots of individual users, interviews, surveys or confidential company material. It will not use social-listening software, web scraping of user content, SPSS, inferential statistics or automated sentiment analysis. This boundary makes the design suitable for a low-risk secondary research project and avoids treating public visibility as permission to analyse identifiable individuals.

3.3 Data extraction and analysis

An item-level extraction sheet will record the identifier, date, source type, publication, format, link or archive route, researcher-authored description, initial codes and visible engagement information where traceable. The descriptive strand will calculate frequencies by date range, format and final thematic category. Available reactions or shares will be listed with the platform and retrieval limitation; no rate, correlation, statistical test or causal conclusion will be produced.

The qualitative component will follow Braun and Clarke's (2006) stages of familiarisation, coding, theme development, review, definition and interpretation. Initial codes include humour, personification, narrative progression, personality cue, cultural reference, challenger positioning, charity linkage, legal sensitivity and reputational constraint. The researcher will maintain a codebook, evidence table and decision log.

Researcher bias will be addressed through reflexivity and iterative review. Before coding, the researcher will record assumptions about Aldi, challenger brands, humour and the dispute in a reflexive memo. A small pilot set will then be coded, after which code definitions and inclusion boundaries will be reviewed before the full corpus is analysed. Changes to the coding framework will be dated and justified in the decision log; earlier items will be revisited whenever a code is added, merged or redefined. A second-pass review, negative-case search and comparison of corporate material with external coverage will test whether themes reflect the full evidence rather than only material that supports the researcher's initial expectations.

The external coverage strand will be coded independently first, with possible framing codes such as reactive marketing, publicity, humour, legal context, cultural relevance and challenger positioning. It will then be compared with the brand-content themes. The comparison will identify agreement, difference and absence, rather than treating media coverage as proof of consumer response. Negative-case checks will look for posts or accounts that do not fit the emerging pattern, and the final discussion will separate what the sources directly show from what is interpretive inference.

3.4 Quality and ethics

Trustworthiness will be supported by a source log, explicit selection criteria, a traceable code-to-theme trail, separate treatment of source types and careful

attribution. Short excerpts will be used only where necessary. Internet-research ethics guidance emphasises context-sensitive judgement and minimisation of avoidable harm (Franzke *et al.*, 2020), so the research studies corporate communication rather than individual members of the public.

4. Expected Findings

This section identifies possible forms of result without anticipating which interpretation the evidence will support. The analysis will assess whether humour, personification, narrative progression, personality cues, cultural references and challenger positioning are present, absent, combined or contested across the retained material. It will also examine whether the event can be divided into distinct communication phases; the evidence may support such a pattern, a different sequence or no meaningful phase structure.

The descriptive map will report only traceable distributions by date, format, final coded theme and visible historical indicator. External coverage will be examined for supportive, critical, mixed or absent framing of the campaign. The analysis will remain open to evidence that the communication generated cultural relevance, that its relevance was limited or ambiguous, or that reputational and legal constraints were more prominent than creative opportunity. No result will be treated as evidence of consumer motive, sales, trust, loyalty, legal merit or causation.

5. Limitations

The study is limited to public secondary evidence and a short historical event window. Original posts or engagement figures may be unavailable, while coverage may privilege entertaining aspects of the story. The corpus will be selective rather than a complete platform archive. The research cannot establish audience motives, brand intention, legal liability, financial results, trust or loyalty; missing evidence will be documented rather than estimated.

As a single UK case, the findings will be analytically informative rather than statistically generalisable. The international-business implications will be framed as transferable questions for managers, not universal advice. Finally, the researcher brings their own interpretation to codes such as humour and cultural relevance. A codebook, source trail and negative-case review will help make those interpretations visible and open to assessment.

6. Timeframe

The project will proceed across four sequential months. Ethics approval is the gate for corpus collection and analysis; those activities will not begin until approval has been received.

Activity	Month 1	Month 2	Month 3	Month 4
Finalise literature review, source protocol and ethics requirements	X			
Identify, verify and log the public corpus after ethics approval		X		
Complete descriptive mapping and initial manual coding		X		
Review the codebook, develop themes and conduct negative-case checks			X	
Compare corporate communication with external coverage			X	
Draft findings and discussion			X	X
Complete conclusion and recommendations				X
Edit, verify references and prepare final submission				X

7. Conclusion

This proposal presents a feasible, low-risk and marketing-led MBA dissertation. It will analyse a bounded Aldi UK communication event through publicly accessible corporate content and credible contemporary coverage. A qualitative-dominant mixed design will use manual thematic analysis as its main contribution, supported by simple descriptive mapping where the historical evidence permits. The project does not overclaim consumer, sales or legal outcomes. Instead, it will provide an evidence-based account of how humour, narrative, personality and cultural relevance may be assembled in reactive marketing, and what opportunities and constraints that process suggests for international challenger brands operating in the UK.

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