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Understanding Consumer Responses to Perceived Brand Inconsistency: A Case Study of A LITTLE's Value-Oriented Charity Communication

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Abstract

As brands increasingly engage with social issues through communication, how consumers respond to perceived inconsistency in brand value expressions has become an important area of inquiry in strategic communication research. Existing studies have largely focused on the effects of brand activism and femvertising on attitudes and purchase intentions, with limited attention to how consumers negotiate understandings of authenticity, motives, and consistency within specific controversy contexts.

Taking the charitable controversy surrounding Chinese tea beverage brand A LITTLE as its case, this study examines how consumers engage in sensemaking, motivational attribution, and relational reconfiguration when value-oriented communication on women's issues is perceived as inconsistent. A qualitative case study design was adopted, drawing on comment data from Weibo and Xiaohongshu and semi-structured interviews, analysed through thematic analysis.

The findings show that consumer responses are driven by cumulative value expectations and social interaction rather than reactions to a single event. Institutional responses that fail to address these expectations may paradoxically intensify suspicions of strategic value expression. Consumer reactions extend beyond consumption resistance to include withdrawal of philanthropic meaning, sustained monitoring, and participation in collective meaning-making on social media.

Three theoretical contributions emerge. Consumer sensemaking is shown to be retrospective and socialised in character. Brand consistency is reconceptualised to encompass value-level coherence beyond procedural compliance. Brand authenticity is demonstrated to be a collectively constructed social judgement rather than a unilateral brand claim.

Keyword: strategic communication; brand activism; femvertising; sensemaking; brand consistency; authenticity; social media; consumer responses

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1.Introduction

1.1 Research Background

In recent years, as gender equality has increasingly taken centre stage in public discourse, a growing number of brands have begun to engage with social issues relating to women through their communication practices. This engagement is evident not only in advertising but also extends to various other areas, including marketing campaigns, public relations and brand initiatives. Against this backdrop, brands are increasingly viewed by consumers as communicators capable of expressing social values, and their involvement in women's issues has become a significant phenomenon in contemporary brand communication.

In the field of strategic communication, brands are no longer understood merely as tools for conveying product information but are regarded as actors participating in the construction of social meaning. Through communication practices such as advertising, marketing and public relations, brands continually engage with broader social issues and articulate their value positions. However, the effectiveness of such communication does not depend solely on the messages conveyed by the brand but is reflected in how the audience understands and interprets these messages. Therefore, understanding how the public constructs meaning from brand communication is of

great significance in explaining how strategic communication shapes brand relationships and public perception.

1.2 Research Context

Against this backdrop, brands' engagement with women's issues can be viewed as a value-driven strategic communication practice, with consumers' understanding and evaluation constituting a crucial element of this process. Existing research regards "femvertising" as a key form of such communication, noting that brands construct new images of women by emphasising female empowerment, independence and diversity (Gill, 2007; Abitbol & Sternadori, 2016). At the same time, the academic community has increasingly turned its attention to the potential issues involved, particularly the fact that whilst brands may borrow feminist or socially progressive discourses to cultivate a positive image, their actual behaviour, organisational practices or commercial logic may not necessarily align with these expressed values. Research on brand activism discusses this disconnect between such value expressions and actual actions as "inauthentic brand activism" or "woke washing", noting that this inconsistency may lead the public to question a brand's authenticity and motives (Vredenburg et al., 2020). In the context of women's issues, this tension is also linked to the incorporation of feminist symbols and values into processes of commodification and branding (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Repo, 2020).

However, in specific communication contexts, the values expressed by brands do not always take the form of explicit commitments; rather, they often gradually establish a relatively stable image in the public consciousness through sustained communication practices. When consumers encounter such communications, they may form expectations regarding a brand's stance and behavioural boundaries based on recurring narrative cues. These expectations do not stem entirely from explicit brand statements, but are gradually constructed through the process of communication and interpretation.

When a brand's subsequent behaviour is perceived as diverging from these established expectations, the consumer's evaluation process is triggered. In this process, consumers' judgements are not confined to a single feminist framework, but often involve multiple dimensions simultaneously. A brand's communication on women's issues is not merely a matter of expressing values; it constitutes an evaluative arena where multiple logics of judgement intertwine.

In the social media environment, this process is further amplified. Through comments, shares and interactions, consumers engage in ongoing discussion and reinterpretation of the brand's behaviour. In this process, the public not only responds to the content of the communication itself but also links it to the brand's past statements, thereby inferring the underlying motives. Existing research indicates that consumers often form evaluations based on the consistency between communicated content and actual behaviour, as well as their attributions of brand motives (Ellen et

al., 2006; Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013). However, these studies have largely focused on the impact of communication on brand attitudes or purchase intentions, with less attention paid to how consumers interpret and evaluate such content within specific contexts prior to these outcomes being formed.

It is therefore necessary to adopt a process-oriented perspective to explore how consumers, when confronted with value-oriented brand communication, form expectations based on prior knowledge and integrate various cues within specific contexts to construct meaning and make judgements regarding brand behaviour.

1.3 Research Objectives

In this background, this paper takes a specific brand case as its subject of study to examine how, when the public perceives inconsistencies in a brand's communication on women's issues, consumers understand and interpret such communication; how they evaluate the brand's motives, authenticity and consistency; and how these understandings and evaluations are further translated into different reactions, such as support, scepticism or resistance.

It should be noted that this paper does not seek to judge whether the brand has objectively deviated from its public interest objectives, but rather focuses on how consumers form expectations based on existing communications and interpret and evaluate brand behaviour within specific contexts. Unlike approaches that treat brand behaviour, consistency or motives as pre-set variables, this paper regards these

elements as interpretative resources drawn upon by consumers when constructing meaning within specific contexts.

Through an analysis of this process, this paper aims to reveal how, in value-oriented communication contexts, consumers construct their evaluations of brands through multiple lines of reasoning, thereby offering a new perspective on the interpretative mechanisms underlying brand engagement with social issues in strategic communication.

1.4 Research Questions

RQ1

How do consumers interpret a brand's engagement with social issues when inconsistency is perceived?

RQ2

How do consumers evaluate the brand's behavior in terms of motives, consistency, and perceived appropriateness or fairness?

RQ3

How do these interpretations and evaluations shape consumers' responses, such as support, avoidance, or boycott?

2.Literature Review

2.1 Value-Driven Brand Communication and the Formation of Consumer Expectations

In the field of strategic communication research, organizational communication is typically understood as a systematic management process centered on specific objectives, rather than merely a one-way transmission of information. In their definition of strategic communication, Hallahan et al. (2007) note that organizations, based on their communication objectives, purposefully plan and integrate communication content, audiences, and processes. This definition indicates that communication is not a neutral act of expression, but rather a strategic practice embedded within the interaction between organizational goals and the environment. From this perspective, it is widely accepted in academia that organizational communication involves not only “what information is conveyed,” but also a series of interrelated questions such as “why it is conveyed,” “to whom it is conveyed,” and “in what context it is conveyed.”

In subsequent research, scholars have further emphasized the complex environmental characteristics in which strategic communication operates. Contemporary organizational communication involves not only internal communication but also engagement with the external public sphere. Strategic

communication managers must simultaneously address the interactions among diverse stakeholders, public opinion, and social issues to achieve organizational goals (Zerfass et al., 2018). In such an environment, communication is no longer merely a instrumental activity serving market objectives but is increasingly understood as a crucial mechanism for organizations to build relationships, negotiate meaning, and express values. Whitley and Chambers (2009) also note that in complex environments, organizational communication must coordinate multiple objectives and shape the organization's overall public image through continuous communication. Consequently, strategic communication research has gradually shifted from "information management" to "relationship and meaning management," providing a crucial theoretical foundation for understanding brand expression in the context of social issues.

Within this framework, the functions of brand communication have also evolved. Existing research indicates that brands are no longer viewed merely as tools for conveying product information; rather, by taking stances and actions on social issues, they are increasingly understood as active agents participating in public discourse and the construction of social values (Cammarota et al., 2023). Particularly when addressing issues such as gender equality and social responsibility, brands use advertising, marketing, and public relations activities not only to convey product values but also, to a certain extent, to express their stances and attitudes toward social

issues. It is against this backdrop that brand communication surrounding women's issues has gradually garnered academic attention.

In studies on gender representation in advertising, scholars have long pointed out that traditional commercial communication often constructs female images in specific ways, thereby reinforcing existing gender norms and role expectations at the cultural level (Gill, 2007). Building on this, relevant research has noted trends in the changing portrayal of women in brand communication. Atkinson et al. (2024) note that in recent years, some brands have begun to reconstruct female imagery through communication practices, shifting it from passive, dependent roles toward representations that emphasize greater agency and capacity for action. Similarly, Abitbol and Sternadori (2019) argue that so-called "femvertising" often employs empowering narratives to highlight women's independence and diversity, thereby conveying social values alongside product information.

However, the academic community does not simply interpret this shift as an update to communication strategies but analyzes it within a broader social context. Existing research indicates that the presence of femvertising in contemporary advertising practices is becoming increasingly prominent, with brands increasingly adopting discourses of women's empowerment and gender equality in their communications—rather than merely conveying product information. This trend reflects a transformation in the functions of brand communication (Varghese & Kumar, 2020). Repo (2020), adopting a political economy perspective, further argues

that the application of feminism in brand communication may exhibit commodified characteristics—that is, while brands express social values, they simultaneously transform these into communication resources that serve market objectives. This research approach indicates that brand communication centered on women’s issues often operates at the intersection of value expression and commercial logic.

Echoing the discussion on femvertising, research on brand activism further situates brand expression within a broader framework of social issues. Vredenburg et al. (2020) note that brands’ stances on social issues are increasingly viewed as part of their public role, and the public evaluates brands accordingly. In summarizing relevant research, Lou et al. (2024) note that when consumers interpret brand activism, they focus not only on the content of brand expressions but also on their authenticity and consistency. Consequently, the existing literature generally agrees that brand communication in the context of social issues has transcended traditional commercial persuasion functions and is gradually becoming an important form of value expression and public communication.

Nevertheless, existing research has increasingly highlighted that the significance of brand communication is not determined solely by the content of the communication itself. Rather, when interpreting brand expressions, consumers contextualize them within a broader framework of brand perception. In his theory of foundational brand equity, Keller (1993) noted that brand knowledge can be understood as a series of associations stored in consumers’ memories, formed through the continuous

accumulation of brand communications and consumer experiences. From this perspective, brand communication does not merely function within a single instance of communication but gradually shapes consumers' overall cognitive structure of the brand through continuous accumulation.

Building on this, subsequent research has further emphasized the structural characteristics of brand cognition. Brown and Dacin (1997) noted that when evaluating brand-related behaviors, consumers often focus not only on specific products or individual communications but also rely on their overall perception of the company, including its performance in social responsibility and value orientation. This implies that the image a brand constructs through long-term communication becomes a crucial reference framework for consumers in understanding new information. Similarly, Erdem and Swait (1998), drawing on signal theory, suggest that a brand can be viewed as an informational signal whose function is to reduce uncertainty in the consumer decision-making process. In this process, the perceptions formed by the brand's past communications and behaviors influence how consumers interpret subsequent information.

Furthermore, this cognitive structure not only influences information comprehension but is also closely linked to consumers' construction of relationships with brands. In his research on brand relationships, Fournier (1998) noted that consumers often view brands as objects of ongoing relationships rather than isolated sources of information. Within this relational process, consumers gradually form

expectations regarding brand behavior and interpret subsequent brand actions based on these expectations. Consequently, brand communication not only shapes cognition through long-term interaction but also, to a certain extent, constructs consumers' expectations regarding the brand's "ideal behavior."

A synthesis of the above research reveals that existing literature highlights the role of brand communication in consumer cognition from various perspectives. Strategic communication research emphasizes how organizations participate in meaning-making and relationship management through communication; feminist marketing and brand activism research point out that brands are increasingly involved in expressing social values; while brand equity and brand relationship research indicate that brand communication accumulates in consumers' memories as stable cognitive structures, which are further transformed into expectations regarding brand behavior.

However, although these studies respectively reveal important aspects of brand communication, cognitive structures, and expectation formation, the existing literature still lacks a systematic explanation of how these elements are integrated in specific contexts. Particularly within the highly socially significant communication context of women's issues, brand expression often involves not only information transmission but also value judgments and public discourse. In such contexts, how consumers form expectations based on prior communication and interpret and evaluate specific brand behaviors remains to be further explored.

2.2 Mechanisms of Consumer Evaluation of Brand Social Expressions: Authenticity, Consistency, and Motivational Attribution

As brands increasingly engage in communication around social issues, related research has gradually shifted from focusing solely on advertising effectiveness or brand attitudes to examining how consumers interpret and evaluate brand behavior in more complex ways. Existing literature generally holds that when brands engage in communication regarding social issues, consumers are no longer confronted merely with the specific content of the communication itself, but rather with a comprehensive object of judgment that encompasses brand expression, organizational behavior, and social context (Lou et al., 2024). In this context, consumers typically engage in multi-layered interpretations and evaluations of brand behavior, focusing on the authenticity and consistency of the brand's expression, as well as the motives underlying it.

Within this research framework, authenticity is generally regarded as a crucial starting point for consumers' evaluation of a brand's social expressions. Relevant studies indicate that when consumers encounter a brand's statements on social issues, they first assess whether the expression is authentic—that is, whether it can be understood as stemming from the brand's genuine stance or long-term commitment (Virkus & Klein, 2026). Lou et al. (2024) also note that authenticity constitutes one of the key dimensions through which consumers interpret a brand's social expression

and plays a pivotal role in their overall evaluation. In this sense, authenticity is not an objective attribute of the communication content itself, but rather a subjective judgment formed by consumers during the interpretation process.

However, existing research further indicates that judgments of authenticity often rely on consistency as a key reference point. Verlegh (2024) notes that when brands express positions on social issues, consumers typically compare their current communications with the brand's past behaviors, organizational practices, and historical stances to assess whether the expression is consistent. Similarly, in their research on brand activism, Vredenburg et al. (2020) propose that when evaluating a brand's social statements, the public focuses on whether the brand maintains consistency between its communications and its practices, and uses this to distinguish genuine activism from "woke washing." Thus, consistency provides a crucial basis for authenticity judgments: whether a brand's expression is perceived as authentic often depends on whether it is supported by its broader behavioral context.

Furthermore, consistency not only influences authenticity judgments but also directly enters the consumer's evaluation process. Becker-Olsen et al. (2006) found in their research on corporate social responsibility that when a brand's socially responsible behavior is perceived as inconsistent with its established image or communications, consumers are more likely to form negative evaluations. This finding indicates that inconsistencies are not simply ignored but are incorporated into the interpretive process as significant cues. In such cases, brand behavior is no longer

viewed as an isolated event but is situated within the overall brand perception framework and contrasted with existing impressions.

Building on this, research further indicates that when consumers perceive a discrepancy between brand communication and behavior, their judgment process often shifts from “whether it is authentic” to “why it is so.” Inconsistent situations trigger a motivation attribution process, prompting consumers to move from superficial understanding to inferring the reasons behind the brand’s behavior. Virkus and Klein (2026) note that in brand activism contexts, consumers typically attribute brand behavior to either intrinsic or extrinsic motives. The former is generally understood as stemming from genuine beliefs in the brand’s values or long-term commitments, while the latter is more often viewed as driven by market strategies or commercial interests.

Similarly, Kim and He (2025) note that consumers distinguish between value-driven and egoistic motivational attributions, which in turn generate different emotional responses. When brand behavior is perceived as value-driven, consumers are more likely to experience positive emotions such as admiration; conversely, when it is perceived as strategic or opportunistic, it is more likely to provoke anger and resistance. This research indicates that motivational attribution is not only part of cognitive judgment but also further influences subsequent behavioral responses through emotional mechanisms.

Furthermore, critical studies on brand social expression further suggest that consumers' skepticism toward brand motives is closely linked to brands' commodification of social issues. Repo (2020), drawing on a political economy perspective, notes that brands may transform social issues such as feminism into consumable symbolic resources in their communications, thereby creating a tension between value expression and commercial logic. Against this backdrop, when consumers encounter a brand's social expression, they often focus not only on its surface meaning but also question the underlying profit motives. Such research provides an important supplement to understanding the tendency toward skepticism in motivational attribution.

Building upon authenticity, consistency, and motive attribution, existing research further examines how these judgments translate into overall brand evaluations. Ketron et al. (2022) note that when a brand's stance on social issues aligns with consumers' own values, consumers are more likely to form positive evaluations. At the same time, Haupt et al. (2023) found that the identification relationship between consumers and brands also influences how consumers interpret brand behavior; that is, individuals who strongly identify with a brand are more likely to judge its behavior with greater leniency. Thus, consumers' evaluations of brands involve not only judgments of the behavior itself but are also closely related to their existing values and their relationship with the brand.

In broader communication contexts, these evaluations may further translate into specific acts of support or boycott. Related research indicates that when a brand's social expressions are perceived as authentic and consistent, consumers are more likely to exhibit supportive behaviors, such as positive word-of-mouth and brand loyalty; conversely, when they are perceived as lacking authenticity or having questionable motives, they are more likely to trigger negative reactions or even boycotts (Kim & He, 2025; Virkus & Klein, 2026).

A synthesis of existing research reveals that consumers' evaluations of brand social expressions can be understood as a multi-stage interpretive process: first, authenticity judgments are formed based on communication content and prior cognitions; second, these judgments are reinforced or revised through consistency assessments; when inconsistencies are perceived, this triggers a process of motivational attribution; finally, these judgments interact to influence consumers' overall brand evaluations and behavioral responses.

Although the aforementioned studies have revealed key mechanisms in the evaluation process, the existing literature remains primarily focused on variable relationships or effect analyses, lacking detailed procedural explanations of how these mechanisms are integrated and actually operate in specific contexts. In particular, how consumers select and organize among multiple cues to form a comprehensive judgment of the brand, especially in contexts where brand communication is perceived as inconsistent, remains to be further explored.

2.3 Understanding at the Individual Level: Interpretive Resources and the Process of Meaning Construction

Beyond the brand-level evaluation mechanisms discussed earlier, existing research further indicates that consumers' responses to a brand's communications on social issues do not follow a linear "input-output" pathway. Rather, consumers typically select, organize, and interpret relevant information based on their existing knowledge and experiences, thereby forming an understanding of the brand's behavior. Therefore, individual-level differences should not be understood merely as variables influencing "attitudinal outcomes," but rather as interpretive resources that shape how consumers engage in sensemaking.

From this perspective, consumers do not receive brand communication messages in a "blank slate" state. Weick (1995) notes that sensemaking is essentially a process of interpreting new situations based on prior experience; individuals extract specific cues from complex environments and organize them into explanations that are "understandable" within their own cognitive frameworks. In this process, individuals do not seek a complete reconstruction of events but rather construct a rational explanation to support their understanding of reality and subsequent judgments (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Therefore, when consumers encounter brand communications regarding women's issues and the subsequent behaviors associated with them, their reactions do not stem directly from the communication content itself

but rather from how they interpret this information within their existing cognitive structures.

In the specific interpretive process, identity is regarded as a crucial interpretive resource. Relevant research indicates that when individuals are more inclined to identify with gender equality or feminist ideals at the value level, they are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward feminist advertisements and exhibit higher acceptance (Sternadori & Abitbol, 2019). This suggests that consumers do not passively accept the value frameworks provided by brands but instead selectively interpret brand communications based on their own identities. For individuals who identify with feminist values, brand messages are more readily integrated into their existing value systems, leading to coherent interpretations; conversely, for those with lower levels of identification, the same messages may be met with skepticism or distancing.

In addition to identity, individuals' existing attitudes toward gender roles also influence their interpretive approaches. Teng et al. (2021) noted that when individuals hold higher levels of hostile gender bias, they are more likely to react negatively to advertising messages that challenge traditional gender roles. This indicates that existing gender beliefs influence consumers' understanding and evaluation of relevant communications. Thus, when consumers interpret brand communications addressing women's issues, they do not make judgments within a value-neutral framework but rather embed brand expressions within their existing gender beliefs. These preexisting

attitudes influence not only whether they accept the brand's message but also how they assess whether the brand's behavior is "reasonable" or "appropriate."

Furthermore, consumers' knowledge base also constitutes an important interpretive resource. Martínez-Aguirre et al. (2025) point out that feminist knowledge significantly influences consumers' perceptions of women's empowerment advertisements, with highly knowledgeable individuals typically exhibiting higher judgments of authenticity and credibility. This finding indicates that consumers do not merely "feel" brand communications but, to a certain extent, "interpret" their content. Individuals with higher levels of knowledge are not only able to identify the form of brand expression but are also more likely to further assess whether it aligns with feminist principles, thereby introducing more complex evaluation criteria into the interpretive process.

Building on this, prior beliefs and brand impressions further influence how consumers organize information. Keller (1993) noted that consumers draw upon their existing network of brand associations to form their understanding and interpretation of information. In their study of online discussions, Lima and Casais (2021) also found that when faced with feminist advertisements, consumers often link the current communication with the brand's past behavior and discuss the brand's motives and stance accordingly. This suggests that consumers do not process current information in isolation but rather reinterpret brand behavior by drawing upon existing cognitive frameworks. Consequently, when brand behavior is perceived as deviating from prior

impressions, this discrepancy is more easily identified and serves as a crucial starting point for meaning construction.

At the same time, the relationship between consumers and brands also influences their interpretive pathways. Fournier (1998) views brand relationships as a relational structure grounded in emotion and meaning, rather than a purely transactional relationship. Haupt et al. (2023) further note that stronger consumer-brand identification buffers negative reactions to brand activism, implying that individuals with high identification are more likely to judge brand behavior with relative leniency. This suggests that when faced with controversial situations, different consumers may adopt distinct interpretive strategies based on the strength of their relationship with the brand. On the one hand, individuals with high identification may tend to seek rational explanations for brand behavior; on the other hand, those with low identification are more likely to adopt a critical perspective and question the brand's actions.

Furthermore, emotional responses play a significant role in the process of meaning construction. Kim and He (2025) note that when consumers encounter brand activism, they first engage in a cognitive evaluation of the brand's motives, and this cognitive process further triggers corresponding emotional responses. When brand behavior is perceived as authentic and aligned with one's own values, consumers are more likely to experience positive emotions such as appreciation; conversely, when behavior is interpreted as inauthentic or motivated by questionable intentions, it is

more likely to evoke anger or distrust. This indicates that meaning construction is not merely a cognitive process but is accompanied by emotional engagement, and that emotions further reinforce existing interpretive pathways.

A synthesis of the above research reveals that when consumers encounter brand communications centered on women's issues, they do not simply react to the information but construct meaning by mobilizing various interpretive resources. These resources include identity, gender attitudes, knowledge levels, prior beliefs, and brand relationships, which collectively form the cognitive foundation for consumers' understanding of the situation. In this process, consumers extract specific cues from complex information and organize them into explanations that are rational within their own frameworks. It is precisely because these interpretive resources vary across individuals that the same brand behavior can elicit radically different understandings and evaluations among different consumers.

From the perspective of literature development, this research approach has shifted the relevant discussion from "which factors influence attitudes" to "how consumers understand brand communication." Rather than treating individual differences as independent variables, existing research increasingly views them as interpretive resources that can be drawn upon during the process of meaning construction. This perspective provides a crucial foundation for understanding how consumers integrate information, identify inconsistencies, and form subsequent evaluations in complex communication contexts; it also establishes the theoretical

basis for this paper's further analysis of how consumers interpret and judge in specific cases.

2.4 Amplification at the Social Level: Public Interpretation and Collective Reactions on Social Media

Building on the aforementioned individual-level meaning-making, existing research further points out that consumers' understanding and evaluation of brand behavior do not end with individual internal processes, but are often expressed, interacted with, amplified, and reconstructed within the social media environment. In other words, consumers' reactions to a brand's social expressions are not a closed process between the brand and the individual, but rather the result of continuous negotiation and reproduction on public platforms. Therefore, to understand how brand controversies evolve from individual judgments into broader support, skepticism, or resistance, it is necessary to further examine how these interpretations are organized and disseminated through social interaction.

In relevant research, social media is typically viewed as a crucial arena for brand meaning-making. Jiang, Luo, and Kulemeka (2017) note that the widespread adoption of social media has significantly transformed the practice of strategic communication and has become an integral component of organizational communication. For brands, this means that communication no longer stops at "publishing information," but enters an interactive process where content can be commented on, shared, reinterpreted, and

publicly evaluated. Precisely for this reason, once a brand's statements on social issues enter social media platforms, their meaning is often no longer determined unilaterally by the brand but is continuously rewritten through user interactions.

Building on this, researchers have further emphasized the importance of consumer speech acts. Fletcher-Brown et al. (2024) note that consumers' comments and interactions on social media are not passive responses but rather amplify and shape brand activism through their online discourse. In other words, consumers are not merely responding to brands; they are actively participating in the process of generating brand meaning. When users ask questions, raise doubts, offer support, or express sarcasm regarding brand behavior, they are effectively redefining what that behavior "means." This research perspective is particularly important for understanding brand controversies, as it demonstrates that consumers are not merely passive recipients of brand communication but actively participate in the construction of a brand's social meaning through speech acts.

Related research also indicates that discussions on social media are not a simple accumulation of individual opinions, but rather an ongoing process of meaning negotiation. In their study of online comments on feminist advertisements, Lima and Casais (2021) found that consumers do not limit their discussions to the advertisement text itself, but rather evaluate it by linking it to the brand's behavioral practices, product logic, and value positions. Through such discussions, the meaning of advertisements or brand actions is continually extracted from the original text and

transformed into broader evaluations of brand stance, brand motives, and brand credibility. Thus, the emergence of brand controversies is not merely the result of what a brand “has done,” but also the result of how the public collectively interprets brand behavior.

Furthermore, the amplifying effect of social media stems not only from its increased speed of communication but also from the fact that platforms lower the costs of individual expression and mutual connection. Kumar et al. (2025) note that in the digital environment, brand activism is more easily linked to collective action because platforms enable individual reactions to be seen, coordinated, and channeled toward shared goals. In other words, a comment that was originally merely an individual expression may, through ongoing interaction, be liked, shared, imitated, or expanded, thereby evolving into a more stable public judgment. In this process, consumers’ interpretations of a brand no longer remain confined to individual attitudes but gradually coalesce into recognizable public stances, such as “this brand is insincere,” “this brand is exploiting a certain issue,” or “this brand is still worth supporting.” Thus, social media not only disseminates controversies but also produces the collective interpretive frameworks upon which those controversies rely.

From a broader perspective, researchers have also begun to understand brand controversies within the context of wider public discourse. Podnar and Golob (2024) note that brand activism is not an isolated, unilateral act by a brand entering social issues, but rather is embedded within an organizational activism ecosystem composed

of multiple actors, including consumers, employees, shareholders, NGOs, and communities. This implies that once a brand's statements enter the public sphere, they interact with existing social discourses and are redefined by groups holding different positions. This is particularly significant for your research, as it demonstrates that consumers' evaluations of brand behavior do not arise in a vacuum but are deeply influenced by the platform environment, public sentiment, and cultural norms.

At the same time, public discourse does not merely “amplify” brand controversies; it also alters the cues upon which consumer judgments rely. Lima and Casais (2021) note that in online discussions, consumers often compare the consistency between a brand's communicative discourse and its actual behavior, thereby forming judgments about whether the brand genuinely supports a particular issue. In other words, comment sections continuously introduce new interpretive resources: some users reference a brand's past behavior, others question the factual accuracy of its communications, and still others reframe the core issues of the event. In this process, consumers' initial interpretations—originally formed based on personal experience—are challenged, revised, or reinforced through public interaction. Consequently, the construction of brand meaning is not a one-time, individual understanding but a constantly evolving social process that unfolds through interaction.

In the Chinese context, existing research also suggests that consumers' understanding of a brand's social expressions is often embedded within broader

gender norms and sociocultural environments. Teng et al. (2021) found that consumers' gender attitudes influence their reactions to advertisements promoting women's empowerment; specifically, the lower the level of hostile gender bias, the more positively individuals evaluate such advertisements. From a societal perspective, this indicates that when brands communicate on women's issues, they do not operate in a value-neutral environment but engage in continuous interaction with societal gender norms, cultural expectations, and the prevailing public discourse. Consequently, the fact that the same brand behavior elicits different interpretations is related not only to individual differences but also to the public cultural context in which it occurs.

Against this backdrop, social media platforms further amplify the emotional dimensions and behavioral consequences of brand controversies. Kim and He (2025) note that emotional reactions triggered by brand activism—such as admiration or anger—further influence consumers' support or boycott behaviors. When these emotions manifest in comments, shares, and interactions, they more readily form visible public opinion trends. Fletcher-Brown et al. (2024) also note that consumers' online speech acts, as a form of discursive practice, can participate in shaping the meaning-making of brand activism and influence others' understanding of related issues. In other words, social media is not a neutral channel for brand communication, but rather a crucial mechanism through which brand evaluations become emotionalized, publicized, and collective.

A synthesis of existing research reveals that brand evaluations at the societal level primarily exhibit the following characteristics. First, social media brings brand expressions into an open, ongoing, and interactive public sphere. Second, consumers' comments, responses, and shares constitute part of the brand's meaning-making process, rather than merely serving as post-communication feedback. Third, individual interpretations are aggregated, reinforced, and transformed into collective evaluations through platform interactions. Fourth, cultural norms, public discourse, and social sentiments further influence the direction and intensity of these evaluations. Consequently, consumer support, skepticism, or resistance toward a brand cannot be explained solely by the brand's actions or individual perceptions; rather, they must be understood within the context of public interpretive processes on social media.

From the perspective of scholarly development, this research approach moves brand communication studies beyond the bilateral relationship between brands and consumers, shifting the focus to how brand meaning is generated and transformed through public interaction. For this paper, this implies that comment sections are not merely repositories of "attitudes," but rather crucial arenas for observing how consumers negotiate meaning around brand behavior. Precisely for this reason, user comments on social media provide critical sociological evidence for understanding how consumers progress from initial interpretations to more explicit support, skepticism, or resistance.

2.5 Limitations of Existing Research and the Focus of This Study

A review of the existing literature reveals that research on feminist advertising, brand activism and consumer responses has provided a significant foundation for understanding the communication of a brand's social value. Strategic communication research emphasises that organisational communication is not merely the transmission of information, but rather a process through which an organisation interacts with the public, issues and the communication environment in pursuit of specific objectives (Hallahan et al., 2007). In the social media environment, this interaction has become even more open and complex, and the public is more readily engaged in the discussion and reproduction of brand meaning (Jiang et al., 2017).

Against this backdrop, research on femvertising and brand activism further highlights that, in the contemporary communication context, brands are increasingly viewed as actors with value-based stances. Vredenburg et al. (2020) note that when brands take a stance on social issues, the public often focuses on whether there is consistency between the brand's statements and its actual actions. Verlegh (2024) also emphasises that brand activism prompts consumers to judge the brand's authenticity, motives and credibility. Consequently, the communication of a brand's social values not only influences consumer attitudes but also places the brand within a public sphere where it is more readily scrutinised and evaluated.

At the same time, consumers are not merely passive recipients of brand messages; rather, they interpret brand behaviour based on their own experiences, values and social context. Sternadori and Abitbol (2019) demonstrate that consumers' identification with feminist values influences their acceptance of femvertising. Teng et al. (2021) further note that existing gender attitudes affect how consumers understand and evaluate advertisements promoting women's empowerment. Martínez-Aguirre et al. (2025), however, found that consumers' level of feminist knowledge influences their judgements regarding the authenticity and credibility of brands' communications on women's empowerment. It is thus evident that consumers' understanding of brands' communication of social values is not determined unilaterally by the brand message itself, but is formed with the involvement of the individual's existing cognitive resources.

Although these studies have provided important insights from multiple perspectives—including brand expression, consumer cognition and social interaction—the existing literature remains somewhat fragmented overall. Firstly, in femvertising research, scholars have largely focused on advertising representations and their communicative effects. Abitbol and Sternadori (2019) examined how women's empowerment advertising influences consumers' brand attitudes and purchase intentions. Atkinson et al. (2024), on the other hand, further explored how brands participate in the construction of female identity through female imagery and gender symbols. Whilst these studies help to understand how brands express their

values by leveraging women's issues, they offer little explanation of how consumers, in specific controversial contexts, translate a brand's expression of women's issues into judgements regarding the brand's overall stance, behavioural boundaries and value commitments.

In contrast, research on brand activism tends to focus more on the brand level, emphasising consistency between brand messaging and organisational practices. Vredenburg et al. (2020) linked the issue of inconsistency in brand activism to “woke washing”, noting that when a brand's stated values lack the backing of concrete actions, the public may question its authenticity. Verlegh (2024) further notes that consumers judge the credibility of brand activism based on the relationship between a brand's stated positions and its actual behaviour. However, this line of research generally still tends to take brand behaviour or brand strategy as its analytical starting point, offering little detailed explanation of how consumers, when faced with specific controversies, integrate different sources of information—such as a brand's past communications, current events, official responses and social media discussions—to form a coherent understanding of the brand's behaviour.

Furthermore, whilst existing research has begun to focus on the active interpretative role of consumers, related discussions are often scattered across different theoretical frameworks. Individual-level studies indicate that consumers' value alignments influence their understanding of brand communications on women's issues (Sternadori & Abitbol, 2019). Research on gender attitudes, meanwhile,

demonstrates that consumers' pre-existing gender perceptions influence their acceptance of or resistance to advertisements promoting women's empowerment (Teng et al., 2021). Studies on knowledge levels further indicate that whether consumers possess knowledge of relevant issues affects their judgements regarding the authenticity and credibility of brand communications (Martínez-Aguirre et al., 2025). Collectively, these studies demonstrate that consumers draw upon various interpretative resources to understand brand communications; however, they have not yet fully explained how these resources are organised in the context of a specific controversial incident.

Research at the brand evaluation level emphasises that consumers base their judgements on brand motivation, authenticity and consistency. Virkus and Klein (2026) note that when confronted with a brand's expression of social issues, consumers distinguish between whether the brand's behaviour is value-driven or driven by external strategic considerations. Research by Vredenburg et al. (2020) also indicates that inconsistencies between brand statements and actual actions undermine the public's perception of a brand's authenticity. Whilst these studies highlight the importance of attributing motives and assessing consistency, they lack a procedural explanation of how consumers progressively form these evaluations based on specific cues.

Research at the social level further illustrates that consumers' understanding of brand behaviour is amplified and reconstructed within social media. Lima and Casais

(2021) found that when discussing femvertising, consumers tend not to evaluate the advertising text in isolation, but rather link it to brand behaviour, commercial logic and value stances. Fletcher-Brown et al. (2024) also noted that consumers' comments, shares and interactions on social media themselves contribute to the construction of the meaning of brand activism. Kumar et al. (2025) further emphasise that digital platforms can transform individual reactions into more collective public actions. It is thus evident that social media serves not only as a channel for consumers to express their attitudes, but also as a space where brand meaning is continually negotiated and reconstructed.

Consequently, a key shortcoming of existing research lies in the lack of a process-oriented explanation of how consumers integrate multiple cues and form holistic judgements within specific value-contested contexts. In real-world scenarios, when consumers encounter brand communications centred on women's issues, they do not react based solely on a single advertisement or a single brand action. Instead, they typically consider, simultaneously, the brand's past value statements, its specific actions in the current event, the adequacy of official explanations, the appropriateness of beneficiaries or resource allocation, and the ongoing public discourse on social media. In this process, consumers do not simply form attitudes towards an advertisement or brand, but rather, through continuous comparison and interpretation, gradually assess whether the brand is authentic and consistent, whether its motives are credible, and whether its practices remain worthy of support.

This shortcoming is particularly evident within the context of strategic communication research. Existing research has already provided a relatively comprehensive account of how organisations achieve their objectives through communication and interact with the public in complex environments (Hallahan et al., 2007). However, when brands enter communication domains with strong value-laden attributes—such as women’s issues or public welfare causes—the public ceases to be mere recipients of information and instead becomes active participants who interpret, question and reconstruct the meaning of the brand. In other words, the research focus should not merely remain on “how organisations communicate”; it must also explain “how the public understands communication ” and “ how they evaluate brand behaviour ” , as well as how these understandings and evaluations are further transformed into reactions such as support, scepticism, resistance or continued observation.

In light of these shortcomings, this paper adopts a sensemaking perspective to integrate brand expression, individual interpretation and social interaction within a single analytical framework. The sensemaking perspective helps explain how consumers, in contexts characterised by incomplete, controversial or contradictory information, extract clues, draw on prior experience, and form a coherent interpretation of events. Rather than treating authenticity, consistency or motivation as pre-set variables, this paper regards them as key cognitive resources that consumers draw upon when interpreting and evaluating situations in specific contexts.

Specifically, this paper focuses on three interconnected processes. First, how consumers use sensemaking to understand the relationship between a brand's past communications and its current behaviour. Second, how consumers use motivational attribution to judge whether a brand's behaviour stems from a genuine value commitment or from strategic or commercial considerations. Third, how consumers re-evaluate a brand's image in terms of consistency and authenticity, and on this basis form varying degrees of consumer response and public expression.

Through an analysis of the specific case of the controversy surrounding A LITTLE's charitable communications, this paper aims to explore how consumers engage in meaning-making, motivational attribution and consistency/authenticity assessments when a brand's value-oriented communications on women's issues are perceived by some consumers as inconsistent with its subsequent behaviour, and how they subsequently form different reactions—such as support, scepticism, resistance or demands for transparency—based on these assessments. Consequently, this paper not only helps bridge the gap between research on femvertising and brand activism but also provides strategic communication research with a consumer perspective that is more closely aligned with real-world communication contexts.

More importantly, this paper shifts the focus of research on brands' communication of social values from questions of “whether communication is effective” or “whether brand behaviour is consistent” towards a process-oriented understanding of “how consumers construct brand meaning and form evaluations

within a complex communication environment". Through this research approach, this paper aims to demonstrate that, in value-oriented communication, brand meaning is not unilaterally determined by the organisation, but is continuously constructed and redefined through the interplay of the brand's long-term communication, consumers' existing perceptions, controversial events, and social media interactions.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Brand Activism and Value Communication

In the context of brands engaging with social issues through communication, existing research has highlighted that such communication is often driven by both the expression of values and commercial objectives. Consequently, the stance presented by a brand in its communications is not always consistently reflected in its actual behaviour, thereby creating a tension between communication and practice. This issue has been extensively discussed in research on brand activism and CSR communication. Relevant research indicates that when there is a discrepancy between a brand's statements and its actions, it is likely to provoke public scepticism regarding its authenticity and motives (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

In specific issue contexts, this tension may manifest in various forms. For instance, in communications regarding women's issues, existing research indicates that brands may utilise feminism as a communication resource, thereby creating potential tension between value expression and commercial logic (Repo, 2020). This phenomenon suggests that inconsistency in brand communications is not incidental, but rather a potential structural feature of such value-oriented communication practices.

In this study, the aforementioned theoretical perspective is employed to define the research context—namely, that brands may inherently face a potential tension between value expression and actual behaviour in the communication of social issues. This tension constitutes the trigger for consumers to engage in sensemaking: when brand behaviour is perceived as inconsistent with established communicative stances, consumers move beyond passive reception of information and actively enter a process of interpretation and understanding. This process is precisely the core concern of sensemaking theory.

3.2 Sensemaking

In the context examined by this study, consumers are not confronted with a clear brand message, but rather with a controversial incident fraught with ambiguity. The brand's previous communications had built up certain expectations regarding its social responsibility, yet its current behaviour is perceived by some consumers as inconsistent with these expectations. In such a context, the core issue consumers need to resolve is not “what this message says”, but rather “what this incident signifies” and “what attitude and stance the brand is demonstrating”. This is precisely the type of issue that sensemaking theory excels at explaining. Unlike information processing models, sensemaking does not presuppose that consumers will decode information objectively; rather, it acknowledges that when faced with ambiguous or contradictory information, individuals actively draw upon their existing experiences and cognitive frameworks to construct an explanation that is sufficiently reasonable within their

own logic. Consequently, sensemaking provides an appropriate theoretical perspective for this study: it can explain why the same brand behaviour elicits radically different interpretations among different consumers, and it can reveal the interpretative process consumers undergo before forming a judgement.

Sensemaking refers to the process by which individuals interpret, understand and ascribe meaning to complex, uncertain or ambiguous information (Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). In strategic communication contexts, the information itself is often uncertain, and different individuals may form different understandings of the same information. Consequently, individuals do not passively receive information, but actively participate in the process of constructing meaning.

Weick et al. (2005) point out that meaning-making possesses four core characteristics: firstly, it is retrospective in nature, meaning that individuals interpret and understand events after they have occurred; secondly, it emphasises plausibility rather than accuracy, meaning that individuals do not seek an objective reconstruction of events, but rather construct an explanation that is sufficiently reasonable within their cognitive framework; thirdly, individuals extract specific cues from complex environments and organise them into coherent explanatory narratives; fourthly, meaning-making is a social process accomplished through communication and interaction within a social context; meaning is not inherent in the information itself, but is continuously generated during the interpretative process.

In the context of brand communication, this theory helps explain how consumers deal with multiple and potentially contradictory pieces of information—such as a brand’s current communications, its past behaviour, and public discourse. Consumers actively engage in sensemaking by extracting specific cues (such as the brand’s historical behaviour, the communication context, and its value stance), integrating these cues into a coherent overall impression, and thereby forming a preliminary understanding of the brand’s behaviour.

However, this initial understanding is not the end point. Sensemaking describes “how consumers interpret what has happened”, but it does not fully explain “how consumers judge whether a brand is trustworthy”. Once consumers have formed a basic understanding of an event, they often ask further questions: Why did the brand act in this way? Is its behaviour consistent with its past positions? This progression from “understanding” to “evaluation” constitutes the second level of this study’s analytical framework, and is also the starting point for the application of attribution theory.

3.3 Motivational Attribution and Consistency Evaluation

Once consumers have formed an initial understanding through sensemaking, they often proceed to evaluate the brand’s behaviour. To explain this evaluation process, this paper introduces Attribution Theory as a key theoretical framework. Attribution Theory was first proposed by Heider (1958) and further developed by Kelley (1973).

This theory posits that when behaviour is inherently uncertain or potentially contradictory, individuals are more inclined to actively infer the underlying causes rather than making judgements based solely on superficial information.

A core assumption of Attribution Theory is that individuals distinguish between different types of causes when explaining behaviour. Specifically, behaviour may be attributed to internal factors—such as values, beliefs or genuine intentions—or to external factors, such as situational pressures or strategic considerations. This distinction is crucial for understanding how consumers evaluate brand communications. In the context of brand communications addressing women's issues, when a brand expresses support for women or gender equality, consumers typically do not limit themselves to understanding the content of the communication itself; rather, they further consider why the brand has made such a statement—whether it stems from a genuine value-driven stance or is driven by market strategy or commercial interests. Different modes of attribution directly influence consumers' trust in and evaluation of the brand.

It is worth noting that the attribution process tends to be more pronounced when the context itself is uncertain or contains potential issues. When there is a perceived inconsistency between a brand's communications and its behaviour, consumers are more likely to question its motives and engage in deeper interpretation. This implies that inconsistent contexts themselves trigger the attribution process, prompting

consumers to move beyond superficial understanding and actively infer the reasons behind the brand's behaviour.

In addition to attributing motives, consumers also rely on consistency as a key evaluation criterion. When interpreting brand behaviour, individuals tend to examine whether the brand's current communications align with its past behaviour, organisational practices and historical stances (Kelley, 1973). This assessment of consistency forms a crucial basis for judging the credibility of brand communication. When brand communication is perceived as consistent with the brand's established behaviour, its message is more readily understood as authentic and credible; conversely, when there is a discrepancy between words and actions, consumers may interpret this as strategic behaviour, a lack of sincerity, or even insincerity, leading them to reassess the brand's motives.

Consequently, consumers' evaluation of brand communication can be understood as two interrelated processes: inferring the motives behind brand behaviour through attribution mechanisms and assessing the degree of alignment between brand communication and its overall behaviour through consistency evaluation. These two processes jointly shape consumers' overall evaluation of the brand and directly influence their subsequent reactions.

Based on the aforementioned three-tier theoretical framework, this study integrates the communication context of brand engagement with social issues (3.1),

the consumer's initial meaning-making process (3.2), and the evaluation mechanisms centred on motivation and consistency (3.3) into a single analytical framework. This is then translated into three analytical levels— " understanding, evaluation and response"—to guide subsequent case data analysis. At the understanding level, the focus is on how consumers interpret a brand's engagement with women's issues and related events; at the evaluation level, the analysis examines how consumers judge the consistency and motivation behind a brand's behavior; and at the response level, the study investigates how these understandings and evaluations are further translated into consumers' emotional expressions and behavioral choices.

4. Case Description

4.1 Case Selection

“A LITTLE” is a Chinese tea beverage chain primarily targeting young consumers. In the mainland Chinese market, it has long focused on high-frequency daily consumption and emotional consumption scenarios. Unlike traditional beverage brands that prioritize product functionality or price, this brand has gradually strengthened its emotional connection with young consumers through its marketing efforts. By consistently sharing lifestyle-oriented content on social media platforms, the brand became associated with particular emotional and lifestyle-oriented meanings among some consumers.

Building on this foundation, the brand has gradually expanded its communication scope from product promotion to value expression, particularly through communication related to women’s issues. Since the launch of the “Dream Launchpad” public welfare project in 2023, the brand has linked “supporting children in need” to its brand image through ongoing communication campaigns. In specific communication practices, it frequently features young girls as the central subjects of its public welfare narratives, which some consumers later associated with supporting underprivileged girls.

It is important to note that the brand's actual operations encompass multiple types of public welfare projects, only some of which are explicitly defined at the official level as "helping underprivileged girls." However, across different public welfare communications, the brand frequently featured girls in its philanthropic narratives. For example, in content related to multiple projects, the brand highlights the living conditions and educational environments of the girls receiving assistance, emphasizing resource scarcity and developmental challenges, and linking its support efforts to improvements in their learning and living conditions. This contributed to a relatively consistent public perception across different projects.

As similar forms of communication appeared repeatedly across different projects, some consumers appeared to develop relatively stable expectations regarding the brand's philanthropic orientation. In this process, "supporting impoverished girls" ceased to be merely the communication theme of a single project; instead, it became an important reference point through which some consumers later interpreted the brand's actions. These accumulated expectations later formed part of the context through which consumers evaluated the controversy.

It is important to note that this perception was shaped primarily through repeated communication practices rather than explicit institutional commitments. As later analysis will show, this distinction became important in how some consumers interpreted the controversy and evaluated the brand's response.

4.2 Brand Background and Communication Content

Against the backdrop of the brand's communication strategy described above, the controversial incident examined in this study began with a charitable post published by A LITTLE on Weibo and Xiaohongshu. The post detailed the brand's sponsorship of an urban boy, including his living conditions, upbringing, and the support provided by the brand. The post resembled the format commonly used in the brand's previous charitable communications, presenting the initiative through the story of a specific individual.

Shortly after its release, the post sparked widespread discussion on social media. The controversy initially centered on the beneficiary's gender. Since the brand's previous public welfare campaigns had frequently highlighted girls and had long cultivated a public perception associated with "helping girls," the fact that this beneficiary was a boy came as a surprise to some consumers.

Subsequently, the discussion expanded to include the beneficiary's family circumstances and the appropriateness of the assistance. Some netizens noted that the boy featured in the "A LITTLE" is a Chinese tea beverage chain primarily targeting young consumers. In the mainland Chinese market, it has long focused on high-frequency daily consumption and emotional consumption scenarios. Unlike traditional beverage brands that prioritize product functionality or price, this brand has gradually strengthened its emotional connection with young consumers through its

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Subsequently, the discussion expanded to include the beneficiary's family circumstances and the appropriateness of the assistance. Some netizens noted that the boy featured in the post was wearing a smartwatch worth approximately 2,000 yuan and had also received items such as comic books. These details sparked debate over whether his family was truly in need and whether the brand was directing its resources toward those most in need. Some consumers felt there was a disconnect between the items shown in the post and the difficult circumstances described by the brand, leading them to question the appropriateness of the beneficiary's selection.

In response to the public debate, the brand issued an official clarification on February 28, 2026. The statement primarily addressed two issues. First, regarding the question of whether “the recipient family was sufficiently in need,” the brand explained that the smartwatch worn by the boy was purchased jointly by relatives for safety reasons, and the other items that sparked controversy were not purchased with the assistance funds. Second, regarding the question of whether “funds intended for girls were used for a boy,” the brand clarified that the “Dream Launchpad” project itself is not gender-specific, while the “Girls' Safety Kit” is a separate, independent initiative specifically for girls; the two are not the same project.

However, the controversy did not fully subside after the clarification was released. Some consumers accepted the brand's explanation, believing the incident stemmed primarily from unclear project information; others felt that the brand's explanation relied mainly on internal audits and endorsements from relevant organizations, lacking evidence that the public could independently verify, and thus remained unable to dispel their doubts.

About two months later, the brand deleted the original post that had sparked the controversy on the Xiaohongshu platform without providing a public explanation for the removal. It should be noted that the comment data used in this study was collected before the post was deleted, so the scope of the data was not affected by the deletion.

Overall, the development of this incident can be divided into three key phases: first, the brand published a charitable post announcing support for boys in a specific city; second, the public engaged in discussions regarding the gender of the beneficiaries, their family circumstances, and the authenticity of the content; and finally, the brand issued a clarification and subsequently deleted the original post. It is precisely this sequence of events that provides the specific context for this study's subsequent analysis of consumer understanding, evaluation, and response.

4.3 Core Inconsistency Incident

This study focuses on the controversy surrounding A LITTLE's charitable communication as a bounded case through which to examine consumer interpretation

and evaluation. In this case, the public not only questioned whether the brand had deviated from its established positioning on women's issues, but also engaged in multi-dimensional discussions regarding the appropriateness of the beneficiaries, the rationality of resource allocation, and the authenticity of the communication content.

The selection of this case is primarily based on the following three considerations. First, in terms of research relevance, this case directly illustrates the tension between a brand's expressed values and its actual behavior in the context of women's issues communication.

When a brand's actions are interpreted by some members of the public as inconsistent with its established communication stance, consumers do not simply accept or reject the brand's message; rather, they engage in interpretation and evaluation centered on the brand's motives, authenticity, and consistency. This scenario aligns closely with the core research question of this paper: how consumers construct meaning and make judgments regarding brand communications on women's issues within specific contexts.

Second, in terms of case characteristics, this incident is highly controversial and open to diverse interpretations. As public discourse evolved, the public did not form a single, stable evaluation but instead interpreted the brand's actions from various perspectives. On the one hand, some consumers, viewing the issue through a gender lens, perceived a discrepancy between the brand's actions and the pro-women stance

presented in its previous communications; on the other hand, discussions also focused on the economic circumstances of the beneficiaries and the fairness of resource allocation, thereby questioning the legitimacy of the brand's philanthropic efforts. Furthermore, some viewpoints highlighted discrepancies between the communicated content and actual circumstances, casting doubt on the authenticity of the brand's messaging. The coexistence of these multiple interpretive pathways allows this case to fully demonstrate how consumers mobilize different reasoning frameworks to form comprehensive evaluations of a brand within complex contexts.

Third, regarding data accessibility, this case primarily unfolded and gained traction on social media platforms, with both the brand's official posts and related public discussions being publicly accessible. The brand's official posts and their comment sections constitute a relatively clear and well-defined discussion space. Within this space, consumers continuously interpret, evaluate, and interact regarding the brand's actions, providing a rich set of naturally occurring data for analyzing the process of consumer meaning-making. Building on this foundation, this paper further integrates interview data to supplement and deepen the interpretive patterns observed in the comment sections, thereby establishing mutual corroboration across different data sources.

Based on the above considerations, this study defines the case as a representative "contextualized controversy case." Through the analysis of public discussions and interviews surrounding this controversy, the researchers aim to explore how

consumers construct their understanding and evaluation of the brand within specific contexts when brand communication on women's issues is perceived as inconsistent, and how this leads to different reactions such as support, skepticism, or resistance.

4.4 Public Reaction

Following the incident, discussions surrounding the brand's charitable initiative quickly spread across social media platforms such as Weibo and Xiaohongshu. Public reaction was not uniform; instead, a range of differing and even conflicting viewpoints emerged.

Some consumers felt that the decision to support the boy was inconsistent with the brand's long-standing image of promoting women's causes, leading them to question the brand's values. Other consumers focused more on the family circumstances of the recipient and the appropriateness of the assistance, debating whether the initiative "truly helped those most in need." Additionally, some comments centered on the wording of the post itself, questioning whether the textual description aligned with the accompanying images.

At the same time, some consumers expressed understanding or support for the brand's actions. These viewpoints argue that charitable assistance should not be evaluated solely based on gender, or that the public cannot judge the true circumstances of the recipient based on limited information alone. Furthermore, many

users participated in the discussion through jokes, questions, or brief emotional expressions, reflecting the complexity of public attitudes as the incident spread.

Even after the brand released a clarification statement, the related discussions did not cease. Some consumers accepted the brand's explanation, believing the controversy stemmed primarily from insufficient information; while others continued to question the brand's explanation, arguing that it relied primarily on internal verification and lacked information that the public could independently verify. The brand's subsequent deletion of the original post further sparked a new round of discussion among some users.

Overall, this incident continued to elicit diverse public reactions on social media platforms. These discussions not only constituted a significant part of the incident's dissemination but also provided a concrete context for subsequent analysis of how consumers understand, evaluate, and respond to brand behavior.

5. Research Design

5.1 Qualitative Case Study Design

A qualitative case study design was employed to explore how consumers interpreted and responded to a brand's engagement with women-related issues within a specific communicative context. Rather than examining consumer attitudes toward brand activism in general, attention was directed toward one particular controversy and the public discussions that emerged around it on Chinese social media platforms. Given the contextual and process-oriented nature of the research questions, a case-oriented approach provided an appropriate framework for examining how meanings and evaluations were constructed in relation to the event.

Case study research is commonly understood as an in-depth investigation of a bounded system situated within its real-life context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2014). What distinguishes case study research from other qualitative approaches is not merely the use of qualitative methods, but the clear delimitation of the unit of analysis. As Stake (2005) argues, case study is less “a methodological choice” than “a choice of what is to be studied” (p. 443). The defining feature of a case study therefore lies in the identification of a specific and bounded case around which analytical boundaries can be established.

The case examined here centers on the public discussions surrounding a controversial charitable initiative conducted by a particular brand, together with the interpretations consumers developed in response to it. The focus is not on brand communication concerning women-related issues as a broad social phenomenon, nor on consumers' general attitudes toward brands. Instead, analytical attention is directed toward a specific communication event and the public discussions surrounding it.

Several boundaries were established in order to delimit the case. First, the case is event-bounded, as the analysis focuses specifically on discussions generated by one particular charitable action rather than the brand's broader communication history. Second, the case is platform-bounded, with empirical materials drawn primarily from comment sections under the brand's official posts on Weibo and Xiaohongshu. Third, the case is time-bounded, concentrating on the period during which public engagement surrounding the controversy was most active.

A qualitative case study approach was particularly suitable because consumer interpretations could not easily be separated from the broader communicative context in which they emerged. Evaluations of the brand's behavior were shaped not only by the charitable action itself, but also by previous brand communication, interactions within comment sections, and the discursive environment of Chinese social media platforms. As Yin (2014) notes, case study research is especially appropriate when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are difficult to distinguish.

5.2 Design of Data Analysis Methods

Thematic analysis was used as the main method for analyzing the textual data. As Braun and Clarke (2006) explain, thematic analysis is a qualitative method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns of meaning within data. Its flexibility makes it particularly suitable for examining how consumers interpret and evaluate a communicative event without relying on predefined analytical categories.

An inductive approach was adopted in order to allow codes and themes to emerge from the data. This was appropriate for the present case because consumers' responses were often shaped through ongoing discussions, disagreement, and interaction within the comment sections. Rather than measuring predetermined attitudes toward the brand, the analysis focused on how consumers interpreted the event, evaluated the brand's behavior, and articulated these evaluations across social media discussions and interviews.

Thematic analysis was also appropriate because the study drew on multiple forms of textual data connected to the same communicative event. Analyzing these materials within a shared analytical framework made it possible to identify recurring interpretive patterns across data sources while preserving the contextual specificity of the case.

5.3 Data Sources

In terms of data sources, the researchers conducted a comprehensive analysis by combining social media comments with interview data.

In the analysis, Official brand posts were used to contextualize the controversy and identify the communicative event surrounding which public discussions emerged. The primary empirical data analyzed in this study consisted of social media comments and interviews. Social media comments were used to capture consumers' immediate reactions and public discussions as events unfolded; interview data was used to further understand how consumers integrate different pieces of information to form more in-depth interpretations and evaluations of brand behavior. By integrating these data sources, this study aims to present consumers' understanding and judgment processes from multiple perspectives while maintaining contextual consistency.

Regarding the selection of social media data, the comment sections under two official posts directly related to the event were used as the starting point for data collection. The first post was the original post that triggered the controversy, which concerned the sponsorship of a young boy, while the second was a follow-up clarification post subsequently published by the brand. Both posts were released simultaneously on the brand's official accounts on Weibo and Xiaohongshu, with largely identical content across the two platforms. In the analysis, the textual content and corresponding comments associated with each post were treated as integrated analytical units linked to the same communicative event.

Weibo and Xiaohongshu were selected as the primary platforms for data collection due to their central role in China's contemporary social media environment and their differing communicative characteristics. Weibo functions as a large-scale public discussion platform characterized by rapid information circulation, visibility, and issue-oriented discourse, making it particularly useful for tracing broader public reactions and online controversies. Xiaohongshu, by contrast, is more strongly associated with lifestyle sharing, consumption practices, and identity-related expression with a predominantly female user base, and extensive brand-related interaction. Previous studies have also noted Xiaohongshu's importance in shaping consumer culture and gender-related discussions in China (de Kloet et al., 2019). Including data from both platforms made it possible to capture discussions generated within different social media environments while maintaining a shared event context.

The decision to focus specifically on comment sections under official brand posts was made for several methodological reasons. First, comment sections provide a relatively shared communicative context in which consumers respond to the same piece of brand communication, making it possible to examine how interpretations and evaluations are constructed around a common reference point. This helps maintain contextual consistency within the dataset. Second, compared with dispersed discussions collected across multiple unrelated sources, official-post comment sections reduce the influence of fragmented information environments and allow the analysis to remain focused on reactions to the brand's own communication. Third,

social media comment sections provide spaces in which users publicly respond to and discuss brand communication in real time. Such characteristics make comment sections particularly suitable for examining how consumers responded to the event and discussed the brand's behavior.

Building on this foundation, this paper further supplements and deepens the explanatory logic observed in the comment sections by incorporating interview data. Compared to the relatively fragmented expressions found in comment sections, interviews provide more coherent and comprehensive narratives, which help us understand how consumers integrate various pieces of information—such as a brand's past behavior, others' perspectives, and personal experiences—to interpret and evaluate the brand's actions.

5.4 Data Collection and Sampling Strategies

In terms of collecting social media comments, this study employs a stratified sampling strategy, filtering comments based on two dimensions: engagement and time. Regarding engagement, comments with a high number of likes or interactions are prioritized to include those that have high engagement and visibility under the platform's algorithmic mechanisms. Secondly, regarding time, comments are drawn from different stages of the event's development to capture shifts in consumer interpretations under varying information conditions. By combining these two

dimensions, this study aims to ensure that the data covers both comments with varying levels of dissemination and discussion characteristics across different stages.

Ultimately, approximately 900 comments were collected from each platform as the initial data set, and stratified comment samples were constructed around two core posts. All comments underwent data cleaning prior to formal analysis, including the removal of duplicate comments, meaningless repetitive text, and content not directly related to the event, to improve data quality and analytical accuracy.

In the initial stage of data analysis, the study first performed open coding on the first 600 comments. Open coding was primarily used to identify recurring concepts, expressions, and interpretive logic within the comments, while preserving the original contextual meaning as much as possible. Throughout this process, the study continuously compared similarities and differences among various comments to identify recurring interpretive patterns and establish a preliminary conceptual classification.

After completing the initial open coding, the study further organized and developed the initial codebook. This codebook included definitions of key codes, their scope of application, and corresponding examples of typical comments, serving to enhance consistency and systematicity in subsequent analysis. Following the establishment of the initial codebook, the study returned to the complete comment dataset to systematically code the entire dataset (apply codebook to full dataset).

During the coding of the full dataset, the researcher did not treat the codebook as a fixed structure but kept it open to adjustments. When new expressions or interpretive logics emerged in subsequent comments that could not be fully explained by existing codes, the researcher added new codes or modified existing ones. This process embodies the logic of constant comparison in qualitative analysis, wherein codes and data continuously refine and adjust each other.

Throughout the data analysis process, the research team continuously assessed whether newly added comments introduced new codes or interpretive patterns. When no new codes or sub-themes emerged for 50 to 100 consecutive comments, the research team deemed the thematic coverage to be sufficiently comprehensive (Guest et al., 2006; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and used this as a basis for deciding whether to halt further data expansion.

After completing the overall coding, the study further grouped codes with similar meanings, interpretive logic, or evaluative orientations into higher-level categories and themes to identify the primary pathways of meaning construction formed by consumers around the event. Through continuous comparison of the associations and differences among various codes. The analysis generated 35 initial codes, which were subsequently grouped into broader categories and themes, which were used to illustrate how consumers interpret brand behavior, evaluate brand motives and consistency, and how these interpretations and evaluations are further translated into different responses such as support, skepticism, resistance, or a wait-and-see attitude.

Regarding the collection of interview data, this study employed purposive sampling to recruit participants. The researcher posted recruitment notices on Xiaohongshu and Weibo, inviting users who had followed the development of the event, read relevant brand posts or platform discussions, and were willing to share their personal views to participate in the interviews.

During the interview process, the sample size was dynamically adjusted based on the richness of the data and analytical needs. The researcher continuously assessed whether new material could provide fresh interpretive pathways or analytical dimensions. When subsequent interviews no longer significantly expanded upon existing themes, the study did not further expand the interview sample. To enhance sample diversity, the study sought to include consumers from different professions and backgrounds. Ultimately, six participants were interviewed, representing diverse groups such as students, working professionals, and freelancers. Table 1 provides an overview of the interview participants' demographic characteristics, illustrating diversity in age, gender, and occupation.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant Name	Age	Gender	Occupation / Role
XY	23	Female	Undergraduate
Cai	19	Female	Graduate student
Rabia	28	Female	PR Specialist

Moon	31	Female	Education
Vivian	25	Female	Stylist
Gala	30	Male	Community Worker

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, focusing primarily on how consumers understood the incident, how they evaluated the brand's motives and consistency, and whether the incident influenced their subsequent attitudes and consumption intentions. For example, the interview included questions such as "What were your initial feelings when you first saw this incident?" "Do you think the brand's behavior in this instance is consistent with its previous communications?" and "Has this incident affected your view of the brand?" During the interviews, researchers followed up on respondents' answers with probing questions to gain a deeper understanding of their reasoning and explanatory processes.

6. Analysis

6.1 How Consumers Made Sense of the Controversy

Consumers do not form an immediate judgment about the controversy surrounding A LITTLE's charitable initiative based on a single piece of information. Instead, they interpret the situation by considering the brand's prior charitable communications, its portrayal of women, and broader discussions on social media. In this context, the narrative the brand originally intended to convey is received differently by each consumer; it is continually questioned, reconsidered, and reinterpreted.

Analysis of comment sections and interviews shows that consumers focus less on the specific rules of the project and more on the brand's established philanthropic reputation, the details provided by the beneficiaries, and whether these elements form a coherent story. Meanwhile, social media interactions — comments, shares, and secondary discussions — shape these interpretations further, turning individual confusion into a more collective understanding.

6.1.1 Framing the nature of the controversy

Consumers' views on the A LITTLE charity incident are not based on one single fact or immediate judgment. Instead, they try to make sense of the situation by

looking at the brand's past charitable actions, how it portrays women, and the wider chatter on social media. Because of this, the story that A LITTLE initially tried to tell isn't taken the same way by everyone; people keep questioning, reinterpreting, and negotiating what it actually means.

When looking at comments and interview responses, it becomes clear that consumers aren't focused on the project rules themselves. They pay more attention to the brand's reputation for charity, the information shared by the beneficiaries, and whether these pieces fit into a coherent story. One frequent theme frames the controversy as a gender issue. Some consumers noticed that sponsoring a boy seemed at odds with the brand's long-standing focus on women, girls, or female customers. For them, it wasn't just about whether a boy could get support—it was about whether the brand's latest move clashed with its previously female-oriented charitable image. These interpretations often show up first in comment sections. For example, one user wrote: "If you'd said from the start that the sponsorship was gender-neutral, I wouldn't have prioritized ordering from A LITTLE every time I wanted bubble tea for charity."

Other consumers commented:

"Many of these sponsorships are clearly intended for women, yet in the end, it's always men who benefit."

—XY, interview

These responses suggest that some consumers interpret the A LITTLE incident through the lens of gender-based resource allocation and discussions about women's philanthropy. For these consumers, the brand's previous communications set certain expectations for its charitable activities. As a result, when A LITTLE later described the project as "gender-neutral," some saw it not just as new information, but as a possible change in the brand's philanthropic approach.

Meanwhile, other consumers focused less on gender and more on how beneficiaries were selected and how resources were distributed. In comment sections, debates often centered on the family situations of the beneficiaries, the type of support offered, and the question of "who truly deserves help." Several consumers emphasized that their concern was not about helping boys per se, but about ensuring that aid went to those who needed it most..

"It's not a gender issue... it's about who qualifies for this help. It's really inappropriate to buy comic books for a little boy who can afford a watch and label it as a charitable act."

Beyond questions of gender and resource distribution, some consumers viewed the controversy as a matter of communication authenticity. These individuals were mainly concerned with whether A LITTLE's charitable narrative was believable and whether the official explanation matched the messages conveyed in past

communications. For them, the key issue was not just “what” the brand did, but also “whether it honestly represented this charitable initiative.”

This skepticism regarding the credibility of the brand’s messaging also emerged in some interviews. Vivian mentioned

“Personally, I think it’s a bit fake; I don’t really believe the official response.”

— Vivian, interview

These different ways of looking at the incident suggest that consumers do not share a single understanding of “what the issue really is.” One event can be seen by some as a gender-related matter, by others as a question of resource allocation, or by yet others as an issue of communication authenticity. Because of this variety, the same incident carries different meanings for different consumers, and the interaction and negotiation between these perspectives play a key role in shaping how consumers understand the controversy.

6.1.2 Sensemaking through perceived inconsistency

In this controversy, consumers did not make judgments based on clear or consistent information. Conflicting and sometimes competing interpretations appeared across A LITTLE’s original post, official clarifications, comments, and secondary shares on the platform. As a result, understanding the incident for consumers became an ongoing process of making sense of conflicting information.

For some consumers, this conflict first leads to uncertainty. They don't immediately accept any single explanation, instead staying undecided while weighing multiple sources. Comments like "What is actually true?", "What on earth are you guys doing?", and "Can we still trust you?" appeared repeatedly. Cai also mentioned in an interview:

"I was genuinely confused at the time. Looking at the photos, I didn't understand why A LITTLE would sponsor this boy."

— Cai, interview

As they kept following discussions in the comments, reading analyses by bloggers covering the incident, and reviewing official responses from A LITTLE, some consumers began to adjust their understanding of what happened. Cai later summarized this change as:

"It went from a misunderstanding to a sense of betrayal."

— Cai, interview

These responses show that consumers' understanding doesn't form all at once. Initial confusion, doubt, or hesitation is constantly reshaped as new information comes in, and even official clarifications don't fully settle how people make sense of the incident.

This kind of information conflict also appears in how consumers understand A LITTLE's philanthropic direction. Some had long associated the brand's charitable efforts with girls, girls' education, and women's welfare. So, when the brand clarified that the "Dream Launchpad" project was open to all genders, some consumers didn't see it as just a simple rule explanation. Instead, they read it as a shift in the brand's established philanthropic image.

For these consumers, the official clarification didn't fully resolve their confusion. When A LITTLE emphasized that the project "itself is not gender-restricted," some began to reinterpret the brand's past charitable communications. Their attention moved beyond the project rules to question why previous messages had allowed the public to form a gender-biased impression of the brand's philanthropic efforts. In this process, the conflicting information wasn't simply about "whether boys could receive support," but about reconciling the brand's long-standing female-focused philanthropic image with its current institutional explanation.

This sense of a gap between past communications and current explanations also appeared in some comments:

" You've always led us to believe you help girls, but now you're telling me this project has never restricted participation by gender—so what were all those previous posts about?"

As a result, consumers' process of making sense of this incident is not straightforward or linear. They constantly compare, filter, and reinterpret information from multiple sources. At the same time, the different ways consumers handle conflicting information shape how they ultimately understand the brand's actions, its stance, and the overall nature of the controversy.

6.1.3 Collective interpretation in social media space

Consumers' understanding of the controversy around A LITTLE's charitable initiative doesn't happen in isolation. Comments, reposts, blogger analyses, and platform recommendations together create a public space where interpretation takes place. In this space, consumers encounter information, compare different accounts, and respond to others, gradually forming their own judgments. In other words, the sensemaking examined here is not just private interpretations of brand communications—it's also a collective process shaped by interactions on social media.

Social media has changed how consumers come across events. Many respondents didn't see the original charity post directly from the brand's official account. Instead, they encountered it through Xiaohongshu, Weibo trending topics, WeChat Official Account posts, or blogger analyses. Often, what they saw was not the original brand content but information that had already been questioned, interpreted, or reframed. This influences how consumers first perceive the controversy: by the time they notice it, the event already carries a sense of public debate.

XY's experience illustrates this point. She didn't actively search for the event but kept coming across related negative content in her Xiaohongshu feed. The platform's recommendation algorithm repeatedly exposed her to similar discussions, making it easier for her to see the event as a brand issue that had already been widely questioned. This doesn't mean the platform decides the consumer's stance, but it does show that the context in which consumers interpret information is not fully controlled by the brand. Once a brand posts content, secondary sharing on the platform quickly changes how that content is read.

In addition to altering information exposure pathways, social media interactions themselves drive the continuous reinforcement and spread of certain interpretations. Particularly in comment sections, many consumers do not use full arguments but instead compress complex judgments into brief, emotional, or sarcastic expressions. For example, phrases like *"Let the bro buy the bubble tea"* or *"men's bubble tea"* are not merely jokes; they condense judgments such as *"female consumers are the primary spenders"*, *"the brand is neglecting its original female supporters"*, and *"the brand's philanthropic direction has shifted"* into a form of online language that is easier to spread and replicate.

Thus, sarcasm and meme-based humor are not just side ways of showing emotion—they also serve as a quick and efficient way of creating meaning. Compared

to long discussions, these short expressions are more likely to be liked, shared, and copied, and they spread more easily across platforms. When this kind of language continues, the controversy moves beyond a single beneficiary and starts to be seen as reflecting an imbalance between the brand and female consumers.

However, collective sensemaking doesn't mean that all consumers come to exactly the same understanding.

"I don't care about others' criticism of the brand. As a social worker, I believe there is too much bias against boys on social media. Regardless of who receives the brand's charitable resources, as long as they are individuals recognized by the state as being in need, it is a good thing."

—Gala, interview

This perspective doesn't see the controversy as a break from A LITTLE's values. Instead, it highlights the negative assumptions about male beneficiaries in social media discussions.

It also shows that collective sensemaking on social media isn't just about everyone agreeing. Different interpretations constantly compete, spread, and get revised. In this way, social media doesn't just amplify controversy—it helps organize, circulate, and reinforce certain viewpoints. As a result, consumers' understanding no longer comes solely from the brand's original statement. It is continually reshaped through platform interactions, algorithmic recommendations, and user

reinterpretations. Brand philanthropy initiatives thus move from one-way communication to a public debate that is continuously negotiated on social media.

Overall, consumers' sensemaking of this controversy is neither immediate nor uniform. They don't just interpret the event based on the project rules provided by the brand. Instead, they connect it to past brand communications, gender-related expectations, ongoing online discussions, and new interpretations circulating on social media. This leads to multiple ways of framing the controversy, including as a gender issue, a resource allocation problem, or a question of communication authenticity. These interpretations are further reshaped by conflicting information, platform interactions, and collective discussion. In other words, consumers don't simply receive A LITTLE's charity story—they actively reconstruct the meaning of the controversy through ongoing comparison, negotiation, and social interaction. These different understandings also become the basis for evaluating the brand's motives, consistency, and legitimacy.

6.2 How Consumers Evaluated Motives and Consistency

Having formed an initial understanding of the incident, consumers then move on to the evaluation stage. They are not only concerned with why the incident has sparked controversy, but also assess whether the brand's actions are sincere, reasonable and consistent with its existing communications, and whether the brand has provided the necessary explanations and taken appropriate responsibility. This

section therefore focuses on how consumers evaluate brands in terms of their motives, authenticity, consistency and the fairness of their charitable actions.

Consumer evaluations are typically not one-dimensional but are formed by the interweaving of multiple logics. On the one hand, they assess the consistency, authenticity and sincerity of the brand's actions by considering its past philanthropic image, the current beneficiaries and official responses; on the other hand, they examine whether resource allocation is reasonable, whether project selection meets expectations, and whether the brand has provided adequate explanations during the controversy. Furthermore, some consumers believe that brands utilize women's charity or feminist symbols for image-building, thereby questioning the brands' strategic motives.

Consequently, this section examines how consumers make attributions and judgements amidst multiple cues. The following three subsections will discuss, respectively: how consumers assess the authenticity and motives of a brand's charitable activities; how they evaluate the fairness and legitimacy of such activities in relation to resource allocation and beneficiaries; and how they assess issues of value contradictions in brand messaging and consistency in communication.

6.2.1 Evaluating authenticity and sincerity

After making sense of the event, consumers then evaluate the authenticity and motives behind A LITTLE's philanthropic actions. At this stage, the focus shifts from

the event itself to whether the brand's philanthropy reflects genuine social responsibility or is mainly a strategic move to enhance its image and marketing.

In interviews, most respondents did not completely dismiss the positive impact of corporate philanthropy. On the contrary, they generally recognized that a commercial brand's charitable actions can provide real assistance while also benefiting the brand's image. However, when this controversy created a perceived gap between the brand's messaging and the specific incident, some consumers started to reconsider the balance between "philanthropic value" and "image management" in the brand's charitable work. This shows that authenticity isn't something a brand can declare once and for all; it is continuously re-evaluated as consumers compare past impressions, current events, and subsequent responses.

"My personal take at the time was that it was basically a marketing blunder."

"I think they're primarily driven by profit; there might be an element of social responsibility, but I'd say that's merely incidental."

— *Rabia, interview*

"Before this incident, I'd have thought there was a genuine desire to do charity work."

"After this incident, I'd start to wonder if it's just part of the brand's marketing strategy."

— Moon, interview

Similar views were expressed in the comments section. Some consumers summarised the incident as “*a public image disaster for the charity initiative*”, whilst others commented that the brand “*was merely using charity as a marketing tool*”, or questioned whether the brand was “*exploiting charity to gain consumer goodwill*”.

These responses indicate that consumers’ skepticism is not directed solely at a single charitable initiative; rather, some consumers have begun to feel that the brand’s image-building strategy has gradually overshadowed the charitable values it originally sought to promote.

However, this skepticism does not imply that consumers entirely reject the commercial elements within corporate philanthropy. Some consumers still acknowledge that corporate philanthropy may inherently serve the dual purposes of social responsibility and brand image building. For these consumers, the issue lies not in whether corporate philanthropy can yield brand benefits, but rather in whether the brand genuinely and consistently invests in philanthropy, and whether it is willing to continue upholding the values it has promoted even after a controversy arises.

“Many companies engage in charitable activities because they want to present a positive image to the outside world; to put it bluntly, they are building a brand persona.”

“Once any company has grown large and strong, it must engage in charitable work and give back to society; this is the social responsibility they must fulfil.”

— Vivian, interview

Consequently, consumers do not begin to question a brand simply because they discover a commercial interest behind its actions; rather, it is because this controversy has led some consumers to feel that the logic underpinning the brand’s image-building has gradually overshadowed the philanthropic values it originally promoted. When consumers begin to perceive this imbalance, the philanthropic image that 1 Point had previously established becomes more susceptible to being reinterpreted as a more strategic and image-driven brand practice.

6.2.2 Evaluating fairness and legitimacy

In addition to authenticity and sincerity, consumers also evaluate brands based on the fairness of resource allocation and the appropriateness of the beneficiaries. In many reviews and interviews, the real questions being asked are: Are charitable resources being directed towards those who need them most? Are the brand’s criteria for selecting beneficiaries clear? Does the image of “children in need” portrayed in the official narrative match the details observed by consumers?

The original charity post established the image of Xiao Ming as a child in need through details such as “a cramped 18-square-metre room”, “not even the most basic study desk”, “moldy walls” and “dimly lit rooms”, to establish Xiao Ming’s image

as a child in need. However, this also meant that consumers would judge whether the beneficiary fit this image based on the very framework of “hardship” provided by the brand itself. In this process, the core of the controversy gradually shifted from “whether the boy should be helped” to “whether charitable resources were allocated to those who truly needed help”. Consequently, details such as the smartwatch and comic books became significant points of contention. These were not merely ordinary items; rather, they were viewed by some consumers as clues to assess whether the allocation of resources was justified. Consumers have clear expectations regarding the intended use of charitable resources. As the original post linked the support initiative to educational narratives such as “dreams of studying”, “study corners’ and “excellent academic performance”, consumers naturally expected the resources to primarily serve the purposes of learning and personal development. When items such as comic books appeared, some consumers interpreted this as a deviation from the legitimate purpose of “academic support”.

“As someone who is genuinely struggling financially, if we had money, we wouldn’t buy a watch; we would buy essentials for daily life.”

— Vivian, interview

“I donated to support his studies, so why give him comic books?”

— XY, interview

Similar views frequently appear in the comments section. Comments repeatedly treat smartwatches, comic books and room conditions as criteria for judging whether the recipient is “sufficiently disadvantaged”, and on this basis question the reasonableness of the brand’s selection of beneficiaries.

These responses indicate that consumers’ evaluations do not merely revolve around whether the project is “compliant”, but rather form a more morally charged logic regarding how charitable resources should be allocated. For some consumers, charitable resources should be prioritised for those they perceive as “more in need” or “less supported”; consequently, any detail that does not align with the image of poverty may undermine the recipient’s legitimacy.

However, the interviews also revealed some reflection on this line of reasoning. Gala explicitly rejected certain netizens’ stereotypical notions of poverty:

“Do children from poor families really have to study 24 hours a day?”

— Gala, interview

This response offers an important counterpoint. Whilst for Vivian and XY, the watch and comic book undermined the image of the recipients’ hardship, for Gala, the very demand that children from poor families should be denied entertainment, communication or relatively normal consumption constitutes an unreasonable moral judgement in itself.

It is thus evident that assessments of fairness are not objectively determined judgements, but rather a negotiation of meaning centered on the question of “what kind of people deserve to be helped”.

This divergence elevates this case beyond a mere gender controversy. When evaluating a brand’s charitable initiatives, consumers draw upon multiple sets of moral standards: gender equity, eligibility for poverty support, resource prioritization, and whether children are permitted to lead normal lives. Whilst the brand originally sought public endorsement through the broad framework of “children in need”, the public does not confine their specific judgements to this abstract category; instead, they demand that the brand clarify its selection criteria and the logic behind resource allocation.

Consequently, consumers’ assessment of the legitimacy of a brand’s charitable initiatives extends beyond merely evaluating whether the project is genuine or the procedures compliant. Consumers assess whether the brand’s selection of beneficiaries, the manner in which they are portrayed, and the explanation of resource allocation align with public expectations regarding fairness in philanthropy. If a brand responds solely with procedural explanations without elucidating the underlying values guiding its choices, some consumers will still deem the response inadequate.

6.2.3 Response: acting on perceived inconsistency

Some consumers interpreted the controversy as a sign of inconsistency in the brand's communication regarding women-related issues. Through previous charitable campaigns and communication surrounding girls' education, women's care, and women-related holidays, the brand had become associated by some consumers with a relatively female-oriented public image. Following the controversy, the brand's response shifted toward institutional explanations such as "the project is gender-neutral", "the process is compliant", and "the source of funds is transparent". This shift led some consumers to re-examine the brand's previous communications and reassess the consistency between its communicated values and subsequent actions.

In the eyes of these consumers, women's philanthropy has become more than just charitable content; it has also become an integral part of the brand's image. Support for the education of underprivileged girls, well-wishes on women's holidays, and emotional resonance with female consumers have collectively helped the brand establish a public image characterised by a concern for women. Consequently, when the brand responded to the controversy by citing gender neutrality and project regulations, some consumers perceived this as a loosening of its commitment to these values.

This understanding is reflected in the remarks made by XY and Cai during interviews regarding the "redirection of women's resources":

“Many of these funding initiatives are clearly intended for women, yet the end result is that men benefit from them.”

— XY, interview

“Subsequently, on 8 March, the brand took actions that were completely different—indeed, the exact opposite—of what it had done in 2025. The brand did not post a single message of goodwill on social media.”

— Cai, interview

These two accounts collectively point to the issue of consistency in the brand’s expression of feminist values. XY interprets the incident within the broader context of experiences regarding the distribution of gender resources; Cai, meanwhile, interprets the brand’s silence on International Women’s Day as a retreat from its stated values. Consumers are concerned with whether the brand has previously leveraged feminist symbols to build trust with female consumers, only to downplay the significance of these symbols once controversy arose.

This line of reasoning highlights a core issue within strategic feminism. Brands establish communicative symbols through feminism, care for women, or support for the education of girls in difficult circumstances; these symbols not only enhance the brand’s market competitiveness but also increase consumer goodwill and moral identification. However, the focus of consumers’ attention lies not in the symbols themselves, but in whether the brand continues to consistently uphold these value

commitments in the wake of controversy. Once women's welfare initiatives become part of a brand's communications strategy, they generate sustained expectations of value. Consequently, when a brand responds to controversy during a crisis with merely technical explanations or procedural justifications, these symbols may be reinterpreted as communicative resources that can be arbitrarily mobilized, packaged or withdrawn, thereby undermining the brand's original value commitments.

In the interview, Moon's observations on the shifting nature of the brand's philanthropic "filter" also reflect this:

"After this incident, I started to wonder whether this was just part of their marketing strategy to cultivate a certain brand persona."

— Moon, interview

Moon's attitude indicates that the controversy has altered consumers' understanding of the brand's past philanthropic image. Content that was originally perceived as heartwarming philanthropy has, following this incident, been re-framed within the context of brand image management. Precisely because the brand has historically relied heavily on narratives of women's philanthropy to build goodwill, consumers scrutinise its value expressions more rigorously during a crisis to ensure consistency.

The failure of the official clarification to fully restore trust among some consumers is also linked to this misalignment of values. The brand emphasised the

source of funding, government verification, the gender-neutral nature of the projects, and the fact that the “Girls’ Safety Kit” was an independent initiative. Whilst these explanations addressed procedural and regulatory concerns to some extent, they failed to adequately address the value expectations formed through the brand’s communications. For these consumers, the real question that needs answering is: why did past communications lead them to believe that the brand primarily supported issues relating to girls or women? Did the brand ever leverage a philanthropic image centred on women to gain the support of female consumers? When these questions are not addressed head-on, the clarification is easily perceived as a public relations response rather than a response to the brand’s values.

It is evident, therefore, that some consumers interpret the A LITTLE charity controversy as a value contradiction exposed by the brand’s strategic use of female symbols. On the one hand, the brand establishes a distinctive image and emotional connection through narratives of philanthropy for women; on the other, it relies on project rules, gender neutrality and procedural explanations to stabilise the situation amidst the controversy. It is precisely this tension between these two approaches that leads consumers to question whether the brand genuinely upholds the values it has communicated, or merely utilises them when market demands dictate.

Consequently, consistency in brand communication involves not only facts and processes, but also coherence between the values communicated, audience expectations and organisational actions. When consumers perceive that a brand

exploits feminist symbolism to garner goodwill yet fails to assume corresponding responsibility during a crisis, its charitable communications may be reinterpreted as “strategic feminism” or “performative activism”.

The most striking finding in this section is that consumers’ evaluation of a brand’s charitable actions does not revolve around a single issue. Consumers make comprehensive judgements about a brand’s behaviour by simultaneously considering various cues, such as authenticity, resource allocation, fairness and value consistency; these judgements ultimately converge on whether the brand remains trustworthy.

Whether the beneficiaries are “worthy of help” influences consumers’ perception of the brand’s sincerity in its charitable efforts; whether the brand consistently upholds its expressions of support for women’s causes further influences consumers’ judgements regarding the alignment of the brand’s motives with its values; and when official responses are perceived as inadequate or evasive, consumers’ overall trust in the brand continues to erode.

This mode of evaluation demonstrates that once charitable communication becomes part of a brand’s image, it gives rise to an ongoing responsibility regarding values. Consumers are not evaluating a single charitable initiative in isolation, but rather whether the brand can maintain consistency across its narrative, actual actions and subsequent responses. Although procedural explanations from the brand may address factual queries, they are unlikely to restore consumer trust at the value level

on their own. For some consumers, what is truly being challenged is not merely this particular charitable project, but whether the value-based image the brand has established through past charitable communications remains consistent with its current behaviour.

6.2.4 Summary of Motivation and Consistency

The most striking finding in this section is that consumers' assessments of A LITTLE's charitable activities do not revolve around a single issue. Authenticity, resource allocation and value alignment constitute distinct evaluation dimensions, yet they are interlinked in actual judgements and collectively determine whether the brand remains trustworthy in the eyes of consumers.

Whether the beneficiaries are "worthy of help" influences consumers' judgement of the brand's sincerity in its charitable efforts; whether the brand consistently champions women's causes affects consumers' assessment of its motives and consistency; and the adequacy of official responses further influences consumers' willingness to continue trusting the brand.

This evaluative approach demonstrates that once philanthropic communication becomes part of a brand's image, it gives rise to an ongoing responsibility regarding values. Consumers are not assessing a single philanthropic initiative in isolation, but rather whether the brand can maintain consistency across its narrative, actual actions and subsequent responses. Although a brand's procedural explanations may address

factual queries, they are unlikely to restore consumer trust at the level of values on their own. For some consumers, the real challenge lies in whether the philanthropic image the brand has built up over time can still underpin its current behavior.

6.3 Consumer Responses and Relationship Reconfiguration

Once consumers have understood and evaluated an incident, their response begins to shift from the cognitive to the behavioral level. This section examines how these interpretations and evaluations influence the relationship between consumers and brands, including reducing or ceasing consumption, demanding more transparent explanations from brands, and engaging in public discourse through comments, shares and satire.

The term “reaction” here does not simply refer to buying or not buying. For some consumers, ceasing to buy constitutes a clear boycott; for others, the change may be more subtle, such as no longer prioritizing the brand, no longer viewing a small purchase as supporting a charitable cause, or beginning to monitor the brand’s subsequent actions closely. There are also consumers who distinguish between issues with the brand’s image and the product experience itself, and therefore choose to continue purchasing.

Consequently, this section does not interpret consumer reactions simplistically as “boycott or no boycott”, but rather focuses on how different consumers respond to brands to varying degrees and in different forms. The following three subsections will

discuss, respectively: how consumers redefine their relationship with brands through the withdrawal of support and consumer resistance; how they push brands to explain their behaviour through demands for transparency and accountability; and how they transform personal judgements into visible public pressure through social media engagement such as sharing, satire and commenting.

6.3.1 Withdrawal of support and consumption resistance

One of the most direct responses from consumers to the controversy surrounding A LITTLE's charitable initiatives has been to recalibrate their relationship with the brand. This recalibration may manifest as outright boycotts, a weakening of emotional attachment, a decline in the brand's priority among purchasing choices, or a reinterpretation of the brand's charitable significance. Consequently, the "withdrawal of support" examined in this study is not merely a reduction in consumption, but rather reflects consumers redefining the emotional and value-based distance between themselves and the brand.

For some consumers, the controversy has directly led to a breakdown in trust in the brand. In the eyes of these consumers, when a brand's philanthropic narrative is no longer perceived as sincere or consistent, the act of consumption itself loses its original value and meaning. As Cai mentioned:

"It did have an impact; I haven't bought this brand's bubble tea since that incident."

“My personal emotional connection with this brand has been severed; I have no trust in it, nor any interest in following how they attempt to restore their brand image.”

— Cai, interview

Similarly, XY expressed an even more explicit stance of boycott:

“My view is that I’m just an observer, and I’ll probably never touch “A LITTLE” again in my life.”

— XY, interview

Similar attitudes of boycott also appeared in large numbers in the comments section. Some consumers explicitly stated that they “wouldn’t buy it again” or “wouldn’t prioritise A LITTLE in future”, whilst other comments interpreted the cessation of consumption as a rejection of the brand’s values and stance. These responses indicate that the withdrawal of support by some consumers is not merely a shift in consumption preferences, but a symbolic severing of ties. Particularly when consumers interpret the incident as a misalignment of brand values, gender inequality, or strategic marketing, ceasing to buy the product takes on the significance of a moral statement. Consumption is no longer merely the purchase of a product, but a means for consumers to redefine their own values and the boundaries of their relationship with the brand.

However, the withdrawal of support does not always manifest as a complete boycott. For other consumers, the controversy has served to erode the charitable significance and emotional value originally attached to the act of consumption by the brand, rather than the act of consumption itself. Moon's remarks reflect this shift:

"In the past, I would have viewed buying Yidianyidian as a way for me... to participate in this charitable cause."

"Now, I see it more as just an ordinary bubble tea."

— Moon, interview

This shift indicates that even if consumers have not completely stopped buying, they may no longer view their consumption as support for the brand's charitable values. In the past, a brand's charitable communications allowed some consumers to derive an emotional sense of belonging from participating in charitable causes and supporting social values during the consumption process; however, following a controversy, this significance is diminished, and the brand is reinterpreted as an "ordinary commodity". Consequently, what consumers are withdrawing is not merely the act of purchasing itself, but also the emotional connection and added value previously established. Similarly, comments such as *"I won't support this brand for its charitable efforts anymore"* and *"From now on, I'll just treat it as an ordinary bubble tea"* have appeared in the comments section; these responses also reflect the diminishing value attached to the brand's charitable initiatives.

Some consumers actively distinguish between controversies surrounding brand values and the product experience. Although they acknowledge that this incident has affected their perception of the brand's image, they have not completely stopped purchasing its products. Vivian mentioned:

“But I think it’s an issue with the company’s operations or its public relations, not with the brand’s products.”

“Personally, I think I’ll still continue to buy them; I haven’t been too affected. Because I really do think they taste good.”

— Vivian, interview

Rabia also expressed a similar distinction:

“My impression of the company has declined somewhat, but for me, that’s actually separate from the products themselves.”

— Rabia, interview

These responses indicate that controversies surrounding brand values do not necessarily translate directly into a consumer boycott. Some consumers distinguish between a company's operations and public relations handling and the product itself. For them, even if the brand's image is tarnished, as long as product quality, taste or consumption habits continue to meet their needs, their purchasing behavior may not undergo a fundamental change.

Overall, consumer reactions to the One Point charity controversy have been inconsistent. Some consumers have redefined their relationship with the brand by ceasing to purchase its products; others continue to buy but have reduced their identification with the brand's philanthropic narrative; whilst some actively distinguish between the brand's value-related controversies and their product experience. These differences demonstrate that consumer relationships in value-driven communication extend beyond the product itself. When a brand's philanthropic efforts are perceived as insincere, inconsistent or lacking in credibility, consumers will redefine their relationship with the brand by adjusting their purchasing behavior.

6.3.2 How consumers demanded accountability and transparency

In addition to withdrawing their support, consumers have responded to the controversy by demanding that the brand provide explanations, disclose information and take responsibility. Such reactions are not merely emotional criticism but place the brand in a position where it must accept public scrutiny. As Little Cup had previously proactively built an image of social responsibility through public welfare campaigns, consumers consequently believe the brand has a duty to explain how its charitable projects are run, where resources are channelled, and the details of the controversy.

In interviews and comment sections, consumers' expectations of the brand extend beyond a one-off "response"; rather, they center on whether the brand is willing to take on the responsibility of providing explanations. For some consumers, the implicit relationship of trust that previously existed between them and the brand has shifted following the controversy. Consequently, the brand cannot resolve the crisis with a single statement alone, but must demonstrate the authenticity of its charitable actions and its sense of responsibility through subsequent actions. Moon remarked:

"I won't trust this wholeheartedly as I did before; instead, I'll keep an eye on whether there are any follow-ups."

— Moon, interview

Vivian also expressed similar expectations:

"I hope that after identifying this issue, the company will genuinely engage in charitable work and then rectify these problems."

— Vivian, interview

In addition to demanding continuous responses from brands, consumers are also beginning to demand more specific and verifiable information. In comments and interviews, many consumers are not satisfied with general statements such as "verified" or "compliant with standards", but instead hope that brands will further

disclose the selection criteria for beneficiaries, the sources and scope of funding, as well as specific details regarding the controversial issues—such as the watches, comic books and family circumstances. In other words, consumers expect not merely a response from the brand, but whether the brand can provide information and evidence that can be verified by the public.

Similar scepticism emerged in an interview with XY:

“These days, PR is basically all the same old routine; they just skirt around the real issues.”

—XY, interview

Similar views are also quite common in the comments section. Some consumers believe that whilst brands constantly emphasize *“taking this very seriously”*, *“welcoming scrutiny”* or *“investigating immediately”*, such statements—if lacking concrete supporting information—are easily interpreted as standardized PR rhetoric rather than genuinely transparent communication. Consequently, for these consumers, transparency means not only that a brand is willing to respond, but also that the content of that response can be continuously verified and publicly scrutinized.

At the same time, consumers also judge whether a brand is genuinely taking responsibility based on its communication methods. Moon mentioned in an interview:

“When there’s controversy surrounding an issue, if you go and delete it straight away, it gives off a sense of guilt.”

— Moon, interview

This response illustrates that consumers are concerned not only with what a brand “says”, but also with “how” it responds. The act of removing posts triggers negative interpretations because some consumers perceive it as an attempt to evade controversy rather than proactively taking responsibility. For these consumers, when facing controversy, a brand should retain information, maintain ongoing communication and provide a clear explanation of the issue, rather than dampening public discussion by reducing the visibility of content. It is precisely for this reason that the act of deleting posts further erodes some consumers’ trust in a brand’s transparency and sense of responsibility.

Overall, consumers’ demands for accountability and transparency indicate that some are not satisfied with a one-off clarification from the brand, but rather expect the brand to continue disclosing information, addressing concerns and providing verifiable evidence in the wake of a controversy. For these consumers, whether a brand is willing to maintain ongoing communication, how it handles disputes, and whether it can provide sufficiently transparent information have gradually become key factors in their reassessment of the brand’s credibility.

Through the analysis in this section, researchers have found that consumer reactions are not merely simple expressions of support or boycott, but rather an ongoing process of relationship adjustment based on prior judgements regarding the brand's authenticity, consistency, and expression of values. How consumers interpret brand behavior and evaluate brand motives and fairness will further influence whether they continue to trust the brand, whether they are willing to maintain their existing consumer relationship, and whether they demand that the brand assume greater accountability.

For some consumers, when a brand's charitable initiatives are perceived as insincere, value-disjointed, or strategic image-building, ceasing to purchase signifies not only a change in consumption behavior but also a proactive redefinition of the value boundaries between themselves and the brand. At the same time, there are also consumers who, whilst continuing to purchase products, no longer attribute the original philanthropic significance or emotional identification to their consumption behavior. This indicates that consumer relationships in value-oriented communication do not merely revolve around the product itself but are continuously influenced by the brand's expression of values and its social image.

Furthermore, consumer reactions do not remain confined to the consumption level. Some consumers have begun to demand that brands provide more consistent, transparent and verifiable information, and reassess their credibility by closely monitoring the brand's subsequent actions. In this process, consumers are no longer

merely passive recipients of public welfare communications; instead, they increasingly view themselves as members of the public with the right to oversee a brand's social responsibility practices. Consequently, controversies surrounding a brand's public welfare initiatives not only affect whether consumers continue to support the brand, but also alter the existing relationship of trust and the nature of interaction between consumers and the brand.

7. Discussion

7.1 Summary of Findings: From Incident to Pattern

Through an analysis of comments and interview data, we observe that consumers' reactions to brand controversies are not merely immediate responses to a single negative incident, but rather a process driven by the long-term accumulation of brand perceptions, multi-dimensional interpretations and assessments of motivation. This finding echoes a fundamental tenet of meaning-making theory: When faced with ambiguous or inconsistent information, individuals form an understanding of an event by drawing on prior experience and extracting relevant clues (Weick, 1995). In this case, the crux of the controversy lies not merely in the specific recipients of the funding, but in the fact that some consumers perceived a misalignment between the brand's actions and their existing expectations. This misalignment triggered a dynamic process—from interpretation to evaluation—which ultimately influenced the relationship between consumers and the brand, as well as brand loyalty.

Consumer reactions begin with a complex process of meaning-making. When a brand's charitable messaging conflicts with the public's existing perceptions, consumers do not interpret the current event in isolation; rather, they frame it within multiple contexts, such as gender expectations, resource equity and authenticity scrutiny. Keller (1993) notes that consumers' brand knowledge consists of

long-accumulated brand associations, which influence their understanding of subsequent brand communications. Consumers in this case demonstrate a similar interpretative logic: they retrace the brand's past narratives of social responsibility and its expressions of support for women, and compare the current incident with these established impressions. Consequently, consumer dissatisfaction is not merely directed at a single social responsibility post, but stems from their perception of a discrepancy between the brand's current behaviour and the value expectations formed through its long-term communications.

This interpretation further drives consumers to reassess the brand's motives. When brands attempt to address controversies by citing project rules, funding sources or procedural compliance, whilst these explanations may address some factual issues, they fail to fully address the judgements formed by consumers based on their emotional and value-based expectations. For some consumers, the issue is not merely whether the project is compliant, but whether the brand's previously established pro-women stance remains credible. Vredenburg et al. (2020) point out that when there is a discrepancy between a brand's statements on social issues and its actual actions, the public may question its authenticity. Consequently, we observe that some consumers are beginning to reinterpret the brand's previous expressions of social responsibility as strategic image management rather than a sincere, value-driven commitment. This shift in the attribution of motives causes a controversy that might

otherwise have been interpreted as a misunderstanding of information to escalate into a crisis of trust.

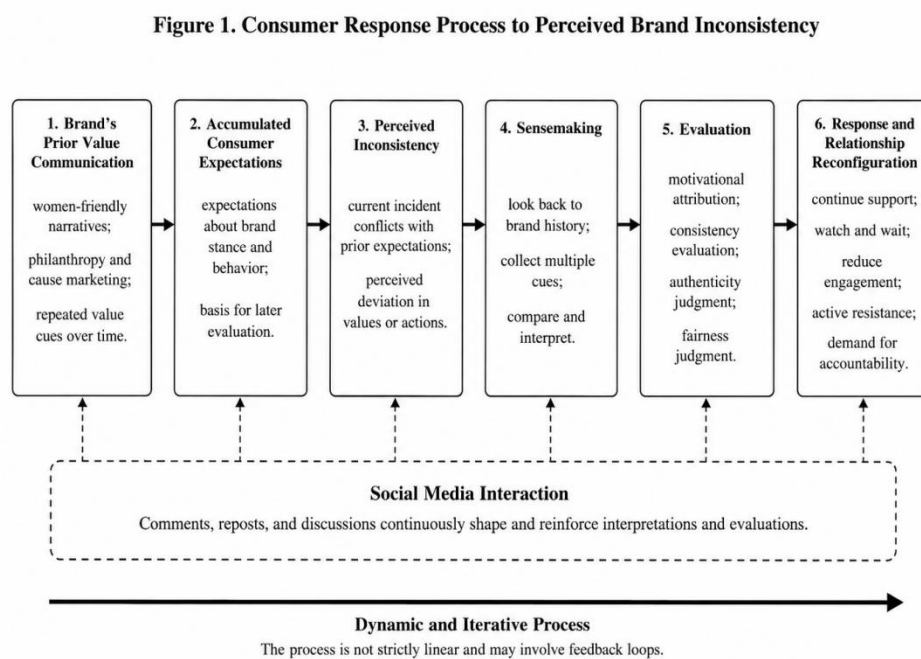
Ultimately, these interpretations and evaluations drive consumers to recalibrate their relationship with the brand. This recalibration manifests not only in consumer boycotts, reduced purchasing priority, or the abandonment of the notion that purchases equate to supporting public welfare, but also in consumers participating in the redefinition of the brand's meaning through social media comments, sarcastic expressions, demands for transparency, and sustained engagement. Fournier (1998) argues that the relationship between consumers and brands is not merely transactional, but also encompasses emotional and meaningful connections. Our findings similarly demonstrate that, in value-oriented communication, the relationship between consumers and brands encompasses value alignment, emotional connection and trust assessments. When consumers perceive a brand's behaviour as inconsistent with the expectations formed through its long-term communication, they may redefine the distance between themselves and the brand through various means.

Overall, this case illustrates that in value-oriented communication, brand image is not unilaterally shaped and controlled by the enterprise, but is continuously constructed and adjusted through the interplay of the brand's long-term communication, consumers' existing perceptions, specific controversial incidents, and social media interactions. Furthermore, consumers' judgements regarding a brand's consistency and authenticity are not derived solely from a single incident, but are

influenced by the accumulated value expectations resulting from the brand's past communications. Consequently, when a brand enters communication domains with value-laden attributes—such as women's issues or public welfare causes—its subsequent behaviour is evaluated by consumers within the context of a longer communication history and a more complex value framework.

Figure 1 summarises this process by showing how consumers move from accumulated expectations to perceived inconsistency, sensemaking, evaluation, and eventual relationship reconfiguration.

Figure 1. Consumer Response Process to Perceived Brand Inconsistency



7.2 Theoretical Contributions: The Retrospective Nature of Sensemaking and the Mechanism of Cue Aggregation

The findings of this study suggest that consumers' reactions to brand controversies are not immediate responses to a single negative incident, but rather a process driven by a combination of long-term accumulated brand impressions, multidimensional contextual interpretations, and motivational evaluations. This finding resonates with the fundamental tenets of constructivist theory, which posits that when faced with ambiguous or inconsistent information, individuals form an understanding of events by drawing on prior experiences and extracting relevant cues (Weick, 1995). In this case, the controversy did not merely revolve around the recipients of the funding themselves, but was closely linked to audience expectations formed by the brand's past communication of values. When consumers perceived an inconsistency between the brand's current behaviour and their established expectations, this inconsistency triggered a dynamic process ranging from understanding and evaluation to relationship adjustment.

Firstly, consumers' reactions began with the construction of meaning regarding the controversial event. When the charitable information released by the brand conflicts with the brand perceptions already held by some consumers, consumers do not interpret the current sponsorship behaviour in isolation; rather, they contextualise it within multiple frameworks, including the brand's past communications, its stance on women's issues, the fairness of resource allocation, and social media discussions. Keller (1993) notes that consumers' brand knowledge consists of long-accumulated brand associations, which influence their understanding of subsequent brand messages.

Similarly, through this study, we found that consumers re-evaluate the significance of the current incident based on the brand's previously and consistently conveyed image of being women-friendly and its philanthropic narrative. Consequently, consumer dissatisfaction is not directed solely at a specific post, but stems from their perception of a discrepancy between the brand's current behaviour and the value expectations formed through its long-term communications.

Secondly, this construction of meaning further influences consumers' assessments of the brand's motives and consistency. When the brand attempts to explain the controversy through project rules, funding sources or procedural compliance, these explanations, whilst addressing some factual issues, do not fully address consumers' concerns at the value level. For some consumers in this case, the core issue is not merely whether the project complies with regulations, but whether the brand's current behaviour remains consistent with the women-friendly image and philanthropic positioning it has established in the past. Vredenburg et al. (2020) note that when there is a discrepancy between a brand's statements on social issues and its actual actions, the public may question its authenticity. Correspondingly, some consumers in this study began to re-evaluate the brand's past value propositions, reinterpreting what were originally perceived as positive philanthropic practices as communication strategies potentially driven by strategic or image-management considerations. This shift in the attribution of motives further eroded their trust in the brand's authenticity and consistency.

Finally, consumers' understanding and evaluations further translated into adjustments to their relationship with the brand. This adjustment manifested not only in whether they continued to purchase the product, but also in a weakening of emotional identification, a decline in consumption priority, continued observation of the brand's subsequent behaviour, and participation in public discourse through social media comments, satire and calls for transparency. Fournier (1998) argues that the relationship between consumers and brands is not merely transactional, but also encompasses emotional and meaningful connections. This study similarly finds that, in value-oriented communication, the relationship between consumers and brands involves value alignment, emotional connection and trust judgements. When consumers perceive a brand's behaviour as inconsistent with the expectations formed through its long-term communication, they may redefine the distance of their relationship with the brand through various means.

Overall, this study demonstrates that in value-oriented brand communication, brand image is not unilaterally determined by the enterprise, but is continuously constructed and redefined through the interplay of the brand's long-term communication, consumers' existing perceptions, specific controversial incidents, and social media interactions. Furthermore, consumers' judgements regarding brand consistency are not derived solely from a single incident, but are influenced by the accumulated value expectations resulting from the brand's past communications. Consequently, when brands enter communication domains with value-based

attributes—such as women’s issues or public welfare causes—their subsequent actions are evaluated by consumers within the context of a longer communication history and a more complex value framework.

7.3 Theoretical Contribution: Redefining Consistency — Value-based vs. Factual

In the “A LITTLE” case, a notable finding is that brands and consumers do not share an entirely identical understanding of “consistency”. When responding to the controversy, the brand primarily sought to demonstrate that there were no issues with the project rules, the use of funds, or the implementation process; however, consumers were not solely concerned with these factual explanations. For some consumers, the more critical question was whether the brand’s current practices remained consistent with the women-friendly image and philanthropic narrative it had repeatedly promoted in the past.

This discrepancy means that the controversy in this case cannot simply be dismissed as a misunderstanding of information. The explanations provided by the brand did indeed address specific issues, such as whether the project was gender-restricted, whether funds had been misappropriated, and whether procedures were compliant. However, these responses did not fully dispel consumers’ doubts. The reason lies in the fact that some consumers were not merely asking, “Has this project breached any regulations?”, but rather, “Is this brand still upholding the values

it has led us to believe in?” In other words, whilst the brand attempted to explain its actions through facts and procedures, consumers were evaluating the brand against the value expectations formed by its past communications.

This demonstrates that brand consistency encompasses at least two dimensions. One is factual consistency—whether the brand’s actions comply with publicly stated rules, project procedures and organisational guidelines. The other is value-based consistency—whether the brand’s current behaviour remains coherent with the value-based image it has cultivated through its long-term communications. In this case, the brand’s response largely remained at the former level, whilst the dissatisfaction of some consumers primarily stemmed from the latter. This also explains why procedural clarifications did not fully restore trust: they may answer the question of “whether the project was compliant”, but they do not necessarily address “whether the brand remains trustworthy”.

Such judgements at the value level do not arise out of thin air, but are linked to the cumulative effect of the brand’s past communications. Previously, the brand had established a relatively stable public image through its engagement with women’s issues, charitable initiatives for girls, and emotional messaging. It is precisely these long-accumulated impressions that lead consumers, when faced with subsequent controversies, to naturally contextualise current events within the brand’s past communications. When a discrepancy arises between current behaviour and established perceptions, consumers re-examine the brand’s previous statements and

begin to question whether these represented genuine values or merely a strategy for image-building.

Consequently, the insights this case offers for research on brand consistency are as follows: in value-oriented communication, consistency must not be understood merely as a match between behaviour and rules, but also as a coherence of meaning between brand messaging, consumer expectations and concrete actions. Consumers do not merely check whether a brand has violated established rules; they also judge whether the brand has upheld the value direction it has established through long-term communication. When a brand addresses only factual controversies without addressing discrepancies at the value level, its actions may still be perceived as inconsistent by some consumers, even if they can be procedurally justified.

In other words, value-oriented communication subjects brands to a more sustained pressure to justify themselves. A brand's past value expressions do not automatically disappear once a campaign ends; rather, they become a crucial reference point for consumers in interpreting subsequent behaviour. For brands, this implies that engaging with women's issues, charitable causes or other areas of social value entails more than merely gaining emotional resonance and a favourable image; it also means that subsequent actions will be evaluated within this value framework. For this study, this finding illustrates that when analysing brand consistency, one cannot merely examine whether a brand's "words" and "actions" correspond; it is also necessary to further investigate how consumers, based on value expectations formed

through long-term communication, judge whether a brand's behaviour remains coherent, credible and authentic.

7.4 Theoretical Contribution: Authenticity as a Socially Constructed and Environment-dependent Judgement

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through long-term communication, judge whether a brand's behaviour remains coherent, credible and authentic.

Through a comparative analysis of interview and comment data, we found that consumers' judgements of brand authenticity do not always manifest in the same way; they are influenced by the context of expression and the interactive environment. Existing research on brand activism has already pointed out that when brands engage with social issues, consumers pay attention to whether their expressions are genuine and whether brand behaviour remains consistent with their value stance (Vredenburg et al., 2020). This study further demonstrates that, in specific controversial contexts, judgements of authenticity stem not only from consumers' individual assessments of the relationship between a brand's words and actions, but are also influenced by the social media interaction environment.

This is particularly evident in the differences between interview data and comment data. In interviews, respondents were often able to articulate more complex judgements. Even consumers who were disappointed with a brand would mention factors such as business operations, the implementation of charitable projects, and incomplete information when explaining their views. In other words, in the relatively private and open setting of interviews, consumers are more likely to retain an understanding of the complexity of the situation. However, in social media comment sections, expressions tend to be shorter, more emotional, and more inclined to take a clear stance. Complex judgements are compressed into sarcastic or labelling

expressions, or brief negative evaluations. It is thus evident that consumers' judgements of brand authenticity do not manifest in the same way across all contexts.

This discrepancy suggests that social media is not merely a channel for consumers to express pre-existing attitudes, but also influences the way authenticity judgements are formed. Research by Lima and Casais (2021) indicates that when discussing "femvertising", consumers often link advertising copy to brand behaviour, commercial logic and value stances, rather than merely evaluating the advertisement itself. In this case study, discussions in the comments section exhibit similar characteristics: consumers do not merely respond to a single brand message, but link the incident to the brand's past image, philanthropic narratives, resource allocation and official responses. In this process, certain interpretations that are more easily disseminated are repeatedly echoed, gradually becoming the dominant interpretative framework within the comments section.

Consequently, authenticity judgements on social media can be understood as an evaluative process shaped by interaction. Likes, shares, comments, imitations and satirical expressions increase the visibility of certain interpretations, whilst also further simplifying and reinforcing complex individual judgements within public discourse. Fletcher-Brown et al. (2024) note that consumers' speech acts on social media are not merely reactions to brand activism, but also contribute to its meaning-making. The findings of this study resonate with this: by commenting, joking and repeating certain hashtags, consumers are not merely expressing

dissatisfaction with the brand, but are also participating in shaping the public judgement of “whether this brand is authentic”.

However, it must be emphasised that this does not imply that authenticity is entirely determined by social media sentiment. Interview data indicate that, at the individual level, consumers still retain complex, hesitant and even contradictory understandings. Therefore, more accurately, this study demonstrates that judgements of authenticity are context-dependent: in interviews, they tend to manifest as complex personal interpretations; on social media, they are more readily condensed into clear, shareable, and emotionally charged public evaluations. This contextual difference suggests that brand authenticity is not a completely stable attribute, but rather a judgement that is continuously negotiated and presented between individual understanding and social interaction.

From this perspective, the contribution of this study to research on brand authenticity lies in its expansion of the concept of authenticity from a purely individual evaluation to the negotiation of meaning within an interactive context. For value-oriented communication, whether a brand is perceived as authentic depends not only on whether its actions align with its statements, but also on how these actions are discussed, repeated and interpreted on social media. When certain negative interpretations gain greater visibility in public discourse, a brand’s official clarification may still address factual issues but may not necessarily alter the authenticity judgements that have already been formed. The challenge facing brands

is therefore not only to explain “what the facts are”, but also to understand how consumers collectively construct “what the brand stands for” through public interaction.

7.5 Practical Implications: Reimagining Value-oriented Communication Strategies

Through an analysis of the “A LITTLE” controversy, this study offers practical insights for value-driven brand communication. It is important to emphasise that these insights do not suggest brands should avoid engaging with social issues; rather, they serve as a reminder that once a brand consistently articulates its stance on a particular social value, consumers are likely to use these statements as a key reference point for understanding and evaluating the brand’s subsequent actions. Consequently, value-oriented communication is not a one-off marketing statement, but rather accumulates continuously in consumers’ perceptions, influencing their judgements regarding the brand’s consistency and authenticity.

Firstly, brands must recognise that consumers do not interpret individual communications in isolation. For a brand, a single charitable initiative, a festive tweet or a statement on a social issue may merely constitute a temporary communication strategy; however, for consumers, such content accumulates over time, gradually shaping their understanding of the brand’s value stance. In this case, the reason some consumers reacted so strongly to the controversy was not because they were solely

focused on the current beneficiaries, but because they linked the current incident to the brand's past expressions of support for women and its philanthropic narrative. Consequently, when engaging in value-driven communication, brands need to assess the expectations formed in the audience through long-term communication more carefully, rather than focusing solely on the communication impact of a single campaign.

Secondly, when a controversy involves value expectations, a brand cannot rely solely on factual clarifications to restore trust. In this case, the brand addressed some of the concerns by explaining the project rules, funding sources and implementation processes; however, these responses did not fully resolve consumer dissatisfaction. The reason lies in the fact that what some consumers truly care about is not merely whether the project complies with regulations, but why the brand's current behaviour appears inconsistent with its previous value statements. Consequently, in similar controversies, a brand's response must not only state the facts but also address the source of the perceived inconsistency felt by consumers. In other words, procedural transparency and factual explanations are necessary; however, if the brand fails to explain how its value stance remains consistent, or does not address why consumers feel misled, such clarifications may be perceived as technical public relations responses rather than genuine communication.

Furthermore, when brands utilise symbols associated with values—such as women's empowerment, philanthropy, and social responsibility—they must consider

the ongoing expectations these symbols generate. Value-based symbols are not one-off communication assets. Once they have established a relatively stable brand impression in consumers' minds, they will influence how consumers judge the brand's subsequent actions. This implies that if a brand has long garnered consumer 认同 through a particular social issue, it must maintain a coherent and explainable consistency in its subsequent communications and actions. This consistency does not imply that brands cannot adjust the direction of their initiatives or expand the scope of their charitable beneficiaries; rather, brands must clearly explain how such adjustments align with their established value propositions, rather than merely retreating to explanations of project rules and procedures once a controversy arises.

Finally, brands must recognise the collective construction of brand meaning by consumers on social media. Social media comments are not merely an outlet for consumer sentiment; they also influence how controversies are defined and the public's judgement of a brand's authenticity. In this case, consumers participated in reinterpreting the significance of the brand's actions through comments, sarcasm, questions and demands for transparency. Therefore, when responding to value-based controversies, brands should not view social media discussions merely as negative sentiment to be suppressed or quelled, but rather as a vital window into understanding consumer concerns. Only by discerning whether consumers are questioning facts, motives or value consistency can brands formulate more targeted responses.

In summary, the practical challenge of value-driven communication lies in the fact that it leaves a lasting imprint of values in consumers' minds. Once a brand has established its image through social issues, it must recognise that subsequent actions will be evaluated by consumers within the context of this communication history. For brand managers, the key lies not merely in ensuring that every communication appears positive, but in maintaining a coherent and explainable consistency between the brand's value statements, specific actions and crisis responses. Only then can a brand, when facing controversy, avoid responding solely to factual issues whilst overlooking the value discrepancies that truly concern consumers.

8. Conclusions

This study set out to examine how consumers interpret, evaluate, and respond to perceived inconsistency in a brand's value-oriented communication on women's issues. Through a case analysis of the charitable controversy surrounding A LITTLE, drawing on social media comment data and semi-structured interviews, the study adopted a process-oriented perspective to analyse how consumers construct meaning and form judgements about brand behaviour within specific communicative contexts. The findings indicate that consumer responses to brand controversy are not immediate reactions to a single negative event, but rather a dynamic process of meaning construction driven by the cumulative effects of long-term communication, value expectations, social interaction, and motivational attribution.

The study first finds that consumers' understanding of the controversy is characterised by multiple, competing interpretive frameworks. When confronted with the same event, different consumers interpreted the brand's behaviour from different starting points. Some understood it as a problem of women's resources being redirected; others focused on whether charitable resources had reached those they deemed "truly deserving"; and others framed the event as a question of communicative authenticity and credibility. This demonstrates that consumers do not simply accept the official narrative offered by the brand, but continuously redefine the

nature of the controversy by drawing on their own prior knowledge, social experiences, and the discussions circulating on social media platforms.

Second, consumer evaluation of the brand was not formed along a single dimension, but emerged from the interweaving of multiple considerations — authenticity, motive attribution, fairness, consistency, and value expectations. In this case, although the brand attempted to address the controversy through institutional explanations, a considerable number of consumers were not persuaded. Rather than restoring trust, these responses — by failing to engage with consumers' long-standing expectations of the brand's pro-female value positioning — led some consumers to reinterpret the brand's prior charitable communication as strategic image management. This reveals that in value-oriented communication, what consumers scrutinise is not simply whether the brand has acted wrongly, but whether it remains faithful to the value commitments it has established through long-term communication.

Third, consumer responses extended beyond the binary of whether to continue purchasing. Some consumers chose to stop buying, treating consumption withdrawal as an expression of their own values. Others continued to purchase products but no longer attributed to those purchases the philanthropic meaning or emotional identification they once had. Still others adopted a stance of ongoing vigilance toward the brand's subsequent actions. This suggests that in value-oriented communication, the relationship brands build with consumers is not merely transactional, but constitutes a relational structure laden with emotional and moral expectations.

At the theoretical level, this study makes three contributions. It deepens the application of sensemaking theory in strategic communication by demonstrating the retrospective character of consumer meaning-making — consumers do not interpret brand behaviour in isolation but continuously connect current events to accumulated communicative history. It extends the concept of brand consistency beyond factual and procedural alignment to include value-level coherence, showing that institutional compliance alone does not satisfy the expectations consumers form through long-term engagement with a brand. And it contributes to the understanding of brand authenticity as a socially constructed phenomenon, demonstrating how complex individual assessments are progressively compressed into dominant collective judgements through social media interaction.

At the practical level, this study suggests that when brands engage with social value issues, they must recognise the cumulative nature of value communication. The value image established through sustained communication gradually becomes an ongoing set of expectations regarding future brand behaviour, and perceived departures from these expectations tend to produce not merely confusion but a deeper sense of relational rupture. When value-level inconsistency is at the heart of a controversy, responses confined to procedural transparency or institutional explanation are unlikely to restore trust on their own. Effective crisis communication must also engage with the emotional logic and value expectations that underlie consumer concern. Furthermore, brands should be alert to how collective

interpretation operates on social media, where nuanced individual responses are rapidly compressed into simplified and shareable public narratives that become increasingly difficult to contest through official clarification alone.

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the research focuses on a single case situated within the Chinese social media context, which limits the transferability of the findings to other cultural or platform environments. Future research could conduct cross-cultural or cross-platform comparative studies to examine how consumer sensemaking mechanisms vary across different social contexts. Second, the interview sample is relatively limited in size and may not fully capture the diversity of consumer perspectives. Future research could expand the interview component to include consumers with varying degrees of brand loyalty. Finally, this study focuses on consumer responses during the period of active controversy and does not extend to questions of long-term trust recovery. A longitudinal design would be well-positioned to examine the process of trust repair following value-related brand controversy.

Overall, this study argues that value-oriented communication is no longer a one-off expression of a brand's stance on social issues, but an ongoing process of relational construction. In an increasingly digital and socially mediated environment, brand meaning is continuously co-produced by consumers through interpretation, interaction, and public discussion. When a brand chooses to enter a particular value arena, it simultaneously enters into an enduring relationship of public scrutiny. How to maintain coherence among value expression, organisational behaviour, and public

expectations across long-term communication has therefore become one of the most central challenges in contemporary strategic communication.

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Appendix 1 : Interview Guide

Introduction

Before the interview begins, I will explain the following to participants:

This interview is for my Master's thesis research. My main aim is to understand your views on the recent public controversy surrounding 'Yidian Dian', and whether it has affected your understanding, evaluation and consumption choices regarding the brand.

- The interview will last approximately 30–45 minutes.
- Participation is entirely voluntary; participants may choose not to answer any question, or may pause or withdraw from the interview at any time.
- If the participant agrees, the interview will be recorded. The recording will be used solely for the purposes of this thesis research; anonymity is guaranteed and no personal information will be disclosed.
- Participants may withdraw their consent prior to the submission of the thesis.

Would you agree to take part in this interview and consent to it being recorded?

Interview Sections

Part One: Exposure to the Incident and Initial Understanding

1. Under what circumstances did you first become aware of this incident?
2. After reading about it, what did you think was going on? How did you understand it at the time?
3. Did you seek out further information? Did your understanding change after doing so?

Part Two: Brand Evaluation

4. What do you think is the main reason behind 'Yidian Dian' undertaking this charitable initiative?
5. How does this incident compare to your previous impression of 'Yidian Dian' – are there similarities or differences?
6. The brand later issued a clarification statement; did you see it? What were your thoughts after reading it?
7. What concerns you most about this incident?

Part Three: Consumer Behaviour and Reactions

8. Has your view of 'Yidian Dian' or your purchasing habits changed following this incident?

9. If ‘Yidian Dian’ were to publish similar content in the future, how would you view it?

10. Would you actively mention this incident to people around you? If so, what would be the key points you would highlight when describing it?

Part Four: Conclusion

11. Is there anything else you feel is important but haven’t yet mentioned?

Xiaoming has long been sharing a cramped 18-square-meter room with his father, without even the most basic study desk.

Yet, the hardships of life have not dimmed his thirst for knowledge .
Xiaoming studies diligently, consistently ranking among the top three in his class.
Each excellent report card reflects his most persistent hope for the future.

Partners from Changsha’s “Dream Start Point” initiative helped transform this “dream room.”ok

They removed the moldy walls, painted with child-safe new paint, installed new ceiling lights, wall lamps, and desk lamps,
reinforced the doorway, installed a new entrance door ,
and furnished the room with a bed, mattress, bedding set, shoe cabinet, study desk, and wardrobe—everything complete!

As each lamp was turned on, the originally dim room instantly became warm and bright .

The comfortable new bed now offers restful sleep,
but what made Xiaoming happiest
was his very own study corner—a brand-new desk, chair, and neatly arranged wardrobe.

His excellent grades shine the brightest in this once dim room .
Our renovation brought a ray of light into Xiaoming’s life.

At this moment, the boy finally has his own desk,
no longer needing to hunch over the bed or sit on a stool to do homework.

As the Lunar New Year approached, we visited the family again.
Xiaoming was thrilled to see us and excitedly said,
“Thank you, brothers and sisters from ‘1 点点’ milk tea!
I’m going to be in the top three in the next semester exam!”

This is more than just a desk; it’s the first step toward a brighter future!

#1DianDian #1pointDianDian #1DianDianCharity #DreamStartPoint
#ChildrenInNeed #CharityInAction #1DianDian[SuperTopic]

2. Official response post

公益之路任重道远 我们初心不变

尊敬的消费者、各界朋友及网友：

近日，我司梦想起点公益项目引发网络关注与讨论，我们高度重视大家的质疑与关切，第一时间核查项目全流程，现就大家关心的问题郑重说明，衷心感谢社会各界的监督。

1点点在发展的同时也注重回馈社会，于2018年在上海总部成立公益事业部，并在全国各区设立公益专岗，推动公益的可持续发展。我们秉持“向下扎根，向上发芽”的公益理念，致力于帮助困境儿童和流浪动物，发起“梦想起点”和“毛孩子关爱计划”两大项目。

“梦想起点”公益项目自2023年发起以来，所有帮扶资金、改造费用均由总部和区域公司各按50%比例共同承担，无任何第三方分摊、无公众筹款。项目帮扶对象为当地低保、低收入及居住环境恶劣的困境儿童家庭，全程由当地政府部门、公益机构工作人员陪同实地走访，核验家庭情况，经多方联合审核确认符合帮扶条件后，再由公司统一实施旧房改造，确保帮扶资源精准投向真正有需要的家庭。

该项目在各地政府及公益机构等相关单位指导下走访上千户困难家庭，成功为213间困境儿童打造专属的学习与生活空间，其中包含女生房间119间，男生房间94间。

鉴于社会大众对项目关注与社会共同参与的理念，1点点小程序于2024年6月1日上线并开启“毛孩子关爱计划公益助力”。为了让更多人一起参与，“梦想起点公益助力”活动于2026年1月正式上线，并将于4月上旬完成相关改造及发放工作进行统一公示。

针对网络上的两处核心误解，我们做出如下说明：

①关于“帮扶家庭不够困难”的误解

孩子佩戴的手表由小朋友亲戚凑钱共同购买，因父亲健康原因，孩子不时需自行前往外婆家，为在路途及时与家人联系、保障安全，故购买此手表。大疆相机为同行志愿者个人物品，漫画为志愿者知道孩子心愿后个人购买作为礼物赠与。所有帮扶家庭均经政府与公益机构实地核实，确保住房条件简陋、存在实际改造需求的困境家庭，绝非随意选定。

②关于“帮扶女童的资金用于帮扶男童”的误解

本项目帮扶儿童不区分性别。“梦想起点”项目中，“女童安心包”项目为女童专项帮扶项目，相应活动及介绍均已在公布活动时公示。

公益之路任重道远，我们会更细致地公示项目信息，后续我们将全面、透明地公示帮扶家庭基础信息（隐去隐私）、走访核验记录、房屋改造前后对比、物资来源等内容，主动接受社会各界全和监督。

我们始终坚守公益初心，用心做实帮扶工作，也虚心接受所有合理监督与建议，感谢大家的理解、包容与监督，我们将继续以实际行动践行社会责任。

在此感谢过去及未来所有倾情参与活动的伙伴，以及我们始终牵挂、悉心帮扶的每一位儿童。你们是祖国的未来、民族的希望，你们纯真而坚韧的笑容，让我们深切体悟生活的厚重与不易，更让我们真切感受到善的珍贵价值。同时，我们也深感歉意——因外界舆论风波，让你们承受了本不该有的误解与委屈。这份愧疚，我们将铭记于心，并以更审慎的态度、更温暖的行动，守护你们的成长与尊严。

1点点公益事业部
2026年2月28日



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(English translation)

Title: The Road of Public Welfare is Long and Challenging, but Our Original Intention Remains Unchanged

Dear consumers, friends from all walks of life, and netizens:

Recently, our “Dream Start Point” public welfare project has attracted attention and discussion online. We highly value everyone’s concerns and doubts, and immediately conducted a full review of the project process. We hereby provide a clear explanation regarding the issues of public concern and sincerely thank society for its supervision.

While developing, 1點點 (1DianDian) also focuses on giving back to society. In 2018, the company established a Public Welfare Department at its Shanghai

headquarters and appointed public welfare officers in each region to promote the sustainable development of public welfare. Upholding the philosophy of “rooted down, sprouting up,” we aim to help children in difficult circumstances and stray animals, initiating two major projects: “Dream Start Point” and the “Care for Pets” Program.

Since its launch in 2023, the “Dream Start Point” project has had all support funds and renovation costs jointly borne 50% each by headquarters and regional offices, with no third-party funding or public fundraising. The project supports local low-income, disadvantaged children’s families living in poor housing conditions. Local government departments and staff from public welfare organizations accompany the process on site to verify family situations. After multiple joint reviews confirm that families meet the assistance criteria, the company implements renovations to ensure resources are precisely allocated to families in genuine need.

Under the guidance of local governments and public welfare organizations, the project has visited thousands of families in need and successfully created dedicated study and living spaces for 213 disadvantaged children, including 119 girls’ rooms and 94 boys’ rooms. In recognition of public attention and the principle of shared participation, the 1DianDian mini-program launched the “Care for Pets Public Welfare Assistance” on June 1, 2024. To allow more people to participate, the “Dream Start Point Public Welfare Assistance” event officially launched in January

2026, and after completing the renovations and distribution in early April, a unified announcement will be made.

Regarding two major misunderstandings online, we provide the following clarifications:

Regarding the misunderstanding that “assisted families are not disadvantaged”

The children’s smartwatches were purchased jointly by relatives of the children. Due to the father’s health reasons, the child occasionally needed to travel alone to his grandmother’s home; the watch helped him contact family and ensure safety. The DJI camera was a personal item of a volunteer accompanying the child. The comic book was purchased by a volunteer after learning the child’s wish and given as a gift. All assisted families were verified on site by government and public welfare staff and were indeed living in poor housing conditions with real renovation needs. They were not randomly selected.

Regarding the misunderstanding that funds for assisting girls were used to help boys

The project does not discriminate by gender. Within the “Dream Start Point” project, the “Girls’ Safety Pack” was specifically for assisting girls. All activities and introductions were publicly announced at the time.

The road of public welfare is long and challenging. We will continue to provide detailed public disclosure of project information, including the basic information of

assisted families (with privacy removed), verification records, before-and-after renovation comparisons, and source of materials, actively accepting supervision from all sectors of society. We always adhere to our original public welfare intentions, carefully implement assistance, and sincerely accept all reasonable supervision and suggestions. We thank everyone for their understanding, tolerance, and oversight, and we will continue to fulfill our social responsibility through concrete actions.

We extend our gratitude to all partners who have participated in the past and will participate in the future, as well as to every child we care for and assist. You are the future of our country and the hope of our nation; your pure and resilient smiles remind us of the weight and challenges of life and allow us to truly appreciate the precious value of kindness. We also sincerely apologize for any misunderstandings or grievances caused by public opinion waves. We will remember these lessons and continue with greater care and warmth to safeguard the growth and dignity of children.

1DianDian Public Welfare Department

February 28, 2026