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The Case of the Kimono: Kim Kardashian's Rhetorical Failure

Most marketing relies on naming. The easier it is to remember the name of something, the better consumers will be able to recall it when shopping for that particular item. Brands rely on being recognized by their name, which gives them the power in a consumer market. Take the Scrub Daddy, for example. It is a sponge that activates differently in different temperature water and was a huge hit on the show *Shark Tank*. Of course, part of what makes the sponge so popular is its catchy name. This is especially true for celebrities, as they fight to enter the business world in ventures other than what they originally deal in. They utilize their celebrity status to create the product, knowing that people will buy it, but utilize the name to create buzz and recognition.

Rihanna has Fenty Beauty, coined after her last name. Selena Gomez has Rare Beauty, which followed the release of her song "Rare." All of these names allow celebrity brands to be recognizable. It is also a way for celebrities to be clever, since as mentioned previously, naming is a big part of marketing. Not one to be left out, reality television star and business mogul, Kim Kardashian, wanted to enter the naming game in June of 2019, when she announced the name of her new solution shape wear. However, her release was not taken kindly and she received a large amount of backlash, with the mayor of Kyoto in Japan even writing her an open letter.

Originally, the brand was going to be called Kimono, or as Kardashian thought, a fun way to incorporate her name into the item just as she had done for her Kimoji, a smartphone application that gave users Kardashian emoticons (hence, the play on the word emoji). Kardashian quickly

realized that this issue was more than just a play on words though, and took into consideration why she was being accused of cultural appropriation. After a high profile decision, Kardashian underwent the costly decision to change the name of her new business, and it has gone on to be a highly successful venture, expanding from shape wear into swim wear, loungewear, and collaborative pieces with high profile designers such as Fendi. While the famous family is known for their own constructed reality, Kardashian herself has always been willing to correct her rhetorical failures, and so she was able to take this instance and turn it around to benefit her. Kardashian rectified the situation by looking at the issue critically and being willing to change after realizing her mistake.

Kardashian utilized the social media platform Twitter to announce the news of her new solutions line. On June 25, 2019, she tweeted out “Finally I can share with you guys this project that I have been developing for the last year. I’ve been passionate about this for 15 years. Kimono is my take on shapewear and solutions for women that actually work” (Kardashian). The tweet was accompanied by photos of the product, taken by Vanessa Beecroft. The shape wear shows its inclusivity, featuring women of all different skin tones and sizes, which is something that Kardashian has always been adamant about. In an interview, Kardashian said, “My solutionwear brand is built with inclusivity and diversity at its core and I’m incredibly proud of what’s to come” (Friendman). The replies started rolling in. People accused Kardashian of dishonoring the traditional Japanese Kimono, which is highly regarded in Japanese culture. The outrage only grew when people learned that she applied for trademarks of the brand name (Friedman). An online petition was started, garnering over eleven thousand signatures, calling for Kardashian to not be able to use that word as her brand (Friedman). In a statement released to the *New York Times*, she states, “Kimono . . . was meant to be ‘a nod to the beauty and detail that

goes into a garment” (Friedman). This naming tactic was a big blunder for the mogul, because she had failed to recognize the deep respect that the culture has for its traditional Kimono garments. While she had released a statement that said she understands and has “deep respect for the significance of the kimono in Japanese culture” (Friedman), it did not excuse her from facing the backlash. Daisaku Kadokawa, the mayor of Kyoto, wrote a letter that states:

Kimono is a traditional ethnic dress fostered in our rich nature and history with our predecessors’ tireless endeavors and studies, and it is a culture that has been cherished and passed down with care in our living . . . I would like you to visit Kyoto, where many Japanese cultures including Kimono have been cherished, to experience the essence of Kimono Culture and understand our thoughts and our strong wish. (Boland-DeVito, 519)

It was clear that this was an intense uproar. Of course, Kardashian has faced criticism for cultural appropriation before, such as the time one of her marketing campaigns for KKW Beauty came out with her skin appearing much darker than it usually is. While Kardashian is Armenian and does have a tanned complexion, fans and critics alike were quick to note that her skin tone was approaching the use of Blackface, which is a culturally offensive practice of applying makeup to look darker than a person is, and has racist roots attached to it. At the height of that scandal, Kardashian had her marketing team pull the advertisements down and take off some of the editing effects, claiming that the retouching team had made her appear darker. She apologized. This controversy was not different. Kardashian took the time to hear what was being said to her, instead of doubling down on her stance. This is important because this business venture is related to her brand and to her as a celebrity.

Kardashian is most well known for her television show, and so her brand needs to reflect that. She is marketable because of who she is as a person and because she is famous. Fans want

to emulate her. They know that she loves to use shape wear products. In the article, “The Marketing of Fame: How Kim Kardashian has Sustained Her Fame, and What Companies Can Learn From Her,” Elizabeth Paquette writes:

Kim’s brand is strongly focused on being the ideal shape and look for women’s beauty, and being a leader in the beauty and fashion world. Therefore, when Kim created her [shapewear] line, or her entertainment app that focused highly on fashion, both of these products had a connection to Kim’s brand, and therefore were believable and made sense for the consumer to buy. (Paquette, 32-33)

Therefore, the success of this brand largely relies on the ways in which consumers react to it. So, people began to express their frustration and disappointment with the entrepreneur, she knew she needed to do something. Her announcement had become a big rhetorical failure because there had been a misstep during naming, which left fans angry and upset. Ultimately, Kardashian made the decision to change the name of the business. She released a new statement that said, “After much thought and consideration, I’m excited to announce the launch of SKIMS Solutionwear,” (D’Zurilla), Kardashian credited fans for giving her the idea for the new name, which was still able to add a touch of playfulness and incorporate her first name into the brand. She told *The Wall Street Journal*, “I’m the first person to say, ‘OK, of course, I can’t believe we didn’t think of this.’ I obviously had really innocent intentions” (D’Zurilla). Admitting her wrong was the first step to fixing the rhetorical failure, and allowing her fans to be included in the new process was another step. In doing so, she showed them that she was open to their criticism and suggestions, and that she can learn along with everyone else. Another thing that aided Kardashian on her journey was the fact that she pushed back the release date in order to accommodate the name change. She also admitted that she had to reconfigure how to brand the

shape wear, since so many pieces had already had the Kimono logo sewn into them. The *Los Angeles Times* reports, “A little more than a month later she delivered a progress report, explaining how she was working on how to change to a new name without wasting the nearly 2 million garments already imprinted with the old one. ‘I do not want to be wasteful,’ she said” (D’Zurilla). Doing all of this highlights just how carefully the celebrity was willing to listen and to change course. It highlights the fact that she is still teachable, even though she has a high net worth. She was humble enough to backtrack. Doing so ensured the success of the brand.

Kardashian could have forged ahead and released her garments on the original date with the original name, ignoring all of the backlash she received. In all reality, it probably still would have sold well, simply because of who Kardashian is. As one of the most famous people on the planet, she probably could have pushed forward and still made sales, but Kardashian showed fans and critics that she was capable of more than that. Many people accuse Kardashian and her family for thriving in the drama and the backlash, because no publicity is bad publicity, it set a higher standard for celebrities. Kardashian is one of the more straightforward members of the family, choosing to confront her mistakes head on. During her television show *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*, she is seen telling her younger sister that she needs to address her controversial Pepsi commercial instead of ignoring it. All of this shows that Kardashian wants to fix what she can, and all of that comes down to help her brand.

Kardashian is a huge celebrity, and she is not going to be able to please everyone. In fact, it seems that every day there are people picking apart her every move, accusing her of being out of touch, and generally disliking her. All of that is fine, and in reality, she is out of touch, as witnessed by her recent remarks that no one wants to work these days, but the way she handled her shape wear rhetorical failure is a master class in how to handle a mistake. Kardashian did not

realize the amount of backlash she would receive for her use of the word Kimono, and while she might have had good intentions, trying to play into her name and to incorporate reverence for detail into it, traditional Kimono's are not undergarments. The intense backlash could have been ignored, chalked up to a failure like so many celebrities. The world probably would have moved on after the initial outrage. However, Kardashian apologized, explained her intentions, and put the release date on hold while she figured things out. She then included the general public by asking for suggestions so that they felt as if she was making it right by them. After all of that, she underwent a costly rebrand. When it finally launched, it was hugely successful, and it still is. She often has pieces sold out, with people waiting months to get their hands on items, and when they do, they usually come with good reviews. While she puts effort and thought into her work, her brand is connected to her as a person, so making it right was the best thing that she could have done for the business, even if she could have gotten away with ignoring the controversy. Her initial Tweet might have been a massive failure, but the steps that she took to rectify it were correct. It shows that she is willing to learn and grow as a person, regardless if she is one of the biggest celebrities out there. It also lends herself a more positive light in a world where she receives a lot of negative backlash. Kardashian's name change helped to turn a failure into a positive, which helped set her up for an even bigger success.

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