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Advanced Marketing Management

WOKE WASHING: HOW FAST FASHION COMPANIES UNFAIRLY PROFIT FROM SOCIAL CAUSES. CAN A CERTIFICATION LABEL FOR BRAND ACTIVISM OVERCOME THE PROBLEM?

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Abstract

With each passing day, consumers in today's marketplace increasingly expect brands to take radical and clear positions on issues concerning the sociopolitical sphere. A brand's customers are no longer satisfied with buying a specific product or service, but rather a whole value system that they can relate to. That’s the reason why the use of Brand Activism, which is the support that companies give to various social issues, is increasing in all sectors, particularly in the Fast Fashion one.

Brand Activism, which most people associate with positive action, can turn into a marketing gimmick when the company's activist messaging, purpose and values are not aligned. Brands who “preach well and do poorly”, creating a strong divergence between activist messaging and practice, do what it is referred to as Inauthentic Brand Activism, also known as Woke Washing. This phenomenon is rooted in the deceptive interest of supporting a right and social cause. Victims of this strategy are primarily workers who suffer daily injustices related to working conditions and the consumers, who are not equipped with clear and relevant information to distinguish a real activist campaign from a fictitious one. Based on the reference literature, this research proposes a qualitative study to analyse the impact that the inclusion of a certification label could have on Brand Perception and Consumer Purchase Intention. The results suggest that, as in the case of green labels, also a *social label* could help to overcome the multiple problems linked to the Woke Washing phenomenon.

Key words: Brand Activism, Fast Fashion, Woke Washing, Certification Label, Brand Perception, Purchase Intention

Introduction

1.1 Current context: the dynamics of advertising as consumer perceptions of social issues change

The cornerstone of successful marketing is understanding the needs and trends of the target group. The ideas and thoughts prevailing in the minds of consumers are subject to constant change, and the challenging role of a marketer is to identify these changes and build an effective marketing strategy on them.

The public gets used to marketing techniques quite quickly and stops reacting to them, triggering the effect that in psychology is called habituation. Just think of how many rolls of advertising, which are played before YouTube videos or by scrolling through the Instagram homepage, are noticed and remembered. For this reason, advertisers must continue to find new ways to promote their products and services, creative, unconventional and relevant methods, and in doing so, approach a process of orientation towards 'invertising'[1]. When the well-known advertiser Paolo Iabichino first introduced the concept of *invertising* in 2009, the context had already been one of convinced scepticism mixed with widespread consumer disinterest in advertising and, consequently, in brands. It was, in some ways, a crisis of consensus towards traditional forms of brand communication. The general public, accustomed to *push-type* communication methods, based on an incessant demand for attention, was showing signs of disaffection towards such invasive and outdated communication. Due to the emphasis on the spread of Web 2.0, traditional advertising appeared outdated and obsolete. Relationship marketing was gaining ground, and this required companies to acknowledge the centrality of the subject, to recognise their multidimensionality, to take an interest in their words and emotions and to welcome them as an equal partner. The Cluetrain Manifesto (1999), a cult of marketers of all times, well reflects the cultural climate of the new millennium of communication: the interpretation of markets as conversations, made up of human beings and not demographic segments; the adoption of a natural voice, not artificial, in conversations, so that they appear human; the use of the internet as a vector of conversations between human beings and so on[2]... Talking about invertising, and therefore making this revolutionary movement, means approaching the change from a push dynamic to a *pull* dynamic: that is, abandoning the idea of pushing out an advertising message aimed at a mass target, and instead committing to pulling in people who find the things the brand has decided to communicate interesting. This requires companies to abandon the idea of advertising as a monologue and open up to a direct dialogue with their customers, who go from being consumers to users. Quoting Iabichino, invertising is "trying to understand how to make a different kind of advertising, more relevant and closer to the people who choose to buy a

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[1] Iabichino P. (2009), *Invertising. Ovvero se la pubblicità cambia il suo senso di marcia*, Guerini e Associati

[2] Weinberger D. (1999), *The Cluetrain Manifesto*, Rick Levine, 1rst Italian edition, 2001

product every day [...] Because being chosen is infinitely more profitable than being bought "[3]. In this process, listening is the key to trigger the paradigm shift from instilling needs to generating affection.

According to thesis 23 of the Cluetrain Manifesto: "companies seeking to position themselves strategically must take a position, ideally on something that the market is really interested in"[4]. This translates into one of the focal points of this communication process: the shift from the brand idea to the brand ideal, with the aim of bringing people closer to brands on shared value territories. Today more than ever, brands have become endorsers of public opinion; consumers, in the midst of a crisis of credibility towards capitalism and their own governmental forces, place their trust in brands, now considered an essential purchasing consideration, to represent something, to do the right thing, to help solve social and political problems. Indeed, Edelman's latest research shows that consumers are increasingly suspicious, with 57% of respondents saying they are disappointed with the management of the public system as a whole[5].

According to a survey by the Washington Post and the Kaiser Family, one in five Americans has attended some form of political rally since the beginning of 2016[6], a figure that well represents how many intend to become more politically active in the future. The latest trend in the social zeitgeist is 'wokeness'[7], or the social and political awareness that leads more and more people to talk about social issues such as sexism, racism and inequality and try to find ways to solve them. The 2018 Edelman Earned Brand study[8], conducted among 34,000 adults worldwide, reveals that almost two-thirds (64%) of consumers now buy based on shared value beliefs, a significant increase of 13 percentage points since 2017, allowing us to define, thus, the Belief-Driven Buyers[9] who, unlike traditional consumers, who may have prioritised price or convenience, want to see brands that improve the world along with profit. They will choose, change, avoid, or boycott a brand based on its stance on political or social issues they care about. The Belief-Driven mindset has now become mainstream, so much so that it is now the majority in all markets surveyed, across all age groups and income levels. Almost as many consumers between the ages of 35 and 54 are buying driven by brand values as those between the ages of 18 and 34; the most impressive growth, however, comes from the older cohort, with an increase of 18 percentage points among those aged 55 and over. A brand's

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[3] Iabichino P. (2009), *Invertising. Ovvero se la pubblicità cambia il suo senso di marcia*, Guerini e Associati

[4] Weinberger D. (1999), *The Cluetrain Manifesto*, Rick Levine, 1rst Italian edition, 2001

[5] Edelman (2020), *2020 Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report: In Brands We Trust? Research Report*, Edelman Trust Barometer Annual Global Study

[6] Report The Washington Post e Kaiser Family Foundation

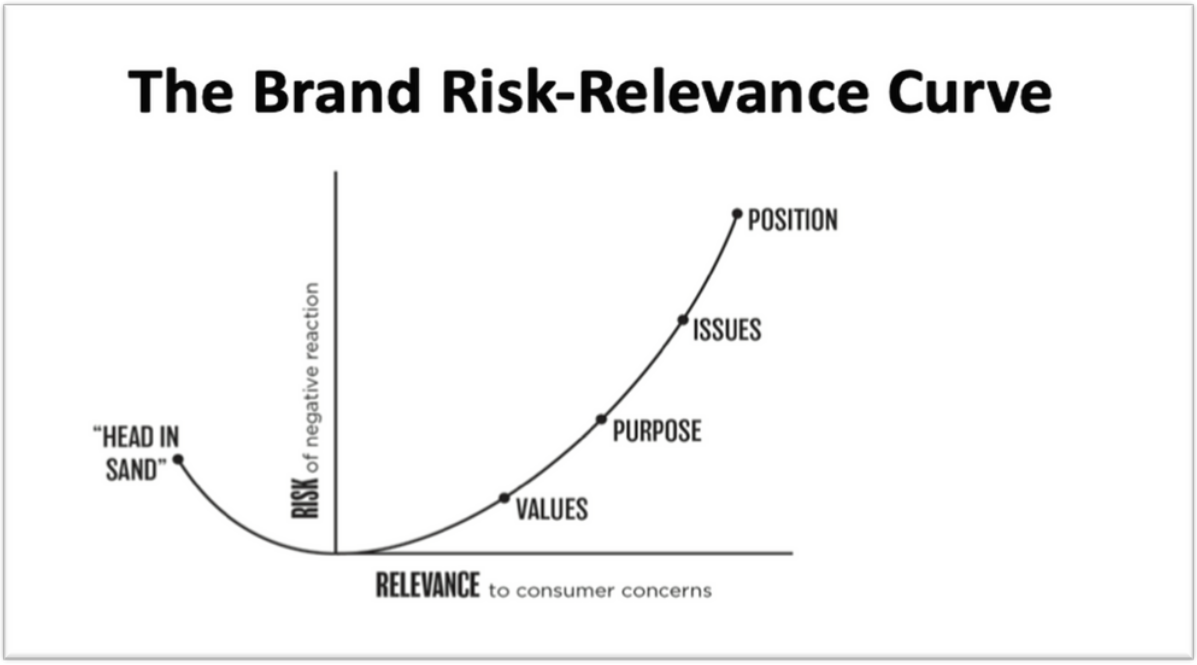
[7] Whiteout S. (2018), *Popularizing Wokeness,* Harvard Journal of African American Public Policy, 63-70

[8] Edelman (2018), *2018 Edelman Trust Barometer: Expectations for CEOs*, Research Report, Edelman Trust Barometer Annual Global Study

[9] Ries T. (2017), *Belief-Driven Buyers - The untapped opportunity for brands,* Edelman

standing drives both purchase intent and advocacy. Showing the principles of a brand or its products inspires purchase in equal measure; indeed, buyers are just as likely to express purchase intent after seeing a communication focused on a brand's value principles as they are after seeing a communication focused on the product. In addition, a communication focused on brand values has an even greater effect on the consumer's intention to support the brand than one focused on product characteristics, thus underlining the strong advocacy role that addressing socially relevant topics could play. There are many reasons why brands may want to take a stand, but one of them is simply that it is good for business. It didn't take long for marketers to realise the importance of social issues to consumers and find ways to use them. Showing responsibility and taking a stand on something builds much-needed trust between a company and its target audience, and companies that reward this trust will see a leap forward in their profits. The days when a company's only responsibility was to sell a product and make a profit are over. Brands with a social cause are growing by leaps and bounds and represent a larger share of the market. Many brands are implementing what could be called 'social issues marketing', although not all of them are getting a positive response. Some brands do not dare to address these issues and choose to stay away from the fine line between being relevant and being controversial.

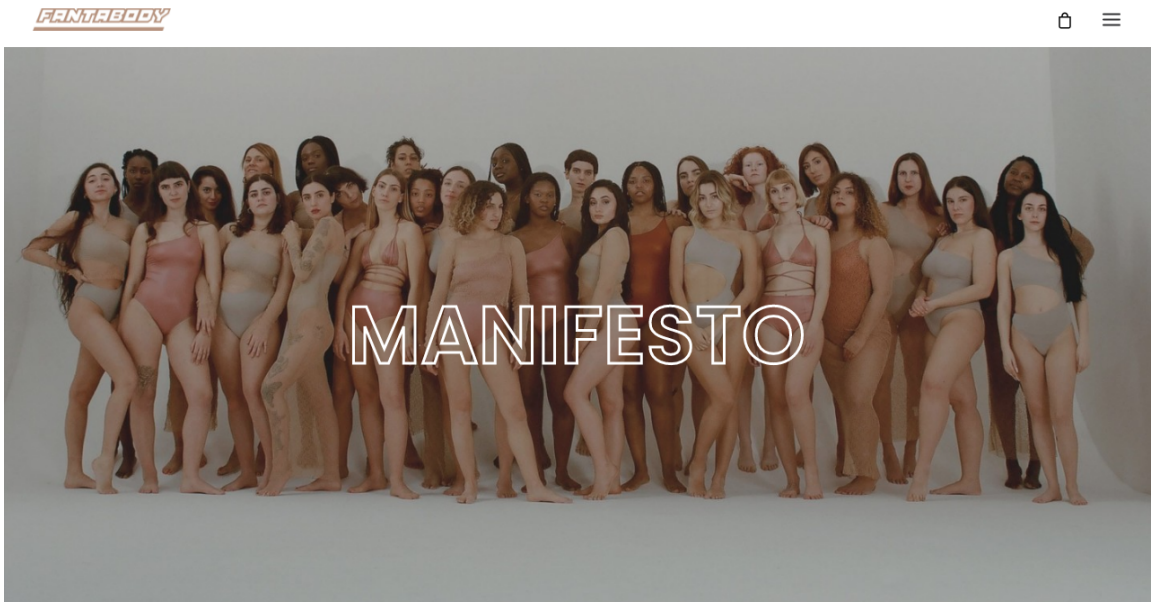
Brand Risk-Relevance is the idea of Fortune 500 marketing executive Peter Horst, presented in his latest book. In it, he identifies a tool to identify different ways to reflect social justice issues in marketing strategy[10].



(Brand Risk Relevance Curve, "Marketing in the #FakeNews Era", Peter Horst)

[10] Horst P. (2018), *Marketing in the #fakenews Era: New Rules for a New Reality of Tribalism, Activism, and Loss of Trust,* Advantage Media Group

The first way is the "*head in sand"* approach, it occurs when the company stays out of anything even slightly political. This approach is not ideal for two reasons: brands may lose the relevance and trust of their customers and risk coming under fire every time there is a social issue that directly affects their company.
The next step is to address the *Values*. This is a safe and basic tactic, almost ubiquitous in today's marketing. On the web page of any brand, in fact, you can find a section dedicated to the fulfilment of its mission with the values it embodies. Generally, values become part of a brand image and do not always refer to social justice issues: they can be as simple as family, security, trust and so on. Peter Horst recommends integrating them throughout the organisation as a kind of internal moral compass. Fantabody[11] is a good example of a focus on values in its marketing: they emphasise the importance of diversity and transparency in their activities.



(Fantabody Manifesto, from https://www.fantabody.com/manifesto/)

A more proactive action is to embrace *Purpose*. Here, companies deal with generally popular and non-controversial issues and do not make hot political statements. The trend is to incorporate these issues into an advertising campaign or overall brand strategy. A good example is the Patagonia DON'T BUY THIS JACKET campaign[12], audacious and potentially suicidal, but that has brought astounding results and created one of the most famous cases of unconventional marketing. The ad promotes more ethical and responsible consumption by listing the environmental and ecological costs involved in producing a single garment, such as the more than 130 litres of water used and the 10 kg of carbon dioxide emitted.

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[11] https://www.fantabody.com/manifesto/

[12] Hwang C., Lee Y., Diddi S., Karpova E. (2016), *"Don't buy this jacket": Consumer reaction toward anti-consumption apparel advertisement,* Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management, 1361-2026

(Patagonia Black Friday 2011 ADV)

The next somewhat riskier step is to present *controversial issues* without taking sides. This tactic results in generating a lot of buzz around the brand, while considering a higher risk of it being frowned upon by people. The advantage of this tactic is that it leaves a space to backtrack and apologise - 'we didn't expect such a backlash, we just wanted to raise this significant issue'. This generates even more publicity: first, because of the controversy around the ad and then another wave once an apology is issued.

Finally, the tactic that has the greatest risk of causing backlash is to take a *position*. In this case, a brand declares its point of view on a particular issue and might even act beyond the creation of visual spots/ slogans, for example, by making donations to specific charities or discontinuing work with certain influencers. ZARA is an example for this kind of strategy: on their website you can find the new #JoinLife advertising campaign, which aims to promote morally and ethically just production, both in human and environmental terms. It is no coincidence that a black model is used, with a minimal and natural background.

(Zara #JoinLife 2021 ADV)

The line between *Issue* and *Position* can be quite vague: sometimes it can be difficult to predict how the audience will react to certain choices. For example, if you put a certain controversial person in a commercial, the intention is to take a position, but you run the risk that this will not be perceived by the audience. Recently, more than a few marketing campaigns have shown brands taking a position, either deliberately or unintentionally, on one or more hot topics, which has led to very polarising reactions. It would be a mistake, however, to think that this backlash was not expected; sometimes, being controversial breaks down the chrism of negativity.

1.2. Brands and politics

Many brands are experimenting with political branding, as a substantial number of studies have reported that Millennials and, even more so, Generation Z are more socially aware than their predecessors and engage in conscious capitalism, using brand purchases to support social causes. Despite the evidence, marketers largely disagree: only 21% believe brands should take a stance on political issues, saying this would have a negative effect on their ability to acquire and retain customers, as well as the drawbacks of making their company stand out in an undesirable way and demonstrating that they are wasting resources on non-strategic activities. A New York Times analyst stated, "In an era filled with divisive political discourse, most major

public companies try to avoid taking positions that might anger customers, particularly when rapid social media campaigns can make any decision a broader social statement."[13] Russ Klein, CEO of the American Marketing Association says: "For many brands today, the blurred line between purpose and profit presents a knotty management problem... I would generally advise against positioning a brand around issues where there are polarising viewpoints. The opportunity to grow a brand is maximised when you bring together many differently minded people who can be satisfied by a powerful and unifying solution to something in their lives... Like Nike, I agree that there are times when it is more important to be provocative than enjoyable. However, from a marketing perspective, my advice to brand owners is that this is an unnecessarily dangerous manoeuvre, commercially or morally, because draping a politically incendiary cape around your brand does not make you a superhero."[14] Industry analysts have sensed the potential of political branding, but have also urged caution, pointing to the role that 'political fatigue' might play. A recent study found that 67% of Americans could be classified as part of the 'exhausted majority', a segment that is tired of the political polarisation in America and seeks to find common ground rather than provoke heated debates. “There is a tremendous anxiety about division and a sense, for most people, that their voice is not being heard... There is a tendency, I think, for the whole nature of political polarisation to become so unpalatable that there are large numbers of people who are turning away from it altogether and don't want to choose sides". In the development of socially motivated promotional campaigns one is likely to stumble, even quite consciously, into politically motivated repercussions. This could be done by involving a leading political figure, perhaps through the inclusion of contrasting testimonials; by dealing with particularly politically controversial topics, especially in certain parts of the world; or even by adopting a campaign linked to a social movement with political repercussions.

1.3. Purpose Marketing aka Brand Activism: the latest marketing trend

At the moment business and society are two warring factions. Society cannot trust business because it knows that it is largely business itself that is creating incredible social and environmental problems. That’s the reason why companies are developing different strategies in order to make their businesses be perceived as more ethical both in social and environmental context[15].

It is precisely from the need to pursue the realisation of shared value, i.e. to unite business and social purposes of the whole community, that purpose marketing also known as Brand Activism was born. Brand

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[13] https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/04/sports/nike-colin-kaepernick.html

[14] https://medium.com/marketing-today/nike-and-the-arrogance-of-moral-certainty-8a5a494fdc96

[15] Porter M.E., Kramer M.R. (2019) Creating Shared Value. In: Lenssen G., Smith N. (eds) Managing Sustainable Business. Springer, Dordrecht. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1144-7_16

Activism is an emerging form of marketing for brands seeking to stand out in a market that is still too profit-driven. In the context of Brand Activism, brands communicate their products or services by taking public positions on social and political issues, thus opening up to purposes other than the mere achievement of revenue[16].

Considering this definition, one could venture that in recent years doing good has become a categorical imperative and a source of competitive advantage in the business world, regardless of the industry in which companies operates. Indeed, launching your company in the right direction could mean assuming an ethereal and distinctive aura, be it in fashion, food and beverage, sports industry... However, communication strategies based on Brand Activism can have both positive and negative effects[17]. In fact, associating the brand to a social cause can mean a positive increase in the consumers' perception of the company, as well as improving reputation and increasing market share... but it can also mean arousing public indignation, normally followed by public boycott. When taking a stand in such sensitive dynamics, the stakes are always high. The success of a strategy that focuses on social issues derives both from the ability to understand one's target audience and from the ability to put into practice what has been communicated, converting the purpose of the brand into clear and tangible action. A new vision of the company and its consumption decision-making process comes into play. From a closed system, the company gets in touch with a series of subjects such as institutions, political decision-makers, activists and other brands. In coming into contact with such a dense and complex network of relationships based on precarious balances, each company must necessarily learn to exercise a real *brand diplomacy*[18], aware that it has an active and participatory role that goes far beyond making products or services available or generating profit.

From a marketing-driven perspective, Brand Activism thus proposes a society-driven perspective: consumption becomes less and less functional and more and more identity-based and driven[19]. Thus the consumer is driven to buy a certain good that represents membership of a certain creed, culture or ideology. This approach is typical of younger consumers, Millennials and Generation Z, for whom in the decision-making process leading to purchase (CDJ), in addition to the factors of product/service quality or economic convenience, what counts is a certain affinity with the brand's values or the possibility of identifying with them.

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[16] Moorman C. (2020), "Commentary: Brand Activism in a Political World,", Journal of Public Policy and Marketing, 39 (4), 388–92

[17] Sarkar C., Kotler P. (2018), *Brand Activism: From Purpose to Action*, Idea Bite Press

[18] Mogensen K. (2017), *From public relations to corporate public diplomacy,* Public Relations Review, Volume 43, Issue 3, Pages 605-614

[19] Johnson O., Chattaram V. (2020), *Signaling socially responsible consumption among millennials: an identity-based perspective*, Social Responsibility Journal, 1747-1117

1.3.1. Brand Activism and CSR: two worlds not too far apart

The objectives and premises of Brand Activism seem to overlap with those of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Environment, Social and Governance (ESG) and in fact it is again Kotler and Sarkar who identify Brand Activism as a sort of "natural evolution" of CSR[20]. Some studies also show how Brand Activism can be compared to the so-called "issue management "[21], i.e. with the ability of a company or a brand to intercept hot topics and issues of a given period, within a specific community, in line with the principles of the target audience. In this sense, using the expression 'corporate diplomacy' to refer to the priority that taking a stand has assumed for companies can be inclusive. In fact just as more traditional diplomacy corporate diplomacy needs to understand which causes it cares most about or which divide the opinion of the community it addresses, to build an agenda of priorities among them and to establish a certain perceived relevance. While it is true that companies and brands can no longer afford not to take sides, it is also true that they need to make their choices as wisely as possible.

Although Brand Activism and CSR may have points in common, it is important to emphasise that they differ in two distinct ways. In Brand Activism, the social purpose and the inherent corporate values are more at the core of the business, whereas in CSR they are more on the periphery although still taken into account[22].
Secondly, CSR-related activities are evaluated positively by most of society, whereas Brand Activism lacks this kind of consensus because there is often no universally 'correct' answer to the socio-political issues under consideration[23]. Picking up on what was said earlier, we can consider Brand Activism as an evolution of CSR.

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[20] Sarkar C., Kotler P. (2018), *Brand Activism: From Purpose to Action*, Idea Bite Press

[21] Cino V., Fontana A. (2019), *Corporate diplomacy. Perché le imprese non possono più restare politicamente neutrali,* Egea

[22] Wettstein F., Baur D. (2016), *'Why Should We Care About Marriage Equality?': Political Advocacy as a Part of Corporate Responsibility*, Journal of Business Ethics, 138 (2), 199–213

[23] Korschun D., Rafieian H., Aggarwal A., Swain S. D. (2016), *Taking a Stand: Consumer Responses When Companies Get (or Don't Get) Political*, SSRN, 2019

1.4 Types of Brand Activism and their application areas

The first important distinction is that between Regressive & Progressive Activism, which can be seen in the work of Kotler and Sarkar[24]. A form of regressive Brand Activism leads companies to either boast unconfirmed benefits of their production activities or products/services or, more frequently, to minimise their negative impact. This was more common in the past than it is now, just think of the advertisements of the past that did not bother to promote masculine and misogynistic stereotypes. The forerunner of regressive activism, to take one specific example, is the Big Tobacco case[25] - tobacco companies who for so many years denied the harm their products caused consumers, even when their own research revealed otherwise.

(First Big Tobacco Companies ADV)

On the side of progressive activism, more and more companies are seeking to make an impact on society's biggest problems with a purpose greater than the simple pursuit of profit, sometimes presenting themselves as initiators of new ideas and interests, leading them increasingly to be considered leaders in their fields. Identifying a brand as avant-garde or retrograde is not a straightforward operation, but some tools help us to

[24] Sarkar C., Kotler P. (2018), *Brand Activism: From Purpose to Action*, Idea Bite Press

[25] Kumar N. (2020), *Study the impact of brand activism and political activism on marketing trends,* European Journal of Molecular & Clinical Medicine, Volume 7, Issue 10, Pages 2010-2021

unequivocally define the nature of the brand, or at least of the respondents' perception of it. In this regard, Kotler and Sarkar propose an innovative method based on the concept of *common good*[26] to measure the level of activism inherent in the brand under analysis. The common good is defined as something that is shared and from which benefits all or nearly all members of a given community or alternatively something that is achieved by the citizenry in the sphere of public service. Following this reasoning it is possible to label regressive Brand Activism as a form of opposition to the common good, while progressive Brand Activism in favour of the community.

Depending on whether a brand presents itself as progressive or regressive, it may lead consumers to discriminate against it or, conversely, to 'evangelise' it. Specifically, a consumer in line with the position taken by the brand will be driven to show support for the company by consciously buying their products, thus activating a 'buycott' behaviour. Otherwise, a consumer might refuse to buy or use a company's or brand's product in protest against its position, thus triggering boycott mechanisms[27]. According to a study conducted by Weber Shandwick and KRC in 2018[28], the portion of consumers supporting brand activists prevails with 83% believing it is more important to take action in terms of "buycott"; while 59% of consumers would be more likely to take part in a boycott. In an era where transparency is an imperative, a diktat, the most appropriate strategy to pursue is the pursuit of justice. Companies that act justly have a greater drive to increase their authority in the market, and it is in this connection that Brand Activism takes on the appearance of brand identity.

Kotler and Sarkar also identify the scope of application of Brand Activism, defining six areas[29]:

a) *Social Activism*: this is often the one most approached by brands and companies from the most diverse sectors, with many business entities recently going public with their position on the recognition of the rights of the LGTBQ+ community, abortion or immigration, for example. It includes areas such as gender equality, race, age; as well as social and community issues associated with education, school funding, etc;

b) *Legal Activism*: deals with laws and policies that have an impact on companies, such as tax laws, the workplace and employment;

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[26] Intermite S. (2019), *Brand Activism: An Interview with Philip Kotler and Christian Sarkar,* The Marketing Journal

[27] Friedman M. (1996), *A positive approach to organized consumer action: The "buycott" as an alternative to the boycott,* Journal of Consumer Policy 19, 439–451

[28] Weber SHandwick and KRC (2018), *Battle of the Wallets: the Changing Landscape of Consumer Activism*

[29] Sarkar C., Kotler P. (2018), *Brand Activism: From Purpose to Action*, Idea Bite Press

c) *Business Activism*: deals with governance, company organisation, CEO compensation, workers' compensation, labour relations and internal workplace policies;

d) *Economic Activism*: may include minimum wage and tax policies that have an impact on income inequality and wealth redistribution. Quite a few companies have recently taken up this type of activism in favour of eliminating the gender pay gap or in favour of granting parental leave to new fathers;

e) *Political Activism:* concerns lobbying, voting rights, electoral politics (gerrymandering, campaign financing, etc.) and migration policies;

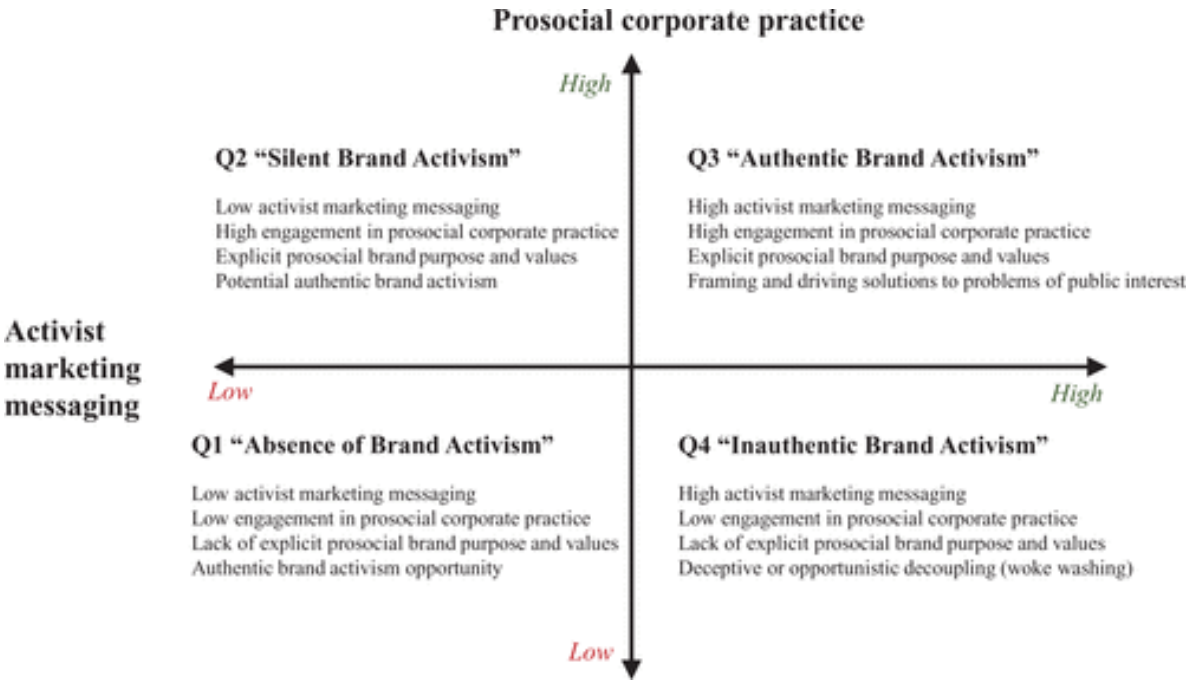
f) *Environmental Activism* deals with laws and policies on conservation, environment, land use, air and water pollution to combat the looming threat of climate emergency.

Of the different types of Brand Activism identified by Kotler and Sakar, the one considered in this paper is Social Activism.

1.4.1. Present or absent? Authentic or inauthentic? Further distinctions of Brand Activism

Drawing on the work of Vredenburg J., Kapitan S., Spry A. and Kemper J., we can analyze other four types of Brand Activism: absent, silent, authentic and inauthentic. The study under consideration[30] proposes a division based on the degree of activist marketing messaging (from high to low) and the degree of pro-social corporate practice (from high to low), thus defining four types of Brand Activism resulting in the following four quadrants.

[30] Vredenburg J., Kapitan S., Spry A. and Kemper J. (2020), *Brands Taking a Stand: Authentic Brand Activism or Woke Washing?,* Journal of Public Policy and Marketing



1) *Absence of Brand Activism:* brands in the first quadrant are those that have not yet adopted pro-social business practices or communication strategies related to activist marketing. These brands normally operate in sectors that do not require social engagement and whose consumers have no interest in getting involved in social dynamics.

2) *Silent Brand Activism:* brands in the second quadrant, although they embrace socio-political causes, do not make this decision explicit but work on them long-term in a tacit way. Their activism is part of their modus operandi and is intrinsically linked to their purpose and values.

3) *Authentic Brand Activism:* brands in quadrant three are those in which their brand purpose and values, activist marketing communication and concrete business practices are aligned. In short, the brand practices what it preaches. Authentic Brand Activism is the best form of Brand Activism for two reasons: it provides for a truthful alignment of activist marketing communication and concrete business practice; it improves brand equity outcomes.

4) *Inauthentic Brand Activism:* brands in quadrant four are those that embrace sociopolitical dynamics through activist marketing communication, but lack an explicit purpose and values and do not exhibit substantial pro-social business practices. Worse still, some of these brands actively conceal their lack of practices or misconduct by using Brand Activism as a deterrent.

1.4.2. Authenticity as a fundamental requirement for Brand Activism

Authenticity of Brand Activism, understood as the alignment of a brand's explicit purpose and values with its activist marketing messaging and pro-social corporate practice, is thus a fundamental requirement for the success of the marketing strategy decided upon and especially for the social change that is to be achieved through it[31].

When brands become activists in the socio-political sphere, their motivations and activities are increasingly in the eye of the crosshairs[32], and the resulting negative attributions can erode business earnings and brand equity[33]. In short, consumers may not believe brands when they engage in activism and this results in economic and reputational loss.

Several scholars have highlighted how important it is to be authentic when it comes to Brand Activism. Not surprisingly, several researches, including the one conducted by Edelman in 2019, point out that more than 50% of consumers believe that too many brands use social issues to sell more than their product[34].
At the same time, consumers increasingly expect big brands to openly take sides on sociopolitical dynamics[35]: some market research conducted between 2017 and 2018 reveals that 65% of individuals want companies and CEOs to take clear positions on these issues[36].

Drawing on and extending Moorman's work[37] on Brand Activism, we formally define and examine authentic Brand Activism as "a purpose- and values-driven strategy in which a brand takes a clear, clear, and radical

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31 Keller K. (1993), *Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Managing Customer-Based Brand Equity*, Journal of Marketing, 57 (1), 1–22

32 Holt D. B. (2002), *Why Do Brands Cause Trouble? A Dialectical Theory of Consumer Culture and Branding*, Journal of Consumer Research, 29 (1), 70–90

33 Shuili D., Bhattacharya C.B., Sankar S. (2010), *Maximizing Business Returns to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR): The Role of CSR Communication*, International Journal of Management Reviews, 12 (1), 8–19

34 Edelman (2019), *2019 Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report: In Brands We Trust? Research Report*, Edelman Trust Barometer Annual Global Study

35 Hoppner J., Vadakkepatt G. (2019), *Examining Moral Authority in the Marketplace: A Conceptualization and Framework*, Journal of Business Research, 95, 417–27

36 Barton et al. (2018), *To Affinity and Beyond: From Me to We, The Rise of the Purpose-Led Brand*, Accenture Strategy

37 Moorman C. (2020), *Commentary: Brand Activism in a Political World*, Journal of Public Policy and Marketing, 39 (4), 388–92

stance on institutionally contested sociopolitical issues to achieve social change as well as marketing strategy success".

2. Woke-washing: what it is and how it manifests itself

In contrast to Authentic Brand Activism, some brands may disconnect their communications from brand objectives, values and corporate practices. This happens when brands use sociopolitical issues as a deterrent to enhance their reputation and increase their earnings[38]. For example, Nike continued to sponsor NFL teams that rejected Colin Kaepernick after he took a knee as a Black Lives Matter protester, despite embracing Kaepernick as its endorser[39]. In this example, as in the case of greenwashing, companies and brands decide to deceive consumers about the sociopolitical performance of a company or the social benefits of the product in order to reap economic benefits[40]. Fundamentally, the brand preaches well and does poorly. Although most consumers do not have the right tools to recognise the phenomenon of Woke-Washing, another part can perceive that brands use social issues as a marketing ploy to sell more of their product[41].

In fact, research conducted by Mintel, the London-based market research company, found that 56% of American consumers will stop buying brands they do not consider ethical[42]. In the collision between consumer buying on brand values and the increased ethical awareness driven by an increasingly "woke" population, consumers are voting with their dollars more than ever before. Brand Activism is gaining traction and has the power to shape our economies and culture. In a recent Forbes study, 75% of Millennials and Generation Z said it was important that the brands they buy from give back to society, showing a growing level of disinterest, ambivalence and outrage towards companies that denounce social injustice without showing any signs of action[43]. However, this is a delicate subject. Brands need to be fully in line with the cause they are approaching: today's consumer is an informed one and will immediately notice if there are discrepancies between the brand's intentions and actions. Brands that are considering taking a stand must be strategic and authentically support causes that have a strong link to the brand's value and message. It is crucial, therefore, that brands align themselves with social, environmental or political issues that match the

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[38] Campbell J. L. (2007), *Why Would Corporations Behave in Socially Responsible Ways? An Institutional Theory of Corporate Social Responsibility*, Academy of Management Review, 32 (3), 946–67

[39] Carp S. (2018), *NFL Confirms Long-Term Extension with Nike*, Sports Pro Media (accessed March 28, 2019)

[40] Delmas M. A., Burbano V. (2011), *The Drivers of Greenwashing*, California Management Review, 54 (1), 64–87

[41] Edelman (2019), *2019 Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report: In Brands We Trust? Research Report*, Edelman Trust Barometer Annual Global Study

[42]https://www.mintel.com/press-centre/social-and-lifestyle/56-of-americans-stop-buying-from-brands-they-believe-are-unethical

[43] Perna M. C. (2020), *Millennials And Money: What They Regret Most,* Forbes

way consumers and stakeholders see them. If the cause is not one that the brand already has a history of promoting and is not related to their products or services, consumers may react negatively, generating a serious boomerang effect. There is an unspoken agreement that a brand's values are a statement of what it stands for and seeks to defend. All brands that support and evangelise diversity, women's empowerment, environmental sustainability and any other important social issue of our time should benefit from the increased ethical and moral awareness we are experiencing. And, in an age where buying from a brand is a vote for its values, establishing a clear purpose and genuinely supporting it not only puts the brand on the right side of history, but affects the bottom line. Today we talk about Woke-Washing, the appropriation of ethical values as a form of marketing; a market strategy that often hides the dark side of conventional capitalist corporate management[44].

A concept, in short, that resembles the 1980s 'greenwashing' and a form of corporate social responsibility, but which in reality is merely the application of a trend. It is precisely the creation of a 'woke' identity without a real adherence to those values that risks becoming counterproductive for both the company and society, emptying important causes such as the environment or civil rights of their value. The Urban Dictionary's definition of woke-washing is "using social justice as a marketing strategy"[45]. In fact, as The Guardian also points out, woke-washing began to be talked about when companies and large international groups began to exploit themes such as civil rights, the environment, social equality... in order to more easily reach specific targets of consumers by appealing to their sensibilities, lifestyles and value patterns, thus implementing a boundless advertising operation[46]. One of the most repeated mantras these days is that brands cannot avoid taking a stand. This sort of duty to have a say on the most pressing public issues derives above all from consumer expectations but also, and no less importantly, from the way consumers themselves seem to be making their purchasing decisions today. Those who have studied them as targets for their own marketing campaigns emphasise that, especially Millennials and Generation Z, pay attention to how the company's mission and values relate to their own worldview and value system. As one of the few people they still trust, brands should be able to offer their audience a purpose with which to confront the profound transformation of a society that is at times incomprehensible. The accusations of woke-washing are among these risks, as is, for example, that of encouraging, even unconsciously, forms of lazy activism ("slacktivism")[47] and the conviction, that is, in those who buy, for example, a pink gadget during the month

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[44] Vredenburg J., Kapitan S., Spry A. and Kemper J. (2020), *Brands Taking a Stand: Authentic Brand Activism or Woke Washing?,* Journal of Public Policy and Marketing

[45] https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=woke%20washing

[46] Mahdawi A. (2018), *Woke-washing brands cash in on social justice. It's lazy and hypocritical,* The Guardian

[47] McCafferty D. (2011), *Activism vs. slacktivism,* Communications of the ACM, Volume 54, Issue 12, 17-19

of October, that they have done their part in the fight against breast cancer. However, there are ways to avoid CSR or Brand Activism initiatives being perceived as bogus and opportunistic:

a) choose the cause well and make sure that it is as coherent as possible with one's own history, values and corporate mission and, at the same time, with the campaigns - communication, charity - already carried out in the past;

b) be clear and transparent about the reasons why you have chosen to support one cause, one movement and not others, especially when donations or fundraising operations are also at stake;

c) assess the risks well: reputational of course because no matter how well-intentioned you are it is almost impossible to avoid someone suggesting that there are hidden interests behind one's Brand Activism. Every time you stand up for a cause, you also risk leaving unhappy, or losing, a portion of consumers with a different opinion, and you are not always so big and successful that you can give it up lightly;

d) build congruence between words and actions: many accusations of woke washing have been levelled at brands for the contradiction between the messages conveyed in their campaigns and the actions taken even in their own work routines;

e) not try to be creative or provocative at all costs, especially when sensitive issues are at stake. In this sense, the flop of the fashion show in which Gucci brought a straitjacket on the catwalk to turn the spotlight on the issue of mental health55 is representative (the same fashion house that had celebrated, shortly before, the freedom of women's bodies with pro-abortion Gucci jackets, triggering the debate on Brand Activism and corporate diplomacy);

f) have a good crisis management strategy in order to be able to manage the possible backlash from the resentment or boycott of some consumers or the wrath of some political forces.

2.1. Relevant cases

Lately, many brands have embarked on the path of purpose marketing, manifesting, however, ill-concealed attempts to follow a trend; ending up, instead, by providing quite representative cases of woke washing, which can serve as a warning to avoid repeating the same mistakes.

A striking example of woke-washing in the Fast Fashion industry is the one that takes place every year on the International Women's Day. Almost all companies, such as Zara, H&M, Bershka... in the industry run advertising campaigns with feminist slogans and/or feminist ambassadors, emphasising the need to link attributes such as *powerful, independent, respectable* to the female sphere. The image below, for example, shows the Swedish singer, songwriter and dancer Zara Larsson wearing one of the products from her capsule collection in collaboration with H&M, launched for the International Women's Day in 2017. Inspired by the Swedish pop star's style, the capsule collection includes an over-sized hoodie and a t-shirt dress, both emblazoned with hot pink graphics and strong feminist messages.

(H&M x Zara Larsson 2017 Capsule Collection ADV)

The Guardian has reported that most women working in Fast Fashion in Vietnam, where H&M has a lot of its producers, have been harassed, groped, and even kidnapped[48]. Fast Fashion operations actively undermine the causes that they seemingly support. Women make up most of the garment workforce. Out of an estimated 8 million garment workers, 85% are women. Women are often in the lowest-paid positions and risk sexual harassment by superiors.

Another clear example of Woke Washing is the one that took place last May 2020, following the death of George Floyd on 25 May in the city of Minneapolis. The tragic event represented yet another case of American police brutality perpetuated to the detriment of the black population. It is the trigger for a long period of protests that aim to constitute a real anti-racist revolt, in which several big companies and many famous faces are also taking part. Some American brands, which are usually reluctant to take particularly radical positions on such sensitive and polarising issues, have on this occasion supported the protests of the victims of American systemic racism. Of all the messages communicated during this period, Nike's

[48]https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/mar/07/hm-hennes-mauritz-supply-factory-in-myanmar-damaged-in-violent-labour-protest

campaign against racism, "For Once, Don't Do It"[49], has a particular impact. Nike's adv came at a time when the nation was navigating not only increased racial strife, but also a global pandemic that exposed the country's deep racial inequalities. And with political divisions at an all-time high, individuals are increasingly looking for familiar voices they can trust during a crisis, this includes brands and athletes they have long been familiar with. Nike's long history of fighting bigotry, hate and inequality starts at the top of the company. According to internal reports, Nike President and CEO John Donhoe shared this reminder with his employees, "I have wondered how to respond in times like these, both as a citizen and as a member of the Nike family," Donhoe wrote.

"Let me be as clear as possible: Nike opposes bigotry. We oppose hate and inequality in all its forms, indirect and overt. While Nike cannot solve injustice, I believe we have a responsibility to work to address it as best we can. What we can do is inspire and empower ourselves and others to act - and try to help shape a better society, acting as a beacon of hope and resilience "[50].

With this message Nike wanted to emphasise its position and closeness to movements working against racial discrimination, including Black Lives Matter, as it has already done with the commercial featuring Kaepernick. After the death of a black man, arrested and knocked to the ground by a white police officer who suffocated him by pressing his knee on his neck for several minutes, who remained impassive to the repeated sound of "I can't breathe", a scene that, also symbolically, represents the supremacy of white man over black man and, after the protests that broke out in Minneapolis, the brand could not avoid creating an ad hoc communication.

This time the Nike campaign against racism was based on a commercial, shared on the main official social platforms of the brand with the caption "Let's all be part of the change", which is also the phrase that closes the video before the famous swoosh. On the same day, the advertising campaign received 35 thousand retweets and more than two million views[51].

The reference to Nike's famous 'Just Do It' payoff is clear, becoming 'For Once Don't Do It': 'Don't pretend there's not a problem in America. Don't turn your back on racism. Don't accept innocent lives being taken from us. Don't make any more excuses. Don't think it doesn't affect you. Don't sit back and be silent. Don't think you can't be part of the change. Let's all be part of the change", this is the textual reference of the commercial, as well as Nike's exhortation to avoid suffering injustice. The communicative strength of this campaign against racism lies entirely in the essentiality of the words used and in the use of anaphora, which

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[49] Nadim H. (2020), *"Woke-Washing" a Brand: Socially Progressive Marketing by Nike on Twitter and the User Response to it,* Institutionen för ABM, Uppsala universitet

[50] Cohen S. (2020), *For Once Don't Do It - The Powerful Idea Behind Nike's New Anti-Racism Ad*, Forbes

[51] Nadim H. (2020), *"Woke-Washing" a Brand: Socially Progressive Marketing by Nike on Twitter and the User Response to it,* Institutionen för ABM, Uppsala universitet

marks a repetition of "Don't" at the beginning of each sentence, which becomes an effective expedient to keep the user's attention threshold high throughout the duration of the commercial (60 seconds). At the end of the video, the "Don't" turning into "Let's" communicates the call to immediate action and the possibility to do something to make a concrete change and put racial discrimination aside for good. Accompanying this campaign is the hashtag: #UntilWeAllWin96, which further emphasises that this is not an issue for a small group of people but for the whole community, including brands. The brand's strong message of solidarity and support for the Black Lives Matter movement was further highlighted through other initiatives[52].

(Nike Post on Instagram after George Floyd's death)

From the comments on the above post, also published on the brand's Twitter platform, although most support the message, it is clear that many users have not forgotten certain negative episodes associated with the brand's conduct in the past, leading to an interpretation of the current communications, as well as the support of the American Black community, as a façade, rather than a real and concrete social commitment[53].

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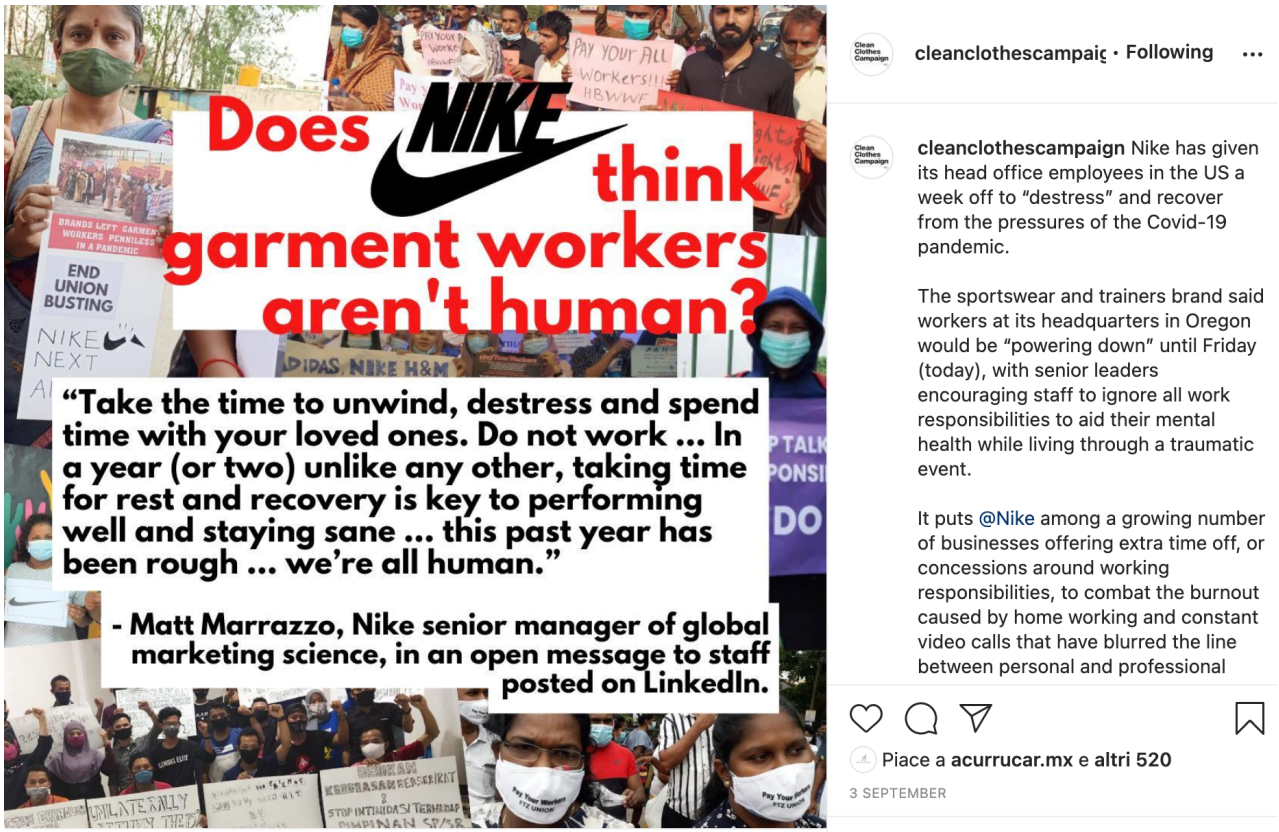
[52] Cohen S. (2020), *For Once Don't Do It - The Powerful Idea Behind Nike's New Anti-Racism Ad*, Forbes

[53] Vredenburg J. et al (2020), *Police Brutality and Running Shoes: Authentic Brand Activism or Woke Washing: An Abstract,* Part of the Developments in Marketing Science: Proceedings of the Academy of Marketing Science book series

A recent study by Ace Metrix[54] found that Nike's ad was perceived positively by 60% of respondents, revealing that the general population of consumers aged 16-49 perceived the ad as 98% more empowering than all other ads. Consumers who found the new ad opportunistic were not opposed to the message, but rather, said they did not want to see a company take advantage of the situation to "sell shoes". Similar to Kaepernick's ads, which experienced an online backlash but were less polarizing than social media suggested, the new ad scored positively for purchase intent and generated less negative purchase intent, signaling a lower likelihood of consumer boycotts. Ace Metrix's research suggests that consumers connect more with ads that take a direct stance against injustice - in this case Nike's, racism and police brutality - and in doing so empower viewers.

These results underline how difficult it is for consumers to distinguish a real campaign from a fictitious one. Although the slogan used by Nike is positive for many, only a minority can recognise that it is a simple publicity stunt, given Nike's known shortcomings with regard to black people, including those in its workforce, who repeatedly report the company for mistreatment and poor working conditions, as the NPO Clean Clothes Campaign underlines in its posts.



[54] https://www.acemetrix.com/insights/blog/nike-for-once-dont-do-it/

cleanclothescampaig · Following

cleanclothescampaign US sportswear giant @Nike saw its fourth quarter revenues rocket 96 per cent higher than the same period last year. Brands like @Nike have the power to make a difference. Pay a #LivingWage and #EndWageTheft: #RespectLabourRights & #PayYourWorkers at the #TokyoOlympics !

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#10CentsMore #UnderpaidInThePandemic #PayHer #SustainableFashion #SustainableClothing #FastFashion #GarmentProduction #LabourRightsAreHumanRights

Piace a **matteo.ward** e **altri 303**

27 JULY

Aggiungi un commento... Pubblica

cleanclothescampaig · Following

cleanclothescampaign Our latest research report found garment workers making clothes for H&M, Primark, and Nike took home $67 (USD) less than before the pandemic, even though they already had problems to make ends meet before.

Garment workers are at breaking point. Brands must #RespectLabourRights & #PayYourWorkers!

Read the full report here: https://cleanclothes.org/breakingpoint Link to our website in out bio

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#10CentsMore #UnderpaidInThePandemic #PayHer #SustainableFashion #SustainableClothing #FastFashion

Piace a **matteo.ward** e **altri 1.181**

2 JULY

(Clean Clothes Campaign Instagram Posts)

The examples of woke washing just mentioned have at least two elements in common. The first is a certain timing of advertising campaigns, hashtag campaigns, CSR initiatives centred on a theme when that same theme is topical - as racial discrimination has become after the death of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests in America, or civil rights become topical every year during Pride June - or, again, when a certain theme is in the news and the subject of imminent public decisions. The second element of commonality lies in the fact that what looks like a lively and participatory form of Brand Activism from the outside is actually an attempt not to miss the trend of the moment, to make one's voice heard, to ride the wave of the news: however committed and ethical they may be, in fact, brands remain profit-making subjects with clear interests to defend.

3. Research Question

In the light of the above, this paper will be part of the emerging literature on the negative effects of Inauthentic Brand Activism and possible solutions to the phenomenon of Woke Washing.
Given that the victims of this phenomenon are mainly younger consumers, children of a radically consumerist system, particular focus will be given to consumers belonging to the latest generations (Millennials and Generation Z), identifying behavioural insights that can serve as reputation amplifiers. Specifically, the research question that this dissertation intends to answer is the following:

"Can a certification label help young consumers in choosing a product that truly respects what the relevant brand promises in the socio-political sphere?"

Brand Activism has emerged as a strategy that fills the lack of trust placed in traditional institutions. The focus of brands on issues of public interest is nothing more than a form of privatisation of social problem solving[55]. The appropriateness of this private mechanism is surely a question that requires further investigation. In general, however, the aims, objectives and end-states of Brand Activism remain as unclear and uncontrolled as those of traditional institutions[56].

The political implications of the type of Brand Activism we will discuss serve as guidelines for brands to maximise the authenticity of their activism strategy and consequently their reputation. In particular, two main paths are encouraged for consumers to make an informed choice and to safeguard the potential impact

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[55] Stewart, David W. (2014), *What Is Policy? And Why It Matters*, Journal of Public Policy & Marketing, 33 (1), 1–3

[56] Dunn, William N. (2015), *Public Policy Analysis*. New York: Routledge

of the Brand Activism strategy for social change[57]. The two paths proposed are a brand-level policy and third-party certification.

As previously mentioned, firstly, the responsibility for the success of Authentic Brand Activism in driving social change depends on the brand-level policy that is designed and used to protect perceptions of authenticity. Brand activists should adopt clear guidelines regarding the choice of words they use within advertising campaigns or within any other type of marketing activity. For example, Authentic Brand Activists should avoid misleading and irrelevant statements while embracing specificity in their activist messaging, thus following the guidelines previously established by anti-greenwashing standards (i.e., ISO 14024 2018)[58]. Authentic Brand Activists should aim to make specific, not overly broad and generalised statements such as 'working for social good', 'socially responsible', 'a socially conscious brand', or 'we promote wellbeing'. This is because such claims may be difficult to prove true for consumers. Instead, messages should be qualified by precise social benefits, using "clear, prominent and specific language". This approach takes its cue from the already well-known common regulatory guidance against greenwashing (FTC 2019)[59].

Secondly, consumers often lack the appropriate tools to evaluate products and services that truly respect what the brand communicates through advertising campaigns in which sociopolitical issues are mentioned[60].

The solution this thesis proposes is that of third-party certification like labels, which are a vital mechanism to bridge the gap between consumer knowledge and trust driven by the increasing presence of brands in activist causes[61].

The question arises: how do consumers know which activist messages to trust and which not to?

Product labels, as in the case of labels on green products, can serve as a certification for attributes included in advertising campaigns that are not directly observable[62].

However, it is important to note that if the activist labels want to be effective, consumers:

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57 Stewart, David W. (2013), *Reinventing Marketing and Public Policy for the Twenty-First Century: An Editorial Statement*. Journal of Public Policy & Marketing, 32 (1), 1–5

58 https://www.uni.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7104%3Aecolabelling-la-en-iso-14024-2018&catid=171&Itemid=2612

59 https://www.ftc.gov/reports/annual-highlights-2019

60 Press M., Arnould E. J. (2009), *Constraints on Sustainable Energy Consumption: Market System and Public Policy Challenges and Opportunities*, Journal of Public Policy & Marketing, 28 (1), 102–13

61 Lai J. (2019), *Woke-Washing: Misleading and Deceptive Conduct*, New Zealand Law Journa, 338–42

62 Daugbjerg et al. (2014), *Improving Eco-labelling as an Environmental Policy Instrument: Knowledge, Trust and Organic Consumption,* Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning, 16 (4), 559–75

1. need to be aware of the rating or labelling standard of the product or service;

2. must have a high degree of trust in the evaluation process and the institutions that deal with it[63].

The idea of proposing the introduction of a certification label stems from the fact that the literature review has shown that there are several variables and factors that can directly or indirectly influence the impact of a certification label on the consumer's purchase intention. In particular, these variables can have a mediating or moderating effect.

The pioneer of this theory was Larceneux[64] who in 2004 identified three main ways in which certification labels can influence consumer purchasing decisions:

1. Perceived quality;
2. Perceived uniqueness;
3. Esteem granted to the producer

The perceived quality of a product is "the evaluation made by the consumer based on the set of intrinsic and external dimensions of the product or service"[65].

In the field of product quality research, it has been shown that brands and labels are, according to most consumers, strong indicators of a product's quality[66].

For example, in the food sector, the distinctiveness of a product certified by a label can be a competitive advantage, as it gives the product the possibility to be different from its competitors, as it has a sense of uniqueness in people's eyes. This process means that when the consumer distinguishes the product by a label, that product is recognised by the public as 'typical'[67]. It is from here that the perceived quality of the product begins to take the form of a mediating variable capable of influencing the impact of the label on consumers' purchase intentions.

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63 Same of 52.

64 Larceneux F. (2004)*, Impact of labelling strategies on the consumer decision process: the case of the organic label*, Actes du XXe Congrès AFM - 6 & 7 Mai 2004, St Malo

65 Sirieix L. and Dubois P-L. (1999), *Towards a quality-satisfaction model integrating trust*, Marketing Research and Applications, vol.14, n°3/99, pp.1-22

66 Grunert et al. (2001), *Perception of quality in food and the role of labels,* Revue Française du Marketing – N°183/184, pp.181- 198

67 Nabil J. and Zaiem I. (2010), *The Impact of Label Perception on the Consumer's Purchase Intention: An application on food products,* IBIMA Publishing, Vol. 2010 (2010), Article ID 476659, 14 pages

The second of the three ways is the Perceived Uniqueness, defined as "the perception that the product stands out from products belonging to the same category"[68]. In fact, it is no news that manufacturers, in order to ensure a positioning in the consumer's mind, try to make their products different, capable of being distinguished from those of their competitors. To succeed in this endeavour, certification labels play a key role in product differentiation and uniqueness.

The third and final way is that of the esteem given to the producer, which is defined as "the degree of consideration, trust and respect that the consumer gives to the producer, compared to other products in the same category"[69]. Therefore, this variable is considered one of the functions of quality labels.
Thus, "the estimation component seems to be general and more abstract as it addresses the variables underlying the product rather than the product itself"[70]. Indeed, the label conveys information about the attributes and characteristics of a product as well as an identification of the producer to the consumer.
These three dimensions have repercussions not only at the theoretical level but above all at the managerial level: they are therefore at the origin of any competitive advantage for a brand. As a consequence, they give the label the possibility to positively influence the purchase intention of consumers.

The decision to investigate the possibility of inserting certification labels also stems from the fact that for some kinds of products i.e. BIO products, certification labels are really helpful for those who are careful about what they buy and not only that[71]. In fact, even those who are not particularly attentive by nature, social context or level of education, are encouraged to take more interest in the origin of the product, the production chain, the materials used etc..
A prime example is the EU Ecolabel, the European Union's eco-label for products and services which, while providing high performance standards, are characterised by a reduced environmental impact throughout their life cycle[72].

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[68] Larceneux F. (2004)*, Impact of labelling strategies on the consumer decision process: the case of the organic label*, Actes du XXe Congrès AFM - 6 & 7 Mai 2004, St Malo

[69] Same of 60.

[70] Nabil J. and Zaiem I. (2010), *The Impact of Label Perception on the Consumer's Purchase Intention: An application on food products,* IBIMA Publishing, Vol. 2010 (2010), Article ID 476659, 14 pages

[71] Edwards D.P., Laurance s. (2012), *Green labelling, sustainability and the expansion of tropical agriculture: Critical issues for certification schemes*, ELSEVIER, Biological Conservation, Volume 151, Issue 1, July 2012, Pages 60-64

[72] https://ec.europa.eu/environment/ecolabel/

Established in 1992, it is in force in the 28 countries of the European Union and in the countries belonging to the European Economic Area - EEA (Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein). The EU Ecolabel has the characteristics of a voluntary Type I label, as defined by ISO 14024[73]:

- it's based on scientifically defined criteria in relation to the entire life cycle of products (from the extraction of raw materials, to the production phase, packaging and transport, use and recovery and disposal). The criteria cover various environmental aspects including the use of energy, water, chemicals and waste production (multi-criteria system), but also the functionality of the product and the quality of its performance;

- the criteria include minimum, or threshold, values;

- compliance with the criteria is verified by an independent third party (the Ecolabel and Ecoaudit Committee).

The EU Ecolabel criteria, which are defined at European level with the broad participation of stakeholders, including producer, consumer and environmental organisations, also cover aspects of consumer health and safety and, where relevant, key social and ethical aspects of production processes.

The EU Ecolabel is aimed at consumers who are assured that certified products, in addition to their high performance, have a reduced environmental impact throughout their life cycle certified by independent bodies (national competent bodies) recognised at European level.
Buying one product over another means voting for one value system over another. Consumers with their purchasing choices have the power to direct the market and stimulate supply. It is therefore vitally important to support consumers in their choice of purchase, giving them all the information they need to make an informed and transparent choice about how to cast their vote.

4. Methodology

In order to answer the above research question this paper proposes a *qualitative research* based on the use of the Focus Group instrument.

[73] https://www.iso.org/standard/72458.html

In the last twenty years there has been a growing interest in data collection techniques that make use of group interaction as the main cognitive resource[74]. This is because in these types of techniques, social actors are not considered simple sources of information, but rather protagonists of the research, able to collectively elaborate the vision of the phenomenon to be investigated.

Hence the decision to carry out this type of research: when we talk about Brand Activism we are referring to a form of communication in which consumers and their emotions are the protagonists, which is why qualitative research such as the focus group, a non-standard technique for gathering information, based on a discussion, is perfectly consistent.

The structuring and development of the focus group followed the guidelines proposed in Eliot & Associates' 2005 paper "*Guidelines for Conducting a Focus Group*"[75]. In the following we go through the main stages of focus group creation, before the analysis of the participants' answers and the conclusions on the case. In particular, we will go through the following phases:

1. Design of focus group questions;
2. Recruitment and preparation of participants;
3. Conduct of the focus group;
4. Data analysis
5. Results

4.1 Design of focus group questions

Based on what was proposed by Eliot & Associates in 2005, the questions were divided into three macro-categories:

- *Engagement questions*: asked to introduce participants and put them at ease with the topic of discussion;

- *Exploration questions*: asked to get to the heart of the discussion;

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74 Colombo M. (1997), *Il gruppo come strumento di ricerca sociale: dalla comunità al focus group*, «Studi di Sociologia», 35, 2, aprile-giugno, pp. 205-218

75 Eliot & Associates (2005), *Guidelines for Conducting a Focus Group*

- *Exit questions*: asked to obtain the answer to the research question and to check if something has been missed in the discussion.

Before the questions there was a short introductory part to put the participants at ease and designed to present the topic, the reasons for the research and its objectives.

4.2 Recruitment and preparation of participants

On the basis of what was investigated in the literature review, the focus group participants have two fundamental characteristics in common, one concerning age and the other concerning the propensity to buy Fast Fashion products.

In particular, the decision fell on young people belonging to the age categories of Millennials and Generation Z, who love fashion. The choice fell on this category of people because, as already mentioned, it is precisely the Millennials and Generation Z who are more exposed to the phenomenon of Woke washing, especially because in most cases they are young people who are not financially independent, and therefore prefer cheaper and more easily available fashion products.

The strategy with which the participants were selected is known as "On Location"[76]. The participants were selected randomly, respecting the above characteristics, outside the store of Piazza Italia, a well-known Fast Fashion chain that has one of its shops in Sorrento, Italy.

[76] Ritchie J. et al. (2013), *Qualitative Research Practice. A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*, SAGE Publications Ltd, Second Edition

(Piazza Italia Store in Sorrento, Italy)

I personally decided to stop people leaving the shop after making at least one purchase, explaining to them the reason and the objective of my research.

A total of six people, two boys and four girls, made themselves available for the focus group, conducted in a bar the following day.

The following table groups the socio-demographic information of each participant.

NAME	BIRTH YEAR	GENDER	ORIGIN	OCCUPATION
Benedetta	1994	F	Naples, Italy	Student
Davide	1993	M	Naples, Italy	Student/Worker
Dora	1999	F	Firenze, Italy	Student
Francesca	1998	F	Segni, Italy	Student/Worker
Margherita	2001	F	Milan, Italy	Worker
Riccardo	1995	M	Sorrento, Italy	Student

4.3 Conduct of the Focus Group

The Focus Group was conducted the day after the selection of participants at a bar in the centre of Sorrento, not too far from the Piazza Italia store.
The decision to hold it in an informal location was dictated by the desire to put the participants at ease, as they were all young and the location gave them the opportunity to quickly break the ice and discuss things calmly.
In all, the Focus Group lasted one hour and forty-five minutes. I started by introducing the topic and then began with individual questions and open discussion among the participants. A colleague was present with me to monitor the progress of the meeting, to check the complete execution of the questions and the level of satisfaction with the answers obtained.

4.4 Data analysis and results

The analysis of focus group data consists of examining, categorising, tabulating, recombining and interpreting the information that emerged in the discussion, in order to be able to answer the research question and report the results obtained in a report.
The process of analysis in a focus group is peculiar since data come from different sources: observation, conversation, recording. This multiplicity of sources means that the focus group cannot be analysed like an individual interview. The analysis is more complex because much of the information collected comes from the interaction of the people in the group: participants influence each other and their opinions change during the conversation, new elements emerge, there are moments of silence or the non-expression of certain topics, the meaning of which should not be overlooked.

There are two fundamental approaches to analysing focus group data: the *ethnographic approach*, which is strictly qualitative, in which the analysis refers directly to textual quotations from the discussion group, and *content analysis*, in which what the participants say is analysed according to a rigorous system which content categories, which can be given a numerical value (quantitative approach).
In this research, the ethnographic method was chosen because the analysis of the data with this approach aims to provide the most accurate description possible of what the participants said, and then attributing to the collected data an explanation that is necessarily subjective. Subjectivity, in this method, is intended as a resource for understanding and interpreting the data, rather than a limitation.

The data, as previously mentioned, were collected through the recording of the entire meeting, which lasted one hour and forty-five minutes.
The focus group opened with a brief introduction supported by me which touched on the main points of the research such as Brand Activism and the Fast Fashion industry.
Once the introductory phase was over and the ice was broken with and between the participants, I moved on to the reading of the questions. After each question, participants were invited to answer freely, with only two rules to respect: raise your hand to answer and don't overpower others' voices.

The results will be analysed by dividing the questions asked into the three macro-categories explained above.

4.4.1 Engagement questions' analysis

The engagement questions were asked to introduce participants and put them at ease with the topic of discussion.

The **first engagement question** was:
"What comes to mind when you hear about Fast Fashion?"

Giving an overview of the answers, 5 out of 6 participants had already heard of Fast Fashion. Only one of them, Francesca, had never heard of the term, but listening to the others talk she then linked it to some problems she was aware of.
The overall assessment of this industry is clearly negative, given the individual responses of the participants.

In particular, Riccardo answered the question by linking the world of Fast Fashion with "*a strong loss of values in consumer choice, typical of our generation"*.

Benedetta, on the other hand, initially responded by mentioning some of the most powerful realities that came to her mind when hearing about Fast Fashion, such as H&M, Bershka and Zara. What was interesting to hear from this respondent was that in her opinion the paradox of the fashion industry lies in the fact that "*it is a free market open to all, considering its affordable purchase prices, but at the same time it limits individual freedom of expression, creating a massification of consumption*".

Davide traced the world of Fast Fashion to "*a lack of ethics, both on the supply and demand sides"*. According to him, what makes Fast Fashion companies far from being ethical is the presence of their factories in underdeveloped countries, such as Bangladesh. What comes to his mind when he hears about this topic is the injustice of the way they make money: *"apart from making money on quantity, they also make money on the low cost at which they produce"*.

Another interesting response was from Margherita, who linked the Fast Fashion industry to the Fast Food industry, arguing that *"in both realities what is worrying and unhealthy is the correlation between a fast production and a low price, especially if they are large"*. In her opinion, all this would induce consumers not to practice any recycling or saving process because of the ease of purchase.

Francesca, on the other hand, had never heard the term Fast Fashion, but listening to the answers of the other participants, she immediately thought of some of the most worrying issues in her opinion related to this mode, namely: exploitation of human resources and consumer homologation. Echoing her words, "*the Fast Fashion industry is one of the main reasons why we live in a society without personality because it is all directed by something bigger that we cannot manage. To this problem is added that of the human sphere behind the production chains of the industry, now deprived of any dignity"*.

Finally, Dora linked the Fast Fashion industry to the lack of care and respect we have for the things we buy. To make the point, the respondent gave an example, stating that *"if I see the shoes I'm wearing now I don't take care of them, while my father has had the same shoes for 30 years. The lack of care comes from the price and the quality of the product that you don't care about preserving or anyway it wouldn't make sense to preserve given the precariousness of the materials"*.

The **second engagement question** was:
"Name some of the issues related to Fast Fashion."

In answering the second question, the participants were rather in agreement about the different problems related to the Fast Fashion industry. After those already mentioned in the answer to the first question, the most mentioned spheres were:

- Environmental sphere: problems with waste disposal and pollution from both the production and use of the products, as many of them are made of materials containing microplastics which are then released into the seas;

- Human sphere: problems related to the exploitation of human resources in the production chain, as well as the conditions of the facilities housing workers in the third world. Particular reference was made to some tragic events in Bangladesh in recent years, where some factories collapsed, killing many workers, including women and minors;

- Socio-cultural sphere: problems related to the impossibility of palpating the above dilemmas, due to the dislocation of the companies and to the fact that the negative effects of the production and consumption of Fast Fashion products can only be observed in the long term;

- Legal sphere: lack of transparency regarding the way garments are produced, the way workers are hired and paid.

The **third engagement question** was:
"Have you ever heard of Brand Activism? What comes to mind when you hear this word?"

Responses to this question were mixed. Most of the respondents were not aware of the term, but by reasoning they came to understand its meaning.

According to Riccardo, the term Brand Activism refers to a brand's commitment to supporting causes in the socio-political sphere. According to the respondent, this commitment mainly concerns advertising campaigns. In particular, in his opinion, Brand Activism means "*showing a false front to cover up problems*". It follows that Riccardo has a negative perception of Brand Activism.

Benedetta had never heard of this topic. However, she confirmed that the word itself sounds like a good thing. She also stated that *"even if it is fictitious activism, useful only for the brand, it is still a positive strategy, because the company is also a social reality [...] Like a company can grow through this strategy and then acquire the power to direct society towards something positive"*.

Like the previous respondent, David had also never heard of Brand Activism. However, he traced this back to an example of a moment he experienced when he was at the supermarket: *"one thing that stuck with me when I went to the supermarket at 365 was a sign saying 'The 365 rules', which was placed near the checkout; it said '365 does not make offers (so no leafleting), to reduce environmental impact'"*.

Francesca had never heard of Brand Activism, but based on the previous answers she constructed her own idea. According to her, however, we consumers look at a certain type of advertising and see nothing different from what we already know. Advertisements, in her opinion, try to give light to things that are actually fictitious.

Margherita had never heard the word either, but she could imagine the process behind it. The respondent stated that "*the fact that there are sporadic engagements makes one doubt the veracity and transparency of Brand Activism. An example is black lives matter, a fashion trend that lasted a couple of months [...] If activism is for the common good it is a good thing, if activism is done exclusively for the brand's image, it is not."* What Margherita asks is how we as consumers can distinguish between the two situations.

Dora has a positive perception of the term Brand Activism. The respondent stated that *"the seller has a power over us and if they can use it to involve people in positive social dynamics it can only be useful and better for society. At the same time, however, it can become a negative thing. It is up to people to take an interest and inform themselves about the real policies that the company follows. [...] It is also true, however, that the brand must have something socially right in it, regardless of Brand Activism campaigns".*

4.4.2 Exploration questions' analysis

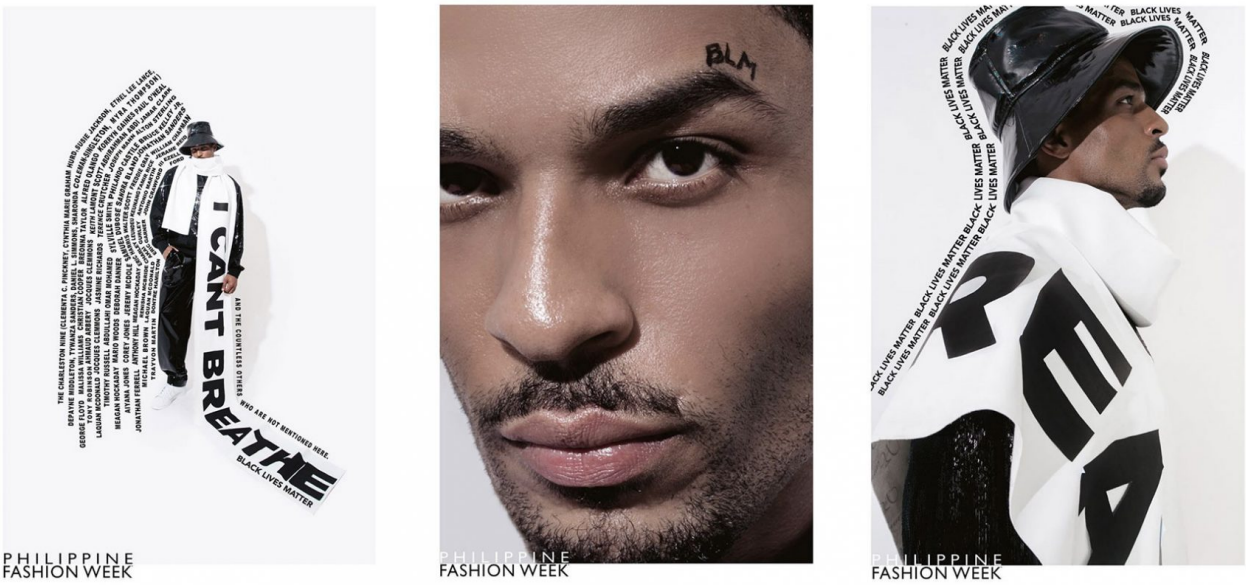
The exploration questions were asked to get to the heart of the discussion.

The **hypothesis** was:

"Let's assume you want to buy a certain product at a certain Fast Fashion shop and that it promotes the product in question through slogans related to some socio-political issues, or through a collaboration with a non-profit organisation dealing with social issues."

Participants were shown the following examples of brand actvism advertising campaigns to make the question clearer.

The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty (2005)



Philippine Fashion Week Campaign (2020)

The **first exploration question** related to the hypothesis was**:**

"Would you be more or less interested in buying the product?"

In answering the question, participants were largely in agreement with small differences concerning the idea of the reliability of the advertising campaign and the social issue covered in the ad.

For instance, Francesca said, "I am more interested in it because the purchase has a greater utility. Usefulness is not only reflected on the person who buys it, but for society as a whole".

Davide also agrees with the previous respondent, in fact he states that he is more interested in buying it because his decision should have a positive feedback on the social good.

According to Margherita, on the other hand, the interest in buying depends on how credible the sponsoring organisation or the advertising campaign in general is. In particular, she said, "If the partnership concerns internationally recognised organisations, for example Unicef, then I would trust it and be more willing to buy the product. If it's smaller, I'm more hesitant". In summary, the respondent would only buy the product if she had proof of what the brand is preaching in the campaign and if the issue in question really mattered to her.

Benedetta, agreeing with the previous respondent, highlighted an interesting thought. According to her, a Brand Activism campaign not only makes the consumer who is already intent on buying the product more interested in buying it, but also makes those who were not intent on buying it become interested in it. Thus, she stated that "if it's a topic that interests me, I'm more interested, even if the good doesn't really interest me. Moreover, if the activism is clear on the product and a slogan, stamp, recognisable logo is put on the product, it makes me proud and makes me feel part of a real community."

The **second exploration question** related to the hypothesis was**:**

"After seeing the Brand Activism campaign, is the brand perception positive or negative?"

In answering the question, the respondents were all in agreement. Their perception of brands is positive for everyone, both because of their commitment to social issues and the fact that it is not taken for granted.

The **third exploration question** was:

"If you found out that it was just a marketing stunt and the company doesn't practice what it preaches but only uses the social issue to attract consumers, would you still be willing to buy that product from that company?"

The responses to the above question were all clearly negative. All participants, in fact, faced with such an event, would absolutely no longer be willing to repurchase from the company under consideration.
Specifically, Benedetta stated that "no, I would no longer be willing. And the worst thing is that such an event discourages me from all other activist campaigns. If a company lied like that, I would start to have negative thoughts about others companies that maybe don't deserve it, I would be skeptical of everything related to Brand Activism and with difficulty I would resume buying a certain category of goods."

Like the previous respondent, David would also no longer be willing to purchase from that company and would also question other post-event advertising campaigns.

Francesca would no longer purchase and would experience a severe loss of trust in the company, which in turn would cause her to lose trust in the entire industry. The result is that "it would become difficult to continue to believe in these types of advertising campaigns, even those that perhaps stem from real, positive social projects."

Dora, like others, would no longer buy from that company. On the contrary of the other respondents, however, she notices in a similar event a precise positive implication: "in front of a trick like this, I lose confidence in the company and in part in the sector in which it operates, but this would push me to be more informed and to support those who really do positive things for the social, looking for more information as possible to make a right choice of purchase". Therefore, according to the respondent, such an event would not be an end in itself, but on the contrary it could serve as a lesson for the consumer to become more informed in the future about the dynamics behind the production and consumption of certain products.

According to Margherita, finally, situations of this kind have three precise negative externalities. The first concerns the company and is nothing more than the bad reputation it gets. The second relates to other companies, which suffer a loss of trust by consumers, even if they do not deserve it. The third concerns the consumer, who is becoming increasingly indifferent to social issues.

The **fourth exploration question** was:

“What I have just reported is an example of Woke Washing, have you ever heard of it? Regarding Woke Washing, as a consumer, how protected do you feel during the purchase decision process?”

Responses to this question were more or less consistent. Almost all respondents, in fact, stated that institutions often err on the side of not intervening in certain business sectors to prevent this type of situation.

In particular, Benedetta stated that she had never heard of Woke Washing and did not feel protected at all as a consumer. "The fact that I have never heard the term Woke Washing already suggests that there is some problem. A phenomenon of this magnitude cannot still come across as taboo to society. Institutions need to stop turning a blind eye and pretending nothing is happening in the face of evidence like this." According to the respondent there is a serious lack of information from the top, which makes it impossible to make a reasonable purchase choice, if not for some elected consumers, who by level of education and social class have the ability and the right tools to inform themselves. To conclude Benedetta states that "the anger comes from the fact that the company could refrain from supporting social campaigns instead of taking advantage of them. Honestly I would appreciate it a lot more if the company didn't speak up than if they told lies."

Riccardo, like the previous respondent, does not feel protected at all. According to him, this stems from the fact that the advertising process that leads to Woke Washing is not primarily controlled.

Davide had never heard of this phenomenon, nor does he feel protected. According to him, this stems from a lack of transparency about how goods and advertising campaigns are produced. In particular he reported an example stating: "information about the origin of the product is not enough. Reading 'Made in China' on a product doesn't give any clear information about how the company is produced, on the contrary, it just makes me think how far away and unmanageable what happens there is".

Margherita said that "it should be clear to everyone that companies operate this kind of deceptive process for consumers. I don't feel protected at all as not only I do suffer from such a phenomenon, mostly no one talks about the latter and on the contrary it is hidden."

According to Francesca, finally, if it is true that it should be the institutions to protect consumers in part, it is also the role of the company, given its ability to disclose, to be able to do something to entice consumers to inform themselves.

4.4.3 Exit questions' analysis

The exit questions were asked to go deeper in the topic and to obtain the answer to the research question.

The **first exit question** was:

"What instruments could help you feel more protected in your purchase decision process?"

The answers to this question were different, but all had in common the idea that there should necessarily be institutional intervention in this matter.

According to Benedetta, in order to have more information about the product and the advertising campaign, good tools could be internal and external quality controls. In particular, the external ones should be random, that is, they should be exercised without prior notice.

According to Margherita there are many useful tools to solve this problem. What really matters is that there is an external body that controls the veracity of the information disseminated, regardless of the tool used. The respondent also stated that "companies should periodically pay fees so that external bodies can actually carry out checks on the production and creation process of advertising campaigns." In addition, according to the respondent, stricter and more up-to-date laws should be enacted around the issue of Woke Washing to protect consumers.

Also according to Dora, companies should contribute financially to the implementation of an ironclad control system regarding the quality of information and its disclosure. The respondent stated that "all companies should pay a fee per year to be audited, as if they were paying for some sort of mandatory annual entrance test to do business. [...] In addition, there should also be punitive measures for companies that do Woke Washing. Or certification labels to be placed on products."

Davide also said that certification labels could be helpful in solving the problem, "just like those made on food products to avoid Greenwashing campaigns."

Finally, Riccardo said that he thinks there should be daily state-subsidized audits of the campaign creation process.

The **second exit question** was:

"If the social campaign presented a certification label, would you be more or less willing to buy the product? Do you think that a label certifying the authenticity of the advertising campaign with social aims could be useful to overcome this problem and to help consumers choose the right products?"

Respondents agreed on the topic. In fact, according to all, the certification label could be a useful tool to reduce cases of Woke Washing and protect consumers in their purchasing decision. All respondents agreed, however, that the label is not enough, but also the existence of a recognized and credible body that issues the label and decides and controls the parameters for obtaining it. In addition, according to the participants, the parameters for obtaining the label should be revised from year to year, making them increasingly strict, so as to orient the entire sector towards a collective improvement, useful for society and for the entire business system.

The **third exit question** was:

"Under the previous hypothesis, is the brand perception positive or negative? Would the brand seem more or less authentic to you?"

Again, respondents agreed: the brand would be more authentic, and the label would have an extremely positive effect. What was interesting to discover is that, according to several participants, the certification label would have several positive externalities, not only on brand credibility and consumer protection, but also on the institutions themselves. During the discussion, it emerged that there is a huge opportunity for institutions to gain more credibility with the population. The argument is surprisingly simple: by feeling more protected, citizens would place more trust in the institutions.

As mentioned at the beginning of the study, business and society are currently enemies[77]. A certification label could speed up the process of rapprochement and consequently accelerate the improvement of industries and the spread of a more ethical and fair business model.

The **fourth and final exit question**, after obtaining positive opinions on the certification label, was intended to capture precise information on the participants' preferences regarding certain characteristics of the label.

[77] Porter M.E., Kramer M.R. (2019) Creating Shared Value. In: Lenssen G., Smith N. (eds) Managing Sustainable Business. Springer, Dordrecht. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1144-7_16

These were of two types: aesthetic and formal. Among the former shape, colour, size and position; among the latter, on the other hand, the presence or absence of a guaranteeing body, and the possible territorial and sectorial power of the body.

Specifically, the question was:

"Are there any particular characteristics that you think are useful for the creation of the label? For example: shape, colour, size and position, whether it should be controlled and issued by a body, and whether the body should be national or international, sectoral or general"

The following are the decisions taken by the participants after discussion:

- *Form*: a hand, to recall the symbolic solidarity value of the label. The slogan "certified by..." should also appear on the label;

- *Colour*: with regard to colour, participants agreed to choose one colour against Woke Washing. According to them, the colour is not important, as long as it is different from other themes (e.g. green for the Greenwashing phenomenon);

- *Size*: big enough to be noticed, so at least as big as the brand logo;

- *Location*: responses varied. Some participants supported the option of placing the label exclusively on the product label, others also on the billboards of offline advertising and on any type of online advertising (media and TV);
- *Guarantor body*: participants expressed the need for a body to issue and monitor compliance with the label;

- *Territorial power of the body*: according to the participants, international bodies and local hubs should coexist. The former should dictate general rules, while the latter should be responsible for analysing and resolving specific situations in smaller territorial areas;

- *Relevance of the body*: according to the participants, entities per sector should coexist that are obliged to communicate and monitor each other.

In addition to the characteristics proposed by the question, participants added that obtaining the label and consequently the internal controls to get it should be compulsory for advertising with an activist background, regardless of the type of activism.

Given the information collected during the focus group, below there is a graphic proposal of what could be the certification label, to be placed on all Brand Activism campaigns:

(Social label proposal)

(Social label proposal on product tag)

(Social label proposal on Brand Activism campaign)

4.5 Conclusions

The entire research and the focus group gave voice to the main issues that consumers feel they experience when it comes to buying a fashion product linked to Brand Activism. Among these, the most important one is the inability of consumers to distinguish a real activist campaign from a fictitious one, due to the lack of clear and transparent information about the production processes, the system of staff remuneration, the working conditions, the protection of workers' rights and so on.

Even if consumers tend to have a good perception of Brand Activism campaigns, once they get in touch with a fake one, their perception of Brand Activism tends to worsen proportionally to the number of cases of Woke Washing, leading to a loss of trust even in those few companies that really support real social causes.

The data collected suggests that the introduction of a certification label in the social field could be an excellent tool to counteract the cases of Woke Washing that emerge every day from the behaviour of companies belonging to the Fast Fashion sector.

In addition, according to the participants, a certification label would cast a new light on public institutions, in which people today find it difficult to trust, as they do not feel protected by them in any way.

Although the participants agree on the inclusion of the label, there are some strictly necessary conditions to be met, such as:

- a guarantor body that issues the label and controls the company's actions;
- specific parameters for obtaining the label;
- a system of intensification of parameters year after year to steer the sector towards real change.

Every day, the Fast Fashion sector confirms that it must be subjected to much stricter controls and economic and legal punishments. What we are unconsciously witnessing every day is a loss of values that will bring the entire social system to a point of no return. It is unthinkable that we can continue to remain impassive in the face of perpetual injustices, such as those experienced by workers in the factories of Fast Fashion companies. National and international public institutions, as well as human rights organisations, have a duty to intervene as soon as possible to protect people, both workers and consumers.

The entire production system needs a strong shake-up from above so that we can go back to producing in a conscious and more ethical way, so that future generations can live in a fairer and more solidarity-based world, respecting the rights of all people and nature.

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Abstract

With each passing day, consumers in today's marketplace increasingly expect brands to take radical and clear positions on issues concerning the sociopolitical sphere. A brand's customers are no longer satisfied with buying a specific product or service, but rather a whole value system that they can relate to. That's the reason why the use of Brand Activism, which is the support that companies give to various social issues, is increasing in all sectors, particularly in the Fast Fashion one.

Brand Activism, which most people associate with positive action, can turn into a marketing gimmick when the company's activist messaging, purpose and values are not aligned. Brands who "preach well and do poorly", creating a strong divergence between activist messaging and practice, do what it is referred to as inauthentic Brand Activism, also known as Woke Washing. This phenomenon is rooted in the deceptive interest of supporting a right and social cause. Victims of this strategy are primarily workers who suffer daily injustices related to working conditions and the consumers, who are not equipped with clear and relevant information to distinguish a real activist campaign from a fictitious one. Based on the reference literature, this research proposes a qualitative study to analyse the impact that the inclusion of a certification label could have on brand perception and consumer purchase intention. The results suggest that, as in the case of green labels, also a *social label* could help to overcome the multiple problems linked to the Woke Washing phenomenon.

Key words: Brand Activism, Fast Fashion, Woke Washing, certification label, Brand Perception, Purchase Intention

Introduction

1.1 Current context: the dynamics of advertising as consumer perceptions of social issues change

The cornerstone of successful marketing is understanding the needs and trends of the target group. The ideas and thoughts prevailing in the minds of consumers are subject to constant change, and the challenging role of a marketer is to identify these changes and build an effective marketing strategy on them. The public gets used to marketing techniques quite quickly and stops reacting to them, triggering the effect that in psychology is called *habituation*. For this reason, advertisers must continue to find new ways to promote their products and services, creative, unconventional and relevant methods, and in doing so, approach a process of orientation towards 'invertising'. Paolo Iabichino first introduced the concept of *invertising* in 2009, when the general public, accustomed to *push-type* communication methods, based on an incessant demand for attention, was showing signs of disaffection towards such invasive and outdated communication

(Iabichino P., 2009). Talking about invertising means approaching the change from a *push* dynamic to a *pull* dynamic: that is, abandoning the idea of pushing out an advertising message aimed at a mass target, and instead committing to pulling in people who find the things the brand has decided to communicate interesting. This requires companies to abandon the idea of advertising as a monologue and open up to a direct dialogue with their customers, who go from being consumers to users. In this process, listening is the key to trigger the paradigm shift from instilling needs to generating affection (Iabichino, 2009).

Today more than ever, brands have become endorsers of public opinion; consumers, in the midst of a crisis of credibility towards capitalism and their own governmental forces, place their trust in brands, now considered an essential purchasing consideration, to represent something, to do the right thing, to help solve social and political problems (Edelman, 2020).

1.3. Purpose Marketing aka Brand Activism: the latest marketing trend

At the moment business and society are two warring factions. Society cannot trust business because it knows that it is largely business itself that is creating incredible social and environmental problems. That's the reason why companies are developing different strategies in order to make their businesses be perceived as more ethical both in social and environmental context (Porter and Kramer, 2019).

It is precisely from the need to pursue the realisation of *shared value* that purpose marketing also known as Brand Activism was born. Brand Activism is an emerging form of marketing for brands seeking to stand out in a market that is still too profit-driven. In the context of Brand Activism, brands communicate their products or services by taking public positions on social and political issues, thus opening up to purposes other than the mere achievement of revenue (Moorman, 2020).

Communication strategies based on Brand Activism can have both positive and negative effects. In fact, associating the brand to a social cause can mean a positive increase in the consumers' perception of the company, as well as improving reputation and increasing market share... but it can also mean arousing public indignation, normally followed by public boycott (Sarkar and Kotler, 2018). When taking a stand in such sensitive dynamics, the stakes are always high. The success of a strategy that focuses on social issues derives both from the ability to understand one's target audience and from the ability to put into practice what has been communicated, converting the purpose of the brand into clear and tangible action.

From a closed system, the company gets in touch with a series of subjects such as institutions, political decision-makers, activists and other brands. In coming into contact with such a dense and complex network of relationships based on precarious balances, each company must necessarily learn to exercise a real *brand diplomacy*, aware that it has an active and participatory role that goes far beyond making products or services available or generating profit (Mogensen, 2017).

From a marketing-driven perspective, Brand Activism thus proposes a society-driven perspective: consumption becomes less and less functional and more and more identity-based and driven (Johnson and Chattaram, 2020). This approach is typical of younger consumers, Millennials and Generation Z, for whom in the decision-making process leading to purchase (CDJ), in addition to the factors of product/service quality or economic convenience, what counts is a certain affinity with the brand's values or the possibility of identifying with them.

1.4.2. Authenticity as a fundamental requirement for Brand Activism

Authenticity of Brand Activism, understood as the alignment of a brand's explicit purpose and values with its activist marketing messaging and pro-social corporate practice, is thus a fundamental requirement for the success of the marketing strategy decided upon and especially for the social change that is to be achieved through it (Keller, 1993).

When brands become activists in the socio-political sphere, their motivations and activities are increasingly in the eye of the crosshairs, and the resulting negative attributions can erode business earnings and brand equity (Shuili et al., 2010). In short, consumers may not believe brands when they engage in activism and this results in economic and reputational loss.

2. Woke-washing: what it is and how it manifests itself

In contrast to Authentic Brand Activism, some brands may disconnect their communications from brand objectives, values and corporate practices. This happens when brands use sociopolitical issues as a deterrent to enhance their reputation and increase their earnings (Campbell, 2007). Although most consumers do not have the right tools to recognise the Woke-Washing phenomenon, another part can perceive that brands use social issues as a marketing ploy to sell more of their product (Edelman, 2019). In a recent Forbes study, 75% of Millennials and Generation Z said it was important that the brands they buy from give back to society, showing a growing level of disinterest, ambivalence and outrage towards companies that denounce social injustice without showing any signs of action (Perna, 2020). It is crucial, therefore, that brands align themselves with social, environmental or political issues that match the way consumers and stakeholders see them.

A striking example of woke-washing in the Fast Fashion industry is the one that takes place every year on the International Women's Day. Almost all companies, such as Zara, H&M, Bershka... in the industry run advertising campaigns with feminist slogans and/or feminist ambassadors, emphasising the need to link attributes such as *powerful, independent, respectable* to the female sphere.

(H&M x Zara Larsson 2017 Capsule Collection ADV launched on the International Women's Day)

The Guardian has reported that most women working in Fast Fashion in Vietnam, where H&M has a lot of its producers, have been harassed, groped, and even kidnapped. Women make up most of the garment workforce (The Guardian, 2017). Out of an estimated 8 million garment workers, 85% are women, who are often in the lowest-paid positions and risk sexual harassment by superiors. Fast Fashion operations actively undermine the causes that they seemingly support.

3. Research Question

In the light of the above, this paper will be part of the emerging literature on the negative effects of Inauthentic Brand Activism and possible solutions to the Woke Washing phenomenon. Specifically, the research question that this dissertation intends to answer is the following: *"Can a certification label help young consumers in choosing a product that truly respects what the relevant brand promises in the socio-political sphere?"*

4. Methodology

In order to answer the above research question this paper proposes a *qualitative research* based on the use of the Focus Group instrument. The structuring and development of the Focus Group followed the guidelines proposed in Eliot & Associates' 2005 paper "*Guidelines for Conducting a Focus Group*". In particular, we will go through the following phases:

1. Design of focus group questions;
2. Recruitment and preparation of participants;

3. Conduct of the focus group;

4. Data analysis

5. Results

4.1 Design of focus group questions

Based on what was proposed by Eliot & Associates in 2005, the questions were divided into three macro-categories:

- *Engagement questions*: asked to introduce participants and put them at ease with the topic of discussion;
- *Exploration questions*: asked to get to the heart of the discussion;
- *Exit questions*: asked to obtain the answer to the research question and to check if something has been missed in the discussion.

4.2 Recruitment and preparation of participants

On the basis of what was investigated in the literature review, the focus group participants have two fundamental characteristics in common, one concerning age and the other concerning the propensity to buy Fast Fashion products. In particular, the decision fell on young people belonging to the age categories of Millennials and Generation Z, who love fashion. The choice fell on this category of people because it is precisely the Millennials and Generation Z who are more exposed to the phenomenon of Woke washing, especially because in most cases they are young people who are not financially independent, and therefore prefer cheaper and more easily available fashion products. The strategy with which the participants were selected is known as "On Location". The participants were selected randomly, respecting the above characteristics, outside the store of Piazza Italia, a well-known Fast Fashion chain that has one of its shops in Sorrento, Italy.

The following table groups the socio-demographic information of each participant.

NAME	BIRTH YEAR	GENDER	ORIGIN	OCCUPATION
Benedetta	1994	F	Naples, Italy	Student
Davide	1993	M	Naples, Italy	Student/Worker
Dora	1999	F	Firenze, Italy	Student
Francesca	1998	F	Segni, Italy	Student/Worker
Margherita	2001	F	Milan, Italy	Worker
Riccardo	1995	M	Sorrento, Italy	Student

4.3 Conduct of the Focus Group

The Focus Group was conducted the day after the selection of participants. In all, the Focus Group lasted one hour and forty-five minutes. I started by introducing the topic and then began with individual questions and open discussion among the participants. A colleague was present with me to monitor the progress of the meeting, to check the complete execution of the questions and the level of satisfaction with the answers obtained.

4.4 Data analysis and results

There are two fundamental approaches to analysing focus group data: the *ethnographic approach*, which is strictly qualitative, in which the analysis refers directly to textual quotations from the discussion group, and *content analysis*, in which what the participants say is analysed according to a rigorous system which content categories, which can be given a numerical value (quantitative approach).

In this research, the ethnographic method was chosen because the analysis of the data with this approach aims to provide the most accurate description possible of what the participants said, and then attributing to the collected data an explanation that is necessarily subjective. Subjectivity, in this method, is intended as a resource for understanding and interpreting the data, rather than a limitation.

The data, as previously mentioned, were collected through the recording of the entire meeting, which lasted one hour and forty-five minutes.

The focus group opened with a brief introduction supported by me which touched on the main points of the research such as brand activism and the fast fashion industry.

Once the introductory phase was over and the ice was broken with and between the participants, I moved on to the reading of the questions. After each question, participants were invited to answer freely, with only two rules to respect: raise your hand to answer and don't overpower others' voices.

The results will be analysed by dividing the questions asked into the three macro-categories explained above.

4.4.1 Engagement questions' analysis

The **first engagement question** was:

"What comes to mind when you hear about Fast Fashion?"

Giving an overview of the answers, 5 out of 6 participants had already heard of Fast Fashion. Only one of them, Francesca, had never heard of the term, but listening to the others talk she then linked it to some problems she was aware of.
The overall assessment of this industry is clearly negative, given the individual responses of the participants.

In particular, Riccardo answered the question by linking the world of Fast Fashion with "*a strong loss of values in consumer choice, typical of our generation"*.

Benedetta, on the other hand, initially responded by mentioning some of the most powerful realities that came to her mind when hearing about Fast Fashion, such as H&M, Bershka and Zara. What was interesting to hear from this respondent was that in her opinion the paradox of the fashion industry lies in the fact that "*it is a free market open to all, considering its affordable purchase prices, but at the same time it limits individual freedom of expression, creating a massification of consumption*".

Davide traced the world of Fast Fashion to "*a lack of ethics, both on the supply and demand sides"*. According to him, what makes Fast Fashion companies far from being ethical is the presence of their factories in underdeveloped countries, such as Bangladesh. What comes to his mind when he hears about this topic is the injustice of the way they make money: *"apart from making money on quantity, they also make money on the low cost at which they produce"*.

Another interesting response was from Margherita, who linked the Fast Fashion industry to the Fast Food industry, arguing that *"in both realities what is worrying and unhealthy is the correlation between a fast production and a low price, especially if they are large"*. In her opinion, all this would induce consumers not to practice any recycling or saving process because of the ease of purchase.

Francesca, on the other hand, had never heard the term Fast Fashion, but listening to the answers of the other participants, she immediately thought of some of the most worrying issues in her opinion related to this mode, namely: exploitation of human resources and consumer homologation. Echoing her words, "*the Fast Fashion industry is one of the main reasons why we live in a society without personality because it is all directed by something bigger that we cannot manage. To this problem is added that of the human sphere behind the production chains of the industry, now deprived of any dignity"*.

Finally, Dora linked the Fast Fashion industry to the lack of care and respect we have for the things we buy. To make the point, the respondent gave an example, stating that *"if I see the shoes I'm wearing now I don't take care of them, while my father has had the same shoes for 30 years. The lack of care comes from the price and the quality of the product that you don't care about preserving or anyway it wouldn't make sense to preserve given the precariousness of the materials".*

The **second engagement question** was:
"Name some of the issues related to Fast Fashion."

In answering the second question, the participants were rather in agreement about the different problems related to the Fast Fashion industry. After those already mentioned in the answer to the first question, the most mentioned spheres were:

- Environmental sphere: problems with waste disposal and pollution from both the production and use of the products, as many of them are made of materials containing microplastics which are then released into the seas;
- Human sphere: problems related to the exploitation of human resources in the production chain, as well as the conditions of the facilities housing workers in the third world. Particular reference was made to some tragic events in Bangladesh in recent years, where some factories collapsed, killing many workers, including women and minors;
- Socio-cultural sphere: problems related to the impossibility of palpating the above dilemmas, due to the dislocation of the companies and to the fact that the negative effects of the production and consumption of Fast Fashion products can only be observed in the long term;
- Legal sphere: lack of transparency regarding the way garments are produced, the way workers are hired and paid.

The **third engagement question** was:
"Have you ever heard of Brand Activism? What comes to mind when you hear this word?"

Responses to this question were mixed. Most of the respondents were not aware of the term, but by reasoning they came to understand its meaning.

According to Riccardo, the term Brand Activism refers to a brand's commitment to supporting causes in the socio-political sphere. According to the respondent, this commitment mainly concerns advertising

campaigns. In particular, in his opinion, Brand Activism means "*showing a false front to cover up problems*". It follows that Riccardo has a negative perception of Brand Activism.

Benedetta had never heard of this topic. However, she confirmed that the word itself sounds like a good thing. She also stated that *"even if it is fictitious activism, useful only for the brand, it is still a positive strategy, because the company is also a social reality [...] Like a company can grow through this strategy and then acquire the power to direct society towards something positive"*.

Margherita had never heard the word either, but she could imagine the process behind it. The respondent stated that "*the fact that there are sporadic engagements makes one doubt the veracity and transparency of Brand Activism. An example is black lives matter, a fashion trend that lasted a couple of months [...] If activism is for the common good it is a good thing, if activism is done exclusively for the brand's image, it is not."* What Margherita asks is how we as consumers can distinguish between the two situations.

Dora has a positive perception of the term Brand Activism. The respondent stated that *"the seller has power over us and if they can use it to involve people in positive social dynamics it can only be useful and better for society. At the same time, however, it can become a negative thing. It is up to people to take an interest and inform themselves about the real policies that the company follows. [...] It is also true, however, that the brand must have something socially right in it, regardless of Brand Activism campaigns"*.

4.4.2 Exploration questions' analysis

The **hypothesis** was:
"Let's assume you want to buy a certain product at a certain Fast Fashion shop and that it promotes the product in question through slogans related to some socio-political issues, or through a collaboration with a non-profit organisation dealing with social issues."
The **first exploration question** related to the hypothesis was**:**
"Would you be more or less interested in buying the product?"

In answering the question, participants were largely in agreement with small differences concerning the idea of the reliability of the advertising campaign and the social issue covered in the ad.

For instance, Francesca said, "I am more interested in it because the purchase has a greater utility. Usefulness is not only reflected on the person who buys it, but for society as a whole".

Davide also agrees with the previous respondent, in fact he states that he is more interested in buying it because his decision should have a positive feedback on the social good.

According to Margherita, on the other hand, the interest in buying depends on how credible the sponsoring organisation or the advertising campaign in general is. In particular, she said, "If the partnership concerns internationally recognised organisations, for example Unicef, then I would trust it and be more willing to buy the product. If it's smaller, I'm more hesitant". In summary, the respondent would only buy the product if she had proof of what the brand is preaching in the campaign and if the issue in question really mattered to her.

Benedetta, agreeing with the previous respondent, highlighted an interesting thought. According to her, a Brand Activism campaign not only makes the consumer who is already intent on buying the product more interested in buying it, but also makes those who were not intent on buying it become interested in it. Thus, she stated that "if it's a topic that interests me, I'm more interested, even if the good doesn't really interest me. Moreover, if the activism is clear on the product and a slogan, stamp, recognisable logo is put on the product, it makes me proud and makes me feel part of a real community."

The **second exploration question** related to the hypothesis was**:**
"After seeing the Brand Activism campaign, is the brand perception positive or negative?"

In answering the question, the respondents were all in agreement. The brand perception is positive for everyone, both because of their commitment to social issues and the fact that it is not taken for granted.

The **third exploration question** was:
"If you found out that it was just a marketing stunt and the company doesn't practice what it preaches but only uses the social issue to attract consumers, would you still be willing to buy that product from that company?"

The responses to the above question were all clearly negative. All participants, in fact, faced with such an event, would absolutely no longer be willing to repurchase from the company under consideration.

Specifically, Benedetta stated that "no, I would no longer be willing. And the worst thing is that such an event discourages me from all other activist campaigns. If a company lied like that, I would start to have

negative thoughts about others companies that maybe don't deserve it, I would be skeptical of everything related to Brand Activism and with difficulty I would resume buying a certain category of goods."

Like the previous respondent, David would also no longer be willing to purchase from that company and would also question other post-event advertising campaigns.

Francesca would no longer purchase and would experience a severe loss of trust in the company, which in turn would cause her to lose trust in the entire industry. The result is that "it would become difficult to continue to believe in these types of advertising campaigns, even those that perhaps stem from real, positive social projects."

Dora, like others, would no longer buy from that company. On the contrary of the other respondents, however, she notices in a similar event a precise positive implication: "in front of a trick like this, I lose confidence in the company and in part in the sector in which it operates, but this would push me to be more informed and to support those who really do positive things for the social, looking for more information as possible to make a right choice of purchase". Therefore, according to the respondent, such an event would not be an end in itself, but on the contrary it could serve as a lesson for the consumer to become more informed in the future about the dynamics behind the production and consumption of certain products.

According to Margherita, finally, situations of this kind have three precise negative externalities. The first concerns the company and is nothing more than the bad reputation it gets. The second relates to other companies, which suffer a loss of trust by consumers, even if they do not deserve it. The third concerns the consumer, who is becoming increasingly indifferent to social issues.

The **fourth exploration question** was:
"What I have just reported is an example of Woke Washing, have you ever heard of it? Regarding Woke Washing, as a consumer, how protected do you feel during the purchase decision process?"

Responses to this question were more or less consistent. Almost all respondents, in fact, stated that institutions often err on the side of not intervening in certain business sectors to prevent this type of situation.

In particular, Benedetta stated that she had never heard of Woke Washing and did not feel protected at all as a consumer. "The fact that I have never heard the term Woke Washing already suggests that there is some

problem. A phenomenon of this magnitude cannot still come across as taboo to society. Institutions need to stop turning a blind eye and pretending nothing is happening in the face of evidence like this." According to the respondent there is a serious lack of information from the top, which makes it impossible to make a reasonable purchase choice, if not for some elected consumers, who by level of education and social class have the ability and the right tools to inform themselves. To conclude Benedetta states that "the anger comes from the fact that the company could refrain from supporting social campaigns instead of taking advantage of them. Honestly I would appreciate it a lot more if the company didn't speak up than if they told lies."

Riccardo, like the previous respondent, does not feel protected at all. According to him, this stems from the fact that the advertising process that leads to Woke Washing is not primarily controlled.

Davide had never heard of this phenomenon, nor does he feel protected. According to him, this stems from a lack of transparency about how goods and advertising campaigns are produced. In particular he reported an example stating: "information about the origin of the product is not enough. Reading 'Made in China' on a product doesn't give any clear information about how the company is produced, on the contrary, it just makes me think how far away and unmanageable what happens there is".

Margherita said that "it should be clear to everyone that companies operate this kind of deceptive process for consumers. I don't feel protected at all as not only I do suffer from such a phenomenon, mostly no one talks about the latter and on the contrary it is hidden."

According to Francesca, finally, if it is true that it should be the institutions to protect consumers in part, it is also the role of the company, given its ability to disclose, to be able to do something to entice consumers to inform themselves.

4.4.3 Exit questions' analysis

The **first exit question** was:
"What instruments could help you feel more protected in your purchase decision process?"

The answers to this question were different, but all had in common the idea that there should necessarily be institutional intervention in this matter.

According to Benedetta, in order to have more information about the product and the advertising campaign, good tools could be internal and external quality controls. In particular, the external ones should be random, that is, they should be exercised without prior notice.

According to Margherita there are many useful tools to solve this problem. What really matters is that there is an external body that controls the veracity of the information disseminated, regardless of the tool used. The respondent also stated that "companies should periodically pay fees so that external bodies can actually carry out checks on the production and creation process of advertising campaigns." In addition, according to the respondent, stricter and more up-to-date laws should be enacted around the issue of Woke Washing to protect consumers.

Also according to Dora, companies should contribute financially to the implementation of an ironclad control system regarding the quality of information and its disclosure. The respondent stated that "all companies should pay a fee per year to be audited, as if they were paying for some sort of mandatory annual entrance test to do business. [...] In addition, there should also be punitive measures for companies that do Woke Washing. Or certification labels to be placed on products."

Davide also said that certification labels could be helpful in solving the problem, "just like those made on food products to avoid Greenwashing campaigns."

Finally, Riccardo said that he thinks there should be daily state-subsidized audits of the campaign creation process.

The **second exit question** was:
"If the social campaign presented a certification label, would you be more or less willing to buy the product? Do you think that a label certifying the authenticity of the advertising campaign with social aims could be useful to overcome this problem and to help consumers choose the right products?"

Respondents agreed on the topic. In fact, according to all, the certification label could be a useful tool to reduce cases of Woke Washing and protect consumers in their purchasing decision. All respondents agreed, however, that the label is not enough, but also the existence of a recognized and credible body that issues the label and decides and controls the parameters for obtaining it. In addition, according to the participants, the parameters for obtaining the label should be revised from year to year, making them increasingly strict, so as

to orient the entire sector towards a collective improvement, useful for society and for the entire business system.

The **third exit question** was:
"Under the previous hypothesis, is the brand perception positive or negative? Would the brand seem more or less authentic to you?"

Again, respondents agreed: the brand would be more authentic, and the label would have an extremely positive effect. What was interesting to discover is that, according to several participants, the certification label would have several positive externalities, not only on brand credibility and consumer protection, but also on the institutions themselves. During the discussion, it emerged that there is a huge opportunity for institutions to gain more credibility with the population. The argument is surprisingly simple: by feeling more protected, citizens would place more trust in the institutions.
As mentioned at the beginning of the study, business and society are currently enemies. A certification label could speed up the process of rapprochement and consequently accelerate the improvement of industries and the spread of a more ethical and fair business model.

The **fourth and final exit question**, after obtaining positive opinions on the certification label, was intended to capture precise information on the participants' preferences regarding certain characteristics of the label. These were of two types: aesthetic and formal. Among the former shape, colour, size and position; among the latter, on the other hand, the presence or absence of a guaranteeing body, and the possible territorial and sectorial power of the body.
Specifically, the question was:
"Are there any particular characteristics that you think are useful for the creation of the label? For example: shape, colour, size and position, whether it should be controlled and issued by a body, and whether the body should be national or international, sectoral or general".

The following are the decisions taken by the participants after discussion:

- *Form*: a hand, to recall the symbolic solidarity value of the label. The slogan "certified by..." should also appear on the label;
- *Colour*: with regard to colour, participants agreed to choose one colour against Woke Washing. According to them, the colour is not important, as long as it is different from other themes (e.g. green for the Greenwashing phenomenon);

- *Size*: big enough to be noticed, so at least as big as the brand logo;
- *Location*: responses varied. Some participants supported the option of placing the label exclusively on the product label, others also on the billboards of offline advertising and on any type of online advertising (media and TV);
- *Guarantor body*: participants expressed the need for a body to issue and monitor compliance with the label;
- *Territorial power of the body*: according to the participants, international bodies and local hubs should coexist. The former should dictate general rules, while the latter should be responsible for analysing and resolving specific situations in smaller territorial areas;
- *Relevance of the body*: according to the participants, entities per sector should coexist that are obliged to communicate and monitor each other.

In addition to the characteristics proposed by the question, participants added that obtaining the label and consequently the internal controls to get it should be compulsory for advertising with an activist background, regardless of the type of activism. Given the information collected during the focus group, below there is a graphic proposal of what could be the certification label, to be placed on all Brand Activism campaigns:

4.5 Conclusions

The entire research and the Focus Group gave voice to the main issues that consumers feel they experience when it comes to buying a fashion product linked to Brand Activism. Among these, the most important one is the inability of consumers to distinguish a real activist campaign from a fictitious one, due to the lack of clear and transparent information about the production processes, the system of staff remuneration, the working conditions, the protection of workers' rights and so on. Even if consumers tend to have a good perception of Brand Activism campaigns, once they get in touch with a fake one, their perception of Brand Activism tends to worsen proportionally to the number of cases of Woke Washing, leading to a loss of trust even in those few companies that really support real social causes. The data collected suggests that the introduction of a certification label in the social field could be an excellent tool to counteract the cases of Woke Washing that emerge every day from the behaviour of companies belonging to the Fast Fashion sector.

In addition, according to the participants, a certification label would cast a new light on public institutions, in which people today find it difficult to trust, as they do not feel protected by them in any way. Although the participants agree on the inclusion of the label, there are some strictly necessary conditions to be met, such as:

- a guarantor body that issues the label and controls the company's actions;
- specific parameters for obtaining the label;
- a system of intensification of parameters year after year to steer the sector towards real change.

Every day, the Fast Fashion sector confirms that it must be subjected to much stricter controls and economic and legal punishments. What we are unconsciously witnessing every day is a loss of values that will bring the entire social system to a point of no return. It is unthinkable that we can continue to remain impassive in the face of perpetual injustices, such as those experienced by workers in the factories of Fast Fashion companies. National and international public institutions, as well as human rights organisations, have a duty to intervene as soon as possible to protect people, both workers and consumers. The entire production system needs a strong shake-up from above so that we can go back to producing in a conscious and more ethical way, so that future generations can live in a fairer and more solidarity-based world, respecting the rights of all people and nature.