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"Take away your take away": exploring brand's power to spark pro-environmental behaviours through a semiotic analysis of McDonald's anti-littering campaign

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Introduction

Climate change is a reality, it is happening all around us. We see it through dramatic images in news reports, documentaries and social advertisings, we perceive it in our everyday lives. Rising temperatures, the extinction of numerous species, extreme weather events such as hurricanes, floods and heat waves are clear signs that the planet is changing irreversibly and extremely fast. Along with climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution add up to the three self-inflicted planetary crises that are closely interconnected and pose a very serious risk for humans. Although they are evident, some denialist movements still contest the severity of these phenomenona and are skeptical about human responsibility. Instead, human activities are the main responsible for air pollution through energy production plants, heating plants, industrial activities, felling of forests and road traffic, for instance. The environmental crisis is unanimously considered the toughest challenge the world will face in the next two decades and institutions, governments and companies are under pressure to find concrete solutions to offset it. Indeed, in the two-year period 2020/2021, over 90% of the world's largest 100 companies made some sort of sustainability or climate commitment (McCann Worldgroup, 2021). Against this backdrop, younger consumers (especially Millennials and, even more, Gen Z) have become incredibly sensitive to these topics and mindful about how brand values comply with their own values, steering their purchasing choice based on brands sustainability actions and the extent to which brands contribute to their own self-identity project and embody their own ideals. In a time where there's growing mistrust towards the role governments and NGOs may have in saving the planet, people increasingly rely on companies and businesses to lead the fight against environmental crisis. Indeed, almost 77% of people globally (McCann Worldgroup, 2021) consider companies to have greater power than governments to make a positive impact and foster concrete actions to protect the earth. Hence, companies and brands are experiencing both business-driven and consumer-driven pressure to take a stance for the safety of the planet and can't fail to meet society expectations; thus, brand neutrality is not an option anymore. Brands are expected to act as cultural activist in society, leading the fight for protecting the environment and publicly taking a stance to drive changes and spread awareness around the seriousness of the issue. Indeed, being an activist brand necessarily entails advocacy, having the power and the responsibility to influence consumers' opinions and actions. Far from being a mere marketing gimmick (which is precisely the case of greenwashing, that will be later closely analysed), brand activism instead requires concrete actions and usually implies courting controversy and addressing divisive issues (like in the case of environmental crisis). Stating

the relevant cultural role that activist brands play in society, this study will adopt the lens of the cultural branding perspective, placing the brand at the centre of the research process in order to explore brand's potential to inspire positive "green" behaviours and spur pro-environmental actions. Prior research was mostly focused on studying how brands reflect (and change according to) culture and consumer trends; instead, the purpose of this study is to consider the reverse influence, exploring how brands in turn contribute to culture and influence consumers' ideas and actions. Indeed, according to the cultural branding approach, brands and culture have a dialectical relationship and brands enter consumer culture as discourses that produce as well as reflect culture (Oswald, 2015). Hence, the research question this study aims to address is how activist brands do inspire and drive positive sustainable changes leveraging sustainability and pro-environmental discourses in their communication campaign. In the effort to answer to the research question, it was considered an empirical case to be analysed, an anti-littering campaign launched the last year (2022) by McDonald's Norway to tackle the environmental issue of city littering, that the brand itself was mainly responsible for. Being the litter found in the streets of Oslo easily identifiable with McDonald's takeout packaging, the brand felt the urge to take the ownership of the problem and committed to become a relevant part of the solution. The research adopted the Brandscape methodology to understand the cultural space occupied by the brand within its market environment, and then conduct a semiotic analysis of each element of the cross-media campaign. The final goal of the analysis (and also the reason behind the choice of this methodological approach) is to prove and highlight how brands, being imbued with cultural meaning, can act as ally for the environment and drive sustainable changes in the society. The results of this study leave open many research opportunities to dive deeper and to potentially extend the scope of the research to other types of activism or to different brands. The following study has been developed in four chapters, starting with a review of the existing literature on the broad and generic topic of brand activism, beginning with the definition of the concept and the appropriate distinction with related concepts, to explore then the strategy behind an activist brand and the different domains of brand activism. The second chapter is devoted to a close exploration of the phenomenon of environmental activism, describing its main traits and relevant expressions, with a particular digression on an absolute best practice of the sector, Patagonia. Then, the elements that predict and steer consumer sustainable behaviours and consumption choices have been analysed, followed by a brief overview of the phenomenon of greenwashing and some real examples. The third chapter entirely revolves around the semiotic analysis of McDonald's brand, starting with the Brandscape methodology, which involves the audit of the brand (through a diachronic perspective)

and of its competitors (through a synchronic perspective), in order to define the positioning of the brand in the marketplace. This phase is followed by the analysis of the entire campaign “Take away your take away” (from print to OOH and TV spot). Finally, the study ends with the main findings emerged and their potential implications for brands and companies, together with some insights and suggestions for future research.

1. Brand activism: business as a force for good

1.1 The evolution of brand activism in the "values-driven era"

Brand activism is the talk of the town and among the most interesting business trends of the moment. Although it may look like a newly emerged trend, it is really the result of several cultural and societal changes happened in the last decades and it is now the benchmark against which modern consumers (especially Millennials and Generation Z) value brands and evaluate their heart and soul. In latest years, brands are acquiring increasingly more facets and meanings, being observed, studied and analysed from different perspectives and being awarded a relevant role within different scopes, such as business, societal and cultural contexts. In the *cultural branding* perspective, for instance, brands are given a significant role in society, acting as vessels of identity-related meanings and as advocates for socially relevant issues and community's anxieties and struggles. Dealing with the concept of brand activism assumes that brands are not anymore confined to the role of sales-pusher and persuasive weapon, instead they give significant contribution to customers' identity value. According to conventional branding models, brands are powerful mediums to make a product or a service recognizable and identifiable among competitors, holding a well-defined position in consumers' mind through the reiteration of attributes linked to the product category to build and strengthen specific strong associations in the mind of consumers (*mind-share model*). Neither brand can be considered as a mere viral phenomenon (*viral branding*) or a "box" of emotional bonds and associations (*emotional branding*). Yet, brands are an active and lively part of popular culture that may shape, drive and symbolize social, cultural, political and ethical movements and trends in such a way to be intertwined in the multifaceted human reality. Indeed, cultural brands embody values and ideals valuable for consumers and are imbued with stories they find significant in their attempt to self-expression (Holt, 2004). Modern consumers have become increasingly demanding in their consumption choice, orienting their consideration towards brands' values and behaviours, rather than focusing on tangible objective features. Millennials and Generation Z are the main characters of what Philip Kotler defined the "values-driven era", steering their choice based on who is selling rather than what is sold. Progressive consumers expect businesses to be active part of the society they're working in, to give a meaningful contribution to social stability and to actively fulfil societal aspirations and believes. Hence, in the modern consumption era, reputation is the real currency and positioning is not enough anymore. What helps brands to stand out from the competition is the ability to detect and

address the most urgent social struggles and shared anxieties (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020). The increasing distrust and loss of faith that society is lately experiencing towards traditional public institutions and authorities (like governments and NGOs) has gradually led people to rely on corporations and CEOs as solid balance points in socio-political issues. Against the backdrop of an extreme lack of trust and of a general sense of discontent and pessimism about the future, businesses are becoming the "retaining wall" for young consumers who expect companies and CEOs to take the side of the society and to be agents of change, actively contributing to social stability and making the difference in the world (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020). Starting from the general definition of *activism*, Sarkar and Kotler (2020) defined *brand activism* as a set of "business efforts to promote, impede or direct social, political, economic and/or environmental reform or stasis" with the aim to foster or hinder improvements in society. Brand activism is the result of long-term socio-political changes and significant shifts in consumer psychology and behaviour. Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) considered brand activism a communication strategy which draws from campaigns of social movements and strives to influence and drive citizen-consumers through messages and campaigns sustained by political values. The bedrocks of this definition are the powerful relationship between consumer brands and political issues and the consciousness that consumerism and citizenship (namely, the collective concern for values deriving from the political and -to a lesser extent- commercial areas like feminism, equality, LGBTQ right, environment protection, etc.) should not be considered as two opposite spheres of activity. Indeed, the brand itself has become the final product, the object of the purchase decision and a vessel of identity meanings and values consumers "use" as reference points for self-perception and self-expression (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019).

The concept of brand activism has gained momentum in latest years enhancing legitimate confusion with similar concepts such as marketing ethics, Socially Responsible Marketing (SRM) or cause-related Marketing (CRM), Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) practices and, finally, with the concept of brand purpose. While marketing ethics involves solely "internal firm processes and risks" (Martin & Burpee, 2022) and entails the inclusion of moral practices in the economy (Gierszewska & Seretny, 2019), Socially Responsible Marketing has an external influence, responding to an implicit social contract which requires to comply with a corporate good citizenship adopting a multi-stakeholder orientation. Martin and Burpee (2022) defined SRM as a set of views, policies and actions that involves the "authentic consideration of stakeholder claims" and the connection between business practices and stakeholders' interests, pursuing social and environmental sustainability in each action. Socially Responsible Marketing is

more than just philanthropy, instead it corroborates the higher-end role of marketing, that goes way beyond persuasion and represents a critical part of the corporate strategy. Moreover, according to Sarkar and Kotler (2020), while cause-related marketing starts from marketing and moves into society, brand activism is born in society and moves towards marketing (Yoo, et al., 2021). Marketing spurs firms to get closer to customers' problems and to align their strategy and efforts in the attempt to solve them. In this sense, marketing is fairly conceivable as a problem-solver and detached from the mere product-pushing and selling roles (Martin & Burpee, 2022). Two more points of difference are that SRM and CRM are usually embedded in the corporate strategy and address non-divisive, pro-social issues which are less likely to generate negative response. Instead, brand activism can be planned ad hoc or be accidental and, since it courts controversy, it usually involves a higher level of uncertainty and risk and may elicit both positive and negative reactions (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Brand activism can be conceived as the natural and more radical evolution of ESG programs and CSR that the EU Commission defined as companies' effort to "integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and their interactions with stakeholders on a voluntary basis", building ethical relations with them, including the natural environment itself (Gierszewska & Seretny, 2019). While both ESG practices and CSR are based on a marketing-driven or a corporate-driven approach, brand activism embraces an outside-in mindset and strives to fill the values-gap between companies and customers, employees or society at large. Several factors define the difference between CSR and brand activism; among the others, CSR requires minimal internal practice and addresses well-accepted and non-divisive pro-social issues which have greater fit with main corporate activities. On the contrary, brand activism exhibits high message-practice alignment, it generates awareness and addresses controversial issues which are less directly linked to the company's core business (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Moreover, brand activism differs for its society-driven approach, since it is steered "by a fundamental concern for the biggest and most urgent problems facing society" (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020). Thus, activism goes beyond social commitment embedded in sustainable policies and ethical practises to take a step further, to promote positive behaviours, committing to consumers' education and encouraging them to actively contribute to a healthier world (Eyada, 2020). Finally, brand activism also goes beyond brand purpose. Brand purpose is the statement that defines the inspiration reason for being of the company and its contribution to better the world, it explains "why the brand exists and the impact it seeks to make in the world" (Hsu, 2017). Purpose-driven marketing is an even broader concept than cause-related marketing and CSR in general, it includes and even transcends them. Moreover, brand purpose is a mindset, an ethic and a mentality, a principle

rooted in the brand which steers its behaviours. However, it's not the same as the corporate mission (which has an internal perspective), in that it's outwardly focused, talking to those whom the company is striving to serve. In this sense, brands are leading to a sort of *spiritual marketing*, which is supposed to serve a higher-end purpose than simply satisfying consumers' needs, and to touch their spirit attaching individual and societal meaning to marketing activities (Evada, 2020). Brand activism is the result of the imperative to embed social issues into brand value to go along with the progressive evolution of consumers into brand citizens (well beyond the ordinary concept of customers, shareholders and stakeholders; Yoo et al., 2021). Proactive consumers do not value brands for the functionality or the emotional appeal of their offering, rather they are mindful about how their values are aligned with those of the brand and attuned to the brand's contribution to make the world a better place (Hsu, 2017). However, claiming a higher purpose is not enough, as well as positioning is not enough anymore. Progressive consumers are way more demanding, they firmly believe that actions speak louder than words, actively looking for the proof (not the promise). Hence, companies must really switch from intention to action and practice what they preach. Social participation is expected at the brand level, not at the corporate level, since the brand is conceived as a "virtual symbolic personality" and a "value messenger" which comes into a core immediate sense to consumers (Yoo et al., 2021). What really counts now are actions and what people truly look at now is how brands behave and act in the real world and through all their touchpoints. Actions, or the absence of actions, are the signals that customers and society use to assess the "heart and soul" of a brand (Korschun, 2021).

Source: Sarkar & Kotler (2020)

In the attempt to define brand activism, it may help considering which features usually characterize an activist brand. Brand activism is unambiguously denoted by two core aspects: in the first place, it holds an inherently public nature (that is what differentiates it from lobbying), indeed it involves publicly stated positions expressed through visible means such as social media, advertising, events, open declarations or public relations. Additionally, brand activism is not an end in itself (e.g., being a responsible company), rather it entails advocacy, the purpose to spread awareness around specific causes, foster persuasion to embrace them, promote collective engagement and support to join the same issues in order to generate change (Korschun, 2021). One more peculiar aspect of brand activism is its innate divisiveness, which may potentially alienate consumers and sometimes even employees (Garg & Saluja, 2022) and expose the brand to backlashes. Brand activism may "take the form of making an open statement in public domain, lobbying for the cause, donating money to the particular cause and making a cause-related statement through their marketing and advertising communication" (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). Also, the path to make brands political advocates can be eased through alliances with 3rd parties NGOs, activists and celebrities. According to Manfredi-Sánchez (2019), activist brands hold four main features. 1) Brand have a symbolic character and value and are not linked to a real product or service, instead they represent intangible goods of reputational nature filled with cognitive and emotional values. 2) Brands become advocate of political issues, without showing support for a specific political party. 3) Despite brand activism being originally

developed and well-established as an Anglo-Saxon trend, their open orientation allows brands to hold the aspirational values of global brands and aim at the general public. 4) Activist brands draw from digital activism, including in their discursive strategy languages, objects and techniques typical of digital generations (e.g., redistribution of videos, use of logos, etc.).

1.2 The forces behind brand activism and its potential consequences for brands

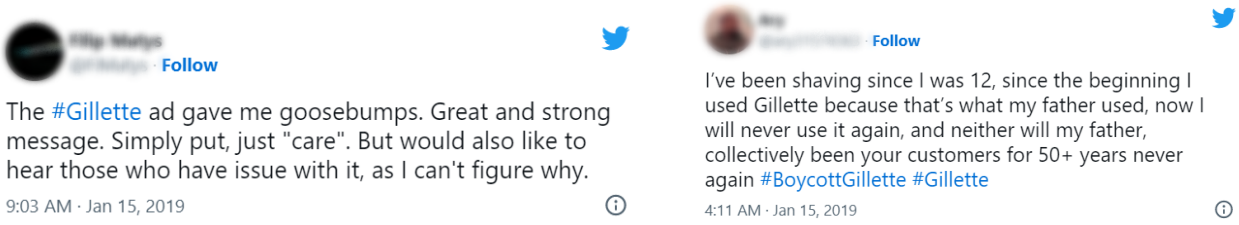
Far from being a mere modern trend, in truth many social and political dynamics have laid the ground for the rise of brand activism. It can reasonably have its origins in late 2000s, when the rise of Millennials and the global financial crisis pushed marketing towards a *human centric* evolution, also referred to as *Marketing 3.0*. This evolution was the brand's reply to the growing urge of giving business relevance to the common good, with companies creating products, services and cultures that bring positive social and environmental impact (Kartajaya, Setiawan, & Kotler, 2021). Thus, companies gradually started to embed ethical and socially responsible practices among their business activity and even in their corporate strategy. Among the critical factors behind the spread of brand activism there are the increasing level of division and distrust in the political landscape and the heightened expectations of progressive consumers towards brands. The growing political polarization in countries around the world is strictly connected to new heavy struggles facing society. Therefore, the dramatic trust loss towards traditional authorities (e.g., governments, institutions and NGOs) has prompted the expectations people have on businesses and brands (Korschun, 2021). Indeed, nowadays people evaluate brands against their values and actions to the point that brands' moral behaviour is consistent with the consumers' default moral expectations; hence, in the mind of consumers, brands have a moral obligation to take the "right stand" and act for the common good (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). To corroborate the idea that brand activism has become almost an imperative, Martin and Burpee (2022) argued that the increasing market demand for activist brands doesn't come just from progressive consumers but also from investors, who value socially responsible firm activities as positive signals of prospective returns. Therefore, firms "increasingly acknowledge (…) that companies must elevate the interests of customers, the environment and local communities (…) to be consistent and of equal priority with the needs and interests of shareholders" (Martin & Burpee, 2022). In his brilliant speech at TED Talk, Michael Porter highlighted that using businesses to solve social issues, as a sort of "higher kind" of capitalism, is critical to create shared value, which comes from the merge of social and economic value delivered simultaneously (Porter, 2013).

Moreover, although government, regulators and public policies should play a primary role in preserving and improving societal well-being, they are not as well-equipped to address societal challenges as firms, which are better positioned to trigger meaningful change, especially in their product market domain (Martin & Burpee, 2022). Nonetheless, NGOs and governments also have a crucial role, indeed NGOs know how to solve social problems effectively and governments may support businesses in getting involved in social issues.
Publicly standing up for a cause and carrying out real supportive actions it's risky, especially for companies with greater market share which have more followers to lose, elicit higher expectations and are more exposed to scrutiny. Then, one may wonder why a growing number of brands is taking the path of brand activism. The truth is that, when businesses don't share the same values of their employees, their customers or society at large, they may come up against even worse threats. Since nowadays people expect brands to solve societal and environmental problems, pressure on brands is high and they cannot afford to be neutral spectators anymore. Thus, if publicly taking a stand and making concrete actions it's risky, disregarding those expectations it's even more hazardous. Against this backdrop, brand activism is the best way to fill this values-gap and preserve companies from ruinous consequences. Rather, it may even be considered a powerful opportunity for businesses to rise above the noise by leveraging their social responsibility. To justify the attention and the emphasis that both the marketplace and the academic literature are giving to the topic, it's worth exploring the impacts of brand activism and the possible reactions and impacts it may elicit. First of all, acts of activism gather the attention of customers and create emotional connection with them, enhance customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, and strengthen associations, in turn generating the buzz around the brand. Empirical evidence proves that investment in social responsibility and brand activism lead to positive marketing outcomes and tangible firm benefits, like granting competitive advantage setting the brand apart from the pool of competition, leading to brand image promotion, perception of better product quality or performance and, in turn, higher purchase intention and higher future cash flows (Martin & Burpee, 2022; Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). Brand activism leads consumers to view brands as extensions of their views, values and lifestyles and, in turn, it has become a significant driver for brand preferences and purchase decisions. People nowadays view sharing advertisements and social media contents as opportunities to become brand ambassadors and raise awareness around the issues they care about and the values they support. Hence, choosing a certain brand is considered a form of social and political act, a way for consumers to raise their voices, to exercise power and make an impact (Eyada, 2020). Also, since brand activism reflects brand's

values, it may influence consumers' brand-value identification (namely the congruity between brand's values and consumers' values, when consumers match the brand's values and identify with them), which in turns translates into positive brand attitudes and commitment, positive WoM and higher willingness to pay (WTP) for the brand (Garg & Saluja, 2022). Socially responsible marketing and brand activism may also protect firms from idiosyncratic (firm-specific) shocks and systematic risks (broader market volatility), by building a sort of "goodwill" among stakeholders and communities. Indeed, according to Martin and Burpee (2022), responsible actions and brand activism efforts lead to the creation of firm's "moral capital", which consists in the set of " accumulated stakeholders' perceptions of a firm's socially responsible activities" which influences stakeholders' assessments, evaluations and actions towards the firm and, in turn, may boost brand credibility among consumers, lead to higher brand commitment among employees and legitimacy among communities, increase firm's attractiveness for investors and trust from partners and suppliers (Martin & Burpee, 2022). Brand activism gives customers the opportunity to assess the level of self-brand similarity based on the extent to which their moral foundations are aligned with those of the brand. Indeed, a high level of similarity between them leads to self-brand identification which, in turn, has a positive effect on favourable attitudes towards the brand, purchase intention and brand advocacy (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). However, according to Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020), it is the misalignment with the brand's stand to have a stronger impact, eliciting negative consequences in terms of attitudes and behaviours towards the brand. Moreover, when the source of the brand's stand is strongly related to the brand itself (e.g., brand's official website or a relevant brand's spokesperson), customers are not likely to apply a *moral decoupling* strategy, namely they're not willing to separate their moral judgments towards the brand from their evaluations on the brand's performance or intrinsic quality (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Thus, when customers disagree with a brand's moral or political stand, they're negative evaluation will spill over other aspects of the brand and will inevitably guide their choices and behaviours towards the brand accordingly. Criticism and public backlash against a brand as a result of its stand are not just a threat to the brand's reputation but also to the moral foundations of consumers who aligned with the brand's stand. Indeed, in those cases, when customers agree with the brand's stand, they act in defense of the brand in the spirit of rewarding it for upholding shared moral foundations. On the contrary, if the brand acts to withdraw its stand and makes apology, consumers may feel betrayed by the brand and will not recognize anymore their "affiliation" to it, in turn penalizing it (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

As already stated, brand activism addresses divisive and sensitive societal issues and this exposes the

brand even to negative reactions and boycotting if the values or ideals defended by the brand are not aligned to those of its customer base or when they are shared inappropriately or offensively. Brands need to be cautious when defining the issues they want to stand behind, as well as on the execution thereof, in order to avoid their strategy to "backfire into a public relations nightmare." (Williams, n.d.). Two clear examples of brand activism campaigns which split opinion and evoked consumers' backlash involved Gillette and PepsiCo. In 2018 Gillette (part of P&G company), the worldwide brand leader in the razors' market, launched a short film called "Believe" to promote its new slogan "The best men can be" in the attempt to overthrow the 30-year-old tagline "The best a man can get". The video showed a sequence of episodes of bullying, sexual harassment, sexist and aggressive male behaviours, showing later men stepping into each of these episodes to prevent or stop them. The campaign was part of a repositioning strategy to consolidate and publicly assert the brand's values and take a clear stand against relevant social struggles involving men's actions like toxic masculinity, bullying, sexism and sexual harassment (showing also support to the *#Metoo* movement), while celebrating men who were already doing fine. As Gillette's president Gary Coombe asserted, conveying the importance for men to hold each other accountable, to abandon excuses and work toward their personal "best" acknowledges the importance of everyone's initiative to generate positive change. However, since the campaign joined the sensitive dialogue on "Modern Manhood", which necessarily implies changes in the way we think about and portray men, not surprisingly it elicited controversial effects. Indeed, while many praised the honourable effort of the brand and shared appreciation and public support to the campaign, the majority of Gillette's customers publicly shamed the brand, declaring the brand was "dead to them" or that they were never going to buy it again; someone even accused it of doing "feminist propaganda" and publicly joined the social movement created by Gillette's old loyal customers to boycott the brand (using the hashtag #BoycottGillette; Baggs, 2019). Despite the intentions and final goal of the campaign being honourable and aiming at fostering and encouraging small actions to bring positive change in society, the brand missed to hit in the right way its customer base, who felt deemed as guilty and accountable for the societal issues condemned in the ad.



Source: Baggs (2019) https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-46874617

Similarly, PespiCo, one of the world's leading food and beverage companies, came up against a tight backlash for the ad "Jump In' Pepsi Moments" launched in April 2017, as part of the "Live for Now - Moments" campaign. The ad showed white supermodel Kendall Jenner posing for a photo shoot and then joining a street march (which echoed the *Black Lives Matter* protest), and it culminated in a final moment of greater tension with Kendall coming in front of a police officer and giving him a can of Pepsi soda as a sort of "symbol for peace". The goal of the ad was to reach out to millennials by advocating a positive message of unity and peace and to embody a lifestyle that "shared a voice" with the generation of the time. Instead, it raised negative reactions and disgust among young audience, with people claiming the brand had trivialized real-life societal problems (like racism, indeed), dramatic events and movements of political resistance, like the *Black Lives Matter (BLM)* movement, for commercial gains (e.g., increasing sales). The brand failed to empathize with youngers and to reflect the ideals of the contemporary generation and it was criticised for its "insensitive" approach to such a delicate theme. One of the reasons behind this flop is likely to be found in the choice for the wrong spokesperson. Indeed, there is a fine line between being appropriate and being controversial (Yoo, et al. 2021) and Kendall Jenner was not deemed relevant to the meaning behind that specific campaign, neither she was known for her activism or her public commitment to any social issues. Moreover, most of the blame was due to lack of market research; indeed, Creators League Studios, the brand-new in-house content creation team of PepsiCo, missed to take a more balanced approach and to consider an outside perspective, neglecting how the brand was perceived in the outside world (Tillman, n.d.). Even in this case, the audience's reaction didn't delay and even Bernice King, the youngest daughter of Sir Martin Luther King Jr., shared her disappointment in a tweet posting a picture of her father during a peaceful protest. Few days after publishing the ad, PespiCo removed the spot and publicly apologized for "missing the mark" to convey a message of "unity, peace and understanding" through a press release on its website and a Twitter post. The brand ended up with

the lowest level of brand perception and purchase consideration among Millennials in the last eight years, tackling a major PR crisis (Tillman, n.d.).

Source: Tillman (n.d.) https://astute.co/pepsi-kendall-jenner-commercial/

New-age consumers are more civic-minded and responsible and are marketing-savvy, with an acute sense of social justice and scepticism towards deceptive marketing efforts. Indeed, their stated preference for transparent and fair marketing and advertising makes them ready to boycott or switch a brand when it prioritizes its commercial interests (e.g., profit) over its social responsibility (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019). Then, it's crucial for brands to properly implement their brand activism actions to avoid alienating the customer base and triggering backlashes from loyal customers who interpret them as mere marketing gimmick, especially in cases when the brand activism doesn't match their core vision, values and ethics (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019).

1.3 Brand activism strategy

Brand activism is a dynamic and fluid process and, as such, it requires brand managers to be cultural genealogists, to get "close to the nation", to be attuned to the world around them and detect the social and political shifts and anxieties the society is struggling with (Holt, 2004). Indeed, brands need to see reality from an *outside in* perspective developing "sensitive antennae" to perceive the most critical issues and to implement policies and concrete actions that support activists and leading progressive

organizations in driving movements to better the world and advance social changes (Holt, 2004; Sarkar & Kotler, 2020). Ben & Jerry's Global Head of Integrated Marketing, Jay Curley, and Head of Global Activism Strategy, Chris Miller, developed a framework to help organizations in building their own approach to brand activism. They identified the **6P's of Brand Activism**, namely a model centred around 6 cornerstones (Purpose, Policy, People, Power, Publishing and Pop culture) to transform brands into advocates for social changes and marketers into activists. The starting point of the framework is made up by corporate core values; it's critical for companies being sure to fully embrace relevant durable values, to be plain and loyal to their core values and to clearly disclose them (**Purpose**). Furthermore, companies are asked to go beyond simple claims to act upon the root cause of social struggles through policy changes and concrete efforts to advance the fight of leading organizations of social movements (**Policy**). Employees and all company's relevant spokespeople are key players in this game: their sincere commitment to the cause they advocate enhances the impact and the credibility of company's efforts to support it (**People**). Companies hold resources (e.g., expertise in market and consumer research, high budgets, world-class creative development) that give them unique power and "authority" over consumers, media and even policymakers. They should leverage them to address civic and cultural disfunctions and to become a force for positive change (**Power**). Moreover, companies should use their voice and exploit their touchpoints to build a continuative credible storytelling, deliver creative content to sensitize consumers and offer people an easy on-ramp to get involved in the movement, like inviting them to make a donation, join a march or sign a petition (**Publishing**). Finally, brands should raise their voice and use their positioning to stand out in the media landscape. Their claimed support for social movements would make brands relevant for consumers and help them positioning as top of mind brands (**Pop culture**). Hence, it's critical for brands to use their position to educate, inspire and motivate customers and, in turn, to influence change (Curley, 2019).

The notion of brand activism assumes the adoption of a specific marketing perspective, the *cultural branding perspective*, which considers advertising not as a mere medium of persuasion, rather as a mean to strengthen the brand positioning and align "the brand message with cultural change" (Oswald, 2015). Also, brands are deemed vessels of cultural meanings and contribute to the cultural system through a dialectical relationship (Oswald, 2015). Transforming a brand campaign into a social movement requires to engage with the dominant cultural narratives in society, transfer a common vision and get the audience actively join in collaborative action.

In the attempt to define a strategy to build activist brands, Sarkar and Kotler (2020) identified five core factors vital to build a movement:

1) First, companies have to set an **honourable mission** directed at the **Common Good**.
2) They have to **imagine** what results the movement aims to reach and how it has planned to achieve them.
3) Companies should figure out how to **inspire** and motivate people to join their actions.
4) Once impressed, they have to **mobilize** and budge committed participants.
5) Finally, they will drive and coordinate joint **action** to generate change.

Source: Sarkar & Kotler (2019)

It's pivotal for brands to create and deliver meaningful messages in line with the dominant cultural narrative of the time, primarily to gain widespread acceptance in society and, in turn, to gain resonance and to influence behaviors. Brands need to be fully transparent and to "walk the talk"; since publicly standing up for a cause is not enough, brands have to earn credibility through concrete actions (Korschun, 2021). Sarkar and Kotler (2020) drew from the Aristotle's *modes of persuasion*, to define the essentials of a powerful and effective brand narrative. In addition to the three classic rhetorical strategies, such as *ethos* (leverage the credibility of the sources), *pathos* (the appeal to human emotions) and *logos* (the appeal to our logical side), they considered also *thumos*, that is the messenger's spiritedness, genuine enthusiasm or passion for the message advanced. Thus, what is critical for brands to engage people and get them actively involved into the movement is to be authentic, human and believable. Indeed, according to Sarkar and Kotler (2020), among the four

dimensions of cultural narratives that have influence on consumers' view, namely *myth*, *history*, *ideology* and *identity*, the latter is the most important for its ability to make the brand storytelling more personal and, in turn, more human, enhancing its appeal and the chances that consumers will empathize with the brand. One of the greatest and clearest evidence comes from the teen climate activist Greta Thunberg, whose message around the urgency of the climate crisis was incredibly effective and resonant among the young and came to influence even the political landscape.

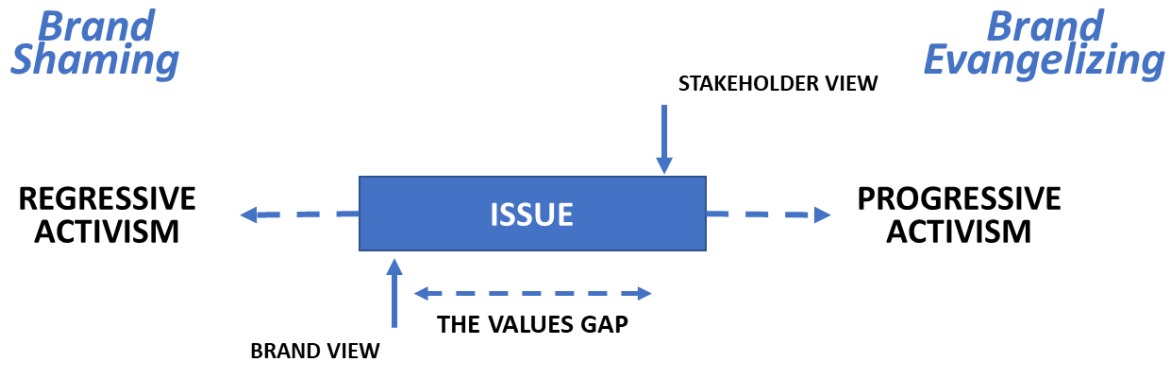
1.4 The dark side of Brand Activism: regressive activism

It may seem strange, but the concept of brand activism does not necessarily have a positive connotation; in some cases, indeed, brands become bearers of regressive forms of activism. The "values gap" between the company's conscience and the conscience of customers, stakeholders or society can turn out to be either a unique opportunity to seize or, rather, to be a serious potential threat for brands that get shameful behaviours steering away from stakeholders' expectations. What distinguishes *regressive activism* from *progressive activism* is the direction the brand takes with regard to the Common Good (namely, the set of conditions or facilities - whether material, abstract, cultural or institutional - which benefits all or most of the members of a community). By definition, regressive brands are brands that actively support, through actions, policies that may threaten or hurt the Common Good and their perspective is at the odds with the basic needs and values shared by community or society (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020). One of the poster-child for regressive activism is definitely Big Tobacco, the tobacco companies that for many years promoted detrimental habits claiming the virtues of smoking and denying the harm their products caused to consumers' health and life, even when it was proved by their own research (Sarkar & Kotler, 2017).

Source: Sarkar & Kotler (2017) https://www.marketingjournal.org/finally-brand-activism-philip-kotler-and-christian-sarkar/

Regressive brands expose themselves to the risk of *brand shaming*, which consists in a decline of brand value and consumers' strike against regressive behaviours. However, the values gap could even be played in reverse, with brand's view staying ahead of its stakeholders and the brand playing a leading role in the fight for the common good (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020). Indeed, progressive brand activism concerns brands that do the right thing and involves actions that promote and support the Common Good. A remarkable expression of progressive brand activism comes from Ben & Jerry, among the most activist companies in the world and one of the first to put its social mission on the same level of its product and economic missions, aiming to create prosperity to everyone who's linked to the business (employees, customers, suppliers, farmers, franchisees, etc.) and to improve the quality of life locally, nationally and globally (Sarkar & Kotler, 2017). Ben & Jerry is considered a "justice-brand" for advocating various social issues, from climate justice, democracy and fairtrade, to LGBT equality and the opposition to racism. Brands involved in progressive activism can elicit *brand evangelism,* a priceless kind of brand trust and enthusiasm. Brand evangelism occurs when some values or qualities of the brand speak to consumers' own identity and choosing a brand becomes a way for them to reinforce their ideas about themselves (Lahey, 2021). Brand evangelism entails the brand's ability to transfer the fervour of the issues and the goodness of the values it advocates, persuading consumers to share them and join the same cause. In this sense, the concept of brand evangelism is closely connected to the concept of "world-of-mouth" (Inside Marketing, n.d.).

Therefore, it is clearly the brand, at the end, rather than the company, that engages and transfers values to the citizen-consumer, leading the process of change (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019).



Source: adapted from Sarkar & Kotler (2020)

1.5 The six domains of Brand Activism

Nowadays humanity is facing a growing number of challenges and interrelated issues which governments and institutions are failing to address, like social unrest, human rights violations, pollution, environmental disasters, species extinctions, wars, pandemics and still many. Within this assorted group of intertwined issues that Sarkar (2019) defined the "ecosystem of wicked problems", he identified a set of seven "macro-areas" which englobe interlinked problems and represent what business and brands are called upon to solve, also to adhere to progressive consumers' expectations: inequality, hate, war, corruption, population, health and livelihood, climate collapse (Sarkar, 2019). **Inequality** comes from the inequal distribution of wealth, it is growing steadily exacerbating social and gender disparity and favouring the spread of poverty, hunger and social disorders. **Hate** originates from society's polarization, which refers to the widening gap between different identity-based, cultural and ideological subgroups that are experiencing a lack of empathy, tolerance and inclusion, shaping a world of conflict, social unrest, hate, violence and wars. **War**, indeed, is the extreme consequence of a series of prejudices, policies, propaganda and the concretization of a culture of militarism, armies and violence that overall lead to lethal group conflict. **Corruption** refers to deceptive conducts of who is in positions of power or from people that try to influence them by fraud or in a dishonest way. **Population**'s unstoppable growth will inevitably bring to the surface the issue of limited resources available to satisfy the need of every human (e.g., primary needs like water, food and energy, but also health assistance and education, for instance) that will hardly be solved without environmental degradation, and will indirectly reinforce phenomena like poverty, migrations and

social disorders. **Health and livelihood** refer to the global challenge of ensuring public wellbeing, in terms of economic wellness and physical and mental health, through public utilities, employment, education and public healthcare services. **Climate Collapse** is among the most urgent problems humanity needs to face today and also the one that is showing with overwhelming evidence. Global warming is sparking a series of dramatic events and natural calamities, like hurricanes, flooding, abnormal heat waves, wildfires, melting glaciers and drought, which are necessarily contributing to gradual ecosystem degradation and species extinction. In the same way, starting from these big classes which gather and cover in a comprehensive way the major issues affecting modern society worldwide, the fields where brand activism may find application can be clustered into six main domains. These broad categories comprise legal activism, political activism, business (or workplace) activism, social activism, economic activism and environmental activism (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020). The focus of **legal activism** is about laws and policies affecting companies, such as employment laws, citizenship and taxes. One example of legal activism comes from 2017, when the president Trump signed an executive order - also referred to as "Muslim ban" or "Refugee ban" - to forbid people coming from seven Muslim-majority countries to enter in the States. Against that disgraceful backdrop, the ride-sharing company Lyft very soon reacted and publicly condemned the act and pledged itself to donate one million dollars to ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) over the next four years (Kaye, 2017). **Political activism** involves lobbying, policies, privatization, voting and voting rights. A meaningful case of political activism comes from brands which took a firm position against Russia, within the Russia-Ukraine conflict that started in February 2022. Many brands closed their stores or suspended their operations in Russia; among those there was McDonald's, whose announcement to temporarily close its restaurants created long lines of devoted Russians waiting hours outside for tasting what could have been (and actually was!) their last-ever Big Mac. Indeed, in May 2022, McDonald's announced its decision to permanently close its businesses in Russia. This was quite a historical moment, just as much as it was the moment when the brand opened its first restaurant in Russia thirty-two years ago, becoming one of the first Western Companies to officially enter the Soviet Union (Turak, 2022). Similarly, Chanel, after shutting its stores in Russia to join global condemnation of Russian military campaign and show support for Ukraine, prohibited the sale of its products to people who would have taken or used them in Russia (in line with the EU sanctions on sales of luxury goods). The firm was accused to be anti-Russian and to promote *Russiaphobia* when Russian famous influencers shared videos on social media capturing them while cutting their Chanel bags, instigating followers to boycott the brand. Loyal customers and brand spokespeople felt

betrayed and discriminated by the brand and used social media to express disdain for it (*Ukraine war: Chanel restricts sales of goods to Russians abroad,* 2022). **Business activism** (or *workplace activism*) involves issues around governance, like CEO pay, workers' compensation, corporate organization, supply chain management. The American brand Uncommon Goods did not become famous just for offering more than double the minimum federal wage to its employees and introducing a fair paid family leave (for those with children or sick loved ones); instead, the company successfully advocated for these rights in the State of New York and still it is going to extend these results on other states too (*UncommonGoods for the Common Good*, 2016). **Social activism** includes inequality (being it linked to gender, sexual orientation, LGBT, race, etc.), societal and community issues like Healthcare, Education, Privacy, Consumer Protection, Social security. Besides being the poster-child of progressive brand activism as a whole, Ben & Jerry is definitely among the greatest examples of social activism, distinguishing itself for the many social issues it has defended (e.g., LGBT equality and some years later supported the "Black Lives Matter" movement against racism (Ben & Jerry's, n.d.). **Economic** activism pertains to wage and tax policies which directly affect redistribution of wealth and income disparity. The Body Shop, an English cosmetics company notable for being a business rooted in brand activism since the very first day, has always been committed to relevant social issues, like women equality and girls' empowerment, as well as stopping the cruel animal testing practice. Since 1987, the Body Shop is running "Community Fair Trade", the biggest fair-trade initiative in the cosmetics industry, which is a bespoke programme to source ingredients across the planet building an authentic connection with local producers and suppliers. By establishing long-term trade partnerships with them, based on fair prices and favourable trade terms, the company ensures financial independence to local producers, especially to women from rural areas that have limited economic opportunities. Furthermore, some partners also receive additional funds to be invested in community projects to promote education, healthcare and sanitation (The Body Shop, n.d.). Finally, **environmental activism** concerns environmental laws and circular policies as well as awareness-raising initiatives and actions regarding climate change, global warming, emissions control, water pollution, land-use and ecocide. In its "Sustainable Living Plan", Unilever set a plan with the general goal to tackle climate change and support human development. Given its threefold purpose (1. improving health and well-being; 2. reducing environmental impact; 3. enhancing livelihoods), the "Sustainable Living Plan" is most likely attributable to the last three categories of brand activism at once, namely social, economic and environmental activism (Sarkar & Kotler, 2017).

2. Environmental Activism

2.1 Acting to save the planet: an urgent imperative for brands

The concept of environmental protection has a very broad scope and incorporates several environmental issues that require actions, such as pollution, climate change, natural resource depletion and extreme weather events. *Environmental activism* refers to the set of actions that various groups of individuals (often volunteers) and organizations (associations, no-profit organizations, companies) put in place in order to safeguard nature and aid the environment. Actions start when they identify issues that seriously threaten the planet's viability (at a community level or at global level) and develop strategies (being them local strategies, nationwide campaigns or creative initiatives) to promote awareness, push institutions towards tough regulations or directly provide solutions to address the problems, with the final goal of making earth "a harmonious living environment" to hand down to future generations (University of Nevada, n.d.). Environmental activism is intrinsically segmentary, since it brings together different groups devoted to the same "green cause"; nevertheless, it is also polycentric, because the groups can have multiple centres of influence; and, finally, environmental activism is networked, since it has a loose, integrated network with multiple linkages due to overlapping memberships (Conserve Energy Future, n.d.).

Environmental activism can be broadly categorized into three main types of activism, namely solution-driven activism, change-focused activism and finally revolutionary activism (Prakoso et al., 2021).

Solution-driven activism involves the identification of the solutions to a specific issue and demanding actions to implement those solutions and address the issue (*What is Environmental Activism*?, 2016).

Change-focused activism doesn't lead to the resolution of the problem, instead it aims to create a valid alternative to the issue (which, in this case, is generally a broader one). The issue is not addressed by replacing a system, but by instituting a new system beside the original system (*What is Environmental Activism?*, 2016). In this case, the activism initiatives might have the function to bring out the alternative, educate people and direct them toward it.

Revolutionary activism, finally, is not focused on pursuing small changes but it seeks to subvert the opposed system and it implies a "fundamental change of society and its major institutions" (*What is Environmental Activism?*, 2016; Prakoso et al., 2021). Environmental movements basically share the same mission, thus to improve and protect the health and "quality of natural environment through

changes to environmentally harmful human activities" (Earth5R, 2022); however, they do not aim to achieve their goals in the same way. This leads to a more specific distinction among them and to the identification of eight slightly different kinds of environmental movements.
1. *Climate activism*, a movement born from the public recognition of the climate change and lead by young activists (like Greta Thunberg, Jamie Margolin, Vanessa Nakate) who created a global youth climate movement, rallying thousands of young activists in activations like School Strike for Climate or Fridays for Future. They raised their voices against climate change urging the world to wake up to the growing crisis and demanding that people in position of power stop chasing money and start acting to fight it. 2. *The conservation movement* aims to protect natural habitats and preserve biodiversity and eco-systems, promoting a sustainable use of natural resources and wilderness preservation. 3. *Environmental defenders* are groups involved in environmental conflicts to protect the environment from damages caused by human activities like hazardous waste disposal, infrastructure projects, resource extraction, tackling the interests of governments, local elites and other groups of power. 4. *Green parties* are "formally organized political parties" with the aim to orient civilization in more sustainable directions. These parties were born to oppose the nuclear power and gradually extended their scope to incorporate further environmental concerns like pollution, climate crisis, and socio-economic issues (like racism and economic inequality); they are based on the principles of green politics, grassroots democracy, social justice and nonviolence. 5. *Water protectors* are activists that work in defence of water and water systems and are guided by a philosophy rooted in indigenous cultural perspective which considers water as sacred and essential for life, thus worthy of respect. 6. *Individual and Political Action* is a form of activism though to reduce greenhouse gases (GHG) emissions, to limit their effects and their impact on climate; it mostly involves changes in laws and regulations directly related the climate change (e.g., carbon tax and carbon pricing). 7. *Environmental grassroots movements* rely on the power of collective actions to generate change, by making use of basic rights like freedom of speech and expression and making pressure to elected officials, government bodies and corporations. These movements are led by communities, social enterprises and even NGOs (for instance, Greenpeace), have no political affiliation and often start as form of local activism and gradually take a regional, national or even global scope. 8. *Eco-terrorism* is a form of radical environmentalism that consists in the use (or threatened use) of acts of violence against people or properties (Earth5R, 2022). These movements are growingly becoming widespread and often take the form of acts of vandalism (yet sometimes

fictitious) committed in public, particularly in places of culture such as museums and exhibitions or in buildings that are home to important institutions to achieve greater resonance.

Citizens and businesses have become growingly aware about the seriousness of the climate emergency and consider the fight against global warming being among the hardest challenges humanity is facing for the next twenty years (McCann Worldgroup, 2021). Today we are living the "age of activism", with people eagerly caring about and being committed to major social, cultural and environmental issues, and campaigns and movements becoming a critical part of our personal and work life. The reasons behind the rise of this groundswell of activism in society are to be retraced in the inequality gap rising in the post-financial crisis, but primarily in the rise of Millennials consumers, who are marked out by the affirmation and the empowerment of the individual self-value and by a new form of socialism, based on a culture of sharing, cooperation and collectivism enabled by the digital revolution (Minár, 2016). Millennials, and even more Generation Z, are leading a paradigmatic shift which is changing the rules of traditional economy, shaping the so-called *gift economy*, where brands and corporations are asked to be social and cultural actors in society and to create cultural value "without any assurance of immediate return" (Minár, 2016), thus regardless of current economic profit. Millennials are growingly interested in "brands that care", that go way beyond expressing identity, status or signalling the brand's commercial presence in the market, to take an ethical and value dimension and give something back to the society and the planet. Accordingly, since traditional advertising is losing the trust of new generation cohorts, it can't be linked anymore to the products or their functional features (as it was traditionally intended to be), it's no more merely devoted to create entertainment and capture attention, nor it is trusted enough by new generation cohorts. Instead, traditional advertising is shifting into *goodvertising*, a form of values-driven communication, embodying brands' expression to valuable issues like community, ideologies and socio-cultural values (Minár, 2016).

In the *GetOutInFront* study conducted by Deloitte in 2020 (involving almost ten thousand people from six countries, through a survey replicated twice, before and after the Covid-19 pandemic) emerged that climate change (in particular, concerns about reducing carbon emissions and extreme weather patterns) and environment (especially reducing air pollution and the single use plastics) are among the primary issues people care about. Most of the respondents declared to care more in 2020 compared to the past and that extreme weather patterns would be bound to become an even "hotter" issue by 2025. Moreover, in 2020 almost 40% of population was already actively engaged in activist initiatives like signing a petition, making a donation, joining a protest, campaigning through NGOs

or charities, and would be going to become more activist in the next future, after Covid-19. Also, most people who care about climate change and environment changed their consumption habits and switched to brands that aligned with their opinions on the theme and their own values and ideals (and encouraged others to do the same). Indeed, people claimed to hold businesses responsible for solving major societal and environmental problems, mainly through adapting business practices to improve their supply chain and resource usage. Additionally, more than 65% of respondents do expected CEOs to have more responsibility than organizations to lead the change and make improvements towards these missions, e.g., tackling air pollution and reducing carbon emissions, improving data privacy and protection against cyber-crimes etc. Most expected actions to be taken are making concrete adjustments in their business practices to generate changes (58% of respondents), creating awareness externally through public relation efforts and advertising (55%) and making financial contribution to dedicated charities (41%; Deloitte, 2020).

Awareness of global environmental issues is changing consumers' attitudes and habits and shaping their brand choice (Haller, K., Lee, J., Cheung, J., 2019). While people consider governments, businesses, brands and themselves equally accountable for stepping up sustainable practises, it's also true that most of them believe brands to have greater responsibility to take the right action to minimise their environmental impact (Robson, 2020) and to have higher power than governments in shaping minds and making a positive impact (McCann Worldgroup, 2021). However, there's not just a clear consumer-driven imperative for change, there's also an urgent business imperative which requires companies to make a shift in their mindset (from an economic to a circular model of production and consumption), to reimagine and quickly transform business models, supply chains and products and, finally, to make doing the right choice easier for consumers (e.g., through product design and packaging, choice architecture, shifting cultural norms, nudging or changing behaviours through ecological brand discourses; Robson, 2020). According to a recent study by McCann Worldgroup (2021), in the two-year period 2019-2020 over 90% of companies have engaged in some forms of sustainability or climate commitment. And if the latest years have been regarded as "the age of activism", then 2019 could be considered the "year of climate strike", witnessing several activist movements involving more than seven million people who held protests, strikes and events in streets and squares around the globe (Bir, 2019). That year was a turning point and marked a significant change in people's consciousness about climate crisis and ecological emergency with the rise of major global activist movements, like Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for Future, Youth for Climate and Global Climate Strike lead by young activists "demanding world leaders to address the threat of

global warming". People started ascribing to brands the responsibility to proactively minimise their environmental impact and demanding CEOs to take actions without waiting for governments to impose it. These movements were mostly born as big schools strikes where groups of teenagers started to rally and took the protests to the streets, and they rapidly spread across the world involving thousands of students and youngers (but also teachers, scientists and celebrities) in countries like Italy, Germany, Spain, U.S. and Canada (the five countries where these movements reported greatest participation). "Climate strike" was so frequently mentioned to become the "Word of the Year" in 2019, a year that hosted more than six thousand events in one-hundred-eighty-five different countries across the world, making global climate strikes among the biggest global demonstrations in history. Teenagers were the indisputable protagonists of these activist movements, led by the Swedish teen climate activist Greta Thunberg, who, in the same year, addressed a plenary session of the European Economic and Social Committee, gathered hundreds of activists at the White House to ask U.S. actions, delivered a speech in both the two legs of the Global Climate Strike and joined the COP25 UN Climate Summit in Madrid. Greta has been the youngest "Time Person of the Year" and was nominated twice for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Environmental activism has changed the way to show itself and to engage the mass throughout the last decades, witnessing the growing role of ambassadors, being them embodied by everyday people, celebrities and brands. Greta Thunberg was the cause of "the paradigm shift in the way the world considers climate change" (Greta Thunberg: The Voice of Our Planet, 2021) and she established a new kind of social activism (i.e., internet activism) which relies on the ability of social media to engage citizens in global policy decisions (compensating for a gap in institutional processes). Indeed, she used Twitter to spread her concerns about climate and her call to action to the general public, mostly reaching the youth (who dominates social media, indeed) and, in the same way, she organized the Anti-global warming movement and her strikes were replicated in more than seventy-one countries around the world. This international movement inspired by Greta created an interconnection between them, which are united by one mission: to reduce global warming threats. In her speeches she demands adults, the climate negotiators, to stop or decrease the rate of climate change coming from economic activity and she accuses them of not being mature enough to work together and prevent the worsening climate change, while instead sacrificing the future of next generations to ensure a small group of actors to make enormous profits (Prakoso, 2021). Behind the success of Greta's strikes are the consistency of the strikes and, in general, the collective actions among people

around the globe, which have led to a rising awareness around the seriousness of the climate emergency (Prakoso, 2021).

Greta with her sign 'School strike for the climate'.
Photo: Catherine Edwards/The Local
Source: *Greta Thunberg: The Voice of Our Planet (2021)*

Source: *Bir (2019)*
https://www.aa.com.tr/en/environment/year-of-climate-strike-climate-change-protests-in-2019/1687317

Not just *internet activism* but also *celebrity activism* has been spreading in latest years, thanks to celebrities from the world of cinema, like Hollywood superstar Leonardo DiCaprio, and other world-famous people, such as the musician Ludovico Einaudi, who have become living symbols of the fight against climate change, exploiting their popularity and world-class public opportunities to express their concerns about the climate crisis and to stir consciences. In the opinion of some expert environmental activists, celebrities' involvement helps to focus public attention on environmental issues, and to "channel support, money, and enthusiasm into real and lasting impact". It proves to be effective (and make people care) when it's clear that who's speaking is truly passionate about the issue and shares facts to back those interest up (Stutzer, 2017). Leonardo DiCaprio has been using his stardom to raise awareness about and fight for the preservation of the environment. At the age of 24 he met the then US vice-president Al Gore at the White House to talk about global warming and, the same year, he founded the "Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation" to support projects around the globe devoted to the protection of fragile ecosystems and key species. He's one the most high-profile climate activists, he personally attended the COP26 in Glasgow, he was designed by the United Nations as a Messenger of Peace for Climate Change (in 2014) and seats in the board of many environmental organizations like WWF. DiCaprio produced and starred many documentaries about this topic and, in 2016, used his Oscar acceptance speech to warn about the concrete effects of climate

change and emphasize the need to act collectively to face it, reminding not to "take this planet for granted" (Rochell, 2022).

Always in 2016, world renowned Italian pianist and composer Ludovico Einaudi joined the Greenpeace campaign in defence of the Arctic Ocean (the least protected sea in the world) to defend its fragile ecosystem threatened by climate change, human exploitation for hydrocarbons and intensive fishing. The musician boarded the Greenpeace ship "Arctic Sunrise" and then performed his specially composed "Elegy for the Arctic" upon a floating wooden platform in front of magnificent glaciers and mountains, in the enchanting frame of the Wahlenbergbreen Glacier, on the Svalbard Islands (Norway). The initiative was sponsored by Greenpeace to raise awareness about the Arctic protection and to call for governments to act. It was a touching performance with the melancholy elegy echoing across the glaciers to deliver a powerful message of urgency and fear, joining to the voices of the eight million supporters around the world (Andrews, 2016; Brenna, 2016; Mitchell, 2016).

DiCaprio joining a Climate March in 2017.
Source: Leonardo DiCaprio/Twitter
https://twitter.com/LeoDiCaprio/status/858507952868794368

Ludovico Einaudi performing at Wahlenbergbreen Glacier, Svalbard, Norway (2016, June 6).
Source: Mitchell (2016)
https://mymodernmet.com/ludovico-einaudi-orchestra-

2.2 Patagonia: a benchmark for environmental activism and sustainability advocacy

When it comes to brand activism there's a brand that always recalls in consumers' mind: Patagonia. To consider it a company would undoubtedly be reductive, since Patagonia is much more than just a business; it is an environmental advocate, in the first place. Before being a leader in the outdoor

apparel market, Patagonia is a world and industry leader in environmental advocacy, with more than one-hundred-forty million dollars donated to environmental non-profit organization (until 2021). Since the very beginnings, the company was conceived a "business to save the planet", it was not just meant to product environmentally friendly outdoor gear and apparel, but to do good for the earth. The first business of the founder Yvon Chouinard, a young French-Canadian guy passionate about rock climbing and exploration, was built upon the creation of effective climbing equipment (indeed, the name of the enterprise was "Chouinard Equipment") and it was built around "clean climbing", sustainability, environmental protection as core missions. Chouinard soon had the idea to expand the business into textiles to create eco-conscious outdoor clothing, creating Patagonia; several years after (1989), after Chouinard Equipment bankruptcy, he decided to focus solely on the business of ethical outdoor clothing.

Patagonia's entire marketing strategy has always been inspired by Chouinard's first climbing gear catalog (in 1972), which included environmental messaging and educational quotes and was a gimmick to inform and sensitize the community about ethical climbing products and the importance to preserve the mountains and protect the planet. This strategy grew success keeping faith to draw attention to climate change (starting in the '70s-'80s, when no one had really done so) leading environmental efforts to become an integrant part of the company culture (Cascade, 2021). Patagonia was a pioneer in driving its business in conjunction with that mission.

The company was not immune to pitfalls and periods of economic recession over the years; however, Patagonia has always fiercely defended its strong and clear identity and has never lost sight of its environmental commitment, building strategic partnerships with manufacturers which shared the same vision. It was during the '90s that Patagonia started its climb to success and its work culture and environmental initiatives marked the difference with every other traditional business (Cascade, 2021).

There's much meaningful evidence of the brand's commitment to the environment, starting from the "1% for the Planet" initiative, the pledge of 1% of its total sales each year to domestic and international environmental groups for the preservation and restoration of the natural environment. And Patagonia has always honoured this commitment, every year since 1985 (Patagonia, n.d.; Cascade, 2021). Still over the years, the company has been the protagonist of countless and various initiatives in favour of environmental protection (e.g., making donations, sponsoring grants, supporting grassroots movements, launching inspiring campaigns around specific environmental issues, and even changing the brand purpose into "We're in business to save our home planet", etc.), often using provocative tones and even taking politically uncomfortable positions speaking out

against political programs threatening the planet's health, in order to use its influence to raise awareness and inspire change. Some of those initiatives are particularly worth to be mentioned, especially for their originality and for the ground-breaking nature of their advertising campaigns.

Don't buy this jacket

Source: Allchin (2013) (https://www.marketingweek.com/case-study-patagonias-dont-buy-this-jacket-campaign/)

On November 25th, 2011, Patagonia posted a provocative ad on the New York Times during the Black Friday. The ad reported the headline "Don't buy this jacket" over a black-and-white picture of its most sold jacket, the R2 Jacket (Fortunato, 2020). Patagonia tried to tackle the issue of consumerism exactly during the sales period, when people easier indulge in over-consumption. The ad invited consumers not to buy new items (e.g., that jacket, for instance) if not really needed, and spurred them to rather extend the use of their own garments (according to one of principles of circular economy, reuse). The company backed up its controversial invitation explaining that each piece of Patagonia clothing, even when based on organic or recycled materials, is responsible for several times its weight of carbon emissions and it draws down copious amount of water. The purpose of the ad was to inspire and implement solutions to protect the environment, by encouraging consumers to think before buying and to reflect on the harmful impacts of our consumption behaviours on the planet (Patagonia, n.d.).

The President stole your land

Source: Fortunato (2020) (https://www.smartalks.it/blog/marketing/il-caso-patagonia-nel-pieno-rispetto-dellambiente/)

In December 2017, the White House released a statement to provide for the details of the President's plans to shrink the size of two national monuments in Utah, Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante sit on millions of acres of land. The provision implied the largest elimination of public land in the American history and it inferred undoing the protection to such lands for the first time in 50 years. Patagonia modified its homepage to display a black screen with the claim "The president stole your land" to rise awareness and concern about the problem, and gather consensus and adhesions to engage in collective actions (Lee, 2017; Fortunato, 2020).

Vote the assholes out

Source: Brand News (2020) (https://www.brand-news.it/brand/persona/abbigliamento/patagonia-e-letichetta-vote-the-assholes-out-da-un-piccolo-dettaglio-nascosto-un-mare-di-pr/)

This atypical campaign from Patagonia was one of the most significant examples of its authority to address both ecological and even political issues and it proves how far the power of influence can go, even when starting from a small message hidden behind a label. The message indeed was sewn in place of the usual washing instructions, behind the label of Patagonia's 'Regenerative Organic Stand Up Shorts', produced since 1973. Thus, the resonance of the campaign mostly relies on a world-of-mouth effect generated by the customers (especially loyal ones) who noted the label and shared their experience. The truthfulness of the campaign was even confirmed by Patagonia that clarified that the message alluded generally to politicians and leaders who deny or ignore the climate crisis. The campaign was launched during the presidential campaign between Biden and Trump, almost one and a half months before the elections and, with no doubt, it seemed specifically directed to President Trump, with the aim of openly contesting his denial of climate changes, drilling operations in Alaska, the shrinking of protected public land and all the unethical provisions under Trump's administration (Brand News, 2020; Fortunato, 2020).

Patagonia "going purpose"

Patagonia, as Chouinard stated, has always been doing its best to tackle the environmental crisis and it has been committed to use the company to change the rules of traditional business. Yet, the founder acknowledged that this commitment was still not enough to fight against global warming and environmental crisis. In 2022 Chouinard announced the decision to transfer 100% actions of Patagonia to its main shareholder, the planet. He had to decide between two options: the first was to sell the company and donate all the money, but this decision couldn't have ensured that the brand values would have been preserved <8and the same for the people employed around the world); the alternative option was to "go public" and change Patagonia into a public company that would probably have sacrificed the environmental mission under the pressure for short-term gains. So, Chouinard created one more alternative solution: he donated 100% of voting stock to Patagonia Purpose Trust that will drive the company according to Patagonia's historical values; 100% of nonvoting stock (i.e., 98% of total stock) to Holdfast Collective, a non-profit organization dedicated to fighting climate crisis and protecting nature. In this way, all the profits (net of revenues to be reinvested in the business) will be distributed as a dividend for the planet and invested to help fighting climate and ecological crisis (Chouinard, 2022). This ground-breaking decision definitely subverted the rules of capitalism and set Patagonia as a benchmark for sustainable capitalism and for activist corporations involved in the fight to save the planet (La Repubblica, 2022; Brand News, 2022).

A washing machine to protect the planet

It is very recent news (January 2023) of the partnership of Patagonia with the South Korean tech giant Samsung, that has created a washing machine able to reduce the dispersion of microplastics in water. Indeed, washing synthetic textiles releases microplastics that end up in the waterways. This process is caused by the mechanical and chemical stresses that the washing process causes to fabrics. This collaboration created a new eco-conscious appliance with a new filter system and cycle that promise to reduce microplastics released by up to 54%. The partnership shaded light on an ecological issue which has never received enough attention and activist campaigns (compared to other sustainability issues) and spread awareness on the threat of microplastics (indeed, almost 35% of marine microplastics comes from washing synthetic textiles; Nss Magazine, 2023). Patagonia gave enormous contribution to the cause sharing its knowledge on the topic from studies and research it that has been conducting since 2014, and motivated Samsung to actively search for and create a commercial and spreadable solution to the problem (*Patagonia and Samsung developed a washing machine that reduces microplastics*, 2023).

Patagonia's commitment to employees

Patagonia has always devoted the respect and care it preached for the planet to its employees as well, building a strong company culture. Since its origins the brand has been giving relevance to work-life balance, outdoor activities and family life, giving its employees the chance to spend time in the nature, arrange their work schedule in a flexible way, beside paid maternity and paternity care. Moreover, its childcare program offered on-site child-care for employees to improve the company morale. Patagonia is committed to give employees the chance to fully live the company's values; it takes care of their environmental education and acknowledges the importance and the benefits of connecting to the nature and enjoying outdoor activities; also, through the "Environmental Internship" program, Patagonia gives employees the chance to convert up to two months of regular work to work for an environmental organization, while continuing to earn their salary and business benefits.

Patagonia has marked the history of environmental activism, being faithful to its values (namely, "build the best product; cause no unnecessary harm; use business to protect nature; not bound by convention"; Patagonia, n.d.) and its commitment to the planet, always putting them ahead of any search for profit (and then using that profit to support them). Its communication strategy is still aligned to its starting educational approach, always focused on raising awareness on environmental issues and sparking forms of civil rebellion and action to protect the earth. So many elements

contribute to make Patagonia a unique remarkable company, starting from its mission (e.g., saving the planet) and the founder's goal to drive the business in conjunction with this mission and using it as a way to pursue it. Though being an apparel company, Patagonia is founded on a counterintuitive business model which fully embodies its core values: it works to create high-quality, long-lasting, eco-conscious outdoor garments designed to grant an extended useful life, it provides "reuse and repair" programs to fight the trend of overconsumption (thus, overpollution) fuelled by the Fast Fashion industry (Wolfe, 2022). There is general consensus in considering Patagonia not just a company, but a beacon in the world of sustainability advocacy and environmental activism.

2.3 The antecedents of sustainable consumer behaviours: eco-warriors vs eco-worries

Nowadays consumers are mindful decision-makers and several factors contribute to influence and shape their consumption path and final choice, not the least sustainability. The concept of sustainable consumer behaviour may embed various actions: in the first place reducing one's consumption; selecting products with sustainable sourcing, production process or features; minimizing the waste of energy, water or resources during the use; favouring sustainable ways of product disposal (White et al., 2019). Indeed, sustainable consumer behaviours more generally refer to actions that result in lessened adverse environmental impacts or decreased use of natural resources and, above all, they are actions devoted to a higher-end purpose, e.g., to generate longer-term benefits to the others and the natural world (White et al., 2019).

When it comes to green consumption and sustainable behaviours, two major themes are the emerging of *global citizenship* and the *attitude-behaviour gap*. According to Ricci et al. (2016), postmodern society has growingly embraced the engagement towards sustainable development and has experienced a systemic shift that is leading to the adoption of new values (e.g., human solidarity, human health, environmental safety, etc.) and the transformation of social relations. Against this backdrop, the consumption field is the perfect place where all the contradictions of ethical human behaviours emerge (in terms of choice, compromise between individual and collective interests, moral obligations, etc.). Indeed, postmodern consumers invest their own consumption behaviours of responsibility towards the common good and the planet's health. This new kind of consumers, referred to as *global citizens*, are able to "embrace a sustainable and moral concept of consumption"

and their purchasing choice is driven by their concern about the collective well-being and the sustainable development of the world community (Ricci et al., 2016). Nevertheless, although most consumers report to care about the environment or to be worried about climate crisis (and even more people are willing to change their habits to live more sustainably) most of the time consumers' behaviour is not aligned with their stated preferences. Indeed, despite showing strong positive attitudes toward environmental issues, they often fail to translate this concern into concrete actions (Chen et al., 2021). Hence, this paradoxical phenomenon is incredibly recurrent, and in the literature it is referred to as the *attitude-behaviour gap* (or *intention-action gap*).

In order to understand what prevent people that report positive attitudes toward sustainable choices from "walking the talk" (namely, backing up their claims with meaningful actions), it's critical to know which factors predict or drive sustainable consumer behaviours. Previous studies on this topic (Davies & Gutsche, 2016; White et al., 2019) highlighted the relevance of the society-self dualism in the decision-making process behind eco-friendly behaviours. Indeed, both social influence (social norms, social identity and desirability) and self-oriented factors (self-concept, self-interest and self-efficacy) take part in this process, as well as both negative (sadness, fear and guilt) and positive emotions (joy, pride, feelings of affinity towards nature) can lead to pro-environmental actions. Even cognition (e.g., information, education and knowledge), framing, situational factors and the level of concreteness of communication affect consumers' proneness to eco-friendly actions (White et al., 2019). Social factors embed different conditions that reflect the ways in which men, as "social animals" by their very nature, are inevitably influenced by society, including all the facets of social influence: social norms, social guilt, social identities, social desirability. *Social norms* refer to the perception or beliefs about what is considered right or is approved in a specific context or by specific social groups; they're a sort of informal understandings about what is considered an acceptable behaviour within a group (White et al., 2019) There can be *descriptive norms* (information about what other people commonly do or have done, especially if in the same context or situation) or *injunctive norms* (that define which behaviours are approved or not by other people). Both these kinds of norms may affect sustainable behaviours (White et al., 2019) and are among the most effective ways to influence sustainable behaviours. *Social guilt* can be considered the combination of a desire for *social justice* (i.e., an equal distribution of opportunities among people and shared wealth) and of an urge to satisfy, through a certain sustainable action, both basic and psychological needs in a desirable *win-win situation* (Davies & Gutsche, 2016). Peer influence and the extent to which it affects our behaviour depends on our *social identity* or "collective self", which means the sense of identity that

comes from our group memberships. Indeed, according to Davies and Gutsche (2016), viewing the self as part of a pro-environmental ingroup is a valuable predictor of eco-friendly choices and behaviours. Quite similar to the concept of social norms, *social desirability* refers to the fact that people tend to endorse sustainable or pro-environmental choices to positively affect their social status and make positive impression on others. If people's social dimension has a relevant role in defining their consumption behaviours and, in general, their environmental choices, it's also true that the individual self has an equally relevant role. First of all, *individual differences* like differences in environmental concern and mindfulness, and especially different "personal norms" (e.g., "beliefs regarding a sense of personal obligation (…) linked to one's self-standards"; White et al., 2019), predict different sustainable behaviours, like recycling, choosing zero-emission means of transport or minimizing the use of disposable plastics. People deem important to keep a positive self-view and tend to reaffirm their *individual self* through consumption; indeed, they often consider their possessions as extensions of the self (in literature, the same concept is express as "extended self"). Thus, positively associating sustainable consumer behaviours to the self-concept can boost and corroborate pro-environmental and sustainable choices and habits. Likewise, *self-consistency* is important; indeed, if people engaged once in a pro-environmental behaviour or a sustainable choice, chances are that they will easier replicate it or extend this "responsible action" to other domains. *Self-interest*, or *self-satisfaction* in general, even can guide sustainable behaviours, especially when sustainable actions or choices are presented by leveraging attributes that appeal to self-interest or highlighting self-benefits. Finally, *self-efficacy* (i.e., people's confidence that their actions will create a meaningful impact), is a critical antecedent of sustainable attitudes and a key indicator of future pro-environmental actions (White et al., 2019).

Decision-making process regarding sustainable choices can either follow an intuitive, emotional route or a deliberative, rational one; indeed, reactions to information about environmental and ecological issues can be driven by feelings or by cognition. It is totally worth to consider both positive and negative *feelings* and emotions as critical drivers of behaviours even in this context; indeed, many successful advertising campaigns have achieved great success because of leveraging an emotional appeal betting on the "right feeling". When pro-environmental actions provide people with hedonic pleasure or similar self-benefits, individuals associate to them positive feelings and are more likely to engage or iterate the same behaviours or choices. Indeed, according to White et al. (2019), warm feelings like *joy* drive positive consumer intentions towards nature and ecological choices; similarly, the perception of an "affinity towards nature" usually leads to sustainable attitudes and intentions.

Even *pride* can be a positive predictor, since pro-environmental actions often generate a feeling of self-effectiveness. Positive environmental behaviours create a sense of *hope* which, in turn, can naturally lead to greater engagement in climate activism and sustainable initiatives and actions. However, negative feelings can have a role too, especially *guilt, fear* and *sadness*. Feeling guilty leads people to consider themselves morally responsible for the environment and held themselves accountable for the negative or unsustainable outcomes of their actions. Hence, a sense of "anticipated guilt" or of "collective guilt" (as already mentioned some lines above) can boost pro-environmental behaviours. Similarly, feelings of sadness and fear, if moderately elicited through environmental information, can predict sustainable behaviours (White et al., 2019). Anyway, also *cognition* and rational information processing can lead to similar outcomes. Indeed, the study conducted by White et al. (2019) highlighted that conveying *information*, providing *education* and spreading *knowledge* about environmental issues lead to "greater responsiveness to environmental appeals and engagement in eco-friendly behaviours". This explains why the message framing can be critical to elicit desired sustainable behaviours; for instance, since people are more concerned about losses than wins, loss-framed messages are likely to encourage sustainable actions (especially if associated with concrete instructions on how to engage in those behaviours). Finally, *habits* are a critical component of many sustainable actions; indeed, many behaviours with sustainability outcomes or implications are habitual behaviours, like choice of transportation, shopping, energy use, products disposal, etc. Moreover, since many consumption habits are unsustainable and sometimes extremely rooted in the daily routine, it's hard to cope with them and to win people's laziness or conformism. This explains why habits formation is crucial to define sustainable behaviour change. The key to success in promoting pro-environmental actions in many cases is to convert bad habits into positive ones through repetition or other techniques like prompts, incentives or feedback. Sustainable behaviours are often considered to be effortful, difficult or time-consuming; thus, making these actions easier (for instance through contextual changes) or simplifying people's decision-making process (i.e., by making sustainable options as the default options), will make it easier for people to engage in pro-environmental actions and form positive sustainable habits. To mention some of them, *prompts* are messages used before the action to remind the desirable sustainable behaviour; *incentives* are extrinsic rewards like gifts, discounts, promotions, etc. and have the drawback of being short-lived; and, finally, *feedback* consists in providing consumers with information or opinions with reference to their performance on a particular task or behaviour (White et al., 2019). Encouraging people to form sustainable habits can spill over, creating a positive "domino effect". Indeed, consumers that started

to be consistent in implementing a sustainable behaviour like recycling (for instance), then move on to act in the other domains, e.g. taking the bike instead of the car (White et al., 2019).

Hence, in their attempt to foster positive changes, brands can't fail to consider how these factors influence (sometimes even impair) people's decisions about eco-conscious behaviours. What clearly emerges from prior research is that people need to feel somehow personally involved in environmental issues. Indeed, they may feel to be part of the cause and experience a sense of "guilt" and responsibility for the future of the earth and, in turn, may be willing to act to offset their harmful behaviours (i.e., what Davies & Gutsche (2016) defined "felt compensation"). Either they could feel mindful of the positive impact of their sustainable actions and confident that their behaviours would make a difference (i.e., self-efficiency). There is evidence that sustainability is still seen as a concept which is distinct from the human sphere, just involving actions to protect the planet when, in fact, they're intended to secure a healthier future for entire human generations. Indeed, when it comes to "protecting the planet" they do not really perceive this concern as directly affecting themselves and their peers, or as a way to "protect themselves" in turn. This means that, regardless of their personal care for the environment, there's a sort of mechanism of dissociation, whereby they distance themselves from sustainable concerns and consider these issues marginally relevant for their personal lives (McCann Worldgroup, 2021).

Brand activism requires consistency and authenticity, demands facts and actions to back up honourable claims. While it is critical for sustainability claims to be substantiated by real results and concrete actions in order to prove their trustworthiness and the authenticity of their actions (thus, leveraging a logic instead of an emotional approach), the truth is that sometimes pro-social discourses are so rife with data and technicalities that they neglect their human perspective. Results from a study conducted in 2021 (involving more than forty thousand global consumers in more than twenty markets) showed that individuals tend to perceive the urge to save planet detached from their personal sphere. Hence, brands need to reframe their sustainability conversation giving up the language of science to retrieve its human aspects (McCann Worldgroup, 2021).

Thus, one of the emerging cultural tensions is the need to "humanize" sustainability reframing the concept of sustainability to make people feel closer and personally involved in this issue. Moreover, culture context matters and it's worth to consider that people's concerns about sustainability are deeply culturally rooted and affected by the role they play in social contexts like family (e.g., parents are usually more concerned about climate change than adults who have no children; McCann Worldgroup, 2021).

One more cultural and social barrier is that a sustainable life is deemed as an option reserved for an elite, wealthy portion of the population because sustainability is considered an expensive lifestyle choice. Individuals often give up the fight against climate change because they believe not to be able to afford sustainable choices. Instead, sustainability needs to be available for everyone and should be perceived as a totally attainable option. As already stated, perceptions and actions towards environmental issues can be strongly affected by how these issues are presented and framed in messages and by the approach used to back up desirable sustainable behaviours. It is proved that a supportive, hopeful approach to address sustainable issues is way more effective and engaging (both at individual and corporate level) than building on negative concepts like deprivation, loss and sacrifice. Indeed hope, as already stated, is one of those positive feelings having a beneficial effect on pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours. Moreover, framing sustainable messages through a lens of "more" instead of "less" (i.e., more time, more health, cleaner air, etc., instead of less pollution, less emissions, less waste, etc…) highlights opportunities for a hopeful future. According to the research conducted by McCann Worldgroup (2021), 77% people globally believe to hold equal responsibility as governments and brands for tackling climate change; however, they also believe that companies have greater chance to make positive impact on consumer behaviours than governments and institutions. From here the urge for businesses and brands to embed sustainable practices and standards in every stage of their value chain and built sustainability into each aspect of the business. Indeed, since "sustainable" or "green" is still just one option among multiple options, people experience choice overload when it comes to consumption decisions. Thus, it's critical to ease their decision process by making sustainability the accessible default option, freeing them from the burden to consciously discriminate the most sustainable choice.

Sustainability is pervaded by the enduring cultural myth of the perfect *eco-warrior* and by a sort of collective utopia about pursuing a holistically sustainable lifestyle. These high expectations, generally accepted and shared by society, make common imperfect individuals feel uncomfortable and not ready to pursue a shift to sustainable behaviours. Many people do not identify themselves in the paradigm of the vegan, of the person who perfectly recycles, avoids any waste, reduces the use of plastics and uses sustainable means of transport. Their perceived divergence from the model of the perfect environmentalist discourages consumers from making even small changes in their daily life. Instead of embodying the ideal of the eco-warrior, people can easier identify with the *eco-worrier*. Indeed, people are more and more conscious of the severity of the environmental crisis and worried about the future of our planet. They experience a sense of "chronic fear of environmental doom"

(Roberts & Lauchlan, 2020) and this form of anxiety (*eco-anxiety)* is exacerbated by the growing frequency of extreme climate events, like floods or wildfires. These feelings inevitably affect human attitudes, beliefs and actions and, for someone, eco-activism or the shift to an eco-friendly lifestyle are the best ways to cope with these feelings. Hence, despite apparently at odds, being an eco-worrier can lead to become an eco-warrior. Indeed, according to a survey conducted in UK, there's a strong positive correlation between eco-anxiety and positive environmental behaviours (like actively looking for sustainable companies and products, buying less, recycling and, not least, advocacy). Most of UK consumers surveyed declared to feel frequently anxious about the planet's conditions and worried for future generations, as well as guilty for their harmful effects on the environment. Among them, those who experience these feelings with greatest intensity and frequency are women and younger generations (Roberts & Lauchlan, 2020). A comparative study about Gen Z, Millennials and Gen X clearly suggests that younger generations have enhanced recognition of human responsibility and greater responsiveness to climate crisis, which result into increased proneness to engage in eco-activism; these results are not unexpected since they have grown up with higher exposure to environmental issues (Roberts & Lauchlan, 2020). Gen Z are sincerely more involved in climate issues, skeptical about companies' efforts to protect the environment and more willing to engage in sustainable consumption choices. Millennials are usually "eco-conscious" and willing to invest and support companies with a pro-environmental commitment. On the contrary, Generation X are more cynical about the negative impact of human activities on the environment and less prone to worry about climate crisis and to engage in sustainability issues (Lauchlan & Moran, 2020). Yet, surprisingly, younger consumers are also the ones less likely to concretely engage in sustainable behaviours (like recycling, buying less, saving energy, advocating around sustainable issues), proving that there's a misalignment between sustainable attitudes and eco-friendly behaviours (i.e., the above mentioned *attitude-behaviour gap*) that might be explained through barriers like convenience and costs, and also considering that Gen Z might have no need to advocate around these issues, being surrounded by peers who are equally concerned and informed about them. However, when it comes to accountability, the generation cohorts agree on deeming governments and global organizations responsible for leading pro-environmental change, followed by individuals and private companies. In the near future, when the youth grown up with activist literature, climate strikes and spread eco-anxiety will made up the next generation of active consumers (i.e., Generation Alpha), the call for companies to fight against the climate crisis will become critical (Lauchlan & Moran, 2020).

Once explored most of the elements that concur to shape consumer sustainable decisions or behaviours, it's also useful to explore, on the other side, how businesses can deliver persuasive messages and engage consumers in behaving sustainably. Persuasion refers to a communication process in which a person or entity aims to influence a person or a group of people to change their beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. In the attempt to identify which elements or features define the persuasiveness of a message or a communication strategy, Villarino and Font (2015) found four main dimensions of message persuasion: type of action narrated, message structure, content and authority.

1.The *type of action* refers both to the theme of the message, so the words used to evidence the sustainable practices of a business, and to the beneficiary of the message, namely who is going to benefit from the sustainable practises (e.g., customers, business or society). In general, it's advisable to prefer specific and well-defined messages (instead of generic claims) and to focus on the benefits provided to the individuals, putting customers at the centre of the experience. The greater the action-business fit (i.e., the alignment between the sustainable purpose and the business' "raison d'être"), the greater the effect of persuasion on consumers, if they perceive the actions as altruistic and not profit-motivated (Villarino & Font, 2015).

2. The *message structure* refers to the way the content is structured and conveyed in order to engage the audience in sustainable behaviours. In this regard, the message is more likely to be persuasive when explicit (versus implicit), this makes it easier to be understood and to reach even consumers who are not familiar with sustainability. Another relevant aspect of the message structure is how specific is the description of the action or behaviours solicited; indeed, an active message directly invites recipient to do something, and is more persuasive and effective than a passive message. Indeed, the more specific the suggestions and advice, the higher the likelihood for recipients to follow them. Finally, for what concerns the semantic type of meaning, a denotative message, which relies on a dictionary meaning that is universally intended and agreed by the community, is a critical part of persuasive messages. On the contrary, connotative meanings reflect the attitudes of specific groups of individuals, are more abstract and, in turn, less persuasive.

3. The *type of content* delivered in a message is relevant to define the extent to which the message itself could be persuasive. Logic content merely relies on conveying objective information, facts and data and doesn't elicit any particular engagement effect. Instead, an emotional appeal makes the message livelier and memorable, revealing greater persuasive power. Moreover, messages which leverage social norms (especially descriptive norms, as already mentioned) have more power to persuade consumers to behave more sustainably. Likewise, including the opportunity to experience

sustainability, through contextualization and by making messages more personal, create a sense of empowerment and makes actions seem more achievable, improving consumer response.
4. Finally, it is worth considering the *authority* of the message that refers to the evidence of the sustainability claims. It plays a relevant role in defining the persuasiveness of the message, it backs up the credibility of the claims and it may reside in the people (and their credentials) that provide the sustainable information, or in sustainability logos like eco-labels, or sustainable alliances (Villarino & Font, 2015).

2.4 Environmental activism as a marketing gimmick: the phenomenon of greenwashing

In what Kotler has defined the "Value-Centric Era" (or Marketing 3.0), he highlighted the emerging of *spiritual marketing* which entails brands using marketing not just to satisfy consumers' needs and elicit emotional reactions and attachment, but firstly to establish a spiritual connection with them, touch their spirit and imbue marketing with individual and societal meanings and values (Kotler et al., 2010). Today brands are living visible identities summoned to play an active role in society and to publicly commit to specific relevant pro-social causes that are relevant to their customers. Thus, choosing a brand becomes for consumers a political and social act and a way to make an impact (Eyada, 2020). Brand activism can bring several benefits and the first, above all, is setting the brand apart from all competitors, but also building a strong brand positioning, improving brand trust and, in turn, boosting brand loyalty. According to Eyada (2020), brand awareness, personal judgement and brand reputation are critical factors to define the outcomes of brand activism. Brand's commitment and social action must match values, ethics and vision of the brand; the fit and legitimacy between the social cause and the brand directly influence brand identity and perception and dramatically affect consumers' trust and reactions.

Nowadays younger consumers steer their brand choice based on brand's commitment to pro-social causes, and they are particularly apt to evaluate the authenticity of the brand activism. According to prior literature around the topic, several authors have tried to identify the factors that compose brand activism authenticity; those which most frequently emerged were heritage, (social) commitment, credibility, transparency, consistency, cultural fit and community link (Mirzaei, 2022). Consumers tend to be very skeptical about brand's engagement in pro-social actions and not to trust their stated commitment, accusing them to conceal profit-seeking motivations and to use activism as way to

capitalize on the growing demand for pro-environmental actions. When brand's pro-social activism is not backed up by a complete sync between the stated commitment and the values of the brand, it is perceived as a mere form of advertising and considered a marketing gimmick, leading to a backlash, negative reactions and even boycotting. If consumers perceive that the "company's motives are self-centred rather than rightfully standing for the cause" (Eyada, 2020) they will experience loss of trust, negative attitudes toward the brand and likely shift their choice toward other brands. Hence, sustainability claims often result in "greenwashing"[1], which, by definition, refers to the process of conveying misleading claims and unsubstantiated information about the environmental impact of a company's products and operations in the attempt to deceive consumers and create a positive public image, possibly concealing the company's involvement in environmentally harmful practices or hiding unpleasant information (Peverini, 2013; Hayes, 2022). This strategic disclosure of positive sustainability performance can happen in various ways: through the use of environmental imagery about nature or wildlife to connote a product or practice as environmentally friendly; by using misleading labels or vague terminology like "eco-friendly" or "sustainable" to describe, for instance, the nature of the packaging; by cherry-picking data to highlight green actions while overshadowing negative information; though "false advertising" and strategic brand communication (e.g., press releases, commercials, etc.) to disseminate unsubstantiated information about corporate sustainable practices (Hayes, 2022). Greenwashing is an unethical practice that evokes positive perception about a company's sustainability effort and misleads consumers and stakeholders to view a company's environmental footprint in a positive light (Hayes, 2022). Modern brands often exploit progressive values as a marketing ploy, appropriating social activism as a form of advertising (Mahdawi, 2018); indeed, they invest more time and money to market products or practices as "green", rather than make them sustainable for real.

The paradox is that not all the companies that indulge in greenwashing do it with malicious intents, sometimes they're even not aware of it and they have misunderstood sustainability. This may happen, for instance, when a company labels as "sustainable" or "eco-friendly" a product, yet it's not able to back up the claim with meaningful data, technical investigations and concrete actions (Acaroglu, 2022). Greenwashing can lead to disastrous consequences for brands, seriously impairing their image and reputation, disappointing loyal customers and affecting their attitudes and purchasing choice; it

[1] Alongside the concept of "greenwashing" there's a broader concept defined "woke washing", the general term used to refer to a company's controversial practice of disseminating unclear, deceitful information about its alleged pro-social commitment (Nassar et al., 2021).

inevitably leads to a decrease in sales and profits, a loss of brand trust and brand loyalty among consumers and it erodes consumers' confidence in sustainability (Eyada, 2020).

The term "greenwashing"[1] was introduced in the '60s but has been around since '80s and it has received increasing public attention in latest years, especially after the signing of the Paris Agreements in 2015. In the last ten years (2012-2022) the number of companies involved in episodes of greenwashing (e.g., incidents linked to environmental footprint or to misleading communication) has increased, with a particularly rapid growth in the Americas which come in first place followed by Europe (respectively counting more than six hundreds and almost four-hundred-fifty companies involved in 2022; RepRisk ESG data science and quantitative solutions, 2022). Moreover, it seems that the percentage of climate-related greenwashing has raised over the past five years (compared to themes like waste of resources, animal mistreatment, impact on biodiversity, etc.) leading themes like climate change, GHG emissions and global pollution to become a more prominent subject of greenwashing and to be growingly fractured across different industries (with greatest rates of greenwashing incidents coming from Oil and Gas and Utilities industries; RepRisk ESG data science and quantitative solutions, 2022).

Greenwashing is everywhere, pervading everyday business, involving various (small and big) companies, industries and governments that engage in greenwashing in the bid to answer to the growing demand for sustainable solutions and eco-friendlier practices, without subverting their status quo. Far from providing a comprehensive overview of the most relevant and famous cases of greenwashing, here is a short-list of some high-profile businesses involved in greenwashing episodes.

Royal Dutch Shell. It may not surprise that a leading company from the fossil fuel industry (which lately has been rebranding itself as "green" and "eco-friendly" by promoting the clean coal and natural gas as sustainable energy sources) appears as first. The Dutch gas and oil company launched advertising campaigns in which it declared to be committed to global net-zero programs, but it failed to show intentions to engage in concrete climate actions. Indeed, Shell continued to search for new opportunities in the oil and gas production, it devoted only 1% of its long-term investments to low-carbon renewable power and it didn't share its plans to achieve the goal of cutting back its carbon emissions (Koons, 2022).

Volkswagen. Everyone heard about the emissions scandal that involved Volkswagen in 2015. The German car manufacturer promoted the new line of diesel vehicles as among the most eco-friendly

products available on the market and it pretended to prove its claim by providing data from emissions tests. Yet, the truth was that the company was faking the reports by falsifying the emissions tests on its vehicles. Eleven million cars were sold fitted with a "defeat device", a sophisticated software that was able to detect when the car was being tested and improved the performance to comply with the emissions target. For many years Volkswagen cars were deemed among the greenest in the carbon-engine market but, when the fraud was discovered, it turned out that the real carbon emissions of its cars were forty times above the target allowed in the US for nitrogen oxide pollutants. The company denied cheating the reports on the pretext of having misunderstood the test requirements; yet it was subject to numerous lawsuits and billions of fines (Hotten, 2015; Koons, 2022; Robinson, 2022).

H&M. H&M, the Swedish Fast Fashion giant, was sued for greenwashing for promoting its line of "green" clothing. In 2019 the brand launched "Conscious", its line of organic clothes designed with an "extra consideration for the planet", based on garments allegedly made from organic cotton and recycled polyester. The company was accused of using misleading claims to capitalize on a growing customer segment that is highly sensitive to environmental issues. To prove its claims, the company used the Higg Index (a sustainability index for the textile and fashion industry); still, an investigation brought out that the Higg Index ratings were used deceptively (due to a "technical error" in the calculation of the score which resulted in false ratings). H&M was even indicted for its "clothing take-back and recycling program" which was deemed deceitful. Indeed, encouraging customers to get back to shops to discard their old garments was a subtle tactic to push consumers to buy new items. Indeed, since only 1% of materials used for each garment can actually be recycled, it would have made more sense, instead, to promote one of most common principle of circular economy, e.g., to extend the useful life of the items in order to buy and consume less of them (Robinson, 2022; Marino, 2022).

Coca Cola. Coca Cola was indicted for greenwashing for its misleading advertising campaigns and unsubstantiated public declarations about its investments in sustainable packaging platforms to reduce the company's carbon footprint. According to the Break Free From Plastic Global Cleanup and Brand Audit annual report, the beverage giant ranked as the world's first plastic polluter for three years in a row, with more than thirteen thousands of its discarded plastic bottles found on rivers, beaches and parks in fifty-one out of the fifty-five countries surveyed in 2020 (Joe, 2021). Still, the company persevered in misleading audiences displaying its care for the environment and its alleged sustainable practices while, instead, keeping to cause irreversible damage to oceans, marine life and coast communities. The Earth Island Institute, a public-interest organization, filed a lawsuit against

Coca Cola holding it accountable of deceiving public, in the attempt to force the company to stop greenwashing and be transparent with consumers about its polluting practices (Robinson, 2022; Joe, 2021).

2.5 The renegotiation of pro-environmental discourses between consumers and brands

Our earth is under serious threat and time is running out. This is the undeniable truth humanity is called to deal with today. The imperative of economic growth and consumption egoism have led to an insane abusive exploitation of limited natural resources and today the earth seems to be inadequate to meet the standards of living demanded by modern society (Gierszewska & Seretny, 2019). Marketing is held accountable for boosting and intensifying the adoption of wrong behaviours and for promoting harmful consumption models that have significantly contributed to increase pollution, damaged natural ecosystems and threatened wildlife. Nevertheless, as White et al. (2019) argued, marketing and sustainability are inextricably linked, although apparently incompatible: in fact, if it's true that conventional marketing appears to be the antagonist of the story, guilty of having instilled negative consumption habits, yet marketing may have a critical role even in influencing responsible consumption and encouraging consumers to act more sustainably (White et al., 2019). Marketing can play a decisive role in the society, for better or for worse, and consumers are wide aware of its potential.

Evidence from prior research and real case studies highlighted that people expect brands to be committed to the common good, take care of society, get close to their anxieties and take the lead to address them. This is not hard to believe, and it can easily be detected in our everyday life from the millions of interactions that consumers have with brands, in a form of dialogue that takes place mainly on social media platforms. Modern consumers feel empowered and legitimized to share their expectations toward brands, to publicly discredit them or celebrate them, making an influence on opinions and attitudes of their own audience.

Yet, what was even clearer is that consumers imbue brands with greater potential to make positive impact and reverse climate change, compared to governments and institutions (McCann Worldgroup, 2021). Indeed, brand neutrality is not an option anymore and companies are under pressure from both

the business world and from the last generation cohorts of mindful consumers. Brands, for their part, have not failed to answer this call to action and have adopted pro-social communication strategies to reassert their environmental commitment (Peverini, 2013). Many companies embed sustainability in multiple aspects of their business and substantiate their ecological discourses through real initiatives and tangible results; yet many others capitalize on the growing demand and attention for pro-environmental activism, and market themselves as "green" and more environmentally friendly than they really are through misleading communication. Companies engaging in greenwashing, in fact, use sustainability as a mere form of advertising and pro-environmental activism as a marketing ploy. On the contrary, many iconic brands have "migrated from marketing to everyday social life" (Marrone & Mangano, 2015) and have reinvented their marketing function acting as social and cultural activists, gathering a deep knowledge of major social changes affecting the nations to get closer to society and culture, neglecting to focus on a specific subset of individuals (e.g., brand customers).

Thus, the way in which companies and brands have engaged with the environmentalist zeitgeist of latest years and have (more or less) genuinely embraced activism has been extensively explored, described and analysed. Instead, there's still a lack of research focusing on "the other side of the coin", namely on the reactions brand activism is able to elicit in consumers. We are used to think of companies as needing to adopt sustainable policies and practices and to engage in meaningful pro-social actions, neglecting their own power to influence and guide consumer choices and behaviours.

To date, most of the prior research has focused the attention on how enterprises are converting their practices and how brands are engaging in meaningful pro-social actions to address consumers' demand for leading sustainable companies. Instead, few studies have shifted the attention to the substantial role that brands can play in influencing consumers' behaviours. Specifically, still not much is known about how brands can structure their communication strategies to spur little actions and generate positive change to protect the planet.

Ironically, it seems like customers and brands share their power to influence: like companies convert their practices and switch their brand conversation toward sustainability in order to tackle consumers'

eco-anxiety and meet their expectations, so consumers can be sensitized and nudged[2] by brands that, for their part, endorses pro-environmental actions and sustainable behaviours.

Hence, if it's true that brands tend to convert their value chain and to adopt new marketing strategy to comply with the urge to protect the planet, it's also true that brands themselves may be the drivers of change, raise awareness and knowledge on ecological issues, providing information and evidence, inspiring audiences to join the cause, to take a stance or to adopt new sustainable habits.

The role brands can play in tackling environmental and climate crisis has been mostly analysed with explicit reference to its objective results (e.g., a lower carbon footprint, the use of alternative recyclable packaging instead of plastics, etc.), its political influence and its capacity to rally global activists around the same fight. However, there's still the need to closely explore their social communication efforts, to gain a deeper understanding on how brands' ecological discourses raise consumers' mindfulness about the urge to save the planet, inspire action and prompt small changes to form new habits.

The aim of this study is, indeed, to explore and learn more about the social communication strategies activist brands use to sensitize consumers on environmental issues and engage them in sustainable behaviours.

[2] A nudge is any aspect of the choice architecture that triggers desirable and predictable behaviour change without involving incentives, banning or persuasive efforts. Nudging someone towards a choice occurs when it takes the easiest choice but also it should be easy to avoid (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008).

3. ‘Take away your take away’: McDonald’s Norway anti-littering campaign

3.1 Research question

At this stage, we acknowledge that climate change is one of the “hottest issues” of the last decade and together the biggest challenge modern society (and its main actors, e.g., governments, organizations and everyday people) is called to face today and for the next two decades. In latest years, environmental discourses have been continually renegotiated by different social actors, not the least brands. This evidence corroborates the idea that there’s an indisputable link between marketing and sustainability and that the line between brand-marketing strategies and the protection of nature is continually blurred (Peverini, 2013).

According to the cultural branding perspective, culture and consumption operate as systems and cultural meaning is integrated into the lives of consumers through consumption. Brands are subject to social and cultural changes, and they’re pressured by consumers to change the way they behave. Yet, brands, in turn, are “cultural artifacts”, storytellers endowed with cultural meaning that play an active role in consumer culture and contribute to the complex network of cultural meanings used in consumers’ collective identity projects (Heding et al., 2009). Hence, this meaningful social and cultural role naturally makes brands potential game-changers in sustainability persuasion. So far brands have already proved themselves much more effective than public information campaigns in persuading and nudging people toward “greener” behaviours. Indeed, even in sustainability persuasion (which is traditional territory of governments and NGOs), progressive brands have successfully built sustainable lifestyles and pushed consumers’ environmental behaviours. As a rule of thumb, the ingredients for effective behaviour communications include clear directives on the desired behaviours, seasoned with mixed social, visual and emotive nudges (Shea, 2012). Most used nudging strategies consist of making the sustainable choice being the default option, making the pro-environmental option easy to adopt or leveraging peer influence, for instance by using descriptive norms (e.g., telling people how others have behaved in the same circumstances).

Young people seem to be wide aware of the need to be educated for responsible consumption and eco-conscious behaviours from an early age. Moreover, they recognize in responsible management and educational marketing activities the greatest potential for raising awareness, promoting a

responsible lifestyle and reducing environmental damage, in order to pursue the long-term challenge of leading to a change of their mindset (Gierszewska & Seretny, 2019).

The growing interest of brands in changing consumer behaviours is one of the most interesting sustainable developments of latest years; yet, brands' nudging potential and the way they can built their brand discourses in order to be effective need to be explored further. The aim of this dissertation is indeed to investigate them by answering to the following research question:

How can brands leverage their influential power to boost consumers' mindfulness about environmental crisis, inspire them and nudge them toward sustainable behaviours? More specifically, how do brands create environmental discourses into their ecological communication campaigns to steer consumers' pro-environmental behaviours and spark positive changes in consumers' lifestyle?

Far from providing an exhaustive answer or a univocal strategy to answer these questions, this study is the result of an attempt to demonstrate one of the strategies brands can pursue (and often already adopt) to nudge positive changes, starting from the analysis of "Take away your take away", the recent integrated advertising campaign launched by McDonald's Norway.

In line with all the assumptions made so far around the cultural role brands play in consumers' life, the dissertation will focus on the semiotic approach to cultural branding which, indeed, assumes that brands enter consumer culture to produce discourses that reflect and, in turn, produce culture (Oswald, 2015). Symbolic consumption is based on the interplay between psychological, material and conventional dimensions of meaning production and entails a "two-way exchange" between culture and consumer behaviour (Oswald, 2015). In other terms, people project thoughts and "concretize" abstract concepts and meanings into material symbols like possessions, imbuing them with value. Once this value is commonly shared within a social group and these symbolic associations are accepted and reiterated, they become "codified" within consumer culture. Thus, culture is considered a non-linguistic sign system inseparable from its signs and representations, made up by cultural codes structured according to a binary logic. The methodology adopted in this dissertation is the *Consumer Brandscape Model*, which puts the brand itself (instead of culture) at the centre of the cultural branding strategy and illustrates the intersecting meanings and codes that shape consumers' perception of a brand (Oswald, 2012). This model seems to be the most suitable approach, in light of what is the aim of the research, namely, to closely analyse how McDonald's tried to enter consumer culture and forge new habits, by inspiring pro-environmental changes through its communication

campaign. Indeed, the main assumption of the Brandscape is that '*no brand is an island'*, which amplifies the dual role that brands assume in society, that is to reflect and, in turn, influence the culture of the time (Oswald, 2012).

The *Brandscape* refers to the symbolic ecosystem that integrates the social, cultural and semiotic dimensions of the brand and it is shaped through the "give-and-take" between the brand, the consumer and the cultural environment (Oswald, 2012). This methodology involves many steps: it starts with the *Brand Audit*, which entails the collection and analysis of the brand's historical advertisements and communications in order to retrace and define the brand heritage and the set of meanings and cultural values attached to the brand; besides conducting this *diachronic analysis*, the audit involves even a *synchronic analysis* of the competitive environment, looking for competitive brands and their communication strategies, so as to map the brand category. Being it a cultural branding approach, the research process will inevitably lead to the identification of major cultural codes structuring the category, in what Oswald (2012) defined a *culture sweep*. Once the data collection ends, the analysis will focus on *decoding the data*, detecting the emotional territories (and their binary dimensions) that structure the product (or service) category through the analysis of semiotic signs and cues from the texts analysed. The research will drive us to identify the major cultural tensions, allowing to position McDonald's according to the level of closeness and conformity of the brand to the overarching paradigms structuring the category. The final aim of this semiotic research is to identify the brand equities and the way they connect with contemporary culture in the anti-littering communication campaign launched by McDonald's Norway in spring 2022.

3.2 Research design: the brand audit of McDonald's

Before starting the semiotic analysis of McDonald's historical advertisings, we will briefly retrace the history the company, the business model and the marketing strategy behind its success and the birth of its iconic logo. McDonald's is the largest fast-food restaurant chain in the world, serving over 69 million customers daily in over 100 countries with around 40,000 outlets (as of 2021). It was founded in 1940 by two brothers, Richard and Maurice McDonald, who opened their first McDonald's restaurant, a BBQ stall, in San Bernardino (California). They invented the "Speedee-Service-System" (modelled after Henry Ford's assembly lines) which allowed to deliver an improved product at a faster pace (reducing preparation time from twenty minutes to less than one minute).

They literally gave birth to the "fast-food" concept revolutionizing the restaurant industry and, few years later, they decided to capitalize on the success of their idea and expand their business. They hired Ray Kroc as a franchise agent, who later bought out the rights of McDonald's and became the driver of McDonald's climb to success, built on a heavy-franchised business model (which entails securing the land or the rental contract for the land, leaving autonomy to independent franchisees while enclosing them in McDonald's general growth plan).

The mission of McDonald's has always been to deliver high-quality products in a fast and affordable way to "make delicious feel-good moments easy for everyone" (*McDonald's Marketing Strategy: How McDonald's makes you love it!*, n.d.), targeting different age groups and shaping its offering for all family members (from the Happy Meal designed for children, to large-sized burgers). In line with its mission, the company strategically places its restaurant next to high-traffic zones, like near major highways, schools and shopping centres. The strengths behind its success are consistency in quality and taste of products (so that everyone knows what to expect when seeing the McDonald's logo), sticking at the core products (promoted through freebies, bundle price strategies, special promotional days, etc.) and being proactive and sensitive to shifts in the consumers' demand. Indeed, in 2006 the company started adding nutritional information for each menu item (after the release of the documentary "Super Size Me") and even introduced healthier items in the menu like salads, coffees, wraps and smoothies to meet consumer demand for a healthier, more transparent eating experience. Alongside consistency, McDonald's has adopted a *glocalization approach*, shaping locally relevant experiences by incorporating localized ingredients and products, creating tailored menu to fit to local tastes and provide travellers with unique experiences. Moreover, the brand also tapped into local marketing channels to appeal to local customers and adapted its brand image and marketing strategies to local customs and local cultural cues to keep relevant to their target in each part of the world. Being committed to serve a very broad target, McDonald's makes large investments in marketing, using multiple channels like public relations, online ads, direct marketing, sponsorships. Furthermore, its marketing strategy includes strategic partnerships, like the historical partnership with Coca Cola, with children's toy manufacturers (for their Happy Meal surprise), or with delivery brands like Uber Eats; product placement in movies, production of documentaries about its production process and a movie about its founding history ("The Founder"); influencers' endorsement ("McInfluencers"), building collaborations with pop singers and celebrities (e.g., the rappers Cardi B and Travis Scott or the champion Michael Jordan) to align with their fan base, keep relevant with the time and ride the wave of pop culture.

McDonald's is one of the most iconic brand and the ninth highest-value brand in the world. Let's think about the unmistakeable logo of the brand. To use a terminology more suited to the nature of this analysis, we would say that McDonald's logo is a material semiotic dimension that stands for the brand and that its semiotic structure is based on the *syntagmatic alignment*[3] of the famous golden arches, the brand name and the red background. Although the red colour may give way to a different background and the brand name may change according to the local language (indeed, these two variable signs make up the *paradigmatic axis* of the logo), the two long, curving golden arches M-like shaped are the unchanging element of the brand, which contributes to uniquely positioning the brand in the fast-food industry. Moreover, the logo design is everything but random, in fact it exploits colour psychology to grab our attention and stimulate our taste buds. The colour palette of the logo is shared with most fast-food restaurants and it's the most popular combination in the product category, always used more generally in the food and beverage industry. Indeed, the bright red used for the background is eye-catching and it is traditionally associated to a sense of appetite and, more generally, a sense of arousal and energy; while yellow conveys optimism, happiness, playfulness and youth and, being the brightest colour in the daylight, it makes the logo visible and recognizable from long distances. Moreover, the two colours recall the sauces traditionally used on burgers and French fries, ketchup and mustard. Even before becoming the core element of logo, the golden arches were already in the founders' vision about the architectural design of their physical restaurants. Indeed, they required a golden arch either side of their restaurant to make it catchy across the driveway and draw traffic from drivers. Later, the logo was designed around the arch-feature of the stores, making out a "M" out of the arches, recalling the name of the brand and reinforcing their tie. The logo passed through many evolutions (that were less relevant in the last fifty years, compared to the first decades) to end with the most minimalist one that we all know today, featuring two simple golden arches which share a middle leg, without the shadow and with no text (*The History Of The McDonald's Logo And The Company,* n.d.) However, overall the logo still conveys a sense of quickness and speed. The right relevance must also be recognized to the famous jingle that complements the logo in most commercials since, despite its slightly variations to fit the theme of the spot, it has become an unequivocal and universally recognizable sign that stands for the brand. Since its origins, McDonald's rapidly came to play a significant role in popular culture, and gradually turned into a ritual, a habit, a

[3] Syntagm and paradigm refer to the operations that shape the relationship between two or more signs. A syntagmatic set of signs is the result of the alignment of contiguous "terms in a text" (like a logo, an event, an advertisement). A paradigm, instead, refers to a set of possible substitutions for elements which made up a sign system, e.g., the variation of brand name in different local languages (Oswald, 2012).

model of food consumption and a symbol of contemporary society, shifting according to shifts in consumer culture. Indeed, the drawback of having an iconic brand and, in turn, an iconic logo is the risk that your faults could become “iconic mistakes”.

3.2.1. Brand audit: the diachronic analysis of McDonald’s advertising campaigns

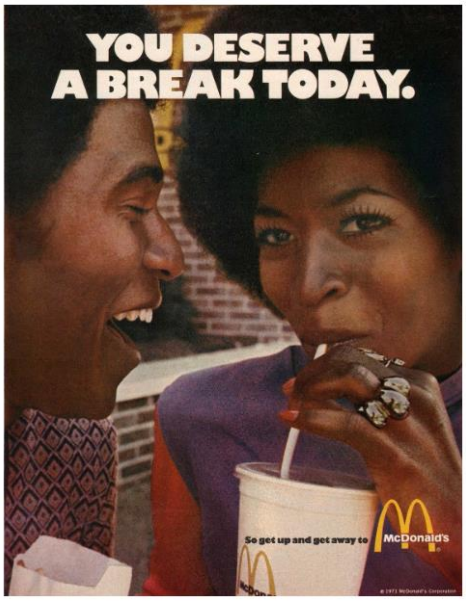
The first stage of the research entails the analysis of McDonald’s historical advertisings and communication campaigns adopting a diachronic perspective and later extends its scope to the analysis of competitive brands in the marketplace, (e.g., competing brands in the fast-food industry like Wendy’s, Burger King and KFC). The purpose of the brand audit is to retrace brand equities, brand image and positioning strategy that McDonald’s has built throughout its history and gather knowledge about the target market, through secondary research based on cultural texts and artifacts (e.g., books, movies, trends, cultural movements, rituals, media content, web material, etc.) to make inference about myths, values and traditions rooted in the popular culture. As previously stated, McDonald’s has been investing large budget on its integrated marketing strategy since ever and, since its business model and strategy drastically changed in its first decades of life, so it did its communication strategy and channels, adopting “glocalization” as the principle steering its marketing strategy, in order to fit to the local market.

McDonald’s’ mission originally was to provide people with a gratifying experience enjoying a tasty meal in the easiest way, namely in a fast and affordable way. Yet, the brand is now on a mission to deliver a soothing eating experience and it’s not just about the delicious taste of the food, yet about feel-good moment of enjoying it. Furthermore, McDonald’s has a strong commitment to a set of *corporate values* which faithfully tries to support through its actions and promote through its marketing strategy: *inclusion, serve* (putting people first), *integrity, community* and *family*. Many advertising campaigns mentioned and described hereafter will serve as a proof of the way the brand has tried to position itself in the market, embodying one (or more altogether) of its core values.

The company started as a BBQ stall with the mission to deliver a cheap food served fast, originally designed to target busy workers looking for a quick meal in their car, trying to grab the attention of passers-by inviting them to “look for the golden arches”, the hallmark of their physical stores. First prints and ads were mainly focused on exalting the utilitarian benefits of choosing a meal from McDonald’s and designed with a very simple layout. From the black and white prints featuring the

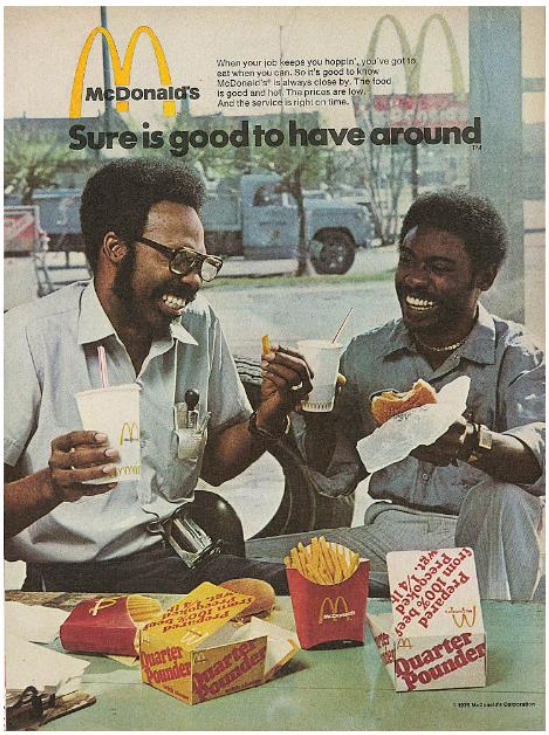
menu, the address and a drawn illustration of the restaurant with the iconic golden arches, to the prints showcasing the product in the foreground, gradually integrating a single colour in the background (for instance, the yellow background of print ad sponsoring "Filet O' fish" on a magazine in 1964) and descriptive text randomly disposed on the page. In 1971 the brand launched the series of "You deserve a break" ads where the layout of the prints was improved, introducing full colour pictures always exhibiting food items in the forefront, but with a defined position of the logo (in the bottom right corner), a clearer disposition of text and a more engaging approach, appealing directly to the audience so as to make the ad somehow "personal". Moreover, the featuring of people in the print (being them employees or consumers, instead of the impersonal pictures of the food or the store) "humanized" the ads, making them even closer to the audience. "You deserve a break today" was one of the most successful McDonald's campaigns with a remarkable slogan (placed in the bottom, before the logo) that would be used for many years after. The campaign started with ground-breaking changes in the visual composition of the prints, elevating prototypical consumers as main characters of the picture. Branded food items are always in the foreground but included in a context in such a way not to be as prominent as they used to be and in which they're represented as the "special treat", the "feel-good moment" and ultimate pleasure people deserve to enjoy. Indeed, main themes of the campaign were joyful moments of togetherness, good food, fun and cheerfulness, though the habit of using text to itemize the main benefits (e.g., good food, no waiting time, relax and ease) persisted.

McDonald's "Filet O' Fish" print ad, 1964. *(Lowbrow, 2015).*



McDonald's "You deserve a break today" ad campaign, 1971. *(Lowbrow, 2015).*

The campaign already signed a shift in the focus of the brand, from delivering good food at a very fast pace, to providing a pleasant moment of break, relax and social interactions. Furthermore, the campaign even signed the moment the brand finally started targeting black customers, initiating a series of "Afro-centric" advertisements featuring black families or friends naturally enjoying their meal together, living a normal harmonious life. In 1975-1977 McDonald's released lots of ads directed toward black consumers and decided to feature pieces of daily life of a normal American family or a group of friends enjoying a meal together in a very relaxed and joyful moment of harmony. Yet, the ads rather showed a craved normality, quite far from the reality of the time. Indeed, in the '70s racial tensions were very high and black citizens experienced high frustration as their expectations of more favourable economic conditions after the Voting Rights Act (which finally allowed them, in 1965, to exercise the right to vote) were unfulfilled. In those years, black Americans realized that true equality (e.g., social, economic and political equality) still eluded them and their anger and frustration often erupted into violent protests and riots. Thus, with these "Afro-centric" ads, McDonald's endorsed a mission, to take a stance against black segregations and racial discriminations and publicly support African Americans' fight for equality, and convey, through their imagery, a message of inclusion and harmonious community, depicting black Americans joining their joyful moments with family or friends (*Black History Milestones: Timeline*, 2018; *Racial Tensions in the 1970s*, n.d.).



McDonald's started to deliver advertising directed toward black consumers. 1975. *(Lowbrow, 2015).*

An ad from McDonald's "We do it all for you" campaign. 1977. *(Lowbrow, 2015).*

Very similarly to its historical partner Coca Cola, McDonald's developed a multicultural branding strategy, taking care to get close to consumers' needs and anxieties, in turn becoming a vessel of cultural meaning and identity value. In this regard, McDonald's can be considered an *iconic brand*, able to tackle social tensions by providing cultural myths to address those struggles in a symbolic realm (Holt, 2004; Oswald, 2015). Furthermore, despite being a worldwide brand and having adopted a "glocal approach" to fit to local markets, there's no doubt that McDonald's is a real American icon, that symbolizes the Western (in particular, the American) culture around the world. Later on, the '80s were the years of the campaign "Nobody can do it like McDonald's can" with the launch of a colourful lively spot starring lots of different characters, from employees joining their lunch break together, to a band of musicians, a group of teenagers, various couples (mother and daughter, father and son, two friends), a noisy gang of lively children seating at a McDonald's restaurant, all seasoned with a pleasant, cheerful music that repeats the slogan in the background. All of them (whose variety matches the broad target of the brand) share the unique tasting experience that only a delicious meal at McDonald's can give, in the attempt to communicate a sense of union and sharing and similarity, even strengthened by the multicultural reality of its multi-ethnic target.

I'm lovin'it

In 2003 McDonald's ran its most iconic campaign "I'm lovin'it", that would have had unexpected and remarkable impact on the audience, launching the longest-running slogan in the brand history. The idea behind the slogan of the campaign was pretty straightforward: to promote McDonald's as one of the simplest pleasures of daily life. It's exactly the way it's expressed, in a short, natural, spontaneous expression that underlines the simplicity of the observation. The slogan was complemented by the jingle "ba da ba ba ba", that was chosen for being simple and easy to remember. With its catchy call-and-response melody and utter lyrical simplicity, the jingle soon became an earworm. However, "I'm lovin'it" was not an ordinary jingle. It was originally sung by Justin Timberlake, who released his homonymous hip-hop hit few months after the launch of McDonald's campaign. It was the result of a sort of "reverse engineering" marketing strategy, almost like marketing a movie: the strategy entailed to boost the credibility of the brand message by putting it into a pop culture form that would not tie back to the brand, furthermore performed by an iconic artist. Not surprisingly, the jingle became iconic and marked the rise of the brand as manifesto of the American popular culture of 2000s. It became a core distinctive element of McDonald's identity, a remarkable sign that unambiguously traces back to the brand (Hogan, 2016). The iconic slogan "I'm lovin'it" is still reproduced today, sometimes reformulating it in the current campaign slogans but always distinguishable.

McDonald's communication strategy across the world proved itself quite sensitive to shifts in consumer culture, trends, channels and emerging needs and anxieties, as well as proactive and ready to change its cultural myths according to shift in customers anxieties and problems.

We can almost state that McDonald's brand communication strategy is so rooted in popular culture that it has inevitably evolved with it through time, being careful to shifting needs and rituals of its multiple targets (from families to young new parents, teenagers and kids), differentiating its discourse to be close to each of them. In the campaign "Hand full" (2018) for instance, McDonald's choose to promote its innovative services (e.g., table service, ordering screen and mobile app) by addressing the ordinary struggles of different human stories, like the need for rest and relax of two exhausted young parents ("Hands full" ad), the astonishment and the wonder in the eyes of a single father when realizing how fast his baby is growing ("Grown up" ad) and narrating stories of ordinary life to position itself as the gratifying moment of the day to relieve the rhythm of routinary life, aligned with its original mission statement (see Annex).

McDonald's campaigns sometimes involved interaction with customers in the stores to celebrate a particular event or day. For instance, in 2014, during Children's Day in Peru, in several McDonald's stores the staff invited customers to play rock, paper and scissors with them giving the meal for free in case of customers' win. The idea was to celebrate children by dressing the promotional initiative using games, surprising and engaging customers. A similar idea, but not as much appreciated, was that behind the spot released at the 49th edition of the Super Bowl, in 2015, called "Pay with Lovin'", showing McDonald's staff asking people to make an act of "love" (like giving a hug, calling their loved ones and say "I love you" or simply showing gratefulness and love for live by dancing with them), instead of paying for having their meal.

To prove how much the brand is attentive to rituals and trends of modern consumers, McDonald's leveraged its own renown among younger generations to realize an appealing and catchy social media advertisement "Search It" starring young comedian Mindy Kaling (see Annex). The ad was disruptive, engaging and provocative. The ad directly spoke to the viewers, challenging youngsters (or, in general, the "switched-on generation") to search on Google for "that place where Coke tastes so good", like if it was a personal, yet not unobtrusive call. What makes the ad intriguing and definitely a masterstroke is that the brand McDonald's is never mentioned, nor its logo appears on the screen; yet, the other two popular brands mentioned (Coke and Google) are used as "bridge" to finally lead viewers to the brand. Though, the yellow dress of the actress and the red background showed a familiar syntagmatic match. The tone of voice is ironic and shrewd, a perfect match to fit with the social media audience and it exploited the way modern consumers search for information or confirmation on Google Search and use social media.

In 2004 the "Super Size Me" documentary was released casting a shadow over the brand, which was blamed among the worst causes of childhood obesity. Together with larger demand for healthy food and greater transparency on the origin of raw materials and on production processes, McDonald's started undertook a rebranding process, in order to reposition itself as a transparent and loyal brand in the mind of consumers. From 2006, indeed, it started including nutritional information over its packaging and gradually added many new healthy items (like salads, wraps, coffee, etc.) to its menu and, in late 2018, the company announced to have removed any artificial preservatives and flavours, neither including added colours from artificial sources anymore in many of its burgers (*The Next Step on Our Food Journey: The Classic Seven Burgers*, 2018). In 2013, McDonald's launched in Australia "TrackMyMacca", a smartphone app based on augmented reality which allowed consumers to go through the processing path and the story behind each ingredient of their tasty meal, by simply

scanning the packaging. One more disruptive communication effort was “Ask McDonald’s”, not a common campaign. It was released in Canada in 2015, when the brand decided “to stop talking and start listening”. The company asked people to share their questions or doubts concerning McDonald’s. They gathered thousands of questions, expressing consumers’ concerns and uncertainties about the quality of their food, the genuineness of the process and the origin of their ingredients, and they answered most of them, proving their claims. The company answered to almost twenty thousand questions, shared some of the questions through print advertisements and set up a Youtube channel to showcase answers and explanations behind the most frequently asked questions, and the campaign went viral. In an age where authenticity is king, McDonald’s acknowledged the relevance of showing itself transparent about its business not just pretending to be authentic in its claims or statements, yet, providing customers with accurate explanations by directly addressing the experts involved in the various stages of the value chain. The brand was praised for seriously taking into considerations the loss in consumers’ trust and trying to address it through transparency.

3.2.2 Analysis of competitive brands: traditional fast-food category

The brand audit necessarily entails looking “around” the brand, gathering knowledge and evidence about competitive brands in the marketplace to infer how McDonald’s has positioned itself in the mind of consumers and has built its brand equity throughout its history. Indeed, brand equity is built upon the meaning transfers between different cultural categories, which affect the brand relevance for the consumers, their perception of brand’s quality and brand’s ability to create culture. There is more than one product and service category McDonald’s could fall into, being it the largest fast-food chain in the world with a diversified food and beverage items in its offering; however, relying on its broad and most relevant competitive environment, the current study will consider, from a synchronic perspective, how the brand is positioned within the food service industry compared to similar players in the marketplace. Two main categories traditionally dominate the food-service industry, fine dining restaurants and fast-food restaurants (broadly referred to as QSR, Quick-Service Restaurants). Yet, lately one more category has gradually squeezed in between them, the fast-casual restaurants category. The latter has positioned itself literally as a middle-way category, balancing the core dimensions structuring the two original tiers. Fast-food and fast-casual restaurants both measure to ensure the speed of service, yet they operate according to different business models. The main differences between them involve the quality of the food, the preparation process, the choice of ingredients, the customizability of meals and the final price. Fast-casual restaurants indeed combine

high-quality food with fast-food affordability, leveraging on quality, taste, convenience and customer service to answer to shifts in consumer lifestyle and spending habits. These restaurants, like Shake Shack or Chipotle, offer casual dining experiences at a fast-food pace, including higher quality food (based on natural, fresh ingredients), freshly prepared dishes with customized and premium selections at a higher (yet relatively affordable) price, with counter service to keep things speedy. (Nath, 2022). It is worth to consider that fast-food is way more than a service category or an originally American trend. Instead, it has become an integrated part of modern popular culture, lately called to renovate itself to comply with a more health-conscious and sustainability-oriented food production and consumption. McDonald's and most of its competitors fall into the fast-food category, whose structure of meanings and core dimensions will be identified and explored in the dissertation, starting from advertising, texts and artifacts observed and collected. McDonald's compete with several brands in the same category, such as Burger King, Subway, Wendy's, Taco Bell and KFC (part of YUM brands), Domino's, Starbucks and Dunkin Donut's, among the most popular.

The fast-food market was traditionally born around hamburger-focused menus and restaurant chains and it rapidly expanded to embed diversified stores and brands serving alternative affordable meals at a fast pace (e.g., sandwiches, tacos, pizza, snacks, etc.). Hence, we can easily distinguish two major sub-categories within the industry, the traditional fast-food restaurants (i.e., quick-service restaurants selling hamburger-based meals as core products) and alternative fast-food restaurants (including all the other chains). Furthermore, the first one approximately accounts for the 30% of all fast-food restaurants (*Trends Transforming The Fast Food Outlook In 2023,* 2023). However, many times these subcategories overlap along their communication strategy (especially for the channels selected and the tone of voice), their symbolic associations and the cultural codes structuring the category (e.g., monochronic time culture, convenience, taste, etc.).

Traditional fast-food restaurants

The fast-food service industry was born in America from the idea of ensuring a speedy service to deliver tasty meals to workers and, in general, passers-by, asking for having good food in the fastest way. It was the natural business response to the on-the-go kind of lifestyle established in America during the 1950s, which literally became part of the "American Dream". Indeed, the birth of this food service category was intended to cope with the increasing *monochronic culture* spreading in American society, which elicited the strive for ultimate productivity cutting off time for any alternative living experiences or activities (like sociality and relationships, sport, fun), shaping the

fast-paced society we all know today. This easily explained the bedrock of this service category, speed indeed. However, the culture of "fast-food" successfully evolved even in European countries, where eating habits are very different and *polychronic culture* dominates, relationships are valued more than productivity and punctuality, and people experience eating as a ritual that takes its own time, often as a social moment. This explains why, for instance, the drive-through service propagated soon in US, compared to Europe and other parts of the world where it has never reached the same capillarity.

Many common traits that unite almost all fast-food restaurants (both traditional and alternative ones) are the business model (usually franchising), the extensive geographical presence and international spread of their business (often combined with a "glocal" approach which results into localized menus and dedicated pricing and promotional strategy, to meet local tastes and spending habits), strategic location of their physical stores (aligned with their own targets) and similar competitive strategies, which usually focus on product convenience, bundle offers, frequent promotions and savings. This explains why, even today, many print and digital ads are product-centred, and their focus is on conveying utilitarian benefits (e.g., convenience, variety), like communicating promotional offer days, focusing on products' convenience or new flavours in the menu.

Almost all brands from hamburger fast-food industry adopt a multichannel communication strategy with tv spots, social media and popular brand ambassadors being the most chosen touchpoints to hit their targets. **McDonald's** focused on tv commercials, OOH (billboards, hoardings, guerrilla marketing installations), and Facebook and Instagram as channels to hit youngests using influencer marketing, videos and social contests to engage them and elicit user-generated contents. **Burger King**, the Florida-based fast-food chain, is the greatest McDonald's direct competitor with its quirky omnichannel marketing strategy. The brand runs out-of-the-box campaigns sharing an ironic and provocative vein on many channels (like tv spots, influencer marketing and OOH) and indulging in ironic real-time marketing posts on social media (especially Instagram) to keep up with times, engage and entertain social audience. **Wendy's** is a direct competitor as well, being the largest fast-food chain after McDonald's and Burger King. The brand has always prided itself for being different from competitors, starting from its products (e.g., using square-sized, fresh-beef hamburger patties, or selling Frosties instead of milkshakes) to its daring comparative advertising strategy on social media. What has made Wendy's even more popular in latest years is its disruptive social media strategy, especially on Twitter, after which it was named as the most innovative company in the social media category (McKinnon, 2020). Wendy's came to play an entertaining role on Twitter, taking care of the

strength of its messages that has often become viral, especially when used to troll competitors and roast enemies (which actually happens very frequently) adopting an incredibly provocative and sharp tone of voice.

Source: Wendy's/Twitter.

Both McDonald's and Burger King stress the deliciousness and taste of their product, while Wendy's highlight the superior quality of its burgers. McDonald's is more anchored to tradition and focused on delivering experimental versions of its historical items, like in the social dissing #E'unBigMac vs. #NonèunBigMac generated in 2022 to create hype and involve loyal customers to define the success of the introduction of two ingredients into the historical recipe for the Big Mac. Besides focused on tradition, McDonald's is trying to differentiate its menu through a gourmet line of (always beef-based) burgers "My Selection", based on local ingredients and inspired to local recipes, endorsed by the popular Master Chef judge Joe Bastianich as an authority to grant the excellent quality and outstanding taste of the new burgers. While one is focused on the sophistication of its offer (which was not expected by any particular target group), Burger King instead has been more innovative, introducing plant-based items in its menu to exactly replicate the meat-based version of its historical items (like the Whopper and the chicken nuggets), positioning itself in the marketplace as more genuine, sustainable and vegan-friendly and targeting "eco-conscious" and vegetarian customers.

Source: Burger King Italia/ Instagram.

An ironic, youthful and sometimes mocking language is typical of these brands' posts on social media, especially since they are aimed at a younger target audience whose attention is hard to capture. Nevertheless, these channels are even used to address serious themes. Moreover, in 2020 the chain announced to have removed any artificial preservatives, colours or flavours from its ingredients in some European countries and in the United States (like announced by McDonald's in 2018), launching a bold disruptive campaign #NoArtificialPreservatives. The 45-second-long video and the images showed the process of burger rotting in the thirty-four days after its production. The spot entitled "The Mouldy Whopper" initially showed the bun being assembled as beautifully as possible and then left to rot, covering itself with mould, due to the absence of any artificial additives. Burger King was innovative in targeting emerging health-conscious and sustainability-oriented consumers, including diversity and variety as principles behind its offering. Even Wendy's proved itself innovative, but for launching on Instagram and Facebook "Wendyverse", an online videogame hosting a virtual Wendy's restaurant created to promote the brand as the "official breakfast" of March Madness. Also, besides associating itself to higher food quality (and higher prices as well), Wendy's even takes care of delivering a premium in-store experience, which makes it allegedly closer to a polychronic (rather than monochronic) time culture.

#NoArtificialPreservatives campaign by Burger King (2020).
Source: https://www.engage.it/campagne/burger-king-nello-spot-il-panino-ammuffisce.aspx

These brands sometimes used their presence on social media channels to publicly take a stance on relevant social issues, like racism or violence against women. In 2020 Burger King changed its logo into "Burger Queen" on every social platform, on the International day against violence on women, to shift attention to the seriousness of the phenomenon and the importance of taking action to solve it. Just like it did on November 25th 2022, sharing a post to denounce some of the toxic attitudes that result in violence against women, through the campaign #ViolenceNotWelcome.

Source: Burger King Italia/ Instagram.

Burger King Italia changed its logo on the International day against violence on women. (2020).
Source: Nappi, 2020.

McDonald's, for its part, has been raising its voice on racial issues since ever, starting from the first decades when, during '70s, the brand tried to spread a message of equality and inclusion featuring black families as main characters of its advertisings. The brand still continues to be an advocate for equality, inclusion (which is even one of its core values) and multiculturality, and in latest years this mission has been reflected in its communication strategy as well. In 2020, McDonald's Italia chose Ghali as brand ambassador, definitely not a random choice. Ghali, Tunisian origin, is one of the most

famous Italian rappers on today's music scene, who recounts sensitive issues such as racism, drugs and suburban degradation in his songs. The campaign was designed to relaunch the iconic Big Mac and it was launched in various countries, starring similar ambassadors to endorse the brand, pop stars like J Balvin, Travis Scott and BTS. This choice also echoed the link between McDonald's and pop culture, strengthening its positioning as a symbol for youth, lightness and fun. Consistently with its commitment, McDonald's exploited social media channels to reassert its open endorsement of the fight against racial injustice waged by Martin Luther King and to share powerful messages to support the Black Lives Matter movement.

Source: McDonald's/ Instagram.

KFC, Kentucky Fried Chicken (part of YUM brands), is a direct competitor of McDonald's, popular for its fried chicken burger. Like previous brands, KFC does not escape the trend of enhancing, through its messages on various channels (especially Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Youtube), the flavour and irresistibility of its products, so tasty to be "finger lickin' good". Like some of its competitors, KFC recently launched it popular chicken nuggets in their plant-based version to fulfil the expectations of more demanding consumers and also win the resistance of skeptical traditionalists, by highlighting the similar taste they share with the classic (meat-based) products. To hit its younger

targets (especially teenagers and young adults) the brand engages in amusing interactions on social media, like reposting contents and comments generated by real customers to enhance the trustworthiness of its claims or sharing posts with the use of memes and a casual droll communication language. On the other hand, KFC also cares about delivering a message of union, social gatherings, positive feelings and sharing. Through its spots, indeed, KFC targets families to promote its eating experience as a precious moment of fun and love, to share with family or friends, and to make good memories with the loved ones. Hence, KFC is more in line with a polychronic culture of time and gives relevance to social gatherings, positive feelings, warmth and sharing.

Source: KFC/ Instagram.

3.2.3 Analysis of competitive brands: alternative fast-food categories

This broad alternative category embeds all fast-food service restaurants and chains whose core offer is not centred around burger-based menus, and it includes many indirect competitors of McDonald's within the pizza and sandwich restaurant categories (e.g., Domino's, Subway), as well as snack-food restaurants (e.g., Starbucks, Dunkin' Donuts). We reserve the right to call them "alternative" in this context only insofar as they do not fit the traditional category, however, in truth, they are rather akin

to traditional fast-foods, and they share with them business models, targets and marketing strategies as well, always focusing on convenience and speed of service.

Domino's Pizza, together with Pizza Hut (part of YUM brands), is the brand dominating the pizza restaurant category. Indeed, it's the largest pizza-chain restaurant with a broad offer and a huge variety of possible toppings and condiments to fit all tastes and preferences (including even other food items like pasta, chicken dishes, breads). Domino's is very well renowned, and everyone knows and recognizes its logo almost everywhere. Thus, the brand often relies on buzz and positive WOM to spread their promotional offers. Its advertising strategy is based on direct marketing via website, app or SMS, and it includes even social media channels and humorous slapstick spots. It's advertisings basically highlight the "greatness" of Domino's resulting in material benefits: first of all, affordability, service efficiency (ensuring a very quick delivery-service), variety to suit all tastes (which positions the brand as the easy choice that brings everyone together), all conveyed against the backdrop of hilarious and funny tales. Hence, the eating experience provided by Domino's is mostly expressed in terms of ease, fun and taste.

Subway is the healthiest brand among the ones here analysed, and it started its business around submarine sandwiches to expand to a broad diversified offering, including a wide range of sandwich options, breads, desserts, snacks and beverages too. The easiest brand associations are health and freshness; indeed, Subway has positioned itself as the healthy fast-food option for calorie conscious people, focusing its communication (and its tagline as well) on stressing the higher quality and freshness of its products, based on natural ingredients, freshly prepared (even in front of customers) and customizable to fit to different taste and need. Despite using its media channels to promote special offers and highlight the price convenience of its offerings, the brand has gained the status of premium brand (within the category) and, in turn, the right to apply higher price for delivering higher quality. The logo itself seems to combine the associations of freshness and wealth expressed through its green background with the dynamism and youthfulness conveyed through the yellow lettering.

Taco Bell is the most famous Mexican fast-food chain in America, selling a variety of local dishes (e.g., tacos, burritos, quesadillas) at a fast-pace and very low price. Taco Bell's communication strategy is centred around promotions and special offers, contributing to position the brand as a price competitive and value for money. In line with Domino's, Taco Bell has advanced the convenience discourse since ever, and, throughout its history, it has always strived to differentiate itself from traditional fast-food and to position itself as the most convenient yet tasty alternative for both young people and families. Taco Bell has incorporated Mexican dishes in the popular American fast-food

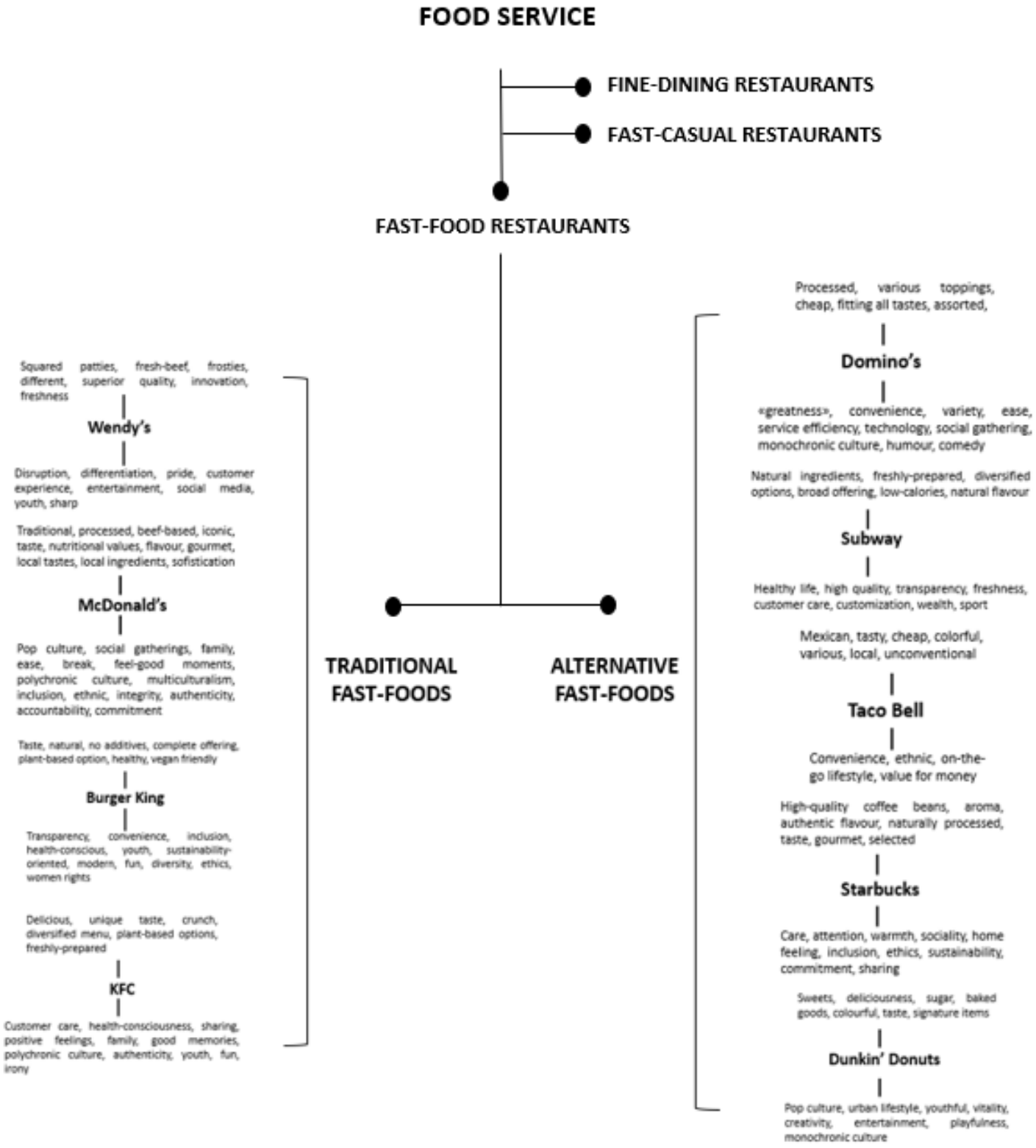
culture and strategically positioned its stores to target youngests, office-goers and travellers, perfectly aligning with the modern on-the-go American lifestyle.

Starbucks is the leading coffee-chain brand in the world. The brand originally gained success due to its speciality, high-quality coffee beans, and lather entered other various product categories like teas, juices, pastries and snacks. However, the reason behind the success of Starbucks relies on its goal to welcome customers in a cozy and warm atmosphere and provide pleasant experiences in its stores, rather than just selling high-quality coffee and snacks. Authenticity and quality have been associated to the brand since the beginnings but, above anything, Starbucks is on a mission to deliver the best customer service, making people feel welcomed and comfortable, like "being home away from home", leveraging attention and care as core points of its strategy, also reflected in its commitments to local communities and to the planet as well. In coherence with its philosophy and its retail strategy, Starbucks is able to convey warmth even through its social media channels, where it shares pictures and videos of testimonials (mostly, nano-influencers or everyday people) filming their first tasting experience with some new products and sharing their opinions, or posts depicting people's pieces of everyday life while enjoying something from Starbucks. This approach humanizes the brand and engages the audience, thanks to the human-to-human connection built through these videos. Starbucks came into the category of fast-food restaurants because it started speeding its delivery time to target office-goers too, granting them the high-quality coffee they deserved. Starbucks has built its brand around ethics and set a focus on customer experience, inclusion and sustainability, which is reflected in helping local communities, ensuring sustainable sourcing, reducing the footprint of its stores investing in renewable sources, choosing recyclable cups, promoting authenticity and respect and supporting diversity, inclusion and equality. Starbucks has become a top-of-mind brand and has positioned itself as a brand that care about people and planet and is involved in programs to help and train coffee farmers, and it invests in new technological solutions to reduce its impact on the environment.

The last brand here considered, and representative of the "alternative" fast-food category, is **Dunkin' Donuts**, which has set itself as the preferred American brand for all-day coffee and baked goods. The main brand target indeed is the urban crowd reached through a multichannel marketing strategy, including digital ads, print ads and tv commercials. Its visual brand image is built upon the brightly coloured packaging and logo and its content strategy is based on compelling creative content that makes the brand remarkable and elicits engagement, especially among kids and teenagers. The brand also relies on influencer marketing, sponsors some sport teams and events and mostly exploits social

media channels like Tik Tok, Twitter and Instagram to reach younger targets and generate buzz using a modern playful language. Throughout its history, Dunkin' Donuts brand is deeply rooted in the American culture to the point of becoming a global symbol of its popular culture and urban lifestyle.

3.2.4 Decoding the data: the cultural dimensions of the fast-food category



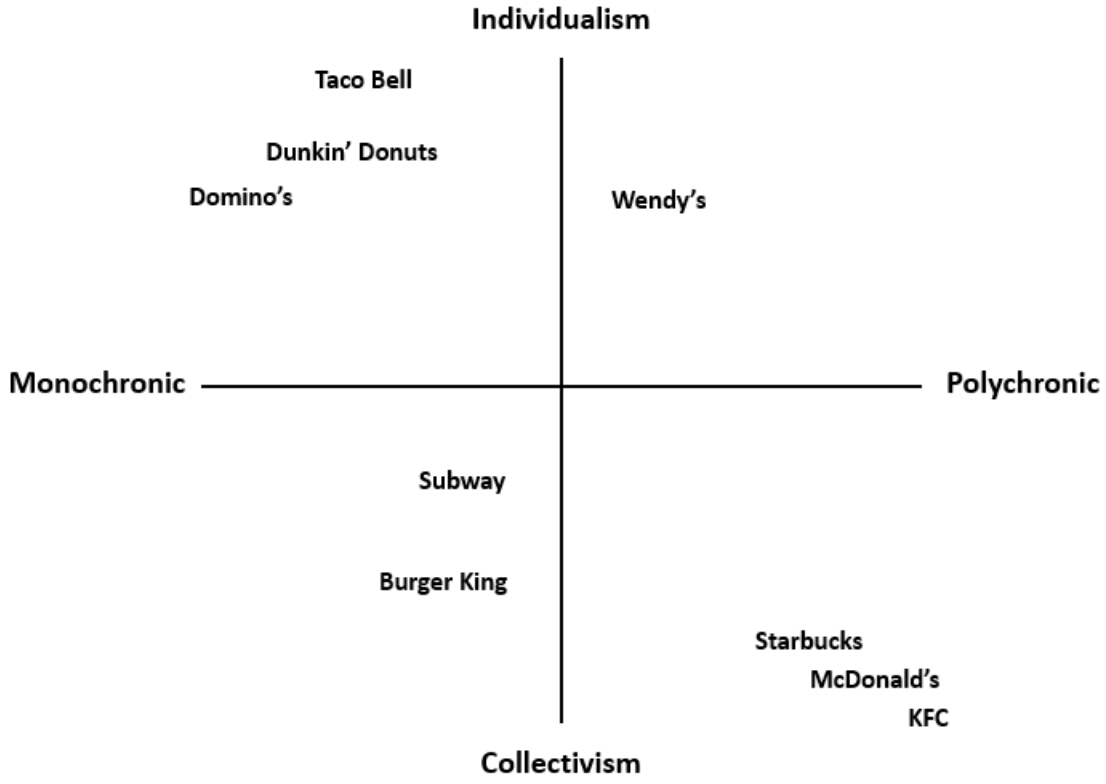
The Fast-food service category.

The brand audit of McDonald's and its competitive environment has been conducted with the collection and analysis of relevant marketing communications, print and social advertisings, tv spots and commercials, packaging, logos and taglines of some of the most well-known brands in the broad fast-food service category. Overall, the analysis involved about 20 advertising campaigns (mostly by McDonald's and often cross-media campaigns), almost 20 print ads, more than 30 social media posts (Instagram and Facebook) and tweets and more than 20 spots (mostly retrieved from Youtube). Fast-casual restaurants and fine-dining restaurants were mentioned but not included in the competitive analysis, to narrow it down to the relevant food service category for defining the positioning of the brand with respect to direct (traditional hamburger-focused fast-foods) and indirect competitors (alternative fast-foods). Product attributes, slogans, media content and labelling helped identifying the emotional territories symbolically associated with the brands, expressed in the form of product attributes, experiential qualities, messages and concepts. As it will emerge from the figure below, in many cases the semiotic cues identified resulted in similar symbolic associations overlapping among the brands. What emerged instantly during the research (and was shared as a general trend within the category) is that visual communication is mostly based on luring images depicting tasty, mouth-watering food to spur appetite and vibrant colours (e.g., like red, yellow, orange) on ads, logos or packaging to boost impulse buying. Likewise, these pictures are often complemented with taglines to stress the "deliciousness" or the irresistible taste of the product and claims to announce special offers, bundle prices or new items included in the menus, sometimes followed by a call to action. However, if it's true that almost every brand started with product-focused visual communication, it's even true that, throughout their history, many of them have evolved their brand discourses to address deeper latent consumer needs, besides physiological and material needs (e.g., hunger, gluttony, pleasure, cheapness, convenience), like the need for affiliation and belonging. Indeed, the shift in the meanings and associations linked to the eating experience has been affected (and still is) by cultural codes. For instance, although speed of service is a basic assumption and a distinct element of fast-food restaurants (to the point of defining the name of the category), the truth is that the quick delivery is no more as relevant as it was before, neither it owns the same relevance in the communication discourses of many brands. It's interesting to note how their messages are in line with the changes that American society has undergone over the years, and especially in line with evolving cultural anxieties and needs. In fact, McDonald's communication used to be simple and direct and aimed at satisfying a practical need (i.e., to have a quick but tasty meal ready in just a few minutes) shared by

more and more people. Over time, however, the values conveyed by the brand have dramatically changed and the idea of a quick meal supposed to "fill the belly" and satisfy the appetite has been replaced by the idea of a meal at McDonald's as a well-deserved break, to relax and chill with family, children and friends. From a quick and tasty meal to a "happy meal" joined with loved ones, a moment of conviviality and sharing. Thus, fast-food restaurants were born to deliver cheap good-quality food at a fast pace mainly using the drive-through service, and store signs, print ads and billboards used to leverage this aspect to attract on-the-go consumers. This code was child of the American culture and fast-paced society, that used to (and still does) consider time an extremely valuable resource, therefore precious, without any space to invest it in anything that is not productive (like relationships and fun). The *monochronic society* brought out the need for a fast delivery but the truth is that, even if fast-food restaurants keep providing a quicker service than traditional restaurants and grant a delivery service, nowadays not many of them stress speed as their core benefit, especially since when they became established even in slower-paced societies (like in Latin America or the Mediterranean,). Indeed, from this analysis, for instance, emerged that only Domino's is the brand most concerned about highlighting its fast-delivery service. Edward T. Hall considered attitude toward time as one of the core dimensions of culture and defined it through the binary opposition *monochronic/polychronic* attitude: the first one considers time as a strict means of order, it is peculiar to societies in which time is strictly finite and circumscribed and it sets the pace for everyday activities; instead, for a polychronic society people and relationships matter more than time, and work (and tasks in general) are regarded as part of a broader interaction with community (Hall & Hall, 1989). Another recurrent dimension emerging from the audit includes the quality and genuineness of the food and the freshness of its preparation process, which also explain the level of price (and convenience) of the brand. Some brands, like Subway, Wendy's and Starbucks, strive to position themselves based upon high-quality food, natural ingredients or freshly prepared meals. In this sense they serve people who care about the quality of food and are willing to pay a higher price for higher quality. On the other hand, brands like Taco Bell and Domino's are widely concerned about stressing the convenience of their products with special promotions and super cheap bundle offers, in turn belittling the quality they deliver. Taco Bell, in particular, has been centred its communication strategy around the unbeatable convenience of its offering since its origins; for example, one of its commercials from 1980 showed a happy family dining at Taco Bell's and the "family man" incredibly satisfied and pleased with his choice, unveiling the slogan "What a meal! What a deal!" (see Annex). This evidence brings out the *quality/convenience* cultural tension structuring the cultural category of

brand benefits. One more relevant cultural binary, emerged sorting and decoding the data collected, comes from the more (or less) conformity of the brands to an *individualistic/collectivist* culture. Individualism (vs collectivism) is one of the five value dimensions Geert Hofstede identified to define the differences between cultures from different nations, together with power distance, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation (Hofstede, 1984). Various symbolic associations may be traced back to these opposed dimensions. Individualism entails self-realization, self-gratification and it involves associations like the desire for taste, the need for a quick food service and value-for-money; it is somehow connected to the selfish fulfilment of personal utilitarian needs. Instead, collectivism refers to symbolic associations that involve the social dimension of the eating experience, associations like feel-good moments, positive memories, social gatherings with family or friends, the act of sharing (stressed in KFC commercials, for instance), up to inclusion and community (like in McDonald's ads). To some extent, one could relate this opposition to the contrast self-oriented/other-oriented; indeed, the concept of collectivism may be broadly conceived and extended to even embed emotional territories like care for health and sustainability, that should be seen as ways to act for the common good and care about society as a whole. Even transparency and social activism may be considered expression of dedication and a form of social commitment. Accordingly, we can consider the collectivist dimension of a brand including "open minded" or "innovative" fast-food brands that are welcoming healthier and plant-based options in their menus, to meet the needs of an increasingly variegated target and to show greater care for the health of people and planet. Among those considered in the case at stake, Burger King and KFC have introduced organic vegan options to replicate the original beef-based items, like the most iconic hamburgers and chicken nuggets. Indeed, alongside the quality/convenience tension mentioned a few lines above and very close to it, we must admit that the fast-food category has always epitomized the conflict between pleasure (or taste) and health. Indeed, the food served in this kind of restaurants has been pointed as "waste food" and accused to be among the major cause of childhood obesity. It seems like this food-service category has contributed to raise the paradigmatic relationship between healthy food and tasty food, based on the idea that organic, freshly prepared food couldn't be pleasant and fulfilling like those delicious burgers or chicken nuggets. Since this tension has intensified in the last decade (and it is expected to worsen even more in the next ones), with people being steadily concerned about healthy lifestyle, food sourcing and healthy eating habits, many fast-food brands are trying to address this tension by integrating their offerings with healthy options. It's not casual, indeed, that brands are launching their plant-based burgers and nuggets by comparing their flavour with the flavour of

traditional items, to provide customers with the perfect compromise between pleasure and health. Indeed, to win the resistance of traditional loyal customers and entice even non-vegan customers to try them, they ensure the same flavour of the original recipes. "(…) tastes like chicken but is made of plant" was the claim by KFC under one of the first posts announcing the new entry in the menu; likewise, "Vege-tali e quali" was the tagline Burger King chose to present its plant-based Whopper (see pictures in paragraph 3.2.2).



The cultural dimensions of the fast-food category.

Having explored the semiotic dimensions of the fast-food category, we are finally able to identify the cultural space of McDonald's and to position the brand on a double vector grid defined by two binary oppositions among the ones just analysed, *monochronic/polychronic culture* and *individualism/collectivism*. The position of each brand is defined by its level of relative conformity to one of the two dimensions of each cultural binary pair, and it represents how each brand balances these cultural tensions. In the upper left individualism/monochronic quadrant, Taco Bell is the most individualist brand for its discourses totally focused on value-for-money and convenience. Dunkin' Donuts is positioned in the same quadrant due to the relevance given to "material" benefits and its retail strategy designed to meet the needs of on-the-go consumers. Following there's Domino's,

whose convenience is usually linked to service efficiency (speed), in line with the classic monochronic time culture. In the lower left collectivism/monochronic quadrant we find Subway and Burger King. Subway is closer to collectivism than it would be to individualism (due to its concern about health and customer care); however, with respect to the other dimension, the brand has never expressed a polarized position, thus it can be considered like a good trade-off between monochronic and polychronic culture, yet slightly closer to monochronic culture. Burger King, instead, doesn't focus much on promoting a slower pace of life or moments of rest and conviviality (indeed it tends towards a monochronic culture); but it has to be considered close to collectivism for its "sympathy" for different consumers' needs (e.g., plant-based options), its transparency and commitment on social issues (like women rights). The upper right individualism/polychronic quadrant is populated only by Wendy's, that cares more to in-store experience than similar brands (which justifies its relative closeness to a polychronic culture), but it's so focused on its higher-quality differentiated food to gain a high position with respect to the other dimension (i.e., individualism). Finally, Starbucks, KFC and McDonald's dominate the lower-right collectivism/polychronic quadrant in very close positions. KFC has positioned itself as a brand that cares to deliver good moments (besides good food) and gives relevance to sociality (family, sharing) and health as well (plant-based options). This explains its high ranking for both the dimensions and its position at the extreme corner of the quadrant. McDonald's has a very close cultural position, being committed to messages of community, family and transparency and promoting eating as a social experience, a moment of break and relax. Furthermore, the sense of community conveyed by the brand is even manifest in its pro-environmental activities, where it tries to engage employees, locals and volunteers to join forces and clean up the cityscape. Finally, even Starbucks is very close to both the previous brands; its mission to care about customers and welcome them in a warm familiar environment, together with its commitment to several social issues, makes it a collectivist brand mostly in tune with a polychronic culture.

3.3.5 The culture sweep: codes defining the food-service industry

The Brandscape methodology here applied to define the positioning of McDonald's (and its competitors) in the relevant service category conceives the brand as a complex ecosystem of social, cultural and commercial forces (Oswald, 2012). As just observed, a multitude of intersecting codes and meanings contribute to shape the perception of McDonald's in the mind of consumers and to

define its cultural space, as a proof that the brand doesn't draw meanings just from its heritage, yet by a network of intersecting influences.

The food-service industry has faced several challenges in the last years, being one of the hardest hits in the economy by the Covid-19. During the pandemic every social interaction was forbidden and, since eating operations were among the primary sources of the virus transmission, eating together became one of the most dangerous things. These events resulted in dramatic changes in the food service industry and in food habits, some of which have evolved after the emergency introducing new enduring trends and "procedures" in the category. Let's think about the shift in the typical eating culture of eastern countries like Korea, for instance, where the MAFRA (Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs) introduced new rules to change the Korean's eating behaviour of sharing cuisines, to introduce one-person portion meal setting (Lee & Ham, 2021).

Dominant codes

Some of the trends and codes that dominate the category today established during the pandemic to cope with the threat of contagion; the "*untact*" (non-contact) *food purchasing* is definitely one of them. Online shopping was already a grounded reality, still not for food products. Today the need for safety and protection (that turned this practice into a trend) has been replaced by the lack of free time, the comfort of a worry-free shopping experience or sometimes simply by laziness; all these elements make non-contact food purchasing a current dominant trend. Fast-food restaurants were already widespread and frequently chosen for the outdoor meal by teenagers and families; however, Covid-19 has definitely enhanced and consolidated the trend of food-delivery, so that nowadays almost each store (not just fast-food restaurants, but even pubs, fine-dining restaurants, pastry shops, etc.) provides a delivery service in-house or through delivery companies (like Uber Eats, Deliveroo, Just Eat, etc.). This was also considered a sort of "Americanization" of the eating culture across the world. Nevertheless, it's even true that, once restrictions were loosened and a condition of safety and near-normality restored, people rediscovered the pleasure of dining out, valuing the experience and the moment more than they used to do before. Hence, due to the resurgence of fine dining, we could state that there's greater polarization between two dominant codes, fast-food service and in-person premium dining experiences. The first, also defined as "*Social refuelling*" refers to faster dining experiences (like in fast-food restaurants, indeed) planned to fit into busy lives and based upon value-for-money, self-service elements. On the other hand, out-of-home dining experience have become sporadic and more expensive, but consumers want to catch up on lost occasions (due to the pandemic)

and crave for in-person meaningful dining experiences. Indeed, they're willing to pay premium price and expect exceptional dining experiences that can't easily be replicated at home, higher quality food and greater sophistication. One more dominant code in the category is the *global cuisine* or, to be more specific, we could even call it "exotic cuisine". The spread of ethnic food cultures within western globalized societies is manifest and seems to be a growing trend. The strongest explosion of the trend was led by the "*All you can eat*" formula, which has found resounding success. This concept offers to consumers the perfect combination between eating "cool" and filling their bellies in an affordable way. Indeed, the reason behind its success it's that it tackles consumers' tension between feeding their hunger and nurturing their ego and their "social self" through cheap yet "sophisticated" experiences to be shared with their social audience. Let's think about the trend that has been running viral on social media, for a few years from now, of sharing luring pictures of tasty dishes (usually with the hashtag *#foodporn*), almost as if it were a global contest of ostentation, imbuing food and dining experience in general with hedonic value, as symbols for status.

Emergent codes

One emerging trend in the food service industry for sure is *food-tech*, namely the adoption of technology and the use of AI (Artificial Intelligence) to speed up service and facilitate processes, especially applied to implement and enhance self-ordering. Again, the pandemic has sped up the use of QR codes to access the menus or pay, the spread of order and pay apps and smart devices for "table-only service". Automated kiosks are already a reality and even "automated restaurant" are going to spread; indeed, in the latest weeks of 2022, McDonald's opened its first automated store in Texas, where there's no human interaction. The model was designed to allow human kitchen staff to speed up the production process and to serve customers faster and easier than before. The pre and post-preparation stages are totally automated, from the order (done by apps or through a kiosk) to the delivery of meals through an automatic conveyer belt which brings orders to the windows (replacing human worker handing you bags with your order).
Furthermore, voice-command features are expected to hit the scene shortly to enhance the self-ordering experience. AI will probably play a key role in this innovation, allowing voice recognition or suggesting dishes according to previous orders. Instead, the use of robotics for various applications, like cooking, serving in restaurants, deliveries (packaging or sorting orders) is not ready to establish itself as an emerging trend in the category, but will certainly become one in the coming years. As previously stated, food-delivery is a popular trend and it is definitely here to stay; what's new,

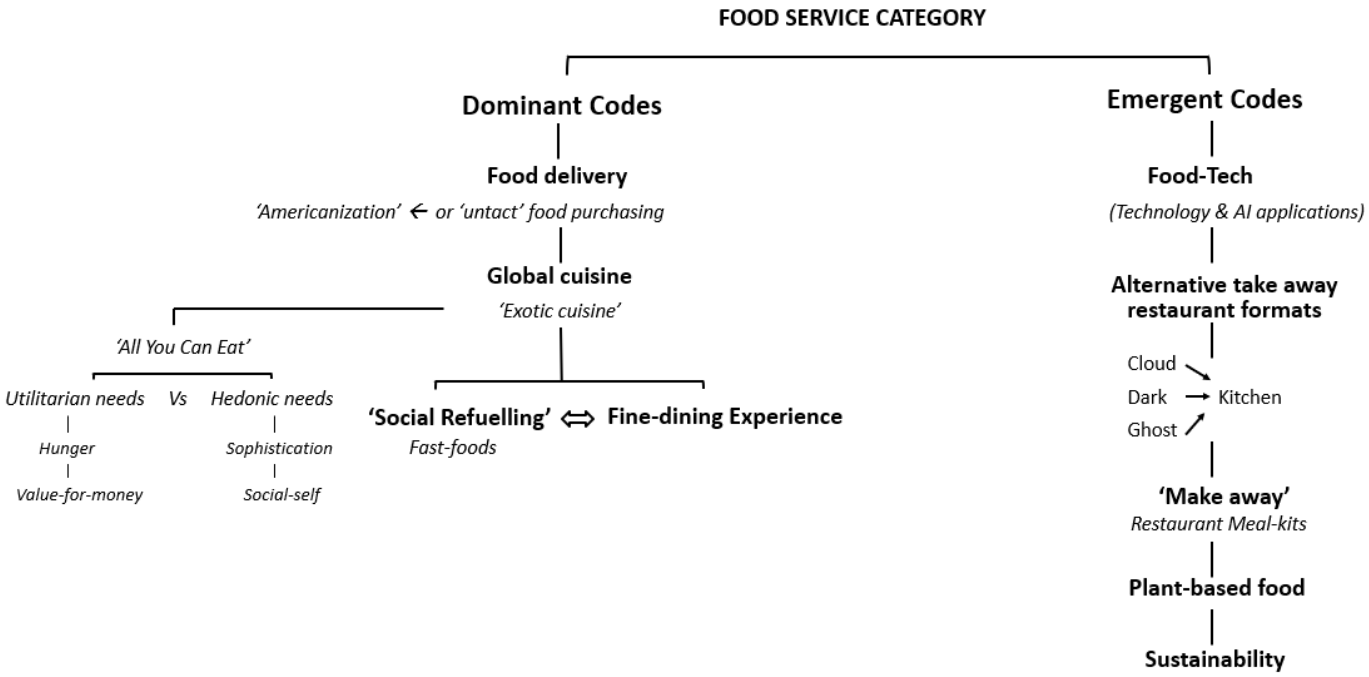
instead, is the spread of alternative restaurant formats entirely dedicated to the take-away service. Indeed, alongside traditional fast-food restaurants (broadly intended) which grant quick delivery and drive-through services, new business models are emerging in this marketplace. It all started with *dark kitchen*, which involves the partition of an area of the existing restaurant kitchen into a separate unit, dedicated exclusively to the production and management of the food delivery offer. The growing demand for delivered food solutions (even from traditional restaurants, like hotel restaurants) brought out the need to leverage space and equipment in order to be faster and more efficient. An even more disruptive business model is that of *ghost kitchens*, which add to traditional take-out-only stores the chance for a single restaurateur to manage several brands or "virtual restaurants" under the same roof with orders coming virtually directly from customers. The brands usually refer to alternative restaurant offerings (mainly from different ethnic cuisines) to ensure a greater depth of options and to optimization of work cycles. Finally, there's also the option of the *cloud kitchen,* which is basically a catering co-working model where two to several operators share the kitchen, a pre-equipped space with all the technical facilities. Each of them manages its own assigned unit to start their own home-delivery restaurant brand, with no business ties among them. (Stenning, 2022).

Alongside delivered-food solutions, another peculiar trend gained momentum during the Covid-19 pandemic, restaurant "*meal-kits*". Indeed, people were forced to stay at home for a long period and started to care more about their health, to pay greater attention to their eating habits and had enough time to cook. However, the trend of "*make-away*" still continues to grow today, since consumers are always looking for prepared products that ensure higher-level dishes than those they would prepare by themselves; moreover, meal-kit products are able to satisfy even the demand of consumers with specific needs (like children, or people asking for gluten-free or vegan products).

Indeed, *plant-based food* is set to be one of the most relevant (and manifest) emerging codes both in the food and beverage and in the food-service categories. The increasing spread of knowledge about certain food-related conditions such as celiac disease or intolerances, together with the spread of particular dietary regimes (like vegetarianism or veganism), have expanded and sometimes revolutionised gastronomic culture worldwide. The food-service industry has become increasingly sensitive to this shift in consumer demand, to the point where vegan or organic options are now present in almost every offering, even in kids' menus. This emerging trend is destined to be more than just a passing fad, rather to become soon a full-blown dominant code. Even fast-food restaurants, traditionally bound to beef or chicken-based menus, have opened up to the new consumer needs, and some popular chains have partnered with established vegan brands to develop delicious meatless

options and include plant-based products in their menus, enjoyed great success and a significant boost in brand reputation; let's think about the success of the "plant-based Whopper", the vegan version of the iconic Whopper by Burger King or about "Beyond Fried Chicken", the plant-based nuggets launched by KFC in collaboration with Beyond Meat.

Finally, one more emerging trend which will hopefully translate into permanent standard practices within the food-service category is *sustainability*. Restaurants, exactly like other business categories, are becoming growingly aware of their call to move toward more sustainable operating procedures. From the selection of socially responsible suppliers and the preference for local producers, which will result in fresher food and a healthier environment, to the choice of recyclable or reusable materials for packaging and kitchen utensils (thus, eliminating single-use plastics and unnecessary packaging); from the use of smart appliances in order to boost the energy efficiency of the venues, reduce waste and save costs, to the implementation of proper waste management and recycling practices to dispose of leftovers from meals and kitchen waste (e.g., through partnerships with a reputable collection service to dispose of or reuse cooking oil, for instance). Additionally, one peculiar issue involving restaurants and food facilities is excess food and food waste. However, the topic of food waste has gained resonance and led to the spread of best sustainable practices, like donating extra food to local communities in order to support especially needing groups; or sending foods through food donation apps or mobile apps like Too Good to Go, born with the mission to connect consumers and restaurants that have unsold good quality food they don't want to waste. Indeed, hopefully the future of food-service restaurants is set to be greener and greener and zero-waste.



Dominant and emergent codes in the Food service category.

3.3 "Take away your take away": a semiotic analysis of McDonald's anti-littering campaign

3.3.1 McDonald's pro-environmental campaigns

McDonald's is a world-renowned brand, but it still far from being a perfect activist brand. Throughout its history, the company has made mistakes and fallen into the pitfall of greenwashing, probably more than once. In 2020, right after the death of George Floyd, a black African American killed by a policeman in Minneapolis (US), many brands took a stance to publicly support the Black Lives Matter movement following the tragic episode. McDonald's join the movement showing support to the fight against racial injustice and launched a 60-minute-long spot showing the names of seven black people killed in acts of violence, stating "They were one of us" (*McDonald's ad strategy in support of Black Lives Matter*, 2020). However, in some parts of the country the campaign backfired, the brand was accused of being hypocritical and of using the ad as a mere gimmick to hide its culture of white supremacy; somewhere, groups of employees protested to increase the wages for black workers. Again, in 2021 McDonald's opened its first "net-zero emissions restaurant" in Market Drayton (UK) powered by solar panels and wind-turbines installed on site, insulated with British sheep wool and using recycled IT devices and appliances. The brand was decried by Greenpeace UK and accused of

greenwashing, claiming that keeping meat and dairy products the basic ingredients of their menus could never lead the restaurant to produce zero CO_2 emissions; instead, the only concrete solution would be to completely switch to only meat-less menus. Moreover, the company has set the goal to cut global greenhouse gas emissions to net-zero by 2050, and this was another element that sparked criticism and similar accuses. However, despite criticism and skepticism, the company is already working to implement progressive changes into its supply chain, in order to become more sustainable. McDonald's is seriously committed to reduce its impact on the environment and achieve a circular economy; indeed, the company acknowledges the role played as the cause of the problem and it is even more conscious about the responsibility it has to help keep communities to clean and preserve the planet for future generations. Given its global presence, it would be unrealistic to think about a "one size fits all" solution; however, the company has set some general rules and goals: eliminating unnecessary packaging, sourcing 100% of our primary guest packaging from renewable, recycled or certified sources by 2025 (e.g., like already happens in Italy, for instance); making easier for customers to engage in recycling packaging and reducing waste; eliminating virgin fossil fuel-based plastics from packaging and Happy Meal toys; building meaningful partnerships with likeminded organizations like World Wildlife Fund (WWF) or Keep America Beautiful and team up with them to increase their impact (McDonald's, 2022). But McDonald's has promoted circular economy and sustainability both inward and outward, not just in its own internal processes and toward the stakeholders alongside its supply chain, but even among its consumers. Furthermore, the brand's commitment to the mission of a cleaner cityscape and a cleaner planet in general is spread and involves many countries, Italy as well. During the last years, McDonald's local marketing strategies have raised the attention on pollution and littering starting by holding itself among the biggest responsible for littering, especially in the cityscapes and the areas near their stores. Indeed, in different European countries the brand has launched pro-social advertising campaigns to sensitize the public around environmental issues like littering, waste and climate crisis, and to spur them to action. The Norwegian campaign object of analysis in this dissertation fits perfectly into this awareness-raising communication strategy, and it has been preceded by similar pro-environmental campaigns that share similar purposes.

- *"Gib Müll eine Abfuhr!"* (translated as "Kick the trash!"), is the title of the anti-littering campaign by McDonald's Germany, launched in May 2010 in Cologne, right ahead of the FIFA World Cup 2010. The goal of the campaign (including print and digital ads) was to minimize the amount of packaging and waste thrown away on the ground (especially in urban

areas) and it was designed to invite young residents to help making cities and towns cleaner. The brand targeted teenagers and young adults who, according to a poll, were the age groups that most frequently engaged in this unethical behaviour and it took playful approach to engage them in a kind of competition, inviting them to "score" their goals with a ball made of crumpled packaging. In 2021, McDonald's Germany launched a new environmental campaign *"Gib Müll 'nen Korb!"* (translated as "Throw garbage in a basket!"), to sensitize consumers about the issue of careless waste disposal, especially in the areas around the restaurants. This campaign was very similar to the first one, both for the purpose and for the approach; the company installed very special waste catch basket (simulating basketball hoops) in selected locations to encourage consumers to accurately dispose of their rubbish and packaging waste while having fun.

"Gib Müll eine Abfuhr!" campaign (2010).
Source: https://popsop.com/2010/07/mcdonalds-wants-german-youngsters-to-kick-the-trash/

"Gib Müll 'nen Korb!" campaign (2021).
Source: https://www.food-service.de/international/int-news/mcdonalds-germany-campaign-against-careless-throwing-away-49116?

- "*Change a little, change a lot*!" is the integrated campaign launched by McDonald's UK in late 2021 to promote a brand platform developed to communicate messages about the company's "Plan for Change", a business and sustainability strategy that sets goals and actions to implement in four domains: planet, people, restaurants and food. The integrated campaign (which included social ads, radio and Youtube) was designed by the advertising agency Leo Burnett London and was made up by three ads that show the commitments and the small actions McDonald's is taking respectively across three core areas: waste, youth and farming. The first ad "Waste" featured real McDonald's employees and showed different small actions the company is already implementing to become more sustainable and achieve circularity (see Annex). The spot showed examples of McDonald's sustainable practices, such as converting

cooking oil as biodiesel for its trucks, recycling McCafé paper cups into greetings cards and reusing plastics from Happy Meal toys to build children's playgrounds. The core message underpinning the campaign was that small positive changes add up to make a real big difference (Watson, 2021).

- In 2022 McDonald's Belgium launched a print campaign to encourage consumers to correctly dispose of their rubbish using trash bins. The issue to be tackled was basically the same addressed by the German campaigns and the Norwegian campaign (to be analysed in this dissertation), yet the approach is quite different. This campaign was created by TBWA agency and visually designed in such a way to promote the bins, instead of the burgers. The communication goal was to raise awareness on the littering issue and engage customers to join forces and act to help the brand in keeping cities clean. Indeed, bins take the place of food, playing the role of main characters, photographed, brightened and edited as if they were burgers, to make them attractive and luring exactly like food. The bins were creatively paired with quirky headlines and witty copy in order to "make trash bins as popular as the burgers", almost recreating the "epicness" of announcing the arrival of a new burger in the menu. The campaign had a clear purpose: persuading customers to join forces to play a key role in solving the problem. Also, each picture allowed a clear glimpse of the iconic McDonald's packaging from the opening of the bins, which clearly reflected the intention of the brand of publicly admitted the role played in causing the littering issue and, at the same time, its mission to be part of the solution. The campaign run on outdoor posters, social media and in McDonald's restaurants across Belgium with the purpose to spur customers to act responsibly with their rubbish.

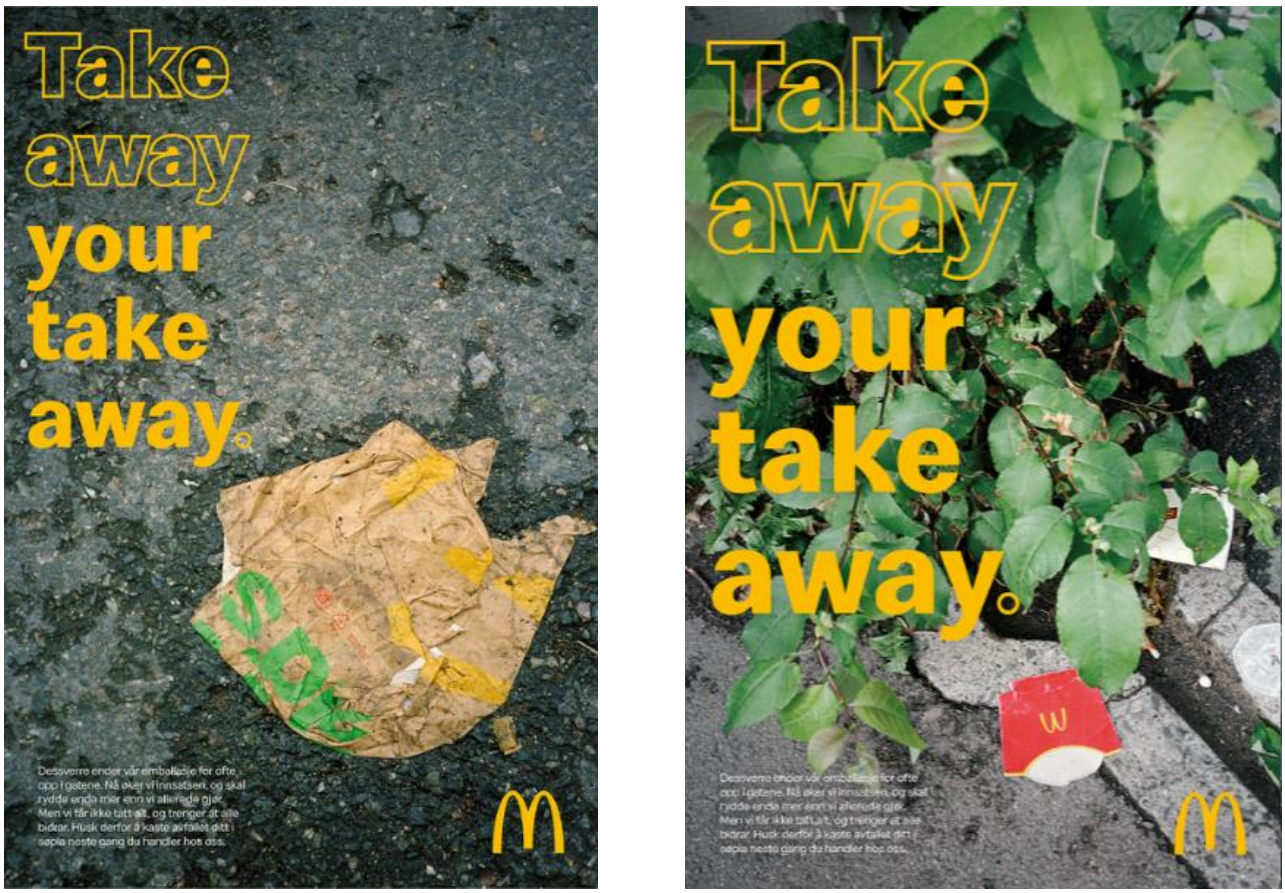
McDonald's Belgium campaign (2022).
Source: https://www.creativereview.co.uk/mcdonalds-takes-its-anti-littering-mission-to-belgium/

3.3.2 The semiotic analysis of "Take away your take away" anti-littering campaign

In spring 2022, the world-popular fast-food giant McDonald's (and the largest takeaway restaurant in Norway) launched an integrated communication campaign against littering to take a stance against rubbish dirtying up Norwegian cities. Data showed that takeaway packaging was the third largest source of littering in cities and, since McDonald's packaging was the most recognizable lying down on the streets, the brand couldn't help taking the ownership of addressing the littering problem. Being the source of the largest and most recognizable amount of trash in the cityscape, McDonald's held itself accountable for the problem; also, the company was even conscious to have both great responsibility and tremendous power to contribute to change. Hence, to cope with the littering problem, the brand tried to exploit its size and authority, inviting consumers to join the cause and help keeping cities clean. The brand launched a social communication campaign, namely a media practice that uses classical (or even unconventional) formats of commercial advertising to raise awareness on specific social issues (littering, in this case), with the aim to encourage (or deter) associated attitudes or behaviours. Social advertising is a very peculiar practice, in that it doesn't

follow the traditional path of creating a text starting from the context; instead, it starts from the text including in it complex unsolved dynamics with the intent to spur a change that will not be easy to control. Also, the effectiveness of social advertising campaign is based upon a sort of "semiotic autonomy" and usually revolves around its ability to highlight and spread the social issue "like a virus" within the media system (Peverini, 2014). For its social campaign, McDonald's partnered with three agencies, NORD DDB, WergelandApenes and OMD, to create a "toolbox of solutions", a brilliant integrated cross-media campaign designed to reach as many customers as possible, involving print advertisings, social media posts, social guerrilla marketing (through remarkable unconventional Out-Of-Home installations) and a commercial shown on TV and online. The slogan of the campaign "Take away your take away" was rather eloquent, simple and built on redundancy, on the repetition of the same wording "take away" twice. The first time it is used as a verb to convey a heartfelt recommendation to the audience; the second time it constitutes a substantive, as well as the focus of the campaign (indeed, the packaging of take away food is the main source of the littering problem). It is clear from the very beginning, therefore from the title, that the campaign is not only intended to raise awareness on the littering issue, but to invite customers to help the brand solving the problem, taking small actions to keep the cityscape clean. Also, McDonald's commitment to the cause haven't stopped there; the company has started working on long-term solutions opening a dialogue with politicians, stakeholders and competitors around the topic; also, it has joined a pilot project with Keep Norway Clean in order to investigate the causes of the phenomenon and discover how to prevent unconscious littering, looking out for achieving enduring change. Moreover, thousands of employees and volunteers around the country rallied and launched collective initiatives to clean the streets and spread the idea, in order to gather consensus and engagement from the audience (indeed, these initiatives are already spread and active in other countries, like Italy). Overall, the campaign was a success reaching up to twenty-three million impressions, it created incredible engagement and started a national dialogue about the problem of trash in the cityscape. Furthermore, the campaign was mentioned and described in more than eleven thousand local and international articles and had two nominations for Cannes Lions 2021.

3.3.3 #McTrash: semiotic analysis of print advertisings and social posts



NORD DDB (2022). Source: https://www.ddb.no/prosjekter/mcd-tayta

Print advertisings are solely made by photographs depicting littering captured around the streets of Oslo. The "iconic trash" was artfully captured by the art photographer Jói Kjartans and used for print, social media, OOH displays and McDonald's trays, to reach as many consumers as possible and spread the message. The background of each photo is mostly a piece of the ground floor, showing different corners and spots of the Norwegian streets (stairs, pieces of the sidewalk, hidden angles). The absolute star of the advertising is the iconic McDonald's packaging (the brown paper bag, the iconic red paper box for fries, the burger wrappers or the white paper cups), crushed on the floor and disregarded as unsightly street refuse. The company started posting these photos on McDonald's Norway Instagram account, creating a dedicated hashtag to make posts and pictures about the theme easily recognizable and retraceable, and to make the campaign becoming viral on the network. The first pictures posted were matched by informative sentences sharing some data to raise attention on the problem of littering in Norwegian urban environment and to highlight the seriousness of the issue. For instance, the first photo was posted on March 18th 2022 and complemented by a descriptive

sentence stating that, every night, two tons of littering are picked up from the streets of Oslo. Similarly, the following posts replicated the same pattern making the purpose of the posts clear: raising attention around the topic and showcasing the prominence of the littering problem, trying to sensitize the audience, especially youngests (who are the largest segment of McDonald's customer base as well as the easiest group to reach on Instagram). Finally, the latest posts were matched by proactive sentences including calls-to-action to engage the audience, like inviting consumers to discover more about the topic and about McDonald's anti-littering activism; inspiring and encouraging them to join the cause and act. There seems to be no retouching or aesthetic refinement in the images, they are just simple photographs that represent reality in a raw and direct way. The choice was totally coherent with the decision of McDonald's to drive an honest and bold campaign showing the ugliest side of the brand (e.g., McDonald's 'iconic trash') and firmly admitting its contribution to the issue. This proof of authenticity and transparency was appreciated by the public and elicited positive reactions, also improving the brand image. Alongside the educational mission, the posts were also used to disclose the brand's commitment to the cause, placing the brand in a leading position in the fight against urban trash. Instagram was used to share brand activism by means of employees' cleaning up initiatives, which engaged also volunteers and communities to clean up city areas near the stores and elsewhere. Indeed, as seen in the second chapter, when it comes to pro-environmental and sustainable behaviours, social descriptive norms (e.g., be informed about what the community does) and social guilt can be real gamechangers and antecedents of eco-conscious actions and positive changes.

Print, OOH and social media posts basically used the same photos captured by Kjartans within different contexts. Prints and posters were matched by descriptive sentences to illustrate the problem and invite customers to join the company in the fight against littering. All images follow the same compositional scheme. The campaign slogan 'Take away your take away', in the same golden tone as the iconic "M", dominates the left side of the image. On the opposite side, is the image of the rubbish (the white paper cup, the classic red container for fries, the brown paper bag, etc.), shown in its realistic appearance. The text is inserted in small, white characters in the side of the image, usually at the bottom left, below the slogan. Instead, the McDonald's logo appears at the bottom left. The colour and size of the characters do not contribute to highlighting the text. In the image absolute centrality is given to the rubbish lying on the streets, the undisputed star of the ad accentuating the bleak truth that the brand has boldly decided to show in the foreground. The photos used for social media posts,

on the other hand, were stark, devoid of logos, slogans and phrases, but accompanied by a caption and the hashtag #McTrash.

3.3.4 'Take away your take away': OOH applications in the city of Oslo

NORD DDB (2022). Source: https://www.ddb.no/prosjekter/mcd-tayta

The social campaign was also run through simple, yet brilliant and unconventional OOH installations. The agency installed adshels [4] in strategic points of the city, replicating the same bleak photos used for prints and social media. But two more elements contributed to make the outdoor applications more than simple posters, and to make them express the "nudging potential" of the campaign at its maximum: trash cans were installed next to the posters and the golden arches of the logo were physically installed and positioned in such a way to point right inside the bin. The message was incredibly simple and clear, yet disruptive. In the installation, the brand logo visually (and physically) drives the gaze of consumers from the problem (e.g., littering, represented in the image of the rubbish abandoned on the street) to the solution (that is, disposing of trash in the correct way, materially

[4] An adshel is a kind of large poster integrated into the structure of a bus shelther, usually backlit.

represented by the trash can as a signifier). The lower leg of the M-shaped logo points downwards toward the opening of the bin. Through simple installations the brand echoed the warning expressed through its bleak photographs and recreated a kind of visual simulation of the gesture that the viewer was invited to perform, showing a simple way to solve the problem. The same simple solution was visually replicated in magazines, where the ads showed images of real dirty spots around the city (like the pictures used for posters and social posts) with the iconic golden M in a jumping motion towards a rubbish can. The choice to simply represent the stark reality, without any fiction or distortion, is consistent with the brand's choice to acknowledge the reality of the facts: that takeout packaging is the biggest culprit of littering and McDonald's, albeit indirectly, is among the main sources of the problem. However, the realism of the images can't ensure that the campaign maintains its force over the course of time. An original narrative structure or an unpredictable script empowers the campaign, encourages the viewers' competence, inviting them to assume the actantial role of the helpers (Peverini, 2014). This original OOH advertising falls into the category of *social guerrilla marketing*, a radically alternative marketing tactic that frees the text from traditional formats and genres and breaks the limits reserved for the conventional spaces of advertising discourse. The tactic implies rethinking the overall objectives and modalities of persuasion, as well as the relationships between the sender (the brand) and the receivers (viewers and bystanders), often bypassing receivers' interpretative skills (Peverini, 2014). The technique used in this advertising is *ambient*, a tactical communication action that declines the discourse of social advertising outside the canonical media places, within pre-existing spaces that fulfil specific functions of use in everyday life (bus shelters, in this case). The tactic relies on a sort of "semiotic parasitism", that is the superimposition of texts on the urban territory, and on the complex relation between the brand and the urban spaces; indeed, the city is no more just a territory occupied by the media but, in turn, it becomes a medium able to create new territories. In none of the photos does a human actor ever appear, the 'iconic trash' is the only star and that is enough to fulfil the mission the campaign aims to pursue. Although the purpose of installations is to visually (and physically) guide consumers towards the "right action", it is not a person who shows up but objects of the urban space and the brand itself, through its logo. The approach used in this case is based on the *rhetoric of visible*: this tactic takes on the actantial dimension of spaces and objects; these elements, that have helper or opponent functions in the realization of simple actions in citizens' everyday life (indeed, trash cans in this case), here become supports to stage a new visual discourse, reinventing a pre-existent discourse regarding a space and the typical practices for which it is used (Peverini, 2014). Moreover, the superimposition of texts in

the urban territory here is even enhanced and corroborated by the prominence of the logo which, most of the time, favours reduced dimensions and is relegated to the margin of the social discourse. Instead, surprisingly, in this ad McDonald's logo immediately imposes itself on the viewer, bursting out of the two-dimensional scale of the poster to come out and blend in with objects of the urban environment, joining them in playing the actantial role of the helper too.

NORD DDB (2022). Source: https://www.ddb.no/prosjekter/mcd-tayta

3.3.5 ‘Take away your take away’: the semiotic analysis of the spot

The final frame (0:42-0:47) of the “Take away your take away” spot. *Source:* https://youtu.be/m1-SOWrBrgc.

The “advertising toolbox” for the campaign was finally complemented by a commercial shown both on TV and online. The video has a duration of 47 seconds and is shot without voices in the background. It depicts the dance of the iconic brown McDonald's bag that floats and twirls along with dry autumn leaves, with sinuous, circular and irregular movements. The video purposely evokes the iconic scene of the fluttering white plastic bag from the acclaimed movie “American beauty”, that was accompanied by the sweet, melancholic notes of the homonymous song by Thomas Newman's in the background. As in that scene, in the commercial the bag is the absolute protagonist of the scene and the viewer's attention is totally directed towards it until the moment when, in the last seconds of the spot, a human figure bursts into the frame. It is the figure of a boy who, walking on the sidewalk where this strange dance is taking place, comes across the brown bag, bends down to pick it up and places it in the bin beside the road.

The semiotic analysis of the commercial will be based upon the methodology of the decomposition by sequences of the spot. The process involves the use of a technical decomposition grid that will allow to identify the relevant elements and their arrangement within the text and technically transcribe the components that play a role within it. The commercial is decomposed and the number of frames and their duration are isolated, together with a description of the sound track and the visual track,

analysed in their constituent elements and their concatenations. Despite the full video has a duration of 47 seconds, it was broadcast as a commercial in the 30-second format. The decomposition of the commercial has been conducted through the help of the grid below.

# Sequence	Duration	Visual Track	Sound Track
1	**0:00-0:02**	- Content description: The shot shows the pavement of a sidewalk, probably during the autumn season, strewn with dried orange and brown leaves. The wind is blowing hard, lifting the larger leaves that are not flattened on the pavement, disrupting them and pushing them to the right (0:00-0.01). A brown paper bag takes over, still whole, blending into the leaves. It moves quickly to the right, barely touching the ground, and, in a second, goes in and out of the frame pushed by the wind (0:01-0:02). - Frame width: detail. The main character of the spot (the brown paper bag) is filmed in full. The frame slowly moves from left to right (0:00-0:01) and then faster, following the movement of the bag (0:01-0:02). - Shooting angle: horizontal, the angle is sideways and close up - Lighting: natural, external (daylight) - Colour: cold. Prevailing colours are grey (light and dark), blue and brown.	Noises: the blowing of the wind and the rustling of the leaves as they brush against the floor and touch each other. Music: piano notes in crescendo.
2	**0:03-0:15**	- Content description: the framing returns again to the bag, which stops on the floor, spinning sideways on itself for a second, showing first one side with green writing and, once turned, the unmistakable golden M of McDonald's (0:05-0:06). It then continues to move a few centimetres above the floor, is propelled forward (0:07-0:08) and pushed back by the wind (0:09-0:10). The bag continues to spin on itself moving sideways towards the wall (0:11-0:13), it is pushed back again and then forward again resting on the floor (0:14-0:15). - Frame width: detail. The brown paper bag is filmed in full. The frame moves	Noises: the blowing of the wind and the rustling of the leaves and the bag. Music: the notes of the piano forte continue to play in crescendo (0:03-0:09); then they stop and a melancholic, tender symphony begins.

		from left to right and from right to left to following its dance. - Shooting angle: horizontal, the angle is sideways and close up - Lighting: natural, external (daylight) - Colour: cold. Prevailing colours are grey (light and dark), blue and brown.	
3	**0:16-0:32**	- Content description: a strong gust of wind pushes the bag back forcefully along with the leaves; then gusts push it up along the wall and finally it falls back to the ground (0:16-0:20). The bag is forcefully pushed back, goes out of the frame to the left for a second (0:23-0:24), then begins an irregular "dance" with the leaves, twirling together with them, twirling on itself several times laterally and frontally (0:24-0:32). - Frame width: detail. The brown paper bag is filmed in full. The frame moves from left to right and from right to left to following its dance. - Shooting angle: horizontal, the angle is sideways and close up - Lighting: natural, external (daylight) - Colour: cold. Prevailing colours are grey (light and dark), blue and brown.	Music: the notes of the tender symphony predominate. Noises: the rustle of the leaves and the bag blown by the wind is always present in the background.
4	**0:33-0:35**	- Content description: The brown bag continues its dance with the leaves and is pushed forward with them. In the centre left foreground appears the first part of the campaign slogan, the golden 'Take away' lettering (0:33) and, a second later, the peaks of the two golden arches of the logo appear in sequence in the bottom left corner (0:34). - Frame width: detail. The brown paper bag is filmed in full. The frame shifts slightly to the left, still following the direction of the bag. - Shooting angle: horizontal, the angle is sideways and close up - Lighting: natural, external (daylight) - Colour: cold. Prevailing colours are grey (light and dark), blue and brown, in contrast with the warm light created by the yellow of the lettering and the logo.	Music: the notes of the tender symphony predominate. Noises: the rustle of the leaves and the bag blown by the wind is always present in the background.

5	**0:36-0:41**	- Content description: enters the scene, from the left, a boy walking on the sidewalk. The only visible parts of his body are feet and legs (up to the heigh of the pelvis). He bends down to collect the bag from the ground (0:37), gets up with the bag in his hand and quickly heads to the bin on his left and shoves it into the opening (0:38-0:40). Then he goes straight, leaving the scene. Meanwhile, on the left side of the frame appears the remaining part of the "your take away" logo, sliding on the first part (0:37-0:38). The slogan is therefore complete. - Frame width : detail. The shot takes the lower part of the figure of the boy, up to the height of the pelvis. When the boy bends over, the whole figure appears in the scene for a second but the frame remains unchanged. - Shooting angle: horizontal, the angle is sideways and close up - Lighting: natural, external (daylight) - Colour: cold colours still dominate in the background (light and dark grey, blue, brown and black) but they're in strong contrast with the warm yellow of the slogan and the logo in the foreground.	Music: the notes of the tender symphony predominate. Noises: the rustle of the leaves and the bag blown by the wind is always present in the background.
6	**0:42-0:47**	- Content description: in the last seconds of the spot the frame is almost still. The scene is no longer dynamic but static and shows the logo on the left of the frame and the trash can on the right; the only exception are some leaves on the sidewalk that still move pushed by the wind. - Frame width: detail. The trash can on the sidewalk is taken whole and is the main object of the scene, along with the logo, but they are both placed on opposite sides of the frame and not in the centre. - Shooting angle: horizontal and frontal. - Lighting: natural, external (daylight) - Colour: cold colours still dominate in the background (light and dark grey, blue, brown and black) but they're in strong	Music: the symphony slows down to dissolve (0:44) immediately replaced by the popular jingle of the brand.

		contrast with the warm yellow of the slogan and the logo in the foreground.	

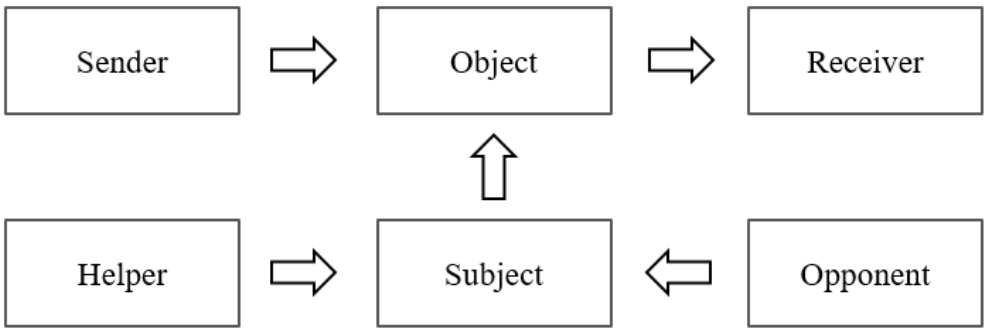
As it emerges from the grid, the spot[5] has been decomposed into six narrative sequences. The reason behind the choice of focusing on narrative sequences instead of frames is that the frame is rather constant for the entire duration of the spot, with no significant variations, and the angle of shooting too. Indeed, the object of the frame is the brown paper bag, the iconic take away packaging by McDonald's, involved in an irregular dance with dry leaves on a sidewalk. The spot closely follows the "story" of this fluttering bag. The scene is animated only by the dynamism of this dance and by the rustling of the leaves in the wind, which is the leitmotif of all the commercial, resounding all the time in the background, as if to keep a constant reference to the element nature. The dance is interrupted by the figure of a boy, who breaks into the scene naturally and, in a few seconds, becomes the protagonist of the scene performing the gesture that represents the "desired behaviour", the "right action" the entire campaign revolves around and towards which it intends to nudge the viewers. The action lasts a few seconds and is the moment towards which the entire spot tends; the fact that it is represented as a spontaneous gesture and played with extreme naturalness, seems to be emphasizing the simplicity and speed of an action that is effortless but can make a difference. Moreover, the appearance of the slogan coincides with the appearance of the boy and appears to emphasise the exemplifying value of the action represented, which serves almost as a visual demonstration of the message contained in the slogan itself.

From an analytical point of view, as regards the combination of sounds and images in the commercial, two types of sounds are easily detected: an *in-sound* (or "synchronous sound", namely a sound whose source is visible in the frame) that is, in our case, the sound of the rustling of the leaves and the paper bag in the wind; and an *off-sound* (whose source is not visible and cannot be located within the narrative frame) which is, in this case, the sweet and melancholic symphony that envelops the viewer throughout the commercial. The in-sound is present and manifest from the beginning till the end of the commercial, and it keeps clearly audible throughout, despite the off-sound variations. The rustling of leaves and paper in the wind somehow represents the element of contact with nature, it establishes a permanent bond with the environment, acting as a sort of reminder to the viewer that evokes and gives purpose to the action performed by the boy at the end of the commercial. Concerning the visual track, instead, the frame is rather stable and close-up, bringing the viewer's gaze fixed on the object

[5] 'Take away your take away' spot is available on Youtube: *https://youtu.be/m1-SOWrBrgc.*

of the whole campaign, the “iconic littering” produced by McDonald's’ packaging. The frame makes small lateral and upward movements to follow the fluctuations of the bag, like a spectator following a moving object with his gaze. Finally, in the last seconds of the commercial, the frame finally stops, straight in front of the bin which, in the whole campaign, has come to symbolically represents the solution to the problem (just like in the anti-littering campaign by McDonald’s Belgium, mentioned above in this chapter).

To deepen the semiotic analysis of the commercial, the study relies on the narrative approach proposed by Greimas, according to which each kind of text (intended as the minimal unit of semiotic analysis) can be conceived and analysed as a construction of narrative signification (Collantes & Oliva, 2015). The Greimasian semiotic perspective entails that there are three inter-locking levels of depth and rules of semantic transformation, hierarchically disposed to make up the “generative trajectory of meaning”: the depth or structural level, the middle or semio-narrative level and the surface or discursive level. The middle level is the point of connection between the semantic values or “semes” (the elementary units of meaning) of the depth level (e.g., core values, brand identity) and the discursive elements (e.g., actors, time, space, style) of the surface level, conferring a structural organizational principle to all discourses (Collantes & Oliva, 2015). Indeed, Greimas posited, on the middle level, the *actantial model*, an articulated narrative model that structures the relationships linking the different narrative roles, or *actants* (distinct from actors, the discursive characters at the surface of the story), assuming that each narrative is based on a set of universal, unchanging actantial positions (*Sender, Object, Receiver, Helper, Subject and Opponent*).



Greimas’ actantial model *(Collantes & Oliva, 2015).*

The Sender is the one who prompts or orders the receiver to complete a task (and evaluates the result); the Receiver is, in turn, the one who receives the task to be accomplished. The Object is what is

desired or what is to be obtained and of value to the Subject, it may be abstract or concrete. The Subject is the role assumed by the Receiver when (s)he is about to take the action to pursue the mission; the Helper is anyone or anything helps the Subject (voluntarily or not) in achieving the goal; while, on the contrary, the Opponent is anyone or anything that hinders the Subject's mission (Collantes & Oliva, 2015). The link between the two levels (actants and actors) is not always linear and univocal and a brand may even assume multiple positions at once; in the simplest case, an actor matches an actant; however, it can happen that multiple actors occupy the same actantial position, as well as there are cases in which the same actor assumes multiple actantial roles (Peverini, 2012). In this commercial, the Object of the narrative is to act responsibly with rubbish, keep cities clean and avoid littering; consumers and citizens in general (including the viewer himself) are the Receivers and then turn into the Subjects called upon to pursue the object, and they are all symbolically embodied, in the spot, by the boy that collects the bag and throws it in the trash bin, With no doubt, the Sender is the brand itself, whose mission is to engage consumers in acting responsibly. Several factors concur to play the role of the Opponents in the spot. From a material perspective, the first Opponent is the brown paper bag and, in general, the rubbish left on the ground in the streets (mostly takeout packaging), which prevents the city from staying clean; from an abstract and attitudinal perspective, instead, the Opponents are factors like indolence, unfair habits, together with conscious and (even more) unconscious littering. McDonald's also plays the role of the Helper that supports the cause both figuratively, through its awareness campaign, and practically, through its local clean up initiatives and its OOH installations. In this regard, we may extend the role of the Helper to the trash bin too; indeed, since conscious littering is commonplace in areas where there are no litter bins, their presence would likely encourage the right behaviour (like it happens in the spot).

Greimas conceptualized another model, the *canonical narrative scheme*, which is directly related to the actantial model and splits the narrative into four phases, logically ordered: *Contract* or *Manipulation, Competence, Performance and Sanction*.

- The *Manipulation* phase is the stage in which the Sender entrusts to the Receiver the task, namely, to throw the trash in the bin and keep the cityscape clean. In the commercial, the first stage is focused in the first thirty seconds, where the frame only shots the bag fluttering with the dry leaves and the Receiver (the boy) is probably already walking on the sidewalk watching the "strange dance".
- The second stage, *Competence*, is the phase when the Receiver/Subject gets hold of the means to accomplish the mission and assumes some "modalities". These are identified according to

the modal verbs want, have to, know and can which refer respectively to the notions of desire, obligation, knowledge and possibility. The relationship between the Sender and the Subject can be conceptualized in terms of modalities; in the spot analysed, the Subject probably experiences both will and power (here intended as "the possibility to do something") to do "the right thing", e.g., to pick up the litter on the ground at his feet.

- The *Performance* stage represents the moment when the Subject takes action to complete the task and address its mission. Hence, in this case, it is the exact moment when the boy bends down, picks up the bag from the ground and throws it into the bin. In the spot, the second and the third stages occur in the same frame, a few seconds apart from each other; indeed, we can assume that, once he gets close to the litter, the boy feels he wants and is in the condition to perform the action.
- Finally, the *Sanction* phase is the assessment stage, when the Subject is valued positively or negatively by the Sender, according to his performance and the result obtained. The result of the assessment can be no other than positive: the subject has precisely fulfilled the mission to which he was called. The evaluation is consistent with the brand's intention to provide viewers with a model for action, a positive example that is encouraging and narrows the gap between awareness and action. Furthermore, the brand's iconic jingle emerges at the very end as if to reassert and endorse the narrative's end point and ultimate goal, thus confirming the Sender's (e.g., the brand and society overall) positive sanction.

To complement the semiotic analysis of the spot, it is also worth to consider the valorisation of the object (product or service) in the commercial, which refers to the valorisation of the stories whereby values are introduced to consumers' life, associated with products or services, and finally leveraged to create identities (Marrone & Mangano, 2015). Starting from the broad distinction between utilitarian and existential values, Floch (1992) developed a sort of *taxonomy of advertising valorisation*, consisting of four main strategies, namely *practical* valorisation and (at the opposite) the *ludic-aesthetic* valorisation; the *critical* valorisation and the opposite *utopian* valorisation. Practical and critical valorisation are both based on utilitarian values, while ludic-aesthetic and utopian valorisation are both linked to existential values, the first being focused on non-utilitarian values and the second being detached from the object itself of the commercial (Peverini, 2012). In the case at stake, it can be reasonably assumed that the spot is based on the process of utopian valorisation, where the focus is shift from the Object to the Subject, namely the consumer (or the viewer too). Indeed, considering the alternative options, it is manifest that the spot doesn't focus on

the empirical, practical benefits of the brand (practical valorisation), neither it does highlight any particular tangible aspects of the brand with a critical lens (critical valorisation). Moreover, the focus of the story narrated is far from being ludic (ludic-aesthetic valorisation), yet the whole story tends towards the final moment, when the Subject, through its action (picking up the rubbish and throw it in the trash bin), makes it clear to the viewer what is the mission and final message the brand intends to communicate.

3.3.6 The cultural branding strategy of McDonald's Norway

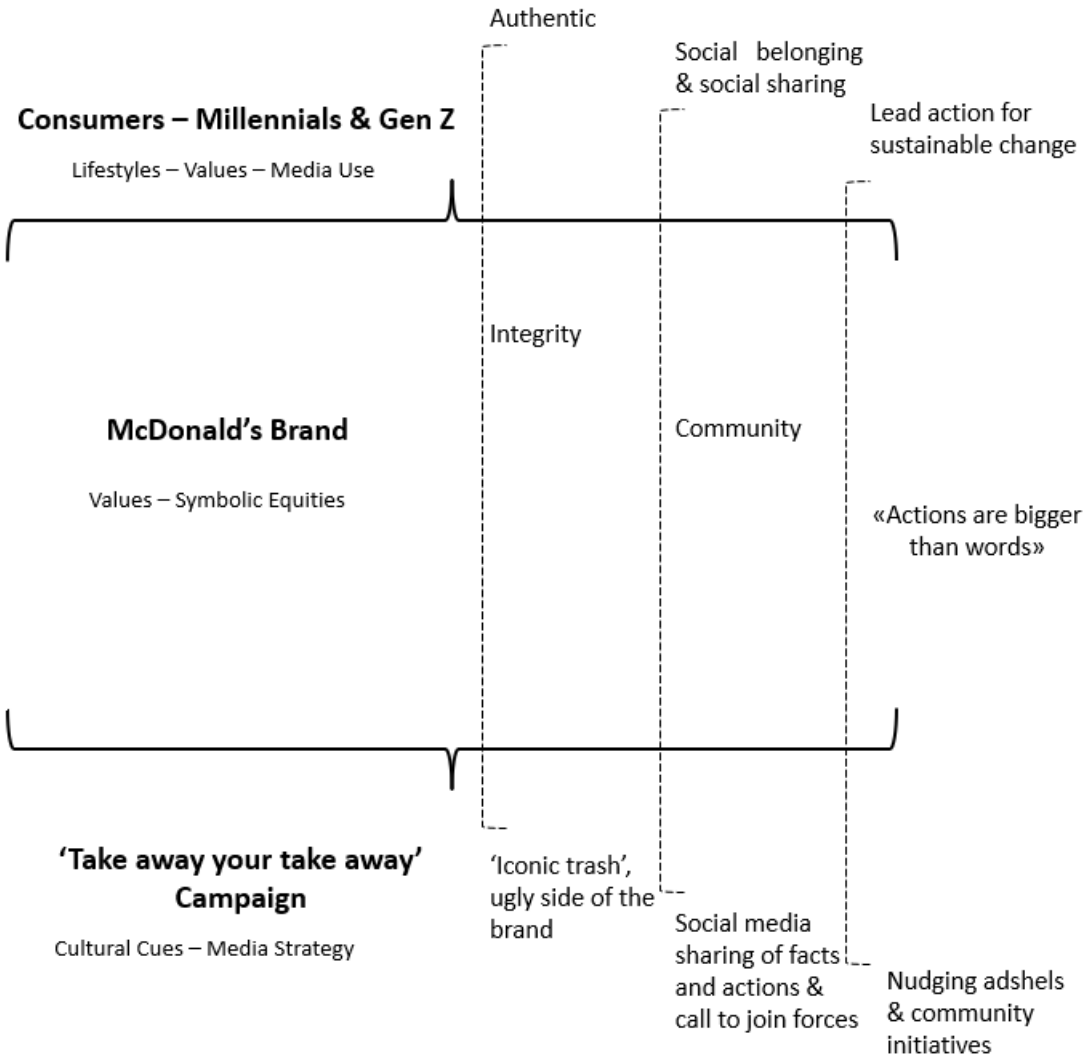
"Take away your take away" achieved great success and media engagement, pursuing the goal to raise attention on an overlooked environmental issue: land littering, responsible for 80% of the waste that ends up in Norwegian ocean (Keep Norway Clean). However, the campaign was created for a higher-end purpose, to engage people in taking action, stopping harmful behaviours by making little changes in their everyday life. The strategy underpinning the campaign seems to be constructed in such a way to build a path toward the desired "good action", like a guide conceived and designed to gradually drive and accompany consumers, step by step, from awareness and attention on the problem to taking individual actions and joining forces for collective actions. The campaign combined different channels and contents to reach different, yet intertwined, communication goals, each contributing to the broader final goal of the campaign. We can almost think of each advertising (prints, commercial and OOH) as the pieces of a puzzle, designed to come together in a unified communication effort and a comprehensive process to sensitize and nudge people. Indeed, the use of stark images in social media posts and prints, which simply capture and highlight an often neglected reality, was probably intended to raise the sensitivity on the issue and bring it to the attention of an extended target (likely the youngests via social media, and the older segments through print ads). The spot moved a step further than the ads; indeed, in that case the evidence of the issue (rubbish on the ground) was only the starting point of an evolving story, which ends with a moral and an explicit message for the viewer ("throw your rubbish in the bin"). The posters, complemented by the physical installations of the "golden M" of McDonald's and the trash cans right next to it, could be considered the mean through which the effort to gently nudge the consumer towards the ideal and desired behaviour is tangibly realised, with a view to instilling a small but constant change that turns into a genuine habit. Hence, this "stage of the process" could be considered the conversion point, the stage that should turn intention into concrete action. Furthermore, the use of social media and the website

to spread the cleaning up initiatives involving McDonald's employees, volunteers and locals is an added value for the campaign, in an attempt to engage people to join environmental initiatives of the brand and its community and turn the most sensitive and most involved consumers into proactive agents of change.

The underpinning cultural and social tension the campaign strives to address is the contrast between indulging in an unethical (sometimes unconscious) behaviour and, on the other hand, a feeling of guilt and discomfort and, in turn, the need to act to compensate it. The campaign indeed is designed to progressively tackle this tension and show consumers the path it, gradually shifting the focus from the waste (literally the main character of prints and social posts) to the bin. In this coping process and in the whole story, the fil rouge leading the entire campaign, despite seeming marginal and overlooked, humans instead play the relevant role of gamechangers, as explicitly showed in the spot and implicitly highlighted in the OOH installations.

Finally, it would be useful to analyse the campaign through a strategic semiotic approach which entails considering the brand (and not culture) at the centre of the cultural branding strategy. This approach implies including a new dimension involved in symbolic consumption, that is the meanings associated with the brand, and conceiving brand identity, values and equities acting as a filter to incorporate cultural meaning in the brand system (Oswald, 2015). In turn, the brand system affects, drives and shapes the media strategy and advertising campaigns. Hence, the brand system is a powerful, clever path to be considered for the analysis of "Take away your take away" campaign and to understand how McDonald's tried to create and establish cultural and social connections between the brand, consumers and popular culture. The campaign was meant to hit youngests (through social media) but even a broader audience, since, as per the overall marketing strategy, the brand has always intended to reach an extended target and multiple age groups; this is an additional element that could justify the diversified advertising strategy adopted (including various channels and communication approach). The campaign leveraged cultural and media connections between consumers and the brand, creating pathways to link McDonald's equities (as being a brand that promotes integrity, a sense of community and togetherness, that values authenticity and actions more than words and encourages changes) to popular culture, consumers' trends and interests and media behaviours (like multiculturalism, values-driven consumption, sustainability, digital presence and media communities). The figure below visually represents the meaning associations between consumer culture and the brand leveraged by this campaign, which in turn has driven its content and media strategy. The three paths of associations here identified refers to integrity, sense of community and

activism that somehow creates a leitmotif, a fil rouge which links “Take away your take away” campaign and the culture system to McDonald’s brand. Indeed, integrity is among the founding values of the brand and also widely expected from loyal customers and young consumers, who require the brand to be authentic; in the campaign, this trait is reflected into the choice to use stark photos and the public admission of responsibility by the brand. Creating a sense of community is another core value for the company, which links to consumer need for sharing experiences, feeling connected and their need for a sense of belonging and identification with a group (social affiliation), to cope with FOMO (fear of missing out). These aspects have driven both the choice of digital channels (social media like Instagram) and the choice to exploit them to include calls to action, to share cleaning up initiatives held by the McDonald’s team and local communities and to encourage young users to join them. The third connection path refers to activism, which is totally aligned with the brand mantra “actions are bigger than words” and is perfectly compliant with the structure and the final purpose of the campaign (nudging consumers, indeed). The path reflects the expectations modern conscious consumers have from brands (that, as widely explored in the previous chapter, are required to lead action to fight climate change). Values-driven consumers consider brand’s values and the extent to which their actions and initiatives comply with them, thus they value trustworthy and impactful brands, that seriously take on sustainable actions. The campaign answers to the need of making concrete action in two ways, firstly through social guerrilla marketing (OOH) for practically guiding and nudging consumers to take action; then, by activating and spreading sustainable initiatives to boost collective actions too.



Rethorical Pathways in 'Take away your take away' campaign.

4. Conclusions

4.1 Results of the research

Besides the allegedly simplicity of the idea behind the campaign, the success of "Take away your take away" campaign relied on the deep understanding of the issue it strived to address, littering. McDonald's was involved in a pilot project, in collaboration with Keep Norway Clean, to study the phenomenon unveiling the causes of people's unintentional littering, in order to prevent it. As explored in the second chapter of this dissertation, several factors (both self-oriented and socially oriented) contribute to define consumer sustainable choices and behaviours; social norms and habits are among them. Unconscious littering occurs more frequently than we would expect, and it's likely that even us have been "victim" of this phenomenon at least once in our life. What is already known about the topic is that littering has not a direct link with income, class and socio-economic conditions, or other demographics in general. Instead, descriptive social norms affect (trigger or prevent) littering most of the time, regardless of one's higher (or lower) selfishness or care for the environment. Hence, littering is predictive of littering behaviours, while litter-free places are perceived as pristine environments that are worthy of protection and have to be preserved. This automatically leads us to two essential conclusions: 1) the presence of trash cans in a place helps preventing littering; 2) being a direct (or indirect) spectator of someone else's behaviour influences others' actions, potentially triggering a "domino effect". The latter concept is somewhat akin to the educational power that lies in providing an example. Thus, in "Take away your take away" campaign showing a boy in the act of throwing rubbish into the bin (in the spot) and placing trash cans next to the outdoor posters proved to be successful strategies to inspire viewers and spark the right behaviours (even enhanced by the cleaning up initiatives spread by the brand to engage local communities). Indeed, McDonald's had already adopted similar strategies in some pro-environmental campaigns in Germany, leveraging descriptive social norms (e.g., providing "role models" in print and spot) in its campaign from 2010, or using special trash bins in the campaign from 2021.

What differentiates the Norwegian campaign "Take away your take away" from conventional pro-environmental campaigns, is the attempt to guide and steer consumers' action taking a step further than just raising awareness, persuading and moving consumers emotionally. McDonald's dared to steer and accompany them towards the right actions, betting on the effect the action itself could generate in turning on consumers' awareness and engagement. Indeed, by making a simple action as

the natural result of their food consumption and disposal, they will likely perceive the action as logic and natural, yet at the same time experience a sense of self-efficiency. The goal of McDonald's was rather ambitious, since it went beyond spurring immediate actions in front of the ad, to rather achieve long-term results fostering permanent changes in consumer behaviour. Indeed, as we've already seen (in chapter 2), most unsustainable actions and choices are made out of habits. Habit formation is an intricated affair, and habit change is even more tough; however, it is totally worth to invest effort on it and McDonald's felt the responsibility and the authority to do it, primarily to provide a permanent, consistent solution to a problem that it indirectly generated.

In most green communication campaigns, the mediatization of environmental crisis often passes through the use of iconic or symbolic eco-images, which have progressively lost their significance and any historical or socially specific identity. Instead, the use of real images in "Take away your take away" campaign locates the issue in a well-defined moment in history or a specific place and connects it to a particular issue. From a communication perspective, one of the unconventional aspects is the use of bleak images that tarnish the brand, showing its worst side. Undoubtedly this choice is "out-of-the-box", since it slightly subverts stereotypes about the visual representation of environmental issues in two ways: firstly, the campaign goes beyond leveraging the fear-appeal reached through impressive images to shock the spectators (instead, it boldly shows a real condition and openly admits the brand is responsible for it); secondly, the overall campaign reframes the environmental discourse in a more human perspective, detaching it from technical, impenetrable language of science. As emerged from the literature review, sustainability discourses need to be reframed and humanized; in this regard, we can state that McDonald's succeeded in this goal, framing its pro-environmental brand discourse to get closer to imperfect consumers and drive them toward the right thing to do. If it's true that the Norwegian campaign is very similar to the German campaigns, yet what makes it even more disruptive is the use of OOH installations, with the logo to concretely show viewers and passers-by the right path. In this sense, we can state that the message is extremely humanized to the point of materially accompanying the consumer towards the desired action.

Assuming that there's not a univocal answer to the research question identified in this dissertation, thus, there's not a univocal strategy that brands can adopt to inspire and nudge consumers toward sustainable behaviours, this campaign illustrates and proves that it is essential to start from a deep understanding of consumer culture in order to build relevant meaning connections, linking brand equities with the message and the strategy of the campaign. Thus, reframing sustainability

communication starting from humanity (and its cultural environment and multiple layers of meaning) could be one of the answers to the research question presented in this study.

4.2 Managerial implications

It is now undeniable that companies are being called upon to play their part in, or even lead, the fight against climate and environmental crises. It is equally clear that this imperative comes not only from increasingly eco-conscious, demanding consumers, but also from the business community, as these actions impact the brand reputation and, in general, the performance of the company itself.

When it comes to sustainable marketing and pro-environmental communication, companies should be able not to fall into the so called "sustainable marketing myopia", which occurs when their communication is product-focused instead of being consumer-focused. Indeed, what emerged from the literature review (conducted at the beginning of the dissertation) is that people often fail to identify themselves into the ideal of the perfect "eco-warrior". This enduring cultural myth that they need to perfectly recycle, ban meat, eat plant-based food, and live a holistically sustainable lifestyle to have a role to play often hinders consumers from acting in a virtuous and environmentally sustainable way. Hence, to boost sustainable actions and trigger responsible consumption behaviours it's critical that companies encourage consumers to implement imperfect pro-environmental changes in their decisions and habits, leveraging collective imperfect progress, that is the only way forward to concretely fight climate crisis.

Moreover, the same barrier experienced by humans is likely to prevent companies too from undertaking their journey toward sustainability: businesses themselves should be keen to implement internal changes and pro-environmental actions and initiatives, even when they lack an historical authentic commitment to ecological issues. Indeed, the rule to rather be imperfect and act applies for companies as well. In this sense, if it's true that humanizing the sustainable message is the key to get closer to consumers and encourage them, it's even true that companies and brands, like humans, may fall into pitfalls and be far from perfection. Patagonia has definitely set the benchmark for aspirational environmental brand activism and has become an absolute best practice in the corporate industry. However, it is not vital to be as dedicated and proactive as Patagonia to become a good environmental activist and to make genuine efforts that generate positive "green" changes. One lesson learned from the case of McDonald's (that is still far from being a perfect environmentalist brand) is that each concrete genuine effort toward sustainability (pertaining concrete initiatives and environmental

discourses embedded in the communication strategy) is likely to inspire consumers and spark positive changes, especially if consistent with the brand values and equities.
Finally, companies should not overlook the cultural branding approach to understand their positioning in the marketplace, neither should underrate the relevance of exploiting semiotic research to explore the ecosystem of meanings behind their brand and to uncover the dialectical relationships between their brand and consumer culture. This could prove crucial in revealing the role that a brand can play in driving change. Indeed, as argued by L. Oswald (2012), successful brands don't just mirror culture; instead, they create culture.

4.3 Limitations and future research

The study was conducted to unveil one of the strategies brands can use to harness their communication campaigns to leverage environmental discourses and spark positive changes, starting from the analysis of an empirical case from McDonald's Norway. The example analysed represents one possible strategy brands can undertake, without pretending to be exhaustive in providing an answer to the research question. The validity of the study could be corroborated by complementing the research with the collection of primary data directly from consumers. One of the most suitable methodologies would be ethnography, an observational field research which requires the researcher to "go native", namely to deeply immerge in consumers' world taking an "insider perspective" to truly understand social and cultural phenomena observing people in their own environment. This methodology implies intensive observation, overtly or covertly joining people's daily lives for an extended period, and collecting every kind of data, with no limits (e.g., interviews, depth interviews, print, photographs, videos, visual impressions, etc.). The collection of primary data would enrich and add nuances to the semiotic analysis conducted in this dissertation and provide a deeper understanding of as many layers of meaning as possible, shine light to consumers' conscious and unconscious attitudes toward sustainability and environmental issues, and allow for creative interpretations. Furthermore, the same research approach could be extended in alternative domains of brand activism starting from the same brand (like social activism, for instance). Finally, it would be interesting to extend the research on environmental activism to competitive brands, to gather evidence of any alternative strategies that might have been adopted for more environmental campaigns within the same service category.

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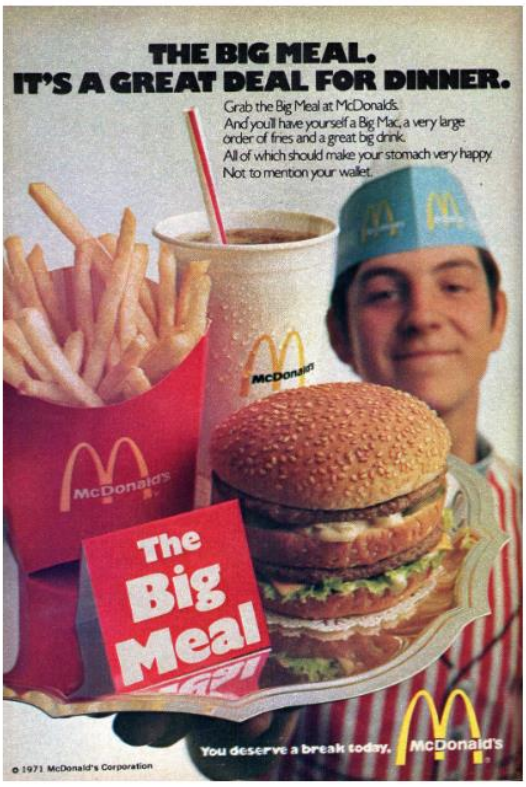
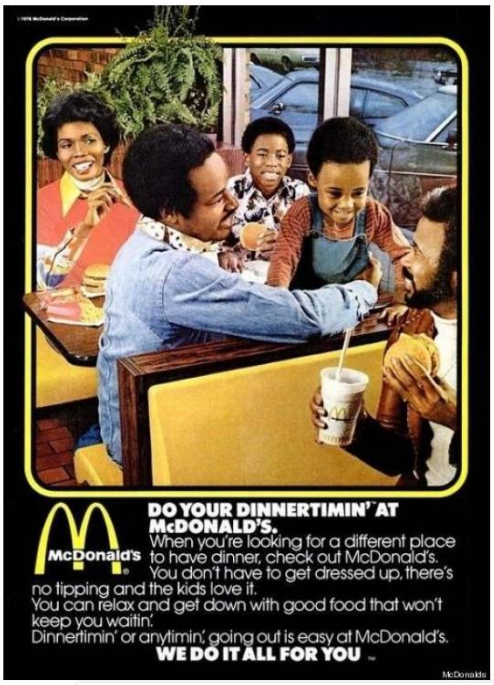
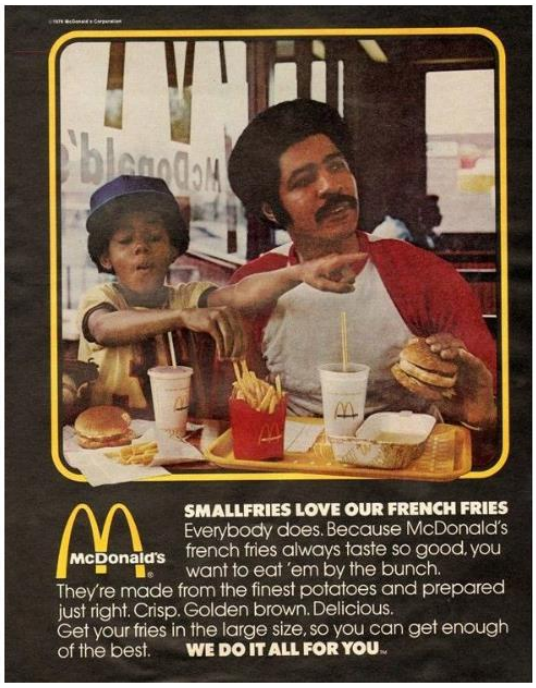
Annex

- “Elegy for the Arctic” by Ludovico Einaudi https://youtu.be/Pk9f1GSGam0
- “You deserve a break today”, McDonald’s (1971)

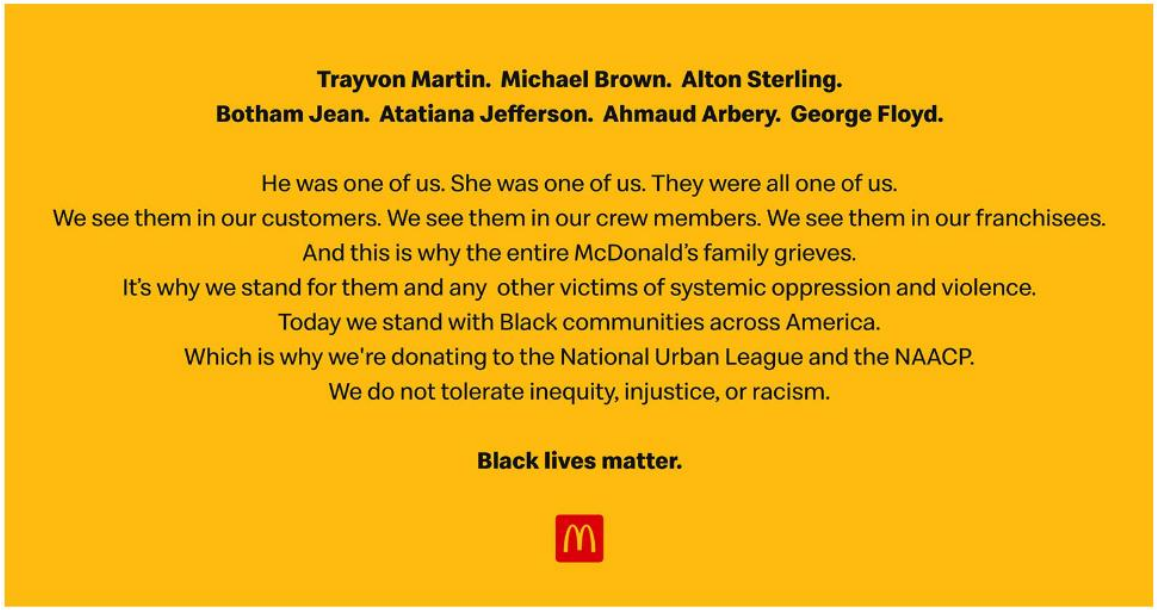


- “We do it all for you” McDonald’s campaign (1976)

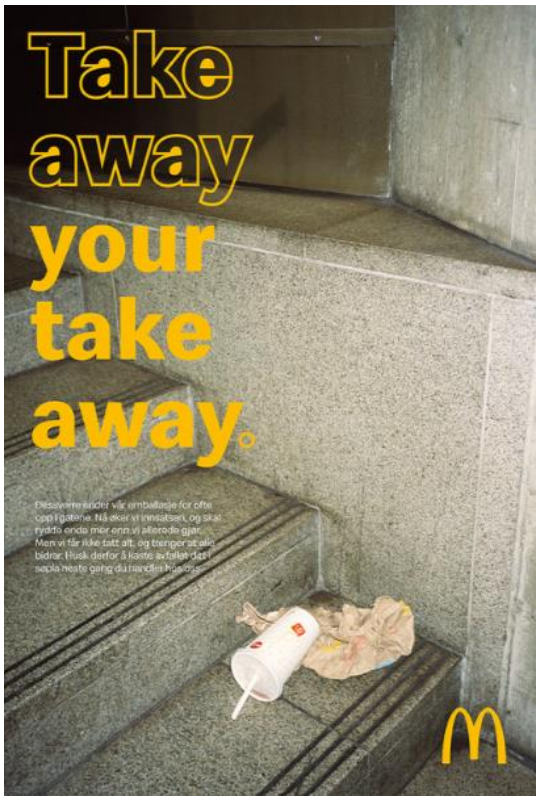




- "No one can do it like McDonald's do" commercial: https://youtu.be/glFa8bXcC-A
- "I'm lovin'it" McDonald's commercial (2003): https://youtu.be/dI-xHMM8wXE
- "I'm Lovin'it" by Justin Timberlake: https://youtu.be/-IHcp8Pl_X4
- "Hands full" McDonald's ad https://youtu.be/Ta_B-szsdpI
- "Grown up" McDonald's ad https://youtu.be/m5b0Fe88nm8
- "Ask McDonald's" campaign https://youtu.be/vRcCG9tczNA
- "Search It" McDonald's social media ad https://youtu.be/q7DN7bhihSA
- "They were one of us" McDonald's campaign to support Black Lives Matter https://www.mcdonalds.com/us/en-us/they-were-one-of-us.html



- "Families" KFC UK spot https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BI22NT5LhJA
- "Anything for taste" KFC South Africa spot https://youtu.be/--27Y8B5tbw
- "What a meal, what a deal!" Taco Bell spot (1980) https://youtu.be/_s4BGBzT0eE
- "Kick The Trash" Digital Campaign, McDonald's (2010) https://youtu.be/NI5gx2-z5io
- "Waste" ad, part of "Change a little, change a lot" campaign, McDonald's UK (2021) https://youtu.be/wrIjvo_xrrk
- "Take away your take away" Spot https://youtu.be/m1-SOWrBrgc
- "Plastic bag scene" from "American Beaty" (1999) https://youtu.be/V73598mBfKY
- "Take away your take away", prints, OOH, social posts (2022)


Take
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JCDecaux
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Take away
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- McDonald's anti-littering campaign, Belgium (2022)

Summary

Introduction

Climate change is a reality, it is happening all around us. We see it through dramatic images in news reports, documentaries and social advertisings, we perceive it in our everyday lives. Along with climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution add up to the three self-inflicted planetary crises that are closely interconnected and pose a very serious risk for humans. The environmental crisis is unanimously considered the toughest challenge the world will face in the next two decades and institutions, governments and companies are under pressure to find concrete solutions to offset it. Indeed, in the two-year period 2020/2021, over 90% of the world's largest 100 companies made some sort of sustainability or climate commitment (McCann Worldgroup, 2021).

Younger consumers (especially Millennials and, even more, Gen Z) have become incredibly sensitive to these topics and mindful about how brand values comply with their own values, steering their purchasing choice based on brands sustainability actions. In a time where there's growing mistrust towards the role governments and NGOs may have in saving the planet, people increasingly rely on companies and businesses to lead the fight against environmental crisis. Indeed, almost 77% of people globally (McCann Worldgroup, 2021) consider companies to have greater power than governments to make a positive impact. Brands are expected to act as cultural activist in society, leading the fight for protecting the environment and publicly taking a stance to drive changes and spread awareness around the seriousness of the issue. Thus, brand neutrality is not an option anymore. Indeed, being an activist brand necessarily entails advocacy, having the power and the responsibility to influence consumers' opinions and actions; also, brand activism requires concrete actions and usually implies courting controversy and addressing divisive issues.

Stating the relevant cultural role that activist brands play in society, this study will adopt the lens of the cultural branding perspective, placing the brand at the centre of the research process in order to explore brand's potential to inspire positive "green" behaviours and spur pro-environmental actions. Prior research was mostly focused on studying how brands reflect culture and consumer trends; instead, the purpose of this study is to explore how brands in turn contribute to culture and influence consumers' ideas and actions.

The research question this study aims to address is how activist brands do inspire and drive positive sustainable changes leveraging sustainability and pro-environmental discourses in their communication campaign. In the effort to answer to the research question, it was considered an empirical case to be analysed, an anti-littering campaign launched the last year (2022) by McDonald's Norway to tackle the environmental issue of city littering. Being the litter found in the streets of Oslo easily identifiable with McDonald's takeout packaging, the brand felt the urge to take the ownership of the problem and committed to become a relevant part of the solution. The research adopted the Brandscape methodology to understand the cultural space occupied by the brand within its market environment, and then conduct a semiotic analysis of each element of the cross-media campaign. The final goal of the analysis is to prove how brands, being imbued with cultural meaning, can act as ally for the environment and drive sustainable changes in the society. The results of this study leave open many research opportunities to dive deeper and to potentially extend the scope of the research to other types of activism or to different brands. The following study has been developed in four chapters, starting with a review of the existing literature on the broad and generic topic of brand activism, followed by a close exploration of the phenomenon of environmental activism, of the elements that predict and steer consumer sustainable behaviours and consumption choices, and a brief overview of the phenomenon of greenwashing. The third chapter entirely revolves around the semiotic analysis of McDonald's brand, starting with the Brandscape methodology, which involves the audit of the brand (through a diachronic perspective) and of its competitors (through a synchronic perspective), in order to define the positioning of the brand in the marketplace, followed by the analysis of the entire campaign "Take away your take away". Finally, the study ends with the main findings emerged and their potential implications for brands and companies, together with some insights and suggestions for future research.

1. Brand activism: business as a force for good

1.1.The evolution of brand activism in the "values-driven era"

Brand activism is the talk of the town and among the most interesting business trends of the moment. It is the result of several cultural and societal changes happened in the last decades and it is now the benchmark against which modern consumers (especially Millennials and Generation Z) value brands and evaluate their heart and soul. In the cultural branding perspective brands are given a significant role in society, acting as vessels of identity-related meanings and as advocates for socially relevant

issues and community's anxieties and struggles. Dealing with the concept of brand activism assumes that brands are not anymore confined to the role of sales-pusher and persuasive weapon, instead they give significant contribution to customers' identity value. Instead, brands are an active and lively part of popular culture that may shape, drive and symbolize social, cultural, political and ethical movements and trends in such a way to be intertwined in the multifaceted human reality. Indeed, cultural brands embody values and ideals valuable for consumers and are imbued with stories they find significant in their attempt to self-expression (Holt, 2004). Modern consumers have become increasingly demanding in their consumption choice, orienting their consideration towards brands' values and behaviours, rather than focusing on tangible objective features. Millennials and Generation Z are the main characters of what Philip Kotler defined the "values-driven era", steering their choice based on who is selling rather than what is sold. Progressive consumers expect businesses to be active part of the society they're working in, to give a meaningful contribution to social stability and to actively fulfil societal aspirations and believes. Hence, in the modern consumption era, reputation is the real currency and positioning is not enough anymore. What helps brands to stand out from the competition is the ability to detect and address the most urgent social struggles and shared anxieties (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020). The increasing distrust and loss of faith that society is lately experiencing towards traditional public institutions and authorities (like governments and NGOs) has gradually led people to rely on corporations and CEOs as solid balance points in socio-political issues.

Starting from the general definition of *activism*, Sarkar and Kotler (2020) defined brand activism as a set of "business efforts to promote, impede or direct social, political, economic and/or environmental reform or stasis" with the aim to foster or hinder improvements in society. Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) considered brand activism a communication strategy which draws from campaigns of social movements and strives to influence and drive citizen-consumers through messages and campaigns sustained by political values.

The concept of brand activism has gained momentum in latest years enhancing legitimate confusion with similar concepts such as marketing ethics, Socially Responsible Marketing (SRM) or cause-related Marketing (CRM), Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) practices and, finally, with the concept of brand purpose. Marketing ethics involves solely "internal firm processes and risks" (Martin & Burpee, 2022) and entails the inclusion of moral practices in the economy (Gierszewska & Seretny, 2019), while Socially Responsible Marketing has an external influence. Martin and Burpee (2022) defined SRM as a set of views, policies and actions that involves the "authentic consideration of stakeholder claims" and the

connection between business practices and stakeholders' interests, pursuing social and environmental sustainability in each action; moreover SRM corroborates the higher-end role of marketing, that goes way beyond persuasion and represents a critical part of the corporate strategy. According to Sarkar and Kotler (2020), while cause-related marketing starts from marketing and moves into society, brand activism is born in society and moves towards marketing (Yoo, et al., 2021).

SRM and CRM are usually embedded in the corporate strategy and address non-divisive, pro-social issues; instead, brand activism can be planned ad hoc or be accidental and, since it courts controversy, it usually involves a higher level of uncertainty and risk and may elicit both positive and negative reactions (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Brand activism can be conceived as the natural and more radical evolution of ESG programs and CSR (both based on a marketing-driven or a corporate-driven approach), it embraces an outside-in mindset and strives to fill the values-gap between companies and customers, employees or society at large. While CSR requires minimal internal practice and addresses well-accepted and non-divisive pro-social issues, activism goes beyond social commitment embedded in sustainable policies and ethical practises to take a step further, to promote positive behaviours, committing to consumers' education and encouraging them to actively contribute to a healthier world (Eyada, 2020). Finally, brand activism also goes beyond brand purpose, that is the statement that defines the inspiration reason for being of the company and its contribution to better the world. Brand activism is the result of the imperative to embed social issues into brand value to go along with the progressive evolution of consumers into brand citizens (well beyond the ordinary concept of customers, shareholders and stakeholders; Yoo et al., 2021). Proactive consumers are mindful about how their values are aligned with those of the brand and attuned to the brand's contribution to make the world a better place (Hsu, 2017). They firmly believe that actions speak louder than words, actively looking for the proof (not the promise). Hence, companies must really switch from intention to action and practice what they preach. Indeed, actions, or the absence of actions, are the signals that customers and society use to assess the "heart and soul" of a brand (Korschun, 2021).

In the attempt to define brand activism, it may help considering which features usually characterize an activist brand. Brand activism is unambiguously denoted by two core aspects: in the first place, it holds an inherently public nature, indeed it involves publicly stated positions expressed through visible means. Additionally, it entails advocacy, the purpose to spread awareness around specific causes, foster persuasion to embrace them, promote collective engagement and support to join the same issues in order to generate change (Korschun, 2021). One more peculiar aspect of brand activism

is its innate divisiveness, which may potentially alienate consumers and sometimes even employees (Garg & Saluja, 2022) and expose the brand to backlashes. Brand activism may "take the form of making an open statement in public domain, lobbying for the cause, donating money to the particular cause and making a cause-related statement through their marketing and advertising communication" (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019).

According to Manfredi-Sánchez (2019), activist brand hold four main features. 1) Brands have a symbolic character and represent intangible goods of reputational nature filled with cognitive and emotional values. 2) Brands become advocate for political issues, without showing support for a specific political party. 3) Brands to hold the aspirational values of global brands and aim at the general public. 4) Activist brands draw from digital activism, including in their discursive strategy languages, objects and techniques typical of digital generations (e.g., redistribution of videos, use of logos, etc.).

1.2 The forces behind brand activism and its potential consequences for brands

Many social and political dynamics have laid the ground for the rise of brand activism. It can reasonably have its origins in late 2000s, when the rise of Millennials and the global financial crisis pushed marketing towards a human centric evolution, also referred to as Marketing 3.0. This evolution was the brand's reply to the growing urge of giving business relevance to the common good, with companies creating products, services and cultures that bring positive social and environmental impact (Kartajaya, Setiawan, & Kotler, 2021). Among the critical factors behind the spread of brand activism there are the increasing level of division and distrust in the political landscape and the heightened expectations of progressive consumers towards brands. The growing political polarization in countries around the world is strictly connected to new heavy struggles facing society. Therefore, the dramatic trust loss towards traditional authorities (e.g., governments, institutions and NGOs) has prompted the expectations people have on businesses and brands (Korschun, 2021).

To corroborate the idea that brand activism has become almost an imperative, Martin and Burpee (2022) argued that the increasing market demand for activist brands doesn't come just from progressive consumers but also from investors, who value socially responsible firm activities as positive signals of prospective returns.

Publicly standing up for a cause and carrying out real supportive actions it's risky. However, since nowadays people expect brands to solve societal and environmental problems, pressure on brands is

high and they cannot afford to be neutral spectators anymore. Thus, if publicly taking a stand and making concrete actions it's risky, disregarding those expectations it's even more hazardous.

To justify the attention and the emphasis that both the marketplace and the academic literature are giving to the topic, it's worth exploring the impacts of brand activism and the possible reactions and impacts it may elicit. First of all, acts of activism gather the attention of customers and create emotional connection with them, enhance customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, and strengthen associations, in turn generating the buzz around the brand. Empirical evidence proves that investment in social responsibility and brand activism lead to positive marketing outcomes and tangible firm benefits, Brand activism leads consumers to view brands as extensions of their views, values and lifestyles and, in turn, it has become a significant driver for brand preferences and purchase decisions. Also, since brand activism reflects brand's values, it may influence consumers' brand-value identification which in turns translates into positive brand attitudes and commitment, positive WoM and higher willingness to pay (WTP) for the brand (Garg & Saluja, 2022). Socially responsible marketing and brand activism may also protect firms from idiosyncratic (firm-specific) shocks and systematic risks (broader market volatility), by building a sort of "goodwill" among stakeholders and communities. Brand activism gives customers the opportunity to assess the level of self-brand similarity based on the extent to which their moral foundations are aligned with those of the brand. Brand activism addresses divisive and sensitive societal issues and this exposes the brand even to negative reactions and boycotting if the values or ideals defended by the brand are not aligned to those of its customer base or when they are shared inappropriately or offensively. Brands need to be cautious when defining the issues they want to stand behind, as well as on the execution thereof, in order to avoid their strategy to "backfire into a public relations nightmare." (Williams, n.d.).

New-age consumers are more civic-minded and responsible and are marketing-savvy, with an acute sense of social justice and scepticism towards deceptive marketing efforts. Indeed, their stated preference for transparent and fair marketing and advertising makes them ready to boycott or switch a brand when it prioritizes its commercial interests (e.g., profit) over its social responsibility (Shetty, Venkataramaiah & Anand, 2019).

1.3 Brand activism strategy

Brand activism is a dynamic and fluid process and, as such, it requires brand managers to be cultural genealogists, to get "close to the nation", to be attuned to the world around them and detect the social and political shifts and anxieties the society is struggling with (Holt, 2004).

Ben & Jerry's Global Head of Integrated Marketing, Jay Curley, and Head of Global Activism Strategy, Chris Miller, developed a framework to help organizations in building their own approach to brand activism. They identified the 6P's of Brand Activism (Purpose, Policy, People, Power, Publishing and Pop culture) to transform brands into advocates for social changes and marketers into activists. The starting point of the framework is made up by corporate core values (Purpose). Additionally, companies are asked to act upon the root cause of social struggles through policy changes and concrete efforts to advance the fight of leading organizations of social movements (Policy). Employees and all company's relevant spokespeople are key players in this game: their sincere commitment enhances the impact and the credibility of company's efforts to support it (People). Companies hold resources that give them unique power and "authority" over consumers, media and even policymakers. They should leverage them to address civic and cultural disfunctions and to become a force for positive change (Power). companies should
exploit their touchpoints to build a continuative credible storytelling, deliver creative content to sensitize consumers and offer people an easy on-ramp to get involved in the movement (Publishing). Finally, brands should raise their voice and use their positioning to stand out in the media landscape. make brands relevant for consumers and help them positioning as top of mind brands (Pop culture).

In the attempt to define a strategy to build activist brands, Sarkar and Kotler (2020) identified five core factors vital to build a movement:

1) First, companies have to set an honourable mission directed at the Common Good.
2) They have to imagine what results the movement aims to reach and how it has planned to achieve them.
3) Companies should figure out how to inspire and motivate people to join their actions.
4) Once impressed, they have to mobilize and budge committed participants.
5) Finally, they will drive and coordinate joint action to generate change.

1.4 The dark side of Brand Activism: regressive activism

It may seem strange, but the concept of brand activism does not necessarily have a positive connotation; in some cases, indeed, brands become bearers of regressive forms of activism. The "values gap" between the company's conscience and the conscience of customers, stakeholders or society can turn out to be either a unique opportunity to seize or, rather, to be a serious potential threat

for brands that get shameful behaviours steering away from stakeholders' expectations. What distinguishes regressive activism from progressive activism is the direction the brand takes with regard to the Common Good (namely, the set of conditions or facilities - whether material, abstract, cultural or institutional - which benefits all or most of the members of a community). By definition, regressive brands are brands that actively support, through actions, policies that may threaten or hurt the Common Good and their perspective is at the odds with the basic needs and values shared by community or society (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020).

Regressive brands expose themselves to the risk of brand shaming, which consists in a decline of brand value and consumers' strike against regressive behaviours. However, the values gap could even be played in reverse, with brand's view staying ahead of its stakeholders and the brand playing a leading role in the fight for the common good (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020). Indeed, progressive brand activism concerns brands that do the right thing and involves actions that promote and support the Common Good.

Brands involved in progressive activism can elicit brand evangelism, a priceless kind of brand trust and enthusiasm. Brand evangelism occurs when some values or qualities of the brand speak to consumers' own identity and choosing a brand becomes a way for them to reinforce their ideas about themselves (Lahey, 2021).

1.5 The six domains of Brand Activism

Nowadays humanity is facing a growing number of challenges and interrelated issues which governments and institutions are failing to address, like social unrest, human rights violations, pollution, environmental disasters, species extinctions, wars, pandemics and still many. Within this assorted group of intertwined issues that Sarkar (2019) defined the "ecosystem of wicked problems", he identified a set of seven "macro-areas" which englobe interlinked problems and represent what business and brands are called upon to solve.

Inequality, which comes from the inequal distribution of wealth; hate that originates from society's polarization and refers to the widening gap between different identity-based, cultural and ideological subgroups that are experiencing a lack of empathy, tolerance and inclusion. War, is the extreme consequence of a series of prejudices, policies, propaganda and the concretization of a culture of militarism, armies and violence. Corruption refers to deceptive conducts of who is in positions of power or from people that try to influence them by fraud or in a dishonest way. Population, whose unstoppable growth will inevitably bring to the surface the issue of limited resources available to

satisfy the need of every human that will hardly be solved without environmental degradation, and will indirectly reinforce phenomena like poverty, migrations and social disorders. Health and livelihood which refer to the global challenge of ensuring public wellbeing. Climate Collapse is among the most urgent problems humanity needs to face today and also the one that is showing with overwhelming evidence. Global warming is sparking a series of dramatic events and natural calamities, like hurricanes, flooding, abnormal heat waves, wildfires, melting glaciers and drought, which are necessarily contributing to gradual ecosystem degradation and species extinction.

In the same way, starting from these big classes, the fields where brand activism may find application can be clustered into six main domains. These broad categories comprise legal activism, political activism, business (or workplace) activism, social activism, economic activism and environmental activism (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020).

The focus of **legal activism** is about laws and policies affecting companies, such as employment laws, citizenship and taxes. **Political activism** involves lobbying, policies, privatization, voting and voting rights. **Business activism** (or workplace activism) involves issues around governance, like CEO pay, workers' compensation, corporate organization, supply chain management. **Social activism** includes inequality (being it linked to gender, sexual orientation, LGBT, race, etc.), societal and community issues like Healthcare, Education, Privacy, Consumer Protection, Social security. **Economic activism** pertains to wage and tax policies which directly affect redistribution of wealth and income disparity. Finally, **environmental activism** concerns environmental laws and circular policies as well as awareness-raising initiatives and actions regarding climate change, global warming, emissions control, water pollution, land-use and ecocide.

2. Environmental Activism

2.1 Acting to save the planet: an urgent imperative for brands

Environmental activism refers to the set of actions that various groups of individuals (often volunteers) and organizations (associations, no-profit organizations, companies) put in place in order to safeguard nature and aid the environment. Actions start when they identify issues that seriously threaten the planet's viability (at a community level or at global level) and develop strategies (being them local strategies, nationwide campaigns or creative initiatives) to promote awareness, push institutions towards tough regulations or directly provide solutions to address the problems. Environmental activism refers to the set of actions that various groups of individuals (often

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Environmental activism can be broadly categorized into three main types of activism, namely solution-driven activism, change-focused activism and finally revolutionary activism (Prakoso et al., 2021).

Solution-driven activism involves the identification of the solutions to a specific issue and demanding actions to implement those solutions and address the issue (What is Environmental Activism?, 2016).

Change-focused activism

doesn't lead to the resolution of the problem, instead it aims to create a valid alternative to the issue (What is Environmental Activism?, 2016).

Revolutionary activism, finally, is not focused on pursuing small changes but it seeks to subvert the opposed system and it implies a "fundamental change of society and its major institutions" (What is Environmental Activism?, 2016; Prakoso et al., 2021). Environmental movements basically share the same mission, thus to improve and protect the health and "quality of natural environment through changes to environmentally harmful human activities" (Earth5R, 2022); however, they do not aim to achieve their goals in the same way. This leads to a more specific distinction among them and to the identification of eight slightly different kinds of environmental movements.

1. *Climate activism*, a movement born from the public recognition of the climate change and lead by young activists (like Greta Thunberg, Jamie Margolin, Vanessa Nakate) who created a global youth climate movement, rallying thousands of young activists who raised their voices against climate change, urging the world to wake up to the growing crisis and demanding that people in position of power stop chasing money and start acting to fight it. 2. *The conservation movement* aims to protect natural habitats and preserve biodiversity and eco-systems, promoting a sustainable use of natural resources and wilderness preservation. 3. *Environmental defenders* are groups involved in environmental conflicts to protect the environment from damages caused by human activities.

4. *Green parties* are "formally organized political parties" with the aim to orient civilization in more sustainable directions. they are based on the principles of green politics, grassroots democracy, social justice and nonviolence. 5. *Water protectors* are activists that work in defence of water and water systems and are guided by a philosophy rooted in indigenous cultural perspective which considers

water as sacred and essential for life, thus worthy of respect. 6. *Individual and Political Action* is a form of activism though to reduce greenhouse gases (GHG) emissions, it mostly involves changes in laws and regulations directly related the climate change (e.g., carbon tax and carbon pricing). 7. *Environmental grassroots movements* rely on the power of collective actions to generate change, by making use of basic rights like freedom of speech and expression, and making pressure to elected officials, government bodies and corporations. These movements are led by communities, social enterprises and even NGOs (for instance, Greenpeace), have no political affiliation and often start as form of local activism and gradually take a broader scope.
8. *Eco-terrorism* is a form of radical environmentalism that consists in the use (or threatened use) of acts of violence against people or properties (Earth5R, 2022). These movements are growingly becoming widespread and often take the form of public acts of vandalism (yet sometimes fictitious).

The reasons behind the rise of this groundswell of activism in society are to be retraced in the inequality gap rising in the post-financial crisis, but primarily in the rise of Millennials consumers, who are marked out by the affirmation and the empowerment of the individual self-value and by a new form of socialism, based on a culture of sharing, cooperation and collectivism enabled by the digital revolution (Minár, 2016). Millennials, and even more Generation Z, are leading a paradigmatic shift which is changing the rules of traditional economy, shaping the so-called gift economy, where brands and corporations are asked to be social and cultural actors in society and to create cultural value "without any assurance of immediate return" (Minár, 2016), thus regardless of current economic profit. Millennials are growingly interested in "brands that care", that go way beyond expressing identity, status or signalling the brand's commercial presence in the market, to take an ethical and value dimension and give something back to the society and the planet.
traditional advertising is shifting into *goodvertising*, a form of values-driven communication, embodying brands' expression to valuable issues like community, ideologies and socio-cultural values (Minár, 2016).
In the GetOutInFront study conducted by Deloitte in 2020 emerged that climate change and environment are among the primary issues people care about. Awareness of global environmental issues is changing consumers' attitudes and habits and shaping their brand choice (Haller, K., Lee, J., Cheung, J., 2019). While people consider governments, businesses, brands and themselves equally accountable for stepping up sustainable practises, it's also true that most of them believe brands to have greater responsibility to take the right action to minimise their environmental impact (Robson,

2020) and to have higher power than governments in shaping minds and making a positive impact (McCann Worldgroup, 2021). However, there's not just a clear consumer-driven imperative for change, there's also an urgent business imperative which requires companies to make a shift in their mindset (from an economic to a circular model of production and consumption), to reimagine and quickly transform business models, supply chains and products and, finally, to make doing the right choice easier for consumers. 2019 was a turning point and marked a significant change in people's consciousness about climate crisis and ecological emergency with the rise of major global activist movements, like Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for Future, Youth for Climate and Global Climate Strike lead by young activists "demanding world leaders to address the threat of global warming".

These movements were mostly born as big schools strikes where groups of teenagers started to rally and took the protests to the streets, and they rapidly spread across the world involving thousands of students and youngers (but also teachers, scientists and celebrities

Teenagers were the indisputable protagonists of these activist movements, led by the Swedish teen climate activist Greta Thunberg, who, in the same year, addressed a plenary session of the European Economic and Social Committee, gathered hundreds of activists at the White House to ask U.S. actions, delivered a speech in both the two legs of the Global Climate Strike and joined the COP25 UN Climate Summit in Madrid.

Environmental activism has changed the way to show itself and to engage the mass throughout the last decades, witnessing the growing role of ambassadors, being them embodied by everyday people, celebrities and brands. Greta Thunberg was the cause of "the paradigm shift in the way the world considers climate change" (Greta Thunberg: The Voice of Our Planet, 2021) and she established a new kind of social activism (i.e., *internet activism*) which relies on the ability of social media to engage citizens in global policy decisions. She organized the Anti-global warming movement and her strikes were replicated in more than seventy-one countries around the world. This international movement inspired by Greta created an interconnection between them, which are united by one mission: to reduce global warming threats.

Not just internet activism but also *celebrity activism* has been spreading in latest years, thanks to celebrities from the world of cinema, like Hollywood superstar Leonardo DiCaprio, and other world-famous people, such as the musician Ludovico Einaudi, who have become living symbols of the fight against climate change, exploiting their popularity and world-class public opportunities to express their concerns about the climate crisis and to stir consciences. In the opinion of some expert

environmental activists, celebrities' involvement helps to focus public attention on environmental issues, and to "channel support, money, and enthusiasm into real and lasting impact".

2.2 Patagonia: a benchmark for environmental activism and sustainability advocacy

When it comes to brand activism there's a brand that always recalls in consumers' mind: Patagonia. Patagonia is much more than just a business; it is an environmental advocate, in the first place. Before being a leader in the outdoor apparel market, Patagonia is a world and industry leader in environmental advocacy, with more than one-hundred-forty million dollars donated to environmental non-profit organization (until 2021). Since the very beginnings, the company was conceived a "business to save the planet", it was not just meant to product environmentally friendly outdoor gear and apparel, but to do good for the earth. There's much meaningful evidence of the brand's commitment to the environment, starting from the "1% for the Planet" initiative, the pledge of 1% of its total sales each year to domestic and international environmental groups for the preservation and restoration of the natural environment. Still over the years, the company has been the protagonist of countless and various initiatives in favour of environmental protection (e.g., making donations, sponsoring grants, supporting grassroots movements, launching inspiring campaigns around specific environmental issues, and even changing the brand purpose into "We're in business to save our home planet", etc.), often using provocative tones and even taking politically uncomfortable positions speaking out against political programs threatening the planet's health, in order to use its influence to raise awareness and inspire change. Some of those initiatives gained much resonance, especially for their originality and for the ground-breaking nature of their advertising campaigns. Among those worthy to be mentioned, there is the campaign "Don't buy this jacket": in 2011 Patagonia posted a provocative ad on the New York Times during the Black Friday to tackle the issue of consumerism exactly during the sales period, when people easier indulge in over-consumption. The ad invited consumers not to buy new items (e.g., that jacket, for instance) if not really needed, and spurred them to rather extend the use of their own garments (according to one of principles of circular economy, reuse). The purpose of the ad was to inspire and implement solutions to protect the environment, by encouraging consumers to think before buying and to reflect on the harmful impacts of our consumption behaviours on the planet (Patagonia, n.d.). Instead, in 2017 the White House released a statement to provide for the details of the President's plans to shrink the size of two national monuments in Utah. Patagonia reacted modifing its homepage to display a black screen with the claim "The president stole your land" to rise awareness and concern about the problem and gather consensus

and adhesions to engage in collective actions (Lee, 2017; Fortunato, 2020). Moreover, in 2022 the founder announced the decision to transfer 100% actions of Patagonia to its main shareholder, the planet. He donated 100% of voting stock to Patagonia Purpose Trust that will drive the company according to Patagonia's historical values and 100% of nonvoting stock (i.e., 98% of total stock) to Holdfast Collective, a non-profit organization dedicated to fighting climate crisis and protecting nature. In this way, all the profits (net of revenues to be reinvested in the business) will be distributed as a dividend for the planet and invested to help fighting climate and ecological crisis (Chouinard, 2022). This ground-breaking decision definitely subverted the rules of capitalism and set Patagonia as a benchmark for sustainable capitalism.

2.3 The antecedents of sustainable consumer behaviours: eco-warriors vs eco-worries

Nowadays consumers are mindful decision-makers and several factors contribute to influence and shape their consumption path and final choice, not the least sustainability.

Sustainable consumer behaviours more generally refer to actions that result in lessened adverse environmental impacts or decreased use of natural resources and, above all, they are actions devoted to a higher-end purpose, e.g., to generate longer-term benefits to the others and the natural world (White et al., 2019). When it comes to green consumption and sustainable behaviours, two major themes are the emerging of *global citizenship* and the *attitude-behaviour gap*. Postmodern consumers invest their own consumption behaviours of responsibility towards the common good and the planet's health. This new kind of consumers, referred to as global citizens, are able to "embrace a sustainable and moral concept of consumption" and their purchasing choice is driven by their concern about the collective well-being and the sustainable development of the world community (Ricci et al., 2016). Nevertheless, despite showing strong positive attitudes toward environmental issues, they often fail to translate this concern into concrete actions (Chen et al., 2021). Hence, this paradoxical phenomenon is incredibly recurrent, and in the literature, and it is referred to as the attitude-behaviour gap (or intention-action gap).

In order to understand what prevent people that report positive attitudes toward sustainable choices from "walking the talk", it's critical to know which factors predict or drive sustainable consumer behaviours. Previous studies on this topic (Davies & Gutsche, 2016; White et al., 2019) highlighted the relevance of the society-self dualism in the decision-making process behind eco-friendly behaviours. Indeed, both social influence (social norms, social identity and desirability) and self-oriented factors (self-concept, self-interest and self-efficacy) take part in this process, as well as both

negative (sadness, fear and guilt) and positive emotions (joy, pride, feelings of affinity towards nature) can lead to pro-environmental actions. Even cognition (e.g., information, education and knowledge), framing, situational factors and the level of concreteness of communication affect consumers' proneness to eco-friendly actions (White et al., 2019). Social factors embed different conditions that reflect the ways in which men are inevitably influenced by society, including all the facets of social influence: *social norms, social guilt, social identities, social desirability*.

Individual self has an equally relevant role. First of all, individual differences like differences in environmental concern and mindfulness, and especially different "personal norms" predict different sustainable behaviours. People deem important to keep a positive self-view and tend to reaffirm their individual self through consumption ; even self-consistency, self-interest, or self-satisfaction in general, can guide sustainable behaviours. Finally, self-efficacy (i.e., people's confidence that their actions will create a meaningful impact), is a critical antecedent of sustainable attitudes and a key indicator of future pro-environmental actions (White et al., 2019).

Decision-making process regarding sustainable choices can either follow an intuitive, emotional route or a deliberative, rational one; indeed, both positive and negative feelings and emotions as critical drivers of behaviours even in this context. When pro-environmental actions provide people with hedonic pleasure or similar self-benefits, individuals associate to them positive feelings and are more likely to engage or iterate the same behaviours or choices. Indeed, according to White et al. (2019), warm feelings like *joy* drive positive consumer intentions towards nature and ecological choices. Even *pride* and a sense of "*affinity with nature*" can be a positive predictor of pro-environmental actions. Positive environmental behaviours create a sense of *hope* which, in turn, can naturally lead to greater engagement in climate activism and sustainable initiatives and actions. However, negative feelings can have a role too, especially *guilt, fear and sadness*. Anyway, also cognition and rational information processing can lead to similar outcomes. Indeed, the study conducted by White et al. (2019) highlighted that conveying *information,* providing *education* and spreading *knowledge* about environmental issues lead to "greater responsiveness to environmental appeals and engagement in eco-friendly behaviours". Finally, *habits* are a critical component of many sustainable actions; indeed, many behaviours with sustainability outcomes or implications are habitual behaviours, like choice of transportation, shopping, energy use, products disposal, etc. The key to success in promoting pro-environmental actions in many cases is to convert bad habits into positive ones through repetition or other techniques like prompts, incentives or feedback.

There is evidence that, when it comes to "protecting the planet", people do not really perceive this concern as directly affecting themselves and their peers, or as a way to "protect themselves" in turn. This means that, regardless of their personal care for the environment, there's a sort of mechanism of dissociation, whereby they distance themselves from sustainable concerns and consider these issues marginally relevant for their personal lives (McCann Worldgroup, 2021). While it is critical for sustainability claims to be substantiated by real results and concrete actions in order to prove their trustworthiness and the authenticity of their actions (thus, leveraging a logic instead of an emotional approach), the truth is that sometimes pro-social discourses are so rife with data and technicalities that they neglect their human perspective. Brands need to reframe their sustainability conversation giving up the language of science to retrieve its human aspects (McCann Worldgroup, 2021). Thus, one of the emerging cultural tensions is the need to "humanize" sustainability reframing the concept of sustainability to make people feel closer and personally involved in this issue.

One more cultural and social barrier is that a sustainable life is deemed as an option reserved for an elite, wealthy portion of the population because sustainability is considered an expensive lifestyle choice. Additionally, perceptions and actions towards environmental issues can be strongly affected by how these issues are presented and framed in messages and by the approach used to back up desirable sustainable behaviours. It is proved that a supportive, hopeful approach to address sustainable issues is way more effective and engaging (both at individual and corporate level) than building on negative concepts like deprivation, loss and sacrifice. Also, framing sustainable messages through a lens of "more" instead of "less" highlights opportunities for a hopeful future.

Sustainability is pervaded by the enduring cultural myth of the perfect *eco-warrior* and by a sort of collective utopia about pursuing a holistically sustainable lifestyle. These high expectations, generally accepted and shared by society, make common imperfect individuals feel uncomfortable and not ready to pursue a shift to sustainable behaviours. Their perceived divergence from the model of the perfect environmentalist discourages consumers from making even small changes in their daily life. Instead of embodying the ideal of the eco-warrior, people can easier identify with the *eco-worrier*.

They experience a sense of "chronic fear of environmental doom" (Roberts & Lauchlan, 2020) and this form of anxiety (eco-anxiety) is exacerbated by the growing frequency of extreme climate events, like floods or wildfires. These feelings inevitably affect human attitudes, beliefs and actions and, for someone, eco-activism or the shift to an eco-friendly lifestyle are the best ways to cope with these feelings. Hence, despite apparently at odds, being an eco-worrier can lead to become an eco-warrior.

Once explored most of the elements that concur to shape consumer sustainable decisions or behaviours, it's also useful to explore, on the other side, how businesses can deliver persuasive messages and engage consumers in behaving sustainably. Villarino and Font (2015) found *four* main *dimensions of message persuasion*: type of action narrated, message structure, content and authority.
1.The *type of action* refers both to the theme of the message (so the words used to evidence the sustainable practices of a business) and to the beneficiary of the message.In general, it's advisable to prefer specific and well-defined messages (instead of generic claims) and to focus on the benefits provided to the individuals, putting customers at the centre of the experience.
2. The *message structure* refers to the way the content is structured and conveyed in order to engage the audience in sustainable behaviours. In this regard, the message is more likely to be persuasive when explicit and when the description of the action or behaviours solicited is specific. Indeed, the more specific the suggestions and advice, the higher the likelihood for recipients to follow them. Also, an active message that directly invites recipient to do something is more persuasive and effective than a passive message. Finally, for what concerns the semantic type of meaning, a denotative message, is a critical part of persuasive messages.
3. The *type of content* delivered in a message: an emotional appeal makes the message livelier and memorable, revealing greater persuasive power.
4. Finally, it is worth considering the *authority* of the message that refers to the evidence of the sustainability claims. It plays a relevant role in defining the persuasiveness of the message and backs up the credibility of the claims.

2.4 Environmental activism as a marketing gimmick: the phenomenon of greenwashing

Today brands are living visible identities summoned to play an active role in society and to publicly commit to specific relevant pro-social causes that are relevant to their customers. Brand activism can bring several benefits and the first, above all, is setting the brand apart from all competitors, but also building a strong brand positioning, improving brand trust and, in turn, boosting brand loyalty.
Brand's commitment and social action must match values, ethics and vision of the brand; the fit and legitimacy between the social cause and the brand directly influence brand identity and perception and dramatically affect consumers' trust and reactions. Several authors have tried to identify the factors that compose brand activism authenticity; those which most frequently emerged were heritage, (social) commitment, credibility, transparency, consistency, cultural fit and community link (Mirzaei, 2022). Consumers tend to be very skeptical about brand's engagement in pro-social actions and not

to trust their stated commitment, accusing them to conceal profit-seeking motivations and to use activism as way to capitalize on the growing demand for pro-environmental actions. When brand's pro-social activism is not backed up by a complete sync between the stated commitment and the values of the brand, it is perceived as a mere form of advertising and considered a marketing gimmick, leading to a backlash, negative reactions and even boycotting. If consumers perceive that the "company's motives are self-centred rather than rightfully standing for the cause" (Eyada, 2020) they will experience loss of trust, negative attitudes toward the brand and likely shift their choice toward other brands. Hence, sustainability claims often result in *greenwashing*, which, by definition, refers to the process of conveying misleading claims and unsubstantiated information about the environmental impact of a company's products and operations in the attempt to deceive consumers and create a positive public image, possibly concealing the company's involvement in environmentally harmful practices or hiding unpleasant information (Peverini, 2013; Hayes, 2022). This strategic disclosure of positive sustainability performance can happen in various ways: through the use of environmental imagery about nature or wildlife to connote a product or practice as environmentally friendly; by using misleading labels or vague terminology like "eco-friendly" or "sustainable" to describe, for instance, the nature of the packaging; by cherry-picking data to highlight green actions while overshadowing negative information; though "false advertising" and strategic brand communication (e.g., press releases, commercials, etc.) to disseminate unsubstantiated information about corporate sustainable practices (Hayes, 2022).

Modern brands often exploit progressive values as a marketing ploy, appropriating social activism as a form of advertising (Mahdawi, 2018); indeed, they invest more time and money to market products or practices as "green", rather than make them sustainable for real.

Greenwashing can lead to disastrous consequences for brands, seriously impairing their image and reputation, disappointing loyal customers and affecting their attitudes and purchasing choice; it inevitably leads to a decrease in sales and profits, a loss of brand trust and brand loyalty among consumers and it erodes consumers' confidence in sustainability (Eyada, 2020). In the last ten years (2012-2022) the number of companies involved in episodes of greenwashing (e.g., incidents linked to environmental footprint or to misleading communication) has increased, with a particularly rapid growth in the Americas which come in first place followed by Europe. Moreover, it seems that the percentage of climate-related greenwashing has raised over the past five years (compared to themes like waste of resources, animal mistreatment, impact on biodiversity, etc.) leading themes like climate change, GHG emissions and global pollution to become a more prominent subject of greenwashing

and to be growingly fractured across different industries (with greatest rates of greenwashing incidents coming from Oil and Gas and Utilities industries; RepRisk ESG data science and quantitative solutions, 2022).

2.5 The renegotiation of pro-environmental discourses between consumers and brands

The imperative of economic growth and consumption egoism have led to an insane abusive exploitation of limited natural resources and today the earth seems to be inadequate to meet the standards of living demanded by modern society (Gierszewska & Seretny, 2019). Marketing is held accountable for boosting and intensifying the adoption of wrong behaviours and for promoting harmful consumption models that have significantly contributed to increase pollution, damaged natural ecosystems and threatened wildlife.

Nevertheless, as White et al. (2019) argued, marketing and sustainability are inextricably linked, although apparently incompatible: in fact, if it's true that conventional marketing appears to be the antagonist of the story, guilty of having instilled negative consumption habits, yet marketing may have a critical role even in influencing responsible consumption and encouraging consumers to act more sustainably (White et al., 2019). Marketing can play a decisive role in the society, for better or for worse, and consumers are wide aware of its potential.

Consumers imbue brands with greater potential to make positive impact and reverse climate change, compared to governments and institutions (McCann Worldgroup, 2021).Brands, for their part, have not failed to answer this call to action and have adopted pro-social communication strategies to reassert their environmental commitment (Peverini, 2013). Many iconic brands have "migrated from marketing to everyday social life" (Marrone & Mangano, 2015) and have reinvented their marketing function acting as social and cultural activists, gathering a deep knowledge of major social changes affecting the nations to get closer to society and culture, neglecting to focus on a specific subset of individuals (e.g., brand customers). The way in which companies and brands have engaged with the environmentalist zeitgeist of latest years and have (more or less) genuinely embraced activism has been extensively explored, described and analysed. Instead, there's still a lack of research focusing on "the other side of the coin", namely on the reactions brand activism is able to elicit in consumers. We are used to think of companies as needing to adopt sustainable policies and practices and to engage in meaningful pro-social actions, neglecting their own power to influence and guide consumer choices and behaviours. To date, most of the prior research has focused the attention on how enterprises are converting their practices and how brands are engaging in meaningful pro-social

actions to address consumers' demand for leading sustainable companies. Instead, few studies have shifted the attention to the substantial role that brands can play in influencing consumers' behaviours. Specifically, still not much is known about how brands can structure their communication strategies to spur little actions and generate positive change to protect the planet. Indeed, like companies convert their practices and switch their brand conversation toward sustainability in order to tackle consumers' eco-anxiety and meet their expectations, so consumers can be sensitized and nudged by brands that, for their part, endorses pro-environmental actions and sustainable behaviours. Brands themselves may be the drivers of change, raise awareness and knowledge on ecological issues, providing information and evidence, inspiring audiences to join the cause, to take a stance or to adopt new sustainable habits.

The role brands can play in tackling environmental and climate crisis has been mostly analysed with explicit reference to its objective results (e.g., a lower carbon footprint, the use of alternative recyclable packaging instead of plastics, etc.), its political influence and its capacity to rally global activists around the same fight. However, there's still the need to closely explore their social communication efforts, to gain a deeper understanding on how brands' ecological discourses raise consumers' mindfulness about the urge to save the planet, inspire action and prompt small changes to form new habits.

The aim of this study is, indeed, to explore and learn more about the social communication strategies activist brands use to sensitize consumers on environmental issues and engage them in sustainable behaviours.

3. 'Take away your take away': McDonald's Norway anti-littering campaign

3.1 Research question

In latest years, environmental discourses have been continually renegotiated by different social actors, not the least brands. This evidence corroborates the idea that there's an indisputable link between marketing and sustainability and that the line between brand-marketing strategies and the protection of nature is continually blurred (Peverini, 2013).

According to the *cultural branding perspective*, culture and consumption operate as systems and cultural meaning is integrated into the lives of consumers through consumption. Brands are subject to social and cultural changes, and they're pressured by consumers to change the way they behave. Yet, brands, in turn, are "cultural artifacts", storytellers endowed with cultural meaning that play an

active role in consumer culture and contribute to the complex network of cultural meanings used in consumers' collective identity projects (Heding et al., 2009). Hence, this meaningful social and cultural role naturally makes brands potential game-changers in sustainability persuasion. So far brands have already proved themselves much more effective than public information campaigns in persuading and nudging people toward "greener" behaviours.

Progressive brands have successfully built sustainable lifestyles and pushed consumers' environmental behaviours. As a rule of thumb, the ingredients for effective behaviour communications include clear directives on the desired behaviours, seasoned with mixed social, visual and emotive nudges (Shea, 2012). Most used nudging strategies consist of making the sustainable choice being the default option, making the pro-environmental option easy to adopt or leveraging peer influence, for instance by using descriptive norms (e.g., telling people how others have behaved in the same circumstances).Young people seem to be wide aware of the need to be educated for responsible consumption and eco-conscious behaviours from an early age. Moreover, they recognize in responsible management and educational marketing activities the greatest potential for raising awareness, promoting a responsible lifestyle and reducing environmental damage.

The growing interest of brands in changing consumer behaviours is one of the most interesting sustainable developments of latest years; yet, brands' nudging potential and the way they can built their brand discourses in order to be effective need to be explored further.

The aim of this dissertation is indeed to investigate them by answering to the following research question:

How can brands leverage their influential power to boost consumers' mindfulness about environmental crisis, inspire them and nudge them toward sustainable behaviours? More specifically, how do brands create environmental discourses into their ecological communication campaigns to steer consumers' pro-environmental behaviours and spark positive changes in consumers' lifestyle?

Far from providing an exhaustive answer or a univocal strategy to answer these questions, this study is the result of an attempt to demonstrate one of the strategies brands can pursue (and often already adopt) to nudge positive changes, starting from the analysis of "Take away your take away", the recent integrated advertising campaign launched by McDonald's Norway.

The dissertation will focus on the semiotic approach to cultural branding which, indeed, assumes that brands enter consumer culture to produce discourses that reflect and, in turn, produce culture (Oswald, 2015). Symbolic consumption is based on the interplay between psychological, material and

conventional dimensions of meaning production and entails a "two-way exchange" between culture and consumer behaviour (Oswald, 2015). The methodology here adopted is the Consumer Brandscape Model, which puts the brand itself (instead of culture) at the centre of the cultural brand strategy and illustrates the intersecting meanings and codes that shape consumers' perception of a brand (Oswald, 2012). This model seems to be the most suitable approach, in light of what is the aim of the research, namely, to closely analyse how McDonald's tried to enter consumer culture and forge new habits, by inspiring pro-environmental changes through its communication campaign.

This methodology involves many steps: it starts with the *Brand Audit*, which entails the collection and analysis of the brand's historical advertisements and communications in order to retrace and define the brand heritage and the set of meanings and cultural values attached to the brand (*diachronic analysis)*; besides, the audit involves even the analysis of the competitive environment (*synchronic analysis).* The research process will lead to the identification of major cultural codes structuring the category, in what Oswald (2012) defined a *culture sweep*. Once the data collection ends, the analysis will focus on decoding the data, detecting the emotional territories (and their binary dimensions) that structure the product (or service) category through the analysis of semiotic signs and cues from the texts analysed. The research will drive us to identify the major cultural tensions, allowing to position McDonald's according to the level of closeness and conformity of the brand to the overarching paradigms structuring the category. The final aim of this semiotic research is to identify the brand equities and the way they connect with contemporary culture in the anti-littering communication campaign launched by McDonald's Norway in spring 2022.

3.2 Research design: the brand audit of McDonald's

Before starting the semiotic analysis of McDonald's historical advertisings, we will briefly retrace the history the company, the business model and the marketing strategy behind its success and the birth of its iconic logo. McDonald's is the largest fast-food restaurant chain in the world, serving over 69 million customers daily in over 100 countries with around 40,000 outlets (as of 2021). It was founded in 1940 by two brothers, Richard and Maurice McDonald, who opened their first McDonald's restaurant (a BBQ stall in California), and later decided to capitalize on the success of their idea and expand their business. They hired Ray Kroc as a franchise agent, who later bought out the rights of McDonald's and became the driver of McDonald's climb to success, built on a heavy-franchised business model. They literally gave birth to the "fast-food" concept revolutionizing the restaurant industry, inventing the "Speedee-Service-System" (modelled after Henry Ford's assembly

lines) to deliver an improved product at a faster pace. The mission of McDonald's has always been to deliver high-quality products in a fast and affordable way to "make delicious feel-good moments easy for everyone" (McDonald's Marketing Strategy: How McDonald's makes you love it!, n.d.), targeting different age groups and shaping its offering for all family members

The strengths behind its success are consistency in quality and taste of products (so that everyone knows what to expect when seeing the McDonald's logo), sticking at the core products and being proactive and sensitive to shifts in the consumers' demand. Indeed, in 2006 the company started adding nutritional information for each menu item (after the release of the documentary "Super Size Me") and even introduced healthier items in the menu. McDonald's has adopted a glocalization approach, shaping locally relevant experiences by incorporating localized ingredients and products, creating tailored menu to fit to local tastes and provide travellers with unique experiences.

Being committed to serve a very broad target, McDonald's makes large investments in marketing, using multiple channels like public relations, online ads, direct marketing, sponsorships. Furthermore, its marketing strategy includes strategic partnerships, like the historical partnership with Coca Cola; product placement in movies, production of documentaries about its production process and a movie about its founding history ("The Founder"); influencers' endorsement ("McInfluencers"), building collaborations with pop singers and celebrities to align with their fan base, keep relevant with the time and ride the wave of pop culture.

McDonald's is one of the most iconic brand and the ninth highest-value brand in the world. Let's think about the unmistakeable logo of the brand. McDonald's logo is a material semiotic dimension that stands for the brand and that its semiotic structure is based on the *syntagmatic* alignment of the famous golden arches, the brand name and the red background. Although the red colour may give way to a different background and the brand name may change according to the local language (indeed, these two variable signs make up the *paradigmatic* axis of the logo), the two long, curving golden arches M-like shaped are the unchanging element of the brand, which contributes to uniquely positioning the brand in the fast-food industry. Moreover, the logo design is everything but random, in fact it exploits colour psychology to grab our attention and stimulate our taste buds the bright red used for the background is eye-catching and it is traditionally associated to a sense of appetite and, more generally, a sense of arousal and energy; while yellow conveys optimism, happiness, playfulness and youth and, being the brightest colour in the daylight, it makes the logo visible and recognizable from long distances. Moreover, the two colours recall the sauces traditionally used on burgers and French fries, ketchup and mustard. Overall the logo still conveys a sense of quickness

and speed. The logo passed through many evolutions (that were less relevant in the last fifty years, compared to the first decades) to end with the most minimalist one that we all know today, featuring two simple golden arches which share a middle leg, without the shadow and with no text (The History Of The McDonald's Logo And The Company, n.d.). The right relevance must also be recognized to the famous jingle that has become an unequivocal and universally recognizable sign that stands for the brand.

Brand audit

The first stage of the research entails the analysis of McDonald's historical advertisings and communication campaigns adopting a diachronic perspective and later extends its scope to the analysis of competitive brands in the marketplace, (e.g., competing brands in the fast-food industry like Wendy's, Burger King and KFC). The purpose of the brand audit is to retrace brand equities, brand image and positioning strategy that McDonald's has built throughout its history and gather knowledge about the target market, through secondary research based on cultural texts and artifacts (e.g., books, movies, trends, cultural movements, rituals, media content, web material, etc.) to make inference about myths, values and traditions rooted in the popular culture. McDonald's' mission originally was to provide people with a gratifying experience enjoying a tasty meal in the easiest way, namely in a fast and affordable way. Yet, the brand is now on a mission to deliver a soothing eating experience and it's not just about the delicious taste of the food, yet about feel-good moment of enjoying it. Furthermore, McDonald's has a strong commitment to a set of *corporate values* which faithfully tries to support through its actions and promote through its marketing strategy: *inclusion, serve* (putting people first), *integrity*, *community* and *family*. Many advertising campaigns mentioned and described hereafter will serve as a proof of the way the brand has tried to position itself in the market, embodying one (or more altogether) of its core values.
First prints and ads were mainly focused on exalting the utilitarian benefits of choosing a meal from McDonald's and designed with a very simple layout. From the black and white prints featuring the menu, the address and a drawn illustration of the restaurant with the iconic golden arches, to the prints showcasing the product in the foreground, gradually integrating a single colour in the background and descriptive text randomly disposed on the page. In 1971 the brand launched the series of "You deserve a break" ads where the layout of the prints was improved, introducing full colour pictures always exhibiting food items in the forefront, but with a defined position of the logo (in the bottom right corner), a clearer disposition of text and a more engaging approach, appealing directly to the

audience so as to make the ad somehow "personal". Moreover, the featuring of people in the print "humanized" the ads, making them even closer to the audience. "You deserve a break today" was one of the most successful McDonald's campaigns with a remarkable slogan; it started with ground-breaking changes in the visual composition of the prints, elevating prototypical consumers as main characters of the picture. Branded food items are always in the foreground but included in a context in such a way not to be as prominent as they used to be and in which they're represented as the "special treat", the "feel-good moment" and ultimate pleasure people deserve to enjoy. Main themes of the campaign were joyful moments of togetherness, good food, fun and cheerfulness, signing a shift in the focus of the brand, from delivering good food at a very fast pace, to providing a pleasant moment of break, relax and social interactions. Furthermore, the campaign even signed the moment the brand finally started targeting black customers, initiating a series of "Afro-centric" advertisements featuring black families or friends naturally enjoying their meal together, living a normal harmonious life. Indeed, in the '70s racial tensions were very high and black citizens experienced high frustration as their expectations of more favourable economic conditions after the Voting Rights Act (which finally allowed them, in 1965, to exercise the right to vote) were unfulfilled. Thus, with these "Afro-centric" ads, McDonald's endorsed a mission, to take a stance against black segregations and racial discriminations and publicly support African Americans' fight for equality, and convey, through their imagery, a message of inclusion and harmonious community. Very similarly to its historical partner Coca Cola, McDonald's developed a multicultural brand strategy, taking care to get close to consumers' needs and anxieties, in turn becoming a vessel of cultural meaning and identity value. In this regard, McDonald's can be considered an iconic brand, able to tackle social tensions by providing cultural myths to address those struggles in a symbolic realm (Holt, 2004; Oswald, 2015). Furthermore, there's no doubt that McDonald's is a real American icon, that symbolizes the Western (in particular, the American) culture around the world. Later on, the '80s were the years of the campaign "Nobody can do it like McDonald's can" with the launch of a colourful lively spot starring lots of different characters that share the unique tasting experience that only a delicious meal at McDonald's can give, in the attempt to communicate a sense of union and similarity, even strengthened by the multicultural reality of its multi-ethnic target.

In 2003 McDonald's ran its most iconic campaign "I'm lovin'it", that would have had unexpected and remarkable impact on the audience, launching the longest-running slogan in the brand history. The idea behind the slogan of the campaign was pretty straightforward: to promote McDonald's as one of the simplest pleasures of daily life. It's exactly the way it's expressed, in a short, natural,

spontaneous expression that underlines the simplicity of the observation. The slogan was complemented by the jingle "ba da ba ba ba", that was chosen for being simple and easy to remember. "I'm lovin'it" was not an ordinary jingle. It was originally sung by Justin Timberlake and it was the result of a sort of "reverse engineering" marketing strategy, which aimed to boost the credibility of the brand message by putting it into a pop culture form that would not tie back to the brand, furthermore performed by an iconic artist. Not surprisingly, the jingle became iconic and marked the rise of the brand as manifesto of the American popular culture of 2000s. It became a core distinctive element of McDonald's identity, a remarkable sign that unambiguously traces back to the brand (Hogan, 2016). McDonald's brand communication strategy is so rooted in popular culture that it has inevitably evolved with it through time, being careful to shifting needs and rituals of its multiple targets, differentiating its discourse to be close to each of them (like emerged in some recent ads such as "Hands full" or "Grown up"). McDonald's campaigns sometimes involved interaction with customers in the stores to celebrate a particular event or day, like for the campaign held in Peru on Children's Day or in the campaign "Pay with Lovin'". To prove how much the brand is attentive to rituals and trends of modern consumers, McDonald's leveraged its own renown among younger generations to realize an appealing and catchy social media advertisement "Search It" starring young comedian Mindy Kaling. The ad directly spoke to the viewers, challenging the "switched-on generation" to search on Google for "that place where Coke tastes so good", like if it was a personal, yet not unobtrusive call. What makes the ad intriguing and definitely a masterstroke is that the brand McDonald's is never mentioned, nor its logo appears on the screen; yet, the other two popular brands mentioned (Coke and Google) are used as "bridge" to finally lead viewers to the brand. In 2004 the "Super Size Me" documentary was released casting a shadow over the brand, which was blamed among the worst causes of childhood obesity. Together with larger demand for healthy food and greater transparency on the origin of raw materials and on production processes, McDonald's started undertook a rebranding process, in order to reposition itself as a transparent and loyal brand in the mind of consumers. From 2006, indeed, it started including nutritional information over its packaging and gradually added many new healthy items (like salads, wraps, coffee, etc.) to its menu and, in late 2018, the company announced to have removed any artificial preservatives and flavours, neither including added colours from artificial sources anymore in many of its burgers (The Next Step on Our Food Journey: The Classic Seven Burgers, 2018). One more disruptive communication effort was "Ask McDonald's", not a common campaign. It was released in Canada in 2015, when the brand decided "to stop talking and start listening". The company asked people to share their questions or

doubts concerning McDonald's. The company collected and answered to almost twenty thousand questions, shared some of the questions through print advertisements and set up a Youtube channel to showcase answers and explanations behind the most frequently asked questions, and the campaign went viral. In an age where authenticity is king, McDonald's acknowledged the relevance of showing itself transparent about its business not just pretending to be authentic in its claims or statements, yet, providing customers with accurate explanations.

There is more than one product and service category McDonald's could fall into, being it the largest fast-food chain in the world with a diversified food and beverage items in its offering; however, the current study will consider, from a synchronic perspective, how the brand is positioned within the food service industry compared to similar players in the marketplace. Two main categories traditionally dominate the food-service industry, fine dining restaurants and fast-food restaurants (broadly referred to as QSR, Quick-Service Restaurants); yet, lately one more category has gradually squeezed in between them, the fast-casual restaurants category, that has positioned itself literally as a middle-way category. Fast-food and fast-casual restaurants both measure to ensure the speed of service, yet they operate according to different business models. The main differences between them involve the quality of the food, the preparation process, the choice of ingredients, the customizability of meals and the final price. McDonald's and most of its competitors fall into the fast-food category, whose structure of meanings and core dimensions will be identified and explored in the dissertation, starting from advertising, texts and artifacts observed and collected. McDonald's compete with several brands in the same category, such as Burger King, Subway, Wendy's, Taco Bell and KFC (part of YUM brands), Domino's, Starbucks and Dunkin Donut's, among the most popular.

The fast-food market was traditionally born around hamburger-focused menus and it rapidly expanded to brands serving alternative affordable meals at a fast pace (e.g., sandwiches, tacos, pizza, snacks, etc.). Hence, we can easily distinguish two major sub-categories within the industry, the *traditional fast-food restaurants* (hamburger-focuse) and *alternative fast-food restaurants* (including all the other chains). Many times, these subcategories overlap along their communication strategy (especially for the channels selected and the tone of voice), their symbolic associations and the cultural codes structuring the category (e.g., monochronic time culture, convenience, taste, etc.).

The fast-food service industry was born as a natural business response to the on-the-go kind of lifestyle established in America during the 1950s, which literally became part of the "American Dream". Indeed, the birth of this food service category was intended to cope with the increasing

monochronic culture spreading in American society, which elicited the strive for ultimate productivity cutting off time for any alternative living experiences or activities (like sociality and relationships, sport, fun), shaping the fast-paced society we all know today. However, the culture of "fast-food" successfully evolved even in European countries, where eating habits are very different and *polychronic culture* dominates, relationships are valued more than productivity and punctuality, and people experience eating as a ritual that takes its own time, often as a social moment.

Many common traits that unite almost all fast-food restaurants are the business model (usually franchising), the extensive geographical presence and international spread of their business, strategic location of their physical stores (aligned with their own targets) and similar competitive strategies, which usually focus on product convenience, bundle offers, frequent promotions and savings. This explains why, even today, many print and digital ads are product-centred, and their focus is on conveying utilitarian benefits (e.g., convenience, variety)

Traditional fast-food category

Almost all brands from hamburger fast-food industry adopt a multichannel communication strategy with tv spots, social media and popular brand ambassadors being the most chosen touchpoints to hit their targets. McDonald's focused on tv commercials, OOH, Facebook and Instagram as channels to hit youngests using influencer marketing, videos and social contests to engage them and elicit user-generated contents. **Burger King**, the greatest McDonald's direct competitor, adopts a quirky omnichannel marketing strategy, runs out-of-the-box campaigns sharing an ironic and provocative vein on many channels indulging in ironic real-time marketing posts on social media (especially Instagram) to keep up with times, engage and entertain social audience. **Wendy's,** the largest fast-food chain after McDonald's and Burger King, has always prided itself for being different from competitors, from its products to its daring comparative advertising strategy on social media. Wendy's came to play an entertaining role on Twitter, taking care of the strength of its messages that has often become viral, especially when used to troll competitors and roast enemies adopting an incredibly provocative and sharp tone of voice. Both McDonald's and Burger King stress the deliciousness and taste of their product, while Wendy's highlight the superior quality of its burgers. McDonald's is more anchored to tradition and focused on delivering experimental versions of its historical items or on differentiating its menu through a gourmet line of hamburgers (like "My Selection", based on local ingredients and inspired to local recipes). Burger King instead has been more innovative and has positioned itself in the marketplace as more genuine, sustainable and vegan-

friendly, targeting “eco-conscious” and vegetarian customers through the introduction of plant-based items. An ironic, youthful and sometimes mocking language is typical of these brands' posts on social media, especially since they are aimed at a younger target audience. Nevertheless, these channels are even used to address serious themes: for instance, in 2020 Burger King announced to have removed any artificial preservatives, colours or flavours from its ingredients and launched a bold disruptive campaign #NoArtificialPreservatives, including the impressive spot “The Mouldy Whopper” (that showed the bun covering itself with mould, due to the absence of any artificial additives). These brands even used their presence on social media channels to publicly take a stance on relevant social issues, like racism or violence against women, like Burger King does. McDonald’s, for its part, has been raising its voice on racial issues since ever, and still continues to be an advocate for equality, inclusion (which is even one of its core values) and multiculturality. In 2020, McDonald’s Italia chose as brand ambassador Ghali, Tunisian origin, one of the most famous Italian rappers on today's music scene, who recounts sensitive issues such as racism, drugs and suburban degradation in his songs. Moreover, McDonald’s exploited social media channels to reassert its open endorsement of the fight against racial injustice waged by Martin Luther King and to share powerful messages to support the Black Lives Matter movement. **KFC** (Kentucky Fried Chicken) is another direct competitor of McDonald’s, popular for its fried chicken burger. Following the “trend”, the brand enhances, through its messages on various channels (especially Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Youtube), the flavour and irresistibility of its products, so tasty to be “finger lickin’ good” and it recently launched it popular chicken nuggets in their plant-based version. To hit its younger target the brand engages in amusing interactions on social media, like reposting contents and comments generated by real customers. KFC is more in line with a polychronic culture of time, it gives relevance to social gatherings, positive feelings, warmth and sharing. and also cares about delivering a message of union, social gatherings, positive feelings and sharing. Through its spots, indeed, KFC targets families to promote its eating experience as a precious moment of fun and love, to share with family or friends, and to make good memories with the loved ones.

Alternative fast-food categories

This broad alternative category embeds all fast-food service restaurants and chains whose core offer is not centred around burger-based menus, and it includes many indirect competitors of McDonald’s within the pizza and sandwich restaurant categories (e.g., Domino’s, Subway), as well as snack-food restaurants (e.g., Starbucks, Dunkin’ Donuts). **Domino’s Pizza** is the brand dominating the pizza restaurant category with a broad offer and a huge variety of possible toppings and condiments to fit

all tastes. The brand is very well renowned, and everyone knows and recognizes its logo almost everywhere. Its advertising strategy is based on direct marketing via website, app or SMS, and it includes even social media channels and humorous slapstick spots. It's advertisings highlight the "greatness" of Domino's resulting in material benefits: affordability, service efficiency (quick delivery-service), variety to suit all tastes. Hence, the eating experience provided by Domino's is mostly expressed in terms of ease, fun and taste. **Subway** is the healthiest brand among the ones here analysed, with a broad diversified offering (including a wide range of sandwich options, breads, desserts, snacks and beverages too). The brand has positioned itself as the healthy fast-food option for calorie conscious people and used its communication strategy to stress the higher quality and freshness of its products, based on natural ingredients, freshly prepared and customizable to fit to different taste and needs. The brand has gained the status of premium brand (within the category) and, in turn, the right to apply higher price for delivering higher quality. **Taco Bell** is the most famous Mexican fast-food chain in America, selling a variety of local dishes at a fast-pace and very low price. Taco Bell's communication strategy is centred around promotions and special offers, positioning the brand as price competitive and value for money. Taco Bell has advanced the convenience discourse since ever, and it has always strived to differentiate itself from traditional fast-food and position itself as the most convenient yet tasty alternative for both young people and families. The company strategically position its stores to target youngests, office-goers and travellers, perfectly aligning with the modern on-the-go American lifestyle. **Starbucks** is the leading coffee-chain in the world and a top-of-mind brand. Authenticity and quality have been associated to the brand since the beginnings but, above anything, Starbucks is on a mission to deliver the best customer service, making people feel welcomed and comfortable, like "being home away from home". Starbucks is able to convey warmth even through its social media channels, where it shares pictures and videos of testimonials or posts depicting people's pieces of everyday life while enjoying something from Starbucks. This approach humanizes the brand and engages the audience, building a human-to-human connection. Starbucks has built its brand around ethics and set a focus on customer experience, inclusion and sustainability; also, it has positioned itself as a brand that care about people and planet and is involved in programs to help and train coffee farmers, and it invests in new technological solutions to reduce its impact on the environment. The last brand here considered is **Dunkin' Donuts**, which has set itself as the preferred American brand for all-day coffee and baked goods. The main brand target indeed is the urban crowd reached through a multichannel marketing strategy. Its visual brand image is built upon the brightly coloured packaging and logo and its content strategy is based on compelling creative

content that makes the brand remarkable and elicits engagement, especially among kids and teenagers. The brand also relies on influencer marketing, sponsors some sport teams and events and mostly exploits social media channels like Tik Tok, Twitter and Instagram. Dunkin' Donuts is deeply rooted in the American culture to the point of becoming a global symbol of its popular culture and urban lifestyle.

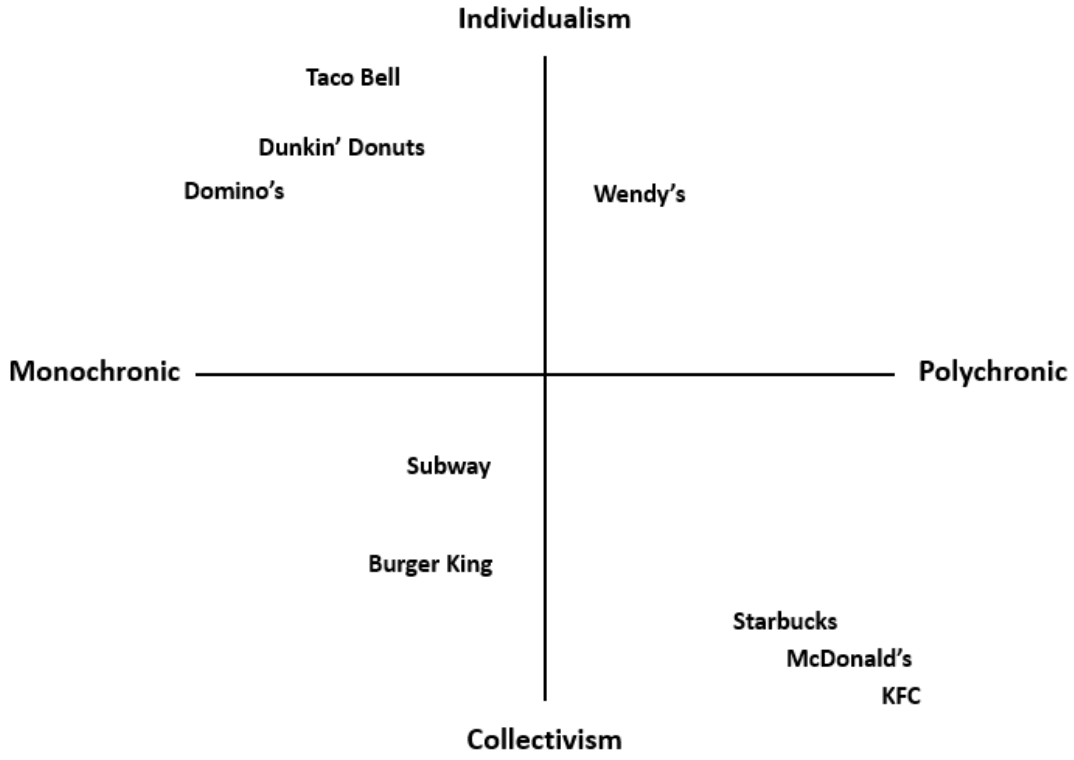
The cultural dimensions of the fast-food category

The brand audit of McDonald's and its competitive environment has been conducted with the collection and analysis of relevant marketing communications, print and social advertisings, tv spots and commercials, packaging, logos and taglines of some of the most well-known brands in the broad fast-food service category. Fast-casual restaurants and fine-dining restaurants were mentioned but not included in the competitive analysis. Marketing collaterals collected helped identifying the emotional territories symbolically associated with the brands, expressed in the form of product attributes, experiential qualities, messages and concepts. In many cases the semiotic cues identified resulted in similar symbolic associations overlapping among the brands. As a first result, visual communication is mostly based on luring images depicting tasty food to spur appetite and vibrant colours on ads, logos or packaging to boost impulse buying, often complemented with taglines to stress the "deliciousness" or announcing special offers, bundle prices or new items included in the menus. However, lately many brands have evolved their brand discourses to address deeper latent consumer needs, like the need for affiliation and belonging. For instance, although speed of service is a basic assumption and a distinct element of fast-food restaurants, quick delivery is no more as relevant as it was before neither in their communications. Instead, it's interesting to note how its messages are in line with the changes that American society has undergone over the years, and especially with evolving cultural anxieties and needs. McDonald's communication used to be simple and direct and aimed at satisfying a practical need; but the values conveyed by the brand have dramatically changed and the idea of a quick meal supposed to "fill the belly" and satisfy the appetite has been replaced by the idea of a meal at McDonald's as a well-deserved break, to relax and chill with family, children and friends. The monochronic society brought out the need for a fast delivery but nowadays not many brands stress speed as their core benefit. Edward T. Hall considered attitude toward time as one of the core dimensions of culture and defined it through the binary opposition monochronic/polychronic attitude: the first one considers time as a strict means of order that sets the pace for everyday activities; instead, for a polychronic society people and relationships matter more

than time. Another recurrent dimension emerging from the audit includes the quality and genuineness of the food and the freshness of its preparation process. Some brands, like Subway, Wendy's and Starbucks, strive to position themselves based upon high-quality food; on the other hand, brands like Taco Bell and Domino's are widely concerned about stressing the convenience of their products with special promotions and super cheap bundle offers. This evidence brings out the quality/convenience cultural tension structuring the cultural category of brand benefits. One more relevant cultural binary, an individualistic/collectivist culture. Individualism (vs collectivism) is one of the value dimensions Hofstede identified to define the differences between cultures from different nations, it entails self-realization, self-gratification and it involves associations like the desire for taste, the need for a quick food service and value-for-money; it is somehow connected to the selfish fulfilment of personal utilitarian needs. Instead, collectivism refers to symbolic associations that involve the social dimension of the eating experience, associations like feel-good moments, positive memories, social gatherings with family or friends, the act of sharing (stressed in KFC commercials, for instance), up to inclusion and community (like in McDonald's ads). The concept of collectivism may be broadly conceived and extended to even embed care for health and sustainability, that should be seen as ways to act for the common good and care about society as a whole; even transparency and social activism (that may be considered a form of social commitment). Along the quality/convenience tension
the fast-food category has always epitomized the conflict between pleasure (or taste) and health, contributing to raise the paradigmatic relationship between healthy food and tasty food, based on the idea that organic, freshly prepared food couldn't be pleasant and fulfilling like those delicious burgers or chicken nuggets.

The cultural space cultural space of McDonald's has been identified by positioning the brand on a double vector grid defined by the two binary oppositions monochronic/polychronic culture and individualism/collectivism. The position of each brand is defined by its level of relative conformity to one of the two dimensions of each cultural binary pair, and it represents how each brand balances these cultural tensions. McDonald's is positioned, together with Starbucks and KFC, in the lower-right collectivism/polychronic quadrant. KFC has positioned itself as a brand that cares to deliver good moments and gives relevance to sociality and health as well. This explains its high ranking for both the dimensions and its position at the extreme corner of the quadrant. McDonald's has a very close cultural position, being committed to messages of community, family and transparency and promoting eating as a social experience, a moment of break and relax. Furthermore, the sense of community conveyed by the brand is even manifest in its pro-environmental activities, where it tries

to engage employees, locals and volunteers to join forces and clean up the cityscape. Finally, even Starbucks is very close to both the previous brands; its mission to care about customers and welcome them in a warm familiar environment, together with its commitment to several social issues, makes it a collectivist brand mostly in tune with a polychronic culture.



The cultural dimensions of the fast-food category.

The culture sweep

The food-service industry has faced several challenges in the last years, being one of the hardest hits in the economy by the Covid-19. This event resulted in dramatic changes in the food service industry and in food habits, some of which have evolved after the emergency introducing new enduring trends and "procedures" in the category. Among the codes dominating the category there's *"untact" (non-contact) food purchasing*, established during the pandemic to cope with the threat of contagion. Covid-19 has definitely enhanced and consolidated the trend of food-delivery, so that nowadays almost each store provides a delivery service. The post-pandemic phase has led to the greater polarization between two dominant codes, '*Social Refuelling'* (faster dining experience, like fast-food

service) and *in-person premium dining experiences*. One more dominant code in the category is the *global cuisine* or "exotic cuisine". The spread of ethnic food cultures within western globalized societies is manifest and has had its strongest expression in the "All you can eat" formula, which has found resounding success. The reason behind its success is that it tackles consumers' tension between feeding their hunger and nurturing their ego and their "social self" through cheap yet "sophisticated" experiences to be shared with their social audience.

Along the *dominant* codes, there many *emerging* codes as well in the food-service category. *Food-tech* is one of them, it refers to the use of technology or AI applications like order and pay apps, QR codes, automated kiosks and voice-command features, as well as robotics. One more emerging trend is the spread of alternative restaurant formats entirely dedicated to the take-away service, namely *cloud kitchens, dark kitchens and ghost kitchens*. Another peculiar trend gained momentum during the Covid-19 pandemic, restaurant "*meal-kits*" or "*make-away*" , a trend that still continues to grow today, since consumers are always looking for prepared products that ensure higher-level dishes than those they would prepare by themselves. Moreover, *plant-based food* is set to be one of the most relevant (and manifest) emerging codes both in the food and beverage and in the food-service categories. This emerging trend is destined to be more than just a passing fad, rather to become soon a full-blown dominant code. Indeed, the food-service industry has become increasingly sensitive to this shift in consumer demand, to the point where vegan or organic options are now present in almost every offering, even in kids' menus. Finally, one more emerging trend which will hopefully translate into permanent standard practices within the food-service category is *sustainability*.

3.3 "Take away your take away": a semiotic analysis of McDonald's anti-littering campaign

McDonald's is a world-renowned brand, but it still far from being a perfect activist brand. Throughout its history, the company has made mistakes and fallen into the pitfall of greenwashing, probably more than once. However, McDonald's is seriously committed to reduce its impact on the environment and achieve a circular economy; indeed, the company acknowledges the role played as the cause of the problem and it is even more conscious about the responsibility it has to help keep communities to clean and preserve the planet for future generations. Furthermore, the brand's commitment to the mission of a cleaner cityscape and a cleaner planet in general is spread and involves many countries, Italy as well. During the last years, McDonald's local marketing strategies have raised the attention on pollution and littering starting by holding itself among the biggest responsible for littering, especially in the cityscapes and the areas near their stores. Indeed, in different European countries

the brand has launched pro-social advertising campaigns to sensitize the public around environmental issues like littering, waste and climate crisis, and to spur them to action. Among them, UK, Germany and Belgium hosted some social advertising campaign to sensitize consumers on the topic and engage them to act. The Norwegian campaign object of analysis in this dissertation fits perfectly into this awareness-raising communication strategy, as well.

In spring 2022, McDonald's Norway launched an integrated communication campaign against littering to take a stance against rubbish dirtying up Norwegian cities. Data showed that takeaway packaging was the third largest source of littering in cities and, since McDonald's is the source of the largest and most recognizable amount of trash in the cityscape, the company held itself accountable for the issue and couldn't help taking the ownership of addressing the littering problem. To cope with the littering problem, the brand tried to exploit its size and authority, inviting consumers to join the cause and help keeping cities clean. The brand launched a social communication campaign, that is a media practice that uses classical (or even unconventional) formats of commercial advertising to raise awareness on specific social issues (littering, in this case), with the aim to encourage (or deter) associated attitudes or behaviours. For its social campaign, McDonald's partnered with three agencies, NORD DDB, WergelandApenes and OMD, to create a "toolbox of solutions", a brilliant integrated cross-media campaign designed to reach as many customers as possible, involving print advertisings, social media posts, social guerrilla marketing (through remarkable unconventional Out-Of-Home installations) and a commercial shown on TV and online. The slogan of the campaign "Take away your take away" was rather eloquent and simple, and made it clear the ultimate goal of the campaign, to invite customers to help the brand solving the problem, taking small actions to keep the cityscape clean. Also, the company has started working on long-term solutions opening a dialogue with politicians, stakeholders and competitors around the topic; also, it has joined a pilot project with Keep Norway Clean in order to investigate the causes of the phenomenon and discover how to prevent unconscious littering, looking out for achieving enduring change. Moreover, thousands of employees launched collective initiatives to clean the streets and spread the idea. Overall, the campaign was a success reaching up to twenty-three million impressions, it created incredible engagement and started a national dialogue about the problem of trash in the cityscape. Furthermore, the campaign was mentioned and described in more than eleven thousand local and international articles and had two nominations for Cannes Lions 2021.

Print advertisings are solely made by photographs depicting littering captured around the streets of Oslo by the art photographer Jói Kjartans. The background of each photo is mostly a piece of the ground floor and the absolute star of the advertising is the iconic McDonald's packaging. There seems to be no retouching or aesthetic refinement in the images, they are just simple photographs that represent reality in a raw and direct way. The choice was totally coherent with the decision of McDonald's to drive an honest and bold campaign showing the ugliest side of the brand (e.g., McDonald's 'iconic trash') and firmly admitting its contribution to the issue. The photos were used for print, social media, OOH displays and McDonald's trays within different contexts.

Prints and posters were matched by descriptive sentences to illustrate the problem and invite customers to join the company in the fight against littering. All images follow the same compositional scheme. The campaign slogan 'Take away your take away', in the same golden tone as the iconic "M", dominates the left side of the image. On the opposite side, is the image of the rubbish (the white paper cup, the classic red container for fries, the brown paper bag, etc.), shown in its realistic appearance. The text is inserted in small, white characters in the side of the image, usually at the bottom left, below the slogan. Instead, the McDonald's logo appears at the bottom left. The colour and size of the characters do not contribute to highlighting the text. In the image absolute centrality is given to the rubbish lying on the streets, the undisputed star of the ad accentuating the bleak truth that the brand has boldly decided to show in the foreground. The photos used for social media posts, on the other hand, were stark, devoid of logos, slogans and phrases, but accompanied by a caption and the hashtag #McTrash.

The social campaign was also run through simple, yet brilliant and unconventional OOH installations. The agency installed adshels in strategic points of the city, replicating the same bleak photos used for prints and social media. But two more elements contributed to make the outdoor applications more than simple posters, and to make them express the "nudging potential" of the campaign at its maximum: trash cans were installed next to the posters and the golden arches of the logo were physically installed and positioned in such a way to point right inside the bin. . In the installation, the brand logo visually (and physically) drives the gaze of consumers from the problem (e.g., littering, represented in the image of the rubbish abandoned on the street) to the solution (that is, disposing of trash in the correct way, materially represented by the trash can as a signifier). The lower leg of the M-shaped logo points downwards toward the opening of the bin. This original OOH advertising falls into the category of social guerrilla marketing, a radically alternative marketing tactic that frees the

text from traditional formats and genres and breaks the limits reserved for the conventional spaces of advertising discourse. The tactic implies rethinking the overall objectives and modalities of persuasion, as well as the relationships between the sender (the brand) and the receivers (viewers and bystanders). The technique used in this advertising is ambient, a tactical communication action that declines the discourse of social advertising outside the canonical media places, within pre-existing spaces that fulfil specific functions of use in everyday life (bus shelters, in this case). The tactic relies on a sort of "semiotic parasitism", that is the superimposition of texts on the urban territory. The approach used in this case is based on the rhetoric of visible: this tactic takes on the actantial dimension of spaces and objects; these elements, that have helper or opponent functions in the realization of simple actions in citizens' everyday life (indeed, trash cans in this case), here become supports to stage a new visual discourse, reinventing a preexistent discourse regarding a space and the typical practices for which it is used (Peverini, 2014). Moreover, the superimposition of texts in the urban territory here is even enhanced and corroborated by the prominence of the logo which immediately imposes itself on the viewer, bursting out of the two-dimensional scale of the poster to come out and blend in with objects of the urban environment, joining them in playing the actantial role of the helper too.

The "advertising toolbox" for the campaign was finally complemented by a commercial shown both on TV and online. The video has a duration of 47 seconds and is shot without voices in the background. It depicts the dance of the iconic brown McDonald's bag that floats and twirls along with dry autumn leaves, with sinuous, circular and irregular movements and it purposely evokes the iconic scene of the fluttering white plastic bag from the acclaimed movie "American beauty". As in that scene, in the commercial the bag is the absolute protagonist of the scene and the viewer's attention is totally directed towards it until the moment when, in the last seconds of the spot, a human figure bursts into the frame. It is the figure of a boy who, walking on the sidewalk where this strange dance is taking place, comes across the brown bag, bends down to pick it up and places it in the bin beside the road. The spot has been analysed following the methodology of the decomposition by sequences of the spot, a process that involves the use of a technical decomposition grid that will allow to identify the relevant elements and their arrangement within the text. the spot has been decomposed into six narrative sequences. The reason behind the choice of focusing on narrative sequences instead of frames is that the frame is rather constant for the entire duration of the spot, with no significant variations, and the angle of shooting too. The spot closely follows the "story" of this fluttering bag.

The scene is animated only by the dynamism of this dance and by the rustling of the leaves in the wind, which is the leitmotif of all the commercial, resounding all the time in the background, as if to keep a constant reference to the element nature. The dance is interrupted by the figure of a boy, who breaks into the scene naturally and, in a few seconds, becomes the protagonist of the scene performing the gesture that represents the "desired behaviour", the "right action" the entire campaign revolves around and towards which it intends to nudge the viewers. As regards the combination of sounds and images in the commercial, two types of sounds are easily detected: an in-sound (or "synchronous sound", namely a sound whose source is visible in the frame) that is, in our case, the sound of the rustling of the leaves and the paper bag in the wind; and an off-sound (whose source is not visible and cannot be located within the narrative frame) which is, in this case, the sweet and melancholic symphony that envelops the viewer throughout the commercial. The in-sound is present and manifest from the beginning till the end of the commercial, and it keeps clearly audible throughout, despite the off-sound variations. The rustling of leaves and paper in the wind somehow represents the element of contact with nature, it establishes a permanent bond with the environment, acting as a sort of reminder to the viewer that evokes and gives purpose to the action performed by the boy at the end of the commercial. Concerning the visual track, instead, the frame is rather stable and close-up, bringing the viewer's gaze fixed on the object of the whole campaign, the "iconic littering" produced by McDonald's' packaging. The frame makes small lateral and upward movements to follow the fluctuations of the bag, like a spectator following a moving object with his gaze. Finally, in the last seconds of the commercial, the frame finally stops, straight in front of the bin which, in the whole campaign, has come to symbolically represents the solution to the problem.

To deepen the semiotic analysis of the commercial, the study relies on the narrative approach proposed by Greimas, according to which each kind of text can be conceived and analysed as a construction of narrative signification (Collantes & Oliva, 2015). The approach relies on the *actantial* model, an articulated narrative model that structures the relationships linking the different narrative roles, or actants (distinct from actors, the discursive characters at the surface of the story) and assumes that each narrative is based on a set of universal, unchanging actantial positions (Sender, Object, Receiver, Helper, Subject and Opponent). In this commercial, the Object of the narrative is to act responsibly with rubbish, keep cities clean and avoid littering; consumers and citizens in general (including the viewer himself) are the Receivers and then turn into the Subjects called upon to pursue the object, and they are all symbolically embodied, in the spot, by the boy that collects the bag and throws it in the trash bin, With no doubt, the Sender is the brand itself, whose mission is to engage

consumers in acting responsibly. Several factors concur to play the role of the Opponents in the spot. From a material perspective, the first Opponent is the brown paper bag and, in general, the rubbish left on the ground in the streets which prevents the city from staying clean; from an abstract and attitudinal perspective, instead, the Opponents are factors like indolence, unfair habits, together with conscious and (even more) unconscious littering. McDonald's also plays the role of the Helper that supports the cause both figuratively, through its awareness campaign, and practically, through its local clean up initiatives and its OOH installations. In this regard, we may extend the role of the Helper to the trash bin too; indeed, since conscious littering is commonplace in areas where there are no litter bins, their presence would likely encourage the right behaviour (like it happens in the spot). Directly related to the actantial model is the Greimasian *canonical narrative scheme,* that splits the narrative into four phases, logically ordered:

- The *Manipulation* phase is the stage in which the Sender entrusts to the Receiver the task, namely, to throw the trash in the bin and keep the cityscape clean. In the commercial, the first stage is focused in the first thirty seconds, , where the frame only shots the bag fluttering with the dry leaves and the Receiver (the boy) is probably already walking on the sidewalk watching the "strange dance".
- The second stage, *Competence*, is the phase when the Receiver/Subject gets hold of the means to accomplish the mission and assumes some "modalities". These are identified according to the modal verbs want, have to, know and can which refer respectively to the notions of desire, obligation, knowledge and possibility. The relationship between the Sender and the Subject can be conceptualized in terms of modalities; in the spot analysed, the Subject probably experiences both will and power (here intended as "the possibility to do something") to do "the right thing", e.g., to pick up the litter on the ground at his feet.
- The *Performance* stage represents the moment when the Subject takes action to complete the task and address its mission. Hence, in this case, it is the exact moment when the boy bends down, picks up the bag from the ground and throws it into the bin. In the spot, the second and the third stages occur in the same frame, a few seconds apart from each other; indeed, we can assume that, once he gets close to the litter, the boy feels he wants and is in the condition to perform the action.
- Finally, the *Sanction* phase is the assessment stage, when the Subject is valued positively or negatively by the Sender, according to his performance and the result obtained. The result of the assessment can be no other than positive: the subject has precisely fulfilled the mission to

which he was called. The evaluation is consistent with the brand's intention to provide viewers with a model for action, a positive example that is encouraging and narrows the gap between awareness and action. Furthermore, the brand's iconic jingle emerges at the very end as if to reassert and endorse the narrative's end point and ultimate goal, thus confirming the Sender's (e.g., the brand and society overall) positive sanction.

Finally, it is also worth to consider the valorisation of the object (product or service) in the commercial. Floch (1992) developed a sort of *taxonomy of advertising valorisation*, consisting of four main strategies, namely *practical* valorisation and (at the opposite) the *ludic-aesthetic* valorisation; the *critical* valorisation and the opposite *utopian* valorisation. Practical and critical valorisation are both based on utilitarian values, while ludic-aesthetic and utopian valorisation are both linked to existential values (Peverini, 2012). It can be reasonably assumed that the spot is based on the process of utopian valorisation, where the focus is shift from the Object to the Subject, namely the consumer (or the viewer too). Indeed, it is manifest that the spot doesn't focus on the empirical, practical benefits of the brand (practical valorisation), neither it highlights any particular tangible aspects of the brand with a critical lens (critical valorisation). Moreover, the focus of the story narrated is far from being ludic (ludic-aesthetic valorisation), yet the whole story tends towards the final moment, when the Subject, through its action (picking up the rubbish and throw it in the trash bin), makes it clear to the viewer what is the mission and final message the brand intends to communicate.

Take away your take away" achieved great success and media engagement, pursuing the goal to raise attention on an overlooked environmental issue. However, the campaign was created for a higher-end purpose, to engage people in taking action, stopping harmful behaviours by making little changes in their everyday life. The strategy underpinning the campaign seems to be constructed in such a way to build a path toward the desired "good action", like a guide conceived and designed to gradually drive and accompany consumers, step by step, from awareness and attention on the problem to taking individual actions and joining forces for collective actions. The campaign combined different advertisings through different channels and we can almost think of each advertising (prints, commercial and OOH) as pieces of a puzzle, designed to come together in a unified communication effort and a comprehensive process to sensitize and nudge people. The spot moved a step further than the ads; indeed, in that case the evidence of the issue (rubbish on the ground) was only the starting point of an evolving story, which ends with a moral and an explicit message for the viewer ("throw your rubbish in the bin"). The posters, complemented by the physical installations of the "golden M"

of McDonald's and the trash cans right next to it, could be considered the mean through which the effort to nudge the consumer towards the ideal and desired behaviour is tangibly realised. Furthermore, the use of social media and the website to spread the cleaning up initiatives involving McDonald's employees, volunteers and locals is an added value for the campaign, in an attempt to engage people to join environmental initiatives of the brand and its community.

Finally, "Take away your take away" campaign was semiotically analysed through the brand system, a powerful, clever path useful to understand how McDonald's tried to create and establish cultural and social connections between the brand, consumers and popular culture. The campaign was meant to hit youngests (through social media) but even a broader audience. The campaign leveraged cultural and media connections between consumers and the brand, creating pathways to link McDonald's equities (as being a brand that promotes integrity, a sense of community and togetherness, that values authenticity and actions more than words and encourages changes) to popular culture, consumers' trends and interests and media behaviours (like multiculturalism, values-driven consumption, sustainability, digital presence and media communities). Three core path of meaning associations emerged from the analysis, namely integrity, sense of community and activism that somehow creates a leitmotif, a fil rouge which links "Take away your take away" campaign and the culture system to McDonald's brand. Integrity is one of the founding values of the brand and also widely expected from loyal customers and young consumers, who require the brand to be authentic; in the campaign, this trait is reflected into the choice to use stark photos and the public admission of responsibility by the brand. Creating a sense of community is another core value for the company, which links to consumer need for sharing experiences, feeling connected and their need for a sense of belonging and identification with a group (social affiliation). These aspects have driven both the choice of digital channels (social media like Instagram) and the choice to exploit them to include calls to action, to share cleaning up initiatives held by the McDonald's team and local communities. The third connection path refers to activism, which is totally aligned with the brand mantra "actions are bigger than words" and is perfectly compliant with the structure and the final purpose of the campaign (nudging consumers, indeed). The path reflects the expectations modern conscious consumers have from brands. The campaign answers to the need of making concrete action in two ways, firstly through social guerrilla marketing (OOH) for practically guiding and nudging consumers to take action; then, by activating and spreading sustainable initiatives to boost collective actions too.

4. Conclusions

4.1 Results of the research

Besides the allegedly simplicity of the idea behind the campaign, the success of "Take away your take away" campaign relied on the deep understanding of the issue it strived to address, littering.

Unconscious littering occurs more frequently than we would expect, and it's likely that even us have been "victim" of this phenomenon at least once in our life. What is already known about the topic is that descriptive social norms affect (trigger or prevent) littering most of the time, regardless of one's higher (or lower) selfishness or care for the environment. Hence, littering is predictive of littering behaviours, while litter-free places are perceived as pristine environments that are worthy of protection and have to be preserved. This automatically leads us to two essential conclusions: 1) the presence of trash cans in a place helps preventing littering; 2) being a direct (or indirect) spectator of someone else's behaviour influences others' actions, potentially triggering a "domino effect". The latter concept is somewhat akin to the educational power that lies in providing an example. Thus, in "Take away your take away" campaign showing a boy in the act of throwing rubbish into the bin (in the spot) and placing trash cans next to the outdoor posters proved to be successful strategies to inspire viewers and spark the right behaviours. What differentiates the Norwegian campaign "Take away your take away" from conventional pro-environmental campaigns, is the attempt to guide and steer consumers' action taking a step further than just raising awareness, persuading and moving consumers emotionally, accompanying them towards the right actions, betting on the effect that the action itself could generate in turning on consumers' awareness and engagement.

The goal of McDonald's was rather ambitious, since it went beyond spurring immediate actions in front of the ad, to rather achieve long-term results fostering permanent changes in consumer behaviour. Indeed, most unsustainable actions and choices are made out of habits.

The use of real images in "Take away your take away" campaign locates the littering issue in a well-defined moment in history or a specific place and connects it to a particular issue. From a communication perspective, one of the unconventional aspects is the use of bleak images that tarnish the brand, showing its worst side. Undoubtedly this choice is "out-of-the-box", since it slightly subverts stereotypes about the visual representation of environmental issues in two ways: firstly, the campaign goes beyond leveraging the fear-appeal reached through impressive images to shock the spectators; secondly, the overall campaign reframes the environmental discourse in a more human perspective, detaching it from technical, impenetrable language of science. As emerged from the

literature review, sustainability discourses need to be reframed and humanized; in this regard, we can state that McDonald's succeeded in this goal, framing its pro-environmental brand discourse to get closer to imperfect consumers and drive them toward the right thing to do. Moreover, what makes the campaign even more disruptive is the use of social guerrilla marketing, with the logo installation to concretely show viewers and passers-by the right path. In this sense, we can state that the message is extremely humanized to the point of materially accompanying the consumer towards the desired action.

Assuming that there's not a univocal answer to the research question identified in this dissertation, (thus, nor a univocal strategy that brands can adopt to inspire and nudge consumers toward sustainable behaviours) this campaign illustrates and proves that it is essential to start from a deep understanding of consumer culture in order to build relevant meaning connections, linking brand equities with the message and the strategy of the campaign.

Hence, one of the answers to the research question presented in this study could be reframing sustainability communication starting from humanity (and its cultural environment and multiple layers of meaning).

4.2 Managerial Implications

When it comes to sustainable marketing and pro-environmental communication, companies should be able not to fall into the so called "sustainable marketing myopia", which occurs when their communication is product-focused instead of being consumer-focused. Indeed, people often fail to identify themselves into the ideal of the "perfect environmentalist" and his enduring cultural myth of the "eco-warriors" often hinders consumers from acting in a virtuous and environmentally sustainable way. Hence, to boost sustainable actions and trigger responsible consumption behaviours it's critical that companies encourage consumers to implement imperfect pro-environmental changes in their decisions and habits, leveraging collective imperfect progress, that is the only way forward to concretely fight climate crisis.

Moreover, the same barrier is likely to prevent companies too from undertaking their journey toward sustainability: businesses themselves should be keen to implement internal changes and pro-environmental actions and initiatives, even when they lack an historical authentic commitment to ecological issues. Companies and brands, like humans, may fall into pitfalls and be far from perfection. Patagonia has definitely set the benchmark for aspirational environmental brand activism and has become an absolute best practice in the corporate industry. However, it is not vital to be as

dedicated and proactive as Patagonia to become a good environmental activist and to make genuine efforts that generate positive "green" changes.

One lesson learned from the case of McDonald's is that each concrete genuine effort toward sustainability is likely to inspire consumers and spark positive changes, especially if consistent with the brand values and equities.

Finally, companies should not overlook the cultural branding approach to understand their positioning in the marketplace, neither should underrate the relevance of exploiting semiotic research to explore the ecosystem of meanings behind their brand and to uncover the dialectical relationships between their brand and consumer culture. This could prove crucial in revealing the role that a brand can play in driving change.

4.3 Limitations and future research

The study was conducted to unveil one of the strategies brands can use to harness their communication campaigns to leverage environmental discourses and spark positive changes, without pretending to be exhaustive in providing an answer to the research question. The validity of the study could be corroborated by complementing the research with the collection of primary data directly from consumers. One of the most suitable methodologies would be ethnography, an observational field research which requires the researcher to "go native", namely to deeply immerge in consumers' world taking an "insider perspective" to truly understand social and cultural phenomena observing people in their own environment.

The collection of primary data would enrich and add nuances to the semiotic analysis conducted in this dissertation, provide a deeper understanding of as many layers of meaning as possible,

and even allow for creative interpretations. Furthermore, the same research approach could be extended in alternative domains of brand activism starting from the same brand. Finally, it would be interesting to extend the research on environmental activism to competitive brands, to gather evidence of any alternative strategies that might have been adopted for more environmental campaigns within the same service category.