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**Sustainable Persuasion:
Leveraging Behavioural Economics and
Brand Activism to Promote
Sustainable Consumer Behaviour**

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Introduction

a. Background

In recent years, the growing importance of sustainability has profoundly reshaped consumer choices. Heightened awareness of environmental issues such as climate change, resource depletion, and pollution has driven consumers to prioritize products and brands that reflect their values of environmental responsibility. This shift is not merely a trend but a fundamental change in consumer behaviour, highlighting the need for business to integrate sustainable practices into their core operations and marketing strategies to meet the evolving demands of their consumers. This thesis explores the intersection between the domain of behavioural economics and psychology, and brand activism. On the one hand, behavioural economics and psychology offers an understanding of this transformation in consumers behaviour. It challenges the traditional assumption that consumers make rational choices revealing the role played by cognitive biases and psychological factors in guiding irrational choices. By underlying this mechanism, business can develop strategies that effectively nudge consumers towards more sustainable behaviours without imposing significant economic burden or restriction. On the other hand, brand activism emerges as a powerful tactic able to align brand values with the concerns of their consumers. Expressing a genuine commitment and action, it gains consumer trust and loyalty, encouraging sustainable consumption patterns.

b. Structure of the Thesis

This research is structured into three interconnected chapters, each built upon the previous to form a cohesive analysis of how behavioural economics and brand activism can promote sustainable consumer behaviour.

The first chapter lays the foundation by exploring the growing importance of environmental sustainability and the historical milestones that have shaped global efforts towards this goal. It delves into the psychological aspects of consumer behaviour, highlighting key cognitive biases that influence decision-making. This section concludes

by establishing the critical role of behavioural economics in understanding and guiding consumer choices towards sustainability.

The second chapter transitions to the concept of brand activism, examining how brands can leverage their influence to advocate for sociopolitical issues, particularly environmental sustainability. It distinguishes between authentic and inauthentic brand activism, emphasizing the importance of genuine commitment to foster consumers' trust. It explores additionally both the connection with Corporate Social Responsibility and the contraposition with greenwashing practices. Hence, this chapter shows that brand activism, when executed authentically, can effectively influence consumer behaviour by aligning brand values with the environmental concerns of their audience.

The final chapter demonstrates that the strategies discussed in the first two chapters are particularly effective among younger generations – Gen Z and Millennials – who are more engaged and responsive to sustainability initiatives. Indeed, they possess higher environmental knowledge and display positive attitudes towards brand activism and green advertising. In conclusion, through a detailed case study of Lush Cosmetics, this section shows practical applications of the theoretical concepts discussed earlier.

c. Aims and Objectives

This study aims to explore the connection between behavioural economics and brand activism to evaluate their influence on sustainable consumer behaviour.

To complement this study's aim, the following objectives have been pinpointed:

<u>First Objective</u>	To critically analyze existing literature and academia with regards to behavioural economics and psychology theories in providing tools and strategies to encourage pro-environmental behaviour in consumers.
<u>Second Objective</u>	To assess the impact of brand activism, focusing on how authentic commitment to environmental discourses can influence consumers loyalty and sustainable purchasing decisions.

<u>Third Objective</u>	To demonstrate that brand activism is most effective within specific demographic groups, namely Generation Z and Millennials
<u>Fourth Objective</u>	To conduct a detailed evaluation of the Lush Cosmetics' case study to illustrate the practical application of these concepts.

Table 1: Research Objectives (Granati, 2024)

d. Research question

The following research question has been assembled as a mean to delineate a structure for the report to achieve both aims and objectives:

“Does behavioural economics theories and brand activism practices influence a sustainable consumer behaviour?”

e. Relevance of the Study

The following study hopes to contribute to the existing body of knowledge in literature and academia surrounding the topic of sustainable consumer behaviour. Its relevance lies in providing actionable insight for business seeking to promote sustainability through the strategic use of behavioural economics techniques and brand activism. The research identifies key demographic groups that are highly receptive to sustainability initiatives: Gen Z and Millennials. This understanding is crucial for brands aiming to build authentic connection with consumers and drive significant environmental impact, thereby addressing the growing consumer demand for corporate social responsibility and sustainable practices.

Chapter 1

Foundations of Environmental Sustainability: Tracing the Path from the Paris Agreement to Consumer Impact

1.1 The Emerging Importance of Sustainability: Paris Agreement and the Origin of Environmental Crisis.

In an era where the impact of human activity on the environment has become a central concern, understanding the interplay between consumer behaviour, cognitive biases and sustainable marketing strategies is more crucial than ever. The intricate relationship between human decision-making processes and environmental sustainability is at the forefront of efforts to mitigate the impact of the environmental crisis. This discourse unfolds within a context where individual choices, driven by complex psychological underpinnings, play a critical role in shaping the global environmental landscape.

The Industrial Revolution marked the beginning of an era characterized by unprecedented economic growth and technological advancement; a period often referred to as the “*Great Acceleration*”. This kind of progress, however, has not been without its environmental consequences. The rapid industrial expansion brought with it a multitude of environmental challenges, including habitat destruction, loss of biodiversity, air and water pollution, and the emergence of climate change. A significant factor contributing to these issues has been the increased concentration of greenhouse gases in the Earth’s atmosphere, primarily from the burning of fossil fuels and deforestation. Through decades, these activities have led to global warming and climate change, posing one of the greatest challenges of our century. In response to these environmental impacts, many geologists have suggested that we have entered a new era in the Earth System: the Anthropocene (Steffen, 2022).

To address these critical issues, climate policy initiatives have been established, aiming at mitigating the effects of climate change and leading global efforts towards a more sustainable and environmentally responsible future. In particular, between the late 1960s and the early 1970s, environmental sustainability was recognized as a global priority,

driven by a widespread awareness and a collective recognition of the urgent necessity for action. Therefore, key international agreements have been developed as groundworks in order to spurred a critical re-evaluation of economic activities, influencing consumer behaviour and business practices to align them with sustainable principles. This journey has been marked by significant milestones, beginning with the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment in June 1972. This pivotal event introduced environmental protection as a field of cooperation within the United Nations, leading to the establishment of the UN Environmental Program (UNEP) and the adoption of the Stockholm Declaration. This declaration emphasized the principle according to which states have the sovereign right to exploit their own resources while bearing the responsibility to prevent environmental damage beyond their national jurisdiction. The UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 followed. Additional principles were introduced, including the duty to prevent environmental harm, the precautionary principle, and the principle of intergenerational equity. These fundamentals aimed to balance the needs of present and future generations, recognized the varied contributions to global environmental degradation, and promote cost-effective measures to prevent environmental harm. The Paris Agreement in 2015 represent a watershed moment in this ongoing journey, establishing a legally bounding international treaty on climate change, adopted by 196 parties at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP21) in Paris (UNFCCC, 2015). Its ambitious goal is to limit the global average temperature increase to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels, with efforts to limit the rising to 1.5°C. These limits were based on the *Planetary Boundary Approach*, a study that defines the thresholds beyond which potentially irreversible changes to Earth's ecosystem and the global environment could endanger the planet's habitability (Richardson et al., 2023). The Paris Agreement is a landmark achievement in the multilateral climate change process, uniting nations in a common cause to fight climate change and adapt to its effect, marking significant step forward in the global commitment to environmental sustainability.

This global environmental alliance not only sets ambitious targets to combat climate change but also serves as a clarion call for individuals, businesses, and governments to re-evaluate their roles in contributing to a sustainable future. In fact, the implementation

of Paris Agreement requires economic and social transformation to achieve long-term goal. For this reason, low-carbon solutions and new market have sparked since its entry into force. More and more countries, regions, cities and companies are establishing carbon neutrality targets. One example is the successful *zero-carbon solutions* which are becoming a competitive economic sector representing 25% of emissions. According to predictions, by 2030 zero-carbon solutions could increasingly gain competitive edge so that they may potentially represent over 70% of global emissions (UNFCCC, 2015).

The compact, as a result, has been applied not only at the governmental tier but also at all levels of economy building a set of economic sanctions and restrictions to punish polluting behaviours and reward sustainable ones. Industries have always had to act in compliance with regulations, permission, and patents, coordinating with policy makers and laws in order to have the permission to produce an output, sell a good and gain a profit. On the contrary, citizens and free individuals are not affected by economic instruments and norms; therefore, they should be driven solely by a strong personal motivation to make eco-friendly choices. That is why is necessary to analyze Paris Agreement as a catalyst for change, producing changing effect at government, business, and individual level. By fostering a global conversation on sustainability, it influences industries and firms' policies and production ending up by influencing consumer preferences. For instance, brands to adopt greener policies are motivated to offer sustainable products and services, generating a shift in consumer demand towards more eco-friendly options. Moreover, by promoting a sense of collective responsibility, several industries are acting as amplifier of community-based sustainability initiatives and messages, participating in environmental movements. Through the use of media and unconventional advertising, firms are disseminating an environmental-base communication, creating a sense of urgency and moral obligation to act. In these ways consumers are persuaded, playing a crucial role in supporting the sustainable transition driving the market towards sustainability.

1.2 The concepts of Consumer Behaviour and Cognitive Biases

As stated before, firm's approach to environmental crisis is a potential key to drive individuals' consumption towards sustainable products. Developing powerful strategies

require a thorough understanding of how consumers make decisions and the various internal and external factors that can impact their inclination toward sustainability. For a business to succeed, it is crucial to comprehend the psychological aspects of consumers behaviour and market its products and services in a manner that aligns with consumer needs both effectively and efficiently. By understanding and addressing consumer behaviour and cognitive biases, brands manage to design sustainable marketing strategies that not only appeal to consumers' desires for environmentally friendly products but also overcome the psychological barriers that might prevent them from making sustainable choices.

To begin, a definition of consumer behaviour must be given. It refers to the study of how individuals or groups of individuals select, buy, use, and dispose of goods and services to satisfy their needs and desires. Consumers' decision to buy any product is likely to be influenced by specific values and beliefs of individuals, which is affected by a complex set of cultural, social, and psychological factors (Campbell,1994). Hence, an emerging body of research suggests that consumers are not the rational decision-makers as envisaged by neoclassical economic models of human behaviour (Henry, 1990). By contrast, their behaviour often deviates from traditional economic assumptions of rationality since it is influenced by "*cognitive biases*" (Kahneman, 2003). The term "*cognitive biases*" was coined by Tversky and Kahneman in the 1970s to define a systematic error in human decision-making which stem from heuristics, mental shortcuts and rules of thumb that limit the need for effective information processing, eventually leading to error in decision-making. These errors can be generated in relation to environmental behaviour too. Indeed, according to rationalist model, educating people about environmental issues would automatically result in a more pro-environmental behaviour. Many NGOs and government had used this assumption, as the case of UK government's "Save it" (1975) and "Are You Doing Your Bit?" (1998) campaigns¹ whose strategies were based on the idea that more knowledge will lead to more enlightened behaviour. However, this model was proven to be wrong and many researchers have tried

¹ The "Save It" campaign was launched by UK Parliament to inform citizens on how to save energy with the aim of progressively changing citizens attitudes and habits in relation to the use of energy. The "Are You Doing Your Bit" was a campaign which promoted energy efficiency, transport, water conservation and waste reduction messages.

to define the causes for irrationality of actions. Direct experience, for instance, tend to have a more significant influence on people's behaviour. Indeed, witnessing to environmental damage has a stronger effect in shaping attitudes. Moreover, temporal discrepancy can affect the consistency of individuals actions, as the case of Switzerland immediately after the Chernobyl disaster: an initial strong opposition to nuclear energy switched into the approval to the building of a nuclear reactor 10 years later. Additionally, social norms, cultural traditions, family customs can play a pivotal role in forming people's attitude (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2010). These and many other causes have been taken into consideration for the formulation and development of heuristics by Tversky and Kahneman. The following sections of the paragraph will be devoted to an in-depth analysis of some heuristics which are relevant for the present work.

1.2.1 Anchoring Effect

One cause of decision bias is the presence of anchor effect (Kahneman and Tversky, 1974) whereby the final decision is biased on the most initial information value. In other words, when people make judgments about something, they are often influenced by first impressions or first information, like an anchor into the deep sea, fixing the minds of people and keeping the decision results away from reality (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979). For instance, the pricing and presentation of an eco-friendly product can be subjected to the anchor effect. Take into consideration the introduction of reusable water bottles with the initial price of \$50. This initial price sets the "anchor". Afterwards, the price for the same reusable bottles is set in a range of \$15 to \$30. Due to the anchoring effect, the consumers will perceive the second option as more affordable and attractive, even if under different circumstances the consumer might have considered them expensive. As a result, this can lead to a higher likelihood of purchasing reusable bottles (Zong & Guo, 2022).

1.2.2 Availability Heuristic

The availability heuristic occurs when people judge the likelihood of an event based on how easily we can recall similar events. Therefore, it substitutes judgment of probability with judgments of ease of recall: an event is more frequent if it comes to someone's mind easily (Valerie S. Folkes, 1988; Schwarz et al., 1991). In the context of sustainable

marketing, this bias can significantly influence consumer's perceptions and decisions based on the information most readily available to them. For example, if people witness to environmental issues such as high rate of pollution, this topic become more accessible in their minds, encouraging them to be more sensitive to sustainable behaviours.

1.2.3 Framing Effect

The framing effect is one of the most common and most important bias used by marketers. Decisions based on framing effect are influenced by the way the information is presented, rather than the information itself. Hence, it can be more or less attractive depending on what features are highlighted. Options, through the strategic manipulation of wording, reference points, and emphasis, can be framed to nudge consumer decision-making in a particular direction. The most common framing is associated with the “*positive gain*” or “*negative loss*”. This is caused by the fact that individuals are highly susceptible, tending to avoid certain losses. This theory was elaborated by Tversky and Kahneman through the so-called “*Prospect Theory*” (1979). According to this theory, driven by a strong aversion to certain losses, consumers prioritize options that guarantee gains over those with a probability of gain. Because individuals aimed at avoiding sure losses, they look for options and information with certain gains. In fact, a sure gain is preferred to a probable one, and a probable loss is preferred to a guaranteed one. This inherent bias in decision-making creates an opportunity for marketers to influence consumer choices by framing information or options in a positive light. By emphasizing potential gains and downplaying the possibility of losses, marketers can nudge consumers towards a desired course of action. (Yacoub, 2012).

The framing effect can have a consistent influence on public opinion. Events and policies that catch the attention from the public can be interpreted very differently based on how they are framed. Many times, decisions that may favor the majority of the population are interpreted as damaging because they are presented under an unfavorable light. On the contrary, policies that do not promote the public good may become popular because of their positive features successfully emphasized (Druckman, 2001). For instance, widely spread evidence show that climate change will result in enormous cost that will be disproportionately bear by low-income communities. Nonetheless, in North America a

significant number of voters still deny the existence of climate change and believe that policies such as carbon taxes are made to disadvantage the majority of citizens. This is caused by the way climate change is presented by media outlets and politicians, who often emphasize the controversial nature of the issue and the high short-term financial costs (Chappell, 2018).

Understanding that consumers are conditioned by framing effect may help firms to focus on the communication of information. In other words, brands should focus on how the information is said in order to make consumers over-value what is being stated, and consequently make them accept it and act on. It is important to frame the message in a favorable light making it more attractive and effective. As a result, it allows companies to better leverage individuals' point of view. A clear example of this bias happened during the Behaviour, Energy and Climate Conference in 2009. Typically, at large events where meat-based main dish is offered, 5-10% of guests ask for a vegetarian alternative. At this event, the organizers chose to make the vegetarian dish the default option, leading to 80% of participants selecting it. This significant change can be attributed to the way options are presented and framed. However, it should be taken into consideration the grade of knowledge and involvement of people. Indeed, more involved individuals are found to be less susceptible to the framing effect, whereas those who are less involved are more sensitive.

1.3 Harnessing Behavioural Economics and Community Engagement for Environmental Sustainability.

Behavioural economics, as stated in the paragraphs above, is able to provide tools and strategies that can be tailored to encourage pro-environmental behaviours by addressing the underlying psychological factors that influence decision-making. Its application can lead to more effective policies, programs, and interventions that align with human behaviour, making it a crucial approach in the effort to address environmental challenges. In particular, it challenges the traditional economic assumption of rational decision-making by highlighting the role of "*nudges*". According to Thaler and Sunstein the term "nudge" refers to any aspect of the decision-making process "*that alter people's*

behaviour in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives” (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008). In other words, nudges are minor adjustment in how choices are presented which can significantly influence behaviour without limiting options or altering economic incentives drastically. For instance, setting environmentally friendly choices as default options may lead to more sustainable decisions, subtly guiding individuals towards greener behaviours without diminishing their freedom of choice.

However, in exploring the role of behavioural economics as a solution to environment concerns, it is essential to understand the psychological underpinning that conditions environmental behaviour. To do so, in 1960s in the US, the branch of environmental psychology emerged in response to a growing need to understand the intricate interplay between humans and their surroundings. This discipline delves into the psychological underpinnings of environmental degradation, investigating the connections between environmental attitudes and behaviours that promote sustainability. These specialists have tried to find and define the barriers that hinder a pro-environmental behaviour, searching for a theory able to explain and overcome the gap between environmental knowledge and environmental behaviour. Recent advances indicate the “*community social marketing*” as the most successful approach to this gap until now (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2010). The following sections will be devoted to a deeper explanation of internal and external barrier to pro-environmental behaviour and of community social marketing as a solution.

1.3.1 Barriers to Pro-Environmental Behaviour.

The first step is to analyze the factors which prevent individuals from acting in an eco-friendly way. To explain this “attitude – action gap”, a distinction between external and internal factors should be made. Among the external factors it may be take into consideration *institutional, economic, and socio-cultural element*. For institutional elements is meant the availability of specific infrastructures, namely recycling tools or public transportation. Moreover, economic incentives or sanctions and low or high prices play their crucial role in consumer’s choice. However, economic factors are intertwined with social, infrastructural, and psychological ones; hence predicting consumer

behaviours on purely economic grounds is misleading. An explanatory example is the pay-per-bag policies which is successful only in a portion of countries which adopted it. Finally, social and cultural factors are equally important. For example, countries which are more contentions of their resources – for example Switzerland and the Netherlands - they tend to be more socially sensitive to their protection rather than resource-rich countries – such as USA (Boehmer-Christiansen and Skea, 1991).

Among the internal factors, *motivation* is one of the driving reasons of our everyday activities. It can be defined as strong internal stimulus around which behaviour is organized (Wilkie, 1990). They can be distinguished between primary motives, the larger motives that let us engage in a whole set of behaviours, and selective motives, those which influence one specific action. To make an example, we can take into consideration the choice a person should made on how to go to work. The possibilities are by bike (pro-environmental behaviour), and by car (non-environmental behaviour). The individual ends up by choosing the car since it's way more comfortable and faster. What emerge from this example is that, most of the time, non-environmental behaviour dominates because primary motives are covered up by selective ones such as personal immediate need. Another factor contributing to internal barrier is the *environmental knowledge*. In order to act in an environmentally responsible way, people must have a basic knowledge about environmental issues and the harmful behaviours. According to Kempton et al.'s study (1995), the majority of people are ignorant about environmental issues. To demonstrate this thesis, a study was conducted in the US surveying different groups of people, from strong environmentalist to strong anti-environmentalist. The result showed an equally lack of knowledge in both of the groups. Furthermore, another important element to take into analysis are the *personal values*. Values are the base which shapes much of people's intrinsic motivation. They are influenced by the microsystem, such us family of peer-groups, and by macrosystem, namely the cultural context in which individuals live. According to Chawla (1998), emotions are crucial elements too. Indeed, the results of his study on the decisions to become an environmentalist demonstrated that emotional connection to natural environment is the key to foster environmental concern. Finally, the last element to compose internal factors are *attitudes*. They are long-lasting positive or negative feeling about some person, object or issue. In the case of environmental attitudes, Diekmann and Preisendoerfer (1992) developed the "low-cost

high-cost model of pro-environmental behaviour”, explaining a significant correlation between environmental attitude and low-cost pro-environmental behaviour. Hence, attitudes play an important role in determining environmentally responsible behaviour but are able to influence less costly activities (e.g. recycling).

On the same line the above-mentioned reasons of the “attitude – action gap”, Blake (1999) proposed his “Value – Action Gap Model”. Blake identified three barriers to action: *individuality*, *responsibility*, and *practicality*. Individual barriers lie within the person and are related to personal attitude and temperament. They are particularly powerful even in people with a strong environmental concern, for example the need to fly from US to visit our family in Europe overcome our effort to minimize global warming. Responsibility is related to a lack of trust in institutions which lead to the personal feeling of not being responsible for that situation. In conclusion, practicality, is correlated with social and institutional constraint that prevent people from acting pro-environmentally, for instance lack of time, lack of money, and lack of information.

1.3.2 The Recent and Promising Advance of Community Social Marketing for Sustainability.

A strategic approach to encourage sustainable behaviour within communities is the Community-based Social Marketing (CBSM). It combines knowledge from social psychology and marketing, however, unlike traditional marketing which focuses on changing individual behaviour through social media and informational campaigns, CBSM adopts a pragmatic approach to address behavioural barriers by employing a multi-step process: selection of a target behaviour to be promoted; identification of key obstacles hindering the desired behaviour; development of a strategic intervention to mitigate these barriers; testing the strategy with a small segment of the community; and evaluating the impact of the strategy and implement it. The effectiveness of Community-Based Social marketing stems from its targeted approach aimed at fostering specific and actionable behaviour. The strength is also its commitment to directly engage the community to study and shape the social dynamics underpinning behaviours. The CBSM can lead to significant and lasting changes by addressing psychological, social and physical factors which affect both individual and collective behaviours. This approach

has been applied in a variety of settings and for multiple activities. To better explain its successful results, we can take into account the “*Buy Recycled, Get-in-Loop*” campaign sponsored by King County Commission in Seattle in 1993. The objective was to encourage people to buy recycled products in order to create a stable market based on the increase of the demand for such goods, leading to greater investments by companies on this sector. Five barriers were pointed out: (1) recycled-content products were more expensive; (2) they were of a poorer quality; (3) low awareness of what products had recycled content; (4) cynicism regarding environmental concern; (5) difficulty on locating products with recycled content. To overcome these barriers, the project was developed through the use of media and in-store advertising to raise awareness. The crucial elements of the promotion were the visual prompts: a shelf talker and a self-stick door with the announcement that the store “proudly offer recycled product”. That campaign was a success, having increased the purchased of recycled products of 27% in one-month promotion (McKenzie-Mohr, 2000).

Chapter 2

Two sides of the same coin: Brand Activism and Greenwashing

2.1 The Involvement of Brands in the Public Sphere

In today's marketplace, consumers require brands to take a stand on sociopolitical issues not only to act as amplifier about social, political, and environmental crisis, but also to make a tangible difference in contemporary times. Our era is characterized by open information, where knowledge and news are accessible at the click of a button. Among the public, awareness and concern are spreading about the role of corporations in addressing global challenges. As a result, the modern consumer does not only look for quality product and services but also seek to align with brands that share their values and are willing to voice their stance on matters affecting society at large. This evolving consumer behaviour underscores a significant change in the relationship between brands and their customers, signing the evolution of a new marketing strategy: the so-called "*brand activism*". Brand activism is an up-and-coming marketing tactic pursued by brands seeking to stand out by taking public stances on burning societal themes. In taking this stance, they find themselves in contentious or potentially risky situation. This emergent approach goes beyond traditional marketing techniques, allowing brands to connect with their costumers on a deeper level by aligning with causes that matter to both the companies and their audience (Moorman 2020; Sakar and Kotler 2018).

Brand activism phenomenon is closely linked to behavioural economics theories explained in the previous chapter. Indeed, behavioural economics taps into the psychological and social factors that influence consumer behaviour. It suggests that individuals' purchasing decision are not fully-rationally based on price; rather they are influenced by emotional, social, environmental, or political issues that engage consumers on a deeper level. This link between products, perceived brand's identity, and purchasing decision can nudge consumer behaviour towards loyalty and advocacy for brands that align with their personal values and beliefs. That is the case of a brand actively exposing to the support of sustainability claims. Consumers that desire to contribute to a positive

social impact will support this brand even if it means paying a premium. Furthermore, brand activism can leverage the anchoring effect by setting a standard or expectation in consumers' minds. For instance, brands that openly support sustainability may set the standard and therefore affect the perceptions of other brands. Lastly, brand activism seeks to take the attention, to provoke a reaction and it represents a call to action for individuals. This attitude rises the awareness of consumers on specific issues, incite a reaction, and generating a change in purchasing behaviours which will end up in a societal change.

This section aims at exploring the phenomenon of brand activism through a detailed analysis. Beginning by tracing its origins, it will emphasize the crucial role played by *brand-focused activists* who have paved the way for this approach. The discussion then shifts providing a comprehensive definition of brand activism, illustrating the different level of engagement of brand in the public sphere through a detailed diagram. Finally, brand activism will be compared to Corporate Social Responsibility's practices, stressing on differences and points of connection.

2.1.1 The power of Brand-Focused Activists is paving the way of Brand Activism

Since 1990s, activists' movements have been increasingly campaigning against corporations with brands globally recognized to expose their overseas practices of exploitation of workers and destruction of ecosystems. Over the past two decades, activists implement the use of media and technological innovation to spread their claims through messaging, trending, photos, blogging and online petition, reaching quickly and cheaply hundreds of millions of shareholders, employees, reporters, state officials, investors, and consumers. Two branches of activists have emerged: the *anti-brand activism* and *brand-focused activism*. The former aimed at the destruction of the brand by reducing sales permanently or bankrupting the company. These groups condemn firms for being "appalling", "immoral", and "gross". Conversely, the latter approach involves actively seeking to initiate a dialogue with brands to foster a reform process. This strategy leverages the incentive of protecting the financial value of global brands as a means to encourage further reforms throughout the global supply chain. Brand-focused activists often collaborate with companies, assisting them in reevaluating and enhancing their

values and corporate social responsibility practices. Their goal is to help these companies achieve recognition as "sustainability leaders" overcoming the difficulty of translating corporate sustainability promises into better on-the-ground management (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006, 2010; Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009, in Dauvergne, 2017).

The influence of brand-focused activists has grown significantly due to several factors. Firstly, the emergence of social media platforms has provided activists with powerful tools to mobilize public opinion and coordinate campaigns at incredible scale and speed (Carty, 2015; Milan, 2013, in Dauvergne, 2017). Secondly, the impact of activism has been supported by the increasing number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and internet-based shaming campaigns focused on environmental and social issues (Dauvergne, 2017). Furthermore, firms and businesses have more and more integrated sustainability into their brand values as part of their strategies, which makes them more susceptible to activism that highlights failures in their environmental and social commitments (Chrun, Dolsák, & Prakash, 2016; Prakash, 2000, in Dauvergne, 2017). Lastly, the rise of eco-consumerism, namely the growing portion of consumer market characterized by a preference for products and services that are considered environmentally friendly or sustainable ((Bartley, Koos, Samel, Setrini, & Summers, 2015; Stolle & Micheletti, 2015, in Dauvergne, 2017). In other words, environmental crisis created by markets can be solved by consumers awareness and their environmental concerns, making brands more vulnerable to activism that calls out irresponsible practices.

The vulnerability of global brands to social media activists is significant since the visibility and the reputation of the companies may be negatively or positively affected by shaming social campaigns. Additionally, brand equity and the adoption of sustainable values is a strategy to attract eco-conscious consumers. This has caused a shift in corporate practices linked to environmental harm and has pushed global firms in entering into public discourse, exposing themselves by taking specific positions. The main example of the influence of brand-focused activism and the consequent vulnerability of firms is represented by the campaigns against unsustainable palm oil, whose plantations are the leading cause of deforestation in Malaysia and Indonesia. For decades now, NGOs

such as Rainforest Action Network, Greenpeace, Global Witness, Rainforest Alliance and World Wildlife Fund (WWF) have been campaigning to end the growing of oil palm on deforested and misappropriated land (Dauvergne, 2017). In 2008, Greenpeace decided to target brand manufacturer and retailers connected to palm oil industry such as Nestlé, Kraft, and Procter & Gamble in order to push for more far-reaching change. This campaign was a victory for activists: from 2010 to 2016 the annual sale of palm oil certified as sustainable fivefold (RSPO, 2017, in Dauvergne, 2017) , by the middle 2015 the vast majority of the world’s multinationals, brand manufacturers, and brand retailers such as L’Oréal, Johnson & Johnson, and Kellogg’s were promising zero deforestation, and overall, the palm oil campaign clearly influenced the Corporate Social Responsibility policies of global brand companies as well as purchasing practices within supply chains (Dauvergne, 2017).

2.1.2 Defining Brand Activism

Driven by years of activist movements, brands over the last decades have increasingly expose themselves through campaigns, products, and internal policies standing in favor or against crucial sociopolitical events and messages. Brand-activism is consequently a purpose- and value-driven strategy in which a brand adopts nonneutral stance on institutionally contested sociopolitical issues, to create social change and marketing success (Moorman, 2020). This definition draws four defining characteristics of the phenomenon: (1) The brand is purpose- and value-driven meaning that a brand is not driven solely by profit, but focuses on a brand’s contribution to wider public interest and societal goals (The British Academy, 2019) prioritizing the support of social and environmental benefits; (2) It addresses a controversial, contested, or polarizing sociopolitical issues which can arouse strong emotions, are politically sensitive, and/or engender disagreement; (3) The issues can be progressive or conservative in nature², indeed issues are subjective and determined by political ideology, religion and other beliefs; (4) The firm contributes toward a sociopolitical issues through messaging which are intangible, and through practice, which are tangible (Vredenburg et al., 2020). In an

² The message supported by the brand can be based on progressive or conservative stances. Indeed, it should not be confused “activism” as mainly a phenomenon with the aim of implement progressive ideologies. Both progressive and conservative messages are considered “pro-social” since both envision their activities to benefits others.

extreme form, brand activism can be interpreted as a political mission which firms incorporate in their purpose³. Moreover, brands may be viewed as educators for a better society, hence aiming at shifting consumer behaviour implementing responsibility among individuals. Furthermore, brands may see themselves as significant and legitimate source of cultural power, thus it is their responsibility to promote a social change by spreading information⁴. Point 4 should be better analyzed: brand activism embraces tangible and intangible commitments to sociopolitical causes. The phenomenon is not limited to merely advocacy; on the contrary it involves alignment with corporate practices that are coherent with brand purposes and values. These tangible changes can be represented by modification of organizational policies, monetary donations, and partnerships aimed at facilitating social change (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Each of the aforementioned factors (purposes, values, messaging and practices) impact, define, and establish the authenticity of the brand. For instance, when messaging operates independently from corporate practice, purpose, and values, the trustworthiness of the brand is compromised. Therefore, these essential features must be aligned one another in a holistic system in order for the brand to be perceived as authentic. According to statistics, 65% of individuals want companies and chief executive officers to take a stand on social issues (Barton et al., 2018; Edelman, 2018; Larcker and Tayan, 2018; Sprout Social, 2017). However, 56% of consumers indicated that too many brands now use societal issues primarily as a marketing ploy to sell more of their product (Edelman 2019). Consequently, achieving and communicating authenticity is critical for marketing success as well as for social change arising from this strategy. In order to analyze the degree of authenticity and thus, of effectiveness of brand activism strategy, a typology of brand activism is proposed. It is built through a graph (Figure 1) that represent the degree of activist marketing messaging (high or low) with the degree of prosocial corporate practice (high or low) (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

³ This is the case of Patagonia that created “Action Work” to connect committed individuals to organizations working on environmental issues and donates 1% of sales to such organizations.

⁴ For instance, Nike is currently embracing this position. The brand is supporting the diffusion of controversial and promotional changes in order to inspire a societal change. That is the case of the Nike Middle East that in 2017 launched a campaign promoting the empowerment of Muslim athletes and consequently create a collection called “Nike Empowers Muslim Female Athletes with Groundbreaking Sports Hijab”.

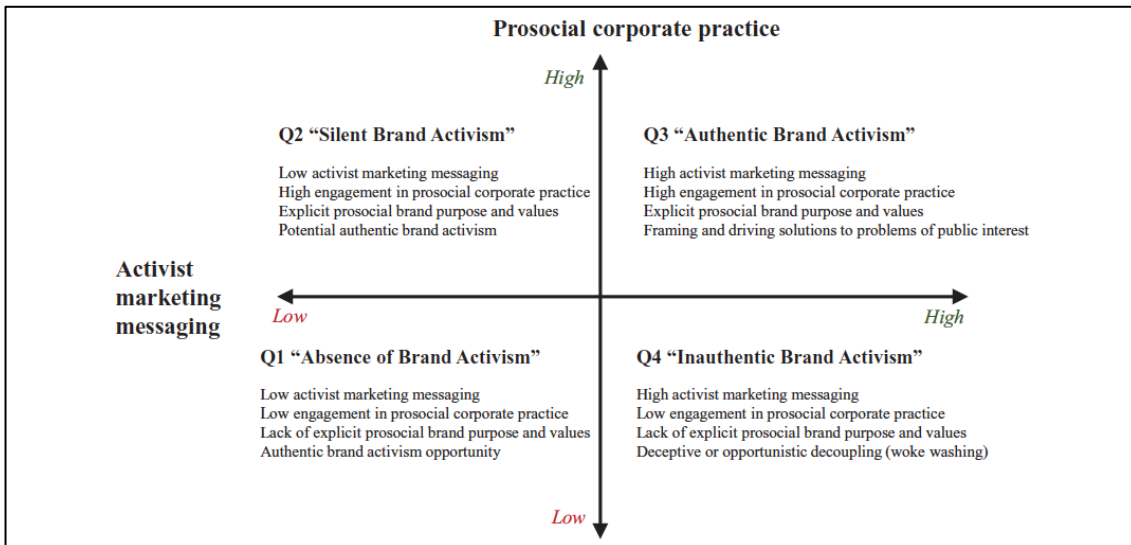


Figure 1: Four Typology of Brand Activism

The “Absence of Brand Activism” category (Q1, Figure 1), embrace those brands that neither adopt prosocial corporate practices in their approach to the marketplace, nor use activist marketing messaging in compliance with prosocial brand purposes and values. They operate without satisfy consumer expectations and they are not involved into sociopolitical causes to source their brand legitimacy. Examples include companies such as Caterpillar, the world’s largest construction equipment manufacturer. The brand so far had not deal with sociopolitical issues; conversely advocating for economic development, expands their project in emerging countries to supply new markets for its construction products.

“Silent Brand Activism” category (Q2, Figure 1) is composed of brands that incorporate sociopolitical causes in core mission. However, they tend to operate behind the scenes, proposing a long-term integrated prosocial corporate practice. Nowadays, these firms are mainly smaller and less powerful in the marketplace despite activism on controversial issues.

In the category “Authentic Brand Activism” (Q3, Figure 1), fall all those brands which are perceived authentic. This process begins with ensuring a truthful alignment between the brand’s marketing messages and its purpose-driven, value-centric prosocial corporate

practices. Brands act as signals not only for product positioning but also for a firm's stance on sociopolitical issues. When a brand credibly communicates its commitment to these stances, demonstrating both the capability and the willingness to face its sociopolitical claims, it boosts consumer-expected utility by presenting the brand as offering add value, thereby enhancing brand equity. Moreover, it generates a positive perception of the brand by the consumer, fostering favorable responses that further contribute to brand equity. Consequently, the accumulation of consumer-based brand equity, reflected through purchase decisions, drives long-term market outcomes and reinforces brand equity for future campaigns.

“Inauthentic Brand Activism” category (Q4, Figure 1) comprehend all those brands whose identity is perceived insincere, inauthentic, or even deceptive. This outcome is caused by a lack of compliance between activist marketing messaging, explicit brand purpose and values, and substantive prosocial corporate practices. Consequently, this negative perception will lead to negative brand equity implications due to an unfavorable brand association and false signaling. The results are phenomena known as “*woke washing*” and, more specifically for environmental-based pladges the “*green washing*” which will be further developed in the following sections.

2.1.3 Differences and Analogies between Brand Activism and Corporate Social Responsibility

Companies may have a positive impact on society in many different ways. This thesis is focused on the marketing messaging approach, namely the emergence of brand activism methods. However, as stated in the previous paragraph, brand activism alone is not fully efficient and may lead to a negative perception of the brand by the consumer. Indeed, advocacy should be followed by practice such as corporate social practices. In this section, the concept of *Corporate Social Responsibility* (CSR) is discussed, and differences and connections with brand activism will be explored.

Corporate Social Responsibility refers to practical actions and policies undertaken by corporations intended to have a positive influence on the world. The concept emphasizes the responsibility, therefore suggests that companies should go beyond their economic

and legal obligations to improve the welfare of society and the environment. The motivation behind a shift towards CSR can be multifaceted, including ethical values, a desire to build a positive brand image, and the intention to create a sustainable business model that considers long-term societal welfare. CSR activities are often broad and are typically related to the company's business operations but focus on contributing positively to society as a whole. For instance, they may involve environmental management, ethical labor practices, volunteering, philanthropy, and community management.

On this premises, brand activism might be considered an evolution of CSR (Sarkar and Kotler, 2018). The former, is more focused, often centered around specific political and social issues that may not be directly related to business operations, while CSR tend to be more about internal practices and policies designed to make the company a responsible part of the community and environment; brand activism is more external, using the brand's platform to advocate for a structural change. However, brand activism and CSR can be seen as complementary elements too. The adoption of both is the key for an impactful and effective corporate image.

2.2 Amplifying Social Causes through Guerrilla Marketing

Brand activism is pursued by companies through marketing campaigns where marketing transforms into a catalyst or social change. A recurrent method in international environment awareness campaigns is the “*guerrilla marketing*”, an unconventional and often surprising tactics that provides the perfect vehicle for brand activism's message to break through the noise of traditional advertising (Levinson, 1984). By adopting guerrilla marketing techniques, brand activism is amplified by the creativity and the directness of these strategies, fortifying not only brand's visibility, but also its commitment to social causes. The objective of guerrilla marketing is the involvement of the spectators through shocking images, attempting to recapture the urgency and dramatic nature of social issues. They often use every-day urban spaces to create a contrast between the ordinary and the unexpected (also known as the *stickering* technique). This advertising aims to persuade rather to explain: they solicit an emotional reaction. It follows two-step procedures: at

first, the viewer stops and looks at the campaign caught by the unpredictability of the message; then, the copy or the logo inform the viewer about the social problem, its causes, and the possible solution, aiming at inducing a disturbing reaction and a fostering consciousness (Peverini, 2014).

Guerrilla marketing exploits the effects of psychological, social, cognitive, and emotional factors on individual's perceptions which may influence their subsequent attitudes. It is built upon Behavioural Economics Theories that empower its potential to influence consumer's behaviour in subtle, yet profound ways. Guerrilla marketing can actually act as a nudge creating immersive experiences or installation in public spaces that are able to acknowledge the spectator and inspire environmentally friendly behaviours. Furthermore, by emphasizing the potential and irreversible loss of biodiversity or the destroying effects of climate change, this marketing strategy manage to stimulate a strong emotional response to individuals due to their loss aversion. In addition, guerrilla marketing utilizes creative framing techniques to present information about sustainability, affecting positively the public response.

Two exemplary cases of guerrilla marketing for sustainability are the "*Green Pedestrian Crossing*" commissioned by the China Environmental Protection Foundation in 2010 (Figure 2), and the UNICEF campaign about landmine victims in 2008 (Figure 3). The *Green Pedestrian Crossing* is a recent case of urban installation with the unconscious involvement of citizens. It was an award-winning social campaign against traffic-caused air pollution set in the city of Shanghai. It consisted replacing some zebra crossings with large canvas portraying a tree without leaves. Washable green paint was placed both sides of the street so that, as pedestrians crossed the street, they stepped onto the green paint. As a result, each green footprint looked like a leaf, conveying the idea that people could create a greener environment just by walking. This campaign was incredibly successful, catching media interest both online and offline at the point that it was exhibit at the Shanghai's Zheng Da Art Museum. According to research, the general public awareness about environmental protection had increased by 86% (Peverini, 2014). The Green Pedestrian Crossing exemplifies essentially how art and activism may merge to produce impactful social campaign that rise sensitivity and inspire collective action. It

demonstrates that creative engagement strategies can considerably enhance public involvement in environmental sustainability efforts through a clever employment of urban spaces. In this way, a deeper connection between individuals and their environment can be fostered, encouraging a more active and conscious participation in the fight against pollution and in the promotion of a healthier planet.

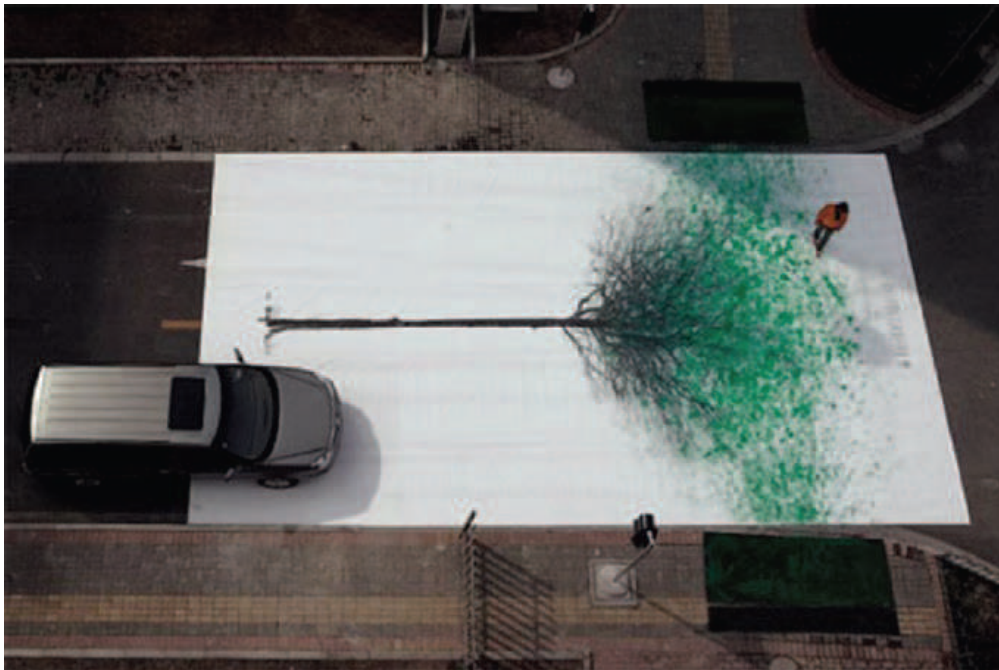


Figure 2 – Green Pedestrian Crossing

The UNICEF campaign about landmine victims (Figure 3) is a further model of ambient campaign. It was created by combining *stickiness* and *camouflage* techniques, using passersby's body as a temporary physical support for the message, maximizing the grade of public involvement. The objective of the campaign was to grab public attention on the pressing issue of landmines and its devastating impact on communities, including the loss of life, serious injuries, and the hindrance of economic development due to inaccessible land. In order to achieve this, stickers with self-adhesive topsides that perfectly reproduced the texture and colors of the sidewalk were strategically disseminated outside several UNICEF Information Booths. Without the passersby realizing it, the sticker attached to the bottom of their shoes as they walked by. Only by removing it did individuals realize that they had become participants in a humanitarian campaign. The stickers represented the landmine picture on the underside. At the same time, the slogan,

the logo, and the copy had the role of giving the readers information about the tragic situation in numerous countries of the world. This subtle yet impactful strategy not only unexpectedly engaged the public, but also served as a powerful metaphor for the unseen dangers that landmines present. Indeed, if the passersby had not been in a simulation, they would actually have been dead or mutilated (Peverini, 2014).



Figure 3 – The UNICEF Landmine Stickers

2.3 The Other Side of the Coin: greenwashing

As brand activism evolves, the risk that it will become a mainstream practice and a merely basic expectation – as the now-commonplace of offering reusable, green shopping bags by retailers – emerges. This trajectory is caused not only by the growing consumer desire for brands to demonstrate heightened accountability and responsibility; but also, by the emergent eco-market and the so-called green capitalism. These elements contribute significantly to the proliferation of the phenomenon of “*greenwashing*”. Indeed, on the one hand, eco-market, characterized by an increase in consumer products that are marketed as environmentally friendly, sustainable, and less harmful to the planet, has played a considerable role in elevating consumers’ awareness and demand for green

products. On the other, green capitalism is spreading the idea that market-driven solutions can lead to significant environmental improvements. However, green capitalism often prioritizes profit over genuine sustainability, exploiting ecological narratives without implementing substantial changes to business practices. These approaches lead to superficial environmental initiatives that do little to address the root causes of environmental degradation. Conversely, they serve to enhance a corporate image that corresponds to a growing consumer base concerned with environmental issues. The consequence is the rise of greenwashing, misleading practices that brands use to overstate or falsely claim the environmental benefits of a product or a service.

Greenwashing is defined by Greenpeace as a “*PR tactic used to make a company or a product appear environmentally friendly, without meaningfully reducing its environmental impact*” (Das, 2022). “Washing” refers to the exteriority, appearance and superficiality. It is about covering or obscuring the true characteristics of a thing, to hide it behind a mirage or veneer of acceptability (Williams, 2024). Greenwashing can be considered as a sub-category of the more general *woke washing*, defined as the “*inauthentic brand activism in which activist marketing messaging about the focal sociopolitical issue is not aligned with a brand's purpose, values, and corporate practice.*” (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 445). Moreover, in the majority of the cases, greenwashing incorporates the *CSR-washing*, “*Companies whose pro-social advertisements are inconsistent with their corporate actions are engaging in CSR-washing.*” (Sterbenk et al., 2022, p. 491).

Usually, when greenwashing occurs, it may be recognized by the following combination of features: (1) misleading or vague claims about the green credential of an organization or product; (2) making token, insignificant or irrelevant gestures towards sustainability; (3) the use of green buzzwords or imaginary to give an impression of sustainability; (4) the misleading use of certification labels or third-parties endorsement; (5) lack of evidence to back up green claims; (6) the use of offsetting that justifies environmentally damaging behaviour in one place whilst simultaneously placing responsibility of mitigation somewhere else; (7) outright lying and dishonesty (Das, 2022; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015; TerraChoice, 2010; in Williams 2024). Furthermore, greenwashing

holds on the guarantee that consumers are not able to discover what hides behind the items they buy, therefore they will accept the false image that is presented. Indeed, brands often obscure the true socio-ecological conditions behind a product while crafting an eco-friendly narrative about it. For example, when consumers buy a pair of jeans, they are told a story of how the cotton was organically grown, branding the product as sustainable and ethical. Yet, the buyers cannot see the actual fields where the cotton was cultivated, the water resources utilized for its irrigation, the individual who picked it, or the workers who manufactured the jeans.

This kind of misinformation may be perceived as a new form of pollution that is not visible in our see, rivers, lands or skies, but is anchored to our minds (Eco-Bot Net, 2021). It is evident how these forms of washing are not simply technical or isolated instances of dishonesty; rather they can be intended as collective cultural constructions that hide, obscure or downplay broader problems in society. They are about denying systemic power imbalances and often involve narratives that transfer responsibility onto individuals to create change. By making appeals to consumer's conscience through the telling of green stories, individuals are persuaded that ethical consumerism is possible; namely that ecologically destructive tendencies of capitalism can be reversed through green markets and that sustainability is possible without radical political change. It is therefore a continued legitimization of the disfunctions and injustice of market capitalism (Williams, 2024).

To conclude, companies that engage in greenwashing may jeopardize the effectiveness of authentic brand activism. When firms adopt and promote specific progressive values without substantiating them through meaningful action, consumers may become skeptical of all brand activism, doubting whether any company's effort are genuine and authentic. When the public begin to perceive brand activism as a mere marketing ploy rather than a real commitment to societal change, the entire strategy can lose its effectiveness. The erosion of trust and the spread of the perception of insincerity in corporate activism can discourage consumers' participation in activities related to environmental protection. Therefore, for the credibility and long-term success of brand activism strategy, is imperative that companies propose themselves as transparent, consistent and aligned with

their stated commitments. Only such authentic engagement will be able to sustain consumer trust and contribute effectively to social good outcomes.

Chapter 3

The Impact of Brand Activism on Consumers' Attitudes and Behaviour

This chapter emphasizes the consumer behaviour and its role in the process of purchasing sustainable products. In particular it delves into the analysis on whether sustainable marketing, in the form of brand activism, is actually effective on driving consumers' decision-making. It nails down to the sustainable consumer behaviour and how it is affected by the exposure to brand activism before going through the examination of the selected case study of Lush Cosmetics.

3.1 What is the Environmental Consumer Behaviour

Consumer behaviour, as introduced in the first chapter of this thesis, is a diverse and animated interaction of both internal and external elements. It involves the cognitive and emotional responses of individuals, alongside the actions they undertake, throughout their engagement with products or services. Besides, it also encompasses the influence of the environment they are in that drives specific course of actions. As a consequence, consumer behaviour is dynamic and involves interactions and exchanges, therefore the complexity of forecasting consumer behaviour is significant (Belz and Peattie, 2009). However, a general trend has emerged towards an increasing demand for sustainable and environmentally friendly products. This shift towards green products indicates a global movement towards more sustainable consumer practices. Moreover, the decisions made by consumers not only affect immediate the environment but also influence the broader production processes. As the world faces challenges with unsustainable production methods and products, the relevance of each consumer decision becomes more significant: the production process itself is shaped by consumer behaviours and their preferences during the purchasing process. In this context, consumer behaviour holds environmental importance if it affects the environment positively, either by reducing impact or having not impact at all. Environmental consumer behaviour can be categorized into two primary approaches: direct mitigation and indirect mitigation. Direct mitigation strategies involve actions that directly reduce environmental burdens at their source. Indirect mitigation strategies encompass actions that contribute to environmental benefits

without being immediately apparent. The former may involve for instance the decision of biking instead of driving on everyday life; whereas an example of the latter behaviour is donating to a charity that researches solutions for environmental problems (Stern et al., 1997).

For the purpose of this study, sustainable consumer behaviour is specifically defined as engaging in green purchasing and recycling activities. Green purchasing refers to intentionally buying of products and services that minimizes harmful environmental impacts throughout the product's life cycle, from raw material extraction and manufacturing to distribution, use, and ultimately, disposal. Recycling refers to the process of collecting and processing used materials that would otherwise be discarded as waste and transforming them into new products. The benefits of recycling include reducing the amount of waste sent to landfills, conserving natural resources, and also minimizing pollution by decreasing the need to collect new raw materials, and by curtailing emissions from waste process facilities (Vazifehdouts et al., 2013).

These purchasing behaviours are not only a consumer choice, it may be rather induced and influenced by several factors. Individual environmental knowledge plays a crucial role since informed consumers are more likely to recognize the benefits of green products and act accordingly (Birgelen et al., 2009; Malik and Signhal, 2017; Martinho et al., 2015; Suki, 2013). Likewise, green advertising manages to significantly shapes consumers behaviour, by informing the consumer and influencing his perceptions (Ankit and Mayur, 2013; Chemika et al., 2015; Hatyko and Matulich, 2008; Khase et al., 2015). The subsequent sections will first explore the growing prevalence of environmental concerns among newer generations, who are notably more engaged in green practices and more responsive to brand activism. Following, the effect and the incidence of both environmental knowledge and green advertising in inspiring environmental consumer behaviour will be discussed.

3.2 The Millennial Generation and Environmental Behaviour

Generation is one of the leading factors that influence environmental consumer behaviour. Gen Z and Millennials are increasingly recognized for their commitment to

environmental causes and susceptibility to brand activism compared to older generations (Sachdev et al., 2021). They have grown up in an era where environmental education has become prevalent and vital. This heightened awareness from a young age fosters a deeper understanding of the implications of climate change, pollution, and resource depletion (Ansberto et al. 2022). Moreover, the rise of internet and social media not only inform but also empowered them to take action, participate in digital activism, and support eco-friendly brands. They tend to support more firms that demonstrate a genuine commitment to environmental sustainability, pushing companies to adopt marketing and sustainable practices to attract younger consumers (Babijtchouk et al., 2018). Environmental brand activism is a great appeal to younger generations since for those consumers a company's environmental responsibility is a significant factor when deciding which products to purchase (Cone Inc and AMP Agency, 2015). Furthermore, they are inclined in searching for green products, making them likely to commit to their desires to purchase green products (Kanchanapibul et al., 2013).

3.3 Environmental Knowledge and Environmental Behaviour

Environmental knowledge is defined as “*a general knowledge of facts, concepts, and relationships concerning the natural environment and ecosystems*” (Frycell and Lo, 2003, p.45). Specifically, it includes knowledge about activities that have an impact on the environment, an understanding of how environmental systems interact, and the belief that sustainable development is vital for the survival of the planet (Kaufmann et al., 2022). Environmental knowledge applied to product's life-cycle refers to the product's impact during manufacturing, usage, and disposal (D'Souza et al., 2006). In general, the more individuals understand about the causes and the impact of human activities on environmental damages, the more likely they are engaged in sustainable behaviour. Therefore, people with higher-education are known of possessing higher levels of environmental knowledge. It has been demonstrated by several researches that will be explored in this section.

In 2017 Parco and Lavador conducted a survey on a sample of 800 millennials from Portuguese universities with the aim of investigating the relationship between environmental knowledge and behaviour. The results showed that students majoring in

engineering, social sciences, and humanities exhibited higher environmental knowledge. Similarly, through the study conducted by Zsóka et al. (2012), it has been demonstrated that environmental knowledge increase with age due to the contribution of higher level of education. Indeed, results confirmed this hypothesis showing that university students possess a significant higher level of environmental knowledge compared to high school ones. Additionally, it indicates that university years are the time in which people are supposed to engage in eco-friendly behaviours and activities. With the objective of testing the correlation between high level of environmental knowledge and environmental consumer behaviours, Suki (2013)'s survey identified a positive association. Among 200 Malaysian millennials, it was noted that the greater determinants for green product use is the environmental awareness, a component of environmental knowledge. Likewise, these results have been confirmed by Malik and Signhal (2017) that surveyed 300 Indian millennials with the aim of finding factors that influence consumer to develop environmental attitudes. Again, a strong correlation between environmental knowledge and green purchasing has been found. Martinho et al. (2015) investigated instead how environmental knowledge affects recycling, concluding that an increase in environmental knowledge rise the willingness to use environmentally friendly packaging.

However, this positive correlation is not always true and sometimes it is proven to be weak. Indeed, a big value-action gap exists, showing that possessing extensive environmental knowledge does not necessarily lead to engagement in environmentally friendly behaviours. According to the report "*Sustainable Consumption: Green Consumer Behaviour when Purchasing Products*", 30% of consumers that are strongly concerned about environmental issues struggle to translate this concern into purchasing habits (Young et al., 2008.)

3.4 Green Advertising and Environmental Behaviour

Empirical research indicates that exposure to green advertising also influences environmental consumer behaviour. Haytko and Matulich (2008) conducted a survey of 565 American university students to examine the effects of green advertising on attitudes and environmentally conscious consumer behaviours. Respondents were divided into three categories based on their environmental behaviours: *environmentally responsible*,

environmentally apathetic, or *neutral*. The study aimed at determining if these groups had positive attitudes towards green advertising. Results indicated that those in the environmentally responsible category showed more favorable attitudes towards green advertising compared to the other two groups. Consequently, the research demonstrated that individuals who respond positively to green advertising are more inclined to be engaged in green purchasing behaviours. A similar and more recent test was developed by Chemika and colleagues (2015). Specifically, their study researched the effect of environmental knowledge, educational level, and green advertising on green purchasing intention. The sample was constituted by 405 Malaysians and results showed that green advertising significantly influences green purchasing intentions. Notably, this effect was particularly pronounced among individuals with university degrees and millennials who exhibited a higher receptivity towards green advertising messages. Lastly, Khashe et al. in the same year examined the influence of exposure to environmentally-conscious branding on consumer behaviour. Their research explored the impact of LEED certification branding on participants' choices within a virtual reality simulation. The participants were divided into two groups: a "*branded group*" who received information about LEED buildings and their benefits, and a "*non-branded group*" who did not receive such information. The findings indicated a significant increase in eco-friendly product selections within the "*branded group*" compared to the "*non-branded group*." These results suggest that exposure to LEED branding, similar to green advertising, can serve as a persuasive tool to encourage sustainable consumption behaviour.

3.5 Brand Activism: a Win-Win Strategy for Sustainable Consumption and Brand Perception

Based on the evidence presented, it can be concluded that individuals exposed to green messaging are more likely to engage in environmental behaviour. In particular, those with a positive attitude towards such advertising are significantly more influenced. This attitude is predominantly evident in new generation, specifically Gen Z and millennials with high education levels. However, a high level of education can sometimes lead to a backlash: well-educated consumers often show resistance to emotional advertising strategies. The more environmental knowledge a consumer has, the less likely he perceives a brand as genuinely green, especially in today's market where many brands

engage in green advertising but are actually involved in greenwashing. As a result, when consumers are well-informed about environmental issues and their consequences, they are more likely to recognize greenwashing and become skeptical of brands' shifts towards green practices.

Building on this foundation, brand activism, particularly in the form of green advertising, serves as a strategic tool for enhancing community awareness and promoting environmentally conscious consumer behaviour. Engaging in brand activism, especially regarding environmental causes, yields social and economic benefits for brands. A positive brand perception contributes to economic returns and bolsters brand equity. Brand perception is not how company perceives itself but how consumers feel about a brand. (Qualtrics, 2020). Recently, we have witnessed a catalyst transformation of market and decision making-process: the narrative has moved from one driven by functionalities and usefulness of products, to another that privileges a symbolic consumption. In other words, today consumers purchase for meanings rather than the product itself. This shift is particularly evident among the consumers Millennials and Gen Z, who are deeply interested in social movements. As a result, brands conduct their advertising differently, adopting a symbolic brand approach, namely brand activism (Selmani, 2020). This type of advertising strategies offers an opportunity to connect with their consumers on a more personal level, in line with their beliefs and desires. In this context, creating a positive brand perception is fundamental for achieving high brand equity, which is the ability to stand out from competitors. This differentiation is not merely about product features or services but also about the values and meanings a brand embodies. Conveying positive and contemporary values is crucial in this context. When a brand successfully aligns its values with those of its consumers, it benefits from the halo effect. This phenomenon occurs when the high regard for the brand's social relevance extends to other aspects, such as the quality of its products and services. Moreover, as a consequence of the modern symbolic consumption, consumers often purchase to gain social status and position themselves within a social category. Selecting a brand allows consumers to create a personal narrative that reflects with the brand's symbolism. This alignment signifies that the consumers' values resonate with the brand's values, making the brand part of their identity. Hence, brand perception is vital for a brand's success and fortune.

A positive perception leads to substantial economic returns. Consumers who perceive a brand positively are more likely to remain loyal, advocate for the brand, and be willing to pay a premium for its products. However, the initial assumption is that brand activism is associated with a genuine commitment of the company toward sustainability. Therefore, if the campaign's communication is authentic, credible, and truthful, brand activism enhances brand perception. Conversely, it risks harming brand equity due to potential negative consumer reaction (Herzberg & Rudeloff, 2022). Indeed, when companies join public discussion, the difference between company's stance and consumers' opinion will impact perceptions and responses toward the company (Chandan, 2019). Specifically, consumers may choose to either *boycott* or *buycott* a company. Boycotting involves consumers intentionally refrain from purchasing specific products to show their displeasure about the targeted company's action. On the contrary, buycotting entails actively purchasing products from a brand perceived to be acting responsibly (Lee & Yoon, 2020). Furthermore, according to Harben and Kim's study (2008), individuals who strongly agree with the message showed a more positive attitude towards an advertising, and the brand, while individuals who did not agree with the message of the advertisement showed more negative attitudes toward the ad and the brand (Vredenburg et al, 2020). These findings suggests that the message agreement in brand activism plays a role in determining the brand perception of the consumers (Harben & Kim, 2008).

In conclusion, brand activism profoundly impacts consumer behaviour and enhances brand perception and value. By engaging in authentic and credible brand activism, companies can inspire sustainable consumer practices, strengthen their brand equity, and achieve notable economic benefits. This dual advantage underscores the critical importance of genuine and effective brand activism in the contemporary market landscape.

3.6 A Case Study: Lush Cosmetics

In the realm of brand activism, Lush Cosmetics stand as a pillar of authenticity and effectiveness. Its brand activism is deeply rooted in its core values. The company's dedication to sustainability extends beyond its production offering, encompassing its

entire supply chain and retail operations. Lush's approach is not merely a marketing ploy; it is an integral part of its corporate identity. It serves as a compelling case study, demonstrating the power of genuine purpose-driven initiatives to foster positive consumer behaviour, enhance brand perception, and drive sustainable business practices. Its success will be used as a testament to the power of brand activism to drive positive change, both within the company itself and in the broader world. This case study will delve into the specific strategies and tactics employed by Lush to effectively engage in brand activism. We will examine how the company leverages its brand messaging, product development, and retail experiences to promote sustainability and social responsibility. Additionally, we will explore the impact of Lush's brand activism on consumer behaviour, brand perception, and business outcomes. Therefore, this real-world example will be employed to illustrate the key tenets of the thesis argument and to further substantiate my work.

3.6.1 Profile

“The Secret Lush Cosmetics Master Plan is rooted in three fundamental principles:

- 1. Make product for every need. It's not what customers want, it's what they need.*
- 2. Be number one in every category. Do not accept the status quo: invent new products that fulfil all of the vision.*
- 3. Create a cosmetic revolution to save the planet. We're running out of time – we need a revolution.”*

(We are Lush, 2023).

Lush Cosmetics, a prominent British company established in 1995, stands out from traditional cosmetics companies with its emphasis on fresh, handmade products and a strong commitment to environmental and ethical practices. Fostering a unique corporate culture, Lush is a 10% employee ownership structure, highlighting the value placed on its workforce, responsible for the company's success. This focus on employees extends to customers, who are referred to as "ours," cultivating a family-like feeling (We are Lush, 2023).

The excerpt above from Lush Cosmetics' official page (We are Lush, 2023) outlines a three-part manifesto that defines their core values and strategic direction - practicality, innovation, and environmental responsibility. It establishes a mission-driven approach to the cosmetics industry. The first point emphasizes practicality over fleeting trends. Lush prioritizes products that address genuine customer needs, not simply passing desires. The second point highlights a commitment to constant innovation. Lush aspires to be a leader in every category, not for dominance, but to challenge the status quo. This leadership is achieved through the development of novel products that embody their vision of a more sustainable and responsible industry. The final point elevates their mission beyond commercial success. Lush positions itself as a revolutionary force, driven by the urgency to create a more sustainable future for the cosmetics industry. This commitment is evident in their focus on responsible production and minimizing waste.

3.6.2 Lush's Commitment towards Sustainability, Transparency, and Authenticity

Lush Cosmetics exemplifies a unique approach to brand activism by integrating advocacy into core business practices. This commitment goes beyond mere messaging, encompassing a holistic philosophy that prioritizes sustainability, transparency, and authenticity throughout the entire value chain.

Lush demonstrates a deep commitment to sustainable practices through their packaging strategy. They utilize recycled materials in 90% of their products, significantly reducing virgin plastic and fossil fuel consumption. Additionally, they promote resource efficiency by closing the loop on waste. Cardboard from factories is recycled into paper for Lush carrier bags, converting over 100 tons of material annually from landfills. Their "black pot" return program further incentivizes responsible recycling by offering customers rewards like face masks or discounts. This program incorporates behavioural economics principles, fostering environmentally conscious choices while reinforcing brand loyalty. They also strongly believe in ethical selling. In fact, they never propose "3 for 2" offers lead to overconsumption and unnecessary waste. Furthermore, Lush stores themselves function as an extension of their environmental concern. The design evokes a natural

aesthetic, featuring minimalistic wooden furniture and asymmetrical shapes that imitates the simplicity of nature. Lush further creates a sensory experience with a variety of plants and natural ingredient fragrances, contributing to recall a jungle-like environment and the indigeneity of the ingredients used. Moreover, Lush's impactful slogan, "*Leave the world Lusher*," transcends mere marketing. It serves both as a call to action, encouraging consumers who value environmental responsibility to choose Lush products; and as a symbol of a true and tangible revolution embodied by the company itself (Dolfić, 2022; Nguyen, 2014).

Lush prioritizes transparency through clear labeling practices. Unlike some companies that might utilize Latin names solely, Lush presents ingredient lists in both Latin and English, ensuring customer understanding. This commitment extends to sourcing. Instead of buying in concentrates, they use fresh ingredients. The team constantly searches for new ingredients and to learn more about their benefic properties, they promote in-person visits. Similarly, every single item is labeled with the date it was packed and the picture of the person who crafted. In this way, they ensure not only that the product is fair-trade and organic, but also the quality of life of farmers who work for the company. It is also a strategy to connect with consumers on an emotional level (Nguyen, 2014; Varshney, 2023).

Lush Cosmetics carves a distinct path in the realm of marketing, eschewing traditional advertising tactics. They recognize the potential for sexism and perpetuation of stereotypes within the industry they operate. Lush prioritizes authenticity over selling false hopes and unnecessary waste, focusing solely on selling their products through their own stores staffed by their own employees. Marketing efforts are primarily conducted in-store or in the immediate vicinity. A key component of this strategy involves hiring passionate activists who embody Lush's core values. This fosters genuine communication while engendering a sense of belonging among employees, who become brand ambassadors. Furthermore, Lush prioritizes ethical practices and actively supports charitable causes. Environmental initiatives, ethical campaigns, and charitable efforts are central to their brand identity. Notably, one-third of their window displays promote charitable causes, often supporting smaller organizations that might otherwise struggle for funding. Their involvement extends beyond financial contributions, as they actively

participate in the causes they champion. This includes educational school tours on recycling and environmentalism, university sponsorships for "Go-Green" and "Save Energy" campaigns, and similar initiatives. Lush's belief lies in the effectiveness of tangible support and active awareness campaigns as superior marketing strategies for their products (Nguyen, 2014; Varshney, 2023).

3.6.3 Effects of Lush Cosmetics' communication on consumers

Overall, in the light of behavioural economics techniques and brand activism practices, a final evaluation of the case study can be proposed. Lush Cosmetics is able to incentivize environmentally friendly choices through the reward system of the black pot return program. This positive reinforcement encourages repetition of the desired behaviour (recycling) and strengthens the connection with the brand (consumers loyalty). Additionally, information disclosure is crucial in influencing consumer decisions. Lush pay attention in increasing consumer understanding through ingredient lists in English. This allowed consumers to make informed choices that align with brand values, namely sustainability. Furthermore, Lush commitment to ethical sourcing, fair-trade practices, and charitable involvement appeals to consumers who value social responsibility. Through employee engagement a sense of social proof is fostered, therefore choosing Lush align and identify the consumer's values with the brand ones, making clear they are on the same team. Moreover, lush stores utilize sensory marketing to create a memorable brand experience and evoke positive emotions. By associating their products with positive feelings and connection with nature, Lush nudges consumers to prioritize sustainable practices. Besides, avoiding "3 for 2" promotions, the company promote the strategy of the limited assortment: reduces offering choices and decision fatigue, subtly steers consumers toward more sustainable options, avoiding excessive packaging and discouraging overconsumption. Finally, Lush exemplifies the ideal marriage between Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and authentic brand activism. Their commitment to sustainability permeates every aspect of their business, representing its signature mark. By aligning their values with those of environmentally conscious consumers, Lush achieves a level of authenticity that resonates deeply. Notably, Lush's success

underscores the growing importance of brands that go beyond selling products; they inspire and empower consumers to adopt sustainable behaviours, ultimately driving positive change within the industry.

Conclusion and Limitations

This thesis has comprehensively explored the nexus between behavioural economics, brand activism, and sustainable consumer behaviour, elucidating their interplay to shape consumer decisions and corporate strategies. The research unfolded through a structured analysis across three critical chapters, each contributing to the objective of understanding and promoting sustainability through informed consumer behaviour and genuine corporate practices. In Chapter 1, a robust theoretical foundation has been provided, tracing the historical evolution of environmental sustainability from key international agreements such as the Stockholm Declaration and the Paris Agreement to contemporary concerns. This section underscored the significant role of behavioural economics and psychology in understanding consumer behaviour. Key cognitive biases were examined to highlight how they influence decision-making process, paving the way for exploring how these insights can drive sustainable behaviour. In Chapter 2, the research transitioned into the domain of brand activism, exploring the mechanism through which brands engage in sociopolitical issues, particularly environmental sustainability. It differentiates between authentic brand activism and greenwashing, emphasizing the importance of genuine commitment to build consumer trust and loyalty. The chapter further delved into the relationship between brand activism and Corporate Social Responsibility, arguing that authentic brand activism, when aligned with comprehensive CSR practices, can effectively promote sustainable consumer behaviour. Finally, Chapter 3 focused on practical application. In this section, the detailed analysis highlighted the significance of green advertising and environmental knowledge in shaping consumer attitudes and actions toward sustainable choices. Addressing Lush Cosmetics as a case study, it illustrates how theoretical concepts are implemented in real-world scenarios. Lush's sustainable practices and transparent communication have been demonstrated to be effective in fostering consumer loyalty and encouraging environmentally friendly behaviours.

Overall, this study has indicated that integrating behavioural economics with authentic brand activism is a potent strategy for promoting sustainable consumer behaviour. The findings indicate that leveraging cognitive biases and psychological insights can effectively nudge consumers. Furthermore, brand activism serves a dual purpose. It not only raises awareness and encourages collective action on important sociopolitical and

environmental issues but also effectively persuades consumers to make more ethical and sustainable choices. However, the above-mentioned positive results are evident only within a specific demographic category: Gen Z and Millennials. Persuasion is not sufficient; it must be paired with comprehensive environmental education and heightened awareness. This combination not only fosters a deeper emotional engagement with environmental causes but also enhances the ability to identify and reject greenwashing practices. A high level of awareness and understanding of environmental issues cultivates a positive attitude towards green advertising, which in turn effectively shapes consumer behaviour towards more sustainable choices.

Despite its contributions, this research is not without limitations. The primary limitation is that the study is not experimental in nature; no primary experiments were conducted by the author. The research is based on secondary data, and samples used are limited and dispersed across various global contexts. Additionally, is the focus on a single case study, which limit the generalizability of the findings across different industries and cultural background. Moreover, the dynamic nature of consumer behaviour necessitates ongoing research to keep pace with evolving trends and societal expectations. Specifically, there are notable contradictions in consumer behaviour that must be considered. Approximately 61% of consumers globally consider sustainability important in their purchase decisions. However, data collected from fashion industry field deny this assertion: fast fashion is expanding by 8% annually. In fact, consumers often prioritize lower prices over the environmental costs and lesser quality of these garments, highlighting a stark discrepancy. This divergence underscores the contrast between the increasing number of young activists advocating for social causes and the booming sales in an industry substantially contributing to climate change.

These contradictions and limitations illustrate the complexity of influencing sustainable consumer behaviour and the challenges faced in aligning consumer intentions with their purchasing actions. Future research should aim to bridge these gaps, potentially through experimental studies and broader, more diverse sampling to capture a more comprehensive understanding of consumer behaviour in relation to sustainability.

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