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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The role of digital platforms in promoting pro-sustainable behavior and conscious consumption by brands

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Abstract – The growing concerns about the effects of the climate crisis and the highest consumer expectations regarding the environmental performance of businesses led companies to adopt a greater sense of accountability for sustainability, and some of them even became advocators of environmental causes. Today, brands are increasingly using digital media to disseminate environmental brand activist campaigns, take a stand on ecological issues, and promote pro-environmental behaviors and conscious consumption practices, although not all brands succeed in this approach. This advanced review aims to address how brands are using online platforms, such as social networks and websites, to amplify their audiences' perceptions about environmental problems, inspire eco-friendly behaviors, and motivate conscious consumption. Thus, this article contributes to a better understanding of how digital media can be an opportunity, if well used, for brands to encourage positive environmental changes, giving current examples of environmental brand campaigns and discussing directions for future research in this field.

Keywords – Environmental Brand Activism, Digital Media, Pro-environmental Behavior, Conscious Consumption

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INTRODUCTION

The mass production processes promoted by the industrial revolution, the improvement of people's living standards, and the consequent growth in population and consumption levels, have generated great pressure on the planet's finite resources (Malthus, 1878), and strongly contributed to environmental degradation, through the generation of a large number of wastes and the increase in greenhouse gases in the atmosphere (Daly, 1977). These issues started to be discussed globally, both in academia (e.g., Daly, 1977; Summers, 1992), and by international organizations and environmental movements, which began to challenge the development model focused exclusively on economic growth, demanding a change in government policies to make more rational use of natural resources and preserve the environment (Rodrigues, 2009).

Increasingly aware and informed about these issues, in recent decades a growing number of consumers have been taking greater account of the environmental performance of the products and services they buy, applying environmental and

ethical concerns in their consumption decisions (Huang and Rust, 2011; Testa *et al.*, 2021). The increase in consumers' ecological awareness, the successive events on sustainability, and the criticisms regarding the impacts of production and consumption on the environment, also led to the brands themselves gaining the notion they had to play a more active role in environmental issues, not only through changing internal practices and policies but also by taking a public stance on these topics, calling for and contributing to the resolution of environmental problems (Eyada, 2020; Dauvergne, 2017).

Currently, one of the main means that brands use to alert and promote environmental causes are digital platforms, given their wide reach and two-way communication that allows brands to magnify their efforts and build public support for the defended issues (e.g., Coombs, 1998; Kumar, 2020; Shah *et al.*, 2013). More and more brands are showing a strong concern in communicating their environmental positions and practices on digital media, trying on the one hand to increase their consumers' ecological beliefs and, on the other hand, to encourage the adoption of behaviors in line with

environmental sustainability (Sarkar and Kotler, 2018). However, not all brands get a positive reaction when they address environmental issues on online media, especially when they advocate for ecological issues but have poor environmental performance (Bowen and Aragon-Correa, 2014; Ioannou *et al.*, 2022; Majláth, 2017).

This article discusses how brands are currently using their digital platforms to take a stance on environmental causes and encourage their audience to adopt pro-environmental behaviors or opt for more conscious consumption, based on a literature review of the most prominent research in the field and concrete examples. Specifically, this article focuses on how online platforms, when used authentically, can be an effective channel for brands to address and contribute to the improvement or resolution of ecological issues, through online environmental brand activism campaigns and the association and communication of conscious consumption practices, such as re-commerce. In this sense, the objective is to contribute to a deeper understanding of how digital platforms can be used to improve perceptions and behaviors towards the environment, both in the field of consumption and in the socio-political sphere. The article begins by describing the background that led brands to start showing greater concern for environmental causes and to take a stand on them. Subsequently, the way in which brands currently use digital platforms to promote pro-environmental behaviors and conscious consumption will be analyzed, giving some real and current examples of brands that are managing to address these causes successfully, but also of brands that have engaged in greenwashing practices, that is, the unjustified or fraudulent appropriation of environmental virtues by companies regarding its products/services or conduct (e.g., Majláth, 2017). Finally, the article concludes on how brands should communicate environmental causes to achieve effective changes in their audience's behavior, also developing some directions for future research in the field.

THE BACKGROUND OF BRANDS' CONNECTION TO ENVIRONMENTAL CAUSES

Although debates about the concept of sustainability and its applicability only began to emerge at the end of the last century, with the 1972 Stockholm Conference organized by the United Nations (UN) (Rodrigues, 2009), the fact is that the origin of the concerns on this subject arises with the first (1760-1840) and second (1850-1945) industrial revolution (Bartelmus, 1994; Goodland, 1995).

The industrial revolution allowed for an exponential increase in the production of goods, as well as the generation of wealth and, consequently, a greater purchasing power. However, the new economic and productive model triggered by the industrial revolution also brought some negative consequences, such as greater economic inequalities and environmental consequences arising from greater productive activity (Daly, 1977). During this period, economists such as John Stuart Mill (1848) and Thomas Malthus (1878) began to warn of the harmful consequences that unrestrained economic and population growth could have on the environment and human well-being. To the consequences of economic and population growth, another factor was also added: with the

industrial revolution, consumption reached ever higher levels, occupying the centrality of economic development and the mediation of human relations (Baudrillard, 1995). Consuming has become a globally encouraged, accepted, and stimulated behavior, mainly because mass production demanded that goods needed to be quickly disposed of (Fontenelle, 2017), with the satisfaction of desires taking the place of meeting real needs (Campbell, 2004). The so-called "consumerism", that is, the growing production and acquisition of consumer goods that people do not necessarily need, in pursuit of well-being and the constant desire to consume (Retondar, 2008), thus also began to be considered within the topic of sustainability, given the pressures it places on the Earth's natural resources and the environment (Daly, 1977).

All these concerns about long-term environmental health culminated in the organization of several world events focused on sustainability and the emergence of environmental movements in the late 1960s and 1970s, which triggered numerous debates about the limits of growth and how environmental issues could be linked to mainstream development issues (Rodrigues, 2009; Sutton, 2004). In this field, one of the great advances for the debate on the importance of sustainability was given by the UN World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), which produced the "Our Common Future" report in 1987 – one of the first efforts to compose a global agenda for a paradigm shift in the human development model, and which defined the concept of Sustainable Development as one that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987, p. 42). The report indicated that poverty in third-world countries and high consumerism in developed countries were fundamental causes that prevented egalitarian development and produced serious environmental crises, leading to a global explosion of academic and political debate on these issues (WCED, 1987).

It was in this sense that the concept of sustainability emerged in the field of business, with the concept of the Triple Bottom Line, a framework for measuring corporate performance that extends the objectives of companies beyond economic factors, defending that sustainability encompasses the simultaneous search for economic prosperity, environmental quality, and social equity, factors that must holistically interact with each other (Elkington, 1997). In environmental terms, this meant that companies should ensure the maintenance of the planet's natural capital, seeking to sustain human life support systems by finding a balance between the planet's ability to generate resources and their consumption and disposal (e.g., Morelli, 2011; Starkey and Walford, 2001; Sutton, 2004).

The awareness that the economic model based on extraction, production, and disposal was saturating the planet's physical resources led several authors (e.g., Braungart and McDonough, 2008; Ghisellini *et al.*, 2016; Stahel, 2013) to develop economic theories based on sustainability, giving rise to the concept of "Circular Economy". This sustainable model, strongly promoted by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, presents itself as an alternative to the linear economic model, seeking economic competitiveness while

promoting the economy of resources, the reduction and management of waste, and the regeneration of natural systems (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2013).

All these developments, combined with the generalization of information about the negative impacts of consumption on the environment, made ecological concerns reach the markets, with consumers – particularly Generation Y and Z – becoming more ethically driven and showing increasing concerns about the environmental performance of companies (Eyada, 2020; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). Indeed, many consumers have come to use the greater ease with which they make their opinions heard about brands on the Web to demand brands demonstrate more responsibility for the environmental consequences of their activities and invest in effective environmental policies (Dauvergne, 2017; Stolle and Micheletti, 2015). Consumers are also joined by all other stakeholders, who increasingly pressure companies to disclose information on their environmental performance, demanding transparency in the communication of the environmental impacts of business activities (Kim and Lyon, 2015; Marquis *et al.*, 2016).

Likewise, consumers started to consider environmental issues in their purchase decisions, increasingly opting for ecologically correct products or services – the so-called eco or green products/services (Chen *et al.*, 2014; Low, 2016; Testa *et al.*, 2021) –, that is, products/services that satisfy basic needs and provide a better quality of life, while minimizing the depletion of natural resources, the use of toxic materials and the pollution throughout their life cycle (Akenji, 2014; Darnall *et al.*, 2012). These greener purchasing options have given rise to the so-called conscious consumption, characterized as being socially responsible, environmentally friendly, and ethical, through which consumers try to minimize their environmental and social impact through the brands they buy (Roux and Nantel, 2009). In fact, according to a 2021 study by the Business of Sustainability Index, 77% of consumers already express concerns about the environmental impact of the products they buy, and 75% are even willing to pay more for an environmentally sustainable product (Business of Sustainability Index, 2021). These concerns extend to the role of brands in solving environmental issues, with 86% of consumers considering that brands have a role in raising awareness and solving environmental problems (Wunderman Thompson, 2021), and 59% admitting to boycotting a brand due to environmental damage or lack of environmental policies (Microsoft Advertising, 2022).

Thus, the increase in ecological awareness, the successive events on sustainability, the advances in theories and application of a sustainable development model, and the growth of conscious consumption, led to environmental issues becoming part of the daily operations of businesses, not only by implementing several pro-environment initiatives, policies, and internal practices (Zibarras and Coan, 2015; Zhang *et al.*, 2018) but also by starting to use their brand online platforms to promote environmental issues and inspire eco-friendly behaviors (Sarkar and Kotler, 2018).

USING DIGITAL MEDIA TO ADDRESS ENVIRONMENTAL CAUSES AND PROMOTE PRO-ENVIRONMENTAL BEHAVIORS: CASES OF SUCCESSFUL AND UNSUCCESSFUL BRANDS

The collaborative and participatory environment provided by the emergence of Web 2.0, which popularized two-way communication platforms such as social networks or blogs, allowed an increasingly closer and interactive relationship between consumers and companies, in which consumers have a prominent role (López *et al.*, 2016). Digital media provided consumers and other stakeholder groups with a way to deeply observe the activities of organizations and pressure them to act on issues they consider relevant (Carroll and Brown, 2018; Low, 2016). Consumers can now interfere in all marketing activities and public positions of companies by having the ability to scrutinize business activities and to transmit their opinions and informational content about brands in the online world (Mazurek, 2009). Digital channels enable the public to be not only a receiver but also a producer and user of information and knowledge (Bruns, 2009), which in the case of consumers made it possible for them to benefit from greater power of influence over their own purchasing decisions and the decisions of others, being able to easily share their experiences with a large number of people (Fine *et al.*, 2017).

Being able to access and share individual and collective experiences more easily, both in consumption and civic terms, consumers also began to demonstrate growing concerns about global issues, such as the environment, raising their expectations about corporate behavior regarding these topics (Gray, 2019), and openly criticizing brands considered unethical towards society or the environment (Schmidt *et al.*, 2022). In this way, many consumers began to take advantage of the interactive functionalities of Web 2.0 to create multiple “virtual communities” with common interests and goals (Milan, 2015), and with the ability to initiate or strengthen social movements worldwide, as consumers can communicate and share their ideals on a global scale and, consequently, can place their issues more easily on the public and corporate agendas (Karamat and Farooq, 2016; Lin, 2018).

Thus, at the turn of the century, consumers began to realize their ability to join forces to influence the conduct of brands they did not agree with. In this way, consumers began to unite in “anti-brand movements” or even in “anti-brand communities” to impose that organizations, especially multinationals, start to demonstrate more responsibility for the environmental and social consequences of the activities developed throughout their value chain (Stolle and Micheletti, 2015). Regarding environmental issues, online actions to pressure brands to invest in effective environmental policies, sometimes accompanied by public protests, started to become frequent and have a huge reach, with consumers opposing brands considered irresponsible towards the environment and praising brands considered to be pioneers in supporting ecological issues (Dauvergne, 2017).

These new ways for consumers to make their demands heard about brands, greatly facilitated by social networks such as

Facebook or Twitter, manage to mobilize millions of people to act on a given issue, putting greater pressure on companies to engage in environmental issues, either by adjusting internal practices or by exposing a public position in support of a cause, whether or not it is directly related to their core business (Lin, 2018). Although the Web has empowered consumers to damage the name of the companies, it is also an excellent source of information for brands, allowing them to understand more quickly what are the issues that concern their consumers and adapt their conduct quickly to consumer expectations and demands (Shah *et al.*, 2013).

In this way, while digital platforms played a driving role in making companies aware of the duty to improve their environmental conduct and adopt an active role in ecological issues (Dauvergne, 2017), it also became one of the most important means for a brand's environmental campaigns and actions. Today, companies are becoming increasingly interested in the use of digital technologies to get involved in the struggle for positive environmental changes, using these platforms to interact with their audience in defense of certain causes, receive feedback from their activist campaigns (Kumar, 2020; Shah *et al.*, 2013), and create ways for its consumers to participate in a more conscious market (Chu *et al.*, 2021).

As a result, brand campaigns and actions began to emerge in digital media promoting the company's values and including central sociopolitical issues (Kumar, 2020; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019), such as environmental problems (Dauvergne, 2017; Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020). In fact, digital platforms are already one of the primary channels for brands to promote environmental causes, given the large audience that brands manage to reach (Gray, 2019). At the same time, digital media are a low-cost and direct communication channel that can help companies to maintain a dialogue with an audience they otherwise might not reach (Dreyfuss, 2017), coordinate efforts with other like-minded stakeholders (Coombs, 1998), and achieve their environmental goals more easily (Shah *et al.*, 2013; Taylor *et al.*, 2001). Digital platforms also make it easier to spread word-of-mouth about an environmental campaign (Corcoran *et al.*, 2016), increasing its potential to go viral (Lee and Yoon, 2020). In addition, brands can also take advantage of the potential of digital platforms to test various communicative approaches to environmental causes, assessing how the market responds to each of these actions and adapting their conduct to the obtained results (Moorman, 2000).

One of the main strategies brands use to address ecological issues is environmental brand activism. Brand activism differs from the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility as it does not only encompass changes in the internal policies and practices of companies at a social and environmental level but also involves the concept of advocacy. Through brand activism, companies proactively seek to change public opinion and encourage behavioral change, trying to raise awareness and galvanize additional support around the issue, for example by trying to get support from activist groups or other institutions (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020). Environmental brand activism thus involves companies' efforts to promote, prevent, or direct environmental reforms regarding topics such as climate

change, deforestation, conservation, ecocide, land use, air and water pollution, emission control, environmental laws and policies, renewable energies, recycling, sustainable urban mobility, single-use products, sustainable products, among others (Eyada, 2020; Sarkar and Kotler, 2018).

These brands' environmental campaigns are increasingly disseminated through digital media, with companies trying to promote ecological causes on a large scale and incite environmental action among consumers and other stakeholders (Castillo, 2014). This occurs for example through campaigns on social networks (e.g., Dreyfuss, 2017; Gray, 2019; Eyada, 2020), pro-sustainability communications on the brand's official website (e.g., Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020; Taylor *et al.*, 2001) or blogs posts relating to environmental issues (e.g., Geissinger and Laurell, 2016; Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020). While websites emerge as a primary resource for communicating with and responding to the public, namely through the dissemination of the brand's environmental performance or its activist actions (Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020; Taylor *et al.*, 2001), social networks allow for greater reach and faster mobilization, allowing brands to interact directly with their public and to notice, almost in real-time, how campaigns are being perceived through the community's reaction to their environmental messages (Campos *et al.*, 2016; Dreyfuss, 2017; Gray, 2019; Eyada, 2020). At the same time, blogs also began to be used for activist purposes, as a low-risk and low-investment tool to reach more consumers and establish stronger relationships with the public that supports and wants to know more about the issues advocated by the brand (Geissinger and Laurell, 2016; Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020). Blogs provide a deeper and lasting reflection, unlike social networks that favor the development of viral episodes and instant indignation to the detriment of a sustained debate (Campos *et al.*, 2016).

Likewise, several brands are also creating their digital platforms to promote pro-environmental behaviors, and specifically conscious consumption, through the creation of re-commerce platforms (Chu *et al.*, 2021; Sularia, 2020). Reverse commerce or Re-commerce consists of the exchange or sale of new or used products between consumers, through physical or online distribution channels (Fontaine, 2008; Van Damme and Stobart, 2010). In 2021, a study by Thredup (2021) revealed that 62% of brands say their customers are already buying used goods, 42% already state that, in the next five years, the sale of second-hand products will become part of their business, and 33% assume that reselling is becoming a very important channel for retailers.

Clothing brand Patagonia is a great example of a company that uses all its digital platforms to engage in environmental brand activism and motivate pro-sustainable behavior. Protecting the environment is at the core of the brand's mission, with the brand donating 1% of each sale to preserve and restore the environment, through One Percent for the Planet, a non-governmental organization (NGO) created by the brand to encourage other companies to follow its example (Patagonia, 2023a). The brand uses its website to convey this and all its other environmental actions and policies, such as the use of solar energy to power all its stores, the use of recycled materials in most of its clothing items, or the

partnership with a few suppliers to limit the impact of production, as well as to disclose all its environmental activism actions (Patagonia, 2023b). These activism actions involve, for example, the creation of an online activism platform – Patagonia Action Work – to inspire the public to get involved in a variety of causes, including protecting rivers and wild places, supporting agriculture, and stopping the climate crisis. Through this platform, the public can search for environmental initiatives close to their area of residence, learn about the work of these organizations and volunteer to help them (Patagonia Action Work, 2023). Likewise, Patagonia also uses its blog to address environmental activism, whether through interviews with environmental activists or initiatives, dissemination of environmental projects, defense of ecological causes, or dissemination of books and films centered on environmental issues (Patagonia, 2023c).

Regarding social networks, the brand also releases a series of social media posts that try to inspire fans to behave in more environmentally responsible ways. For example, in 2016, Patagonia created a short film to support the defense of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge against its exploitation by oil companies, sharing it on your social networks to involve society in this environmental cause and inspire action around policy to protect the Arctic (Patagonia, 2016).

To encourage sustainable consumption, Patagonia also entered the re-commerce field, creating its re-commerce platform – Worn Wear Patagonia –, where the brand's customers can sell, repair, exchange, and buy used Patagonia products (Worn Wear Patagonia, 2023).

IKEA is another brand that has been using its digital platforms to communicate environmental causes and promote pro-sustainable behaviors. The brand communicates all its sustainability policies on its website, such as the partial equipping of its stores with solar panels, growing plants on the roofs and LED lighting, the elimination of all single-use plastic from all stores, or the creation of a product repurchase and resale service (IKEA, 2023). The brand has already launched some environmental activist campaigns on its social networks, encouraging its consumers to adopt more sustainable consumption practices. For example, IKEA's "Repurposeful Instructions" campaign, launched in 2021, promotes the reuse of the brand's products, with a collection of 12 creative ideas using IKEA's iconic assembly instructions that show how to upcycle some of its popular products and help breathe new life into old furniture (Keighran, 2021).

Despite the environmental consequences of the fast fashion market to which it is related, Spanish textile manufacturing and distribution multinational Inditex is increasingly making a transition to the circular economy. Inditex has several initiatives to reduce and green its consumption (e.g., use of innovative technology for efficient energy and water management and saving, prioritization of renewable energies across the value chain, closed-cycle industrial refrigeration, etc.), reduce its emissions (e.g., programs to reduce all direct and indirect emissions from the activities of the organization, including fuel combustion and carbon dioxide emissions), and reduce the generation of waste (clothing recycling or

recovery programs, recycling of cardboard, plastics, metal, and textile waste, use of more sustainable materials in packaging, etc.) (Esbeih *et al.*, 2021). The organization communicates these initiatives to the public through its website and social networks, encouraging its consumers, for example, to hand in their used clothing to be reused, thus trying to encourage its consumers' commitment to environmental issues (Inditex, 2023). In the same way, in April 2023, Zara, a brand of the Inditex group, announced a partnership with the circular textile company Circ on its website and social networks, launching a new clothing collection made from existing textile waste that can be recycled again after use, to promote sustainable consumption (Zara, 2023).

For its part, the global beauty brand The Body Shop has a history of more than 35 years of environmental activism, with several activist campaigns in defense of biodiversity, animal rights, and climate awareness. The brand has already teamed up with several NGOs and other companies, such as Greenpeace, the World Land Trust or TerraCycle, to create campaigns and actions to promote, for example, the use of renewable energies, recycling or regenerating forests, and reconnecting endangered species (The Body Shop, 2023a). To promote the circular economy, in 2019 The Body Shop also launched the "Return, Recycle, Repeat" campaign on its website and social networks, encouraging its consumers to buy a refillable aluminum bottle and fill it with a choice of eight shower gels and bring it back to refill once it's empty, to reduce the use of plastic and the brand's impact on the environment (The Body Shop, 2023b).

At the level of re-commerce, in 2021 Nike also announced on its social networks the launch of its re-commerce initiative – Nike Refurbished –, which allows its customers to return their used shoes to the brand, which will sell them at reduced prices, or convert them into other materials, such as rubber for bicycles (Nike, 2022). Another example is Decathlon's Second Life program, which allows Decathlon customers to sell their used sports products to Decathlon in exchange for a discount voucher on their next purchase at the store. Second-hand products can be found on the brand's re-commerce platforms – Decathlon's Second Life –, and are resold in its stores (Decathlon, 2023).

These examples are thus ways that brands use to try to influence the pro-environmental behavior of their consumers. Environmental behaviors correspond to actions that take into account the protection of the natural environment, ecology, and environmental issues (Bamberg, 2003). Güven (2013) emphasizes that individuals with positive behaviors towards the environment are of great importance in terms of eliminating and preventing environmental problems, since these people engage in environmental issues, such as the Earth's load capacity, nature preservation, or sustainable development, and opt for more sustainable practices such as recycling, saving energy, choosing environmentally friendly means of transport, or engaging in conscious consumption (Bamberg, 2003).

Some studies indicate that consumers from all generations respond well to environmental brand activism, given the growing belief that businesses should be held responsible for

their emissions and make special efforts to reduce climate change (Sharma *et al.*, 2017). For example, research by Chemika *et al.* (2015) and Khashe *et al.* (2015) suggests that green brand campaigns and actions serve as effective ways to alter consumers' environmental behavior, such as influencing green purchasing and recycling. Likewise, Romani *et al.* (2016) studied a real corporate initiative to encourage ecologically correct and conscious consumption, verifying that the support of brands to environmental causes promotes consumer readiness to support the environmental cause promoted by the company and other causes of environmental protection, namely through the support for the choice of ecological products. These results can also be concretely verified, for example, in Patagonia's campaign in defense of the Arctic. From the dissemination of the campaign on social networks, the brand gathered more than 94,000 petition signatures to request the U.S. Senate to pledge to defend the Arctic Refuge from oil drilling, thus involving its audience in an environmental cause that led the former president Barack Obama to designate the bulk of the U.S. Arctic waters indefinitely off limits to oil and gas drilling (Care2, 2016).

However, not all brands manage to get their consumers involved with environmental causes or can influence their behavior toward the environment. Many brands still approach environmental causes without demonstrating internal and practical consistency with these themes, incurring the so-called greenwashing. This public relations strategy occurs when companies that have a bad or insufficient environmental performance deliberately address environmental issues without knowing and understanding them properly, or positively communicate the company's environmental practices or the environmental benefits of a product/service, often omitting relevant negative information (Bowen and Aragon-Correa, 2014; Ioannou *et al.*, 2022; Majláth, 2017). These brands only engage in environmental causes due to the pressure or urgency in responding to market expectations or for performance/profit reasons, ending up disconnecting their communications from their values and corporate practices (Georgallis, 2017).

For example, in 2010 the clothing design retail company H&M announced on its digital platforms the launch of the H&M Conscious clothing line, a line of products that promises to take additional consideration for the planet in the choice of materials and production of the garments. However, the 2021 report by the Changing Markets Foundation, a foundation that aims to fund and support campaigns related to sustainability, showed that 96% of the brand's environmental claims were false and that no details were given to support overly vague terms such as "environmentally friendly" and "green". Furthermore, the H&M Conscious collection was found to contain a higher share of harmful synthetic materials than its main line (72% compared to 61%). In addition, H&M, along with fast fashion brands, continues to be one of the main contributors to the emission of greenhouse gases and the consumption and pollution of water (World Bio Market Insights, 2021).

Another major greenwashing scandal occurred in 2015 when Volkswagen also used its digital platforms and mass media to announce the creation of emission-free diesel engines, advertising its diesel vehicles as clean and environmentally

friendly. However, the United States Environmental Protection Agency discovered that the brand used software to deceive technical tests designed to measure the emissions of polluting gases and greenhouse gases from the engines. It was also discovered that cars were releasing up to 40 times the permitted amount of nitrogen oxides, considered primary air pollutants, into the atmosphere (Hotten, 2015).

In these cases, greenwashing practices may not only have negative consequences for brands, such as negative impacts on brand credibility (Nyilasy *et al.*, 2014) and brand reputation (Leonidou *et al.*, 2013), decrease in consumer purchase intention (Zhang *et al.*, 2018), or losses on the company's financial performance (Leonidou *et al.*, 2013), but can also lead to consumer skepticism (Aji and Sutikno, 2015) and undermine public engagement with broader environmental issues (Gillespie, 2008), thus hindering the adoption of pro-environmental behaviors and conscious consumption.

As such, brands need to be conscious and accountable when they address environmental problems, ensuring that these issues are truly an integral part of the company's conduct and that they have the knowledge and moral authority to address the issue (Eilert and Cherup, 2020). Only in this way can brands guarantee that consumers perceive them as authentically motivated to contribute to sustainability and not just seeking profit or competitive advantages (Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020).

CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER DIRECTIONS

Scientific and academic advances in terms of sustainability, combined with technological innovations and an eco-friendly culture, created the perfect environment for brands to start addressing environmental causes and contributing to their resolution or improvement (e.g., Dauvergne, 2017; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020). Thus, several online brand campaigns and actions began to appear, in which companies alert their audiences to environmental problems and try to change behaviors to become more in line with sustainability (e.g., Eyada, 2020; Sarkar and Kotler, 2018). Likewise, many brands also try to promote pro-environmental behaviors within their markets, for example by creating their digital re-commerce platforms as a way to encourage conscious consumption (e.g., Chu *et al.*, 2021; Sularia, 2020).

However, if some brands manage to obtain positive results with these actions and influence the pro-sustainable behavior of their consumers (e.g., Khashe *et al.*, 2015; Romani *et al.*, 2016), others end up falling into greenwashing practices, with very negative consequences not only for brands but also for consumers' pro-environmental predisposition (e.g., Gillespie, 2008; Leonidou *et al.*, 2013; Majláth, 2017).

Thus, to be successful in their online environmental campaigns and to be able to motivate pro-sustainability in their consumers, brands must assume a well-defined and authentic environmental purpose, in the sense of not demonstrating inconsistencies between what they communicate and their conduct (Eyada, 2020). This implies, on the one hand, ensuring a natural congruence/adequacy of

the brand's environmental stances with the corporate's identity, values, business practices, and purpose (Abdallah *et al.*, 2018; Lin, 2018) and, on the other hand, the active and authentic involvement of brands with the defended causes (Key *et al.*, 2021; Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020).

In fact, Lin (2018, 2022) argues that companies should invest their capital and expertise in issues of which they have the knowledge and for which they offer a competitive advantage, in addition to verifying whether their internal policies reflect the purpose and identity they seek to project in their environmental campaigns and working together with activists to understand and fulfill the collective moral obligations towards communities and the environment. In the same way, for brands to be able to generate effective changes in the pro-sustainable behavior of consumers, their environmental posture must be considered authentic and sincere. To be considered authentic in environmental activism, brands must thus maintain a continuous alignment between declared intentions (communication messages) and implemented actions (pro-environmental corporate practices, partnerships with environmental organizations, donations to environmental initiatives, etc.), effectively engaging with the advocated cause (Key *et al.*, 2021; Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020).

In addition to establishing a congruent environmental purpose and approaching it authentically, companies should also ensure their environmental stances and actions are communicated effectively so that they are well-perceived by the target audience and lead to positive environmental changes (Key *et al.*, 2021). According to Key *et al.* (2021) and Taylor *et al.* (2001), brand activist communications should always be based on dialogic communication, through the constant promotion of interactions and the provision of relevant information to the target audience. In particular, companies must take into account the holistic process of how their audience receives and understands their storyline, creating campaigns that do not significantly deviate from the target audience's expectations and experiences and their understanding of the environmental issue.

To motivate consumers to effectively adopt pro-sustainable behaviors and assume a commitment to conscious consumption, it is also important that the brands' environmental communication not only enlightens consumers about the brands' environmental policies and/or the importance of the advocated environmental issue but also educates consumers on how they can act and consume more sustainably, for example by teaching them how to use and dispose of products in a more responsible way (Goleman, 2009; Mohanasundaram, 2012). Likewise, the brand's point of view needs to be conveyed consistently in all its online and offline communications, capturing, building, and reinforcing the underlying logic of its environmental stance with transparency and credibility, focusing not only on the brand's environmental strengths and its environmental causes but also on what it still needs to improve in ecological terms (Goleman, 2009).

Summarily, companies must be intentional in the way they communicate their environmental position and causes, basing it on real evidence and proving their environmental performance, for example through third-party audits or eco-

labels, as a way to minimize the risk of alienation and maximize their ability to create impact and promote the pro-environmental behaviors of their consumers (Key *et al.*, 2021; Mohanasundaram, 2012).

Given the relevance of the relationship between environmental communication and new digital platforms, namely in the context of markets, it is crucial to continue investigating how online platforms can favor or hinder pro-environmental change. Interesting research lines could include the study of how brands' online environmental communication strategies can influence other stakeholders, such as the pro-environmental behaviors of employees or shareholders, the qualitative analysis of consumer reactions to greenwashing communications on social networks, and whether these campaigns are currently an obstacle to conscious consumption (e.g., by increasing consumer skepticism), or the study of how brands can make environmental issues more appealing to consumers by using immersive technologies, such as augmented reality and virtual reality. Internally, it would also be interesting to understand how brands are using digital technologies to reduce their ecological footprint, namely by using online platforms to improve internal communication processes on sustainability, better manage product breakage processes with suppliers, or improve their distribution routes.

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