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Brands' Green Activism: An Empirical Comparison between Posts of Digital Influencers and Brands

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Abstract: In this article, we present a study that investigates the effectiveness of social media communication in conveying brands' green activism actions framed by corporate social responsibility. To address this question, a survey was conducted with 550 participants, comparing their opinions about the green posts made by brands and influencers. Statistical analysis (Wilcoxon rank-sum test means comparison of responses between the two groups) revealed significant differences in consumer perceptions between them. The findings indicate that using social media channels to communicate green initiatives is effective for brands. Moreover, the study concludes that direct brand communication is more beneficial than relying on digital influencers. This research contributes to the existing literature by providing empirical evidence on the comparative effectiveness of brand-generated social media posts and influencer-generated content in promoting green activism actions. The study highlights the importance of direct brand communication in enhancing consumer perception and engagement with green initiatives. It offers valuable insights for brands seeking to optimize their social media strategies for sustainability messaging.



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Citation: Silveira, P.D.; Sandes, F.S.; Xara-Brasil, D.; Menezes, K. Brands' Green Activism: An Empirical Comparison between Posts of Digital Influencers and Brands. *Sustainability* **2024**, *16*, 6863. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16166863>

Academic Editor: Jun (Justin) Li

Received: 18 June 2024

Revised: 1 August 2024

Accepted: 4 August 2024

Published: 9 August 2024



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Keywords: green activism; social responsibility; marketing; social media; sustainability messaging; digital influencers

1. Introduction

In recent years, the interplay between brand activism and digital influencers has become a focal point in the realm of marketing and consumer perception [1,2]. In this context, the present article investigates a crucial question: how effective are social media communications in conveying brands' green activism actions, and how do individuals perceive these communications when made by the brands themselves versus digital influencers? More specifically, we aim to determine whether the impact differs between the two and, if so, how and which is more relevant. The influence of brand activism on brand equity stands at the heart of this inquiry.

Brand activism, a strategic approach where businesses take a stand on societal issues, has been gaining traction. Brand activism is framed within responsible marketing philosophy, and this one belongs to Corporate Social Responsibility strategies [3–6]. Previous authors [1,2] have highlighted successful brand activism, emphasizing the importance of aligning activist messaging with corporate practices to engage consumers and potentially increase brand equity. This strategic involvement in societal issues goes beyond mere product promotion, striving for societal improvement [7,8]. In this context of brand activism, it is important to know the factors that impact the consumers' altruistic values [9]. However,

challenges arise in this endeavor, as communicating a brand's corporate social responsibility might paradoxically decrease public perception and value, adding complexity to brand equity [10–12]. This article addresses the gaps in the literature concerning how brand activism, communicated via social media, influences consumer perceptions and brand equity, especially when considering the role of digital influencers.

The role of Generation Z (also called Gen Z, Zoomers, or Centennials) in this context is important [13,14]. As a demographically important group with a distinct blend of activism and social engagement [13], driven mainly by their extensive use of social media [14], Gen Z's influence extends to various aspects of life, including consumer-purchasing decisions [15–17]. Their attitudes and behaviors, shaped by factors such as social isolation, gender diversity, and sustainability concerns, provide a unique lens through which to view consumer behaviors and attitudes [18–20]. The influence of Gen Z's perceptions of brand activism on brand loyalty suggests a potential link between brand activism and brand equity [21,22].

Digital influencers, who are particularly influential among Gen Z individuals, play a pivotal role in shaping brand image and brand equity [14]. Their influence ranges from enhancing brand awareness to molding consumer behavior [23–25]. They are not only instrumental in fostering brand associations and loyalty [26–28] but also significantly contribute to brand equity [29,30]. The intricacies of this relationship, particularly in the context of brand activism, form the crux of the present research, aiming to elucidate the differential impacts and relevance of brand versus influencer-led activism on brand equity.

The theoretical contributions of this article are significant and multifaceted. Firstly, it adds to the existing literature on brand activism by investigating the effectiveness of social media as a medium for communicating green activism, thereby providing valuable insights into how brands can more effectively engage with socially conscious consumers. Second, it explores the particular role of digital influencers in this context. It provides a nuanced understanding of how influencer endorsements can enhance or diminish the perceived authenticity and impact of brand activism messages. Third, by focusing on Generation Z, this study sheds light on the preferences and behavioral patterns of a key demographic cohort. In doing so, it enriches understanding of intergenerational differences in responses to brand activism. Finally, by illustrating how responsible marketing strategies and influencer collaborations can synergistically enhance or potentially diminish a brand's perceived value, it contributes to the broader discourse on brand equity.

The following section presents the literature review related to brand activism, issues associated with the communication of green activism, and previous findings on how social media/network sites might affect the communication of brands' activism. Section 3 describes the empirical study design, presenting the procedures, sample, and variables measured. The subsequent section is devoted to the report and discussion of results, followed by the conclusions and implications, in which empirical evidence will be presented regarding the higher effectiveness of brand-generated social media posts, when compared with influencer-generated content in promoting green activism actions.

2. Conceptual Background

2.1. Overview of the Proposed Conceptual Background

This conceptual background begins by discussing the influence of brand activism on brand equity. Brand activism moves beyond mere product promotion to address significant social, political, and environmental changes. This strategic method, particularly in the context of green activism, involves leveraging brand platforms to authentically promote environmental actions, aligning brand messages with corporate values and enhancing brand equity. The integration of social responsibility into brand strategies not only meets consumer demands for ethical practices but also fosters long-term loyalty and positive brand perceptions.

The discussion then shifts to the role of digital influencers in marketing and their significant impact on brand image and consumer behavior. These actors play a pivotal role

in contemporary branding strategies, significantly impacting brand equity through their ability to influence consumer opinions and behaviors. Their authentic content and endorsements can build trust and foster brand loyalty, making them indispensable in marketing. By aligning their personal branding efforts with corporate values, digital influencers enhance the effectiveness of brand messages and contribute to a brand's market position.

Following this, we discuss Gen Z's influence on digital influencers and activism. This generation has a profound influence on digital influencers and brand activism as they prioritize inclusivity, environmental sustainability, and social justice in their engagement with social media and expectations for influencer activism. Their extensive use of social media platforms amplifies their voices and shapes social trends, making them a critical demographic for brands aiming to convey green messaging effectively.

Finally, we discuss the implications of digital influencer activism. Despite its potential, digital influencer activism faces several challenges, including maintaining authenticity and balancing commercial and activist roles. Influencers must navigate issues of transparency, credibility, and the impact of digital technologies on societal well-being. Addressing these concerns is essential for fostering trust and achieving long-term brand loyalty, thereby reinforcing the effectiveness of brand activism and digital influencer strategies in contemporary marketing.

2.2. The Influence of Brand [Green] Activism on Brand Equity

Brand activism represents a pivotal shift in how businesses engage with society [2]. It is not just about promoting products or services; it is a strategic approach aimed at championing, challenging, or shaping social, political, economic, and environmental changes [31]. Regarding environmental issues, green [or environmental] brand activism may be defined as a company's action plan that utilizes its brand platforms, such as advertising, websites, product packaging, spokespeople, and other marketing tools, to promote environmental actions authentically [31]. Often called "instant cultural branding", this modern branding method rapidly integrates into mediated and public conversations with consumers [8]. It leverages pressing socio-cultural and political issues, creating a dynamic, real-time dialogue [8].

The "noble" pursuit of brand activism strives for societal betterment [7] and is a continuing development from the concept of corporate social responsibility [2]. Social responsibility plays a crucial role in shaping the perception and effectiveness of brand activism and influencer marketing [2,31]. Brand activism has gained attention recently as companies increasingly take a stand on societal issues [2,32]. Additionally, according to the 2024 Edelman Trust Barometer global report, governments are perceived as far less competent and ethical than companies [33]. In this context, "social good" is entering the mainstream: consumers want brands to take a stand on sociopolitical issues such as the climate crisis, and an increasing number of brands are actively involved in this trend [2]. Consequently, a deeper alignment of activist brand messages with brand purpose, values, and prosocial corporate actions is critical to the long-term success of an activist brand strategy, enhancing perceptions of brand or company authenticity [2].

In brand activism management, a brand clearly demonstrates its support or opposition to one side of a partisan sociopolitical issue, adopting a non-neutral stance on institutionally contested sociopolitical issues, such as same-sex marriage or gun control [34]. This process is operationalized by public speeches or actions focused on selected topics by the company, on behalf of the company, using its corporate or individual brand name [35]. Ultimately, it aims to create social change and improve marketing performance by raising awareness about a cause and influencing consumer behavioral change [2]. Previous authors [1] found that advice-giving can enhance brand activism behavior, support behavior, and benefit the brand, indicating that successful brand activism involves engaging consumers through advice. Similarly, authors [2] have highlighted the importance of aligning activist messaging, purpose, and values with prosocial corporate practice to engage in authentic brand activism, leading to potential social change and increased brand equity.

However, the path of brand activism has challenges. Communicating a brand's corporate social responsibility can paradoxically decrease public perception and value in cases where a brand works in a controversial industry, such as gambling, tobacco, or adult entertainment [10,36,37]. The concept of brand equity, encompassing numerous dimensions, further complicates this landscape [11]. There is a rich tapestry of perspectives on how brand equity forms and functions [11]. Moreover, researchers suggest that brand managers adopt a nuanced, dualistic perspective when considering raising issues that might be controversial, as it needs to consider the diverse associative biases of employees and customers, which can significantly influence consumer perception of a brand [38]. By doing so, a better and more holistic understanding of brand impact and perception emerges, which is essential in the dynamic contemporary scenario [11,31].

In recent decades, several trends have amplified the power of brand-focused activism: the increasing influence of social media [34], the growing importance of NGOs engaged in active green activism [10,39], the integration of sustainability issues into companies' values, strategies, and practices [2,10], and the rise of eco-consumerism concerns [39]. Different brands have supported green causes using diverse methodologies and platforms, including social media, by varying their levels of prosocial corporate practices and the intensity of activist marketing messaging [2]. Utilizing digital social media platforms involves an ethical obligation for brands and influencers to act in the best interest of society, balancing profit motives with societal well-being [10,11]. This concept underpins the authenticity of brand messages and the credibility of influencers as consumers increasingly demand transparency and ethical practices. Integrating social responsibility into brand and influencer strategies not only enhances consumer trust but also fosters long-term loyalty and positive brand equity [10,11,32]. These aspects lead to the formulation of the research hypotheses.

H1a. *Using social media is an effective way for brands to use green messaging, through the brand own channels.*

H1b. *Using social media is an effective way for brands to use green messaging, via digital influencers.*

2.3. The Role of Digital Influencers in Shaping Brand Equity

Seminal research has demonstrated that, in a general context, social influence occurs when opinions or behaviors are affected by others [40], in a process that involves conformity, the ease of influence to obtain gains and avoid disapproval from a person or group, with the content itself not being the reason for influence [41], identification (in which the desired relationship is associated with freedom from influence [42]), and internalization (that runs through the content that must be intrinsically rewarding and connected with the consumer's values, leading them to accept a belief or behavior [43]). Relating it to marketing communication, the budgets are substantial, and brands are investing in new media and formats, such as the internet and hybrid models, to better fit with changing consumer behavior [44,45]. Consumers now have the option to choose whether they want to receive marketing messages rather than to be passive recipients [16]. This shift has extended effects, not only on individual consumers but also on economic and social spheres [44]. The sphere of online social media marketing, especially its impact on brand equity, has also sparked keen interest. Social media marketing is compelling and challenging for brand strategists, marking a dynamic shift in how brands engage with audiences [45]. Additionally, the fusion of digital entrepreneurship and technology design in fostering digital inclusion and innovation is a noteworthy trend [46–48]. This might be particularly relevant in communicating sustainable companies' initiatives, given that social media can cause consumers to feel social pressure from others by comparing an individual's own behavior with others [49].

In this context, digital influencers play a pivotal role in branding strategies [25], brand image, and brand equity [29], displaying a diverse range of influences from augmenting

brand awareness to molding consumer behavior [25,34]. Brand awareness and image enhancement through influencers are particularly noteworthy, mainly through authentic content [23]. Complementing this, digital influencers may alter consumer perceptions and behaviors, thereby influencing purchase decisions [25,45]. Some studies [25,27,29,34] propose a different perspective by investigating the influencer marketing campaign process on Instagram, shedding light on the challenges managers face in measuring the return on investment and the impact of influencer marketing [46]. From that perspective, the authors commend the efforts made by brands to integrate digital influencers into their strategies despite the difficulties in measuring the impact of this practice [46].

The role of digital influencers in fostering brand associations and loyalty is multifaceted and profound, for instance, in how influencers' endorsements can transfer personal characteristics to the brand [26]. Additionally, a good influencer-brand alignment can enhance consumer trust [27], and the community-building prowess of influencers is crucial for brand loyalty [28]. Other studies further support this aspect, which emphasizes influencers' role in fostering consumer-brand relationships [47]. Digital influencers' cumulative impact on brand reputation and equity seems undeniable and multifaceted, and the influencers' personal branding efforts can substantially elevate a brand's market position [31]. To achieve this, digital influencers pay significant attention to their digital content. Influencers' content impacts people's behavior, depending on their relevance, reach, and persuasive capacity, but also on the degree of insertion of these people in each digital environment [48]. The contribution of content to impact individuals may also be associated with the number of brand followers on social media, as it is a number visible to everyone [49].

The influencer marketing landscape constantly evolves and presents significant challenges [25]. These challenges arise, especially from the behavior of Generation Z, who are increasingly aware of the marketing strategies used by influencers and brands, which can lead to distrust and avoidance of these practices [13]. The brand's perceived control over influencers' content also plays a crucial role in how consumers, particularly younger consumers, respond to influencer marketing [50,51]. In a duality between trusting and not trusting, several factors play an important role, such as the authenticity of the content [25,34], transparency in commercial partnerships [25], and the perception of the credibility of influencers that impact trust and the distrust side, concerns about the authenticity of the content promoted by influencers and the perception that they may not use the products they recommend [52]. Although it changes the applied sense, using influencers in a strategy can still directly impact purchasing and consumption decisions [34].

While influencers significantly contribute to brand awareness and loyalty [25,34], the direct messaging from brands might resonate more profoundly with consumers, especially in the realm of green activism, due to its perceived credibility and intrinsic connection to the brand's core values and actions [2,39]. So, direct brand communication might enhance authenticity and align more closely with corporate values and social responsibility initiatives, which are critical in fostering consumer trust and engagement [39]. By that, building on the established importance of brand activism and the pivotal role of digital influencers in shaping consumer perceptions, we propose that in the context of green messaging, brand-originated communications have a stronger impact on consumer perception compared to messages disseminated by digital influencers. So, considering that rationale, we suggest the following research hypothesis.

H2. *Green messaging has a stronger impact on consumer perception when endorsed by a brand.*

2.4. Gen Z's Influence on Digital Influencers and Activism

Gen Z, born between the late 1990s and early 2010s, is characterized by their digital nativity, social consciousness, and value for authenticity; being one of the largest generations in contemporary history, estimated to be close to 30% of the consumer population in the world by 2026 [53,54]. They are highly adept with technology, having grown up with smartphones and social media, and they prioritize inclusivity, environmental sustain-

ability, and social justice. Gen Z shares some similarities with previous generations. Like Gen Y, they are tech-savvy, value experiences over material possessions, and emphasize authenticity from brands and influencers, showing a strong preference for ethical and socially responsible practices. Compared to Gen X, Gen Z values independence and self-reliance, often displaying entrepreneurial spirit and adaptability, as both generations were shaped by witnessing economic challenges during their formative years [54,55]. Digital influencers are increasingly embracing activism, a trend significantly influenced by Gen Z consumers [13,14]. This generation's expectations have not only reshaped the role of influencers but have also set a new standard for all social media users [13]. The growing expectation for influencers to engage in activism reflects a broader shift in consumer behavior, highlighting the intertwining of social media marketing and digital activism [54,56,57]. Gen Z stands out for its unique blend of activism and social engagement, fueled primarily by its prolific use of social media platforms [25,34]. Known for their strategic efforts to enhance online personal influence, Gen Z individuals seek to boost their social media presence through likes, shares, and followers [54]. This intense engagement with social media does not just amplify their voices, it significantly shapes social trends, particularly in the realm of activism [34]. As social media natives, they see digital influencers as celebrities with vast influence over them [56]. Some digital influencers chose activism as their main voice in the social media realm, as it connects them to their audience from other influencers [58].

Previous studies underscore the critical role of social media in shaping trends and behaviors [54,57]. For instance, Ismail [57] highlights social media marketing's key role in building brand loyalty, underscoring its growing significance in the digital age and political attitudes' influence on digital activism [59]. Robles et al. [58] focused on the importance of political beliefs in driving digital activism, suggesting that understanding these underlying attitudes is vital. Furthermore, Ahuja et al. [59] explored how social media facilitates collective action, shedding light on the unique opportunities for activism these platforms offer. These discussions illustrate how consumers' demand for activism among digital influencers is more than a fleeting trend. It reflects more profound shifts in consumer expectations, influencing their peers and setting a new norm across all demographics on social media [59].

It is, therefore, possible to conclude that Gen Z consumers are deeply engaged with social media platforms [57,59]. This generation's prioritization of environmental sustainability and social justice suggests that they are particularly responsive to green messaging on these platforms. The influence of digital influencers, who are increasingly embracing activism, further supports the idea that social media serves as a powerful medium for green messaging. This alignment with Gen Z's values and their extensive use of social media demonstrates the effectiveness of these platforms in conveying environmental messages, thereby strengthening H1a and H1b proposed in this study.

2.5. Challenges and Issues in Digital Influencer Activism

Digital technologies propel digital activism and sustainable transitions [60]; thus, the impact of digital influencers as activists has garnered significant attention in the context of social media marketing and digital activism [60]. Indeed, the role of influencers in corporate social responsibility communication is valid and vital [61].

Research has highlighted the growing importance of social media marketing, particularly in influencing brand loyalty [57]. Furthermore, the role of digital skills in conditioning digital political participation has been studied, shedding light on the influence of digital competencies on digital activism [56]. Moreover, the impact of social media marketing activities on brand equity has been a subject of interest, indicating the attention-grabbing and challenging nature of social media marketing for brand marketers [41]. Additionally, the role of digital entrepreneurship and digital technology design activities in promoting digital inclusion and innovation systems has been examined (e.g., [60]), highlighting the potential of digital technologies in driving digital activism and sustainable transitions [60]. In the context of political activism, the role of political attitudes in digital activism has been

studied, emphasizing the need to understand the political beliefs of digital activism [62]. Furthermore, the influence of digital technologies on the development of economic subjects and the correlation analysis of digital technologies' influence on the GDP level have been explored, indicating the far-reaching impact of digital technologies on various domains besides brand activism [63].

The multifaceted concerns that digital influencers might have about their commercial and activist roles in society encompass various domains [27,30]. These concerns include transparency, impact on public health, and the repressive nature of surveillance [64]. Furthermore, digital influencers may grapple with the potential overlap between commercial and activist ends, the influence of digital media on political mobilization, and the impact of digital technologies on society [65]. Additionally, essential considerations for digital influencers' use of digital media for metapolitical goals, the construction of networked leadership, and the limitations of analytic activism are important considerations [65].

Authenticity is also a critical aspect for digital influencers to become activists [25]. More broadly, these concerns include issues related to authenticity, credibility, and the co-fabrication of authenticity by digital influencers [66]. Additionally, digital influencers may grapple with the commodification of authenticity [64] and the impact of influencer marketing on their perceived authenticity and responsibility [66]. Furthermore, concerns about maintaining creative freedom, speaking honestly about products, and the potential questioning of authenticity and credibility are essential considerations for digital influencers [34,46]. Moreover, the influence of digital records authenticity, vehicular authentication in ad-hoc networks, and the challenges of authentic digital scenarios are areas that digital influencers may find concerning in their roles [67].

Generation Z's appreciation for authenticity and ethical practices influences their perception of both brands and influencers. They expect digital influencers to engage in sponsored content and promote green messaging directly on their channels, as well as through paid promotions with influencers. When they see brands actively endorsing green messaging, it reinforces the message, making it more impactful on consumer perceptions [58,59]. This endorsement by credible figures or brands magnifies the influence of green messaging, suggesting that brand endorsement is highly effective in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors. This strengthens H2 proposed in this study.

3. Material and Methods

3.1. Framework

Given the knowledge gaps found and the literature review, Figure 1 summarizes the framework used in the empirical study, putting into practice the main hypotheses previously established.

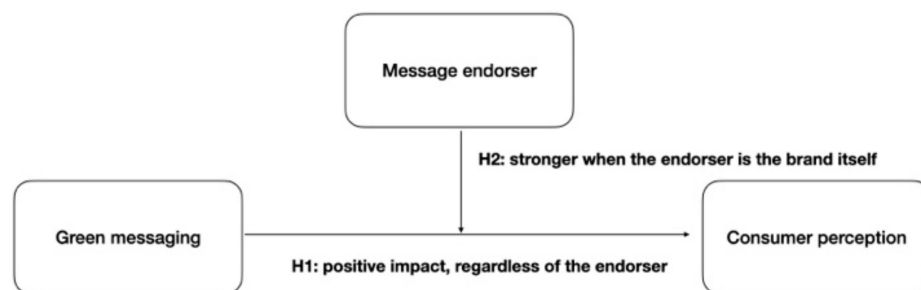


Figure 1. The framework of the empirical study.

The framework illustrates the influence of green messaging on consumer perception and the significance of the message endorser. Hypothesis 1 posits that green messaging positively affects consumer perception regardless of the endorser (H1a and H1b). However, hypothesis 2 (H2) suggests that this positive impact is stronger when the brand itself endorses the message. This implies that consumers find green messaging more credible and authentic when it comes directly from the brand, leading to greater trust and a stronger

positive influence on their perception. This framework highlights the critical role of both the message content and its source in shaping consumer attitudes towards a brand.

3.2. Research Design

This study employed an empirical quantitative approach, using an online questionnaire to collect primary data. The sample consisted of six pairs of brands and digital influencers representing various industries, such as personal care/hygiene, clothes, and food. The brands used in this study were Garnier, Nivea, The Body Shop, Bioré, Tezenis, and Too Good To Go. Besides posting about an environmental cause at the data-gathering time simultaneously with an influencer, the brands were selected for having different characteristics to foster diversity in the research—the brands belong to different sectors; some operate internationally, and others are national, and they vary in dimension. The environmental posts were related to animal rights, sustainable products, sustainable packaging, and general earth protection. Besides those aspects, the brands were chosen randomly while pursuing different typologies of green messages.

3.3. Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire was divided into two main sections. One section presented a real social media post from one of the six brands, showcasing a green action undertaken by that brand (examples in Appendix A). The following section featured the same action of the same brand but communicated by a digital influencer using influencer-generated content (examples in Appendix B). Besides those two main sections, the questionnaire also had a section to understand the participants' involvement in activism (their passion for activism and their consuming decisions in sensitive situations) and another section to describe the respondents' demographic profile.

3.4. Data Collection

Participants were asked to analyze both posts (brands and influencers), responding to the same questions and variables for each scenario. The main variables were adapted from Gray's previous study [68] and measured using a 5-point Likert response scale [from 1—Totally disagree to 5—Totally agree]. The variables were operationalized through responses to the following sentences:

- Benefits the society/world [Var 1]
- Seems to benefit people [Var 2]
- Made you have a positive opinion about the brand [Var 3]
- Changed your view about the brand [Var 4]
- Changed your view on the cause [Var 5]
- Is a genuine contribution to the cause [Var 6]
- The intention is more to make a profit than to collaborate with society [Var 7]
- May positively affect your intention to buy that brand [Var 8]

These variables were designed to assess the perceived impact of brand and influencer-led green actions on consumer perceptions and attitudes.

3.5. Data and Sample

The data were structured and analyzed quantitatively using IBM SPSS 25 software, employing descriptive techniques and inferential hypothesis testing via non-parametric tests.

The sample profile consisted of 550 participants, 48% female, 49% male, and 3% identifying as other. The mean age was 28.3 years, with a standard deviation of 12.9. Almost 70% of the sample consisted of Gen Z individuals. In addition to demographics, an initial analysis of the participants was conducted to understand their passion for causes, based on Hermann's [69] types of causes classification. As shown in Table 1, environmental causes were rated second, and the mean passion level for environmental causes was higher than "very interested" [mean = 3.13].

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of consumers' passion for activism themes.

Variable ^a	Total Sample [N = 550]		
	Mean	Median	Std. Dev.
Passion for social causes	3.28	3.00	0.741
Passion for environmental causes	3.13	3.00	0.714
Passion for political causes	2.79	3.00	0.843
Passion for economic causes	3.06	3.00	0.822
Passion for cultural causes	2.94	3.00	0.847

Source: authors' own elaboration based on survey output. ^a Response options: 1—Disinterested, 2—Not much interested, 3—Very interested, and 4—Extremely interested.

4. Results

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics regarding the participants' green activism actions concerning the boycotting and "buycotting" of brands [based on Hong's [70] classification]. Through those results, it can be deduced that consumers tend to agree that they have been taking several individual actions to make brands act toward a positive change in society. More specifically, the participants tend to make those actions using their purchasing power to express their green values, either by buying or not buying ["buycotting"] brands.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of consumers' activism with boycotts and "buycotts".

Variable—in the Last Six Months... ^a	Valid Sample [N = 431] ^b		
	Mean	Median	Std. Dev.
Made a buycott to make a brand change position	3.46	4.00	1.394
Made a kind of boycott to make a brand change position	2.86	3.00	1.359
Made a boycott to express an emotion	2.88	3.00	1.395
Bought the brand to express support for a cause	3.09	3.00	1.455

Source: authors' own elaboration based on survey output. ^a Variables measured from 1 to 4 on a Likert scale. ^b In the valid sample, the missing values responses were excluded.

Regarding the two main research hypotheses, the study's respective main variables for the statistical analysis were tested using non-parametric statistics, given that the normality distribution was not verified, as can be verified in Table 3.

Table 3. Statistics of normality distribution by type of post.

Variable ^a	Brands Posts * [N = 431] ^b			Influencers Posts * [N = 431] ^b		
	SK	Ku	KS	SK	ku	KS
Var 1 Benefits the society/world	−1.154	0.906	0.000 *	−0.647	−0.542	0.000 *
Var 2 Seems to benefit people	−1.028	0.835	0.000 *	−0.799	−0.164	0.000 *
Var 3 Positive opinion about the brand	−1.077	0.681	0.000 *	−0.609	−0.352	0.000 *
Var 4 Changed the view about the brand	−0.554	−0.264	0.000 *	−0.483	−0.520	0.000 *
Var 5 Changed your view on the cause	−0.488	−0.331	0.000 *	−0.359	−0.747	0.000 *
Var 6 Is a genuine contribution to the cause	−0.789	0.017	0.000 *	−0.578	−0.466	0.000 *
Var 7 The intention is to make a profit vs to collaborate with society	−0.532	−0.497	0.000 *	−0.678	−0.274	0.000 *
Var 8 May positively affect your intention to buy that brand	−0.822	0.148	0.000 *	−0.552	−0.585	0.000 *

Source: authors' elaboration based on survey output. ^a Variables measured from 1 to 5 on a Likert scale. ^b In the valid sample, the responses with missing values were excluded. * Rejection of the hypothesis $p = 0.05$ applying the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test.

Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics of the main variables in this study, separated by the two types of posts studied: brand posts and digital influencer posts. In all those variables,

the mean is higher than the middle/neutral point [i.e., mean = 3]. Therefore, we used the one-sample Wilcoxon signed-rank test to examine whether the data would come from a symmetric population with a specified median [the middle/neutral point, mean = 3], given that this is the appropriate non-parametric test for that purpose [71]. In all those variables, the one-sample Wilcoxon signed rank test led to the rejection of the null hypothesis of the median being equal to that neutral point [$p = 0.000$ in all variables]. These results support both H1a and H1b, leading to the interpretation that using social media is an effective way for brands to communicate green actions, either via owned media (the brand itself) and digital influencers.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of consumers' posts evaluation.

Variable ^a	Brands' Posts [N = 431] ^b			Influencers' Posts [N = 431] ^b		
	Mean	Median	Std. Dev.	Mean	Median	Std. Dev.
Var 1 Benefits the society/world	4.05	4.00	1.066	3.63	4.00	1.275
Var 2 Seems to benefit people	3.93	4.00	1.028	3.66	4.00	1.266
Var 3 Made a positive opinion about the brand	4.01	4.00	1.083	3.56	4.00	1.209
Var 4 Changed your view of the brand	3.48	4.00	1.167	3.35	3.00	1.239
Var 5 Changed your view on the cause	3.41	3.00	1.179	3.26	3.00	1.278
Var 6 Is a genuine contribution to the cause	3.84	4.00	1.099	3.48	4.00	1.246
Var 7 The intention is to make a profit vs to collaborate with society	3.64	4.00	1.151	3.65	4.00	1.193
Var 8 May positively affect your intention to buy that brand	3.79	4.00	1.127	3.50	4.00	1.259

Source: authors' elaboration based on survey output. ^a Variables measured from 1 to 5 on a Likert scale. ^b In the valid sample, the responses with missing values were excluded.

In further analysis, regarding H2, the effectiveness of brands' and digital influencers' posts was compared, as shown in Table 5. In almost all variables [except Var 7], the brands had a higher mean than the influencers' posts. This result is statistically significant in all variables [tested via the Wilcoxon signs classification test]. So, it seems even more effective for brands to communicate green actions via owned media [brands' posts] than via earned media [influencers' posts], which supports H2.

Table 5. Comparison of consumers' posts evaluation.

Variable ^a	Brands' Posts [N = 431] ^b	Influencers' Posts [N = 431] ^b	Brands' vs. Influencers' Posts
	Mean	Mean	Wilcoxon Test
Var 1 Benefits the society/world	4.05	3.63	$p = 0.000$ * $Z = -8.714$
Var 2 Seems to benefit people	3.93	3.66	$p = 0.000$ * $Z = -6.190$
Var 3 Made a positive opinion about the brand	4.01	3.56	$p = 0.000$ * $Z = -7.767$
Var 4 Changed your view of the brand	3.48	3.35	$p = 0.004$ * $Z = -2.889$
Var 5 Changed your view on the cause	3.41	3.26	$p = 0.001$ * $Z = -3.448$
Var 6 Is a genuine contribution to the cause	3.84	3.48	$p = 0.000$ * $Z = -7.840$
Var 7 The intention is to make a profit vs to collaborate with society	3.64	3.65	$p = 0.036$ * $Z = -2.093$
Var 8 May positively affect your intention to buy that brand	3.79	3.50	$p = 0.000$ * $Z = -5.733$

Source: authors' elaboration based on survey output. ^a Variables measured from 1 to 5 on a Likert scale. ^b In the valid sample, the responses with missing values were excluded. * Rejection of the hypothesis $p = 0.05$ [two-tailed].

5. Conclusions and Implications

Green brand activism has been included in a growing number of brand strategies, and genuine engagement in social and environmental issues may have a relevant impact on consumer trust and loyalty if activist messages are aligned with the brand's purpose and values. Social media marketing is tailoring many brands' strategic decisions and operational practices fostering impacts on consumers' perceptions and behaviors. Based on this dynamic shift in how brands engage with audiences, our literature review highlighted the growing importance of social media marketing and digital activism on brand vision and practices.

In this context, this article aimed to contribute to the discussion about the effectiveness of communicating and promoting brands' green actions through digital media channels, specifically, to study the effectiveness of digital marketing communication for promoting brands' green actions through social media posts from digital influencers and the brand's official social media account. To achieve this, we conducted an empirical quantitative study that collected data on respondents' passion for different types of causes, their green activism actions concerning brands, and the perceptual impact of digital communication through the brand itself and a digital influencer in three distinct product categories. The perceptual impact was studied by analyzing respondents' perceptions of green actions in social media content posted by digital influencers and the brand itself.

Based on the empirical results, communicating sustainable actions through social media plays a significant role in consumer perception [2,31], supporting H1. These findings align with previous research indicating that consumers are sensitive to social and environmental causes and use their purchasing power to influence brand behavior [2,34] positively. The data analysis showed that both brands' and digital influencers' posts positively impact consumers' perceptions of green activism practices [31]. According to our analysis, we also deduce that the use of digital social media is an effective way for brands to communicate green actions and that green brand content has a positive impact on consumers' perceptions regarding activism practices, whether posted directly through the brand's social media platforms or through a digital influencer, in line with previous studies [2,39].

However, the empirical results indicated that brands' posts scored higher than influencers' posts, suggesting that brands have an advantage when communicating their sustainable actions directly through their own social media channels [31,34]. These findings support our hypothesis that in the context of green messaging, brand-originated communications have a more substantial impact on consumer perception compared to messages disseminated by digital influencers [2,39]. Additionally, these findings align with prior studies showing that brands' posts are perceived as more authentic and genuine than digital influencers' posts [31]. This point highlights the importance of transparency and credibility in communicating sustainable practices, as consumers value the authenticity of brands when addressing environmental and social issues [10,11]. Therefore, brands looking to promote their green activism initiatives should consider building a consistent and transparent narrative in their social media communication strategies [2,10].

In the present study, we found support for H2, the hypothesis that green messaging has a stronger impact on consumer perception when endorsed by a brand. Based on that, we suggest including a third type of message endorser, celebrities, given the ongoing debate about the effectiveness of influencers versus celebrities [24,34]. Additionally, we propose examining brand image as a relevant outcome.

Finally, this study's results highlight the need for brands to invest in effective communication strategies to promote their sustainability actions [2,39]. The finding that brand posts had a more significant impact than influencers suggests that brands can strengthen their image and reputation through direct and authentic communication with consumers [2,23]. By taking a more proactive approach to publicizing their green activism initiatives, brands can raise awareness about environmental issues and build stronger relationships with their target audience, fostering consumer loyalty and trust [2,31,39].

Like any investigation, this one has limitations that must be considered when interpreting the results. An important limitation of this study is its exclusive focus on consumers' perceptions of brands and influencers' posts about green activism, without exploring other critical aspects of consumer behavior or broader marketing performance metrics. This scope means that we did not examine how those perceptions translate into actual consumer behaviors, such as purchasing decisions, loyalty, or advocacy, which are essential for understanding the full impact of green messaging. Additionally, the study does not consider other marketing performance indicators like sales growth, market share, or return on investment, which could provide a more comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness of green communication strategies. The authors anticipated this limitation and accepted it as a necessary condition to ensure the study remained manageable and within the scope of the chosen methodology. This methodological choice allowed for a focused and detailed examination of consumer perceptions but inevitably excluded broader behavioral and performance metrics.

Another limitation is the lack of an in-depth analysis of the long-term impact of brand communication strategies. Our study provides a snapshot of consumer perceptions at a single point in time, but it does not account for how these perceptions might evolve or change over an extended period. Long-term studies are crucial to understand whether the positive effects of green messaging on consumer perception are sustained over time or if they diminish as consumers are exposed to more such messages. Additionally, the long-term impact on brand loyalty, repeat purchases, and overall brand equity remains unexplored.

Future research should address these limitations by incorporating a wider range of consumer behavior metrics and marketing performance indicators. Longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into the enduring effects of green communication strategies and help brands refine their approaches to sustain positive consumer perceptions and achieve long-term marketing success.

Regarding the contributions of this study, this article offers significant managerial insights by highlighting the importance of direct brand communication in promoting green activism initiatives. Brands can leverage these insights to enhance their social media strategies, focusing on building authentic and transparent narratives that resonate with consumers. Brands can foster stronger consumer trust and loyalty by emphasizing their commitment to environmental and social causes directly through their own official media channels. Managers should also recognize the potential advantage of using brand-originated messages over influencer-promoted content to communicate sustainability efforts. This approach can help brands strengthen their image, improve consumer perceptions, and drive positive purchasing behaviors.

Theoretically, this study advances the understanding of brand activism and the role of digital influencers in shaping consumer perceptions. It contributes to the literature by empirically demonstrating that brand-originated communications have a more substantial effect on consumer perception than influencer-promoted messages, particularly reinforcing the importance that brand activist practices need to be aligned with the brand's purpose and values. This finding supports the hypothesis that direct brand communication enhances authenticity and aligns more closely with corporate values and social responsibility initiatives. Additionally, the study highlights the evolving expectations of Gen Z consumers, emphasizing their preference for transparency and ethical practices. These insights contribute to the broader discourse on brand equity, social media marketing, and consumer behavior, providing a nuanced understanding of how brands can effectively engage with contemporary audiences.

For future studies, longitudinal research is suggested to evaluate the long-term impact of brands' communication strategies regarding green activism. Furthermore, exploring how different consumer segments respond to brands' sustainability messages and how these perceptions influence purchasing behavior would be interesting. Investigating the effectiveness of different content formats and social media platforms in communicating

sustainable practices can also provide additional insights to enhance brands' green marketing strategies.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, P.D.S., D.X.-B., F.S.S. and K.M. Methodology, P.D.S., D.X.-B. and F.S.S.; formal analysis, P.D.S.; writing P.D.S.; D.X.-B., F.S.S. and K.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This article is financed by Instituto Politécnico de Setúbal. The authors also thank CEFAGE, namely National Funds of the FCT—Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology within the project UIDB/04007/2020.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical review and approval were waived for this study due to the nonexistence of an Ethics Committee at the time.

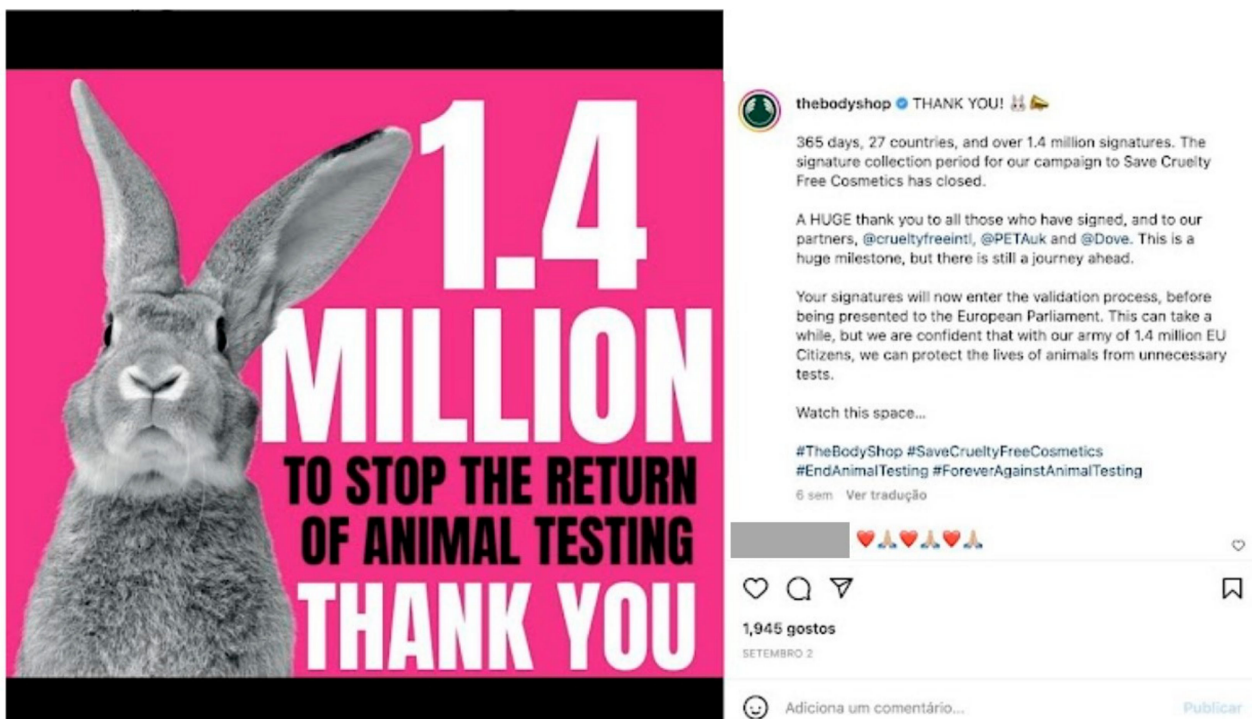
Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data of this study is available on request from the corresponding author [PS].

Acknowledgments: The authors acknowledge the voluntary responses of all participants, the help of the undergraduate Marketing students involved in the data collection, and the support of Instituto Politécnico de Setúbal and CEFAGE.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest. The funders had no role in the study's design, the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data, the writing of the manuscript, or the decision to publish the results.

Appendix A. Examples of Brands' Posts





Appendix B. Examples of Influencers' Posts





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