



## Sustainability, brand authenticity and Instagram messaging

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### ABSTRACT

The role of Instagram brand messaging as a force for good is examined when a brand's mission is creating societal change and where being authentic can also lead to controversy and negative responses. A depth study of an exemplary brand is used to explore brand authenticity in the context of sustainability, brand activism messaging and consumer responses to brand posts on Instagram. We offer a unique perspective by focusing on authentic brand sustainability activism. 104 brand messages and 5541 consumer responses to Patagonia, an activist brand renowned for supporting environmental and social issues, are analysed. An extended 'activist sustainability view' of brand authenticity is proposed including the conceptualisation of *authentic brand sustainability activism*. Eight types of consumer response to brand sustainability posts that encompass both positive and negative sentiment are identified. Theoretical and managerial implications, and avenues for future research are offered.

### 1. Introduction

The climate crisis poses an existential threat; if we don't clean up our mess, we'll be history. Business has a role to play, but it's only one lever. We must use all the tools at our disposal to secure a safer, more just future. (Ryan Gellert, Patagonia CEO cited in [Patagonia, \(2022a\)](#)).

A key issue in business research concerns how organisations position themselves to deliver more than growth and profit – positive impact on society and the environment as tenets of sustainability are a given ([Lloveras et al., 2022](#)). An emphasis on sustainability marketing that considers a variety of marketing practices and interactions is now critical if there is to be genuine change for people and planet ([Thomas, 2018](#)). Brands are increasingly used as a marketing tool for more than driving sales – they can represent an organisation's *raison d'être* and become a platform for societal change. Brand identity created around sustainability must deliver on promises and ensure authentic embedding of sustainability ([Vallaster et al., 2012](#)). Research suggests that when brands promote sustainability values it is essential to be perceived as authentic because consumers are often sceptical about sustainability claims ([Ginder & Byun, 2022](#); [Iglesias & Ind, 2020](#)). But what happens in terms of brand authenticity when a sustainable brand takes a stand on controversial environmental, social, and economic issues and essentially becomes a sustainable activist brand?

Being an authentic brand and communicating authentically is characterised by having brand behaviour and core values that are consistent

over time ([Bruhn et al., 2012](#); [Fritz et al., 2017](#); [Spiggle et al., 2012](#)), remaining real, truthful, honest and true to itself ([Becker et al., 2019](#); [Beverland, 2006](#)), and symbolising what the brand stands for ([Jian et al., 2019](#); [Morhart et al., 2015](#)). Brand scholars agree on four key dimensions of brand authenticity that can lead to enhanced brand attachment, positive word of mouth, and intentions to purchase, including continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism ([Carsana & Jolibert, 2018](#); [Morhart et al., 2015](#)). These dimensions of brand authenticity have been exemplified by famous brands that show leadership in some facet of business and connect well with their customers, for example Lego, Amazon and Apple ([Goldsmith, 2019](#)). However, while many famously authentic brands have well-accepted prosocial Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) agendas they tend not to adopt issues that are divisive ([Mirzaei et al., 2022](#)). Less is known about how the reported dimensions of brand authenticity play out in the context of activist brands that have strong, uncompromising, and sometimes polarising socio-political and sustainability agendas ([Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020](#)).

Brand activism is an emerging phenomenon where brands take a stance on controversial issues such as addressing climate change, using their platform to impact societal goals ([Vredenburg et al., 2020](#)). We embrace Eilert & Napier Cherup's (2020) view of brand activism as an organisation's commitment to addressing societal and global issues by impacting attitudes and behaviours of actors in its system to initiate change. By definition, the strategy of such brands is underpinned by their purpose and values. At first sight, it might be expected that brands

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committed to sustainability build loyalty and cultivate lifelong customers who share their values. However, this strategy is a double-edged sword when a sustainable brand also becomes an activist brand (Cammarota et al., 2023).

Taking a strong position exposes a brand to risk and marketing leaders tend to worry about delivering on their core mission in a brand-consistent manner. There is considerable danger in a brand being fully honest and uncompromising, transparent and unequivocal about both vision and flaws (Carsana & Jolibert, 2018; Morhart et al., 2015). This is particularly evident in the face of social media backlash, which is challenging especially for activist sustainable brands that are unwilling to rebrand, reposition or change in the face of criticism. Social media strategies play an important role in ensuring the sustainability intent of brands is communicated authentically through effective messaging (Kong et al., 2021). Such social media messages invite discussion among consumers and, crucially, with 'non-consumers' who may follow a brand for other reasons. Posts of activist brands communicate the deliberate alignment with causes that create controversy (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Activist brands truly committed to raising awareness of sustainability related issues do so through posts that elicit two-sided consumer responses. Furthermore, these brands stand by their convictions despite the fallout. However, it is evident that the literature does not fully encompass the complexity of brand authenticity for activist brands with sustainability at their core, particularly as they elicit both negative and positive responses from the wider community and their brand followers.

Our study offers a more nuanced approach to brand authenticity through an in-depth examination of messaging from a sustainable and activist brand that takes a stance on complex sustainability issues and is purposely controversial and provocative in order to shift consumers towards societal change (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020; Mirzaei et al., 2022). This exploratory work adopts an in-depth case analysis of Patagonia, an activist sustainable brand renowned for its commitment to sustainability and stance on environmental issues and social causes. We address two key questions RQ1) What are the characteristics of sustainability messages posted by an activist sustainable brand and how do they align with brand mission? RQ2) How do consumers respond to such messages in terms of brand authenticity and sentiment?

Our research takes a unique perspective in that we focus on brand authenticity of an activist sustainable brand on the business objective of creating societal change through official brand posts on Instagram. In doing so we make three key contributions to brand authenticity and brand activism literature. First, we build on recent brand activism work to incorporate sustainability, resulting in a new definition for an activist sustainable brand. Second, we re-conceptualise brand authenticity in the context of activist sustainable brands and propose a definition of authentic brand sustainable activism, extending the work of Vredenburg et al. (2020) on authentic brand activism. Importantly, we propose an extended 'activist sustainable view' of brand authenticity and identify nuances of brand authenticity important for activist sustainable brands. Third, we identify eight types of consumer response to an activist sustainable brand's posts that encompass both positive and negative sentiment. In doing so, we provide evidence of activist sustainable brand message sentiment and extend the scope of Instagram as a force for good by understanding how messaging can be used in the context of sustainability and activism. Finally, we offer practitioner insights into marketing practice for sustainable brands that intend to move towards being an activist sustainable brand.

## 2. Sustainability, sustainability marketing and activist brands

There remains increased pressure on business to respond to the grand challenges of our time – pandemics, climate change, poverty and, sustainability. This aligns with a growing awareness of planetary boundaries and the need to ensure negative impacts on our environment are minimised. Sustainability initiatives designed to address social and environmental issues are regarded as an inherent component of

organisational strategy. Such attention to 'sustainability' arguably covers the 'triple bottom line' with care for people, planet and prosperity (Elkington, 1997; Lelieveld, 2012). Although the term sustainability is complex (Barone et al., 2020), it is often encapsulated in three key aspects – environmental (preservation of natural resources), social (improving living conditions and promoting equal opportunities), and economic (economic viability that ensures wellbeing for people and planet) (Hanss & Böhm, 2012). From an organisational perspective, sustainability considerations extend from production to consumption, through to how an organisation's sustainability marketing efforts are communicated to stakeholders, including consumers.

Sustainability marketing is a growing field of study that still requires research to understand the nuances of what constitutes sustainable marketing practices and management (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019). There is a need for marketing to move towards an orientation that 'drives markets for sustainable products and services and builds sustainable societies' (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2021, p. 150) forming realistic holistic solutions to sustainability issues (Thomas, 2018).

The role of marketing in promoting sustainability has been a continuing feature of explorations designed to understand the relationship between marketing, communication and sustainability (Lim, 2016; Palakshappa & Dodds, 2020). Marketing and communication are crucial in directing both value and identity for organisations (Li, 2022). Within this context, brand messaging performs an important function in promoting engagement between an organisation's efforts around sustainability by connecting brands and consumers (Fernández et al., 2022). Brands, using cause connection, create more meaningful associations through marketing communication (Keller, 2020). Positive engagement provides a win-win – for the organisation, brand value is enhanced, and identity is strengthened; for the consumer, there is satisfaction in associating with and supporting what they consider to be an authentic sustainable brand.

However, when a brand makes a commitment to take a stand on sustainability issues such as climate change, environmental protection, diversity and inclusion, and it goes beyond being a sustainable brand and good corporate citizen, it becomes an activist brand, engaged in corporate/brand activism (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020; Moorman, 2020). The difference between being a sustainable brand as a responsible corporate citizen, adopting sustainability practices (e.g., offering sustainable products, implementing transparent supply chains, and promoting sustainability); and an activist brand is the degree of partisanship and extent to which the issues being raised are favoured by consumers. Sustainable brands tend not to be partisan when they are applying sustainability practices and promoting sustainable behaviours (e.g., recycling, reducing waste) that are generally accepted by society. In contrast, an activist brand can be polarising by highlighting potentially controversial issues (e.g., climate change, diversity and equity issues) (Bhagwat et al., 2020). Highlighting these differences and combining both sustainability and activism, we coin the term *activist sustainability brand*. We define an *activist sustainability brand* (ASB) as follows:

An activist sustainability brand has sustainability as a core ethos and is committed to sustainability practices, while taking a stand on environmental, social and environment issues to create societal and planetary change.

When brands, particularly sustainable brands, become activists, they take a huge risk as their motives are examined more closely and consumers become more sceptical about them "woke washing" (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Therefore, ASBs need to be even more cognisant of 'brand authenticity' than non-activist brands.

## 3. Brand authenticity

A cross-disciplinary understanding is that authenticity is about being true and original, and true to oneself where actions reflect the core-self

(Fritz et al., 2017). Authenticity is associated with attributes such as genuineness, reality, and truthfulness (Molleda, 2010; Schallehn et al., 2014). In marketing, authenticity is seen as a prized quality for brands and organisations because it improves message and source credibility by reducing consumer scepticism and enhancing trustworthiness with indirect benefits that include loyalty and advocacy behaviours (Pérez, 2019).

Brand authenticity has become a business imperative which needs to be carefully managed to ensure brand actions and perceptions reflect the image and story an organisation wants to portray (Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020). Consumers are demanding brands be authentic particularly in their marketing communications (Chiu et al., 2012) and interactions. The increase in social media and online reviews in the past 20 years has enabled brands to communicate with their consumers and for consumers to converse with each other (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Consumers are able to scrutinise brands, enter into dialogue with them and others, and voice their opinions and feelings (Campagna et al., 2023) making it essential that a brand 'lives up to its promise' (Dwivedi & McDonald, 2018, p. 1388).

A review of the literature identified many conceptualisations and dimensions of brand authenticity for mainstream brands (i.e., brands that do not have sustainability and/or activism as a core ethos) as outlined in Table 1. The consensus across the definitions of brand authenticity is that to be authentic brands need to be genuine and true to their core values. Key brand authenticity dimensions that appear constant are – continuity/consistency (timelessness, history, and heritage), credibility (reliability, trustworthiness, and sincerity), integrity (good values and sincere care), and symbolism (styles, symbols, what the brand stands for). Scholars have considered brand authenticity in a CSR context, where brands implement CSR initiatives, highlighting that these brands need to be cautious about their claims and must ensure that their CSR actions are genuine and sincere (Alhouthi et al., 2016; Pérez, 2019). Likewise, when a brand makes assurances about sustainability it is critical for them to be authentic and to be believed (Iglesias & Ind, 2020). However, there is a gap in the literature regarding how brand authenticity plays out for an activist brand with a sustainability mission.

Recently, scholarship has begun to address the phenomenon of brand activism and authenticity (Ahmad et al., 2024; Mirzaei et al., 2022; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Vredenburg et al., (2020, p. 446) are arguably the first to formally define 'authentic brand activism', "as a purpose- and values-driven strategy in which a brand adopts a nonneutral stance in institutionally contested sociopolitical issues, to create social change and marketing success." They propose four characteristics of authentic brand activists – brand is purpose and values-driven; it addresses controversial, contested, or polarising sociopolitical issues; the issues can be progressive or conservative in nature; and the brand contributes towards a sociopolitical issue/s through messaging and brand practice. Mirzaei et al. (2022) join the conversation with a 'woke brand activism authenticity' framework identifying six dimensions including – social context independency (history of activism), inclusion (gender, race, age-neutral), sacrifice (forgo profit for society), practice (practice what they preach), fit (causes align with brand's core values), and motivation (altruistic and transparent). More recently, Ahmad et al. (2024) provide empirical evidence that establishing brand cause fit and using concrete messages, as opposed to abstract messages, is more effective at strengthening perceptions of activist brand authenticity. Despite these advancements in authentic brand activism, brand scholars have not considered activist brands that have a holistic view of sustainability (i.e., prepared to make a stance on many issues related to environmental, social, and economic factors), what we refer to as an ASB, and, importantly, have not explored the type of consumers responses, positive and negative, that such a brand would evoke.

Central to brand authenticity is the premise that an authentic brand has beneficial impacts, particularly on consumer responses and behaviours (Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020). Studies have demonstrated that perceived brand authenticity is linked with positive outcomes such as

**Table 1**

Review of brand authenticity definitions and dimensions – Note: Bold dimensions highlight constancy of the dimensions across the literature, namely – consistency/continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism.

Brand authenticity definition	Brand authenticity dimensions and Authors
Brand authenticity is constructed by consumer perceptions and is culturally determined; consumers decide what is real, genuine, and authentic	<b>Heritage, consistency</b> , genuineness, truth - Beverland (2006, 2009) Beverland & Farrelly (2010)
Genuineness of the brand	<b>Continuity</b> , originality, <b>reliability (credibility)</b> , naturalness - Bruhn et al. (2012)
Brand extension authenticity – consumers' sense that a brand extension is a legitimate, culturally consistent extension of the parent brand	<b>Styles and standards (symbolism)</b> , brand <b>heritage (consistency)</b> , preserving brand essence, avoiding brand exploitation Spiggle et al. (2012)
Perceived brand authenticity depends on the perception of its antecedents, i.e., its individuality, consistency, and continuity. Brand attributes should be reflected in its individual, consistent, and continuous brand behaviour	<b>Consistency, continuity</b> , and individuality - Schallehn et al. (2014)
Consumer's assessment of the brand's genuineness	Quality commitment, brand <b>heritage, sincerity</b> - Napoli et al. (2016; 2014)
Extent to which consumers perceive a brand to be faithful and true towards itself and its consumers, and to support consumers being true to themselves	<b>Continuity, credibility, integrity, symbolism</b> - Morhart et al. (2015)
<i>Related to CSR</i> – the perception of a company's CSR actions as a genuine and true expression of the company's beliefs and behaviours towards society that extend beyond legal requirements	Genuine, unique, <b>consistent</b> with values, true to itself, stands up for what it believes, socially responsible -Alhouthi et al. (2016)
Perceived consistency of a brand's behaviour that reflects its core values and norms; that it is true to itself	<b>Continuity</b> , originality, <b>reliability</b> , naturalness - Fritz et al. (2017)
Interplay of objective facts (indexical), subjective mental associations (iconic authenticity) and existential motives (existential authenticity); depends on how consumers perceive the brand to be true to itself	<b>Continuity, integrity, credibility, symbolism</b> - Carsana & Jolibert (2018)
Brand authenticity is a way to build brand trust, helps build a unique brand identity and provides strong associations	<b>Virtue (integrity)</b> , connection, realism, <b>aesthetics (symbolism)</b> , control, originality - Tran & Keng (2018)
Genuine, real, and true with regard to some executional element	Preserving brand essence, brand <b>heritage (continuity)</b> , realistic, <b>credible</b> - Becker et al. (2019)
<i>Related to CSR</i> – a sense that consumers gain when a brand that is involved in environmental issues and/or social causes communicates its CSR activities. The message is perceived as sincere, original, genuine, unaffected, and distinct	<b>Sincere</b> , original, genuine, unaffected, distinct, reflects essence of brand - Perez (2019)
A judgment about the genuineness of a brand's image; consumers' judgement of whether that image reflects what the brand really is	<b>Credibility, integrity, continuity, and symbolism</b> - Cinelli & LeBoeuf (2020)
Genuine brand with a unique style that cares about being open and honest with consumers and will survive times and trends	Conscious, <b>longevity (continuity)</b> , self-empowerment - Campagna et al. (2023)

brand attachment, relationship quality, positive word of mouth (WOM), and forgiveness (Fritz et al., 2017; Morhart et al., 2015). However, we argue in the context of ASBs that are strong advocates for change that sometimes being authentic can lead to negative responses, due to the maintenance of a strong voice that can polarise consumers, particularly around issues of climate change and other sustainability issues (Jung et al., 2020). Existing conceptualisations do not fully encompass the complexity of brand authenticity when an activist brand elicits both negative and positive responses from the wider community and their

brand followers. Given the two-sided nature of brand authenticity in the context of sustainability, a nuanced approach is especially critical when studying brands that actively take a stance on complex issues and are purposely controversial or provocative in order to shift consumers towards societal change (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020).

In order to understand how ASBs are perceived as authentic or otherwise, it is important to examine how such brands communicate their sustainability values, how brand authenticity is portrayed and how consumers respond to brand messages. Ideally, concrete sustainability brand communication offers credible information, enabling consumers to understand the content and connect with the story (Chiu et al., 2012). There is considerable evidence in the literature to indicate that posts on social media that reflect CSR and sustainability practice produce positive benefits. Consumer support of brand messages is often contingent on involvement with the social issue or cause that the brand is communicating about and their level of engagement with the brand (Li et al., 2022) which, if perceived as authentic, could be a catalyst for creating a trajectory of lasting change (Choi, 2020; Holiday et al., 2021). Brand authenticity in all brand communication is essential for organisational success and for initiating greater positive societal change towards a sustainable future. Studies have identified that communication effectiveness is related to fit with various causes (Champlin et al., 2019). Recent research suggests that consumer perceptions of fit are an important antecedent of positive outcomes when marketers focus their efforts on sustainable marketing strategies (Gleim et al., 2023). However, for activist brands not all consumer sentiment in response to brand posts is positive (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Therefore, work is needed to develop a nuanced understanding of brand authenticity in social media marketing communication around brand activism and sustainability.

#### 4. Instagram and brand communication

Social media such as Instagram play an important role in how brands communicate with their fans and others about their sustainability intent and initiatives through posts. Certainly, activist brands make extensive use of social media as brand advocacy vehicles, utilising the capacity to share and engage with others via internet, using videos, imagery and text-based stories (Voorveld, 2019). Instagram is an important social media platform through which brands publish evocative, emotion-laden, and visually rich branded content they have created in order to strengthen their brand and foster brand community via official brand accounts (Kim et al., 2021; Rietveld et al., 2020). It is popular with young adults and has become an important space for interactivity and negotiating ideas. Instagram facilitates conversations about issues of interest, enabling users to share posts and make meaning with brands and other consumers in real-time (Loukianov et al., 2020). Researchers have also identified that brands use Instagram as a platform to generate environmental discussions and encourage people to be “greener” (Zafar et al., 2021, p.4).

There are a number of interesting studies about consumers and Instagram post content. Firm generated content reportedly has a greater impact on long standing and loyal consumers (Kumar et al., 2016) and if consumers do not trust a brand or share its values they are less likely to engage, share or participate online (Chepurna & Criado, 2018). Social media consumers tend to seek out sources of news and Instagram accounts that align with their existing beliefs (Pelletier et al., 2020). While informational content is important, consumers are often highly knowledgeable about brands and informative posts may be irrelevant and annoying (Rietveld et al., 2020). From a ‘uses and gratifications’ perspective, consumers look for Instagram posts from their favoured and trusted brands that are novel and evocative but authentic and congruent with existing values (their own and the brand’s). However, relatively little has been reported about how consumers respond when Instagram is used as part of a brand strategy to engage consumers with social and environmental causes that are central to an activist brand’s mission. Questions of what consumers perceive and respond to on activist brand

Instagram accounts, the characteristics of sustainability messages posted on social media by activist brands and the issue of how they align with brand mission and brand authenticity have not been addressed in published studies.

## 5. Methodology

### 5.1. Overview of case study approach

This exploratory study addresses how an ASB authentically advocates through sustainability posts, and how consumers respond to an activist sustainable brand’s sustainability messaging. We utilised an interpretive qualitative methodology employing a case study approach. A single exemplar information-rich mature ASB was chosen as an insightful case that would generate theoretical insights into a relatively new phenomenon that requires deep exploration (Yin, 2017) within a specific context (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A similar approach for analysing sustainability messaging was also used to study the global youth climate movement (Molder et al., 2022).

After developing a case description and examining the brand’s history, philosophy, and core values, data were collected over six months, during which time we studied all posts and consumer responses on the brand’s Instagram account. From the analysis of posts about environmental and social sustainability issues, and comments about those posts, we developed insights into how authenticity is evidenced by the brand and construed by consumers who chose to engage with the brand on Instagram.

From a case selection perspective Patagonia represents a large sometimes controversial internationally recognised activist brand with a strong sustainability ethos. It is an organisation that communicates extensively on Instagram regarding sustainability practices and issues. As a mature outdoor clothing retailer that has sustainability at its heart (i.e., not just a token gesture) Patagonia is leading the way in mitigating the issues associated with the textile and fast fashion sector, forging ‘real’ transformation globally and within the system (Boström & Micheletti, 2016; Simões & Sebastiani, 2017). Our focus on an iconic brand mirrors prior work by Mirzaei et al. (2022) on brand activism who studied two iconic brands, Nike and Gillette. We specifically chose Patagonia because it is an iconic brand that has a strong commitment to sustainability and a long history of activism. Given our focus is on what messages an activist sustainable brand posts and how consumers respond to such messages, Patagonia offered a strong fit with our selection criteria.

### 5.2. Data collection

Data collection and analysis involved two distinct stages. Stage 1 involved developing and writing a detailed case description of Patagonia from secondary sources including the company website, publicly available reports, and published journal articles about the brand. In line with in-depth case analysis, multiple sources were used to ensure data trustworthiness and accuracy in identifying the values and mission of Patagonia and to understand the brand’s key drivers around sustainability and authenticity, in preparation for stage 2 of the research.

Stage 2 included reviewing and documenting Patagonia’s Instagram posts from their official US account over 1 July – 31 December 2021 (4.8 M followers). Data collection involved firstly exporting every post over six months into an excel spreadsheet (date, post’s accompanying text, and consumer’s comment text) using a third-party website called Export Comments. For each post we then tallied the number of comments and created descriptions of visual content (e.g. video loop, multi-page post, collage, number of separate images, camera angles, colours, focus on people/scenery/text, summary of subject matter etc).

### 5.3. Data analysis

Data analysis of stage 2 involved content analysis of the posts and thematic analysis of the consumer comments. To address RQ1, one researcher firstly conducted a preliminary content analysis of brand post themes for all 104 posts within the six-month period. The formal process of data analysis was highly iterative, following the general approach advocated by Miles and Huberman (1994). Excel software was used to organise data and facilitate repeated coding, abstraction, and systematic comparisons. When the project started the analysis emphasis was discovery oriented, exploratory, and descriptive in flavour, with a focus on the characteristics of the sustainability messages including imagery description and text that accompanied each brand post, with an emphasis on identifying sustainability themes. First order codes included sustainability facts, activists, initiatives, indigenous knowledge, glorious scenery, diverse environments, impact and loss, education, personal relevance etc. Six major categories of post content were then inductively created by the first researcher and then the codes were reviewed and revised in conjunction with a second researcher until there was 100 % agreement between them.

In order to analyse how consumers respond in terms of brand authenticity and sentiment (RQ2) we first analysed all 104 posts for evidence of brand authenticity, deductively applying codes derived from existing theory. Four dimensions of brand authenticity – consistency/continuity, credibility, symbolism, and integrity – identified as common in the brand authenticity literature (see Table 1) were used for the analysis which was reiterated until there was full agreement on the coding of each post between two researchers. This phase established how and when brand authenticity was evidenced in posts prior to evaluating consumer comments.

Next, the two researchers thematically analysed all 5541 consumer comments that remained after the first step of data cleaning – removing duplicate and non-English language comments. Two researchers worked together to develop simple first order codes that encompassed the consumer post type (e.g. product query, post feedback, brand comment, response to other consumer, rant, emoji, spam etc) and content (e.g. discussion on environmental issues, community and diversity, ethics, personal experience, and connection etc). In the second step of data cleaning we set aside irrelevant types of comments (e.g. stock availability enquiries, spam, @friend tags etc) and then re-read the consumer posts that were in response to brand sustainability posts or otherwise in any way about sustainability issues. Based on our analysis we inductively identified eight second order sentiment themes which could be classified as either positive or negative consumer responses (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Then we ranked brand posts according to the number of consumer responses (after data cleaning) and recorded the post themes evident in all posts with more than 50 comments ( $n = 29$ ). Finally, where possible we attempted to evaluate and code the consumer comments relating to the final 29 posts according to the brand authenticity elements. Some comments were too short or unclear to confidently infer any element of authenticity while others were written in ways that made it possible for the researchers to agree on how/if brand authenticity was evident.

## 6. Patagonia case overview

We draw on secondary information about Patagonia and their Instagram posts to answer RQ1: What are the characteristics of sustainability messages posted by an activist sustainability brand and how do they align with brand mission? Since its inception 50 years ago as a climbing gear company, Patagonia's central ethos has remained the same – to do all it can to protect the environment. As a mature activist outdoor clothing and equipment brand it has fostered a deep connection with consumers which has been attributed to their pledge to authenticity and transparency (Guèvremont & Grohmann, 2016). Patagonia's significant growth since 2010 is mostly attributed to sustainability efforts

(Demkes, 2020) although growth in sales and distribution are a secondary focus. Recently, Patagonia have pledged to use all their resources as an engine for positive change. As an activist brand Patagonia wants to send the message that corporate profits can be used to *do good* and create change (Chiu, 2022). Chouinard has always had this vision, as shared in a 2012 interview 'Patagonia: Growing the Sustainable Company', stating that Patagonia "has this tremendous power to change...change society and to change larger companies and lead by example" (Chiu, 2022). Table 2 provides a case summary that captures salient aspects of Patagonia's philosophy and sustainability agenda.

Patagonia uses social media, particularly Instagram, as a platform for change. Since joining Instagram in 2012, Patagonia has focused its messaging on the brand's core mission of saving the planet, as opposed to using it for sales and marketing (Social Republic, 2022). The analysis of Patagonia's Instagram posts over a six-month period supports this with fewer than 6 % of the posts related to sales and marketing and the rest (approximately 94 %) devoted to their mission in various forms. A thematic analysis of these posts revealed five key themes (see Table 3). Most posts incorporated several themes simultaneously, with two themes each recorded in about 75 % posts. The occurrence and frequency of the themes provides evidence of Patagonia's mission and efforts to be an authentic activist brand that is intent on forging change. Table 3 also highlights which themes were involved in the brand posts that received the most consumer comments, although as discussed later, responses were both positive and negative, and commenters could have been both brand fans and those who were sufficiently motivated to criticise the brand. Patagonia's Instagram account posts nearly every day but only engages with commenters when answering serious queries. The single most commented on post in our sample received 347 comments (and more than 830,000 views), and 29 posts received more than 50 comments.

Patagonia frequently use high quality images that emphasise the beauty of the planet and places that are the setting for connection with nature through sports which are central to the users of their outdoor clothing products. More than half of all posts highlight people taking action and doing good at a micro/local level to counter specific environmental, social or community issues. Patagonia regularly pays attention to Indigenous rights, cultural issues, and traditional ecological knowledge in the Americas, as well as environmental sustainability matters. This diverse and holistic sustainability messaging reflects caring for people, planet, and prosperity (Elkington, 1997; Lelieveld, 2012; Placet et al., 2005). Patagonia use Instagram as a platform to promote sustainability and engage consumers with key issues, creating more meaningful associations for the brand (Fernández et al., 2022; Keller, 2020), and as a powerful tool to change the world (Stanley, 2020). Specifically, their advocacy and promotion of individual activists taking action and doing good for environmental *and* social issues highlights that Patagonia goes beyond standard sustainability messaging.

## 7. Brand authenticity and consumer responses

We present our findings and draw on literature to address RQ2: How do consumers respond to sustainability messages in terms of brand authenticity and sentiment? We begin with an elaboration of our authenticity findings, followed by an analysis of consumer responses. To show the interrelationships between the sustainability message themes outlined in Table 3, and the subsequent brand authenticity dimensions and consumer response findings, we offer a visual representation of the findings (Fig. 1).

Our analysis of brand authenticity uses the four well-established dimensions – consistency and continuity, credibility, symbolism, and integrity. These specific dimensions were chosen because they represent important aspects of brand authenticity identified in the literature, and therefore provide a solid theoretical base to explore the nuances of brand authenticity for an ASB such as Patagonia, with the intention to extend them. We discuss these four dimensions in the context of the key

**Table 2**  
Patagonia case summary.

Key area	Information on Patagonia	Quotes
Background	Founded in California as mountain climbing gear company in 1973 by Yvon Chouinard. Specialty outdoor goods manufacturer and retailer. Philosophy of product innovation that minimises the environmental impacts of their products.	“Use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis.” We’ve always taken that seriously” (Patagonia, 2022a)
Company values	Core values: Quality - build the best product provide the best service and constantly improve everything we do; Integrity - Examine our practices openly and honestly, learn from our mistakes and meet our commitments; Environmentalism - Protect our home planet; Justice - Be just, equitable and antiracist as a company and in our community; Not bound by convention - Do it our way. Accredited founding member of the Fair Labor Association, and certified B Corp.Ethical Fashion Report: consistently outstanding	“We’re in business to save our home planet” (Patagonia, 2022b)
Ethos of authenticity and quality	Actively involves itself in sustainability practices but does not refer to itself as ‘sustainable.’ Communicates to consumers that it is true to its mission statement: that it is doing all it can to protect the environment. Actions include devising innovative solutions to reduce carbon footprint, using novel, organic, regenerative, and recycled materials. Donating \$140 M to environmental sustainability efforts through their 1 % for the Planet non-profit corporate alliance. Investing in start-ups that offer solutions to the environmental crisis.	“If you’re serious about [the climate crisis] and this is your business, you’ve got to develop a level of comfort with contradiction. We know that our business activity – from lighting stores to dyeing shirts – is part of the problem. We work steadily to change our business practices and share what we’ve learned. But we recognise that this is not enough. We seek not only to do less harm, but more good (Patagonia, 2022a)
Brand image and messaging	Corporate social responsibility and sustainability are central to the company’s actions and messages. Uses social media platforms to educate on environmental and social issues.Diverse and holistic sustainability messaging reflects caring for people, planet, and prosperity. Messaging dominated by focus on climate activism and political advocacy.Does not shy away from controversial and polarising issues.	We are “committed to use all resources as an engine for positive change.”“It’s worth losing a few customers - we always gain more when we take one of these [contentious] positions” (Chang, 2021)
Social media	Patagonia’s Instagram account @patagonia has 4.9 M followers, posts most days. The average post generates around 16.9 K likes and 295 comments (Speakrj.com, 2023)Does not utilise shoppable posts and rarely mentions products or retail promotions on Instagram.	“If we feel strongly about an issue, then we have an obligation to step forward” ( Balch, 2021)

**Table 3**  
Comparison of theme frequency across all posts (n = 104) versus posts with most comments (n = 29).

Theme	Description	% Theme frequencyall posts	% Theme frequency most commented posts
Beauty of the planet	Dramatic wilderness of biologically and geographically diverse regions	77.9	79.3
Human connection with nature	People and (mostly) solo sporting pursuits, engendering a sense of connection, challenge, and exhilaration	74.0	69.0
People taking action /doing good	Activists, individuals leading initiatives, volunteers, people taking a stand, using personal interests and skills for change	51.9	51.7
Environmental sustainability	Climate change, ecosystems, deforestation, habitat renewal, watershed destruction, regenerative agriculture, environmental protection, recycling, indigenous land stewardship	41.3	41.4
Social /community sustainability	Diversity and inclusion, racial injustice, community prosperity, preservation of cultural landscapes and knowledge, family economic sustainability, physical and mental wellbeing	37.5	55.2
Marketing	Product features and benefits, holiday promotions, discount schemes	5.8	6.9

mission that Patagonia articulates – ‘we’re in business to save the home planet’ and their commitment to sustainability and ‘use all resources as an engine for positive change’. We also highlight the post themes identified in Table 3, using italics, to show the connection between each post theme and the brand authenticity dimensions.

Analysis of consumer post comments identified eight types of consumer responses, four positive and four negative sentiments. We note that since most sustainability brand posts encompass multiple themes it was not possible to identify key image attributes or themes that elicit positive and negative responses (Aramendia-Muneta et al., 2021) or hypothesise cause and effect. Our approach in this exploratory work is holistic – we report descriptions for individual sustainability brand posts that lead to particular types of consumer responses.

7.1. Consistency and continuity – Authenticity element 1

Analysis of the brand’s sustainability posts over a six-month period reveals a disciplined approach to message consistency and continuity. Patagonia consistently repeats sustainability messages that reflect internal values and external brand claims that have been in place for 50 years. Such consistency and continuity evidences authenticity and is in line with Morhart et al. (2015) and Spiggle et al. (2012). Patagonia is consistent in employing their Instagram account as an engine for change, valorising the *efforts of individuals/activists* and highlighting small initiatives which taken together, are making a difference. By using

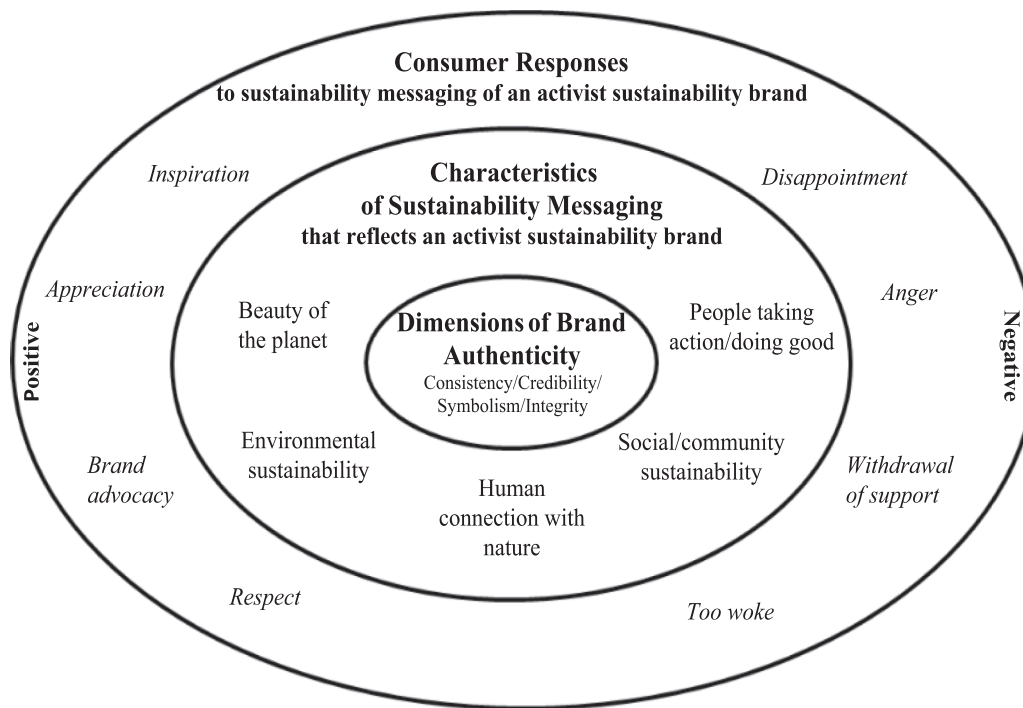


Fig. 1. Diagram connecting consumer responses to sustainability messaging and activist sustainability brand authenticity.

their Instagram account in the way that it does, Patagonia are living up to their promise (Dwivedi & McDonald, 2018) as a brand that wants to save the planet and be an engine for positive change without overtly labelling themselves as the champion.

At the same time Patagonia's actions and points of concern are entirely congruent with the interests of likely brand followers – trail riders, hikers, runners, skiers, surfers, and fly fishers. The posts we analysed consistently brought a focus on the *beauty of the natural environment* for its own sake and as a playground for recreation and *human connection with nature*, resonating with these consumers (Pérez, 2019). This reflects their agenda to remind consumers about the importance of the environment. Similarly, paying attention to projects such as regenerative agriculture or raising children to be planet-loving activists highlights the end goal for Patagonia – ‘protecting the home planet.’

Posts also communicate hard hitting messages about *environmental sustainability* (climate change) and *social sustainability* which demonstrate that the brand is not afraid of alienating some consumers (or retail distributors or political groupings). Creating controversy, consciousness raising and setting the agenda for public debate and about various sustainability issues is consistent with their mission and core values and is characteristic of an authentic brand that does not pull its punches.

Analysis of comments by consumers in response to posts also suggests that some consumers perceive this aspect of authenticity, through the consistency in Patagonia's stance. Examples of comments about Patagonia's consistency included mention of how they are ‘*always* keeping the environment and world in thought,’ in response to a post focusing on the spectacular location of some backcountry snowboarding, and about ‘*always* using real people with real stories...[being] ethical, real and effecting real change’ in a story highlighting the positive consequences and importance of children having wilderness experiences.

## 7.2. Credibility - authenticity element 2

Patagonia's authenticity as a credible ethical brand (true to its vision) was evident in the sustainability posts we catalogued, particularly because of their support and focus on *people taking action* and good

initiatives, regardless of which organisation established them. Causes apparent in posts ranged from recycling clothing and countering racism (*social sustainability*) to celebrating legislation restricting salmon farming that would preserve the environment and positively impact local community interests. A focus on *activist individuals* is used to highlight issues e.g., forest destruction and restorative ocean farming approaches. Exemplar individuals are utilised by Patagonia to model ideal behaviours and prompt everyone to consider how they personally might realistically contribute towards the project of saving the planet (*environmental sustainability*) and producing positive change. A post about an activist – ‘who found his own way to contribute because he couldn't totally relate to some forms of climate activism’ – also genuinely resonates with Patagonia's core mission by drawing attention to what individuals can do in working towards a common end goal. In this way Patagonia communicates the power ordinary that people (like Patagonia's consumers) have, to make a difference by raising consciousness of what other individuals are already doing. Through their Instagram account Patagonia also enhance their brand's credibility by creating awareness of events and people who make a difference through small actions e.g., writing/launching books around activism.

Responses to brand posts provided evidence that consumers construed Patagonia as a credible brand that was seen as helping save the home planet and encouraging behavioural change. For example, one commenter recognised that in posting about donating clothing with dignity to a local shelter Patagonia had the ability and willingness to move beyond their ‘Worn Wear’ program and had recommended alternative ways of dealing with unwanted clothing – ‘I will *definitely think* about donation the next time I have clothes in good condition.’ Posts elicited comments and consumer engagement that speaks to the credibility of the brand's aspirations, who they are and what they stand for (Stanley, 2020), e.g. ‘[thanks for] *standing up* for some values’ and demonstrating solidarity in support of a post about Patagonia's position regarding the Maipo Valley watershed destruction. This provides an additional spotlight on how the mission and values are put into practice and demonstrates the brand's trustworthiness and genuineness, critical to brand authenticity (Fritz et al., 2017).

### 7.3. Symbolism - authenticity element 3

Patagonia uses carefully curated symbolism to enhance the narrative of brand authenticity. Analysis of sustainability posts identified symbolism which provides a strong point of reference for what the brand actually stands for (Morhart et al., 2015). Messaging forges a deep connection between their mission and the *wonder of our home planet*. Real aesthetic beauty is evident in the brand's posts – a visual feast designed to 'reward,' awaken or provide solace to viewers.

Patagonia's Instagram imagery communicates how vast the natural world is – framing how humans are a very small part of the ecosystem by utilising photographic techniques to emphasise this *human/nature relationship*. Much of the symbolism is designed to evoke the *beauty and solitude of our planet* – authentically reinforcing the importance of saving what we have, and perhaps stimulating a sense of romance and nostalgia playing on an individuals' desire to revert to a more simplistic past. Alternating depictions of diverse ecosystems serve to raise awareness of the destruction that is happening over land and under water (*environmental sustainability*).

Symbolism is used to authentically connect the brand mission with consumer experiences. For example, Patagonia evokes a sense of solitude in posts to represent the connection, challenge, exhilaration, and sense of wellness from being at one with nature, especially during recreational pursuits such as rock climbing, biking, and running. It also reminds the viewer that the responsibility of caring for the planet occurs at an individual level through the depiction of individuals pursuing their own goals, of breaking free of the confines of modern living and getting back to nature. Particular photographic techniques, such as closeups or long focus panoramas position the viewer in relation to the subject, and the use of sepia in a family stewardship and tradition story is used to highlight heritage and nostalgia, both key antecedents of brand authenticity (Fritz et al., 2017). Symbolic representations are used effectively to reinforce the authenticity of Patagonia's intention to use their brand as an engine for positive change.

Many responses from commenters provide evidence that consumers appreciate the symbolic representation of key experiences that highlight the value of the planet and acknowledge real *social sustainability* issues, such as around diversity. For example, 'so stoked for more queer *representation* in climbing' was posted regarding a nonbinary climber's journey of inner-growth and self-acceptance. Likewise, 'incredible, such an amazing planet...you guys are incredible' was a response to a post encouraging care for the planet and capturing the essence of mountain biking in a stunning location. In these posts nature is used as a symbolic, authentic background rather than the focus.

### 7.4. Integrity - authenticity element 4

A critical aspect of authenticity that speaks to integrity on Instagram is that Patagonia does not focus on marketing their products or trumpeting their philosophy or success – they are modestly devoted to sustainability messaging. The integrity dimension of brand authenticity in Patagonia's messaging is particularly revealed in the written content of posts rather than in images. One particular post on Instagram, made in response to consumer feedback, really illustrates Patagonia's integrity in taking a very controversial stand. It states, 'we've made a decision based on our values. We do not take our actions lightly but feel strongly that saying and doing nothing was too important.' Such comments reflect their core mission, honesty, sincere care, and good values. Patagonia's honesty is also captured in an exchange where the brand responded frankly when asked if a jacket was pfc-free. Patagonia's response is transparent – 'thanks for asking this important question.... Unfortunately, the Torrentshell is not quite there yet, but our goal is to be completely PFC-free by Fall of 2024'.

Self-reflection provides a vehicle to continually improve and understand how to make a difference to people, planet, and profit, and maintain integrity. When prompted to comment on their clothing design

strategy for 'curvy and fat people' Patagonia say – 'thanks for sharing this kind sentiment with us. Size inclusion (*social sustainability*) has been on our radar and has been a focus that we're currently working on fully realising.' Posts encouraging clothing repair and swaps rather than buying new is another example of this intent to evolve. Acknowledging aspects that can be improved speaks to a brand's sincerity and integrity, reflecting an image of an organisation that is honestly doing their best (Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020).

Comments by many consumers in response to posts provide evidence that they perceive the integrity of the brand. For example, the following response encapsulates the perception that Patagonia has integrity – 'Doing *what is right* is always in fashion' – regarding a post about running as a tool for activism to raise awareness for the destruction of a watershed (*environmental sustainability*). Even when Patagonia is not perfect, and being asked to explain itself, there are signs that consumers recognise the brand's fundamental integrity and authenticity – 'so much of what you guys are about is beautiful and worthwhile and important'. Consumers seek authentic experiences and therefore expect brands to have integrity, and for brand messages to be authentic by being transparent (Marmor-Lavie & Stout, 2016).

### 7.5. Consumer responses to sustainability posts

We identified eight types of responses to brand posts regarding sustainability that reflect on authenticity and selected examples of these are offered in Table 4. Table 4 is designed to synthesise our analysis – we first bring together the characteristics of sustainability messaging (themes) and consumer responses. Viewed in this way, the four dimensions of authenticity are represented.

Positive consumer responses in Table 4 highlight that Patagonia's posts have evoked inspiration, appreciation, brand advocacy and respect in response to focal people, places, actions, and emotions captured in post imagery and text. Affirmative consumer comments are reflective of high engagement with sustainability issues and understanding that work is needed to achieve solutions and 'collective' good, implicitly signalling their belief that Patagonia is an authentic sustainability brand. Our findings lend support to studies which suggest that emotion-laden, visually rich branded content is useful in building connections with consumers (Rietveld et al., 2020) and which highlight the importance of evoking positive emotions and feelings that lead to positive attitudes towards the brand (Poels & Dewitte, 2006).

While there are many positive comments overall, we saw that some brand posts stirred up controversy and there were big variations in how consumers responded to the brand's authenticity. During our sampling period there was also significant media coverage of a political party issue that Patagonia got involved with, no doubt provoking some of the partisan feedback on their Instagram account. Some scepticism was discernible, and we note that responses were sometimes tinged with sarcasm and negativity because of inauthenticity and a perceived disconnect between brand messaging and consumer perceptions of Patagonia and sustainability issues. Negative responses ranged from disappointment, anger, withdrawal of support and claims of being too woke. Clearly, there is a risk of negative reaction when a strong position is taken on an issue that is not relevant to all consumers.

We found, similar to Iglesias and Ind (2020), that when Patagonia makes claims about sustainability issues or takes a strong stance on specific causes or events they are more likely to be scrutinised by consumers, particularly if they are knowledgeable about the issues (Rietveld et al., 2020). It appears consumers whose views on issues do not align with Patagonia's values (or stance) are mostly likely to post negative comments, as reported in the literature (Chepurina & Criado, 2018; Pelletier et al., 2020).

Certainly, responses to brand posts reveal consumer stances which illustrate that being authentic and true to themselves and their life experiences affects how they react to sustainability messaging. Such comments include 'This is the world I want to live in and for my



**Table 4**  
Selected types of consumer responses corresponding to brand sustainability posts.

Description of the posts	Post Themes	Positive consumer responses to sustainability posts
New law against salmon farming in beautiful Tierra del Fuego.	Beauty of planet, Environmental sustainability	<b>Inspiration</b> Incredible, and a reminder to stay engaged in these fights in our local communities. This is beautiful, watched it...continuous inspiration + education.
Wishing for regenerative agriculture to become the norm. Setting up an outdoor stall selling vegetables.	Environmental sustainability, Social and community sustainability, Human connection with nature	<b>Appreciation</b> Thank you for using your platform to amplify this story.
Indigenous regenerative and traditional family farming practices. Combatting systemic racial and social issues.	Human connection with nature, Environmental sustainability, Social and community sustainability	You are one of the few companies that has taken real concrete steps toward a more sustainable future.
Climate crisis is an existential threat; every part of our business is implicated. We must radically reduce carbon emissions.	Environmental sustainability, People taking action doing good, Beauty of the planet	<b>Brand advocacy</b> Everything that Patagonia stands for ... is brilliant! I use your gear hard in the field and that's why I will continue to buy your gear and recommend it. Feel good about being good! Adding you to the list of companies I will spend my money at!
Solar panels: one person's steps to contribute to climate change when they did not totally relate to some forms of climate activism.	People taking action doing good, Environmental sustainability	<b>Respect</b> This is absolute perfection in marketing. Keep setting the gold standard. You've earned a new customer for life...My respect for you standing up against anti-Semitic, anti-science, anti-climate change, anti-democracy rhetoric. It's so awesome you continue to stick to your ethics and values ... Customer for life right here.
Self-sufficiency and growing beans in an apartment in Chicago, in the early days of the pandemic.	Social and community sustainability	I admire a company that puts their money where their mouth is.
Clothes lasting a lifetime; durable gear made for longevity.	Marketing, Environmental sustainability	<b>Negative consumer responses to sustainability posts</b> <b>Disappointment</b> Super disappointed, got a new beanie, it is made in China. How long have your products been made in China now? Wasn't that your WHOLE thing? Small, sustainable, local businesses?
Running as a tool for activism to raise awareness for the destruction of a watershed.	Beauty of the planet, People taking action doing good, Environmental sustainability, Social and community sustainability	Very disappointed that you haven't spoken out yet for women's rights and the anti-choice
Chilean mountain biker working to replace a history of resource extraction with a community-based recreation economy.	Beauty of the planet, People taking action doing good, Environmental sustainability, Social and community sustainability	
Dramatic beautiful snowy wilderness at late sunset.	Beauty of the planet, Human connection with nature	
A child wearing a beanie having fun in the snow, building a snowman, and connecting with nature.	Marketing, Human connection with nature	
Beautiful ocean and the exhilaration of surfing.	Beauty of the planet, Human connection with nature	

**Table 4 (continued)**

Description of the posts	Post Themes	Positive consumer responses to sustainability posts
A lone woman enjoying fly-fishing in the wilderness.	Beauty of the planet, Human connection with nature	laws... Please use your voice. <b>Anger</b> Christ!!!! Your gear is so expensive!!! I had a Patagonia rain jacket and your customer service have me one option. Recycle.... Shaking My Head. Ironclad guarantee... Ha! I want everyone, EVERYONE, to have access to the outdoors... but this is wrong-headed messaging.'
Community event to counter racial abuse of black surfers.	Social and community sustainability, People taking action doing good	<b>Withdrawal of support</b> I won't be purchasing your clothing anymore I hope you can take the time to educate yourself on proper forest management practices. Lost respect after your little "voluntary" SPF garment mishap.... Claimed 50 + and barely hit 17 SPF in some.... What a shame. I used to love Patagonia ... but your blatant lack of #BIPOC representation in almost everything you do sends the message loud and clear
A large group of forest defenders and environmental activists protesting the deforestation of an old-growth forest.	People taking action doing good, Environmental sustainability	<b>Too woke</b> This company makes some really high-quality stuff, and they seem to do it fairly responsibly BUT I'm getting tired of this woke stuff. Going "woke" on Jackson Hole accomplishes nothing. Beyond childish. I would have expected better. Enough with the virtue signalling. You sell clothes made from oil for Pete's sake.
A small multigenerational family organic cotton farm	Social and community sustainability, Environmental sustainability	
Various (white) people connecting with nature, doing outdoor activities in beautiful locations.	Human connection with nature, Marketing, Beauty of the planet	
Climate crisis is an existential threat, and every part of our business is implicated	Environmental sustainability, People taking action doing good, Beauty of the planet	
Solitude of fishing on a lake during late sunset.	Human connection with nature, Social and community sustainability, Beauty of the planet	
Indigenous Peoples' Day. Showing respect to the Native Nations who steward the lands, air, and waters	Social and community sustainability, People taking action doing good, Human connection with nature, Beauty of the planet	

children,' 'Wow! This picture certainly resonates,' and 'Couldn't agree more.' One of the key findings is that consumer responses are very idiosyncratic. As illustrated in Table 3 environmental sustainability' (sometimes embodying provocative/political content) appeared in 41.1 % of brand posts that received the most consumer response and 'beauty of the planet' (not a particularly contentious matter) featured in 79 %. It appears that one of the strengths of Patagonia's Instagram posting strategy is the content variety of issues, scenery and people that evoke memories, thoughts, and emotions. Instagram posts generate tension, vociferous comments in support, heightened levels of awareness and dialogue between commenters, evidencing Patagonia's promise to use all resources as an engine for positive change. The fact that all sorts of differently themed brand posts can stimulate strong responses and promote online discussion may be seen as a successful outcome aligned to their mission.

### 8. Re-conceptualising brand authenticity in the context of ASBs

Our findings highlight two sides to brand authenticity and sustainability messaging on Instagram when viewing brand authenticity in the context of an ASB. We note the importance of aspects that speak to both a brand’s own authenticity alongside individual consumer authenticity (i.e., a brand being true to their own values, while allowing consumers to voice their own opinions, positive or negative). Although definitions of brand authenticity discussed in prior literature are useful when considering mainstream marketing, they do not necessarily encapsulate the essence of brand authenticity for brands that have sustainability at their core and engage in brand activism to initiate change for the great good of society and the planet. Therefore, we propose a definition of *authentic brand sustainability activism* as follows:

The extent to which a brand is consistently true towards its sustainability ethos and values and is willing to take a stance on sustainability issues for the greater good of society and the planet, while enabling consumers being true to themselves.

We argue that the traditional dimensions of brand authenticity – consistency/continuity, credibility, symbolism, and integrity – provide a strong theoretical platform for our sustainability activist view of brand authenticity. We expand these four dimensions to incorporate the nuances of an ASB. Table 5 captures the existing view and our activist sustainability view of brand authenticity dimensions.

For ASBs, such as Patagonia, our research speaks to the importance of engendering brand authenticity through *consistency* by being committed to implementing sustainable practices and critically utilising sustainability messaging. This consistent ASB commitment not only aligns with a brand’s mission and values that resonate strongly with consumers but demonstrates willingness to take a stance on controversial sustainability issues that can potentially elicit negative consumer responses. What is interesting to note for an ASB is that messaging that is authentic to their own brand mission and values aligns with what the organisation views as their core intent, not necessarily aligning with what consumers perceive as authentic. This is critical in this context because it is contrary to brand authenticity scholarship that has always determined brand authenticity from the consumer’s perspective. We argue that for ASBs to be authentic they need to be cognisant of consumers responses, but not reliant on them, if they want to make a difference to society and the planet.

*Credibility* is shown in the intensity of Patagonia’s messaging, particularly in highlighting apparently innocuous positive and hopeful scenarios, which may remind consumers of issues raised elsewhere in the media that do/do not support the view that all is well with the brand. Likewise, product and service experiences provide dis/confirmatory thoughts in response to brand posts that feed into perceptions of brand authenticity or inauthenticity. For example, the ‘beautiful ocean and the exhilaration of surfing’ post evoked consumer responses pointing out that Patagonia have yet to speak out about women’s rights and called for the organisation to use their voice. Being an ASB is about modelling behaviour for the greater good, prompting others to consider their behaviour and voicing opinions that are true to themselves, positive or negative.

From an authentic *symbolism* perspective, by maintaining a staunch commitment to authentic brand activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020), Patagonia can often be seen to create tension through the material they post that evokes the critical nature of planetary and societal issues. Their focus on increasing awareness of sustainability issues results in posts that may be viewed as outside organisational scope. Such posts raise questions about why Patagonia engages in issues tangential to their core business, although clearly the brand believes that these issues are relevant to their core purpose.

Finally, *integrity* for an ASB brand is being transparent and unequivocal about vision and mission, e.g. Patagonia’s mission to “save the home planet” extends beyond creating a brand that consumers respond

**Table 5**  
Brand authenticity dimensions important for activist sustainability brands.

Brand authenticity dimensions	Existing view versus activist sustainability brand view	Managerial implications for activist sustainable brands
Continuity and consistency	Existing view: Brand’s behaviour and core values are consistent over time. <i>Activist sustainability view: brand’s sustainability values need to be consistent and reflect the brand’s behaviour yet prepared to take a stance on controversial sustainability issues.</i>	Messaging about brand’s sustainability values need to be consistent and reflect the brand’s behaviour with regards sustainability and marketing practices. Messages go beyond promoting the brand to promoting and creating awareness around sustainability issues.
Credibility	Existing view: Brand is true to itself by being real, truthful, and honest. <i>Activist sustainability view: The brand models behaviour ‘for the greater good’ as well as prompting others to consider their own behaviour</i>	Sustainable brands need to be true to themselves – this requires knowing their core ethos and having sustainability at the heart of the brand. Takes a stance on key sustainability issues that are important to them and expresses their commitment despite potential for polarised consumer responses. Encourages and inspires consumers to consider their own sustainable behaviours. Allows consumers to voice their opinions and be true to themselves.
Symbolism	Existing view: Brand symbolises what it stands for. <i>Activist sustainability view: The brand uses symbolism to evoke the importance of planetary and societal issues, using it as a force for positive change</i>	Brand uses appropriate imagery and taglines that reflects their core vision and values of the brand. Brand can stimulate and provoke conversation through strong imagery, storytelling, advocating for change and in some instances being an activist on key issues.
Integrity	Existing view: Brand demonstrates good values and sincere care. <i>Activist sustainability view: The brand is transparent and is unequivocal about both its vision and mission</i>	Brand is transparent about its own sustainability practices and is open and sincere about where it needs to improve. The brand needs to be unwavering with regards its vision to be sustainable and promote sustainability.

positively to and want to buy – it is a brand whose purpose is to be controversial to create change (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020).

### 9. Implications and conclusions

Being an authentic ASB does not mean it is without fault and cannot improve, but it does mean being true to its mission. Of course Patagonia is ultimately a business and will only survive if people continue to consume and use their products. Ironically, their sustainability agenda may also drive consumption. However, on balance, their drive to reduce their own impact on the planet (production side) and their commitment to use resources for good to encourage reductions in the impact of consumption (related to their own industry and more generally in the wider world) is full of integrity. As an activist sustainability brand they have been consistent in their use of authentic symbolism and continuously credible in their drive to do better – as any authentic brand should be – and this case study of a 50-year-old activist brand has allowed us to make several theoretical contributions.

### 9.1. Theoretical contributions

We make three key contributions to brand authenticity and brand activism literature. First, we contribute to a greater, deeper understanding of brand activism, a relatively new area, by building on recent work (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020; Moorman, 2020) to incorporate sustainability and developing a new definition of - ASBs. Consequently, we widen the scope of brand activism with the design to generate further conversation in this emerging area.

Second, we contribute to literature on brand authenticity by demonstrating how an ASB is perceived by consumers as authentic, and how consumers respond to sustainability messaging on social media that is authentic. In doing so, we build on the extensive work by scholars on brand authenticity as outlined in Table 1. We propose a definition of *authentic brand sustainability activism* specifically extending the work of Vredenburg et al. (2020) on authentic brand activism. Notably, we offer an extended activist sustainability view of brand authenticity in contrast to the four well-established brand authenticity dimensions – consistency/continuity, credibility, symbolism, and integrity. Our work addresses a gap in the literature in sustainability messaging on social media platforms focusing on Instagram. By doing so we extend the scope of Instagram as a force for good by understanding how messaging can be used in the context of sustainability (Li, 2022). Fundamentally, we advance the concept of brand message authenticity in CSR (Alhouti et al., 2016; Pérez, 2019) to include the broader aspects of sustainability messaging.

Third, we identify eight types of consumer response to an ASB's posts that encompass both positive and negative sentiment. Through the exploration of two sided (positive and negative) comments, our nuanced study demonstrates the pivotal role that authentic brand sustainability activism plays in encouraging consumer awareness and change towards greater sustainability. A brand's use of social media messaging as a force for good is apparent when the mission is creating societal change, and where being authentic leads to controversy and negative responses. Our study is one of few that analyses the actual comments made by consumers in response to real brand posts on Instagram and as such offers insights informed by contemporary marketing practice.

### 9.2. Managerial relevance

Sustainability messaging on social media can be a powerful tool in building brand authenticity and creating a platform 'for good.' Our analysis offers practical implications for managers of sustainability activist brands to consider when using social media messaging vehicles such as Instagram for brands as a positive force for good. We utilise an ASB to understand the nuances of key dimensions of brand authenticity related to sustainability messaging, however, our findings are applicable for other brands who are serious about claiming to be sustainable and are committed to promoting and standing up on sustainability issues. Brands that are just starting on their sustainability and/or activist journey should focus on consistency of messaging and attempt to align sustainability causes and issues with their brand values, leaving being more controversial or less aligned with issues until their mature phase when they can consolidate a commitment to sustainability issues.

It is critical that brands are authentic in their sustainability messaging. Each of the brand authenticity dimension that we discuss in our extension (Table 5) provides specific direction for brand activity that promotes brand authenticity for brands that have sustainability at their core and want to become activist by nature. Brands need to ensure their internal vision and mission is consistent with the brand's external claims and be cognisant of how visual imagery portrays the sustainability message. Sticking to the core message, regardless of consumer response (or whether it is positive/negative), is crucial in conveying the message with integrity and cognisance of the organisation's mission. To generate lasting engagement with sustainability issues brands need to highlight pressing problems in a way that is accessible and credible – and

consumers need to understand how they can make a difference. Brands need to use data-derived analytics from their social media accounts to guide any social media sustainability communication strategy. Finally, brands need to recognise that acting with integrity requires transparency, and they need to communicate that they cannot necessarily be sustainable on all fronts – people, planet, profit – all the time. Managers need to be able to communicate how and on what basis brands are or are not sustainable.

### 9.3. Limitations and future research

Our work provides valuable insights into sustainability messaging, opening avenues for further research. First, as this study focused on Instagram, it is important for future work to consider sustainability messaging across other social media platforms. Such an examination would extend our understanding by providing further knowledge of how users of other platforms might respond and engage differently with the brand and cause (e.g. on less visual platforms such as Twitter).

Second, there are many interesting avenues to explore regarding the relatively low level of follower engagement on Patagonia's account and what this might suggest about the majority of Patagonia followers. Similarly, studies investigating how many and why consumers who are NOT followers comment (negatively) on Patagonia's account would open up a new avenue of consumer research in the sustainability domain. It would also provide managerially useful insights into how to effectively create buzz and controversy within the wider online community.

Third, our findings are derived from particular posts and responses. Scholars could take our exploratory findings on consumer response types and create a typology in future research. Further large-scale research could extend this work by studying a much larger sample of brand sustainability posts to identify key image attributes or themes that elicit the most comments using machine learning techniques to aid data collection and analysis. Future research could do more to explain about the posts that people do engage with versus those with low engagement. Overall, the present study provides an important starting point for assessing the nature of sustainability messaging and brand authenticity on social media platforms to create lasting 'change for good.'

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

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### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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