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The Role of Consumer Speech Acts in Brand Activism: A Transformative Advertising Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Transformative advertising research (TAR) suggests examining advertising's transformational possibilities via the interactions between institutional actors at each marketing level to gauge its effect on society. We employ rhetorical institutionalism as a lens to examine the online speech acts of consumers as they respond to a brand activism campaign focusing on an environmental problem. Our data take the form of written comments by YouTube users and employ a research design using automated text analysis and qualitative thematic data analysis. Our contributions to TAR are threefold. First, we offer a preliminary conceptualization of the role of consumer language as rhetorical institutional work to advance TAR scholars and practitioners' insight. Second, we highlight the role of linguistic tone and clout in giving speakers agency through which consumers as institutional actors create, maintain, and disrupt institutional logics and practices. Finally, we develop a tripartite classification of consumer speech acts used to support brand activism. We label these activist warriors, brand champions, and conscious consumers as typologies that deepen understanding of how consumers' online speech may amplify brand activism, thereby contributing to advertising's transformative outcomes. We conclude by outlining important managerial implications including how practitioners can adopt the tripartite classification to enhance brand activism campaigns.

Transformative advertising research (TAR) has developed as a preemptory agenda in marketing scholarship to address global environmental, societal, and health, and well-being challenges in modern society (Huh and Faber 2022). Gurrieri, Tuncay Zayer, and Coleman (2022) suggest examining possible transformational marketing opportunities via the interactions between institutional actors at the micro-level, advertising

institutions at the meso-level, and the aggregate effects of advertising at the macro-level. The catalysts for the TAR agenda are twofold. First, there is a growing call for firms to integrate United Nations Sustainable Development Goals within their business strategies, with advertising providing an important opportunity to do this (UN 2020). Second, the knowledge that 62% of consumers believe companies should engage in

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sociopolitical issues suggests firms could utilize their advertising to align with consumers' expectations (Accenture 2019; Vredenburg et al. 2020).

Brand activism advertising campaigns that spotlight major social and ecological causes of consumer concern have become increasingly commonplace in marketing strategies (Dahlen and Rosengren 2016). They are defined as "public speech or actions focused on partisan issues made by, or on behalf of, a company using its corporate or individual brand name" (Moorman 2020, p. 388) which are usually developed by a social movement of citizen-consumers (Vredenburg et al. 2020). For instance, Dove's brand activism "Campaign for Real Beauty" reshaped consumers' social identity by affecting change in advertising's institutionalized gender stereotypes and beauty norms (Feng, Chen, and He 2019).

However, despite the TAR's key theoretical and managerial advancements, considerable gaps in knowledge about advertising's transformative force on society persist (Mende and Scott 2021). For example, while previous research has largely considered consumers as targets, an examination of their role as "influencers who exert leverage through their language" (MacInnis et al. 2020, p. 5) has developed mainly to assist advertising researchers and practitioners with risk management (Gavilanes, Flatten, and Brettel 2018). Although useful, additional TAR that examines how consumer language could yield a positive effect on brand activism may prove valuable but is more rare (Vadakkappatt et al. 2022).

Indeed, there is recent recognition that understanding the use and exchange of consumer language is important for advertising practice and research (Packard and Berger *forthcoming*) and may be central to processes of societal and cultural change via the reshaping of institutional logics, practices, and arrangements (e.g., Cornelissen Joep et al. 2015; Eilert and Nappier Cherup 2020). Thus, rhetorical institutionalism allows for a consideration of how consumers use speech to legitimize or bring about the disruption of institutional stability (Hakala, Niemi, and Kohtamäki 2017; Thompson-Whiteside, Turnbull, and Fletcher-Brown 2021). We use this conceptual background as an enabling lens to examine consumers' agentic online speech acts to identify how language is used to create, maintain, and disrupt marketplace logics and practices in collaboration with a brand's activism campaign.

To do this, we adopt a netnographic enquiry to examine consumer speech in the form of text comments posted on YouTube in response to a brand activism campaign about the environment. First, we employ automated text analysis of the comments (Humphreys and Wang 2018), which creates clusters of consumer

speech styles by using two key linguistic metrics: tone (emotion) and clout (level of confidence). We focus on these variables because while emotion is conveyed through linguistic tone, confidence is demonstrated through clout. Moreover, both tone and clout reflect specific linguistic styles, thus offering novel insight into the functions of language (Aleti et al. 2019; Van Laer and De Ruyter 2010; Visentin, Tuan, and Di Domenico 2021). Specifically, we uncover new insight about consumers' different linguistic forms deployed as rhetorical institutionalism to disrupt existing marketplace logics and practices. Second, we undertake a thematic analysis (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013) using a priori codes drawn from Austin's (1962) speech act theory (i.e., locutionary force, illocutionary force, and perlocutionary force), allowing us to delve more deeply into how consumers gain agency through their linguistic force. Overall, the research design allows us to capture how consumers use online speech to express their campaign-related opinions and the effects of consumer speech on others.

Our contributions to TAR are threefold. First, we offer a preliminary conceptualization of the role of consumer language as rhetorical institutional work to assist TAR scholars, advertising agencies, and policymakers to uncover advertising's capacity to drive macro-level change by influencing prosocial behavior. Second, we highlight the role of linguistic tone and clout in affording speakers agency, enabling consumers as institutional actors to create, maintain, and disrupt institutional logics and practices. Finally, we develop a tripartite classification of consumer speech acts that are used to support brand activism, which we identify as activist warriors, brand champions and conscious consumers. These typologies deepen understanding of how consumers' online speech may amplify brand activism, thereby contributing to knowledge on advertising's transformative outcomes, which is a novel finding. In addition, we outline important managerial implications, including how practitioners may utilize the tripartite classification to enhance brand activism campaigns.

The Power of Advertising to Benefit Society

TAR has evolved from a debate about advertising's ability to tackle ethical issues that exist at each market level. The marketplace is best examined through three categories known as the macro-, meso- and micro-levels, driven by actors and institutions peculiar to the market level in which they operate (Mason and Harris 2006). For the purpose of our study, the macro-level is composed of broad sociocultural forces supported by ideologies, structures, and practices that are external to, but

influenced by, micro- and meso-level phenomena (Gurrieri, Tuncay Zayer, and Coleman 2022). The meso-level includes advertising institutions and other collective organizations such as agencies, clients, regulatory bodies, and the media. At the micro-level, institutional actors may include consumers, audiences, and other individuals that may reiterate, reinforce, and/or challenge institutional work and macro-level cultural discourses (e.g., Coleman, Tuncay Zayer, and Karaca 2020; McDonald, Laverie, and Manis 2021). Viewing the marketplace in this way facilitates research about understanding advertising's transformative ability in society. For example, consumer pressures at the micro-level about the use of objectified and sexual stereotypes of women have influenced progressive advertising practices in many advertising agencies today (Connors et al. 2021; Middleton and Turnbull 2021).

Recent scholarship has also examined the potential for meso-level organizations within the advertising sector to confront sociopolitical issues at the macro-level. Agencies benefit from staff diversity, as well as younger entry-level advertising professionals, who bring a different social conscience to the industry and act as institutional entrepreneurs (Middleton and Turnbull 2021; Thompson-Whiteside and Turnbull 2021). These examples illustrate how advertising actors can challenge meso-level institutional practices, structures, and policies, thereby impacting macro-level sociocultural dynamics. In addition, agencies have used their creative capabilities to create campaigns that challenge the complex environment utilizing broader logics and discourses, such as championing consumers' disabilities (Kearney et al. 2019) or adopting the logics of vulnerability (e.g., Windels et al. 2020). In this vein, we argue that the cultural visibility and recursive relationship of advertising within society imbues it with an institutional role which allows it to both shape and be shaped by forces in the market at macro-, meso-, and micro-levels (Middleton and Turnbull 2021). Specifically, we follow calls for scholars to examine the role of language (Packard and Berger *forthcoming*) in uncovering how institutional actors as socially connected individuals use digital platforms to create and disseminate discourse about sociopolitical and environmental challenges (Huh and Malthouse 2020).

Institutional Rhetoricalism and the Marketplace

Institutions have been defined as "symbolic and behavioral systems" (Scott and Meyer 1994, p. 68)

operationalized by rules and regulatory mechanisms. Institutional theory recognizes networked consumers as institutional actors operating within institutional systems from which they derive common meaning, actions, and routines. Actors are able to work at the micro-level collectively and with agency to create, maintain, or disrupt marketplace logics and practices that are considered legitimate (Fan and Zietsma 2019; Zietsma and Lawrence 2010). For example, scholarship has examined how actors operating in the marketplace may work to disrupt societal institutions (e.g., Scaraboto and Fischer 2013; Tuncay Zayer and Coleman 2015), especially when new institutional logics and practices are connected to broader social movements (King and Pearce 2010; Vadakkepatt et al. 2022). Middleton and Turnbull (2021), for instance, reveal how advertising practitioners have both responded to and reconstructed market logics in support of gender-progressive societal discourses. Such outcomes indicate how individual and collective actors undertake institutional work to disrupt institutions through their reflexive actions.

Research has also identified that the use and exchange of language may be influential in the reshaping of institutional logics, practices, and arrangements (e.g., Cornelissen Joep et al. 2015). Recognized as a branch of institutional theory, rhetorical institutionalism (Eilert and Nappier Cherup 2020) identifies that negotiation through language and discourse may be seen as a contestation practice, whereby institutions and their embedded actors use language strategically and intentionally to enact change (Green and Li 2011). This view allows for consideration of how institutional stability and legitimacy is achieved through the consistent use of language and, crucially, the central role of language itself in bringing about the disruption of stability (Cornelissen Joep et al. 2015). Language and the communication thereof may act as persuasive forces, regulating marketplace impressions and images. However, they may also be used to challenge marketplace institutions and their logics as the subject of ongoing negotiations (Fan and Zietsma 2019). Those engaged in such negotiation, including consumers, may intentionally deploy persuasive language to influence meaning or call for action (Middleton et al. 2022). Classic rhetoric assumes a direct link between the use of language and cognition (Green and Li 2011). Therefore, those looking to disrupt institutional legitimacy and undermine institutional logics might employ rhetorical tactics to challenge existing understanding.

Consequently, we examine how those seeking to take an activist-advocacy standpoint may employ strategies and tactics within acts of speech to both change and respond to the understanding of others (Cornelissen Joep et al. 2015; Searle 1969, 626). In particular, we are interested to know how consumer-to-consumer language may be beneficial in enhancing a brand activism campaign. A principal idea in institutional theory is agency, which refers to the ability of self-organizing actors to have an impact on the social world through pursuing interests that may result in changes to existing rules (Scott 2013). Digital technology has improved connectivity, offering consumers the potential to renegotiate new market logics (Dolbec and Fischer 2015). Indeed, consumers may display performative citizenship or dysfunctional behavior that will have a tangible effect on either helping or hindering an organization's growth (Balaji 2014). More specifically, recent research in marketing has credited consumers with the ability to establish the legitimacy of marketing practices (Biraghi, Chiara Gambetti, and Beccanulli 2020; Hakala, Niemi, and Kohtamäki 2017), as well as delegitimizing or subverting them (McCarthy and Glozer 2022; Middleton et al. 2022; Wilson, Robson, and Pitt 2021). Accordingly, in this study we draw on these concepts to understand how online consumer-to-consumer speech acts, in reaction to a brand activism campaign, drive emergent consumer behavior and shape market logics.

While some research has acknowledged that different sets of market actors may work together to shape change (Baker and Nenonen 2020; Ertekin and Atik 2020), to the best of our knowledge, few have considered the advertising interface between brands and consumers as activists in this context. Thus, our examination of consumers as institutional actors capable of collaborating in brand activism advertising campaigns via online speech aims to advance understanding about the power of advertising to influence societal challenges.

Conceptualizing Forms of Rhetorical Institutionalism Used by Consumers in Brand Activism

Recognizing that consumers search for meaning, Kozinets and Handelman (2004) identify consumer movements as a key source to transform consumption ideology and culture. Consumer movements may be directed toward subverting mainstream consumption practices or they may be motivated by higher-order

values and a desire for progress (Middleton et al. 2022; Wilson, Robson, and Pitt 2021). Here, consumers take a performative role toward change by raising other consumers' awareness about salient issues. For example, when consumers participate in online discussion on social media, this can be viewed as consumer advocacy. In so doing, consumers are actively supporting the framing of the marketers' appeal strategy, thereby facilitating the construction of novel marketplace meaning (Kachen and Krishen 2020). Previous research also suggests that consumers' online speech-based interactions (e.g., in brand communities) may be used to build legitimacy for change (Hakala, Niemi, and Kohtamäki 2017) or retaliate against societal transgressions or perceived injustice. For example, Thompson-Whiteside and Turnbull (2021) undertake critical discourse analysis of women's use of language and voice to expose experiences of sexual abuse in the French advertising industry.

Examining consumers' use of rhetoric, Middleton et al. (2022) noted the power of traditional media in supporting consumer activists' social media complaints about a piece of sexist advertising. Thus, while consumers produce value through performative labor in social media, they also work toward achieving the Aristotelian idea of "virtuous action" that forms part of a life well-lived with others (Biraghi, Chiara Gambetti, and Beccanulli 2020). Conceptually, our study views consumer-to-consumer speech as a form of consumer citizenship (Balaji 2014) to energize pro-social behavior in others, which in turn has an aggregate positive effect on the organization's overall brand strategy. This view highlights the social nature of marketplace exchanges and sees their role in shaping consumer citizenship in others.

To identify the persuasive effects of language on others in marketplace interactions, researchers have predominantly utilized the linguistic dimensions of tone and clout (Aleti et al. 2019; Ireland and Pennebaker 2010; Langacker 1988). While tone denotes the use of positive or negative emotional terms in an individual's language (Flusberg, Matlock, and Thibodeau 2018), clout reflects an individual's expertise, standpoint, and linguistic persuasiveness, distinguishable by his or her use of pronouns (Kacewicz et al. 2014; Langacker 1988). Therefore, tone and clout are valuable tools for our study, which examines how consumers use language to reshape marketplace logics and practices and are further summarized in Table 1.

Next, within our analysis of how consumers use language with agentic force, we analyze the effects of

Table 1. Summary of variables: Tone and clout.

Variable	Description
<p>Tone</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive emotion words (e.g., <i>love, nice, sweet</i>). • Negative emotion words (e.g., <i>hurt, ugly, nasty</i>) (Cohn, Mehl, and Pennebaker 2004). 	<p>Tone is a summary variable that can be used to understand the level of positive and negative emotions conveyed in words:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A high tone score suggests speaking/writing with a more positive, upbeat style (Aleti et al. 2019). • A low tone score discloses greater anxiety, sadness, or hostility within discourse. This is based on a longitudinal study of online journals (Musolff et al. 2022). <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The identification of an accusatory (versus a sympathetic tone) facilitates understanding about the intended logistic effects. • Tone has the ability to frame the emotional style of the perlocution (i.e., to convey the meaning) in an individual's speech or writing. For example, an urgent tone has been found to motivate others to action (Flusberg, Matlock, and Thibodeau 2018), which is applicable for our study that focuses on how consumers use language to reshape institutional practices in a brand activism context (Kacewicz et al. 2014; Langacker 1988).
<p>Clout</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The use of first-person-plural pronouns and second-person pronouns/tentative words (e.g., <i>maybe, perhaps</i>) (Kacewicz et al. 2014). 	<p>Clout is a summary variable that assess a person's importance, rank and influence over others in a social setting or network (O'Dea et al. 2017).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clout identifies the individual's ability within the social network to exercise agency (Battilana 2006), designating their potential to reshape institutional arrangements (Kacewicz et al. 2014). This is applicable in our research which seeks to determine how consumers exhibit agency through their language. • An externally focused style has a greater incorporation of first-person-plural pronouns (e.g., <i>we/us/our/ourselves</i>) and second-person-plural (e.g., <i>yours</i>) (Kacewicz et al. 2014). Thus, clout shows the perspective from which the author is speaking (e.g., from a high expertise or from a more uncertain or less confident position). • A high clout score suggests speaking or writing with high expertise and confidence (versus a more tentative humble style). This is based on studies about higher-status individuals' decision making, chats, and personal correspondence. These individuals, who have higher social standing and symbolic capital, tend to reflect an externally focused style in their speech and writing (Kacewicz et al. 2014). • A low clout score suggests an internally focused style with a greater incorporation of first-person-singular pronoun (e.g., <i>I/me</i>) and second-person pronouns (e.g., <i>you/your</i>) that is associated with a lesser standing in social hierarchies.

the locutionary force or the referential meaning of speech. The locutionary force is determined by both the illocutionary force, which is the performative function and implication of the speaker (e.g., giving a warning or recommendation), and the perlocutionary force, which is the outcome or consequences of a communicative effort (e.g., acting on a warning or recommendation). The components of speech act theory are classified in Austin's (1962) work and draw a distinction between what a speech or a text *says* versus what it *does*. Caplan and Farling (2017) offer an example of what an advertisement may say about a restaurant: "This place is great for groups or couples" (its locutionary force). While the text performs the rhetorical inference of suggesting that consumers try a restaurant (its illocutionary force), subsequently a restaurant full of patrons would demonstrate the advertisement's perlocutionary force. In this study's sample, analysis of the illocutionary and perlocutionary forces that make up the locutionary force of speech is useful for extracting insightful information about how

consumers use language to collaborate with a brand's activism campaign. We apply this theoretical framework to our investigation of consumer speech acts to discover underexplored influences of rhetorical institutional work that shape the behavior of others in a brand activism context, thus uncovering a new perspective of the transformative nature of advertising.

Developing Transformative Brand Activism with Consumers

Brand activism is a purpose and values-driven communications strategy in which a brand adopts a nonneutral stance on institutionally contested sociopolitical issues, such as same-sex marriage or gun control (Bhagwat et al. 2020). Brand activism differs from corporate social responsibility, which is seen as less controversial and more concerned with nondivisive, prosocial issues, like disaster relief or community projects (Mukherjee and Althuisen 2020). In contrast, brand activism usually addresses controversial, contested, or polarizing

sociopolitical issues and is driven by advertising (Sarkar 2018). Vredenburg et al. (2020) interpret brand activism as a unique branding execution which aims to create social change and foster marketing success by raising awareness about a cause and encouraging consumer behavioral change.

Consumers' affinity with brands is increasingly dependent upon congruence between the brand's stated purpose and the consumer's own core values (Williams, Escalas, and Morningstar 2022). A brand activism advertising strategy recognizes that consumers are more likely to be drawn to brands that share, or are in step with, their own important goals in life, providing a chance for brands to engage with consumers on controversial issues and debates. Aligning with social or political causes has been found to bring specific advantages, such as aiding marketplace differentiation (Middleton and Turnbull 2021), increasing purchase intentions (Moorman 2020; Sarkar 2018), and boosting brand advocacy (Stokburger-Sauer 2010).

Nevertheless, although brand activism may genuinely be part of an organization's broader strategic ambition, if such virtue-signaling efforts are perceived as inauthentic by consumers, brand activism strategies may yield negative brand effects, including backlash or boycotts (Hsu 2017; Mirzaei, Wilkie, and Siuki 2022). For example, Nike's support of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests was criticized by consumers who pointed out the absence of people of color on the company's board (Ritson 2020). The brand was subsequently accused of wokewashing and labeled inauthentic in their brand activism activities. Given such risks, brand activism research to date has focused on its potential negative effects. Specifically, brands that are exposed as not being truly committed to the brand activism issue they claim to support, are commonly accused of employing deceitful marketing tactics (Eccles and Serafeim 2013), which can disrupt previously balanced brand-consumer relationships (Ozanne and Murray 1995). For instance, cynical consumers may join forces to challenge marketing practices (Minocher 2019), or even use anti-brand or anti-consumption rhetoric when united by a common detestation of specific brands (Lee, Motion, and Conroy 2009).

While it is important to understand the risks associated with negative consumer reactions to brand activism (Fernando, Suganthi, and Sivakumaran 2014; Gavilanes, Flatten, and Brettel 2018), little research has examined the potential for brand activism to make a positive impact on society and the sociopolitical issue in focus (Vadakkepatt et al. 2022). This is particularly remiss given the increasing recognition of the importance of advertising as a sociocultural institution capable of

shaping markets and having a transformative effect on society (Gurrieri, Tuncay Zayer, and Coleman 2022; Nenonen, Storbacka, and Windahl 2019). Nevertheless, some recent studies are aligned with our research. For example, research about marketplace interactions has developed the categorization of nuisance consumers who are active in litigation activities against the misselling of products (Lightfoot 2019), has identified how consumers use social media to alert others about greenwashed environmental claims (Fernando, Suganthi, and Sivakumaran 2014), and highlights how consumers adopt social advocacy in social media to reduce wildlife crime (Kachen and Krishen 2020).

As such, social media emerges as a dominant conduit for consumer activism. Consequently, a wealth of research has investigated the role of social media in brand activism and, in particular, social media influencers and the brands they endorse (Lou and Yuan 2019). The influencers' value to brands and their ability to cultivate a sizable consumer activism movement has also been considered (De Veirman et al. 2021; Yang, Chuentrawong, and Pugdeethosapol 2021). However, while prior research has outlined the potential for consumers to gain agency through collective advocacy on social media (Aleti et al. 2019; Fletcher-Brown et al. 2021; Mirzaei, Wilkie, and Siuki 2022), to the authors' knowledge, no studies have investigated how consumers might collaborate with brands to positively boost brand- and cause-related campaign outcomes. Thus, our analysis of consumer online speech acts in response to a brand's activism campaign will augment understanding about brand activism efficacy and processes, thus offering value to advertising researchers, practitioners, and policymakers alike (Eilert and Nappier Cherup 2020; Moorman 2020).

Methodology

Our objective is to examine consumers' agentic online speech acts to identify how language is used to create, maintain, and disrupt marketplace logics and practices in collaboration with a brand's activism campaign. To this end, we adopt a netnographic approach (Kozinets 2002) to examine an environmental brand activism campaign which has significant societal relevance (Matthes 2019). Conducted on virtual communities dedicated to marketing-relevant topics (Belk and Kozinets 2017; Kawaf 2019; Thompson-Whiteside et al. 2023), netnography (or market-oriented ethnography) is particularly helpful in assessing consumers' hidden motives and in characterizing their responses to advertising content (Belk 2017; Fletcher-Brown et al. 2021).

The Selected Case

The context for this investigation is 2018 Christmas advertising campaign “There’s a Rang-Tan in My Bedroom #NoPalmOilChristmas” (see [Appendix A](#)) by international retailer Iceland Foods (Iceland), a British supermarket chain headquartered in Wales, United Kingdom. The use of palm oil in food and cosmetics has become a prevalent cause among environmentalists and concerned consumers (Corciolani, Gistri, and Pace 2019). The advertising film was originally created by Greenpeace, an independent global movement of those who are passionate about defending the natural world. The campaign narrates the tale of an orangutan whose home has been destroyed by tropical deforestation caused by palm oil farming. The campaign’s launch date dovetailed with Iceland’s strategy to be the first global retailer to commit to the elimination of palm oil from their own brand products by the end of following year. However, Greenpeace was deemed to be a political advertiser, leading the campaign to be subsequently banned from U.K. television despite the absence of any Greenpeace branding. Following this decision by the regulators, Iceland decided to post the video on YouTube asking consumers to share it: “You won’t see our Christmas advert on TV this year, because it was banned. But we want to share rang-tan’s story with you. Will you help us share the story?” The video went viral, attracting more than 80 million views, creating thousands of posted comments and reactions from consumers in response to Iceland’s brand activism, thus demonstrating the viewers’ concerns about the environmental issue.

Data Sample

The data set comprised all publicly available comments from Iceland’s “Say Hello to Rang-Tan #NoPalmOilChristmas” retrieved from YouTube, a popular platform which permits the formation of social relationships around video content (Khan and Vong 2014). The inclusion criteria specified that comments must be written in English and relate to the research question. The comments were posted over a four-year period (November 2018 to May 2022). The video received more than 80 million views and initiated global conversations, attracting 2,217 original comments and 4,385 replies, arriving at a sample of $n = 6,602$.

Sequential Data-Analytic Approach

Performing qualitative analysis across a large social media data set is cumbersome and impractical (Andreotta et al. 2019). Instead, the adoption of

computerized technology is recommended to compress large data volumes into smaller data sets (Aleti et al. 2019; Kietzmann and Pitt 2020), yielding a more manageable thematic analysis to understand the broader social context and meaning of the data (Andreotta et al. 2019). We employ automated text and qualitative analysis to assess the themes emerging from consumers’ language. Using both quantitative and qualitative data enhances the data evaluation process by ensuring that the limitations of one data type are balanced by the strengths of the other (Hitchcock and Onwuegbuzie 2020).

Stage 1: Quantitative Automated Text Analysis

While (digital) technology has mobilized consumers’ connective actions (Packard and Berger *forthcoming*), computer science offers improved tools for analyzing language from large data-sets (e.g., Humphreys and Wang 2018). We use Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) software, which has been adopted in multiple consumer behavior studies assessing language and contexts, *inter alia* (e.g., those evaluating product performance (Lee and Bradlow 2011), online community-based discourse (Netzer et al. 2012), the spread of conspiracy theories on social media (Visentin, Tuan, and Di Domenico 2021), and the role of timelines in the media framing of casino and lottery gambling (Humphreys and Latour 2013). LIWC computes word frequencies and different lexical and grammatical categories of input text (Pennebaker, Francis, and Booth 2001, 71). It also features options to analyze the text with a choice of summary variables. In this regard, we select tone and clout, which have been thoroughly validated in previous linguistic research. For example, these variables have been used in prior studies investigating brand engagement through the linguistic elements of social media posts (Hwong et al. 2017), consumers’ dissemination of harmful product-related information (Akpınar, Verlegh, and Smidts 2018), and the relationship between language use and opinion expression (Margolin and Markowitz 2018).

Building on prior research, we highlight the role of linguistic tone and clout in affording speakers agency in a brand activism context. While LIWC software defines clout as “the relative social status, confidence, or leadership that people display through their writing or talking,” it conceptualizes tone as having both positive and negative emotional dimensions. Therefore, a high tone score suggests speaking or writing with a positive, happy, and upbeat style (Aleti et al. 2019). Conversely, a low tone incorporates language exposing feelings of grief, disappointment, and sorrow (Musolff

et al. 2022). LIWC is able to compute high, medium, and low tone scores, which may subsequently impact clout, or the persuasiveness of speech acts (Aleti et al. 2019). Understanding the connection between the level of positive and negative emotions and influence conveyed in words can identify an individual's conviction about a subject (Fan and Zietsma 2019). For example, an individual's confidence is reflected by the incorporation of first-person-plural pronouns (e.g., *we, us, our, ourselves*) and second-person-singular pronouns (e.g., *you, your, yours*) (Kacewicz et al. 2014). Such content has been identified as an externally focused linguistic style that instills a sense of authority, status, and potential influence on the part of the speaker (Moore, Yen, and Powers 2021). Thus, when an individual's language encourages others to follow or copy a particular action (e.g., sharing a comment), the original commenter appears more knowledgeable and powerful to others (Aleti et al. 2019). Following Kozinets (2002), we downloaded all relevant YouTube comments (in English) in the designated study period. We conducted a *k*-means cluster analysis to partition the attained tone and clout observations to the nearest-mean cluster to produce a typology of each cluster's speech acts (see Table 2). The results indicate the presence of three clusters, identified by the commenter's emotional style (tone) and agentic effect (clout), differentiated by the intended use of language (Langacker 1988).

In summary, Cluster 1 reveals a low tone score coupled with the highest clout score (i.e., negative comments conveyed with high confidence and an externally focused style). Cluster 2 exposed the highest tone scores and medium clout scores (i.e., the most positive comments conveyed with high confidence). Cluster 3 featured the lowest tone and lowest clout scores (i.e., the most negative comments conveyed with low confidence and a more internally focused style).

Stage 2: Qualitative Thematic analysis

After developing commenters' tone- and clout-based clusters, we next undertook an a priori thematic analysis drawn from speech act theory (Austin 1962) to better understand the overall locutionary force as

Table 2. Clusters differentiated by their respective linguistic style (tone and clout).

	Cluster 1: 2,646 Speech Acts	Cluster 2: 2,573 Speech Acts	Cluster 3: 1,833 Speech Acts
Style			
Tone	19,059	94,733	17,283
Clout	68,033	56,103	13,041

Tone: $F(6,599) = 34,918; p < 0.00$

Clout: $F(6,599) = 1,101,727; p < 0.00$

functions of speech in the identified clusters. We coded the comments in each cluster as displaying either an illocutionary or perlocutionary force. In other words, we examined whether the force of the utterance was to influence others (illocutionary; e.g., "We humans are responsible for practices which harm animals. Well done Iceland! Stop palm oil") or whether it showed a change in the speaker's intention in response to either consumers' comments or to the advertisement (perlocutionary), for example, "The big supermarkets are responsible for driving forward change. I will check the ingredients from now on." Taken together, analysis of the illocutionary and perlocutionary forces in each cluster deepens understanding of the locutionary force or the referential meaning of language in each cluster. In so doing, we develop a tripartite typology of how consumers use rhetorical agency to collaborate with the brand's activism campaign.

Guided by Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2013), we reread the online comments and manually organized the data into comments aligning to speech act theory-informed a priori themes (i.e., locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary force; see Table 3). We considered the consumer-to-consumer comments and prior knowledge about the phenomenon to generate first-order themes, thus permitting the emergence of novel theoretical insight (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991). This stage yielded 10 first-order themes (e.g., challenge companies about using palm oil, inform other consumers about the consumption problem). In the final coding stage, we grouped the first-order themes into the three aggregate themes, which form the typologies: activist warriors (speech acts drive collective sociopolitical activism), brand champions (speech acts support the brand), and conscious consumers (speech acts encourage others to change their consumption behavior).

To ensure the validity of our thematic analysis, we followed Wallendorf and Belk's (1989) suggestion to seek intercoder agreement. The protocol revealed a 95% overlap between the two coders ($n = 144$). The coders discussed the remaining 5% of data ($n = 7$), and an agreement was reached to endorse the protocol's reliability.

Findings

We examine how consumers' agentic online speech acts may legitimize or disrupt institutional logics and sociopolitical discourses. We identified the role of linguistic tone and clout in affording speakers agency to

Table 3. Thematic analysis to understand how consumers undertake rhetorical institutional work in a brand activism campaign context (from Stage 1).

Cluster	Data Comments	Applying a priori Theory	Themes from Speech Act	First-Order Themes	Aggregate Themes
<p>Cluster 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Lower tone:</i> Uses negative sentiment. • <i>Highest clout:</i> Exhibits externalization of the sociopolitical issue. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “This is shit! If you’re an environmental campaigner, ask other groups for help with finances. We are fighting for environmental and social justice for our neighboring brothers and sisters. We’ve done stuff for Filipino forest activists and even had some surfers over from Bali to fund raise.” (Comment 2391; illocutionary force) • “Western countries move their factories and farms into third world countries and fuck up their flora and fauna, no one cares. They continue to scourge our land and seas for oil. Our duty is to keep lobbying about the rainforests.” (Comment 5860) Perlocutionary force • “Keeping messages like this away from our young people will not help us in the future—they need to learn from our mistakes. With knowledge comes power, but also responsibility. I will be showing this campaign in my science lessons next week!” (Comment 4875; illocutionary force) • “Me and my friend are making posters for this so we can spread the word. You should too.” (Comment 623; perlocutionary force) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Democracy. What democracy? Arrogant corporations run the world NOT politicians and they treat us like mushrooms—keeping us in the dark, feeding us their junk media, showing us what they think we should see rather than the truth. We must challenge them ourselves” (Comment 794; illocutionary force) • “Everyone Sign up to this petition! Get this ad back and running again and shame the companies who are ruining animal’s homes!!!!” (Comment 470; perlocutionary force) • “I’m going to encourage my children to watch this ad from Iceland and they should be angry. Fukkkk, that way this situation might change for the future.” (Comment 539) Perlocutionary force • “Time for action. Let’s ask those politicians why they are doing this? What about the future of those living there and nature? F’kin disgraceful! Share Let’s make it public!” (Comment 1207; illocutionary force) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenge companies about using palm oil • Fight for the use of palm oil to become a political issue (e.g., sign a petition). • Galvanize the discussion of sociopolitical issues. • Share the ad with others to enlighten and instigate change. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activist warriors: Locutionary force of speech acts drives collective sociopolitical activism • Brand champions: Locutionary force of speech acts support the brand. 	
<p>Cluster 2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Highest tone:</i> Uses positive sentiment. • <i>Medium to high clout:</i> Exhibits internalization/externalization of the sociopolitical issue. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Excellent! Not gonna lie, this was better than the past 3 John Lewis Christmas ads combined. I love seeing what others are doing here. I’ve joined a local eco group.” (Comment 4390; illocutionary force) • “We humans are responsible for practices which harm animals. Well done Iceland!!” (Comment 862; illocutionary force) • “It is a wonderful moving advert. Iceland, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “How could such a piece of good sense be banned? This is the message that we should be receiving and heeding. I’m with Iceland on this.” (Comment 3762; illocutionary force) • “We want to see animals rightfully living in their own environment. Any step toward supporting that right will always get the thumbs up from me, and obviously others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give credit to the brand because it engages in sociopolitical activism. • Recognize that brands have the capacity to shape sociopolitical issues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brand champions: Locutionary force of speech acts support the brand. 	

(continued)

Table 3. Continued.

Cluster	Data Comments Applying a priori Theory	Themes from Speech Act	First-Order Themes	Aggregate Themes
	<p>the author and the production team ought to be commended for highlighting the plight of these animals." (Comment 3431; illocutionary force)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I'm gonna shop in Iceland now!" (Comment 009; perlocutionary force) • "What a relief? A brand that is doing something more than just selling stuff." (Comment 26; illocutionary force) 	<p>too from what I can see on here. Good work Iceland." (Comment 301; illocutionary force)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Thank you, Iceland, for highlighting the appalling destruction of orangutans and their habitat in Borneo and Sumatra, 100,000 dead in just the last 15 years!" (Comment 787; illocutionary force) • "Sweet rang tan. But this whole story is anxiety giving. I'm glad Iceland has done this story and is taking the initiative to do something." (Comment 729; illocutionary force) 	<p>Uphold brands that take responsibility for sociopolitical issue.</p>	
<p>Cluster 3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Lowest tone</i>: Uses negative sentiment. • <i>Lowest clout</i>: Exhibits internalization of the sociopolitical issue. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "What have we done to these creatures? trading the lives of thousands of animals for some jars of Nutella is just not right. I feel bad." (Comment 862; illocutionary force) • "If we all can do something then we can help save the destruction we are inflicting on our planet and wildlife." (Comment 1076; illocutionary force) • "It's easy to avoid consuming products with palm oil. People feel they're just one person in a world of eight billion others, and their help won't change anything. It's why problems aren't being solved." (Comment 2669; illocutionary force) • "Awful so I decided to do the right thing. I went shopping today and spent ages checking all the labels. If everyone can do this it sends a message (Comment 5128; illocutionary/perlocutionary force) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I know they [palm oil companies] have been destroying our lives and homeland for decades but the whole ecosystem is being destroyed." (Comment 5521; illocutionary force) • "Not sure if I can make a difference but I think I'm going to stop buying stuff with palm oil in it." (Comment 78; perlocutionary force) • "Cadbury is the biggest user of palm oil in the world so now I boycott Cadbury chocolate and if enough people do the same then maybe they'll learn the lesson and stop." (Comment 965; illocutionary/perlocutionary force) • "The big supermarkets are responsible for driving forward change. I will check the ingredients from now on." (Comment 3197; perlocutionary force) 	<p>Inform other consumers about the consumption problem.</p> <p>Show feelings of guilt about contributing to the issue. Identify ways consumers can change consumption practices.</p>	<p>Conscious consumers: Locutionary force of speech acts encourage others to change consumption.</p>

facilitate consumers in their rhetorical institutional work. This knowledge is particularly valuable for advertising researchers and managers who wish to interpret how consumers do rhetorical institutional work in response to brand activism campaigns. Our analysis reveals a tripartite classification of consumer speech acts that are used to support brand activism,

which we label as the following typologies: activist warriors, brand champions, and conscious consumers (See Figure 1).

In Cluster 1, activist warriors' language comprised low tone scores (19,059) coupled with the highest clout scores (68,033) of the three clusters. Their language tends to incorporate second-person-singular

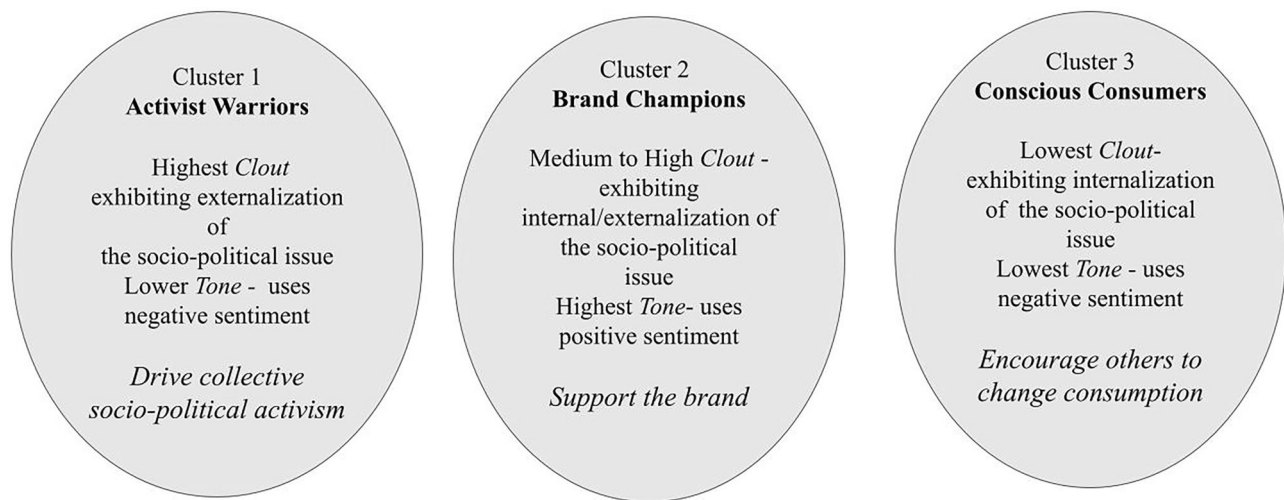


Figure 1. Tripartite classification of consumer speech acts used to support brand activism.

pronouns (e.g., *you*, *your*) and the repeated use of first-person-plural pronouns (e.g., *we*) with an external focus which places the blame of the environmental problem on macro-level institutions. They also voice authoritative commands to the audience (e.g., calls to action). For example, “If we don’t do something now, the rainforests . . . will disappear. But we can do something positive to make a difference. Tell your friends to watch this video and encourage them to do something to stop it” (comment 460; illocutionary/perlocutionary force). In this cluster, speech acts amplify the gravity of the cause by displaying elements of leadership (Kacewicz et al. 2014). For example, “I have started a group that helps all those who are worried and want to do something and not sit on their arses to get involved. Join at this link and you can select what you want to do” (comment 394; illocutionary/perlocutionary force). Common parlance in this cluster incorporates illocutionary/perlocutionary language, for example, “You all need to realize pretty quickly we need to act now! I know if you pressurize the institutions that rape the forest of palm oil they’ll listen. C’mon you can get with me and do this” (comment 24; illocutionary/perlocutionary force), thereby displaying fervent engagement with the sociopolitical issue.

Activist warriors’ agentic online speech acts illustrate rhetorical institutional work as they confidently share their knowledge about the issue and communicate to others how they can become involved in environmental activist activities. Exposed as seasoned activists, they employ accusatory language toward the institutions responsible for the production of palm oil. The data show activist warriors’ use of speech to actively engage others in collective work through the locutionary force (meaning) and within the illocution (performative function) and perlocution (outcome of

communication) inherent in the use of language as follows:

1. **Challenge companies about using palm oil.** For example, “Selfish, nasty manufacturers should clean up their act. We know you use palm oil to make a profit. Well you’ll lose out when we don’t buy your products anymore” (comment 52; illocutionary/perlocutionary force).
2. **Fight for the use of palm oil to become a political issue.** For example, “Everyone needs to take action about palm oil. Use your vote. The self-serving political elite in cohorts with greedy corporations, don’t want people to know the truth, as it could damage their billions in profit and affect their privileged positions” (comment 2809; perlocutionary force); and “Woo Woo! Sign up to the online petition and prove the companies who are ruining animal’s homes wrong!” (comment 2701; perlocutionary force).
3. **Galvanize the discussion of sociopolitical issues in the classroom.** For example, “I’ll be using it in my geography lessons. Students should know about such devastation and be encouraged to get involved!” (comment 4875; illocutionary force).
4. **Share the ad with others to enlighten and instigate change.** For example, “This is what social media is for to share the truth and not what governments want us to believe. Share!! share!! Share!!” (comment 1114; perlocutionary force).

In sum, using language that incorporates strong emotions (e.g., a furious or angry tone) displays issue-related knowledge or leadership (i.e., clout). Therefore, activist warriors’ speech acts drive

collective sociopolitical activism to reshape institutional logics and practices (e.g., Cornelissen Joep et al. 2015; Eilert and Nappier Cherup 2020).

Cluster 2: Brand Champions' language reveals the highest tone score (94,733) among the identified clusters, coupled with medium to high clout scores (56,103). Hopeful language extolls the benefits of environmental preservation, demonstrating support for the brand's activism efforts. For example, "I'm in touch with saving the environment because it's so beautiful and nature is wonderful. It's about time retailers did something so well-done Iceland for doing something positive. Let's all support this brave initiative" (comment 315; illocutionary force).

Unique to this cluster, medium linguistic clout is signified by both internalization and externalization of the issue, with a range of personal pronouns used: first-person-singular pronouns (e.g., *I*, *me*), second-person pronouns (e.g., *you*, *your*), first-person-plural pronouns (e.g., *we*, *us*, *our*, *ourselves*), and second-person-plural pronouns (e.g., *yours*). For example, "I always do my bit for the beautiful bees and environment but this is much bigger. I'd like to get involved and help Iceland save the rangtans. I see some people on here know what to do. I'll share this page and sign that petition" (comment 359; perlocutionary/illocutionary force). Internalizing the focal brand activism campaign issues enables consumers to form an opinion about the campaign and decide whether to participate in institutional work to support the brand activism. For example, "Those cute monkeys deserve protection so well-done Iceland for raising this problem. I'm shopping with you now because I care and want to help you and others here" (comment 1962; illocutionary force). At times, their language incorporates externalization of the palm oil catastrophe (e.g., by using language identifying the irresponsibility of macro-level institutions). For example, "I didn't realize just how much the government was helping the destruction. They say they want to help the environment but they're doing nothing. It's brilliant Iceland are showing them up for the idiots they are. I have decided to shop with you. I salute your campaign" (comment 59; illocutionary force).

Brand champions' speech acts are aimed at other micro-level consumers and meso-level advertising institutions to encourage them to perform rhetorical institutional work with the intention to impact macro-level sociocultural forces in the following ways:

1. **Give credit to brands that engage in sociopolitical activism.** For example, "Because of Iceland's

advert, I'm now only buying palm oil free peanut butter for my toast, even if it means we don't use our favorite brands" (comment 3218; illocutionary force).

2. **Recognize that brands have the capacity to shape sociopolitical issues.** For example, "Bloody marvelous Iceland, fucki'n politicians should be driving this but all they do is take the money. Thank you for highlighting this because I knew it was happening and now I'm gonna buy from you to help the rainforest" (comment 1789; illocutionary force).
3. **Uphold brands that take responsibility for sociopolitical issues.** For example, "I've looked it up. Cadbury is the biggest user of palm oil in the world so now I don't eat any sort of Cadbury chocolate. If we all do the same then maybe they'll learn the lesson and stop. Well-done Iceland for leading the way" (comment 965; illocutionary/perlocutionary force).

Brand champions' positive tone is illustrated in their congratulatory language as they celebrate the brand in its work. The role of high tone and medium clout has an agentic effect that encourages the brand's efforts and supports the campaign because the campaign aligns with the individual's own beliefs. By using language that suggests cheerful, joyful emotion (i.e., positive tone), and displaying confidence (i.e., high clout), brand champions' speech acts support the brand, suggesting individuals are collaborating with the brand to reshape commonplace, or existing, palm oil-based institutional arrangements.

In Cluster 3, conscious consumers' speech comprises the lowest tone (17,283) and clout (13,041) scores. Their language frequently incorporates negative sentiment and uses many first-person-singular (e.g., *I*, *me*) and second-person pronouns (e.g., *you*, *your*), thus appealing to others to do institutional work by changing their consumption of palm oil. For example, "It's easy to avoid consuming products with palm oil. People feel they're just one person in a world of eight billion; their help won't change anything. It is why problems aren't being solved" (comment 2669; illocutionary/perlocutionary force). Their language suggests a greater internalization of, as well as emotional attachment to, the environmental issue.

Conscious consumers' speech highlights their enlightened desire to address the consumption problem by adopting social advocacy in their language, thus illustrating their ability to shape consumer

consumption patterns and encourage prosocial behavior in others. For example, “This is so dreadful. You can make a start like I did by switching brands for the every-day-type-of products. It became really easy and I feel at least I’m doing my bit to help. I usually always try to shop in Iceland now too” (comment 429; illocutionary/perlocutionary force). Thus, the low tone and clout scores in this cluster’s language illustrates agentic possibilities through micro-level acts of performative labor (e.g., by altering one’s shopping habits to foster change in institutional practices). The locutionary sentiment in acts of speech (e.g., anxiety and guilt about consumption responsibilities) contains the perlocutionary force to motivate individuals to consider changes to their own consumption practices, thus helping to solve the environmental problem. Conscious consumers’ language identifies agentic potential to disrupt consumption logics in the following ways:

1. **Inform other consumers about the consumption problem.** For example, by demonstrating their knowledge about palm oil production (e.g., “It’s not only palm oil, vegetable oil needs a bigger land mass!” (comment 6383; illocutionary force) or “The habitat for these rang tans has almost been wiped off this earth in places like Borneo too” (comment 55; illocutionary force).
2. **Show feelings of guilt about their own contribution.** For example, “Am I the only one crying while watching this? This situation is so wrong. I need to do something about it” or “This made me sad . . . I’m not going to buy any stuff with palm oil in it anymore” (comment 783; illocutionary force).
3. **Identify ways to change consumption practices.** For example, “I had such anxiety about this especially when I looked at my beauty products. I’ve made a list of brands I won’t buy now because I want to do something helpful. I keep this list with me when I go shopping you could do the same” (comment 376; illocutionary/perlocutionary force).

In sum, this cluster uses language that displays their emotional guilt (i.e., through tone) and their lack of confidence about the palm oil issue (i.e., low clout). Therefore, conscious consumers’ speech acts encourage others to change the consumption of palm oil products (see Table 2). We next discuss these findings and their implications for TAR and brand activism advertising research and practice.

Discussion, Implications, and Limitations

Discussion

Gurrieri, Tuncay Zayer, and Coleman (2022) invite advertising researchers to explore the beneficial, individual, and societal effects of transformative advertising. This study extends TAR (Gurrieri, Tuncay Zayer, and Coleman 2022) by considering consumers as agentic actors capable of taking an institutional role toward change via their responses to brand activism (Huh and Malthouse 2020; Packard and Berger forthcoming). Although there is academic discussion about the risks that may arise from negative consumer reactions to brand activism (Gavilanes, Flatten, and Brettel 2018; Hsu 2017; Mirzaei, Wilkie, and Siuki 2022), there is scant research that examines the potential for such advertising to make a positive impact on society and the role of consumers in that process (Vadakkepatt et al. 2022). In this study, we elucidate consumer speech as an iterative process that is both responsive to and influential over the understanding of other environmental and societal issues (Cornelissen Joep et al. 2015; Searle 1969, 626). This approach recognizes that consumer speech has the potential to enhance brand-related and cause-related outcomes of brand activism campaigns. This is particularly relevant to managers seeking to align their advertising communications with the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals to garner citizen-consumers’ support.

Our approach spotlights the institutional role of advertising—located at the interstice of production and consumption—as a key instrument for change to marketplace and societal practices (Gurrieri, Tuncay Zayer, and Coleman 2022; Middleton and Turnbull 2021). Specifically, we identify consumer online speech as rhetorical institutional work toward a collective renegotiation of new marketplace logics. Applying speech act theory (Austin 1962), our study uncovers new understanding about the agentic possibilities of consumer’s online language as an influential force. Our novel typology of speech acts provides deeper understanding of the role of tone and clout in linguistic agency, which enables consumers “to get things done” in disrupting stable consumption and production practices (Smets and Jarzabkowski 2013, p. 1281). The tripartite classification informs and guides brand activism-related research and management about the linkage between consumer emotions (tone) and consumer social status and leadership (clout). For instance, activist warriors feel and exhibit stronger emotions (tone), such as anger and outrage, in their

language, whereas conscious consumers exhibit guilt and shame, which aligns to this cluster's internal/external focus (clout). Our study extends prior findings about the role of consumer emotions in institutional work (Fan and Zietsma 2019; King and Pearce 2010) by providing detailed analysis of the role of emotions within language as rhetorical institutional work in the brand activism context. The proposed typology offers a valuable tool for advertisers who are intent on developing activism campaigns congruent to focal sociopolitical issues.

While our analysis builds on prior research exploring the role of emotion in institutional work—for example, market actors' emotions or agentic abilities (Fan and Zietsma 2019), emotion in social movements (King and Pearce 2010), and the emotions associated with subversive consumer actions (Middleton et al. 2022)—we explore how consumers use emotion in rhetorical institutional work, yielding novel insight. Activist warriors' emotion-laden language exhibits their broad ambition, or efforts, to drive marketplace change (e.g., by encouraging others to question or critique established macro-level institutions, including the media, governments, and firms). This understanding of consumer speech opens up possibilities for brands to involve citizen-consumers in their brand activism campaigns. We next discuss key theoretical implications that arise from our work.

Theoretical Implications

Using rhetorical institutionalism, we examine consumers' agentic online speech acts to identify how language is used to create, maintain, and disrupt marketplace logics and practices in collaboration with a brand's activism campaign. Our findings provide evidence of advertising's transformative effect through the interactions of micro-level institutional actors and meso-level advertising institutions that shape market-level interactions. Our empirical study contributes to TAR and brand activism advertising research as follows. First, we offer a preliminary conceptualization of consumer speech acts used as rhetorical institutional work to support brand activism (see Figure 2).

Second, we highlight the role of linguistic tone and clout as key agentic effects through which consumers as institutional actors create, maintain, and disrupt institutional logics and practices. Specifically, our analysis suggests that speech-based tone and clout endows speakers with agency, thus facilitating their rhetorical institutional work in response to a brand activism campaign. In other words, tone and clout emerge as pertinent linguistic elements that can provide the required agency to drive institutional or sociopolitical change, raising interesting implications for further theory development. For example, what is the relative role of tone (versus clout) for particular consumers throughout different stages of their brand relationship?

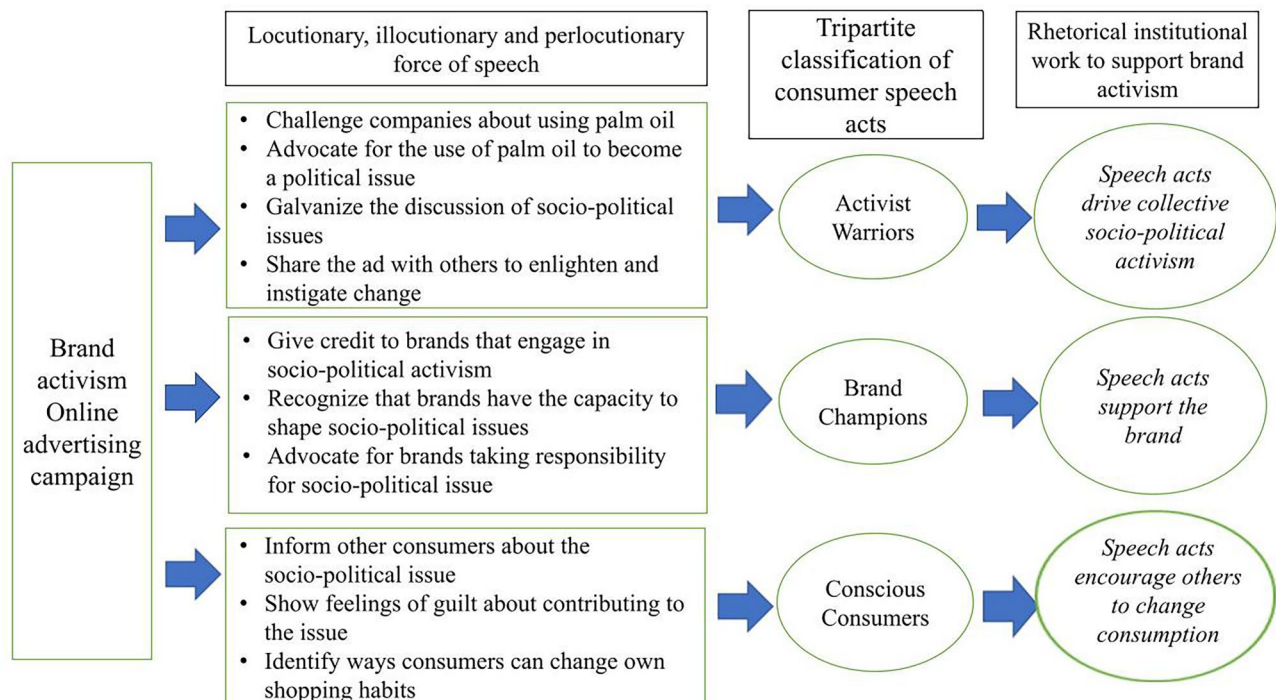


Figure 2. Consumer speech acts as rhetorical institutional work to support brand activism.

Finally, we develop a tripartite classification of consumer speech acts used to support brand activism. We label these typologies as activist warriors, brand champions, and conscious consumers. These categories deepen our understanding of how consumers' online speech may amplify brand activism, thereby contributing to the transformative outcomes of advertising. In addition, these identified clusters serve as a starting point for further research. For example, does the proposed tripartite classification of consumer speech acts hold in other such as negative responses to advertising campaigns (Bowden et al. 2017)?

Managerial Implications

Our analysis also presents relevant implications for advertising practitioners. First, our novel understanding of consumer speech as a form of rhetorical institutional work opens up possibilities for brands to involve citizen-consumers in their brand activism campaigns. Advertising managers seeking to disrupt marketplace logics and practices through brand activism may wish to deploy the proposed tripartite classification to plan or manage consumers' rhetorical responses. In this way, consumers will contribute to boosting activism campaign effectiveness. In particular, user experience (UX) directors and information architecture (IA) directors may wish to consider consumer speech acts in relation to the brand's digital assets to optimize ongoing campaign engagement (Hollebeek and Macky 2019). Brands could consider additional messaging that aligns with each cluster's tone and clout-based characteristics to energize audience engagement. Overall, using speech act analysis should be seen as a leading indicator to assist with ongoing campaign correction.

Second, the findings raise awareness of the role of consumer speech acts in supporting brand activism campaigns, and the importance of considering or involving consumers during the objective-setting phase of campaign planning. Campaign planners may wish to consider setting specific objectives for the identified clusters. For example, given the high clout content of activist warriors' language and their ability to motivate others, brands should consider responding to this cluster's feedback with tangible actions (e.g., signing petitions). Continuing this line of inquiry, it may also be valuable to understand other linguistic elements that may impact consumers' speech acts in response to brand-related activism campaigns.

Third, we advise advertising managers to stay abreast of the cultural zeitgeist, enabling them to

authentically engage with cultural conversations (Hollebeek and Macky 2019). We highlight how successful brand activism campaigns build on consumers' valid sustainability concerns, suggesting the potentially lasting impact of brand activism campaigns.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contribution, this research also has limitations that yield additional opportunities for further research. First, we captured the observed consumer speech acts in rich detail from a single case, rather than using multiple-case data (Yin 2013). While qualitative approaches are becoming more prevalent in consumer behavior research (Belk 2017; Fletcher-Brown et al. 2021), the generalizability of our findings may be impacted by the use of single-case data. Future researchers may find value in adopting multiple-case data to further explore the role and effects of consumers' speech acts in brand activism campaigns.

Second, campaign planners will often use data from focus groups or fictitious or artificial settings to understand consumer attitudes and behavior. However, though our data were sourced from a natural setting, we used only a single platform (i.e., YouTube) to collect our data. Future scholars may wish to use other or supplementary (e.g., social media) platforms or a differing time frame to collect their data, which may see differing results.

Third, we show that consumers may deploy emotions in different ways in their rhetorical institutional work, yielding further research opportunities (e.g., by delving more deeply into the affective components and mechanisms that may aid consumers to work together toward desired marketplace change). Brand activism is an inherently risky activity for brands, as the association with a controversial issue can provoke negative consumer responses. However, the present findings indicate that this risk may be mitigated if the organization is able to positively engage consumers (Hollebeek and Macky 2019), suggesting the importance of conducting further research into this phenomenon to validate our findings. To better understand the complexities of affective consumer-citizenship and its alignment with controversial or activist advertising, scholars could examine the factors that drive the display and management of agonistic (anger) versus retreat (fear) emotions in consumers' responses to brand activism throughout their consumption journey.

Fourth, as brands and organizations are increasingly called upon to address broader societal challenges, the further development of understanding of the mechanisms that allow consumers and brands to collaborate in more sustainable and ethical consumption would be fruitful. We particularly welcome longitudinal studies exploring rhetorical institutional work in contexts where the brand remains committed to the brand activism campaign. Moreover, scholars may wish to examine contexts in which consumers are contributing to, or leading, brand activism.

Fifth, future research could augment understanding of perceived brand activism-related authenticity and its role in boosting consumers' positive campaign-related responses. These could, for instance, address consumers' ability (e.g., self-efficacy) to change or improve the problematic issue raised by the brand, or consumers' perceptions of the steps taken by the organization or brand to use their platform for good and the implementation of practical steps to address the problem, both inside and outside of the organization.

Sixth, we also recognize that while our respondents feel relatively free to comment on the brand or relevant sociopolitical issues, this may not apply universally. Consequently, it is important to consider the extent to which rhetorical institutional work can be traced within or across cultural contexts. For example, are there differences between consumers' speech acts in institutional work in individualist versus more collectivist societies (Hollebeek 2018). The application of a similar research design as our study would be fruitful in these contextual suggestions.

Finally, this study highlights the value of combining qualitative and quantitative data analytic approaches to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of brand activism campaigns. While there is pressure on campaigns to perform in the short term (e.g., through the deployment of short-term metrics, like search, downloads, likes and sales), the brand's longer-term health also requires monitoring. This study shows how brands are able to use consumers' YouTube feedback as a form of always-on metrics to allow for continuous tracking, thus exposing emergent (e.g., consumers' brand sentiment-related) trends. Furthermore, in an era of rising accountability, advertisers may wish to consider using econometric or marketing mix modeling to evaluate future brand activism campaign performance. In this vein, it would be valuable to understand how activism campaigns impact a brand's market share and growth, after isolating other

economic, marketing, and distribution factors from the campaign's effect.

Ethics Statement

Ethical approval was granted from University of Portsmouth, UK: BAL/2022/16/FLETCHERBROWN.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflicts of interest were reported by the author(s).

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Appendix A



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fGox3HGyKkI>