

Environmental Activism For Sale: A Visual Analysis of the Relationship Between Product Advertising and the Environmental Movement in 2022



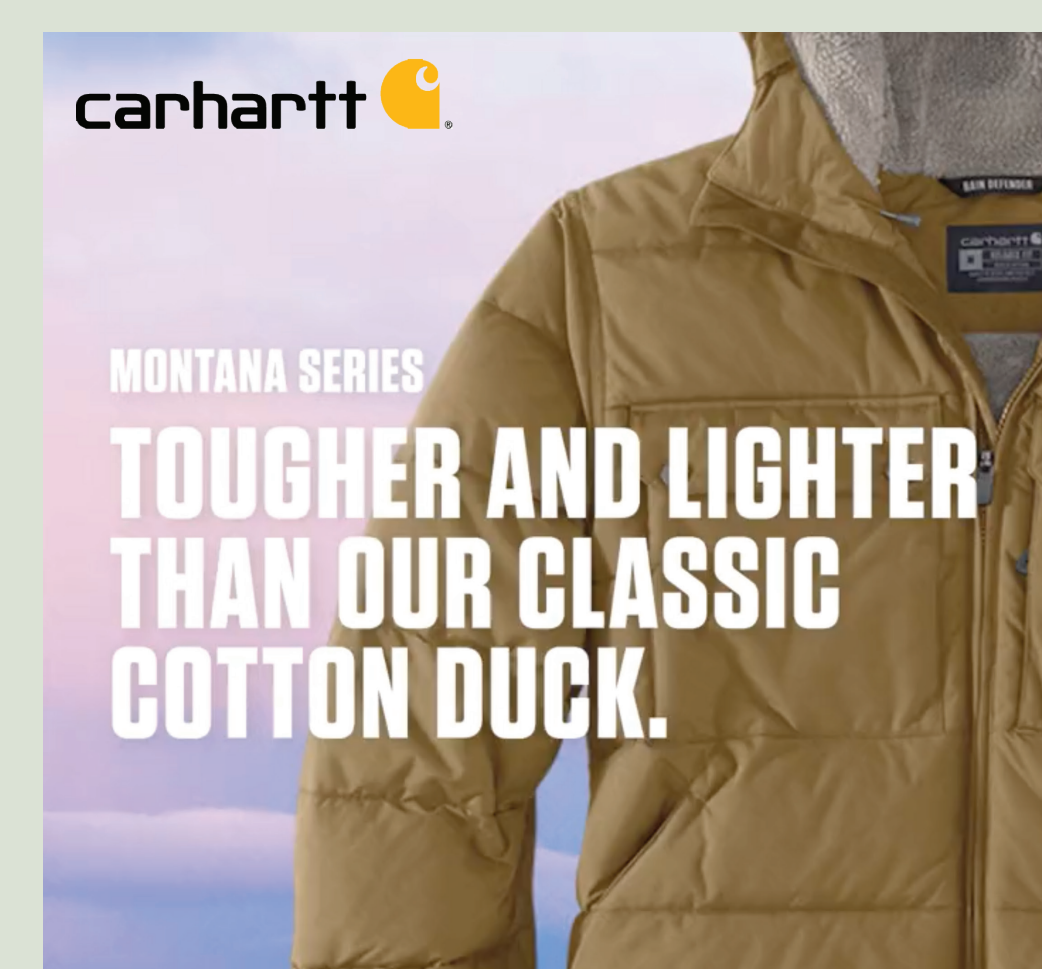
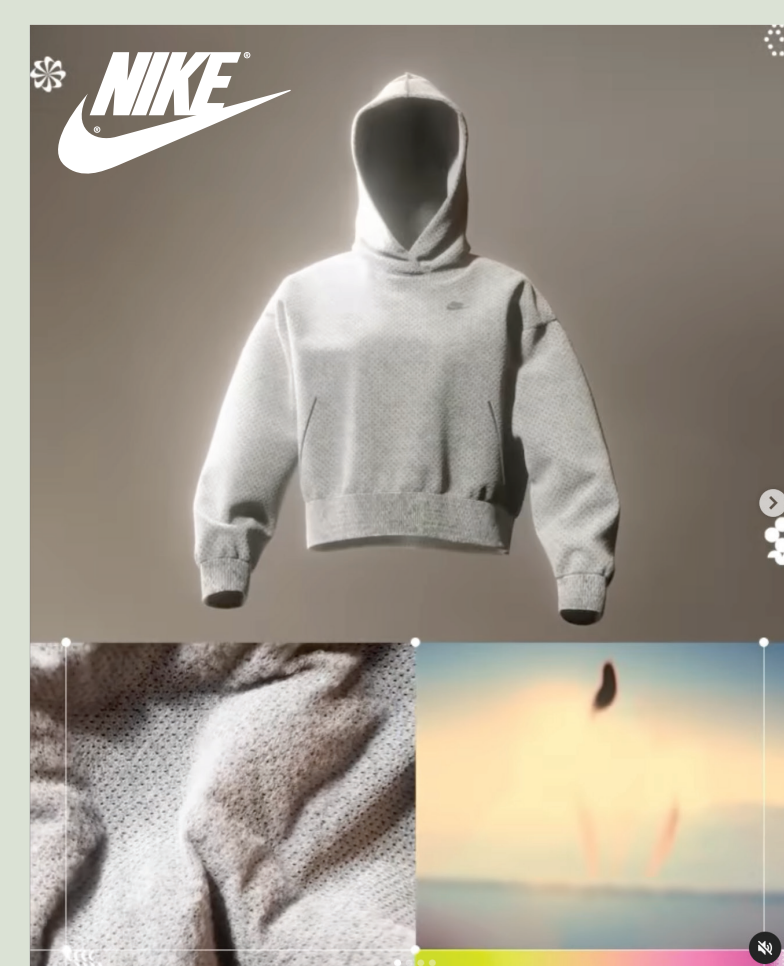
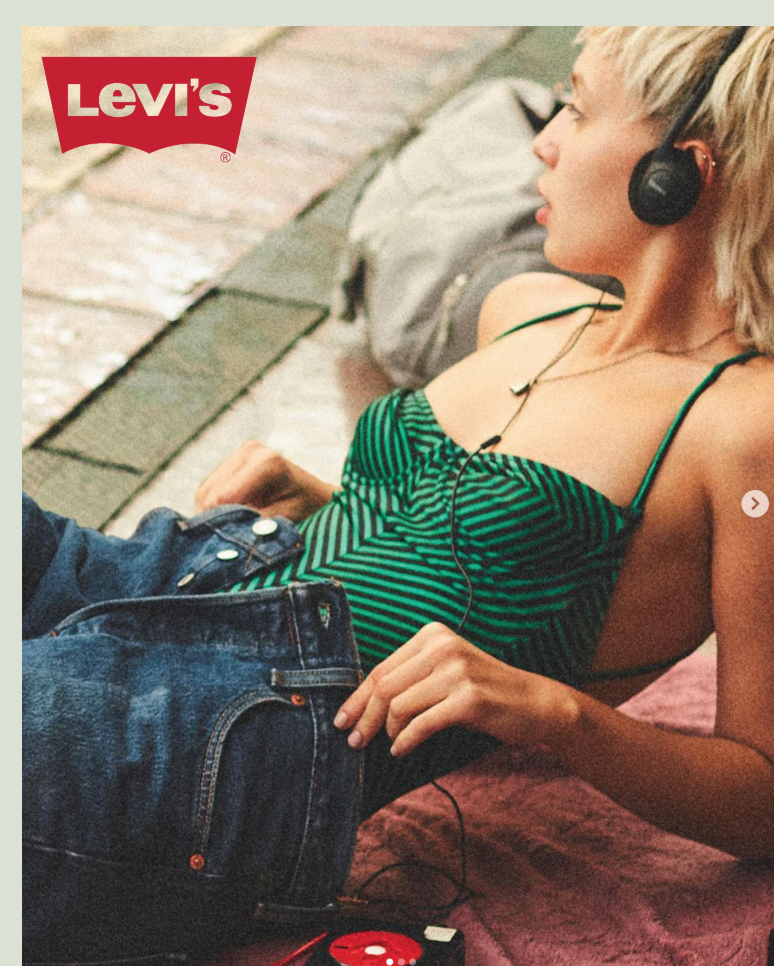
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Brand Activism & Social Responsibility

As the corporate use of social movement rhetoric in advertising increases, the role of corporate participation in activism gains significance. Advertising is the process of creating promotional material and strategies that allow companies to sell their goods and services to consumers. Advertising is considered a type of rhetoric in which visual and verbal devices are used to inform and persuade the target market.

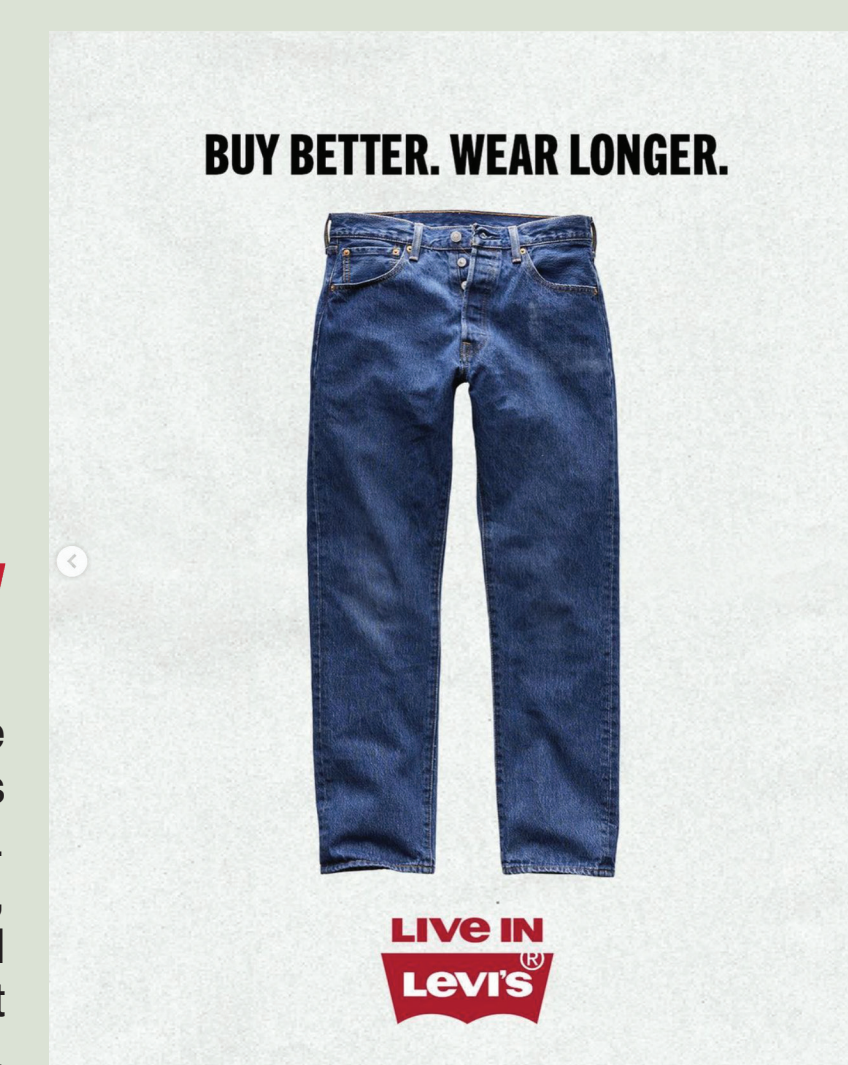
The commodification of social movements within product advertising is at the core of brand activism and corporate social responsibility (CSR). Brand activism, a value-based extension of CSR reporting, occurs when companies take non-neutral public stances on sociopolitical issues as a means to stand out against competition through advertising campaigns.* Companies that regularly engage in authentic brand activism build long-lasting trust with consumers.

Advertisements



As seen in the left image, Patagonia's second image utilizes aesthetic patches coined as "badges of honor" as symbols of environmental activism. This framing inserts Patagonia's company values into the narrative of the environment and aims to make sustainability fashionable.

The final image of Levi's ad connects the 501 Originals denim style with its longstanding anticonsumption campaign. As evident from the first and last images, Levi's ad is not visually cohesive, yet still communicates the company's apparent sustainability goals to consumers.



Advertising the Environmental Movement

Advertising commodifies social movements through campaigns to sell more products to its target audience. The alignment of advertising campaigns with the environmental movement creates the condition for companies to increase the perceived value of their products by highlighting sustainable aspects of the products or the brand. There are two main advertising strategies: Green marketing generally promotes the environmental benefit of purchasing a good or service*; anticonsumption appeals urge consumers to not consume for the sake of the environment rather than for financial hardship.*

Analysis

Creating a Trustworthy Brand Image

- The North Face creates and manipulates brand trust through an emphasis on pride received from purchase and apparent ethical production practices.
- Carhartt manipulates consumer trust in its longstanding brand image of providing high-quality workwear without an emphasis on environmental impacts.
- Patagonia (pictured left) relies on previous advertising and the creation of an emotional incentive for consumer trust.
- Levi's (pictured right) connects a popular product with an existing environmental campaign through visual elements.
- Nike exploits consumer trust in their innovative and activist reputation through repeated visual elements and branding.

Methodology

In this project, I utilized a combined methodology of visual rhetoric and semiotics. Visual rhetoric considers individual visual components of an advertisement (font choice, colors, image composition, movement, etc.) as persuasive and communicative elements.* Semiotics views the signs within an advertisement as symbols of the society they originated from.* The use of combined methodologies creates a comprehensive understanding of the persuasive visual elements within an advertising campaign and each element's potential meaning within society.



Nike's new product ad is less heavily branded than previous advertising, yet still assumes consumers are familiar with the brand, as evident from the final image shown here. Nike Forward becomes an active symbol of the environmental movement and the innovation necessary for Nike to be a sustainable and activist company.



The North Face features three main storylines in its video ad: one of apparent ethical production, one of family and posterity, and one of the impacts of TNF on friends. These narratives and correlating visuals center on the many roles the company aims to play in environmental activist efforts.



Suggesting a Convergence of Corporate & Activist Interests

- Nike (pictured left) condenses all their previous brand activism into advertising that suggests that the purchase of Nike products positively impacts a range of social movements, including the environmental movement.
- Patagonia constructs the purchase of the product as an aesthetic symbol of consumer activist support in the environmental movement. By doing so, Patagonia displays its products in direct connection to its continued devotion to environmental activism.
- The North Face (pictured right) highlights the central role the company will have in environmental activism and posterity with the help of activist consumer purchases.