

Brand activism in search for ethical communication leadership: Vivienne Westwood and the clashes between person and brand

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Abstract

Frame of the research: This paper builds on the recent, fast-growing body of literature on brand activism to explore how brand leaders construct themselves as activists in contemporary society and the challenges they face inherent to their roles.

Purpose of the paper: The aim of our paper is to shed light on how the cultural tensions of being a socio-political activist and an iconic fashion entrepreneur in the current scenario of consumer movements and collective agitations are constructed and amplified in social media platforms.

Methodology: We developed an in-depth critical case centered on Vivienne Westwood as person, leader, and brand. We adopted a netnographic research design that combined a diachronic, retrospective, and auto-biographical reconstruction of Vivienne Westwood's life story, with non-participant observation of online posts, conversations, and comments centered on Westwood as person and as brand, shared on social media platforms.

Results: Our study highlights a series of clashes that arise when an activist leader does not act as a true ethical leader of meanings and does not use engaging, and fine-tuning communication as a strategic lever to transform society through listening to, engaging, and fine-tuning with stakeholders, but rather indulges in a self-referential attitude aimed at giving full expression to her changing moods, needs, and desires.

Practical implications: This paper highlights the challenges of being an activist leader and brand in contemporary woke society. In so doing, it provides strategic guidelines on how communication should be conceived in the company to achieve ethical leadership and overcome cultural tensions.

Originality of the paper: This paper contributes to advance brand and CEO activism as well as strategic communication theoretical debate, through explicitly linking the tensions and the clashes between authentic purpose and commodified market logics emerging in social media platforms to a lack of exercise of ethical communication leadership on the part of the brand leader.

Key words: brand activism; CEO activism; strategic communication; leadership of meanings; ethical leadership

1. Introduction

In our geo-politically divided times, everyone feels entitled to have and share an opinion. Now, not only companies and brands are expected to

publicly state where they stand on a controversial issue; also, corporate leaders and CEOs (Chief Executive Officer) are expected to express their opinions on societal matters and to take a public stance on those issues that are felt as cogent by society. When Disney CEO Bob Chapek was initially reluctant to publicly condemn Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill, his silence prompted Disney employees to walk out in protest¹. This legislation prohibited classroom instruction and discussion about sexual orientation and gender identity in certain elementary school grades. Although initially silent, Disney joined the debate at the urging of its employees, and Chapek made several remarks criticizing the bill². In response to Disney's denunciation of the education legislation, Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida began to mock the company as "Woke Disney" and his supporters started to accuse Disney of adopting stances that conservatives said went too far, such as changes to its theme parks and streaming services in terms of retheming some symbols, visuals, and representations of gender and ethnicity (i.e., removing a scene depicting pirates selling women in an auction in the Pirates of the Caribbean ride to make it more inclusive and fair).

The dispute between Disney and Florida lawmakers is indicative of the increasing pressure corporations face to be involved in partisan battles. If leaders stay silent, their companies and brands are likely to face blowbacks. However, when leaders expose themselves they enter bipartisan controversies that can easily escalate in our testing and delicate geo-political times.

How can brand leaders navigate the tensions and the controversies that arise from being activists? What is the role of strategic communication in supporting leaders to face such delicate matters? In this paper, we build on the recent and fast-growing body of literature on brand activism (Sarkar, 2018; Eyada, 2020; Moorman, 2020; Muckerjee and Althuisen, 2020; Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020; Key *et al.*, 2021; Sibai *et al.*, 2021; Mirzaei *et al.*, 2022; Andersen and Johansen, 2023; Cammarota *et al.*, 2023; Gambetti and Biraghi 2023; Verlegh, 2024; Ahmad *et al.*, 2024; Westwood and Kelly, 2014) to explore how brand leaders construct themselves as activists and how their engagement with bipartisan issues can generate controversies that are inherent in the mandate that contemporary leaders are taking on to deliver growth and profitability for their companies and brands in tandem with social value for their stakeholders.

To reply to our questions, we conducted an in-depth critical case centered on Vivienne Westwood as person, leader, and brand, to shed light on how the cultural tensions of being a socio-political activist and an iconic fashion entrepreneur in contemporary society of consumer movements and collective agitations are constructed and amplified in social media platforms as the result of a lack of ethical communication leadership.

Our study highlights a series of clashes and mismatches that are inherent to brand leaders' commitment to be an activist and actively involved in shaping, supporting, and fighting for societal priorities. Those clashes arise

¹ <https://www.forbesindia.com/article/darden-school-of-business/take-a-stand-or-sit-one-out-ceo-activism-and-partisan-consumer-behavior/81381/1>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/article/disney-florida-desantis.html>

when an activist leader does not act as a true ethical leader of meanings and does not use communication as a strategic lever to transform society through listening to, engaging, and fine-tuning with stakeholders, but rather indulges in a self-referential attitude aimed at giving full expression to their changing moods, needs, and desires.

In terms of our contribution, we advance the debate on brand activism by critically unpacking the role that leaders have in framing meanings though their actions and statements and the controversies to which them and their brands might be exposed in the dialogic arena of the sociotechnical platforms, in which brand leaders' commitments are subject to consumers' scrutiny. The critical case that we develop in this paper contributes also to advance the debate on the role of strategic communication by highlighting how communication can play a vital role as the conscience of the organization and the brand when activism and engagement with bipartisan causes or ethical matters are at quest.

Our study is organized as follows. First, we present brand activism as a contest territory that can position a brand at the hearth of social and geopolitical tensions and polarizations, which force brand leaders to be more exposed as they are expected to act as the public face of their companies and brands' commitments. Then, we present the results of our critical case, in which we highlight the discrepancies between Vivienne Westwood pol-ethical leadership, the positioning of her brand, the construction of her fashion empire, and the consumers' counter culture that harshly refused and rejected Westwood's communication messages as a committed brand leader.

2. Navigating controversies in brand activism

Brand activism has emerged over the last few years as one of the most prominent and fast-growing debates in the branding literature (i.e., Sarkar, 2018; Eyada, 2020; Moorman, 2020; Muckerjee and Althuisen, 2020; Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020; Key *et al.*, 2021; Sibai *et al.*, 2021; Mirzaei *et al.*, 2022; Andersen and Johansen, 2023; Cammarota, *et al.*, 2023; Gambetti and Biraghi 2023; Verlegh, 2024, Ahmad *et al.*, 2024; Pimentel *et al.*, 2024).

Brand activism has been defined as a brand effort that aims to “promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to make improvements in society” (Sarkar, 2018, p. 554). This is done through an act whereby a brand publicly takes a stand on divisive social or political issues (ibi). This is exemplified in Westwood's 2020 article of The New York Times, where she openly acknowledged her brand's commitment to reducing consumerism and challenging an economic system that prioritizes profit over environmental health. This issue has historically tackled both an economic and political divide, sparking contentious debates and dividing factions over the years.

The contentious nature of brand activism differentiates it from corporate social responsibility or cause-related marketing (Chernev and Blair, 2015; Luo and Bhattacharya, 2009), which typically deal with generally-accepted, non-divisive, pro-social issues such as supporting access to healthcare and education or fighting natural disasters (Muckerjee and Althuisen, 2020).

In a recent study, Gambetti and Biraghi (2023) found that activism positions the brand at the hearth of the contestations and polarizations that are the result of the unresolved inner tension of the brand being both a cultural and a market player. Activist brand can alienate a significant part of their existing market whose positions contrast those taken by the brand (Key *et al.*, 2021; Westwood, 2020).

In analyzing Freeda Media's recipe of brand activism, the authors unmask a spiral of mismatches between the brand conduct and consumer perceptions that erodes the credibility of brand purpose, creating the conditions for consumers' critique. Among those mismatches, the brand suffered a misalignment between the ideological and socio-political background of its leaders, whose past commitments collide with the brand purpose. The founders and leading managers of Freeda Media were former executives working in Silvio Berlusconi's media empire, well-known and criticized for its cultural responsibility in objectifying the role of women in media representations and narratives. That marks a direct clash with the Freeda Media's brand project whose purpose is to genuinely support women valorization and gender equality.

Literature on brand activism underlines that commitment to be an activist brand requires to pursue activism as a business strategy (Pimentel *et al.*, 2024) and not just as a marketing ploy (Sarkar, 2018). Companies like Patagonia are born with a political mission also due to the imprinting of their leaders (Boeker 1989). "Yvon Chouinard's founding mission at Patagonia to "Build the best product, cause no unnecessary harm, use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis" has influenced the company's intense political advocacy around public lands and environmental practices, even using its marketing prowess to influence the election of pro-environment candidates through its "Vote Our Planet program" (Moorman, 2020, p. 391). The political mission that lies at the hearth of the brand purpose and inspires the business strategy stems from the engagement of brand leaders as activists. Brand activism then raise higher pressure and demands on leadership, as brand leaders are now expected to shoulder societal responsibilities and be the public face of their companies and brands' commitments.

2.1 Brand leaders as the new face of brand activism

The claim for or against a specific societal priority or cause is often declared directly by the brand leading figures, like the CEO (Bedendo and Siming, 2021; Burbano, 2021; Chatterji and Toffel, 2018, 2019; Coombs and Holladay, 2018; Melloni *et al.*, 2024). Brand leaders and CEOs are perceived as the face of the company and usually receive the highest publicity (Fetscherin, 2015). Therefore, silence is not a viable option for leaders anymore (Sterbenk *et al.*, 2022). The founders and CEOs can act on behalf of the brand and make activist statements inspired by their own personal values (Hambrick and Wowak, 2021). Leaders' opinions and statements have a significant impact on financial aspects such as financial performance, profits, and stock returns, as well as on non-financial aspects such as job application and retention of employees, trust, and the company's overall reputation (Fetscherin, 2015).

Due to the increasing role that leaders play in ensuring their companies and brand success, over the last few years, CEO activism has been on the rise (Chatterji and Toffel, 2015), and scholars (Chatterji and Toffel, 2018; Brown *et al.*, 2020; Hambrick and Wowak, 2021) have started to explore the impact and the influence that brand leaders and CEOs who speak out have in shaping policies thanks to the visibility of their corporations and their publicly declared involvement.

Up to now, this recent form of activism is getting increasing media attention and public relations firms are now building new consulting practices around it (Chatterji and Toffel, 2018). Also, thanks to the visibility that brand leaders' statements have on social media, their personal commitment to activism is quickly becoming a strategic lever in corporate branding and corporate communication (Vitulli *et al.*, 2024).

As we have entered in a new age of CEO activism (Sarkar, 2018), more studies are needed that investigate in-depth how and why corporate leaders are deciding to shoulder activists' responsibilities. Taking a stance, brand leaders and CEOs are showing their ability and sensitivity to recognize the moral content of situations and to pursue their moral beliefs in all those situations as stakeholders are judging brands also based on their competence to act as true activists (Sibai *et al.*, 2021).

So far, the debate on CEO activism has offered prescriptive guidelines on how to strategically manage communication messages and storytelling to maximize impact and perceived authenticity of activist brands' claims (Key *et al.*, 2021; Dowell and Jackson, 2020; Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020; Appels, 2022) and the outcome of brand activism (Villagra *et al.*, 2021; Schmidt *et al.*, 2022; Hou and Poliquin, 2023). Most of these studies have analyzed the drivers that push brand leaders toward activism (Hambrick and Wowak, 2021) and the stakeholder responses to activist stances (Chatterji and Toffel, 2019). While these studies have explored the alignment between CEOs' commitments and stakeholders' expectations and reactions (Rim *et al.*, 2020; Hambrick and Wowak, 2021; Afego and Alagidede, 2022), studies are missing that have undertaken a more comprehensive and critical examination of the broader aspects of value alignment in the context of brand leaders' activism.

This gap is particularly urgent to be filled in face of the call raised by the special issue on "The Strategic Role of Communication in Management", whose intent is to stimulate scholars to reflect on how communication can support corporate leaders in managing business processes (Falkheimer, 2014). Considering that the CEO and corporate leaders personify and signal where a brand stands in terms of value and moral engagements, their credibility and the credibility of their communication cannot be taken for granted (Melloni *et al.*, 2024). Especially when leaders take actions that appear inconsistent with their stated ideals and/or intents (Melloni *et al.*, 2024).

This is typical of deliberate corporate strategies that in organizational and strategic management studies have been conceptualized as "decoupling", a notion that refers to the formal disengagement of a company from actions that may contradict external expectations (Meyer and Rowan, 1991). In situations where external stakeholder expectations and managerial interests

collide, companies may strategically dissociate policies from practices (*Ibi*). This translates for instance in strategically communicating a specific policy or program to stakeholders, while actual corporate conduct diverges from these formal declarations, creating an illusion of compliance with external expectations and pressures (Westphal and Zajac, 2001; MacLean and Benham, 2010; Benham and MacLean, 2011; de Bree and Stoopendaal, 2020).

Indeed, the way in which brands leaders formulate their communication messages has an impact on how commitments to activism are received by consumers and stakeholders, therefore brands must ensure there is no disconnection between what leaders strategically communicate, how the company acts, what consumers want to hear (Ahmad *et al.*, 2024), the good fit with the bipartisan issue they choose to support (Ahmad *et al.*, 2024) and the brand essence and DNA (Verlegh, 2024).

More than ever, purposeful communication retains a strategic role in advancing the corporate mission deliberately engaging in communication practice on behalf of organizations, causes, and social movements (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007; Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2014). In our polarized and delicate geo-political times, corporate communication has the challenging mandate to ensure and safeguard the alignment between the brand purpose, the statements, commitments of the brand leaders, and the expectations of the stakeholders. This mandate makes communication a strategic asset that can help leaders to drive transformation and change through actions that are visible, consistent, distinctive, transparent, and authentic (Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2014).

In this paper, we critically delve into the clashes that arise when brand leaders become activists without being inspired by a strategic communication ethos that guides their leadership to provide guidelines on the role that strategic communication should play in supporting the brand navigate tensions and overcome clashes in times of consumer and brand socio-political activism.

3. Methodology

This study develops a critical case sampling approach (Coyné, 1997). Critical case sampling provides an information-rich context for an in-depth study based on its potential to enable significant insights or contribute substantially to theory and practice, as individuals, groups, or settings are selected that bring to the fore the phenomenon of interest” (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007, p. 112; Coyne, 1997). Our critical case is constituted by the case of Vivienne Westwood, a British luxury fashion brand, whose establishment and development trajectory resonate of the ongoing tensions and contradictions embodied in Westwood as an upstream, anti-capitalist, activist person guided by a fervent desire to disrupt and change, as opposed to Westwood as entrepreneur of an elitarian, high-end fashion brand navigating the commodified market logics of contemporary capitalist society. This tension plays out against the background of a societal and political milieu where contrasting consumer

movements, consumerism, political, and environmental activism, and anti-capitalist critique coalesce, collide and are amplified in the space of social media platforms. This makes Vivienne Westwood a critical case that constitutes an ideal unit for in-depth analysis that may be generative of insights and cultural understanding of the clashes existing between person, leader, and brand in times of societal brand activism.

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To carry out our critical case study, we developed a netnographic research design (Kozinets, 2020) that combined an in-depth, diachronic, retrospective, auto-biographical reconstruction of Vivienne Westwood's life story, with non-participant observation of online posts, conversations, comments, and reactions centered on Vivienne Westwood as person and as brand, shared on social media platforms both owned by Westwood and independently owned by consumers and opinion leaders. Table 1 presents all the sources we considered to collect and aggregate data useful for our dataset composition. Particularly, the diachronic retrospective reconstruction was based on critical analysis of news, interviews, opinion pieces, and other media archival materials related to Vivienne Westwood's lifestyle and lifestory both as a woman and as a stylist and entrepreneur. Archival data analysis was complemented by an in-depth interview that one of the authors personally conducted with the British stylist in 2018, where issues related to her view of fashion, of society, of politics and how these translated into her brand essence and vision were deepened.

The non-participant observation of online posts and conversations on social media platforms generated an investigative work that resulted in the selection, collection, assemblage, and archive of a total dataset of 240 posts, reels, stories, videos, 9362 comments, 31 media articles and 1 book (see Table 1). Moreover, this investigative phase was paralleled by an immersion phase where the authors engaged in immersive journaling operations, writing personal, reflective, emotional notes that complemented, enriched, and integrated the investigative dataset (Kozinets, 2020). In the immersive journal that counts about 4.200 words, deep data were singled out that were most revelatory of the clashes inherent in Westwood as person and Westwood as brand. Deep data that resonate of the multiple tensions between authentic purpose and market logics that mark the life trajectory of Westwood as activist and as entrepreneur.

Finally, data integration was performed through a combination of deductive and inductive coding of the collected materials as well as through the ongoing interpretation of emergent cultural insights facilitated by the immersive journals. Interpretation emerged as an interactive, iterative process aimed at generating a hermeneutic circle of understanding where each portion of the data was interpreted in relation to the developing sense of the whole (Thompson *et al.*, 1994). Interpretation was enriched by triangulating our insights across the researchers to enhance the reliability of the interpretive process.

Tab. 1: Dataset composition

Type of data	Research context	Research engagement (Investigated data)	Links
In-depth interview	Online interview with Vivienne Westwood in 2018	1 interview, lasting about 2 hours	
Vivienne Westwood's owned media	Corporate website	Full-site	https://www.viviennewestwood.com/it-it/home/
	Website of the Vivienne Westwood Foundation	Full-site	https://theviviennefoundation.com/about/
	Instagram Vivienne Westwood	38 (posts, reels, stories) and 238 related comments	https://www.instagram.com/viviennewestwood/
	Instagram Vivienne Westwood Foundation	79 (posts and reels) and 211 related comments	https://www.instagram.com/TheVivienneFoundation/
	Facebook	22 posts and 95 related comments	https://www.facebook.com/VivienneWestwoodOfficial
	X	76 posts and 5.421 related comments	https://twitter.com/FollowWestwood
	TikTok	2 videos and 848 comments	https://www.tiktok.com/@viviennewestwood
Online Media and Consumers' social media production	Instagram	6 posts and 145 related comments	Instagram.com
	TikTok	10 videos and 293 related comments	TikTok.com
	YouTube	7 videos and 1479 related comments	YouTube.com
Archival Materials	Web news, interviews, articles (i.e. theGuardian.com, Dailymail.co.uk, theBusinessoffashion.com, leMonde.fr, nytimes.com, Harper's Bazaar, VoguUK.com, Lampoon Magazine, Remake.world)	31 articles 812 related comments	Selected links: https://remake.world/stories/news/vivienne-westwood-denounces-her-new-documentary-for-not-telling-her-activist-story-but-do-her-actions-speak-as-loud-as-her-words/ theguardian.com/lifeandstyle nytime.com/fashion dailymail.co.uk/female \
	Vivienne Westwood memoir, book written by Vivienne Westwood and Ian Kelly		
Total	240 (posts, reels, stories, videos) 9362 comments 31 articles 1 book		

Source: our elaboration

4. Findings: Vivienne Westwood's activism vs. her brand leadership, a story of mismatches

Till her demise in 2022, Vivienne Westwood represented an 'extreme' (Clarke and Holt, 2016) embodiment of the tension between her commitments as activist and her business orientation as brand leader. This tension set an ideal background to explore Vivienne Westwood - the person and the brand - focusing on the reasons why Westwood communication

strategy as a leader and entrepreneur could not only affect the experience of Westwood's consumers but exert a much broader impact on their ideologic path as citizens and individuals, stimulating debates and controversies, so that the brand communication strategy became dependent on her fervent activism.

"The first thing you should really know about me is that I was born in the Second World War. Rationing. All of that. I didn't have a banana until I was seven. Things were scarce. And everybody was knitting [...]. I am a fashion designer and I am what is known as an activist. And I suppose there were signs of that from an early age. I have been embarrassed sometimes at telling stories that give the impression I thought I was special or some sort of goody-goody person. That isn't right"³. Vivienne Westwood was a global fashion icon, but a punk provocateur and a political activist. At her seventies, she was a Dame of the British Empire, head of a global fashion brand, and one of the most influential designers on the planet, "the Coco Chanel of our times" (according to Alexander McQueen). But at the same time, she managed her collections in absence of a real chain of command (apart from Carlo D'Amario, CEO and 'Italian godfather to Vivienne Westwood Inc.): no call sheet, no director, things related to design happening by stealth and by osmosis (Westwood and Kelly, 2014).

4.1 Cultures and subcultures nurturing Vivienne Westwood pol-ethical design style

As Ian Kelly tells in the Westwood memoir he collaborated to write, clothes as an intimate and feminized territory before fashion system itself have been the compelling tool to put Westwood at the centre of a story of tumult and to make her able to tell the story of a changing Britain (Westwood and Kelly, 2014).

Modern British culture was born with the Second World War: the Depression, the War, the post-war austerity, the birth of the National Health Service, the welfare state, and then the Queen, who became primary source of inspiration for the company's logo. The cultural relationship between Winston Churchill and Vivienne Westwood diverse myths has been even definitively clear during May 2000 anti-capitalist riots in London, when a punk Mohican hairstyle fashioned out of turf was placed on the head of the man who 'saved Western democracy' statue. From austerity to activism, informed eye on fabric and fashion has been, is, and probably will be for a long time, a political and social matter: Westwood started surfing DIY and 'make do and mend' cultures in her childhood and never let it go, as her company's twenty first century claim 'Buy less. Buy well and make it last' demonstrates (Zetlaoui, 2019). In the wartime and post-war years, through what they wore they were political and became uniform in the national cause, as clothes could mirror ethical values like sacrifice and practicality.

Austerity has been the first source of inspiration for Westwood cultural mantras: 'clothes for heroes, clothes that state intent', but then she evolved, also thanks to her personal and intimate political guru, her business and

³ Do It Yourself, film documentary - a year in the life of Vivienne Westwood, written by Jean-Marie Sztalryd, directed by Letmiya Sztalryd, Arte Films, 2010

romantic partner Malcolm McLaren, the impresario, musician and fashion designer, 'father' and manager of punk and new wave bands like Sex Pistols and Adam and the Ants and early commercial architect of the punk subculture. In the '70s, McLaren gave her the opportunity to have her first touchpoints with fashion (Clarke and Holt, 2016).

The second cultural root to nurture Westwood's activist plant and her fashion design creativity has been music: rock, the revolutionary new music of late 50's, but also the powerful new youth culture. This culture became a look, made of brothel creepers, slicked-back hair for boys and new silhouette and attitude for girls. It was the birth of Teddy Boys dress scene, a look known first as working-class incarnation and then as a threat to society, associated to teenage violence. 'Let It Rock', born in 1971, was McLaren's store in West London, where Westwood customized and repaired original clothing (in 1973, the shop was given a new name, 'Too Fast To Live, Too Young To Die', to reflect a range of clothing from Britain's early '60s 'rocker' fashions). Her first creations were a mix of the Teddy Boys suits and the American uniform of teenage rebellion inspired by T-shirts, leathers and jeans of Marlon Brando and James Dean. As costume historian Colin Woodhead said, "The idea of fashionable clothes as a threat to society was born".

McLaren was also able to inject Westwood's style with the philosophical inspiration of the avant-garde political revolutionary group rejecting capitalist authority and using interventions to subvert and challenge the bourgeois status quo (Debord, 1967): t-shirts with disturbing slogans such as 'Destroy' superimposed over a swastika and an image of the Queen or a pair of homosexual cowboys naked from the waist down found youth favor in an era of ethnic tension, jaded establishment, industrial, and military unrest (Savage, 1991). Half a century later, Westwood activist slogans kept the same inspirational guideline: "Every demonstration is a fight against capitalism, against the government and against austerity. Capitalism is the enemy of the bees, capitalism is the enemy of human rights. Everything is connected" (Westwood and Kelly, 2014).

The Westwood-McLaren merchandise has been the fundamental matrix for punk style. Sex was the focus for rebellion. In 1975, the Westwood's store changed its name in "Sex": walls covered with porno graffiti, selling fetishist clothes. For women, it was the first aggressive approach to fashion in post-war culture and a corresponding emancipation of subcultural style, as punk girls engaged in the activity of confusing sexual messages: they looked like prostitutes but were not and this became an exercise of power (Evans and Thornton, 1991).

But if wartime and post-war DIY, '50 rock and its '70 revival, agit-prop situationism and punk style as endorsement to social construction of female power and sex liberation have been the cultural signifiers for Vivienne Westwood till the end of the '70, when she and McLaren broke, she found a more creative source than something to fight against: tradition. For Westwood, now alone in her success path, fashion was the reinvention and renewal of tradition: "I'm not trying to do something different, I'm trying to do the same thing but in a different way" (Clarke and Holt, 2016).

4.2 *The birth of the luxury brand: pol-ethics vs. profit*

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In 1976 till 1980 Westwood's store was re-named 'Seditionaires - Clothes for Heroes'. A living rat in a cage on the main desk of the store and a collection including pin-up clothes, chains, leather jackets, fetishist belts was the stylist's way of opposing old generations, as she declared, but also to find a design language that could have been 'inside' fashion borders, looking for a collection that could evolve from boycotting market and society to pro-cotting a style and collection series.

In 1981, the store became 'World's End': walls were decorated as a pirate galleon, clothes reminded of some outlaws, dandies and buccaneers and they were all unisex. In 1982 Westwood designed the Savage collection, inspired by native Americans and she opened her second store, 'Nostalgia of Mud'. Westwood became the most appreciated stylist by musicians and bands such as Duran Duran and Spandau Ballet, who wore her mini-crinoline (typical English textiles such as tweed) and platform shoes, which are still her most famous and typical trademarks. In 1986 Westwood's mini-crini (a '60 style mini-skirt in hooped nineteenth-century Empire crinoline, mythology of restriction juxtaposed with liberation) definitely become fashion design for fashion market.

Westwood became one of the greatest designers and the figurehead of a company, named after herself, Vivienne Westwood, (Waston, 2019) and co-founded with Carlo D'Amario. Back then, D'Amario was coming from a leading position in Fiorucci and Elio Fiorucci himself was the first one to help D'Amario and Westwood in the production of their first official collections as a company. D'Amario's goal as a CEO was since the very beginning to preserve both Westwood-person's authenticity and creativity and, more in the backstage, to ensure corporate competitiveness and aggressiveness in the global fashion market.

Selling clothes and products in more than 50 countries, with more than 400 employees, four different clothing lines - Gold Label, Red Label, Men and Anglomania - and over 700 points of sale worldwide across all five continents (Clarke and Holt, 2016), boycotting tradition was too generic for Westwood's ethical leadership, and at the same time too British-based. So, for her and Andreas Kronthaler, her last husband, with whom since 1992 she created and revised every single collection detail⁴, another theme became even more central: sustainability and the dedication for humanity and the environment. This commitment marked the very birth of a contradiction between Vivienne Westwood the person and the brand. Approximately 15 years before her demise, Westwood discovered James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, which outlooks the biosphere as a living being and all its inhabitants as organs of Mother Earth. From this time, she constantly worked for the improvement of the condition of our planet and valued human rights. She tried to raise the awareness for this topic through her own website "climaterévolution" (Zetlaoui, 2019), calling for a wiser consumption (Clarke and Holt, 2016). This call continued in her fashion brand: the production of the collections has been scaled down with the aim to convince her consumers to buy quality rather than quantity.

⁴ De Tommasi A. (2019), "Vivienne Westwood", vanityfair.it

In 2015 Westwood relaunched the ethical fashion initiative “Handmade with Love” bags: the people privately supplied the fashion brand with a range of high-end accessories produced in Nairobi, Kenya, and the collaboration gave back to the communities where the inspiration was taken from, especially through its new sustainable wealth creation approach (Veridiano, 2018). This attempt had the goal of empowering women artisans, entrepreneurship, and financial independence and for the Kenyans it meant the ability to grow a new industry and pass on skills to the next generation to promote long-term wealth for families and the entire economy.

Over time, till her death, Vivienne Westwood’s engagement in sustainable values as a leader deepened up to the point where she was well-known for her punk and historically inspired collections as well as for her ecological violence. But, if this was her facet as an ethical activist, what about the brand leader?

As Vivienne Westwood brand has been always privately owned, one of the freedoms of Westwood’s person has been to follow her own will and do not distress about shareholders and the size of their dividends. Westwood brand suffered a misalignment between the ideological and socio-political background of its leader, whose commitment collided with the brand purpose. In 2010 after presenting her collection during London Fashion Week, Westwood made a stand against consumerist society declaring to reports: “Stop all this consumerism. I just tell people, stop buying clothes. Why not protect this gift of life while we have it?” (Katz, 2010). With her growing insistence that consumers should resist consumerism, the tension within the company increased (Clarke and Holt, 2016). Were Westwood the person and the brand following the same principles? Communicating the same core messages through commitments and actions? The Westwood brand official website with its online selling system with a dedicated team of 50 employees driving 45% of the turnover from the e-commerce shows that the person/brand ideologies remain the same: quality versus quantity; Gaia, arts and culture; climate change and human rights. Nevertheless, Vivienne Westwood has always been a fashion brand like any other, pushing consumers into a cycle of production, advertising and consumption, creating logoed t-shirts, outsourced perfumes and cheap jewelry (Clarke and Holt, 2016).

4.3 Consumers’ counter culture questioning Westwood’s pol-ethical activism

Consumers’ participation in the world of Vivienne Westwood has been rich and variegated. Although the brand and Westwood have been largely appreciated by their social media followers, a vast group of consumers exist that cast doubts on the authenticity and real commitment of Vivienne Westwood’s to her professed pol-ethical activism and affiliation to punk ideology and values.

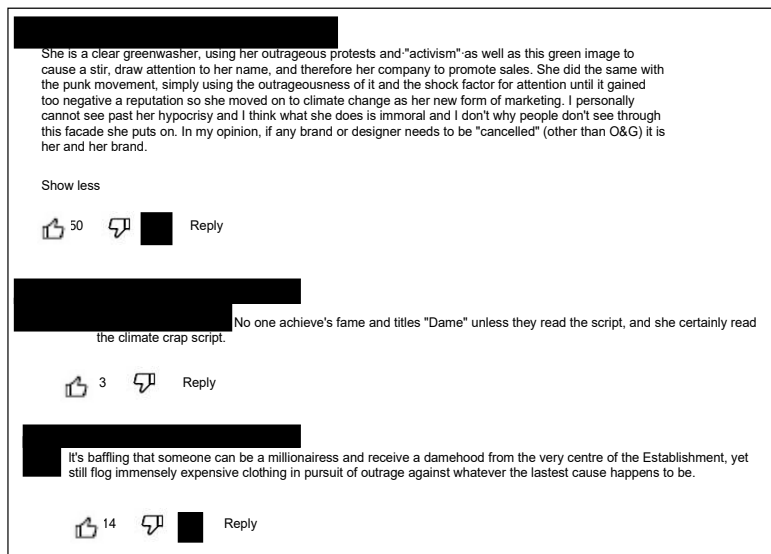
The harsh critique, propagated and amplified on social media platforms, has triggered a controversial and heated counter-cultural debate primarily revolving around two key themes: 1) consumers have questioned Westwood’s commitment to a plethora of different socio-political themes

without a clear focal point. This multifaceted engagement with multiple causes has led consumers to perceive Westwood's activism as superficial; 2) consumers have highlighted the mismatches between Westwood's affiliation to punk ideology and her brand positioning.

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- 1) Vivienne Westwood has long proclaimed herself an activist, a beacon of social change, and an advocate for various causes. However, in recent times, a growing number of consumers have started to accuse her to be a 'catch-all values' activist. Based on our archival and netnographic analysis, this accusation is rooted in Westwood's personal history and past business practices. She began her career as a punk political designer, when she endorsed social construction of female power and sex liberation and actively protested against Queen Elizabeth II and later against Margaret Thatcher (Westwood and Kelly, 2014). However, since these political interests and protests failed to generate attention and equity for her brand (Westwood and Kelly, 2014), she later redirected her focus toward other causes, such as fighting against tradition, sustaining sustainable production, human rights, and climate change. This multifaceted array of interests has prompted consumers to question the depth and authenticity of her socio-political commitment. Our analysis of social media conversations highlights that consumers blame Westwood for picking up commitment by selecting the causes that are trendy and reflect the "*flavour of the month, the current thing to protest about*", rather than showing a permanent and unwavering dedication. For consumers, this perception gains strength from the fact that her protests were "*unsustained over any length of time and had no significant lasting value*", which renders her commitment "*superficial and suspicious*", seemingly tailored to "*pander to the public and trends by tapping into the most current way of thinking*". This idea was particularly widespread, as evidenced by the engagement metrics of this single YouTube comment. It reached 611 views, received 41 likes, and generated 13 replies, all of which reinforced this viewpoint. Not only Westwood is blamed for her shifting commitments, consumers argue that her choices were more strategically-driven rather than ethically-inspired. Westwood revolved her attention toward those socio-political causes that could benefit her personally and her brand. In Figure 1, which highlights a dynamic discussion on YouTube, consumers suggest that Westwood initially aligned herself with the punk movement, leveraging its cultural influence until it encountered what they term a "*too negative reputation*". Subsequently, she transitioned her activism "*to climate change as her new form of marketing*". Indeed, the interest on climate change served her as a vehicle to "*draw attention to her name and therefore her company to promote sales*". Furthermore, it resulted in the prestigious title of "*Dame*" being conferred upon her (see YouTube comments in Figure 1). This viewpoint was also widely shared, as evidenced by the number of likes the comment received in this conversation: a total of 67 likes (see Figure 1).

Fig. 1: Consumers blaming Vivienne Westwood to be strategically-committed to socio-political causes for personal gains



Source: YouTube

As a result, the 'catch-all' engagement of Vivienne Westwood in numerous trendy socio-political themes has diminished the perceived authenticity of her self-narrative in the eyes of consumers, who have harshly created a counter-narrative that conversationally constructs Westwood as a superficial, suspicious, and strategically-driven fake political activist.

2) In their counter-narrative, consumers also blame the discrepancies between Westwood's professed punk ideologies and the positioning of her brand. More than a political activist, Westwood consistently branded herself as a "punk provocateur" since the beginning of her career (Westwood and Kelly, 2014, p. 164). However, consumers raise substantial critiques against Westwood's brand communication campaigns, which according to consumers profoundly contradict the punk ideals. In social media conversations, consumers recurrently criticize the campaign "Buy less. Buy well and make it last". The campaign comprised a press release, a lookbook, and a short film published on Westwood brand's website and social media. The film showcases the collection and concludes with Westwood herself, alongside a model, both wearing a T-shirt on the runway displaying the message "Buy Less". Figure 2, sourced from Westwood's Official Website, captures this closing scene. As visible in the photo, the "finale" goes beyond the t-shirts. The subjects hold torches while framed against a virtual background depicting flames. According to Westwood, this imagery is inspired by Taoism and aims to convey the idea that consumerism is fueling the destruction of our planet, but with the same intensity, we can combat this vicious cycle of consumption buying less clothes.

Fig. 2: Westwood metaphorically burning down consumerism in the final frame of the lookbook for the campaign “Buy Less. Buy well and make it last”

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Source: Vivienne Westwood Official Website

Our analysis of social media conversations highlights that consumers see a paradox between the overarching message of this campaign and the actual business practices of the brand: a plethora of consumers blame Westwood for her decision to incessantly launch new collections, *“it’s a bit ironic after years of selling brand new collection after collection”*, *“she is an absolute hypocrite with her activism rubbish. How can the creator of such a huge global brand protests on consumerism when her company contributes so much to it with production, transports, sourcing”* and *“How about u STOP making new clothes if you really want to reduce!??”*. Just these three specific Instagram comments generated a total of 138 likes, indicating that many other consumers also shared the same idea. Furthermore, consumers draw attention to a misalignment between the campaign message and the foundational punk principles centered around the rejection of class differentiations. They emphasize that, despite the campaign’s emphasis on acquiring high-quality products, Westwood continues to market her ostensibly *“overpriced clothes”* to *“elite and bourgeoisie”*. This discrepancy led consumers to interpret the campaign message as an endorsement of the upper class of society, consequently eroding the essence of punk ethos that staunchly advocates for egalitarianism.

Finally, also the campaign “Handmade with Love”, which was supposed to present the ultimate actualization of an ethical fashion project, has been harshly criticized by consumers. The campaign, represented in Figure 3, was a carousel of photos featuring Vivienne Westwood, elegantly attired in gold and laces, selling handbags and handmade jewelry laid out on a paper carpet amidst the African slums.

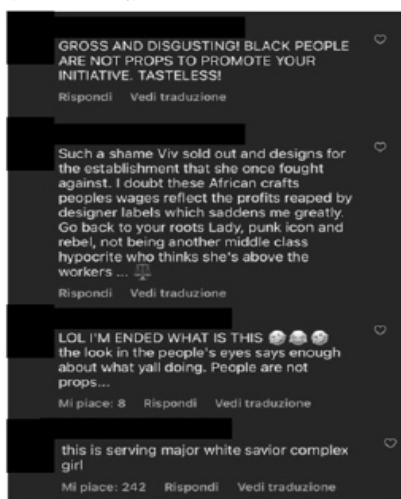
Fig. 3: “Handmade with Love” campaign, produced by Vivienne Westwood in the streets of Nairobi in 2015



Source: The Mail & Guardian.com

The campaign on social media generated a hatred debate, with consumers describing it as “gross”, “distasteful”, “so wrong on many levels”, “embarrassing”, “disgusting”, “out of touch” and “unsettling and aesthetically unappealing”. Figure 4, highlights a specific selection of comments from the campaign Instagram discussion. These comments, alone obtaining an engagement of 250 likes (see Figure 4), reveal a critical response to it, pointing at the mismatches between Westwood’s declared values against capitalism and white-supremacy and the visuals in the campaign, particularly her portrayal. She appears as the sole white figure “dressed in couture garments in the slums of Africa surrounded by the natives”. Consumers accuse her of being a hypocrite, asserting that she has forsaken her “punk roots” and is now projecting herself as a “white savior”, while exploiting the poverty of Africa and black inhabitants to promote her own initiative (Figure 4).

Fig. 4: Consumers’ comment on the inconsistency between Vivienne Westwood’s anti-white supremacy punk ideology and her communication campaign in Nairobi



Source: Instagram

Consumers' criticism remains persistent over time: in 2018, after the publication of an article in *The Guardian*, which chronicled Vivienne Westwood's activist actions over the years also referring to the "Handmade with Love campaign", consumers used the article as a platform to voice their views on the campaign, sharing comments such as "*I find it very hard to take Viv W's latest statement seriously. Her current advertising campaign features couture clothes and goods that cost small fortunes, spread out in the poverty stricken African urban market setting. The Mockery she makes of countries mired in poverty while their political elites stock up bling such as hers is just beyond tacky*". Therefore, by presenting herself as a wealthy, white woman adorned in luxury products within the slums, consumers perceive Vivienne Westwood as accentuating the narrative of capitalist inequality and white supremacy, a stance that she had ostensibly declared herself against.

As a result, consumers' counter-narrative recurrently label Vivienne Westwood a "grifter" and a "*walking contradiction of punk*". This is mainly due to her declaration against capitalism while yielding her brand to the market logic in a way that "*benefitted so highly off of capitalism*" "*becoming super rich*".

These inconsistencies between Vivienne Westwood's professed affiliation with the punk subculture and her branding strategy have fueled consumer uncertainty regarding her authenticity and have, in turn, led to disillusionment among consumers. They find it challenging to reconcile her activist stance with her branding and communication practices, and this incongruity has cast doubt on the sincerity of her commitment to the causes she champions.

5. Discussion: The urgency of an ethical leader of meanings

In the realm of Vivienne Westwood's fashion empire, her commitments as activist takes precedence over the brand leader, often leading to provocative clashes between Westwood's political ethos and the brand positioning and its commercial pursuits.

How could have the brand navigated through the tensions and the clashes that arose from Westwood's bold and provocative activism?

From a strategic communication standpoint, leadership communication retains a crucial role for the success of any organization: leadership communication is embedded in concrete actions and statements through which organizations can establish social relations and enable discussions and confrontations from which joint perceptions and meanings might arise (Zerfass and Huck, 2007).

Our critical case shows that Vivienne Westwood failed to exert a 'leadership of meanings' (Zerfass and Huck, 2007) and take the responsibility to articulate a cohesive vision for her brand. While she undoubtedly generated a plethora of meanings that could have inspired societal betterment, in doing so she adopted a self-referential and provocative attitude that was not aimed at including or guiding others (and

specifically her brand) toward a common purpose. On the contrary, she was driven by a solipsistic, ego-centered intent to liberate herself and to express her freedom to contradict, to generate disruption, to fight against everything that could be fought against in a socio-political background characterized by ongoing turmoil. Based on our findings, Westwood's activism represented for sure a provocative sociopolitical force; however, it missed a strategic use of storytelling and corporate communication that could have minimized and managed the discrepancies, transforming also her brand in a societal change agent (Key *et al.*, 2021). While the principles of strategic communication for a postmodern activist society advocate for a Foucauldian management of 'ethics as aesthetics' (Holtzhausen, 2013, p. 38), where the liberating effort of the self in the exercise of leadership of meanings is aimed at transforming society by incorporating, guiding, and sensitizing with all the stakeholder groups, Westwood refused to assume this leadership role, being more inclined to critique than to construct. As consumers' counter-cultural online discourse shows, her cherry-picking activist narrative was perceived more as the voice of an opportunistic marketing intent to embrace a catch-all woke washing strategy rather than an organic, authentic manifestation of a transformative ethos that is backed up by a strategic approach to communicating with stakeholders.

A strategic communication approach would have required a long-term commitment to a single cause. A commitment fueled by an open, two-way confrontation, negotiation, and sensitization on that cause, which incorporates her company's internal stakeholders in charge of managing her brand, consumers, institutions and all the other societal stakeholders meant as partners in pursuing the brand purpose (Invernizzi and Romenti, 2014; Romenti, 2010). A commitment where Westwood, in expressing her true self and liberating her creative force, assumes the role of an ethical leader of meanings.

Being an ethical leader of meanings implies that the meanings which are created and shared are the result of the alignment between the values of the entrepreneur as a person and the values of the entrepreneur's brand as a for-profit company that marketizes a lifestyle for societal betterment. Moreover, while now leaders are expected to react quickly to sociopolitical issues (Nam *et al.*, 2023), the ethical leader of meanings is one that engages in a durable and long-term ethical effort that is aimed at transforming society, beyond shaking and contrasting it. This ethical effort of transforming society is constructed in every day communication acts that are conceived of as part of a strategic communication approach embraced by the leader that extends to her company and the way the company engages in interactions with all the stakeholders, so as to manage the company as a communication-oriented organization (Invernizzi and Romenti, 2011).

When communication is strategically managed, "leaders think in longer time frames, see their own organizational units in the context of larger realities, emphasize intangible assets related to their interaction with followers (visions, values, and so on), think in terms of renewal and have political skills to deal with different stakeholders" (Witherspoon, 1997, p. 2).

So, what is the role that strategic communication should have in supporting leaders to face such delicate matters? Our netnographic analysis highlights that Westwood's activism deliberately neglected the need for a vision and a guidance, in a word a brand leadership, that could have acted as the custodian of the alignment between the voice of the activist Westwood and the brand messages.

In strategic communication in fact, leadership requires framing which involves emphasizing or deemphasizing particular aspects of political and social reality to make them more salient in communication, to promote a particular problem definition, its interpretation, moral evaluation or treatment (Hallahan, 2011, p. 178). To conclude then, transforming society through an ethical leadership of meanings that navigates the tensions inherent to the clash between ideology, purpose, capitalist critique and capitalist commodification, requires that communication is strategically conceived as the conscience of the organization (Holtzhausen and Voto, 2002). In this way strategic communication can frame a purposeful metanarrative of ethical behavior that can inspire the betterment (Holtzhausen, 2013) and create opportunities for the growth of the brand along with society. Being the conscience means then for strategic communication to become a leading compass that constantly works to smoothen the harshness of the tensional territories that entrepreneurs, brand leaders, companies, and society inhabit. A critical conscience that listens and includes the multiplicity of instances and voices of all stakeholders and aligns them with the leader's personal ethos and vision and the brand's strategic goals.

On a pragmatic level, strategic communication today is called upon to become a moral guide. Brand activism is fundamentally a moral issue (Rohmanue and Jacobi, 2024; Wannow *et al.*, 2024), which firstly requires the ability to identify, in a divisive cause, the position that the company can most credibly maintain, and secondly, the ability to build the authenticity of the adopted position over time by constructing a narrative that coherently incorporates the meanings expressed by the leaders. Today, more and more companies, after experiencing and also enduring the risks of activism, are withdrawing from this commitment. They are putting the brakes on activism. Or they purposively develop enticing brand activism narratives with which strategic communication complies with stakeholders' expectations but that are not back up in corporate facts and conducts. We believe that strategic communication at this historical moment can be defined as such if it possesses the courage to act as the company's moral compass and as a strategic thread that can create a dialogue between the brand DNA, its leaders, consumers, and stakeholders to navigate and resolve ethical tensions and become a force for change and societal betterment.

Future research is needed that not only explores and reveals those tensions at societal level that are amplified and nurtured in social media platforms, but also educates and inspires corporate leaders and communication leaders to become ethical leaders, fostering an open dialogue that incorporates and co-constructs on a continuous basis the shifting stakes of the company and of its stakeholders. In this regard,

studies like ours could be stretched further to include an educational scope, soliciting the creation of a table of discussion or other moments of informal and formal confrontation (i.e., round tables, seminars, think tanks) where the research scholars and the communication leaders of the investigated companies debate, exchange ideas and experiment innovations on how to pursue an ethical positioning of the company that is credible, authentic, sustainable and beneficial to both company and stakeholders over time.

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