

Kurskod: SKMP08  
Termin: VT 2014  
Handledare: Cecilia Cassinger  
Examinator: Henrik Merckelsen

*MSc Thesis*  
*MSc in Strategic Public Relations*  
*jointly delivered by the University of Stirling and Lund University*

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# Global anti-corporate activists and their communication strategies: an analysis of the use of rhetoric to engage with publics

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# Abstract

This thesis examines the rhetoric used on three anti corporate activist groups to draw visitors' attention to their causes and support them and get them engaged and involved in their campaigns. In particular, global anti corporate activism is examined in this thesis, as an interesting yet not so much explored topic of research. Activists often share public relations goals, and they use more and more similar strategies to PR to achieve them, making this topic relevant for the public relations field. A reflection on the Internet and its role within activism is also presented, as the web has been the main factor that has made it possible for activism to overcome geographical issues and become global. Through a rhetorical analysis of three activist groups' websites based on the concepts of logos, ethos and pathos, common strategies are identified and discussed. In line with previous research, the presence of technical aspects required to create interaction, that is the presence of spaces on the website where visitors are invited to express their opinions, was confirmed. However, engagement is not encouraged at all on the websites analysed. Surprisingly, social media platforms are not yet fully exploited, not compromising however the existence and success of the organisations analysed, as they all are still existing and still running campaigns relying exclusively on their websites, when it comes to their online presence.

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Word count: 15.866

# 1.Introduction

"There are certain corporations which market themselves so aggressively, which are so intent on stamping their image on everybody and every street, that they build up a reservoir of resentment among thinking people."

— Trim Bissell, American labour rights activist<sup>1</sup>

This quote represents the essence of anti corporate activism. It is a movement that rose from the feelings of resentment and frustration that corporations ended up creating by becoming ubiquitous. Multinationals and their logos have become extremely visible and powerful (Merkelsen, 2011, p.128; Klein, 2009, p.337), becoming symbols of a certain lifestyle (Bennett, 2003, p.152). However, it was not long before people started to feel trapped in a multinational-led world, which did not leave space for personal choices. That is when people started to realise that if they were affected by those images, they could use them against multinationals (Klein, 2009, p.293) and soon enough brand image, which for long had been a source of wealth for corporations, became their Achilles' heel (ibid., p.341).

This is not to say that multinationals are losing their power. However, the more visible and powerful they are, the more they get targeted by activists. And since we are surrounded by multinationals, activist campaigns surround us as well: we see them while on the tube, on posters on the street or while reading the papers. Activist groups have started to use more and more public relations strategies to communicate with their publics (Zoch *et al.*, 2008; Reber & Berger, 2005). In particular, with the advent and the diffusion of the Internet, these campaigns have spread quickly and worldwide, overcoming the barrier of territorial issues (Illia, 2003, p.327). All these campaigns are telling us that something is wrong in the world and that is up to us to join forces to make

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<sup>1</sup> Quote from the book No logo (Klein, 2009, p. 288)

a change. So, we are offered the chance to sign a petition, to join a non-violent march or parade, to participate in a protest or to support their causes by donating money. Their aim is to bring about political and social change (Den Hond & De Bakker, 2007), in the specific case of anti-corporate activism, by pressuring multinationals. As some authors have noticed (Bennett, 2003; Van Laer, 2010), the Internet has created a general hype amongst activist organisations as a tool that makes it easier and faster to organise and manage mobilisation and participation in collective actions.

This thesis will give its contribution to the field of public relations through an analysis of the rhetorical tactics employed by activist groups. As stated earlier, activist groups are using more and more public relations strategies, since their ultimate goal is that of persuading and convincing people to support their causes. However, given the different economical resources available to multinationals and activist groups, and the different challenges they face, since multinationals ultimately sell goods and services while activist groups sell the idea of joining forces to create a fairer world, these public relations strategies are used slightly differently, making it an interesting and relevant study object. The language and more specifically the rhetoric used on activists' websites will be analysed in order to find out how such organisations convey their messages and engage their visitors. In particular, I am interested in the rhetorical tactics used to grab people's attention and then encourage interaction. In order to provide an answer to these questions, three websites of activist groups will be analysed.

## **1.1 Research problem**

This thesis seeks to explore the characteristics of the rhetoric employed by anti-corporate activist groups on their websites. Rhetoric studies in the past have mainly focused on the rhetoric used by organisations rather than activists. Activism has not been studied as a form of public relations, although some authors (Coombs & Holladay,

2012; Zoch *et al.*, 2008) have identified a connection between the two fields, and have argued that they can and do influence each other. Activism and public relations share some goals, for instance raise awareness about specific issues, they share strategies, such as campaigns, and both have an impact on society. However, challenges that multinationals face when setting up a public relations strategy are rather different from the challenges faced by activist groups: the main goal of the first ones is to sell a product or service, and keep a good reputation. Therefore, public relations is used to convince consumers that they need that product and that they are “behaving well”, or to manage crisis if and when they arise. As Sproule (1989, p.264) stated, “organizations try to privatize public space by privatizing public opinion; that is, skilfully (one-sidedly) turning opinions in direction favourable to the corporation”. On the other hand, activist groups do not sell products, but rather need to get as many people as possible involved in their causes in order to survive and fulfil their reason to be: pressure power sources to bring about a change. Thus, although they are not trying to privatise public opinion, they do try to turn opinions in favour of their causes. Both parties achieve this through rhetoric. In the words of DeLuca (2005, p.36), “groups ... through their rhetorical tactics and strategies create social movements, changes in public consciousness with regards to a key issue”. These generic “groups” could refer to activists and NGOs as much as to corporations, since this statement would fit both perfectly, as explained earlier. However, the different challenges that these groups face influence the type of rhetoric that they use to convince their publics, hence making it an interesting topic to be studied.



## **1.2 Global anti corporate activism**

The Oxford Dictionary of English defines activism as “The policy or action of using vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change” (Oxford Dictionary, 2014). These campaigns need to be planned and carried out by some entity and to be addressed at some other entity: the usual scenario would be activist groups or NGOs campaigning against either the Government or corporations. Their aim is ultimately to bring up sensitive issues (mostly social or environmental) that in their opinion Government and/or corporations are not caring about, and push them to change their view and most importantly their actions. Klar and Kasser (2009, p.3) give a more elaborated and broader definition of activism, referring to it as

“...the behavior of advocating some political cause (for instance, protecting the environment, human rights issues, opposing abortion, or preventing wars) via any of a large array of possible means, ranging, for example, from institutionalized acts such as starting a petition to unconventional acts such as civil disobedience”.

The idea of protesting to change something that is not considered right has roots that go back to the Victorian age, where the main role of men and activism was perceived as that to “create and re-create” the world, rather than just measure a “fixed and dead one” already existing (San Juan, 1964, p.599).

This thesis will analyse global anti-corporate activism. This movement is relatively recent, as it arose as a consequence of multinationals growing and enhancing their power and influence in the 70s (Barnet and Müller, 1974). Nevertheless, it is an interesting topic for different reasons: to begin with, anti-corporate activism has not been researched much within public relations, field with which it shares common

techniques and goals, for instance the creation of campaigns to raise public awareness. Moreover, if multinationals become more and more part of our everyday life, so does this type of activism, creating an interesting paradox and fuelling the topic of hypocrisy, also quite intertwined with public relations (Merkelsen, 2011, p.137; Lipson, 2007). As Klein remarks in her book (2009, p.424-425) many activists are “normal” people, working on their Macs, wearing Nikes and eating at McDonald’s. And they recognise that often smaller companies (not multinationals) are not much better at treating their employees, they just do not draw so much attention on themselves ([www.nosweat.org.uk/story/2012/11/04/introduction-no-sweat](http://www.nosweat.org.uk/story/2012/11/04/introduction-no-sweat)).

The empirical material collected for this thesis consists of three activist groups’ websites. This choice was influenced by the importance of the Internet for activists. Considering that activist groups often are funded by donations, their budgets are rather low, especially for smaller groups. Hence, many activist groups often find themselves using public relations techniques and strategies to reach their publics (Taylor *et al.*, 2001, p.264; Zoch *et al.*, 2008, p.351). Having a strategically designed website could represent a great opportunity for them to raise awareness of their existence, to get their messages across and gain supporters for their causes while cutting down costs.

### **1.3 Relevance**

This piece of work is relevant for different reasons. First of all, literature about activism and activist groups within the field of public relations is lacking as the majority of studies carried out about this topic belong to marketing or business research. Simmons (1998) studied the way NGOs affect government and multinationals, coming up with a list of four factors: setting agendas, negotiating outcomes, conferring legitimacy, and implementing solutions (p.84). Corning and Myers (2002) studied and defined a scale,

the Activism Orientation Scale (AOS), to measure “individuals’ propensity to engage in social action” (p.703). In 1991, Rose wrote an article about activist groups starting to use public relations and mastering it to advance social policy initiatives. Smith (1997), Keck and Sikkink (1998), Bennett (2005), and Tarrow (2005) have instead covered the topic of transnational activism, that is, the activists’ response to globalization and internationalism. Den Hond and De Bakker (2007) analysed the influence of activism on corporate social change activities; Rehbein *et al.* (2004) carried out a study to find out what kind of corporations are mainly targeted. The focus on NGOs is explained by the fact that they are generally bigger and more organised organisations than activist groups, and therefore, draw much more attention on themselves and their actions. However, this led to a genuine lack of studies about activist groups’ rhetoric and use of online resources within the field of public relations.

Moreover, most part of the existing literature about activism has focused mainly on how and why activist groups pick their targets (Strickland, Wiles, & Zenner, 1996; Rowley & Moldoveanu, 2003). Some of the more recent studies (Bennett, 2003; Taylor et al., 2001) have brought up the issue of social media, however they have only scratched the surface of the topic: in 2001/2003, when these studies were carried out, social media did not exist and the Internet was at its dawn, with not many people having access to it. Therefore, the context and environment of their studies were very different from today’s reality. Given the importance of the Internet today and its advantage of spreading messages across borders (Hollenbeck & Zinkahn, 2006) keeping costs low, this analysis will focus on and explore activist groups’ websites. Websites also allow activist groups to reach higher numbers of people without increasing their costs (Gerlach, 2001), and represent a faster and easier way to get involved, as people can support a cause and donate money with a click from their couch without the need of physical participation in demonstrations and manifestations (Hollenbeck & Zinkahn, 2006, p.483). The analysis

seeks to understand what kind of language and rhetoric they use to create engagement with their publics. With engagement it is understood, in this thesis, the presence on the websites of buttons, boxes and links that make it possible for visitors to get involved and actively participate and contributing with the cause supported by each group. That is, all the links and alike that allow visitors to donate money, download material, sign petitions or get additional information on relevant topics. These tools allow visitors to engage with the website and the activist group's cause. It is hard to prove that the presence of these tools actually translates into an active engagement of the visitors, however, this thesis seeks to analyse whether the websites chosen offer visitors an opportunity of engagement, not to demonstrate or examine their consequences. In particular, Taylor et al.'s study (2001) analysed 100 activist groups' websites and came up with a list of five principles of dialogic relationship building to create a questionnaire. The analysis of the chosen websites will look for these principles, checking whether they are still present and relevant to activist groups nowadays.

Analysing the rhetoric employed by activist groups will benefit the PR world in the academic environment as much as in the practice one. From a theoretical point of view, this work seeks to explore the rhetoric used by activist groups on their websites: this could ultimately benefit the academia world since public relations consists for a good part of being able to use language smartly. Those activist groups, who do get their messages across and reach their publics, ultimately get free exposure and publicity, which can be considered as a successful form of PR. The academic world of public relations is lacking actual studies about the connection between activism and PR and how they influence or they could benefit from each other. Coombs and Holladay (2012) argue that activism and public relations are strictly related and that activism could actually help critical PR become more mainstream. They're argument is based around

the concept of power, and in particular they state that by becoming activists, publics gain power, and use public relations to keep that power and influence organisations (p.883). They continue highlighting the importance of studying this process for a better understanding of activists and their use of PR as their “potential to become more prominent actors in public relations legitimizes as a focus for study” (p.885). Zoch *et al.* (2008) studied activists’ websites to analyse the framing techniques used with their public relations messages; framing techniques used by activist groups were also studied by Reber and Berger (2005). Sommerfeldt *et al.* (2012) also analysed activists’ websites to understand how information is disseminated. It is clear then, that quite a few authors have recognised the link between these two fields and in particular the utility and importance of the Internet to get messages across with very low costs. However, none of these studies has analysed the type of language used by these websites or their rhetoric, which will be the contribution of this thesis.

From a practical point of view, the same language and rhetoric can be then used (or avoided) by corporations and public relations agencies, since although they aren’t the same thing, they all function with the same principle: maintaining good relationships with their publics and communicating their messages to them, which is ultimately a public relations task. Smith and Ferguson (2001, p.295) state that activist organisations “must maintain membership, thrive in what might be described as a competitive marketplace of ideas and issues, and adjust to changes in their environment”, making them a relevant subject to be studied in public relations (Taylor *et al.*, 2001, p.264). Public relations also play an important role in establishing a two-way communication system through social media (Illia, 2003, p.334). Rhetoric used by activist groups can result helpful for corporation as well, and more in general, for all companies, associations and agencies that need to get their messages across.

## **1.4 Research aim and questions**

The aim of this thesis is to analyse the characteristics of anti-corporate activism's rhetoric on their websites. At first glance, activism and public relations might look like two worlds apart. However, by digging deeper it soon becomes clear that they share more similarities than one could think: practitioners working in both fields ultimately try to attract attention, to influence their publics and get people involved in their causes. Activist groups use public relations techniques to gain power and support their causes. Therefore, the two fields are strictly connected and influence each other.

This research will try to answer two main questions:

Q<sub>1</sub>: How do activist groups employ rhetoric on their websites?

This question will be answered by analysing the rhetoric used on the websites selected to examine how activist groups try to persuade their visitors into supporting their causes. The websites will be analysed through Aristotle's three concepts of Logos, Pathos and Ethos which will enable to understand the overall structure of the website, the logistical arrangement of information on it, and the general attitude of the groups and their web pages. These three aspects will be considered and analysed from a linguistic and visual point of view, that is looking for elements such as catch phrases, puns, key words, slogans as well as pictures, logos and selection of colours used on the websites chosen.

This question is relevant to the field of public relations since rhetoric, seen as the art of organising a discourse in order for it to be persuasive and influence an audience (Leach, 2000, p.208), is ultimately the foundation of public relations. Failing to persuade people into getting involved with their causes would cost activist groups to fail in bringing

about a change, which is the reason why they exist in the first place. But it is also a goal of public relations practitioners to get their messages, or the messages of the companies that they represent, across. Therefore, both activism and public relations share a common goal and both need rhetoric to achieve it.

Q<sub>2</sub>: How does the rhetoric on activist groups' websites encourage engagement with their publics?

This second question will be explored using three of the five dialogic principles proposed by Taylor *et al.* (2001), as will be explained in the method chapter. Once again the focus will be on the use of language and specific expressions that would encourage people to get involved and create a dialogue.

This question is relevant to the field of public relations as it deals with the much discussed idea of two-way symmetrical communication. This concept is fundamental to create ethical relationships between organisations and their publics. But it is also very important for activist groups, for which it is vital to get people involved in their causes and get their support in order to survive and operate. Therefore, engagement of publics is a relevant topic for both activism and public relations, and language they mean to achieve it.

## **1.5 Outline of the thesis**

The thesis started by defining the topic of global anti-corporate activism. After explaining the relevance of this thesis within the field of public relations, the aim has been assessed and the research questions have been formulated. A background chapter will follow, in which concepts such as global anti-corporate activism and brands will be farther explained, a definition of activism will be given and the history, evolution and

development of this phenomenon will be analysed. Then previous literature will be discussed, including an evaluation of the impact that the Internet and social media have had on the spreading of news and campaigns, to the advantage of activist groups, allowing the movement to reach global dimensions. The chapters regarding the method, the analysis of three chosen website and the discussion of the findings will follow. The thesis will conclude with a final conclusion and suggestions for further research.

## **2. Background – From NGOs to transnational activism**

### **2.1 History and evolution of activism within the field of public relations**

Skjelsbaek (1971) published a study in which he stated that the Rosicrucian Order, an educational and fraternal order founded in Egypt in 1500 B.C., complied with the UIA definition of NGO in 1694 (p.424). It wasn't just the first NGO in the world, but, for around 150 years, it was also one of the very few existing. Starting from 1850 other NGOs were founded and ever since their number has constantly grown at a rate of 6 percent annually (p.433). Skjelsbaek calculated that such a rate would have meant a total of 9,049 NGOs in the world in the year 2000. Almost two decades later, Simmons (1998) stated that NGOs numbers, influence and reach were at "unprecedented levels" (p.83). As of January 2014, the Yearbook of International Organizations Online (YBIO) provides the profiles of 67,097 international associations. The yearbook puts together a list of NGOs worldwide, and it is regularly updated with an average of 1,200 new entries added per year. These numbers are significant and show the extent and outreach of these organisms.



However, it is not just the number of NGOs that has changed in time. Activism as a phenomenon itself has evolved and so have its targets. If we think back at the definition of activism presented in the introduction, the reason for this change seems rather logic: activists use different forms of pressure to bring about a change (Gerlach, 2001, p.300; Berry, 2003, p.6). However, a change can only happen where there is the power to make it happen, as power is “inextricably tied up with the capacity . . . to make a difference” (Orssatto & Clegg, 1999, p.276). Two centuries ago that power was held by the States and their governments, which were the targets of activist groups: they would pressure policy makers, because they had the power to change things (Spar & LaMure, 2003, p.5). Although governments are still important targets, the increase of significance of multinationals and most importantly their influence, made it possible for NGOs and activists to turn their attention to them. Multinationals and bigger corporations play a huge role in the economies of some countries, especially developing ones. As a consequence, they are rather powerful and can be pressured to make a change (Spar & LaMure, 2003, p.6). Hence why, since the beginning of the 1990s, firms started to be targeted directly by activist groups (Berry, 2003; Den Hond & De Bakker, 2007, p.918).

As targets were changing, power was being re-distributed and globalization was settling its roots, activist groups’ tactics and techniques needed to adapt as well. In the 60s, for instance, environmental activists’ role was purely that of providing the Government with “scientific information, popular exposés of polluters and ... [purchasing] land to protect it from development” (Wood & Moore, 2002, p.21). In the 70s, activists started to challenge corporations, in the hope to provoke a change (Broad & Heckscher, 2003, p.721). Rose (1991, p.26) explains how, in the late 1970s in the United States, activists that had challenged corporations winning significant battles, were then offered positions within government. However, during the 1980s, the situation changed when Reagan

was elected as the new president. Activists' power decreased, forcing them to find and develop new forms of advocacy. That's when activist groups started to deal with the media trying to get their attention; public relation was slowly being introduced to and fused with advocacy, to the point that a new term was being introduced as well: "media advocacy", referred to as "the strategic use of mass media for advancing a social or public social initiative" (Rose, 1991, p.29). This has led to a different approach of activists, who have started to challenge corporations directly, beginning from the 90s (Den Hond & De Bakker, 2007, p.918).

## **2.2 NGOs and activist groups**

It is important at this point to recognise that there is a distinction between activist groups and NGOs. The word NGO first appeared in 1945 when the United Nations used it to describe the role of consultants in nongovernmental UN activities (Lewis, 2001). Lacking a proper definition, however, in time the term has started to include more organisations than originally intended (Srinivas, 2009, p.614; Simmons, 1998, p.83). Therefore, today under the NGO category fall all those organisations responsible for carrying out tasks that the Government is not willing to perform itself. These tasks include, for instance, humanitarian issues. These organisations often deal with issues and concerns to be handled together with Government, although they are not controlled by it. As Esty (1998) pointed out, NGOs play an important role in counterweighing governments during intellectual forums, raising topic that might otherwise go unnoticed. People working for NGOs are usually former Government workers and official, and they normally set up partnerships with local leaders and groups to achieve their goals. NGOs are quite known for being good at showing goodwill, which ultimately leads to credibility.

Activist groups, on the other hand, are normally formed by everyday citizens that represent a social movement (Den Hond & De Bakker, 2007, p.903) and that come together to bring about a change around the issues they are concerned with. Therefore, unlike NGOs, activist groups arise around an organisation and are completely independent from it. Activist groups' structure is thus often less informal than that of NGOs: some are local, small and informal, while others are bigger, structured and concerned with issues which affect a broader population. Moreover, activist groups can have very different approaches when it comes to achieving their goals: from obstructing a company from doing something, to being more collaborative with the organisations they attack to reach an agreement. Lastly, activist groups are aware of their potential to “generate enhanced social and political power” (Berry, 2003, p.6), rely on various channels and forms of pressure on organisations to gain media attention and thus reach out to as many people as possible.

Thus, although activist groups and NGOs are slightly different in both their structure and their actions, they have the same goal: get their cause known and reach out to people to make a change about the issue they are concerned with. Since this paper tries to understand the rhetoric used to reach out to and engage with people, examples of NGOs rhetoric will still be considered.

### **2.3 Anti-corporate activism**

1999 is considered by many (Ayres, 2004, p.10; Broad & Heckscher, 2003, p.713) a milestone year towards the affirmation of anti-corporate activism and anti globalisation movements: on November 30th about fifty thousand people in Seattle protested the World Trade Organisation meetings, accusing the WTO decisions to be helping corporations to expand their power over the sovereignty of the public and pursuing corporate capitalism and dominance (Kahn & Kellner, 2004, p.87). Protesters were also

worried about corporations' "race to the bottom", that is companies exploiting the conditions of liberalised trade by relocating their production to more convenient areas: developing countries with lower wages and less regulations both on a social and environmental level (Ayres, 2004, p.21; Broad & Heckscher, 2003, p.718). Another area of concern was represented by what have been defined "sweatshops": using child labour in Third World Countries to maximize profits (Bair & Palpacuer, 2012, p.522). However, the seeds of these ideologies were planted long before, precisely two decades earlier (Broad & Heckscher, 2003, p.714). As the term itself states, this type of activism expresses its discontent towards corporations and multinationals. Activist groups identify behaviours of a specific company that they feel are not ethical or not fair, or that create issues and start challenging that company to change those behaviours (Den Hond & De Bakker, 2007, p.917). In particular, activists belonging to this movement protest against the ever growing power of multinationals, their omnipresence and their lack of responsibility. At least at its dawn, anti-corporate activism was strictly related to the concept of brand: in the 70s, multinationals began their extensive expansion, their "global reach" (Barnet and Müller, 1974, cited in Broad & Heckscher, 2003, p.719). During these years citizens started to campaign to denounce corporate misbehaviours and abuse, asking for stricter and more specific corporate codes (Broad & Heckscher, 2003, p.721). By the beginning of the 90s, brands and their logos were everywhere (Klein, 2009, p.198), and multinationals had started to understand that the key to their success was to sell a brand and an ideology rather than a product. By the early years of 2000, multinationals owned pretty much everything (Shepard & Hayduk, 2002, pp.4-5) and were almost as powerful and influential as governments. That's when people started to protest and claim their space back (Wood & Moore, 2002, p.31): they were asking for freedom of choice and for a world without (or at least with less) logos (Klein, 2009, p.97). However, anti-corporate activism as we know it today most likely came to be

when corporations started to put their own benefits first and started to export their production abroad, closing down factories and causing the loss of thousands of jobs (Klein, 2009, p.201). At this point people truly realised the power that corporations had in their hands, and learned how to use it to their own advantage. Anti-corporate activism today is expressed in many ways: from environment activists asking multinationals to take more care of our nature and be “greener”, to animal-rights activists demanding corporations to stop animal testing and cruelty, to human-rights activists fighting for better working conditions in Third World Countries and against sweatshops. More extremist movements include, for instance, anti-consumerism, a socio-political ideology that is concerned with the growth of power of multinationals which poses a threat to States and the public sphere: without a doubt, they have now become “the dominant political, social, economic, and environmental forces on the planet, eclipsing the nation-state” (De Luca & Peeples, 2002, p.126). Activists adhering to this movement start selecting products that they decide to consume based on different reasons, one being whether they share and respect the same values as the company producing those products (Cromie & Ewing, 2009, p.220) or the same political views (Sandikci & Ekici, 2009).

## **2.4 The concept of brand**

Brands and branding have been largely studied within the field of marketing by many authors (de Chernatony & Dall’Olmo Riley, 1998; Brown, 1992). Although it is not the aim of this thesis to discuss the concept of brand, it is very hard, if not impossible, to get a thorough understanding of what anti-corporate activism is without a minimum understanding of what a brand is and the extent of its power. Within this thesis, explaining this concept becomes important because it is the expansion of brands and their increasing power that has made them a favourite target for activist groups (Klein,

2009; Merckelsen, 2011, p.128-129). Activists exploit the visibility of brands' logos to pressure the companies behind those logos to make a change. As Bennett noticed (2003, p.152), brands and their logos have become symbols of specific lifestyle systems among consumers: attacking those logos allows activist groups to get political messages into mass media.

As de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley (1998, p.417) argue, definitions of the "brand" abound. One of the reasons is that a "brand" can be interpreted slightly differently depending on the perspective from which it is analysed (Wood, 2000, p.664). The American Marketing Association (1960) and other authors such as Kotler *et al.* (1996, p.556), Guzman (2004, p.1-2), Palazzo and Basu (2007, p.336) and Dibb *et al.* (1997, p.264) among others take a more product-oriented approach, defining a brand as a 'name, design or symbol that identifies a company's product and at the same time it differentiate that product from the competitors'. On the other hand, other authors such as Ambler (1992, cited in Ambler & Styles, 1997, p.222-223), analyse a brand from a consumer perspective, defining it as

"the promise of the bundles of attributes that someone buys and provide satisfaction . . .

The attributes that make up a brand may be real or illusory, rational or emotional,  
tangible or invisible".

Lastly, there are many authors who define a brand based on the various methods used to achieve this differentiations: the image of the brand in consumers' minds (Keller, 1993, pp.3-7), the value systems created around a brand (Sheth *et al.*, 1991), or the added value provided by brands (Doyle & Stern, 2006, p.165). These concepts are summarised in the broader definition provided by Brown (1992), which refers to a brand as "the sum of all the mental connections people have around it". De Chernatony and

Dall’Olmo Riley (1998) analysed over a hundred articles and journals within the marketing sector to provide a comprehensive view of the conspicuous definitions of brand. They concluded that brand is a multi-dimensional construct through which values are communicated by the corporation, and recognised and appreciated by consumers (p.427).

Understanding what a brand is enables us to understand why, at a certain point, some people decided to “turn against” it. Therefore, what is important to underline here is the fact that the attributes of a brand are created using the marketing mix and the image of a brand is tailored to the demands of its specific target (Wood, 2000, p.663-664). Within the business field, Clark and Fijimoto (1989) showed that costumers tend to buy more and more products that fulfil their own values and lifestyle necessities. Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) conducted a similar marketing study and concluded that consumers tend to build stronger relationships with brands with whom they identify themselves the most (2003, p.77). Consequently, it is now easy to see why, when a brand is not representing the values that it is supposed to or declares to be representing, consumers don’t identify with the brand anymore (Fournier, 1998) and, in some cases (activism) decide to provoke a change in the corporation behind that brand (Micheletti *et al.*, 2003; Sandikci & Ekici, 2009, p.208).

## **2.5 Brands become vehicles for anger and frustration**

As we have seen, the “Battle for Seattle” highlighted the discontent of citizens towards the dominant power of multinationals. Activists displayed this feeling by “trashing the material manifestations of corporate global dominance” (De Luca & Peeples, 2002, p.125), for instance, by smashing the windows of Nike Town. Multinationals dominance and monopoly over States was also represented and proved by their wealth:

in some case (Microsoft and Wal-Mart are just few examples) a corporation's market value was equivalent to the gross domestic product of some Countries (ibid., p.126).

If it is true that corporations defend themselves by stating that they have helped improving the living conditions of people in developing countries (Klein, 2009, p.235), and certainly, at least at the beginning, they did create new jobs, it is also true that by becoming omniscient, brands reduce people's choice (Cromie & Ewing, 2009, p.218-219). This hegemony of brands could also create a feeling of disempowerment in consumers, which, when the situation becomes unbearable or creates dissatisfaction (Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009, p.1120), turns into activism (Cromie & Ewing, 2009, p.228). This happens because consumers are aware of what corporations do, and when they cause harm to society or the environment, people know they can respond and have their voices heard in different ways: from negative word of mouth, to boycotts, from complaining, to legal actions (Grappi *et al.*, 2013, p.1814).

## **2.6 Brands' strengths become their own Achilles' heel**

As it is known, with power comes responsibilities, and when corporations do not take responsibility for their actions, people react (Palazzo & Basu, 2007, p.339). And they do it full force, using every mean at their disposal, one of them being brand opposition. In the words of Foucault (1988, p.94): "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power". That is to say that people do not just wake up one day and decide to be against a certain brand. These feelings are the result of a constant exposition to brands, and the more one brand imposes itself upon consumers, thus creating a state of hegemony, the more consumers are likely to develop feelings of resentment towards it. As long as decision makers will gather, movements against corporate globalization will continue to show their opposition (Zontine, 2010, p.29). After all, as Cherrier (2009, p.189) states,



anti-consumption arises from, among other things, empowerment. Brands which become iconic and hegemonic could end up causing a feeling of disempowerment (Cromie & Ewing, 2009, p.227). Consumers want to make space for themselves and reposition themselves in society, and the way for them to do it is to refuse brands.

That's when corporations' strengths turn into their own weaknesses: activists are well aware of the fact that the more visible and powerful a company is, the more damage their activity can cause them (Rehbein *et al.*, 2004, p.250; Palazzo & Basu, 2007, p.340), and therefore, these corporations become favourite targets (Palazzo & Basu, 2007, p.338). Since it is proven that anti-brand activism has a significant ability to actually cause damage to a global brand (*ibid.*, p.342), big multinationals and important brands normally do listen to activists request and put effort into trying to fulfil them (David *et al.*, 2001, p.146) and at times they even partner with activist groups (Stauber & Rampton, as cited in Coombs & Holladay, 2013, p.10).

## **2.7 Transnational activism**

“It is not the technology alone that creates rapidly expanding action networks—it is the capacity to move easily between on- and offline relationships that makes the scale shift to transnational activism possible” (Bennett, 2005, p.205). Bennett had a point: it would not be fair to give all the credit to technology and the Internet, although they did play a major role in it. Anti-corporate activism went global when the economy went global and the multinationals it was attacking went global: in one word, when globalisation happened. As Guindry *et al.* (2003, p.3) have stated,

“globalization has in fact brought social movements together across borders in a ‘transnational public sphere’, a real as well as conceptual space in which movement organizations interact, contest each other and their objects, and learn from each other.”

In particular, the “Battle for Seattle” can be considered the spark that ignited this idea of uniting forces across the borders around the globe, as it represented the first time ever that a mass-directed event was broadcasted worldwide, bringing different networks together against their common enemy: corporations and their global hegemony (Juris, 2008, p.28). As Broad and Heckscher (2003, p.725) have stated, activist movements are effective when they manage to reach people where they are and in creative ways. Which is exactly what activists in Seattle (Shepard & Hayduk, 2002, p.18) and transnational advocacy networks (TANs) did: they chose a platform, the Internet, which had not been used before for this purpose and was therefore creative, where people already were (the internet itself was not a new born creation, so people were starting to use it), and created a common space where people could work together on international issues, sharing the same values and exchanging information (Keck & Sikkink, 1998, p.2). Technology has created a feeling of empowerment within activist groups, by allowing them to create their own spaces, such as blogs and websites, where to express their opinions and get in touch with other people who share the same, or similar, views (Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009, p.1121).

Although activism has existed before the Internet, online tools have brought consumer activism to a new level (Roper, 2002). The web has allowed activist communities of different kinds to proliferate without any temporal or geographic restriction (Hollenbeck & Zinkahn, 2006, pp.478-480; Wood & Moore, 2002, p.26). In their study of consumer activism, Hollenbeck and Zinkhan (2006) analysed the role of the Internet within activist community and identified four factors of activism that have been enhanced by

the Internet: the speed of sharing information on-line, which influences efficiency and effectiveness, as community members are informed instantly as soon as something happens, allowing them to organise themselves consequently; the convenience for members of being able to take part in discussions and plans from wherever they are and whenever they have time; the community formation: members of the community are evaluated based on their contribution to the group, not on their background. This means that, although they will all most likely share the same views on the topic, they might approach situations in different ways, encouraging diversity and thinking “outside the box”, which can be beneficial in our modern society. Lastly, the Internet grants for anonymity: for some activists anonymity is the main reason why they joined the community in the first place and what determines their level of engagement (pp.483-484).

### **3. Literature review**

Although the topic of branding and anti corporate activism has been widely discussed and studied, it is important to mention the fact that most of the studies mentioned in this thesis belong to the marketing or business research field, highlighting once again the lack of studies concerning the rhetoric employed by activist groups within the field of public relations. However, many authors have recognised the fact that activism and public relations are strictly connected, and therefore, analysing this topic from a public relations point of view is important and could advance knowledge, since it would examine public relations from a slightly different perspective. As stated earlier, the challenges for multinationals and activists are different, and therefore both need to adapt their strategies to their needs, resulting in a different use of rhetoric. This means that

both could learn something from each other: for instance, multinationals could learn how to be more transparent from activists, while activists could learn how to use better visuals on their websites. It is generally accepted that activists use public relations strategies and tactics more or less effectively (Reber & Berger, 2005, p.186). Furthermore, Taylor *et al.* (2001,) have highlighted the importance of studying activism within public relations since “they have unique communications and relationship-building needs” (p.264).

Zoch *et al.* (2008) links the two fields through the concept of framing, highlighting the importance for activists to frame their messages so that they can “achieve maximum impact” (p.355). Coombs and Holladay (2012 p.882) establish a parallel between activism and PR, since both use rhetoric, power and persuasion to provoke a change. In particular, activists could use public relations to create power and influence and persuade organisations to change their behaviours and policies. This view is shared by Sommerfeldt *et al.* (2012, p.305) who also state that activist groups use public relations techniques to achieve their missions. Henderson (2005, p.133) emphasises the importance of building relations and dialogue, highlighting how the Internet can facilitate dialogic activism. Moreover, although a good part of these studies focus on the role of the Internet and websites in particular when communicating with publics, little is known about activists and their websites (Sommerfeldt *et al.*, 2012, pp.303-304). Those authors who have analysed activists’ websites, have focused on the efficacy of websites and the channels used. However, the rhetoric they use has not been a topic widely researched: Cherrier (2009) analysed the kind of language used by anti-consumption websites “to show the importance of anti-consumption practices in the construction of consumer identities” (p.181), while Krishnamurthy and Kucuk (2009) focused on the language used in anti-brand sites, specifically to understand how language is used strategically to “affect brand value” (p.1123).

The public relations studies mentioned above represent only a minimum part of the activist literature. The idea of a brand and branding is clearly a marketing related field. At the same time, anti-corporate activism, anti-consumerism and anti-branding are a direct consequence of the abuse of power of corporations and the ubiquity of their logos. Therefore, it is easy to understand why most of the research done within this topic comes from the marketing and the business research sectors. And, not surprisingly, most of these studies analyse the corporations' perspective, trying to identify issues that benefit them: how to avoid anti-branding, how to respond to activists, what kind of companies are attacked and why, what the consequences of activism are (Bair & Palpacuer, 2012). Nevertheless, analysing the situation from the activists side is interesting too, and can still benefit corporations as well. Activists use communication as their primary weapon, which is ultimately strictly related to the public relations field. Studying the rhetoric that activists use to engage with their stakeholders can advance knowledge in this area, as it could be applied to any other type of communication between whichever company and its stakeholders, which is by definition what public relations practitioners do. It could help multinationals becoming more creative, transparent and therefore more trustworthy, for instance.

As far as the language used by activist groups on their websites is concerned, I will refer back to Cherrier (2009) and Krishnamurthy and Kucuk (2009). The first author uses a rhetorical framework based on Aristotle's principles of logos, ethos and pathos to analyse the topic of anti-consumption and identifies two consumer-resistance identities: the hero identity, which proposes values expressing an alternative to the existing society, and the project identity, which relates on the consumers' idea that they can reposition themselves in society. Krishnamurthy and Kucuk (2009) studied the language used by anti-brand sites to affect brand value, coming to the conclusion that this

websites tend to use easy-to-understand language and adopt market speech to criticise brands.

This thesis will also refer to and draw upon Taylor *et al.*'s principle of dialogic relationship building. Although this framework is rather technical, its principles can be linked to some of Aristotle's rhetoric principles and canons. The first principle identified by Taylor *et al.* is the "ease of interface": it represents a fundamental prerequisite for dialogue on websites, as visitors might get annoyed at websites in which it is too difficult to retrieve information, thus discouraging them to come back and get involved or engaged. Therefore, the first step for a website to create a possibility of dialogue and engagement is to be easy to navigate and retrieve wanted information. Visitors should not be required to click on too many links to access information. That is, the language and visuals used should direct visitors' attention to certain sections of the website, for instance by using a different colour and size for headings. This principle can be linked to the idea of disposition of elements in a text (*logos*), which is one of the canons of rhetoric: the way elements of a text are disposed can influence the way people read it and react to it. The second principle concerns the "usefulness of information": in order to get people interested in a website, it is very important that they get all the information they were looking for when they clicked on it in the first place. Relevant information that should be present on an activist' website include, for instance, the group's philosophy and mission, information on how to become a member, donate or get involved in the cause and show support. From a linguistic point of view, information should be clearly stated, easily understandable, not contradicting and not ambiguous or vague. This principle relates to the credibility of the association, that is what rhetoric defines as *ethos*. The last principle is the "dialogic loop", that is the creation of spaces on the website where visitors can interact and create dialogue, by sharing their opinions and views. These can take the shape of surveys, message boxes, polls or requests for

updates or newsletters. The language used should encourage and persuade visitors to get involved, being however careful not to sound too imperative, so that they don't feel like they are being forced to do something they don't want to do. The third and fourth principles, "conservation of visitors" and "generation of return visits" respectively, will not be taken into consideration in this study, as they are not concerned with the type of language used on the websites but rather strictly on its content, which is not the focus of this study.

## **4.Method**

The rhetoric employed by anti-corporate activists on their websites is a topic that has not been widely studied yet. Thus, this thesis represents an exploratory study, making it appropriate to use qualitative methods to obtain a deeper initial analysis.

Qualitative research is commonly used when the researcher is dealing with language and how concepts are expressed. This type of research "starts from the perspective and actions of the subjects studied" (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p.7), and deals with lived experiences, "where individual beliefs and actions intersect with culture" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p.2). It is thus clear to see why qualitative research is the most appropriate research method to answer the questions of this thesis. Activism arises when our individual beliefs and culture differ from and clash with our lived experiences. That is, when the reality as we experience it is different from the way we would want it to be or we think it should be. This clash produces actions; when this actions take the form of protests, boycotts, petitions and similar, we are dealing with activism.

Qualitative researchers' approach to the world is normally interpretive and naturalistic, in that they study phenomena in their natural settings, collecting empirical material that

they then analyse to better understand problems and meanings in the lives of individuals (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p.3-4). As Erickson (2011, p. 43) stated, qualitative research reports “what particular people do in their everyday lives and what their actions mean to them”. In this thesis those particular people would be activists, the “everyday” activity analysed would be their websites, and the meaning would be their chance to spread their messages and survive as a group.

Qualitative research is however a big umbrella under which a lot of different methods are available to researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p.3) . It is not unusual for many qualitative researchers not to follow any specific protocol when analysing their empirical material (Peräkylä & Ruusuvaara, 2011, p.530), but rather reading the material collected multiple times in search for key themes that will be then used to draw a picture and make an analysis of the assumptions and problems related to that world represented by the empirical material. However, this thesis will analyse the empirical material through a rhetorical perspective.

#### **4.1 Method of analysis and perspective**

Rhetorical analysis will allow to take an approach data-driven rather than theory-driven. The analysis will work upward from elements of the texts analysed rather than downwards from abstract models of discourse (Johnstone & Eisenhart, 2008, p.3). Rhetoric is based upon the three concepts of Logos, Pathos and Ethos defined by Aristotle (Cherrier, 2009, p.183). Logos considers the overall structure of the text and the logic of it. That is, if the content makes sense, if it is coherent, if it follows a certain logical flow. Pathos has to do with emotions present in the text: whether the page conveys any sort of feelings, for instance anger, negativity, positivity, sadness and so on, or whether it is quite neutral. Ethos represents the credibility of the text and its link to other texts. This framework will allow to understand how these websites are



structured to persuade visitors into getting involved in their cause. The analysis of relevant images will be deepened through visual rhetoric: this will allow to examine activist groups' intentions behind their selection of visual material on their websites (Scott, 1994, p.253).

As Benoit and Harthcock (1999, p.69) stated, emphasis or focus are a fundamental aspect of rhetoric. This means that not all topics and ideas presented and discussed in a text, or a website in our specific case, have the same relevance: activists who create and design websites, that is our "rhetors", repeat and push forward certain arguments and ideas that are more relevant to them and the cause that they are supporting making sure that people's attention is also drawn to those points. Therefore, I will not analyse the three websites in their entirety, but I will look for those arguments that are mostly emphasised and focus on them.

I will take an interpretive perspective. Interpretive work has often been considered too subjective and unscientific, and has therefore been denied legitimacy, since this type of work does not follow the same experimental procedures as positivists (Mishler, 1990, p.416). As a matter of fact, this approach rejects positivism: our experienced life is not static enough and therefore, cannot provide with the level of certainty required by positivists and quantitative methods (Angen, 2000, p.380). Communication and language are constantly evolving and changing, making it hard to study them "scientifically". Moreover, an interpretive approach will allow to "enlarge and deepen our understanding" (ibid., p.380) of how people experience their world and reality through language (ibid, p.386), which is the overall aim of this thesis: to analyse how rhetoric is used in activists' websites. Interpretivists claim that interpretation is fundamental for understanding, since the reality that we know is constructed inter subjectively through the meanings that we gather from the world (Angen, 2000, p.385).

However, rejecting positivism has had consequences concerning the validity of research. Hammersley (cited in Angen, 2000, p.382) has tried to overcome this problem by finding a compromise between positivism and interpretivism: he acknowledges the existence of a world independently of our knowledge of it, but at the same time claims that reality is always viewed and known from specific perspectives.

## **4.2 Empirical material**

The three websites selected for the analysis are activist groups' websites. In particular, two of them, No Sweat (<http://www.nosweat.org.uk/>) and Labour Behind the Label (<http://www.labourbehindthelabel.org/>), specifically target clothing companies, asking, among other things, to grant better and safe working conditions, adequate wages and the abolition of sweat shops. The third one, Baby Milk Action (<http://info.babymilkaction.org/>), targets food multinational Nestlé and precisely, their baby formula. Although they highly encourage breastfeeding as the best and safest infant feeding method, especially in Countries with unsafe water, they are not claiming nor denying the importance of baby formula, which they recognise to be the only alternative in certain situations. However, they are accusing Nestlé to be putting out non accurate information to consumers in order to trick them into buying their products. Therefore, what they are asking is for this multinational to provide with accurate information and let the mothers decide for themselves whether they want to breast feed or use baby formula. It is worth mentioning at this point, that they now have just opened a new webpage at a different url address. However, at the time that this analysis was done, that website was not existing yet, and therefore everything mentioned about Baby Milk Action refers back to their old website.

The three websites chosen were selected from a list of anti-corporate campaigns retrieved from Corporate Watch (<http://www.corporatewatch.org/?lid=62>). It is “an

independent, not-for-profit journalism, research and publishing group” launched in 1996, that researches the impact of corporations on a social and environmental level. To date, it is the only organisation in the UK that critically analyses corporations’ structural features. It is considered a vital source of information for groups who want to start campaigning against specific companies and it provides with reliable and up-dated knowledge about corporate power. After excluding campaigns that were not targeting corporations, campaigns that were not running anymore, and online campaigns not organised by activist groups, three remaining websites were randomly selected. One is targeting Nestle in particular and their baby formula marketing, which has to be responsible and provide parents with accurate and truthful information. The other two websites both target clothing multinationals, fighting and asking for better working conditions and for companies to take responsibilities for workers’ rights throughout the entire supply chain.

### **4.3 The focus on websites**

The Internet allowed activists to reach out to a higher number of people even to individuals outside their group and was therefore introduced as new a tool to spread their messages (Gerlach, 2001, p.297-298).

According to a survey carried out by Naveed in 2012, 73% of respondents stated that the Internet has made it easier and quicker to build relationships between organisations and their publics. Moreover, social media has increased trust: 49% of respondents of the same survey agreed that information they retrieved from online platforms is perceived as more reliable and trustworthy than that coming from traditional media. It is also understood (DiStaso & Bortree, 2012, p.511) that companies’ presence on the Internet

increases transparency, vital for activist groups, who need to be clear in stating what they are fighting against so to get as many people as possible involved.

According to the Internet World Stats (2012), Internet users have increased immensely since 2000 with a growth equal to 566.4% worldwide. (Taylor & Kent, 2010, p.207) Crowe (2010, p.411) underlines how important it is for companies to be present on the platforms where their stakeholders are already looking for information, since this enables a greater exposure. The Internet represents one way for activists to “better serve their publics, extend their reach, and coordinate efforts with other like-minded groups”. (Taylor *et al.*, 2001, p.264). However, websites alone can be also completely useless or even bad if they are not designed in a way that meets viewers’ needs and expectations (Rosen & Purinton, 2004, p.787).

Therefore, websites were chosen as the empirical material for this thesis. A website represents the first contact between a potential supporter of a certain cause and the activist group’s activities. It is vital for the website to provide enough and accurate information, catch the visitors attention and invite and encourage them to support their cause. Achieving this benefits activist groups as, through their website, they can reach out to many people and thus spread their messages at very low costs. Considering their websites as the first contact with visitors and therefore their main chance to have an impact on people, everything that was not mentioned on the websites was not taken into consideration. That includes their Facebook pages (for those activist groups who had it). Social media channels are not explicitly nor clearly mentioned on any of the websites analysed, and visitors are not invited nor encouraged to visit their other social media profiles. Therefore, the websites were chosen as the only focus of the analysis.

This type of data constitutes what Peräkylä and Ruusuvuori (2011, p.529) defined as “naturally occurring” analysis of text. To be more precise, the written texts on the

websites selected have been analysed, including pictures and logo, that is visual material, whenever relevant to the topic of research. The main focus was given to the home pages, as they represent the first impact and first impression for visitors, and potentially what makes them decide whether they are interested in further navigating the site or not. Moreover, emphasis was given to the “about us” sections, since this is the area where the activists present themselves, their vision, mission and ideals. This is also a very important section, because it can be and needs to be very clear and persuasive in order to get people interested in the topic, engaged with the website and the activist group and involved in their causes. Lastly, images and colours used on the websites were also examined and analysed, as they are triggers of emotional responses and therefore play an important role into influencing people to get involved in activists campaigns.

#### **4.4 Quality criteria for rhetorical analysis**

As we have just seen, belonging to qualitative research, rhetorical analysis has often struggled with the issue of validity. This thesis is no exception to the rule. It is quite a shared opinion that a qualitative study gains validity when it provides new possibilities and remains open to different or deeper interpretations (Angen, 2000, p.392), and are discussed by other scientists and members of larger communities with different and conflicting views (Mishler, 1990, p.420). Leach (2000, p.219) defines two important aspects of good rhetorical analysis that enhance its validity. The first one is based on the assumption that truth is place- and time-dependent, and therefore, it is not possible to generalise findings. The second aspects relates to the first, claiming that it is however possible to make normative proclamations. This thesis does not try to discover universal truth about the rhetoric of activist groups, although it does identify some similarities among the websites analysed. Moreover, the study is based upon models that have been

used and verified before, and most findings are in line with previous ones, increasing the reliability of this thesis.

#### **4.5 Limitations**

This sample clearly presents some limitations: to begin with only three websites were selected. The websites might use a specific language that would not necessarily apply to all websites addressing the same issue, and not having any comparison with other similar websites it is hard to establish the reasons of different strategies chosen by each individual activist group. The second limitation concerns the fact that the Corporate Watch website does not state on which basis those campaigns made the list and why others might not have been included. However, it is hard to believe that the campaigns listed on their website actually represent the entirety of campaigns against corporations currently being undertaken in the UK, since the list is not that long. Therefore, the sampling is not really random as it does not give all activist groups currently existing in the UK and campaigning against corporations the same chances to be picked. As far as the approach undertaken is concerned, the content of the websites is analysed and interpreted by the researcher, and therefore it is inevitable, at least to some extent, that their culture, knowledge and personal experiences influence their interpretation of the material selected and their conclusion.

## **5. Analysis**

The first research question of this thesis aimed at discovering how rhetoric is used by activist groups on their websites. Rhetoric commonly refers to the three principles of Logos, Ethos and Pathos by Aristotle, therefore, the presence and development of these

three canons were researched and analysed. Some patterns and similarities were identified throughout the three websites analysed, as well as some different approaches.

## **5.1 Logos**

Logos refers to the logistical arrangement of a text, how pieces of a text are assembled together to persuade the audience or the readers and possibly provoke a change in them (Eisenhart & Johnstone, 2008, p.6). Within a website the concept of logos can be identified with Taylor *et al.*'s principle of "ease of interface", that is the idea of a website easy to navigate and to find information on (2001, p.269). An organisation's website represents their way to present themselves to the public and, therefore, their first step into influencing the viewers. It is somewhat like their business card: it is vital that they are clear about who they are and what they stand for, information needs to be easily retrievable, so that people won't lose their patience, the different possible actions (such as donating money, supporting the cause, getting involved, helping spreading their messages) need to be visible and clearly explained. Rosen and Purinton (2004, p.789) explain that a coherent text allows a better understanding for the viewers, and a complex text, that is a text rich in content, encourages viewers to explore the site. Coherence "relies on redundancy of elements and texture" (ibid, p.789): elements of the text should not be contradictory, colours and pictures picked should be coordinated with the content. Complexity refers to the amount (richness) of elements present on the website: pictures, articles, videos, interviews, menu bar for navigation.

The three websites analysed were very clear about their aim and what they stand for, with a specific section dedicated to explaining their mission and vision. Information was usually easily retrievable, although one website (No Sweat) required visitors to click on a very high number of different links to get the desired information. Information was

also abundant on all website except for one (Baby Milk Action), in which most information had to be retrieved from links leading to external sources. This continuous necessity to click on different links to know more could discourage visitors, who might find the website too complicate to navigate or requiring too much time and effort (Taylor *et al.*, 2001, p.269). Overall, however, the general rule seems to be that of having information available possibly all under the same section without having too many external links, or at least, external links should be there for additional information, but enough information should be provided on the website itself. This is in line with the concept of disposition, which belongs to rhetoric, of information within a text: the most important and relevant information should be immediately presented without visitors having to look around the website too much (Leach, 2000, p.214). Information is also coherent and not contradicting throughout the website, and in line with messages and additional information retrievable on other websites affiliated and sponsored on the activists' websites. Some messages seem to be rather recurrent and emphasised: for instance, on the No Sweat website, sentences such as "fighting ... in solidarity with workers", "stands for workers' solidarity", "we aim to make solidarity with sweatshop workers", "we seek to build common, united, campaigning action", and "all workers, in every country, deserve and need rights", and "sweatshop workers ... are like us" make it clear that they highly focus on the two concepts of solidarity and equality. The concept of solidarity and working together to achieve common goals is stresses on the Baby Milk Action website as well, through the use of stances such as "your share in our success", "you are helping [our] work" and "you are making a difference". On the Labour Behind the Label website words such as "victims", "human rights", "basic needs" and "family" recur often creating a feeling of empathy for the visitors. On the other hand, complexity is mostly not reached, as most websites do not use pictures, except for their logos, there are no videos (only one website has them, but



they do not work) and no interviews. The content of all websites seems to be consisting almost exclusively of news articles and latest news about their causes and the topics they each handle. A menu bar is present in all websites and is pretty visible and intuitive and easy to follow. The language used is easy-to-understand, confirming Krishnamurthy and Kucuk (2009) study. The vocabulary used is basic, with everyday words: neither technical language nor jargon is used.

## **5.2 Ethos**

Ethos refers to the credibility aspect of a speech or text. One way to establish credibility for activist groups is to use links to other similar and relevant websites. This allows them to position their organisation “within a greater activist cause”, and it is also a way for this groups to “suggest identification with other reputable and like-minded organizations” (Taylor *et al.*, 2001, p.270). The strategy of creating connections and links with similar websites (similarity), also allows this activist groups and social organisations to “exchange” visitors among each other, which also enhances their visibility and their chances to gain more supporters.

All websites analysed provided with external links to other similar organisations and campaigns and trustworthy sources, such as newspapers and international entities. In particular the Baby Milk Action website provides with plenty links to external websites, including the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN), a network of 273 groups worldwide that supports and protects breastfeeding as a societal norm, and of which they are a member, UNICEF, the WHO, law groups and similar associations in other countries make them reliable and worth of attention. All of the websites except the first one are up to date and provide visitors with current news on topics relevant to their causes. The use of videos or interviews to enhance credibility is not common: the No

Sweat and Baby Milk Action websites do not have any videos available, while the Labour Behind the Label website does have a few, of which, however, only one works. Not updated websites can create disinterest in the viewers and broken links or non working videos might annoy visitors, who could lose interest and decide not to support the cause. Moreover, it might make viewers wonder whether the organisation is even still existing or not. Therefore, although it might not affect directly credibility, it could still work against them. Considering that these activist groups rely on their websites quite a lot, as we have already mentioned, it is extremely important for them to keep their material up to date in order for visitors to come back and get involved. Credibility seems to be created mainly through the use of a pretty scientific language and the availability of scientific articles on the website for the Baby Milk Action website. For the Labour Behind the Label websites, the choice of a quite neutral language, that does not really take anyone's side, gives an idea of objectivity, thus enhancing their credibility. They even acknowledge, even if briefly, that some company are actually putting some effort into one of the campaigns that they support, making them look like a company that brings some examples of the possibility of change and the potential effectiveness of activism, thus enhancing their credibility and possibly encouraging action. Overall, the language used is not aggressive and they do not attack multinationals, no strong nor rude words are used against them. Multinationals are not depicted like a dooming evil threatening the world as it happens in other activists' websites (Greenpeace, for instance). Their credibility is also increased by the availability on their website of a lot of material produced by themselves but also by other external organisations to support their causes.

### 5.3 Pathos

Pathos concerns the language used and the emotions conveyed through a text. Emotions can be conveyed not only through the words used or the syntax used. Colours and the choice of pictures used on a website also can have a strong impact on visitors, persuading and convincing them to support a certain cause or not. Rosen and Purinton (2004, p.793) studied some design characteristics of websites and came to the conclusion that home pages should be simple, “with eye-catching but appropriate graphics” which would encourage visitors to explore further the website. Different studies (Jacobs & Hustmyer, 1974; Wilson, 1966) have analysed the connections between colours and emotions, concluding that, generally speaking, long-wavelength colours, such as red and yellow, trigger a more negative feeling in visitors than short-wavelength colours, such as blue and green. Elements such as colours, images and videos are very important in creating a user’s perception of a website (Simon, 2001), hence persuading them. According to Pieters *et al.* (2002), websites matching users’ perceptions result more trustworthy and engaging, therefore more likely to persuade visitors into supporting their cause. Analogies are rhetorical tropes belonging to the wider category of metaphors that are used to trigger emotions in visitors as well (Chandler, 2013). Metaphors and analogies are often used, especially in advertising and marketing, to create connections, both positive or negative, in the mind of visitors: two different elements are compared and linked to trigger a reaction in people and change their views or attitudes. A parallel between two things is created, so that the vision of one of them immediately reminds the observer of the second one (Leach, 2000, p.218). These parallels are created when the sender’s messages are crafted “using shared knowledge of various vocabularies and conventions, as well as common experiences”

(Scott, 1994, p.252). That is to say, that metaphors and analogies are cultural dependent and have to be carefully tailored to the specific target audience.

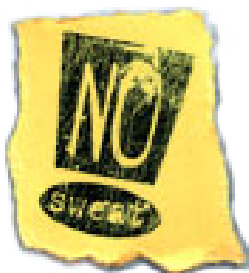
Overall, the language used in all the websites analysed was not aggressive: none of the websites used rude terms or words, they did not depict multinationals as evil institutions that need to be destroyed, still highlighting their need to take responsibilities for their actions and pay for their mistakes. The Labour Behind the Label and Baby Milk Action websites also managed to create a feeling of empowerment, through the use of words that conveyed a message of possibility to make a change by working together and joining forces. Overall the message of joining forces is present in all the website, although through very different strategies. As seen earlier, the first two websites rely more on the feelings of solidarity, equality and the concept of family, while on the third website the idea that visitors can make a difference is pushed forward mostly through the demand for donations. The Labour Behind the Label website seems to be the one that relies the most on the empathy of visitors, leveraging on values such as family and human rights. A choice also strengthened by their selection of pictures, starting with their logo (picture 1): two hands next to each other, giving an idea of helping each other, joining forces, working together. But they also remind of a sewing thread used to create the seams in the shape of the two hands, which is a symbol for the job that the workers in the sweatshops do: they sew clothes and fabrics. This logo does not just represent the website's goal to provide help and collaborate to make a change; it also symbolises the workers they are trying to help.



Picture 1: Labour Behind the Label's logo

Their website is also the only one that uses pictures: the only images present on the other websites are their logos. All three websites chose to use the logo of the targeted multinational and distort it, and then use it in their website, either as their own logo or as posters for their campaigns.

The No Sweat logo (see Picture 2), a yellow irregular square-like shape with a black exclamation mark on it, inside which there is the writing “no sweat”, resembles the label of some jeans brands, for instance, the irregular shape of some B. S. J jeans labels (see Picture 3), or some Levi Strauss & Co. labels with their paper-like texture (see Picture 4).



Picture 2: No Sweat logo



Picture 3: B. S. J jeans labels



Picture 4: Levi Strauss & Co. label

However, it could also resemble some graffiti style writings, a form of art normally used to express feelings of injustice and unfairness, and often associated with the idea of

protests. The exclamation mark highlights the concept of protest, a call for action against something that is wrong and needs to be changed, but also represents a shout out, a scream, a voice that needs to be heard. The use of capital letters for the word “no” is also significant: within Internet communities capital letters generally indicate that the person writing is “screaming”. Once again, the idea of protest, screaming against what is not right and standing one’s ground to make a change, come to mind and can be found in this logo. Labour Behind the Label uses Benetton’s iconic green label (an example of a generic ad is presented in picture 5) to mock and target this multinational, thus triggering an emotional response in its viewers: perfect happy models are replaced by a picture of sad workers and the word “colors” is changed to “victims” (picture 6).



Picture 5: A Benetton's ad



Picture 6: Mocking of a Benetton's ad by Labour Behind the Label

The changing of words is not the only mocking aspect of this picture. Benetton has always used, as a distinguishing feature for its ads, the casting of people with different racial backgrounds, as to say that they are a brand meant for everyone in the world, regardless their ethnicity. However, in the picture used by Labour Behind the Label, this multi-ethnicity is lacking. The picture seems to be saying: your clothes might be for everyone, but we’re the only ones paying the price for it.

The same strategy is used by the Baby Milk Action website in their petition to remove Danone from their partnership with the Department of Health for England and Wales on their Change4Life health education campaign due to conflict of interests.



Picture 7: The Danone logo



Picture 8: Mocking of the Danone logo by Baby Milk Action

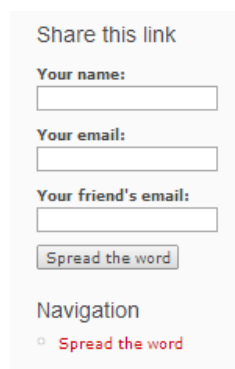
The picture represents a distortion of the Danone logo (Picture 7): the word “Danone” has been changed to “Danono”, with the last “no” in red, and the red curved line underneath the brand, which is usually pointing upwards, as to represent a smile, has been turned upside down, resembling a sad face (picture 8). The use of analogies mocking brand and multinationals’ logos is also in line with Krishnamurthy and Kucuk (2009) study, confirming the use of marketing speech (visuals in this case) on this type of websites.

As stated earlier, colours also play a very important role in triggering emotional responses in the visitors. Labour Behind the Label is the only website that uses short-wavelength colours such as blue and green. While the other two websites decided to use red as their main colour. Although it is impossible to establish the reasons behind this decision without asking them directly, overall they both create a stronger first impression, slightly more aggressive and almost more violent even. Especially the Baby Milk Action website, with its dark red and black logo, and dark red header and side bar for navigation appears almost slightly intimidating.

#### **5.4 Engagement on the websites**

The second question aimed at finding out how rhetoric on activists’ websites is used to encourage visitors to engage and get involved with their causes. According to Taylor *et*

*al.*'s last dialogical principle, engagement is created through the presence of tools, such as surveys and message boxes, that allow visitors to express their opinions, get in touch with representatives of the activist group and request regular updates (Taylor *et al.*, 2001, p.271). Obviously, the mere presence of these tools does not necessarily imply that visitors will engage with the website and get involved in their activities. However, making them easy to find on the websites, making them stand out from the rest of the text or making them easy, intuitive and fast to use could enhance their persuasiveness. The analysis of the three websites selected has identified an overall general lacking of encouragement towards visitors to get them involved and engaged. Only rarely visitors are explicitly invited to join the ongoing campaigns, to take part to events or to get active. For instance, there is one sentence in the entire No Sweat website that calls for action: "Come and join us, help us, get active!". On the Labour Behind the Label a "contact us" section is completely missing, with no possibilities in the entire website to leave a comment, express an opinion or get in touch with other website users. Only one e-mail address and a telephone number are available. The same is true for the Baby Milk Action website, with the only difference that here donations are quite encouraged through sentences such as "please click the donate button below" and "one pound ... can make a big difference". They also offer visitors the chance to "spread the word" by e-mailing the website to their friends (picture 9).



Share this link

Your name:

Your email:

Your friend's email:

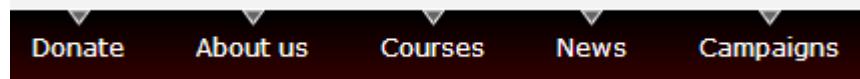
Navigation

[Spread the word](#)

Picture 9: "Spread the word" button on the Baby Milk Action website



However, overall in any of the websites are there any slogans or catch phrases. Sections to donate or take part in their actions are available on all websites, but they are not more visible nor do they stand out from the rest or the text (pictures 10 and 11), with the exception of the Labour Behind the Label website, in which those buttons are pretty big and colourful and therefore quite eye catching (picture 12). The language and the structure of the website do not direct visitors immediately towards these sections.



Picture 10: "Engagement" buttons on the Baby Milk Action website

[Donate to No Sweat](#)

Help No Sweat change the world, only quicker...

Picture 11: Donate button on the No Sweat website



Picture 12: "Engagement" buttons on the Labour Behind the Label website

Moreover, none of the websites encouraged visitors to get in touch with them or to write and share their opinions. To be precise, two out of three websites did not offer the possibility for visitors to interact in any way in the first place. The first website does

create the possibility for interaction, although it does not necessarily encourage it through language. Links to social media profiles (when existing) are barely mentioned on the websites and require some time and effort to be found: visitors are not encouraged to visit their social media pages, or to get in touch with them through social media or even to spread the word around about what they stand for.

## **5.5 Rhetorical patterns**

Logistically, all websites analysed look a lot like blogs. They all provide with plenty of information for the visitors, who can deepen their knowledge about the different topics presented in the websites. This could be a sign that their main goal is actually to raise awareness and make people aware of what the real price of what we buy is. Providing with so much information and external links to bigger organisations also makes them more reliable and credible, which ultimately is what may convince people that something is wrong and it is time to make a change, thus persuading them to actively get involved. The choice of a blog-like webpage could also suggest that activist groups are very reactive to the current trends within the world wide web and keep up to date with what people like as to be more appealing to them. In fact blogs have been considered a very popular tools for publishing on the Web in the past decade (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005, p.3). Another pattern common to the three websites is the general lack of aggressive language towards their targets and more in general a lack of a direct attack against a specific brand. These websites seem to be targeting more a general attitude, such as the exploitation of workers in developing countries and the use of aggressive law-violating marketing strategies to sell products, rather than making names and pointing out specific multinationals. This might not draw as much attention on them as if they were explicitly attacking a big and well known corporation, however, it may have a more persuading effect on people: people buying and wearing Nike shoes

daily will not donate money and take part into a campaign against Nike and would probably feel directly attacked. But if they were informed that corporations manufacturing shoes (Nike being one of them, but not the only one) do not grant their workers with basic safe working conditions or a decent salary, this could trigger empathy in the visitors who might eventually decide to support the activist group's work. A third common pattern deals with the visuals on the websites: the general tendency seems to be that of not having many pictures. This rather surprising choice could be due to the fact that these activist groups do not possess pictures (for example to show evidence of the terrible working conditions of the workers) or it could be a thought out choice of not displaying such pictures. Exposing visitors to a too high number of such "heart-breaking" images might make visitors doubt of the truthfulness of their stories: readers might feel like the situation is being exaggerated to persuade them, a sort of marketing move to get money from people, rather than a representation of a real situation. This might be the reason why the majority of images present on this websites are mocking of famous brand logos distorted in some ways. This allows visitors to create an immediate parallel with something that they already know (a brand), without necessarily making them question whether the cause they are fighting for is real or an exaggeration of reality. The parallel is created because these websites target western audiences, and more specifically audiences that are most likely already interested in these topic, since people do not just end up on such websites by mistake, therefore are aware of these brands and recognise their logos.

To sum up, it seems the websites' strategy is to persuade visitors to get involved in their cause. The strategy is developed and implemented through rhetorical tactics: persuasion is pursued by raising awareness about a specific topic or condition, by not making people feel guilty about their purchase choices (specific brands of food and clothes), and lastly by not exaggerating the situation they are depicting, thus avoiding a "too-

marketing-like” website. It is then clear that the hype around the Internet and social media is, in some cases, just not there: some websites are a lot more mundane and simpler than what people would expect, either because of financial reasons or voluntary choice, as discussed below.

## **6. Discussion**

The analysis of the three websites confirmed two of the three dialogic principles identified by Taylor *et al.* (2001) in their study, precisely the ease of interface and the usefulness of information. On two websites information was easily retrievable, confirming the first principle, while the second principle was confirmed by the presence of a section dedicated to explaining the vision and mission of the organisations, details on how to become members and to make donations and the presence of a logo that will be remembered by visitors. However, the third principle, the dialogic loop, was almost completely absent. None of the websites offered a chance for visitors to leave public messages, interact with other users or express their opinions. Only the first website presented visitors with the opportunity to take part into a poll, thus expressing their opinion, and to create content for the website, at least in theory, since the link is blank.

Therefore, the analysis of the three cases selected partially conforms with their findings, highlighting how activist organisations are not using the full potential of their websites to engage visitors and create interaction. Overall, it is clear that these type of websites rely on the pathos aspect the most, as “playing” with visitors’ emotions and empathy is what ultimately gives them the highest chance to persuade people to get involved. Credibility also plays an important role into persuading people to support their cause,

even though this aspect could be further enhanced, for instance through the presence of some experts' opinions. Given the interactivity of web pages and the easiness of use of menu bars, the logistical arrangement of the information provided probably does not affect the persuasiveness of the messages, still remaining an important aspect to keep in mind while designing a website.

The hero identity identified by Cherrier (2009, p.189), can be found, more or less subtly, through all websites. In fact, all of them propose values such as defending human rights, granting equality to all workers, and in general fighting for more fairness, all of which are in contrast to their perception of current society. The project identity is lacking, as the websites do not propose a way of repositioning consumers or, on a more general level, individuals in society. They do not offer a way for people to free themselves from brands and multinational, they simply shed light on their lack of responsibility.

The websites analysed present similarities in their choice of rhetorical strategies, such as the use of analogies to create a connection in the minds of the visitors with the multinational that they are targeting, the use of a rather neutral and objective language, that makes them sound more credible, and the choice of a rather simple layout, that makes it easy to retrieve information and navigate the site. However, the websites appear visually very different from each other and do present some differences as well. One reason behind this could depend upon the availability of financial resources. The No Sweat website is run completely by volunteers and represents a smaller, less known association. On the other hand, the Labour Behind the Labour website "has been produced with the financial assistance of the European Union", as they state on their home page, while activists working on the Baby Milk Action website are paid a salary derived from what they raise with membership fees, their online shop and donations,

clearly indicating that these two associations are bigger and better known. This could, at least partially, explain why the first website looks more neglected: the volunteers taking care of the website do it presumably exclusively out of passion and in their spare time, if they have any. Moreover, they might not be professional web designers, nor employees within the field of communications. In the other two cases, taking care of the website is a proper job, with dedicated hours and a salary. Although it does not constitute a solid proof that the people responsible for the websites work within public relations or communications, it is still their job, therefore, it is rather safe to assume that they are somehow qualified for it. On the other hand, it is also possible that a rather plain and not flashing website is actually a studied move and strategy: since they run on donations and invite people to donate money to their causes, it is only fair that they actually use that money towards their causes rather than to produce a perfect website. A very well designed website, too professional looking, might actually trigger the opposite reaction in the viewers, discouraging them to donate, if they get the feeling that their money is being used to improve the website rather than to help the social cause in question. The size of the associations and the financial resources available to them could also explain the presence or absence of other social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Since they require less time to be taken care of and do not entail any costs, they might be preferred by smaller groups that lack time and funds, whereas bigger associations that can afford a website prefer to focus on it. However, the absence of social media could also depend on the challenges that an organisation faces when it decides to be present on different platforms: it becomes more difficult to control campaigns and coherency (Bennett, 2003, p.145), and it requires much more time and effort to make sure that coherency is created throughout all the platforms.

Relying on their websites to attract potential visitors and supporters, activist groups need to make sure that their websites are up-to-dated and working at all times. Broken

links might not affect the credibility of the website or the organisation itself, however, it could give the impression to the viewers that the activists behind the website are not passionate or into their causes enough to dedicate some time to their online spaces, thus discouraging engagement and involvement. This works against their main motivation for having a website in the first place.

## **7. Conclusion**

The aim of this thesis was to examine the characteristics of the rhetoric employed by anti-corporate activists, in particular on their websites. Firstly, it was established that both activism and public relations share some common goals, such as raising public awareness, creating and maintaining relationships with their publics, and influencing public opinion to bring about a social change (Merkelsen, 2011, p.130). They also share some means to achieve these goals, such as creating campaigns to publicise issues (Bennett, 2003, p.150), lobbying and communicating relevant information to their publics. Moreover, this connection has been confirmed by the analysis of the chosen websites, which presented these four points as their mission and vision.

The analysis of the selected websites has identified some differences but also some similarities in the choice of the rhetoric adopted by activist groups. All websites present a similar structure, similar neutral language and a similar rather plain aspect, although the use of colours and pictures is slightly different in each website. Plenty of information is presented to support their causes, as well as a lot of links to external websites of similar organisations and campaigns, although there is an overall lacking of interviews with relevant people and experts that might have enhanced even more their credibility. The language used is not aggressive, but rather tries to create empathy with

the visitors. Another strategy common to all websites is that of using pictures that create immediate analogies in the visitors' minds with famous multinationals' logos. Social media platform do not seem to be quite established yet as a way to spread their messages, and overall interaction is not quite encouraged. This last point also partially confirmed Taylor *et al.*'s last principle of dialogic relationship building (2001): the technical aspects required to build interaction are partially met, except for the presence of comment boxes or surveys, which would allow visitors to express their opinion. However, overall, engagement is not encouraged throughout the websites. Their other two principles, the ease of interface and the usefulness of information, were confirmed by the fact that all websites were coherent in their messages and easy to navigate, and most important information was retrievable directly from the website, while plenty of additional information was provided through external links to similar associations and groups.

Moreover, this study supports the findings of both Cherrier and Krishnamurthy and Kucuk's studies (2009): the first one only partially, as the hero identity was identified in all the three websites, while the project identity was lacking. The latter study was confirmed through the presence in all websites of easy-to-understand language and marketing speech, represented in our case by the presence of distorted brand logos.

Therefore, as far as the first question is concerned, the main common rhetorical strategies used by activist groups on their websites are: an easy layout of the home page, which facilitates the navigation and persuades visitors to stay on the website; the choice of a clear, neutral, and easy to understand language, which makes it clear to the visitors what the activist group stands for and what the possibilities of getting involved are; the presence of external links to similar organisations, groups and campaigns, which enhances their credibility and positions the activist group within a bigger cause; the creation of analogies with famous multinationals' logos, which establishes an



immediate parallel between the organisation's goals and their target, and makes it easier for visitors to remember the activist group and their website; and the creation of a feeling of working together and joining forces to achieve a common goal, which helps persuading people into getting involved, or at least would get them interested, in their causes.

As far as the second question is concerned, visitors are not really encouraged to get involved and engaged in the websites and with the activist groups. The websites are not very interactive, the sections dedicated to actions, campaigns, and donations are present in all websites, but do not particularly stand out. Overall, visitors and their attention are not necessarily directed to these sections. Possibilities of interaction are nonexistent, as it is not possible to leave messages, participate in discussions or express opinions.

These findings could benefit the field of public relations, as organisations and public relations agencies could use some of these strategies for their own benefit. For instance, they could use a more neutral and less marketing-style language, which would make them sound not one-sided and hence more credible; they could enhance their credibility by providing with more information on their websites and increasing their transparency; or they could even decide to prevent being attacked by these groups in the first place, by being more open about what they do and how they do it, and maybe even try to collaborate with this activist groups.

## **7.1 Further research**

This thesis could constitute a starting point for future research. Interviews with representatives of these organisations could be set up to analyse even further some aspects of the research: for instance, why social media are not used, given their financial benefits and their ability to spread messages around the world. Moreover, a deeper and much more detailed research could be carried out to investigate the reasons behind such

plain websites, not colourful and lacking “heartbreaking” pictures. It could be interesting to research activists’ websites maintaining a rhetorical approach, but analysing for instance organisations operating within the same field (food, clothing, environment), to see whether other patterns could be identified. It could also be interesting analysing and comparing the rhetoric of activist groups with that of corporations, to see what they have in common and how they differ from each other. Another interesting aspect would be analysing and comparing a big activist organisation such as Greenpeace with a smaller and less known one, to investigate to which extent size and popularity of activist groups influence their choice of strategies.

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