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Lush or Flush?

A multimodal analysis of how brands can drive
brand polarisation through communication strategies

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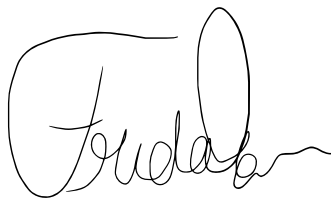
Foreword

As the turn-in of this thesis marks the end of our three-year journey as strategic communication students, we have reached a significant milestone in our academic and intellectual growth. Notably, this thesis has opened our eyes and unlocked a new perspective on the everlasting question: What is strategic communication?

With that said, we wish to direct our immense gratitude to Asta Cepaite Nilson, who has not only facilitated a deeper understanding of this question but also for her brilliant support as we delved into the newly emerging phenomenon of brand polarisation. Your engaging and uplifting supervisor sessions have been instrumental in shaping our research journey.

Lastly, we hereby confirm that both authors contributed equally to conducting this research project.

—
Lund, May 18, 2024



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Abstract

“Lush or Flush?”

This thesis analyses what brand communication practices, strategies, and actions could create conditions and drive a polarising nature in brands. This was achieved by conducting a multimodal analysis applied to the cosmetic brand Lush. Recognised for its bold sociopolitical stances, the *Votes for Animals* and *ESC Big Tech* campaigns illustrate how Lush is an exemplar for exploring a brand’s potentially polarising nature. Despite the rising prominence of brand polarisation in academic discourse, current literature predominantly adopts a consumer-centric perspective. Thus, this research adopts a brand-centred approach, using a theoretical framework that integrates brand activism as a prerequisite to understanding the conditions under which brands could generate brand polarisation. The drawn conclusions of this study suggest that Lush employs identification and provocation strategies to drive diverse opinions towards the brand, thus creating conditions for a polarising nature. Importantly, we found that Lush’s authentic activism serves as a requirement for the brand to manage these communication strategies. Lastly, this thesis contributes to the understanding of how strategic communication initiatives can impact brand polarisation, emphasising the importance of communication strategies in shaping consumer perceptions and behaviours to reach its mission.

Keywords: Brand polarisation, brand communication strategies, brand-centred perspective, brand activism, sociopolitical initiatives

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Sammanfattning

“Lush eller Flush?”

Den här studien utforskar vilka varumärkespraktiker, strategier och handlingar som kan skapa förutsättningar och driva en polariserande natur inom varumärken. Detta uppnåddes genom att genomföra en multimodal analys på skönhetsmärket Lush som är igenkända för sina vågade sociopolitiska ställningstaganden. Därför utgör Lushs kampanjer *Votes for Animals* och *ESC Big Tech* exempel för att utforska ett varumärkes potentiellt polariserande natur. Trots varumärkespolariserings ökade uppmärksamhet i akademisk forskning antar aktuell litteratur främst ett konsumentcentrerat perspektiv. För att få en ökad förståelse för varumärkespolarisering antar denna studie istället ett varumärkescentrerat synsätt där vi integrerar teorin brand activism för att förstå under vilka förhållanden som varumärken kan generera varumärkespolarisering. De dragna slutsatserna av denna studie föreslår att Lush skapar förutsättningar för en polariserande natur genom att använda identifierings- och provokationsstrategier för att väcka olika åsikter kring varumärket. Studien fann även att Lushs autentiska aktivism agerade som ett avgörande krav för varumärket att hantera dessa kommunikationsstrategier. Slutligen bidrar denna forskning till förståelsen för hur strategiska kommunikationsinitiativ kan påverka varumärkespolariseringen och betonar vikten av kommunikativa strategier för att forma konsumentuppfattningar och beteenden.

Nyckelord: Varumärkespolarisering, varumärkeskommunikationsstrategier, varumärkescentrerat perspektiv, varumärkesaktivism, sociopolitiska initiativ

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1. Introduction

“What are your thoughts on Lush?” You probably think this is an unlikely conversation starter – it doesn’t cross your mind that many people may have strong feelings about fun and colourful bath bombs.

1.1 Background

Ever since the cosmetic brand opened its first store in 1995, Lush has actively been fighting against animal testing in an effort to improve cosmetic science, making the brand known for its natural, creative, colourful, and cruelty-free products (We are Lush, n.d.). Just like how consumers can follow their noses to a Lush store down the street, their advocacy for various sociopolitical issues is equally recognisable, akin to their unmistakable fruity and luscious scent. The brand's commitment to activism has progressed beyond solely addressing animal rights to encompassing a wide array of sociopolitical concerns. Lush's inclusive approach to addressing these issues is evident in its campaign archive, where the campaigns *Votes for Animals* and *ESC Big Tech* serve as prime examples of its expansive activism (We are Lush, 2022). The brand’s strong foundation of core values and beliefs is highly notable, regardless of whether you walk past one of its 886 shop windows or visit its website. The statement *“We can’t keep quiet about the things we care about”* is frequently recurring, and Lush ultimately states that *“We are campaigns”* (We are Lush, 2022).

By publicly advocating for a diverse set of sociopolitical issues, Lush will inevitably receive scattered responses from its consumers. Diverse values and beliefs regarding political stances are frequently characterised as having a polarised nature, involving two opposing opinionated camps (Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016). In discussing the phenomenon of polarisation, it has been predominantly researched and established within the domain of political science. Levin et al. (2021) explain that there have been historical fluctuations in polarisations at all levels of our society. Specifically, polarisation is commonly seen and discussed within and among nations and peoples, emphasising opposing societal issues and ideological beliefs. Therefore, when discussing and contemplating the concept of polarisation, we often associate it with national politics, such as Republicans versus Democrats in America, or anti-vaxxers versus pro-vaxxers during the Covid-19 pandemic (Levin et al., 2021).

In contrast to polarisation in political science (Levins et al., 2021), researchers have recently begun to establish the phenomenon within the field of branding and communication; *brand polarisation* (Osuna Ramírez et al., 2019; Mafael et al., 2016; Monahan et al., 2023). Borrowing the term from political science allows researchers to examine and explore the puzzling nature of brands that adopt both lovers and haters within their business. This puzzling nature described is what today's researchers conceptualise as brand polarisation. Due to its new emergence, brand polarisation as a theoretical field is still vague and under-researched. Lacking operationalisation, we don't know much about the conditions that foster brand polarisation nor the effects of being a polarising brand (Osuna Ramírez et al., 2019).

Continuously when discussing conditions conducive to brand polarisation, attention must consistently be directed towards the organisation's communicative practices. What are they doing and how are they doing it? Therefore, theories within branding are found necessary to support the understanding of how communicative choices and activities may drive, support, or create conditions for polarisation. Notably, researchers within branding literature have drawn attention to brand activism; a risky marketing tactic that involves taking a public communicative stand on social and political issues (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Moorman, 2020; Ciszek & Logan, 2018).

Brands taking a bold stand have never been more divisive; for instance, Iyer and Yoganarasimhan (2021) highlight Nike's "Believe in Something" campaign which elicited strong reactions across racial and political spectrums. Aligned with their initial opinions of the stand, consumers tended to express heightened emotions, resulting in a campaign marked by highly polarised responses (Iyer & Yoganarasimhan, 2021). However, prior research has yet to establish causality between brand communication strategies and the emergence of conditions creating brand polarisation. To delve deeper into our interest in brand polarisation, integrating brand activism could offer a potential extension to our understanding of the phenomenon.

To circle back to our initial conversation starter, "*What are your thoughts on Lush?*", you might find that this question had more layers than you initially thought. Presumably, these feelings stem deeper than merely not enjoying their products, opening up a new arena of wonders. Why would people have extreme feelings about a company that sells bath bombs? What has Lush done to provoke extreme feelings? Is it all about timing their campaigns with a current agenda and riding a societal wave? Or are they excelling in their visual marketing and wordplay? To map out our research contributions to the theoretical field

of brand polarisation coupled with its relevance for strategic communication, we will define this study's research problem, purpose, and research questions below.

1.2 Problem Definition

Brand polarisation is an emerging research topic with an increasing number of reports (Osuna Ramírez et al., 2019; Osuna Ramírez, 2020; Lou et al., 2013; Monahan et al., 2023; Rozenkrants et al., 2017; Rudeloff & Amin, 2023; Iyer & Yoganarasimhan, 2021), indicating an expanding field. While interest in the phenomenon appears to be rising, nuanced research to operationalise and validate its dimensionality remains lacking (Osuna Ramírez et al., 2019). Therefore, our study addresses an identified research gap concerning the inception of a polarising brand, defining the initial development pathways and factors contributing to the conditions for brand polarisation.

It has become evident to us that existing research has exclusively focused on studying behaviours solely from a consumer perspective (Osuna Ramírez et al., 2019; Rozenkrants et al., 2017; Monahan et al., 2023; Rudeloff & Amin, 2023). Specifically, the authors have examined how consumers choose to engage, behave, and interact with polarising brands, resulting in consumer-centric conclusions. Ultimately, this has resulted in significant attention to the impacts that strong consumer emotions of love or hate can exert on a brand.

However, little to no research covers what brands do to foster or drive such strong emotions (Osuna Ramírez et al., 2019). In light of our curiosity about further understanding and expanding brand polarisation, we suggest that it is important to introduce a brand-centred approach when studying the phenomenon. Specifically, incorporating what brand communication practices, strategies, and/or actions could be related to brands' polarising nature.

Given the background of our research gap, we recognise the necessity of incorporating brand-centred theoretical concepts to facilitate more nuanced conceptualisations of brand polarisation. Therefore, we consider the theory of brand activism appropriate for further exploration into what types of communicative initiatives may engender divisive opinions. This establishes a vital linkage to strategic communication, investigating whether specific strategic communicative initiatives contribute to factors for polarisation.

Additionally, we have found that current research lacks practical implementation of the phenomenon. Thus, we find the need to move away from theoretical hypotheses by

applying the theory to a tangible matter. Although some studies have exemplified the phenomenon, these have solely focused on the polarised nature of brands such as, McDonald's, FaceBook, and Microsoft (Lou et al., 2013; Osuna Ramírez et al., 2019). Subsequently, this gives a vague perspective of brand polarisation, implying that the concept explicitly applies to corporate giants. Hence, we also see the need to examine a diversity of brands.

We propose that one way of unlocking a more holistic approach to brand polarisation is through a strategic communication angle. Zerfass et al. (2018) conceptualise strategic communication as “*the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission*” (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 487). Moreover, this study handles this definition from the perspective that brands can purposefully work with their communication in a digital arena to achieve polarisation. Ultimately, this study will treat brand polarisation as a sub-field to strategic communication to both strive for more robust validation of brand polarisation and contribute to new insights about brands’ digital communicative practices within the strategic communication domain.

1.3 Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to examine brand communication strategies and practices that could drive and create conditions for a polarising brand. In investigating how brands can build polarisation, we will analyse how Lush’s brand practices are reflected in their campaigns, *Votes For Animals* and *ESC Big Tech*. Through adopting theories within brand polarisation and brand activism, this study aims to analyse how the campaigns’ visual and textual elements could infer the inception of brand polarisation. Hence, the goal of the study is to illustrate what communication strategies Lush employs to build polarisation within its brand.

1.3.1 Limitations

We wish to clarify that this study is rooted in a brand-centred approach, meaning consumer behaviours, attitudes, and actions associated with Lush will not be taken into consideration when conducting the analysis. Further, it’s vital to address that we do not draw conclusions regarding whether Lush is a polarised brand or not. To specify, the study will exclusively examine if Lush contains and/or adopts characteristics and factors that could potentially create conditions for a polarising brand.

1.3.2 Research Questions

RQ1: What communicative strategies does Lush employ to create conditions for brand polarisation?

RQ2: What visual and textual elements seen in the chosen campaigns are Lush using to drive a polarised brand?

The remainder of the study is dispositioned as follows: First, we report what is known about brand activism and brand polarisation in the existing literature. This leads us to the development of a theoretical framework where the typology of brand activism and drivers of polarisation are at the core. The methods used to collect and analyse the data and findings are presented next, followed by a nuanced analysis of our research questions. Lastly, we highlight the research contributions of this work to the literature on brand polarisation and strategic communications, as well as directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

This section presents previous research on brand polarisation relevant to the thesis. Firstly, we review definitions of brand polarisation and polarisation in general and identify theoretical gaps in the current literature. Then, we provide a brief overview of what is known about the phenomenon, focusing on the existing literature's consumer-centred approach.

2.1 Moving Towards a Definition of Brand Polarisation

Brand polarisation as a theoretical field has newly emerged, and increasing numbers of reports on the subject imply that the field is expanding (Osuna Ramírez et al., 2019). Nevertheless, Osuna Ramírez (2020) states that there is still limited available research, with most existing literature mainly focusing on analysing the concept of polarising brands and polarising products. The term polarising products refers to “*whether some people strongly like the product and other people strongly dislike the product*” (Rozenkrants et al., 2017, p. 759). Research has shown that consumers find products with high rating distributions to be more desirable since it is a way for self-expression to tell who we are and simultaneously tell who we are not (Rozenkrants et al., 2017). Additionally, Lou et al. (2013) were one of the first publications within our reach to draw attention to the concept of brand polarisation. However, with closer examination of the authors' statement of making the most of a polarising brand, the main focus is on creating polarising products. Ultimately, the concept of polarising products is transferred to the concept of polarising brands. More recent research (Mafael et al., 2016; Osuna Ramírez et al., 2019; Osuna Ramírez, 2020) has not yet agreed on a definition of brand polarisation, implying the concept is under-researched and lacks a clear definition.

To understand brand polarisation, one must look at the definition of the noun polarisation itself, coupled with more established research on polarisation. Firstly, Oxford Learner's Dictionaries defines polarisation as “*the act of separating or making people separate into two groups with completely opposite opinions*” (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, n.d.). Secondly, political science is one of the fields in which polarisation is more distinctly defined. The most frequent definition of polarisation is described as an intense ideological disagreement where the difference between opposing viewpoints stems from conflicting ideas (Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016). In this ideological disagreement, through which polarisation

occurs, people undergo a self-categorisation process. Hoffarth & Hodson (2016) depict this process as a way to align themselves with a particular ideology and widen the gap to opposing groups, as well as strengthening one's chosen ideology. Similarly, Endres et al. (2021) illustrate how Americans' identification as Democrat or Republican extends beyond mere political affiliation and becomes a central part of their self-identity, drawing association to social identity theory. With partisanship in the US becoming more divided, researchers shed light on the effects of in-group bias, which entails favouring one's own party while simultaneously devaluing the opposing party – an occurrence known as affective polarisation (Endres et al., 2021).

In summary, one can conclude that extensive research within the field of political science has thoroughly explored the definitions and complexities of polarisation (Osuna Ramírez, 2020). However, current definitions of polarisation in a brand context have yet to fully recognise the individual complexities of brands, coupled with the complexities inherent in polarisation itself. Below, we list existing research definitions of the brand polarisation phenomenon.

Definitions of Brand Polarisation

- D1: *“A number of well-known brands are not only loved by many consumers, but also hated by a sizeable portion of the population and are thus termed polarizing brands”* (Monahan et al., 2023, p. 1).
- D2: *“Brand polarisation occurs when a specific brand possesses an ample group of consumers expressing emotions on the positive extreme of the consumer-brand relationship (love), and a substantial and contrasting group of consumers on the opposite end of the emotional scale (hate).”* (Osuna Ramírez, 2020, p. 27).
- D3: *“Brand polarization is defined here as an affective phenomenon where beliefs and emotions of a significant number of people induce a simultaneous move to the extremes involving passionate positive and negative feelings and convictions towards the brand, like-minded consumers and opposite-minded consumers.”* (Osuna Ramírez et al., 2019, p. 620).

As seen in the definitions above, brand polarisation is continuously characterised with strong similarities to the definition of the noun polarisation – two groups of completely opposite opinions, namely either loving or hating a brand passionately. The recurrent approach in the definitions and existing literature of polarising brands is clearly centred toward the consumer

perspective with a focus on consumer behaviours. To move the research forward, Osuna Ramírez et al. (2019) explain that “*the concept of brand polarisation requires a robust operationalization and validation of its dimensionality*” (Osuna Ramírez et al., 2019, p. 627). In order to achieve a nuanced understanding, it is important to shift focus from the consumer perspective to a more brand-centred approach. Thus examining what polarising brands do to create these extreme emotional attachments (Osuna Ramírez et al., 2019). In conclusion, based on our examination of existing brand polarisation research, it is evident that the field is underexplored, highlighting the necessity for a more varied research methodology. Specifically, this involves recognising and analysing a wider range of brands, brand practices, and polarising contexts. These approaches are relevant to further developing and legitimising the field, not least following how current consumer brands advance in their organisational practices.

2.2 What is Known About Brand Polarisation

Traditionally, a brand is a symbol that represents a company, product, or service, encompassing its reputation and unique attributes to differentiate in the market and increase purchase intentions (Osuna Ramírez, 2020). However, Osuna Ramírez et al. (2019) explain that consumer brands have evolved beyond mere facilitators of product recognition and transactions; they now function as relationship partners. In today’s society, consumers ultimately form emotional attachments to brands, striving to develop interpersonal-like connections with them. Additionally, Osuna Ramírez (2020) describes that the relationships consumers develop with brands vary in terms of strength (weak to strong) and valence (positive to negative). Brands with high dispersion in consumers’ expressed emotions, meaning having consumers that strongly love and hate the brand, imply that the brand is polarising, also known as *brand polarisation* (Lou et al., 2013). In previous literature, one can identify recurring examples of highly considered polarising brands, such as McDonald's, Starbucks, and Facebook. Opposingly, examples of brands with low polarisation are Amazon, Intel, and FedEx (Lou et al., 2013; Osuna Ramírez et al., 2019).

2.2.1 Brand Love & Brand Hate: The Extreme Emotions of Brand Polarisation

Brand polarisation as theory and practice has predominantly been examined from a consumer-centric viewpoint, distinguishing positive and negative consumer-brand relationships (Osuna Ramírez et al., 2019). Similarly, prior research commonly and

recurrently refers to the terminology *brand love* and *brand hate* to explain consumers' deep emotions towards brands (Monahan et al., 2022). In discussing previous brand polarisation literature, researchers illustrate the typically conceived impression that negative feelings towards brands (brand hate) are thought of as “bad”, resulting in poor image and reputation amongst consumers (Osuna Ramírez et al., 2019). Moreover, Osuna Ramírez et al. (2019) problematise this conception, showing that negativity towards a brand can represent an opportunity rather than a disadvantage when issuing brand polarisation.

Monahan et al. (2022) support this problematisation, explaining that the most hated brands are often also coinciding with the strongest, most highly recognisable and most loved brands. This paradox suggests that brand love and brand hate can co-exist within the same brand, creating the studied phenomenon of brand polarisation. Furthermore, Monahan et. al (2022) explain that brands with a polarising nature face various positive outcomes, including leveraging marketing efforts. More specifically, this entails utilising consumer hate and turning it to the brand's advantage. This concept is also referred to as *hate-acknowledging advertisement* (HAA), defined as a brand's open acknowledgement and embracing of being hated by a proportion of its consumers. Additionally, favourable outcomes related to HAA include ad credibility, brand trust, and positive word of mouth (Monahan et al., 2022). In addition to this, Osuna Ramírez et al. (2019) highlight further potential benefits for brands with a polarised nature relating to brand strategies. To specify, identifying and clearly defining a group of lovers and a group of haters, allows organisations to evaluate their development and implementation of suitable and effective brand strategies. Ultimately, previous research mutually agrees that being a polarised brand can offer various advantages for obtaining differentiation and segmentation, allowing them to capitalise on polarisation.

3. Theoretical Framework

This section presents a nuanced description of theories and perspectives relevant to answering the thesis's research questions. Firstly, the theoretical field of brand activism is mapped out along with explanatory lenses as to why brands choose to engage in political activism. Next, the typology of brand activism is introduced with descriptions of the four different forms of brand activism. Lastly, perspectives related to brand polarisation are presented, including the social identity theory as well as strategies related to brand polarisation.

3.1 Brand Activism

Brands taking a bold sociopolitical stand is termed *brand activism* (Rudeloff & Amin, 2023; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Earlier, organisational practices related to corporate social responsibility (CSR) have been a way for brands to stand out in a segmented marketplace. However, Rudeloff & Amin (2023) state that in today's society, consumers are showing an increased interest in sociopolitical issues, which has resulted in brands holding a basic requirement to show interest and awareness of societal or environmental issues. Hence, CSR is no longer suitable for building a distinctive brand image but rather a norm and standard for brands to follow. Brand activism can, therefore, be seen as a natural evolution of CSR, which Vredenburg et al. (2020) explain as an emerging marketing tactic by taking a public stand on controversial sociopolitical issues.

With big corporations' increasing influence in today's society, Barnett et al. (2020) explain that people turn to corporations to address social concerns since these brands often hold more power over our society than governments. In other words, consumers expect brands to be involved in progressive or conservative issues that lack consensus (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Further, Moorman (2020) explains that examples of such political topics could be transgender rights, gun control, or climate change initiatives. In turn, when brands frame controversial sociopolitical issues of public interest, they become actors in society's political arena. In summary, brand activism occurs when public speech or actions related to bold sociopolitical issues are made on behalf of a corporation using its own brand (Moorman, 2020).

3.1.1 Brand Political Activism Lenses

Brands hold different reasons for engaging in political activism. Moorman (2020) uncovered several *brand political activism lenses* that guide brands' decisions for political activism. Each one of these lenses serves as a perspective to understand a brand's beliefs, roles, risks, and company responsibilities that relate to the extent to which companies engage in activism. We choose to draw attention to the following lenses: *brand authenticity view*, *corporate citizen view*, *calculative view*, *brands as educators view*, and *political mission view* (Moorman, 2020). Below, we address the lenses separately. Importantly, one should keep in mind that they overlap with each other, and brands can have multiple lenses that guide their political activism.

Beginning with the most accepted lens in the marketing community, *the brand authenticity view* implies that brands should only be political if they can do so genuinely and consistently with their target markets. Marketing leaders are often concerned about maintaining brand authenticity when engaging in political activism. Hence, the perspective also highlights why some brands opt out of political activism due to the risk of negative associations with their brand image (Moorman, 2020).

Another accepted and established perspective in the corporate realm is *the corporate citizen view*. This perspective highlights a brand's motivation to engage in political activism due to its societal responsibility to contribute to a better world (Moorman, 2020).

While political activism can be an opportunity for differentiation, Moorman (2020) explains that some brands' political activism is completely driven by "wins" in the marketplace. This perspective is called *the calculate view* and sees political activism as a game to generate new segments or improve brand image. Importantly, this perspective also comes with risks of being perceived as inauthentic. However, compared with *the brand authenticity view*, the wins in the game justify brands' engagement in political activism.

Corporations can also captivate a leadership position and use their marketing ability to teach consumers new ideas and behaviours. This perspective guides brands into *the brands as educators view* where the goal is to shift consumer preferences to bring social change (Moorman, 2020).

When a brand has a founding premise of being an educator for social change, it often intersects with *the political mission view*. Namely when political activism and social change are the brand's core and purpose. Hence, products and services are only tools for reaching its political mission. Moorman (2020) explains that some companies are born from a political

mission, while others evolve into this position. In other words, brands that are guided by *the political mission view* see political activism as more than a marketing strategy; it is their business strategy.

3.2 Typology of Brand Activism

When integrating the theory of brand activism into our theoretical framework, it is essential to distinguish the diverse approaches brands employ to incorporate activist marketing messages into their organisational strategies. Firstly, Vredenburg et al. (2020) draw attention to a spectrum of activism through a *typology of brand activism*, highlighting how, when, and if brands are engaging in sociopolitical issues. Specifically, the typology aims to determine different forms of brand activism by considering the alignment of four brand characterisations: (1) *purpose and values-driven*, (2) *contested, controversial and polarising sociopolitical issues*, (3) *progressive and conservative stances*, and (4) *messaging and brand practice*. Ultimately, this framework is found relevant since Vredenburg et al. (2020) explain that authentic brand activism (an alignment of all four characteristics) lays the foundation for the greatest potential in achieving social change and acquiring brand equity.

The first characteristic, *Purpose and values-driven*, relates to a brand's purpose being rooted in its core values. Consequently, a brand is motivated not only by profit but also by its role in advancing broader public interests and societal objectives. Secondly, Vredenburg et al. (2020) highlight *contested, controversial and polarising sociopolitical issues*, meaning brands are opting to, and are at ease with, the idea of alienating certain consumers by getting involved in divisive sociopolitical issues. Continuously *progressive and conservative stances* illustrate a brand's establishment of progressive and/or conservative opinions while believing their engagement will benefit society. Lastly, *messaging and brand practice* entails brands moving beyond mere advocacy or messaging and includes aligning with corporate practices that uphold the brand's purpose and values. Depending on how these four characteristics interplay and align with each other, Vredenburg et al. (2020) define four distinct forms of brand activism, contributing to a comprehensive typology. Below, we present each form to illustrate different ways brands engage in activism.

3.2.1 Silent Brand Activism

As addressed before, Vredenburg et al. (2020) state that brands engage in brand activism when integrating sociopolitical causes into their core mission or strategic direction. Yet, some

brands may opt for a more discreet approach. This is what Vredenburg et al. (2020) refer to as *silent brand activism*. Silent brand activists tend to operate quietly behind the scenes, focusing on long-term prosocial corporate practices that are inherent to their way of operating and closely aligned with their purpose and values. However, despite their involvement in contentious issues, silent brand activists often wield less influence in the marketplace due to their low activist marketing messaging. In other words, silent brand activists successfully align characteristics (1), (2), and (3) but fail to incorporate their messaging and brand practices (4). Thus, Vredenburg et al. (2020) suggest that brands in the silent category have the least risk when entering the activist marketing messaging arena, as they already possess prosocial brand purpose, values, and corporate practices to align with their messaging. This alignment serves as a crucial initial step toward authentic brand activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

3.2.2 Absence of Brand Activism

Brands that have not adopted prosocial corporate practices, a prosocial brand purpose and values, or those not utilising activist marketing messaging fall into Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) category of *absence of brand activism*. Hence, such brands obtain none of the four characteristics. More often than not, brands operating without any form of activism tend to be industries that have yet to depend on engaging with sociopolitical issues to ensure their brand legitimacy, e.g. B2B companies. Vredenburg et al. (2020) suggest that this is because industries of this kind have traditionally not been associated with such matters, as consumers do not expect their involvement. However, one may need to acknowledge the changing societal norms, evolving marketing strategies and anticipations of brands taking a stand. Consequently, as brand activism is increasingly anticipated and even demanded, brands in the absent activism category would benefit from seeking ways to incorporate prosocial values and practices.

3.2.3 Inauthentic Brand Activism

As opposed to *absence of brand activism*, this category of brand activists predominantly engages in activist marketing messaging, communicating their support and stance on sociopolitical issues. However, Vredenburg et al. (2020) point out that these messages are not aligned with the brand's purpose and values since the corporation does not actually engage in prosocial organisational practices. Thus, inauthentic brand activists acquire two out of four characteristics, namely (2) and (4). Consequently, such brands fall under the perception of not

being genuine in their activism, also called woke washing. As addressed earlier, transparent brand behaviour and engagement in sociopolitical issues are increasingly anticipated among consumers, which simultaneously increases the risk for brands in this category. Specifically, inauthentic brand activism could result in negative brand equity through unbeneficial brand associations and, nonetheless, making misleading and substance-lacking claims. Vredenburg et al. (2020) conclude that even if a brand communicates a strong activist message amongst a large audience, it can not be considered authentic if it is not supported by prosocial brand purpose and values coupled with prosocial corporate practices.

3.2.4 Authentic Brand Activism

As opposed to the previously mentioned categories, *authentic brand activism* is when the brand achieves a truthful alignment of all four characteristics. In other words, its brand purpose is embedded and derives from its core values and is visible in its activist messaging to support the brand's overall corporate practices. When brands engage in *authentic brand activism*, their interest in social change is seen in all parts of the organisation's practices. In particular, Vredenburg et al. (2020) explain that *authentic brand activism* is superior to other forms of brand activism, as it serves as a vital trigger for social change. Not to mention, it delivers the greatest brand equity outcomes. By credibly, consistently, and genuinely signalling the corporation's position on a sociopolitical issue it can lower consumers' information costs and justify their choice of consuming the brand. Correspondingly, consumers view the brand as delivering added value by being ethical and true to its values. Brand equity is thus delivered by consumers holding positive associations about the brand and responding with favourable actions.

As addressed before, Vredenburg et al. (2020) describe that one of the requirements for brand activism is that corporations are involved in issues that do not have a consensus in society, often determined by political ideology, religion, and other beliefs. Hence, *authentic brand activism* may be a risk of losing current stakeholders and attracting new ones. To understand and legitimise the potential risk, Ciszek and Logan (2018) highlight more clearly what this risk entails. When addressing controversial issues, the organisation is aware that some of its stakeholders will not agree with their standpoint and will not act as loyal supporters. However, this loss can still be legitimised due to obtaining more supportive and loyal stakeholders who believe in their purpose and values. In summary, their corporate practices, purpose, and values can, therefore, be justified because they serve as a unique marketing strategy to build brand equity and drive social change (Ciszek & Logan, 2018).

Further, Vredenburg et al. (2020) call attention to factors that can either enhance or undermine the strategic impact of *authentic brand activism*. Previously, CSR practices served as a means for brands to establish points of differentiation. However, due to CSR becoming the norm, corporations today rather seek brand activism to build brand equity. Yet, the authors point out the potential pitfalls of brand activism if the strategy walks in the same direction. Vredenburg et al. (2020) emphasise the concept of *optimal incongruence* to avoid the risk of consumers perceiving *authentic brand activism* as commonplace.

As more brands adopt brand activism, congruence – meaning a match or alignment between a brand and its key associations, might not be sufficient to capture consumer attention and engagement. Therefore, Vredenburg et al. (2020) propose brands with *authentic brand activism* to explore sociopolitical issues that are moderate and “optimally” incongruent with their brand image. Since consumers in today’s society expect a certain base level of activism, it can be beneficial for brands that hold authentic reputations to experiment with causes that extend their brand activism. As opposed to congruent relationships, incongruency is more noteworthy and interesting, promoting deep processing in consumers’ minds. Such a pairing that adopts *optimal incongruence* will stimulate more intense reactions and might deliver greater brand equity from one’s *authentic brand activism* (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

3.3 Brand Polarisation

As mentioned in our literature review, brand polarisation is yet not clearly defined (Osuna Ramírez et al., 2019; Osuna Ramírez, 2020; Monahan et al., 2023). However, we have chosen to use the third definition listed in the literature review – “*Brand polarization is defined here as an affective phenomenon where beliefs and emotions of a significant number of people induce a simultaneous move to the extremes involving passionate positive and negative feelings and convictions towards the brand, like-minded consumers and opposite-minded consumers.*” (Osuna Ramírez et al., 2019, p. 620) – since it encompasses a more robust understanding of the phenomena by incorporating the affective dimension while capturing the intensity of emotions.

3.3.1 Self-identification Within a Brand

In order to explore conditions for the inception of a polarising brand, we also see the need to draw attention to how brands can utilise concepts of consumer behaviours. Osuna Ramírez et al. (2019) argue that the extreme feelings involved in brand polarisation closely

align with Tajfel's (1974) *social identity theory*. The theory implies that an individual's self-esteem increases when they can identify with members similar to themselves while distancing from rivals or opponents. Consequently, similar dynamics can be found in brand polarisation, wherein lovers and haters of a brand tend to align with like-minded others (Osuna Ramírez et al., 2019). Further, Jungblut and Johnen (2022) explain that when brands increasingly choose to take a stance on polarising political issues, consumers also increasingly choose to support or oppose the brand. Ultimately, Osuna Ramírez et al. (2019) imply that brand polarisation manifests a self-categorisation process among individuals, increasing the feeling of belonging to a specific group.

Tajfel (1974) contends that initially, groups are formed as a common shelter for their members, allowing for deeper relationships wherein individuals can find belonging. This approach can be extended to brands, which serve as a safe space for consumers by facilitating conditions for identification. Additionally, Osuna Ramírez et al. (2019) draw attention to the obscure behaviours individuals might show as a result of the intensity of social identification with a brand and against the ones opposing it. These intense emotions may foster rivalry, enhancing the individual's self-expression through negative word of mouth of detractors and intergroup stereotyping to increase the perceptions of public collective self-esteem and in-group distinctiveness. The salience of social identification delineates a clear "us versus them" dynamic. The relationship between social identity and self-categorisation within brand polarisation implies an affective nature of the phenomenon and underscores the emotions inherent in these dynamics (Osuna Ramírez et al., 2019).

3.3.2 Drivers of Brand Polarisation

A brand that evokes both intense love and hate among consumers possesses various potential advantages, including leveraging marketing efforts, enhancing ad credibility and brand trust, generating positive word of mouth, and enabling effective brand strategy development and implementation (Osuna Ramírez et al., 2019; Osuna Ramírez, 2020; Monahan et al., 2023). If a brand demonstrates a significant level of polarisation, Lou et al. (2013) propose two brand strategies to capitalise on polarisation to the brand's advantage.

Firstly, Lou et al. (2013) clarify that brands often hold extreme opinions because they do what most of us do not. Instead of attempting to mitigate negative sentiment, the authors suggest the tactic of *poke the haters*. The strategy implies that brands should intentionally provoke detractors by engaging in behaviours or actions that deliberately antagonise certain segments of the audience. In fact, the strategy can generate buzz and strengthen a brand's

bond with its most enthusiastic consumers. Consequently, the defence mounted by these supporters often influences neutral consumers to align themselves with the brand, transforming them into loyal supporters (Lou et al., 2013).

Coupled with the strategy of *poke the haters*, Lou et al. (2013) also propose brands to *amplify a polarising attribute*. The authors explain that sometimes, polarisation is created due to a single characteristic of a specific product, service, or within the company. The brand should therefore embrace the point of differentiation of the characteristic instead of seeking to neutralise its polarising nature. As a result, the strategy can bolster and increase loyalty among consumers who love the specific characteristic (Lou et al., 2013).

In the event when a product or brand isn't polarised by its nature, Lou et al. (2013) also highlight two tracks of introducing polarisation as a marketing strategy: *drive a wedge in the market* and *launch a provocative ad*. In order to create polarisation, brands cannot "be for everyone". Hence, to create polarisation brands must target a specific consumer segment. By adopting different positioning and messaging that resonate strongly with their chosen audience segment, they can potentially alienate others. Furthermore, brands can employ controversial and provocative advertising campaigns with the goal of extinguishing a certain share of their viewers. Thus deepening the gap between loving supporters and hating detractors (Lou et al., 2013).

4. Methodology

This section first presents the thesis's scientific approach along with motivations for adopting a qualitative research strategy. Secondly, we describe the chosen multimodal analysis and motivations for its relevance to answering the research questions. Moreover, our empirical material and sampling method are presented. Lastly, the thematic analysis of the material is explained, followed by a reflection of the quality of research.

4.1 Scientific Approach

Since this study aims to conduct a nuanced examination and provide an in-depth understanding of brands' communication strategies and practices related to the inception of brand polarisation, a qualitative research strategy is found suitable. Schreier (2012) explains that a qualitative methodology allows researchers to study the interpretation and handling of symbolic material such as verbal data, visual data, and artefacts. With a fundamental interest in the underlying meanings of Lush's verbal, textual, and graphic material, the qualitative research approach allows us to move away from general conclusions, measurable data and large sample sizes. Due to the qualitative approach focusing on the varying interpretations of concise material and the changing meaning of data (Schreier, 2012), the strategy allows the study to provide in-depth explorations of social meanings. Using a qualitative method is, therefore, suitable as it enables us to interpret and find a cultural understanding of Lush's brand practices seen in the campaigns.

Aligning with the qualitative research strategy, our study adopts a social constructivist perspective, meaning that the process of gaining knowledge is socially and culturally constructed (Bryman, 2018). Hence, this study sees meaning as shaped by individual social activities, allowing us to integrate subjective understandings of Lush's brand practices with established theories to guide our research contributions. Accordingly, the study's epistemological stance posits that knowledge is acquired through interpretations of personal experiences while adopting an ontological constructivist stance that views social phenomena as shaped by representations and subject to continuous revision (Bryman, 2018).

In this study's research process, we have employed an abductive approach involving a dynamic interplay between theory and empirics (Flick, 2018). Given the nascent nature of brand polarisation as a theoretical field, we draw upon existing theories from brand activism

to elucidate the missing facts presented in our research gap. The abductive approach allows us as researchers to re-think, revise, and challenge theoretical assumptions regarding brand polarisation. Importantly, Flick (2014) contends that the abductive approach may yield multiple legitimate explanations from the analysis. To ensure a robust conclusion from our analysis, we have therefore engaged in thoughtful consideration and thorough examination while embracing theoretical pluralism. Moreover, theoretical pluralism has underscored the understanding that knowledge is socially constructed and studying brand polarisation may require multiple accounts.

4.2 Multimodal Analysis

When examining how various communication initiatives are created and how they convey a shared meaning, it is crucial to employ a methodology that enables an analysis of individual elements both separately and collectively. Hence, the multimodal analysis is suitable. Eksell and Thelander (2014) explain that brands more commonly use multiple communication forms, such as language, graphics, and sound, in a single communication initiative. These choices of design are critical to understanding the complexity of how real-world interactions are mediated through various communication elements in digital technologies (Flewitt et al., 2019). Continuously, the multimodal analysis not only takes different modes of communication initiatives into account but also has a strong focus on the effects of their interplay to create meaning and a strong message (Pauwels, 2012). Thus, the method clearly aligns with studies within branding and strategic communication since it identifies how a brand's values and practices are reflected in its strategic choices of elements used in its communicative material (Eksell & Thelander, 2014). By adopting a multimodal analysis, we can thus identify and explore Lush's strategic choices of textual and visual communication and how they collectively create conditions for polarisation.

To examine the relationships in various forms of communication, Eksell and Thelander (2014) explain that the analysis should explore the material's semiotic resources. A semiotic resource can be a word, body gesture, or graphical object that has its own potential to deliver meaning depending on its previous associations, individual characteristics, and possible areas of use (Eksell & Thelander, 2014). In this study, the communicative initiatives taken by Lush are analysed through the semiotic resources' verbal/written signifiers, colours, and composition. Next, we will concisely present the three chosen semiotic resources.

Firstly, the analysis of verbal/written signifiers involves explicit and implicit content in written or verbal utterances, such as opinions, word choice, and humour. The semiotic resource reinforces the understanding of culturally specific meanings and reveals insights into the sender's social background, beliefs, and intended audience (Pauwels, 2012). Additionally, understanding a brand's strategic choice of colours provides insights into how it desires to convey ideas, build relationships, and orient its stakeholders to its message (Eksell & Thelander, 2014). Lastly, analysing the material based on its composition advances the understanding of how the overall arrangement of elements contributes to the brand's communicative brand message (Eksell & Thelander, 2014).

4.3 Empirical Material and Sampling Method

This study's empirical material includes multimodal communication initiatives from Lush's campaigns *Votes for Animals* and *ESC Big Tech*.

The *Votes for Animals* campaign, henceforth referred to as VFA, depicts campaigners wearing animal masks while marching on Parliament to highlight the significance of animal welfare concerns. This campaign was launched in conjunction with the 2015 UK General Election in collaboration with other animal rights organisations to encourage voters to vote "ethically" with animals in mind (We are Lush, 2022). More specifically, the campaign aimed to "help inform the public on where their local candidates stand on the issue of animal welfare and to take this into consideration when voting" (We Are Lush, 2022). In particular, the retrieved empirical material from VFA includes a YouTube video along with five images from the campaign.

In conjunction with last year's Black Friday, Lush initiated and launched its latest campaign *ESC Big Tech*, henceforth referred to as ESC. The campaign aims to reduce surveillance advertising, manipulative algorithms, harmful content, and echo chambers (We are Lush, 2023a). In joint forces with the decentralised movement, *People vs Big Tech*, Lush is encouraging its consumers to consider the topic of Big Tech and raise money to control the abuses of Big Tech giants. The cosmetic brand further states that Black Friday is a time when such companies generate huge profits at the cost of peoples' personal data (We are Lush, 2023a). Hence their campaigning efforts during this time. Building on the cosmetic brand's anti-social policy, Lush signed out of Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and Facebook. Ultimately, Lush completely devoted its Instagram to the ESC campaign (We are Lush, 2023b). The retrieved empirical material from ESC includes Lush's nine Instagram posts and

the campaign's designated landing page. In a further attempt to encourage its consumers to engage in the campaigns, Lush has launched associated charity-aiding bath bombs dedicated to each campaign (Lush Upon a Time, 2015; We are Lush, 2023b).

4.3.3 Purposive Sampling Method

To gain nuanced and broad representations of Lush's communicative practices and initiatives, we searched for campaigns that reflect the cosmetic brand's diverse set of values and beliefs. Thus, this study adopts a purposive sampling method which entails a purposely selective data sample that is information-rich and relevant to the aim of the study (Flick, 2018; Schreier, 2018). In searching for suitable material, we wished to find one campaign that represented the core values of Lush and its origin: VFA. Further, we wanted to incorporate a current and relevant campaign, illustrating its diverse activism: ESC. When choosing these specific campaigns, we explored We Are Lush's campaign archive on its website. Campaigns proven to be low in analytical purposes, e.g. lacking in information or prescribed material, were passed on to include more information-rich campaigns. Instead of analysing several campaigns, we aimed to incorporate two campaigns with as much relevant, informative, and robust material as possible.

Theoretical sampling is inherent within the concept of purposive sampling (Flick, 2018), representing the method of gathering heterogeneous samples to gather theoretical insights simultaneously with the research process. In other words, our sample supports newer understandings of brand polarisation through continuous comparison between data collection, analysis, and theory.

4.4 Thematic Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis method wherein researchers read through a data set to identify recurring patterns in meaning and derive themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Hence, this study adopts the thematic analysis to find patterns of meaning in the chosen material and analyse what strategies coupled with visual and textual elements drive brand polarisation. To identify patterns of meaning, we started to map out what Eksell and Thelander (2014) call metafunctions to understand how the multimodal elements are intertwined in the material. More specifically, we analysed *the ideational function*; whether the resource represents something other than itself, *the interpersonal function*; what relation the resource creates with the receiver, and *the textual function*; how the overall representation

of the resource is connected (Eksell & Thelander, 2014). The tables showing the metafunctions of each semiotic resource can be found in Appendix 1-3.

Through mapping out metafunctions connected to each campaign, we were able to identify shared characteristics in our material, which were subsequently constructed into a set of codes to create themes (see Figure 1 below).

Theme	Codes
Sociopolitical stance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Education ● Controversy ● Black and white colours ● Lush's core
Identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use of first person singular/plural (you, we, us) ● Responsibility ● Familiar terms ● Emotions of humanity and compassion ● Reference political history
Provocation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Humour/satire ● Wordplay ● Call to action ● Black and white colours ● Serious tone ● Anger

Coding sheet, Figure 1

4.5 Quality of Research

The traditional criteria of validity, reliability, and objectivity are commonly used to assess research quality. However, Eksell and Thelander (2014) argue that they may not be suitable for qualitative research since the criteria orient toward a positivist scientific approach within quantitative methodologies. Given our study's grounding in a social constructivist perspective, the authors argue that these criteria should not be directly applied. Instead, we emphasise Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility and transferability, along with Korstjens and Moser's (2018) criterion of reflexivity, to ensure the study's trustworthiness.

To begin with, credibility is established through our collection of vast empirical material, providing plausible information about Lush's campaigns and communicative initiatives. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of how Lush's brand is conveyed through its brand communication practices. Further, Eksell and Thelander (2016) infer that transferability is impossible to achieve with a social constructivist perspective since reality is seen as a representation of our own personal experiences. However, by emphasising

theoretical pluralism and providing clear descriptions of our methodology, coupled with the context in which we examine brand polarisation, we enable readers to apply our findings to other scenarios. Lastly, reflexivity, as highlighted by Korstjens and Moser (2018), involves critical self-reflection by researchers throughout the study process. This is especially important due to the analysis is based on our interpretation of the material. Notably, the thematic analysis approach also supports an active process of reflexivity, where the researcher's subjective experience plays a central role in interpreting the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Hence, we limit our subjective values and political standpoints by continuously addressing our biases, preferences, and preconceptions when conducting the analysis. Importantly, we wish to clarify that our study was not conducted with the goal of serving objectivity since it was not achievable with our scientific approach.

5. Analysis

The analysis consists of three parts that present the study's identified themes: sociopolitical stance, identification, and provocation. The objective is to uncover how these themes are visible in VFA and ESC and what these entail in relation to Lush's communication strategies.

5.1 Addressing Sociopolitical Communication Initiatives

In the first part of the analysis, we investigate our theme of *sociopolitical stance* to understand Lush's sociopolitical activism and how this may create polarisation within the brand. Firstly, the analysis maps out Moorman's (2020) brand political activism lenses and how these are visible in the material to grasp what guides Lush's engagement in sociopolitical activism. Furthermore, we address Lush's form of brand activism through the typology of brand activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020) and how it contributes to the brand's overall strategy.

5.1.1 Lush's Perceived Responsibility

A motivation for brands to engage in political activism is due to their perceived societal responsibility to contribute to a better world (Moorman, 2020). Lush's responsibility concerning ethical digital rights and animal rights is clearly visible in both campaigns through their verbal/written signifiers and composition in the material. Hence, to lay the foundation for the ongoing analysis, we argue that Lush's overall involvement in sociopolitical issues needs to be seen through Moorman's (2020) brand political activism lens *corporate citizen view*. To specify, this lens illustrates the brand's core motivation in launching and driving the campaigns.

To begin with, Lush's dedication to educating its receivers on sociopolitical issues is an occurring aspect seen in the campaigns. Lush draws attention to the campaign's cause by captivating a leadership position and teaching its consumers about the issues' current state and urgency. Hence, implying that Lush's political activism is also driven by Moorman's (2020) *brands as educators view*. However, the teaching approach differs between the two campaigns. ESC entails a more fact-based and direct style, while VFA adopts an indirect teaching style by encouraging and informing the receivers to independently search for information (see quotes below). This perspective, evident in the verbal/written signifiers,

indicates that Lush recognises the information’s limited accessibility and thus assumes its responsibility to inform the receivers. Ultimately, *the brands as educators view* reflect Lush’s commitment to foster social change by consistently reminding and educating their audience about these concerns.

“If someone knocks on your door, ask them what they’re going to do for animals(…)” (Lush Archive, 2015).

–
“Here is what Instagram won’t tell you” (Lush, 2023).

Additionally, the composition choices within the ESC campaign serve to reinforce Lush’s teaching position further. Notably, in Figure 2, the statistic stands out significantly more than other elements while also entailing a dynamic motion, the percentage accelerating from 0 to 71 on the website. Eksell & Thelander (2014) contend that these composition choices imbue the statistic with meaning by reducing competition between other elements. Consequently, we infer that Lush perceives this as one of the pivotal components of their website and aims to captivate the audience’s attention to this aspect.

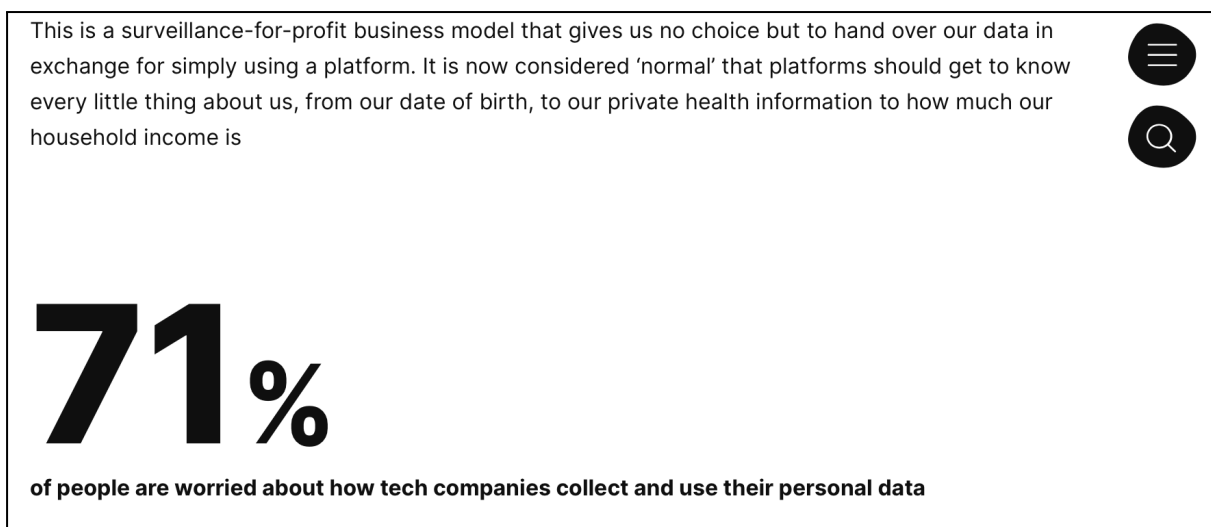


Figure 2 (We are Lush, 2023a)

With the *brands as educators view* in mind, we wish to circle back to Moorman’s (2020) *corporate citizen view* to further analyse Lush’s perceived responsibility. In particular, the brand’s eagerness to contribute to a better world is highlighted in the verbal signifiers in VFA by declaring their societal responsibility (see quotes below). By emphasising “us”, Lush clearly sets an expectation and demand on the brand to contribute to a better world for

animals. The meaning of incorporating a strong feeling of “us” will further be analysed in 5.2.2 *The “Us Versus Them” Dynamic*.

“Animals’ lives are controlled by the people and how they’re treated, how they live, and unlike us, how they die.” (Lush Archive, 2015).

–

“It’s up to us” (Lush Archive, 2015).

5.1.2 Activism at Its Core

Ensuring authenticity and a genuine approach is declared as the foremost crucial aspect for brands engaging in sociopolitical activism (Moorman, 2020). In analysing our sampled data, we draw attention to what elements could indicate Lush achieving authenticity in their communicative practices. Firstly, in the ESC campaign, Lush articulates its comprehensive dedication to addressing sociopolitical issues they deeply care about. However, upon closer examination of these statements, it becomes evident that this commitment extends beyond a single campaign but rather encompasses their organisational practices as a whole.

“We’ve been campaigning for human rights for over 25 years, and we believe that digital rights are human rights. We will always stand up alongside grassroots groups calling for action and actively campaigning for reform,” (Lush Archive, 2015).

–

“At Lush, we can’t keep quiet about the things we care about.” (We are Lush, 2023a).

Additionally, as found in the VFA campaign, Lush consistently refers to its enduring commitment to animal welfare, emphasised by its steadfast anti-animal testing policies and overall compassion for animals. Furthermore, it does not come across as surprising for Lush to create such initiatives as it strongly resonates with the brand’s core mission. Lush’s director and co-founder verbally articulates:

“For myself and the founders of Lush, we have been against animal testing and against the abuse of animals all our career, all our lives, that’s not going to change” (Lush Archive, 2015).

Through these written/verbal signifiers, Lush illustrates its longstanding commitment to addressing issues they care about, as seen in word choices such as *“all our career, all our lives”* and *“We’ve been campaigning for over 25 years”*. Importantly, they also emphasise that they cannot and will not cease to articulate their sociopolitical stance. Seen in *“We will*

always”, “*we can’t keep quiet*”, and “*that’s not going to change*”. Lush’s recurring and consistent word choices connected to its campaign motivations and brand purpose reflect a genuine and authentic-driven approach to its activism. This leads to our impression that *the brand authenticity view* guides Lush’s brand activism; meaning that the brand chooses to be political in its brand communication practices since they can do so authentically and consistently with their target markets (Moorman, 2020). Given this examination, we proceed to exemplify Lush’s authenticity further.

Another demonstration of Lush’s consistency lies in their colour choices. The brand is recurringly using a combination of black and white. Notably, Lush incorporates black and white elements in their brand logo as well as the majority of their packaging labels (see Figures 3 & 4). Similarly, we draw attention to their key statements seen in the ESC and VFA campaigns, designed in black and white (see Figures 5 & 6). Ultimately, we suggest that this design choice is consciously made to reinforce Lush’s values-driven brand core to their campaigns, creating a linkage between the recognisable logo and the campaigns’ communication messages. Additionally, the choice to exclusively compose the messages in black and white directs the receivers’ focus to the message in contrast to everything else (Eksell & Thelander, 2014). Lastly, this study presumes that Lush strategically uses black and white to underscore their persistent and thorough activist position by integrating them into their visual identity (logo and packaging) as well as their campaign messages (signs in VFA & Instagram posts in ESC).



Figure 3 (Lush, n.d)

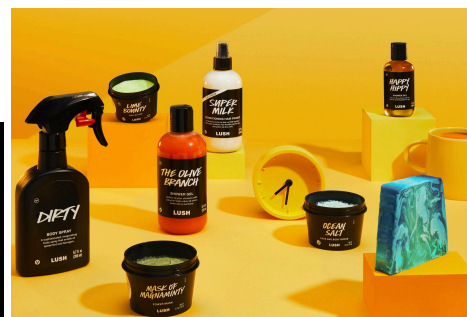


Figure 4 (Lush, n.d.)



Figure 5 (We are Lush, 2022)

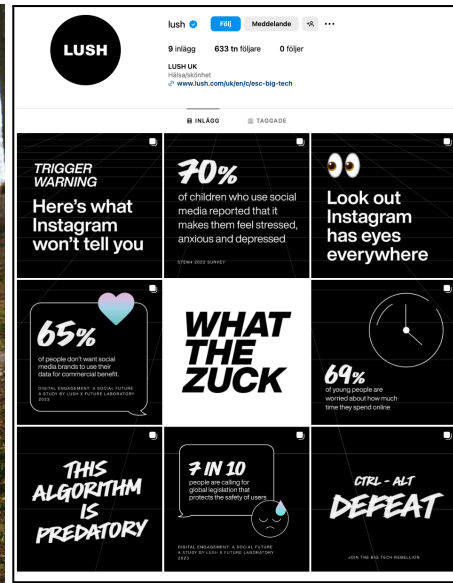


Figure 6 (Lush, 2023)

The narrative in the campaign's written/verbal signifiers, coupled with the black and white colour scheme, underscores that Lush's brand purpose is embedded within the campaigns and derives from its core values. Moreover, Lush's brand purpose is evident through the strategic selection of semiotic resources in its activist messaging, which aims to support Lush's overall corporate practices – bringing social change. Ultimately, this demonstrates their ability to "walk the talk" effectively by translating words into action. Thus, Lush's commitment to social change is apparent not only in the organisation's values but also in its brand communication practices in the campaigns. Therefore, we suggest that Lush effectively manages *authentic brand activism* and successfully aligns the four characteristics put forth by Vredenburg et al. (2020). The semiotic resources further illustrate that Lush does not engage in the other forms of activism, namely *silent*, *absence*, or *inauthentic brand activism*. Vredenburg et al. (2020) argue that these alternative types arise when brands do not embody or integrate all four essential characteristics in the typology of brand activism.

5.1.2.1 Moving Beyond Expectations

It has become evident to us that Lush continuously emphasises its deeply rooted compassion and concern for animals' lives, implying that its commitment to animal welfare is a well-known aspect of the brand among consumers. As previously addressed, brands profit by staying true to the position consumers are familiar with, suggesting that going beyond this position might have negative effects (Moorman, 2020). Consequently, brands often refrain

from advocating for issues that do not align with their core values, as doing so could be perceived as inauthentic.

In contradiction to this, Lush shows time and time again that they are not afraid of speaking out on a wide range of sociopolitical issues that may go beyond their primal interests. For instance, we suggest that Lush moves beyond consumer expectations (animal rights) by getting involved in issues regarding digital ethics, personal data and Big Tech giants, as seen in the ESC campaign. Continuously, statements such as “*We will always*”, “*we can’t keep quiet*”, and “*that’s not going to change*” indicate that Lush’s determination to contribute to “a better world” is of greater importance than the potential negative response or even loss of stakeholders. To exemplify this, we consider the visual difference between the two figures below. Given the depictions of animals, the black and white signs and the artistic style, we suggest that one could instantly assume Lush’s involvement with the first image (see Figure 7). Meanwhile, we propose that the second image (see Figure 8) is not as easily associated with Lush, given the tech-related symbols, colourful backdrop, and graphic style as it moves away from the perceived visual expectation of Lush.



Figure 7 (We are Lush, 2022)

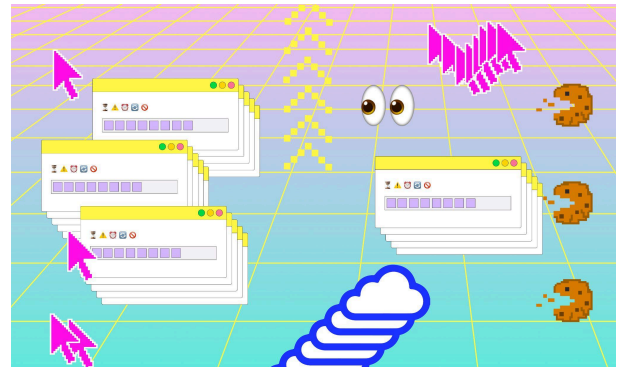


Figure 8 (We are Lush, 2023a)

As Lush exceeds its primal brand-core values and starts to walk in a more sparse direction in its activism, we assume that Lush adopts what Vredenburg et al. (2020) refer to as *optimal incongruence*. Hence, Lush’s involvement in diverse sociopolitical issues might create new opportunities for building brand equity. To illustrate, if Lush’s brand activism were solely focused on animal welfare, consumers would gradually lose interest and attention in its messages. Instead, integrating unique causes, even if they seem incongruent with the brand, proves to be more captivating and noteworthy as it promotes deep processing in consumers’ minds (Vredenburg et al. 2020). With campaigns like ESC, Lush effectively

advances their overarching mission of driving social change and making the world a better place.

Despite the potential risk of the campaign being perceived as unfitting or insincere, we suggest that Lush maintains authenticity due to their activist core, which compensates for any such concerns. Ultimately, Lush succeeds in upholding their deeply ingrained commitment to animal rights while simultaneously capturing the interest of consumers with innovative and unexpected causes. This ultimately establishes Lush's *optimal incongruence*, which is accomplished through its authenticity, enabling them to explore a wide array of issues that collectively align with the statement – “*We Are Campaigns*”.

We conclude that Lush effectively manages to stay true to their core values through which consumers are familiar, while simultaneously incorporating innovative and groundbreaking causes that extend the consumers' expectations, capturing their attention and creating buzz. Such a pairing that adopts *optimal incongruence* will stimulate more intense reactions and might deliver greater brand equity from Lush's authentic brand activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

5.1.3 A Marketing or Business Strategy?

As seen and presented in the analysis throughout *5.1 Addressing Sociopolitical Communication Initiatives*, Lush demonstrates a successful commitment to *authentic brand activism*. By aligning core values with messaging and corporate practices, Lush's brand communication practices serve as a trigger for social change (Vredenburg et al., 2020). The brand's foundational mission to drive social change, coupled with its visible political activism in core and purpose, underscores that Lush's brand activism is rooted in Moorman's (2020) *political mission view*. This commitment is detectable in their written/verbal signifiers, which consistently reflect a dedication that Lush is born from the political mission to make the world a better place for animals and humans. Notably, attention directed to Lush's products in the campaigns is non-existent, and no semiotic resources serve as product advertising. Hence, the priority on social change over product promotion emphasises Lush's strategic use of semiotic resources to bring the receivers' attention to the sociopolitical issues. Ultimately, this approach confirms *the political mission view* (Moorman, 2020), inferring that Lush sees its products as mere tools for conveying its political mission to its target markets.

Viewed through the lens of *the political mission view*, Lush's activism transcends mere marketing strategy to generate new segments or improve brand image. Unlike Moorman's (2020) *calculate view*, where brands engage in political activism primarily for the

potential benefits in the marketplace, Lush's activism originates from a bigger societal objective. In essence, we can draw the analysis that Lush's engagement in political activism is and has always been a part of its core, ultimately leading to the fact that Lush's brand activism is the brand's overarching business strategy.

5.2 Creating Conditions for Self-identification

In this second phase of the analysis, we delve into the theme of *identification* to uncover how Lush fosters interpersonal relationships in its campaigns, through which polarised camps are formed. By providing individuals with opportunities to be acknowledged and heard on behalf of the brand, Lush establishes favourable conditions for fostering identification with the brand, leading to the expression of both positive and negative sentiments (Osuna Ramírez et al., 2019). Throughout the ESC and VFA campaigns, Lush consistently endeavours to build interpersonal connections with its audience by strategically selecting verbal/written signifiers and colours complemented by the materials' composition.

5.2.1 Turning the Lens on "You"

To begin with, Lush consistently directs its communication toward the receivers by using first person singular in their verbal/written signifiers. This approach is more commonly found within the ESC campaign and signals a perception of compassion to the receiver. As the quote below shows, Lush uses "you" to articulate their ambition to see and care for the individual receiver. According to the *social identity theory*, raising attention to the individual and their perceived needs may increase one's feeling of self-esteem (Osuna Ramírez et al., 2019). Hence, the style of this written signifier reveals Lush's attempt to form a personal relationship with the people present on social media by emphasising the individual.

“(...)we're not talking about 'somewhere' or 'someone' else. We're talking about you (...)”(We are Lush, 2023a).

When highlighting the receiver's role in the issue it also brings attention to their individual meaning in the issue's broader picture. The use of metaphors combined with first person singular in the quote below illustrates Lush's optimism that the receiver can bring change through their own position. In particular, the feeling of responsibility is transferred to the receiver. This approach can be a way for Lush to motivate the receiver to see their societal responsibility in the issue. Similarly, as discussed in 5.1.1 *Lush's Perceived Responsibility*,

Lush uses the brand political activism lens *corporate citizen view* not only as a way to communicate their own beliefs, roles, and responsibilities but also as a tactic to motivate the receiver to take action (Moorman, 2020). By calling attention to the individual receiver, Lush is able to motivate the user's commitment and responsibility to personally invest in the cause.

"Don't lose your head in the cloud, There's a brighter future ahead." (We are Lush, 2023a).

5.2.2 The "Us Versus Them" Dynamic

In addition to creating a personal motivation through the use of first person singular, Lush mostly uses styles of first person plural to communicate belonging to a bigger community. The use of the pronoun "we" creates a different relation to receivers than "you" since it enhances the feeling of belonging to something bigger than yourself (Eksell & Thelander, 2014). The two quotes below represent Lush's usage of first person plural to symbolise a united force within the brand. By communicating Lush's shared dedication, they create an opening for other individuals to identify and join their beliefs. Drawing attention to the shared experience by employing phrases like "*we need*" and "*we will*" can ultimately boost an individual's self-esteem, encouraging them to voice their opinions in alignment with Lush and show support for the brand (Osuna Ramírez et al., 2019).

"We need a government who is going to be really concerned about animal welfare" (Lush Archive, 2015).

—

"We will vote for animals and common decency" (Lush Archive, 2015).

By emphasising a shared experience through a united community, Lush also distances themselves from others standing in their way to achieve social change. It is consistently seen in both campaigns how Lush strategically creates two opposing camps, heroes and villains, through their verbal/written signifiers. Examining the quotes below from this perspective offers the analysis the interpretations that the villains are: (1) in ESC, the Big Tech monopolies, such as Meta, and (2) in VFA, the political parties not acknowledging animal welfare. Similar for both campaigns is that Lush and its brand community are presented as the heroes.

"It's up to us" (Lush Archive, 2015).

—

Lastly, Lush promotes in-group favouritism through its distinctiveness in the “us versus them” dynamic. Ultimately, the material’s verbal/written signifiers and composition enhance the positive aspects and welcome receivers to engage in their campaigns while simultaneously turning their backs on the ones who chose to oppose.

5.2.3 Foster Familiarity by Recognition

In both campaigns, Lush alludes their communication to something recognisable to the receiver. Firstly, in ESC, the term “CTRL-ALT” is frequently used as a clear reference to the known keyboard shortcut (see Figure 10). Adverting to the digital world in its word choices creates associations that we, as receivers, should have the same control over our digital ethical rights as we have over what we choose to write in a blank document. Hence, the use of “CTRL-ALT” can also be viewed as a metaphor for taking back control from the Big Tech monopolies. Similarly, as the use of first person plural to embrace an “us versus them” dynamic, the use of familiar semiotic resources within the Big Tech domain can be connotated to the phrase “Big Brother is watching you”. Much like the universally accessible keyboard shortcut that allows anyone with a computer to delete unwanted content, digital resources controlled by major tech monopolies should similarly offer users the ability to control their personal information. Ultimately, the campaign questions the power structures and sets Lush as an antagonist to the Big Tech giants. Hence, using recognisable terms to foster familiarity with receivers opens up for identification with the ones that can recognise themselves as subordinate in these power structures.



Figure 10 (Lush, 2023)

Subsequently, VFA mimics the suffragettes' "Votes for Women" through the written signifiers, colours, and composition. By analysing Figure 10, it is clear that the two pictures obtain a similar dynamic. Firstly, we choose to bring attention to the written signifier "VOTES FOR ANIMALS" since it is the most prominent element in the picture. The word choice in the campaign is not only highly recognisable, reminiscent of the tagline used by the women suffragettes, but also the used font serves to establish a clear association between Lush's campaign for animals' rights and the suffragettes' march for women's rights. Moreover, Lush's choices of attire and colours in the picture are similar to those in the original photo. The natural and dull colours of the dress, along with the open and dark forest, connotates to an old-fashioned approach and transport the receiver to historical times. Hence, Lush's mimic of the suffragettes through the semiotic resources also serves as a metaphor for the fact that animals are voteless, just as women once were. Receivers who see this familiarity and can identify with the battle for women's rights may feel compassion for the message in the campaign. Hence, the recognisable expressions open up for identification.



Figure 11 (We are Lush, 2022; Wikipedia, 2024)

The old-fashioned aesthetic of the imagery, combined with the lack of bright and luminous colours, brings attention to the animals' vulnerable nature. Notably, the absence of urban landscapes adorned with neon colours or bustling crowds in the campaign serves to further enhance the feeling of being transported to the open nature. This vulnerability is amplified by the depiction of the forest, seemingly during autumn or winter, evoking associations with the cycle of nature, presumably dying nature. Usually, the idea of a forest connotes a green, bright, and leafy environment where the feeling of harmony is apparent. The campaign's environment is in visible contrast to this conception and instead depicts feelings of mystery and unhappiness. These strategic choices allow for identification for the receivers who feel strongly connected to nature and normally view nature as a lively and happy place. Enhancing the dark sides brings out a seriousness in the material and thus a seriousness in the animal rights issue. Moreover, depicting a half-human/half-animal further highlights the feeling of compassion for the issue. Depicting a feeling that we as humans are a part of the animals and thus a part of their nature. These strategic choices bring out a feeling of humanity, and receivers who usually see themselves as a part of nature may feel compassion for Lush's message and can, hence, ally with the material.

Giving recognition to the familiar expressions seen in ESC and VFA suggests a space for consumer self-identification with Lush, while simultaneously closing the door to those who do not recognise the underlying meanings. Ultimately increasing the sense of an in-group distinctiveness in which members understand the jargon, style of communication, and the foundation of the addressed sociopolitical issue (Osuna Ramírez et al., 2019). As a result, Lush effectively fosters familiarity in its communication by promoting in-group favouritism and thus increases the likelihood of finding belonging within Lush and opposition toward the out-group.

5.3 Provoking, Triggering, and Pushing Social Change

In this final section of the analysis, we will examine the theme of *provocation*. Drawing from strategies related to brand polarisation (Lou et al., 2013), the analysis can uncover what semiotic resources are seen in Lush's campaigns that could potentially drive diverse opinions. In delving deeper into what can drive polarisation, Lou et al. (2013) draw attention to the fact that provocation itself naturally stimulates high emotions. Lastly, the analysis addresses how the overall seriousness seen in the material pushes provocation and further enhances high emotions.

5.3.1 An Outside-the-box Strategy

As we approach the final stages of our analysis, we aim to delve deeper into the unique communication strategies employed by Lush in the ESC and VFA campaigns. Being a cosmetic brand rooted in activism, it comes as no surprise that Lush holds extreme opinions, as demonstrated throughout this study. Considering this, Lush proves its willingness to take actions that many businesses typically shy away from – doing what most brands do not.

Firstly, we observe Lush’s attempt to deliberately provoke reactions and emotions among their target markets by strongly expressing their disapproval of the Big Tech giant Meta in the ESC campaign. To illustrate, Lush openly opposes Meta in a humorous wordplay manner through one of their posts, questioning, *“What the Zuck—Happened to your digital rights?”* as a poke at Meta founder Mark Zuckerberg (see Figure 12 and quote).

“(…) keep us clicking and scrolling, even as they are spreading hate, lies and impacting our mental health (we’re looking at you, Meta).” (We are Lush, 2023a).



Figure 12 (Lush, 2023)

Similarly, Lush add *“What the Zuck are you waiting for?”* on its website, alongside an image produced by People vs Big Tech depicting the Meta founder holding a sign articulating *“I know we harm kids, but I don’t care”* (see figure 13). Lush also takes its messaging even further by signing out of its social media platforms and further asserts that they will not return *“until these platforms take action to ensure a safer user environment”*. We infer that the

aggressive while sarcastic tone evident in these statements aligns with Lou et al.'s (2013) *poke the haters* tactic, as Lush deliberately seeks to provoke Meta. Simultaneously, this approach could generate buzz and reinforce the bond with its most loyal stakeholders and those who are in agreement with their stance (Lou et al., 2013).



Figure 13 (We are Lush, 2023a)

Notably, we find this to be a rather bold poke, given that the Meta platforms belong to the world's most popular social media platforms. For Lush to put themselves against such an organisation in an alienating manner creates a feeling that one must choose their position – Lush or Meta. Similarly, this circles back to what is discussed in 5.2.2 *The “Us versus Them” Dynamic*. Ultimately, Lush deliberately puts itself at risk of being rejected by its consumers by them potentially “choosing” Meta. This alludes to what Lou et al. (2013) explain as one of the conditions for polarisation since brands cannot “be for everyone”. Thus, Lush’s use of wordplay and satire also hints at their attempt to *driving a wedge in the market*, consciously creating a space for both loyal supporters and detractors by targeting a specific consumer segment – those who agree with their viewpoints.

The tactic of *driving a wedge in the market* (Lou et al., 2013) is also visible in Lush’s timing of launching the campaign on Black Friday. Black Friday is commonly known as a popular shopping day, during which brands market highly promoted sales. While many brands may see this as a beneficial marketing opportunity to drive huge sales, Lush does the

opposite. Rather than promoting its products during this time, the cosmetic brand chooses to dedicate its marketing platform Instagram to ESC. Hence, we suggest that Lush is taking advantage of this day in a rather unusual way, choosing to drive its activist messaging instead of taking the opportunity to promote and sell bath bombs. The way Lush opposes Meta and the timing of the campaign ultimately illustrate an out-of-the-box strategy.

This study finds the strategy of the VFA campaign to be rather outside-the-box as well. Considering the campaign's imagery and pictures, we draw attention to the aesthetic of the animal masks (see Figure 14). From solely examining the design, one can note its solid, sharp and angular shape, depicting angsty eyes and the absence of smiling facial expressions. Moreover, we argue that this is a deliberate strategic choice for the campaign to be established in a frightening manner, as depicting the animals as fluffy, round, and cute wouldn't have the same effect. Thus, this strategy gives the impression of frustration in the cause, creating an opportunity for receivers to feel emotions of stress, uneasiness, and fright. Additionally, similar connotations are found in the verbal signifiers of the accompanying VFA's YouTube video. As seen in the quotes below, Lush stresses its found responsibility, but also everyone else's, to vote and make a change in the world by emphasizing that *"we get the chance"*. Once again, this brings a feeling of stress and obligation to take action in this matter.



Figure 14 (We are Lush, 2022)

“Only once every five years we get the chance to give animals a voice and I'm not going to waste mine.” (Lush Archive, 2015).

Continuously, the second quote is delivered in a bold and angry tone, directed at the government, insinuating that they are responsible for how animals die while making a comparison to human lives. Notably, the word choices “*how they die*” suggest conditions for strong emotions of guilt, anger, and melancholy, which insinuates one’s compassion with their stance. However, it is worth acknowledging the other side of the coin, where those who disagree could conceive this message as excessive, overdramatic, and ridiculous.

“Animals lives are controlled by the people in there (the government) (...) how they live, and unlike us, how they die” (Lush Archive, 2015).

In conclusion, it might seem uncommon, or even odd, for a cosmetic brand to intentionally evoke frightened emotions and provoke its consumers. However, in the case of Lush, this strategy appears to align with its brand purpose, fostering conditions conducive to achieving its mission of driving social change.

5.3.2 “*Seriously*” *Bringing Social Change*

As discussed above in the analysis, Lush expresses a clear feeling of anger in the campaigns. This anger and frustration over the addressed issues are enhanced by the direct call to actions, black and white colour scheme, and static composition. Collectively, the semiotic resources push the seriousness and urgency of the social change that Lush strives to achieve. Hence, we identify that in its communicative initiatives, Lush strategically chooses to embrace its activism characteristic. By highlighting Lush’s point of differentiation in the campaigns, we suggest that the brand capitalise on its activism by adopting the strategy to *amplify a polarising attribute* (Lou et al., 2013). Lush’s involvement in animal rights and digital ethical rights does not unexpectedly carry the risk of divisiveness, since we argue that activism connected to politics naturally should come with diverse opinions. Instead of seeking to neutralise its commitment to social change, Lush goes in the other direction and further amplifies its seriousness through its semiotic resources.

To begin with, we draw attention to Lush’s use of direct call to actions that give the impression of a tipping point directed at the receiver. To specify, until presenting the campaigns’ call to actions (for example, “*What the Zuck are you waiting for*” and “*It’s up to*

us”), receivers are primarily introduced to Lush’s frustration and advocacy for the issues. Hence, the call to actions act as a point of determination for receivers – join or discard Lush. Instead of merely adopting an encouraging approach in the statements, Lush embraces urgency, which further expresses its seriousness regarding the causes.

Further, we previously discussed the black-and-white colour scheme in which Lush effectively aligns its recognisable logo with the campaigns’ communicative messages. However, we would like to draw further attention to the feelings this attributes to the material. In visually analysing Lush’s colour choices, the material’s use of black and white hints that its sociopolitical messages are metaphorically just as black-and-white, limiting the room for interpretation. Correspondingly, the colour choices further illustrate Lush’s frustration with the past inadequate seriousness of these issues. For instance, the issues should be as unmistakable as a black-and-white subject: the equivalence of animal rights to human rights and the unethical aspect of Big Tech giants profiting from collecting individuals’ private data. From this perspective, the black and white colour scheme reflects that the issues must be taken seriously.

Lastly, the seriousness of Lush’s commitment to bringing social change can also be justified by the materials’ static composition in the campaigns’ imagery. The majority of the elements are not seemingly dynamic nor illustrate a form of motion, which further enhances a direct and consistent approach. Similarly to the black and white colour scheme, the static composition limits the receiver’s room for interpretation.

It is evident that Lush does not take these issues lightly and does not settle with a weak approach to its social change commitment. Notably, the brand is not afraid to take the extra step, as seen in the semiotic resources that further enhance Lush’s point of differentiation, as well as the signing out from Instagram or arranging a march on the streets of London. Hence, Lush further demonstrates its ability to “walk the talk” in its serious commitment to reach social change. By amplifying its activism, Lush can bolster and increase loyalty among consumers who agree with the standpoints. Furthermore, pushing the brand’s seriousness in its purpose can either attract or dissuade neutral consumers (Lou et al., 2013). Through its semiotic resources, Lush proves once again who its desired consumers are. Conclusively, the materials’ seriousness illustrates the idea that consumers must be prepared to go the same distance as Lush does.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This section discusses and concludes the key findings from the analysis and answers the study's research questions. Lastly, the research's contributions to the field of strategic communication and suggestions for future research are presented.

This thesis aimed to explore the inception of brand polarisation, more specifically, what brand communication practices, strategies, and actions could be related to a polarising nature of brands. The purpose was fulfilled by conducting a qualitative multimodal analysis of Lush's ESC and VFA campaigns. By examining the identified themes, *sociopolitical stance*, *identification*, and *provocation*, we were able to analyse the factors that could engender conditions for divisive opinions within the cosmetic brand. From our research, we have found that Lush primarily adopts identification and provocation strategies as a way to drive polarisation. In discussing, we chose to distinguish these two strategies as they contain different characteristics, each generating unique emotions resulting in different effects regarding receivers' impressions and opinions of Lush.

As stated in the study's problematisation, current research requires a brand-centred approach to enable conclusions regarding drivers of brand polarisation. Similarly, the body of the literature review recognised the dominance of consumer-centred approaches, focus on corporate giants, and the beneficial aspects of a polarised brand. Considering our research gap and curiosity to delve deeper into understanding brand polarisation, Lush served as an exemplar to examine the theories in practice, exceeding theoretical implications. Additionally, incorporating the theory of brand activism allowed the study to unlock the brand-centred approach due to its focus on brand communication practices. As demonstrated in the problematisation, this was a necessity to facilitate a broader conceptualisation of brand polarisation and an understanding of its potential drivers.

Firstly, the analysis presented identification as one of the strategies that could either reinforce the bond with loyal supporters or discard others. Pushing identification in communication practices will inevitably result in a divide between receivers who can and cannot identify with the brand's intended identifying elements. This state of possessing both like-minded consumers who embrace and appreciate the familiarity in the brand's communication practices, and opposite-minded consumers who reject and fail to comprehend

these practices, resonates with the definition of brand polarisation put forth by Osuna Ramírez et al. (2019). The identification strategy was predominantly exemplified in Lush's campaigns in two ways: establishing an "us versus them" dynamic and alluding to familiar connotations. Moreover, the analysis illustrated that the identification strategy was the most prominent in the VFA campaign. In essence, the choice of framing a united composition, dying nature, and alluding to a historical event collectively invited the receiver in a soft informative approach to join the fight against animal testing. Subsequently, these semiotic resources serve as identifying elements through which receivers find identification or not, resulting in a divide between appreciation and rejection.

Secondly, the study identified provocation as one of the strategies that could create conditions for deepening the divide between passionate positive and negative convictions for a brand. In essence, using a provoking strategy to convey one's messages naturally stimulates high emotions, especially as it is rarely seen in typical brand messaging. Hence, the tactic may resonate strongly with some receivers who appreciate the boldness and passion behind the messaging. However, it can also offend or even alienate those who perceive it as excessive or overly dramatic. This study especially finds this divisiveness of significance since it creates conditions for two camps to be established – a "love it or hate it" dynamic. Ultimately, the provocation strategy's ability to form extreme emotions of either love or hate strongly aligns with Osuna Ramírez et al.'s (2019) explanation of brand polarisation. This strategy was exemplified in Lush's campaigns in two ways: adopting an outside-the-box strategy and amplifying its seriousness to social change. The analysis showed that the provocation strategy was primarily seen in the ESC campaign due to its dominance of textual elements and black and white colour scheme. In particular, the textual elements' aggressive tone, use of satire, and most importantly, explicit articulation of opinions were enhanced by the colour scheme that created a bold and direct approach to join Lush's fight for social change. Ultimately creating conditions for feelings of both appreciation and offensiveness, resulting in receivers either loving or hating Lush's brand communication practices.

Importantly, we see that Lush's dedication to its sociopolitical stance stands as a crucial condition for managing these strategies. In analysing the two campaigns, it has become evident to us that Lush manages authentic brand activism through its purpose, values-driven brand core, and activist messaging. In the case of Lush, we infer that "walking the talk" is a qualifying factor in adopting identification and provocation strategies in the campaigns to drive conditions for brand polarisation.

As we conclude this discussion, we wish to revisit our initial question one last time: *"What are your thoughts on Lush?"*. Perhaps now, having engaged with this thesis, your response holds more depth. You might find yourself drawn to the brand's communication practices, experiencing feelings of compassion, appreciation, and love, or conversely, you might perceive its approach as overly dramatic, offensive, and ridiculous. Nonetheless, it is evident that Lush strategically employs provocation and identification strategies in its campaigns, aiming to evoke specific emotions in its audience. This deliberate approach creates a dichotomy in responses, creating conditions for the receiver to either love or hate their brand communication practices. In conclusion, the study's findings underscore how the utilisation of identification and provocation strategies in brand communication initiatives can serve as potential development pathways for brands to obtain a polarising nature.

6.1 Research Contributions and Directions for Future Research

This study delved into the under-research aspect of brand polarisation within a brand-centred context, offering a practical understanding of the early development pathways that could create conditions for brand polarisation. The research questions' attention to strategies seen in visual and textual elements enabled the study to fill the identified research gap concerning the emergence of a polarising brand. Specifically, this study contributes to the theoretical field of brand polarisation by illustrating how brands can drive polarisation by employing identification and provocation strategies in their brand communication practices. Additionally, handling brand polarisation in the context of brand activism invited brand-centric theories to the field. This serves as a vital step for future researchers since it has paved the way for further exploring and incorporating branding theories within brand polarisation, enabling brand-centred conclusions.

Moreover, this study contributes to the field of strategic communication, as the key findings indicate ways for brands to advance their digital strategic communication. While previous research has emphasised the beneficial aspects of being a polarising brand, this study positions the phenomenon within strategic communication. In essence, it illustrates how brands can build polarisation through strategically selecting strategies to convey their messages. Therefore, our study holds importance for researchers in strategic communication as it reveals insights into how brand polarisation can be seen as a mission that brands seek to fulfil through their purposeful use of communication.

Although this study identified identification and provocation strategies as drivers for brand polarisation from a brand-centred approach, more research regarding the inception stages of brand polarisation is necessary to credibly generalise the study's findings into the theoretical field. Additionally, the field is in need of longitudinal studies regarding various brands in different areas to develop a robust operationalisation. Similarly, the definition of brand polarisation, and what it entails to be a polarising brand, must be further explored and analysed to further conceptualise the field and validate its dimensionalities. Research may need to explore other theoretical fields addressing polarisation, such as within political science or behavioural psychology, to involve the inherent complexities of polarisation coupled with the individual complexities of brands.

This research was limited to the communicative initiatives presented in the campaigns without acknowledging Lush's broad range of products. Interestingly, future research could study if there is a connection between a brand's products and activist campaigns that further allude to one's brand management. Such research could focus on campaigns' potential effects on a brand's products and whether this could increase polarisation within a brand.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Multimodal metafunctions - *Verbal and written signifiers*

Metafunctions	ESC Big Tech	Votes for Animals
Ideational function	The constant use of humorous wordplay by using recognisable tech terms reflects a playful approach while addressing a serious cause.	Similarly, humour is integrated by stating, “Keep those badgers alive”, signalling a lighthearted but yet serious approach. Additionally, Lush draws recognisable textual parallels to the women suffragettes through the VFA campaign.
Interpersonal function	By personalising the messages through first-person singular, Lush creates a relationship with its receivers.	By recurrently referring to first-person plural (we, us) Lush attempts to create an united community with its consumers and general voters.
Textual function	Call to actions are recurrently used in the written signifiers to illustrate frustration in their political stance to promote action.	Word phrases dedicated to animal rights are frequently used in the written signifiers to illustrate compassion in their political stance to promote action.

Appendix 2

Multimodal metafunctions - *Colour*

Metafunctions	ESC Big Tech	Votes for Animals
Ideational function	The use of black and dark colours on Instagram signals power, unhappiness, hatred, and evilness. Meanwhile, bright and luminous colours on the landing page represent optimism, strength, and kindness.	Similarly, the black and dark colours used on the signs reflect power, unhappiness, hatred, and evilness. Additionally, the dull and blurry background pictures of the forest signal seriousness and mystery.
Interpersonal function	By combining and contrasting the use of black and white, the colours support a clear and strict message to its receivers, limiting the room for further interpretation. The bright and luminous colours on the banner create an inviting impression.	By combining and contrasting the use of black and white in the sign, the colours support a clear and strict message to its receivers, limiting the room for further interpretation. Other colours in the campaign are mostly dull and low in saturation, thus not signalling any specific interpersonal relationship to the receiver.
Textual function	The pervasive use of black and white provides clear guidance for its receivers, avoiding competition with bright and luminous colours. It conveys an overall	The widespread usage of black and white on the signs, coupled with the dull colours of masks and attire, provide an overall alarming, gloomy, and sad perception.

	serious and urgent perception.	
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Appendix 3

Multimodal metafunctions - *Composition*

Metafunctions	ESC Big Tech	Votes for Animals
Ideational function	The clearly framed composition on Instagram conveys clarity and structure, while the spacious composition of the banner and website represents openness and opportunities.	The images, composed of only three elements (environment, sign, and creature wearing a mask), create a spacious composition that symbolises mystery and vulnerability.
Interpersonal function	The banner greets receivers with a colourful composition of graphical tech-related, designed to catch their focus and interest.	By positioning the four creatures in the centre of the image against the open forest, receivers are able to direct their attention to the group and create meaning and identification.
Textual function	Several elements are perceived as roughly the same size, which makes them compete, but the integration of frames on Instagram and motion elements on the website guides the receiver to the most important parts.	The central positioning and significant size difference give the elements meaning. Further, ample space and size differences reduce competition between elements and bring harmony into the pictures.