Chapter 5

The Role of Consumer Activism in Sustainability Governance

Fatih Sahin[1]

Abstract

Consumer activism has shifted from the margins of market action to the centre of contemporary sustainable governance, serving as an informal but vital mechanism of corporate accountability for environmental, social and ethical practices. In this chapter we dwell on the political and ethical importance of everyday consumption in digital networked economies where formal regulation can all too easily fall behind corporate misconduct. Hence, consumer activism is not addressed as one phenomenon but as three logics at work, which work simultaneously. Exit-based activism refers to the use of punitive withdrawal strategies such as boycotts, anti-consumption and brand avoidance to impose material and reputational costs on offending companies. Voice-based activism can turn moral outrage into discursive leverage via digital platforms, petitions and collective mobilization to transform personal grievances into collective action. Loyalty-based activism turns these principles upside down, directing purchasing power to companies whose actions align with the ethical values of their customers. This leads to a green brand advocacy which supports value matching corporate behavior. The three modes share a common theoretical basis in signaling theory, social identity theory, social exchange theory, and the value-translation paradigm, but they differ in the behavioral patterns in which the paradigm manifests itself in response to antecedent contexts. The chapter argues that consumer activism is not a substitute but a complement to formal regulation. The continuing attitude-behaviour gap and the structural effects of cost, convenience and habit constrain the ability of market forces to substitute institutional regulation. Mutually limiting arrangements between consumers, corporations and policymakers might collectively increase transparency, mitigate greenwashing and enable long-term commitments that no single entity can maintain on its own. The chapter ends with implications for management practice, focusing on authenticity and dialogic interaction, and for policy design, focusing on transparency regimes, consumer education and incentive structures to convert diffuse consumer demand into systemic results.

1 Assoc.Prof.Dr., Bandırma Onyedi Eylül University, fsahin@bandirma.edu.tr, orcid.org/0000-0002-4760-4413

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1. Introduction

Society has moved through different historical paradigms from the Industrial Revolution to the postmodern era. The Industrial Revolution followed the Renaissance, shifting society away from the Renaissance's focus on art and toward material growth and mass production. Modern factories came into being due to the invention of technology and the conversion of natural resources into useful goods. Mass production and mass consumption flourished. In Renaissance society, humanism was the prevailing intellectual force and following era, in industrial society, however, material values, private enterprise, and open competition dominated economic life, with profit seeking becoming central, and parliamentary democracy and labor movements continuing to play important roles. The triadic approach to Masuda (1980)'s industrial and Renaissance society deals with consumption needs, individualism and physical effectiveness. As mass production and mass consumption continued to grow, society had more money and more free time. But this prosperity also generated a consumer culture of excess that increased the depletion of natural resources, polluted the environment and disturbed ecological balance.

The key factor of production has changed across historical transitions. In the agricultural era, the land was the main productive resource, in the industrial era, capital became dominant and in the post-industrial era, knowledge became the most critical factor of production (Sarlak, 2010). Communication networks and information technology have improved, accelerating the flow of knowledge. Information and data are both the input and the output of economic activity. This change has produced an information society, in which the logic of industrial material production has been replaced by the ability to produce and distribute information. These technological infrastructures have also changed the organization of work, facilitating the collaboration between geographically dispersed actors and increasing the importance of time as competitive advantage depends on the speed of information production and response. In this respect, globalization is widely recognized as being characterized by collaboration and time compression. As these conditions deepen, they generate co-operative forms of economic organization and raise the social contribution, participatory democracy, and social movements to the status of integral features of the epoch rather than accidental developments.

According to Bell (1973) the post-industrial organization of society around information, innovation and social control produces new social relations and institutional structures which require political management. In this sense, post-industrial society is supported by a strong infrastructure of public capital and knowledge-based human capital, and also promotes a voluntary civil society based on cooperation and social benefit. Masuda (1980) goes on to identify three interrelated features that characterize this type of society. As the constraints of the past are relaxed by computerization, knowledge production proliferates, community life becomes more dependent on voluntary participation, and individuals orient their lives towards self-actualization. Together these factors form the basis of what Masuda calls a high-welfare society. This is a qualitative break with industrial society. Industrial society was organized around material production; the post-industrial order is shaped by achievement, dispersed collaboration, and the effective use of information. A similar distinction is found in the relation between economy and environment. Industrial growth has always meant pollution and ecological disruption. The information society stresses production that does not cause depletion and that makes conservation central. Within this welfare-oriented framework, new priorities emerge as consumer protection, social welfare, and the expansion of leisure time.

Social and economic problems have become global concerns due to globalization. Climate crisis, social inequality, and ethical production practices are not just concerns of individual nations anymore but increasingly addressed on a global level. At the same time, rising stakeholder expectations and the growing power of digitally empowered consumers have raised expectations on responsible action. The renewed meaning of voluntarism here aligns with a wider social logic in which individuals and communities are increasingly viewing these problems as collective responsibilities. Therefore, consumer activism is an important form of action in contemporary society, which allows people to influence the behavior of companies and promote social change with their actions. In a globalized and digitally connected world, consumers can reward responsible companies, punish bad behavior, and pressure businesses to respond to climate, labor, and social justice concerns. Thus, consumer activism has emerged as a powerful form of collective action in modern society.

Subsequently climate change has been given a label that clarifies the reason it resists solutions. Levin et al. (2012) call this a “super-wicked” problem, and we are running out of time. But the people who made it are the same people expected to fix it, there is no authority that could compel a coordinated response, and policy continues to discount the future over reason. Furthermore, an increasing number of studies are treating global warming not as an environmental problem but as a sign of unequal responsibility, trying to interpret the crisis in the context of colonial modernity. The countries that built their economies on industrial expansion produced more than ninety percent of excess emissions while still being the least exposed to its worst effects. Seen this way, the crisis is a debt, run up over generations and owed by those who incurred it (Bhambra & Newell, 2023). Global mean temperature now sits around 1.3 to 1.4°C above the pre-industrial baseline, and the frequency of weather and climate disasters has risen about fivefold over the past five decades (WMO, 2021). For marketing and consumption, figures of this kind make a shift in priorities difficult to treat as optional rather than urgent.

The climate crisis is not socially neutral (Engle, 2011). Its costs are highest for the least responsible communities, for the emissions that caused the crisis, particularly the global South, where the capacity to adapt is lowest (Bhambra & Newell, 2023).

The supply chains of the transition process to solve this problem present the same disparity. Decarbonization depends on cobalt and lithium, and the extraction of these minerals has tended to reproduce older colonial patterns of dispossession and ecological harm, loading the damage onto a few mining regions while the benefits settle elsewhere (Kramarz et al., 2021). Furthermore, this is an environment where stakeholder expectations are going beyond traditional corporate social responsibility (Sha et al., 2025). This can be observed in the fact that investors are looking at environmental, social and governance performance in a more sophisticated way rather than simply as a reputation issue, but as a material issue of financial risk, illustrated by the now familiar assertion that climate risk is investment risk (Adams, 2017). But the corporate pressure brings a more subtle shift in activism. Social media can serve to amplify the voice of everyday actors, especially younger generations, to raise concerns to a global audience and document local harm where formal governance is weak or absent (Boulianne et al., 2020).

In general, these developments show a relocation of responsibility for sustainability. This means it is no longer seen as just a mandate imposed by governments and corporations, but something implemented through the market by consumers acting as political, ethical and economic actors (Boulianne et al., 2020; O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009). There are numerous studies that explain this change. For instance, studies on political consumerism frame everyday choices from veganism to recycling and moral tension. Pickard et al. (2020) and Higham et al. (2014) identify tools used by young people to drive change in both markets and governments within the context of the air travel passengers' dilemma. A second approach treats ethical consumption as an intuitive method; how much a consumer identifies with potential victims of climate change shapes what they are willing to buy; thus, a purchase ceases to be a simple transaction and becomes a statement about the world they wish to live in (Hart & Nisbet, 2012). A third approach is drawing on feminist ecological citizenship from Gaard (2015)'s study, which challenges the masculine technoscientific framework of responses to climate change and argues that ethical consumption should encompass a holistic space connecting humans, other species, and ecosystems. The common theme among these approaches is the assertion that the individual's role has evolved. The next section will discuss how these energies have translated into specific forms of consumer action and what these changes mean for marketing.

2. Consumer Activism

Consumer activism is a concept theoretically grounded and refers to organized or individual actions to utilize marketplace interactions, through consumption choices or communicative efforts, to challenge institutional logics, redistribute power between buyers and sellers, and effect socio-environmental or political change (Lekakis, 2022). Consumer activism is a form of social change. This idea is an embodiment of the idea of being the change you wish to see in the world (De Moor, 2017). It is a type of institutional work, where customers are agentic stakeholders challenging established business procedures and redefining the symbolic meanings of brands (Valor et al., 2021). Activists are not passive consumers of marketing but rather interpretive actors who use the market as a place of political conversation and identity work through their consumption behaviors (Patsiaouras, 2022). This process is increasingly mediated by digital tools that lower barriers to entry and enable the quick aggregation of individual objections into collective movements (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Thus, consumer activism is represented as a purposeful, agentic engagement with the marketplace where actors use consumption or its strategic abstention as a device of institutional work to oppose hegemonic field logic, counteract power asymmetries and promote systemic socio-environmental change. This construction is rooted in the logic of political consumerism, which goes beyond the limits of economic choice and functions as a kind of lifestyle politics where the market becomes a central place for the demonstration of public virtue and civic identity (Beck, 2000). From a consumer culture theory perspective, activists are interpretive agents who renegotiate brand meanings to contest the cultural infrastructure of consumerism (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). From a stakeholder theory perspective, activists are secondary stakeholders who can organize collective power to inflict reputational or financial penalties on reluctant corporations (Den Hond & De Bakker, 2007). This behavior is based on the social identity theory that states that marketplace choices merge with a shared "moral identity" that turns individual actions into individualized collective action, driving collective action (Su & Teo, 2026).

Consumer activism can be divided into three distinct types according to the mechanisms through which consumers affect the market actors and corporate structures. Exit-oriented activism relies on the logic of punitive withdrawal. Consumers intentionally boycott firms, brands, and platforms they perceive as transgressing moral, social, political, and environmental norms. Activists seek to impose economic and reputational costs on targeted organizations through market exits, boycotts, behavioral changes, and other forms of consumer avoidance. Second, voice-oriented activism depends on communicative intervention and the public expression of grievances, criticisms, and resistance to challenge the legitimacy of the organization. The consumers mobilize collective narratives, disseminate anti-brand meanings, and generate public pressure to influence corporate behavior not necessarily by breaking market relationships but by using digital media and network-based communication. Third, loyalty-oriented activism has a positive endorsement logic where consumers strategically allocate their purchasing power to organizations that practice what they stand for in terms of ethical, social, political, or environmental issues. Activists reward value-aligned firms and promote the dissemination of preferred corporate norms via collective buying, informed customer choices, and positive advocacy. Together, these forms demonstrate different but related ways in which consumers turn taking part in the market into a vehicle for social, corporate, and political change.

2.1. Exit-Based Activism

Conceptual boundaries and manifestations Exit-based activism is defined as the deliberate and punitive withdrawal from commercial relationships by consumers to discipline firms, challenge established institutional logics, and drive socio-environmental reform (Mulyono & Rolando, 2025). Grounded in (Hirschman, 1970) seminal framework of exit, voice, and loyalty, this construct represents a logic of "market rejection" where consumers leverage their purchasing power or its intentional absence, to signal moral or political discontent. Overall, exit-based activism is expressed through three primary techniques (Mulyono & Rolando, 2025): boycotts, which are organized and collective efforts to refrain from selected transactions to penalize corporate misconduct; anti-consumption, which involves the meaningful rejection, restriction, or reclamation of consumption to resist prevailing mass-market ideologies and mitigate ecological excessive consumption; and brand avoidance, a persistent and often individual rejection of specific brands based on negative experience or symbolic identity-value incongruence.

The increasing popularity of exit-based activism is explained by a fundamental change in the relationship between consumers and corporations in which the market has become a central arena for lifestyle politics or "subpolitics" (De Moor, 2017). This growth is strategically driven by the platformization of activism, where information and communication technologies and social media networks act as "distributed sensor networks" (Narayanan & Singh, 2025). These digital affordances lower the barriers to participation and enable the rapid transformation of isolated individual grievances into highly visible collective firestorms and activist publics (Cammarota et al., 2023). For these digitized consumers, therefore, not being heard on social justice or environmental issues is increasingly a form of complicity, placing firms in the crosshairs of global scrutiny (Wicaksono et al., 2025). Furthermore, the literature shows a complex interplay of individual, collective, and contextual antecedents that trigger exit-based responses. At the individual level, triggers include moral outrage, perceived betrayal, and the violation of "psychological contracts" (Alyahya et al., 2023; Liao & Liu, 2022). Participation is further moderated by consumer ethnocentrism (Mulyono & Rolando, 2025), religious convictions (Swimberghe et al., 2011), and internal environmental locus of control (Cleveland et al., 2012) the belief that one's personal choices can effect ecological change. Collective stimuli encompass corporate social irresponsibility, human rights violations, and woke washing (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

The influence of exit-based activism on firms operates through two distinct pathways: the logic of material damage, which aims to increase the direct financial costs of contested corporate policies (Legocki et al., 2022), and the logic of reputation (Mulyono & Rolando, 2025), which inflicts symbolic damage to a firm's brand equity and license to operate. These actions of consumers serve as the signaling mechanism of Connelly et al. (2011) to reduce information asymmetry by informing firms and investors of shifts in consumer values and new risks associated with regulations. Regarding corporations, the effects of exit-based activism extend from immediate sales reductions, immediate short-term to long-term stock price volatility and damage to reputation (Narayanan & Singh, 2025). Mulyono & Rolando (2025) state that persistent consumer pressure is often a regulatory catalyst that propels market issues into the public policy arena and leads to formal legislative reform, e.g., mandatory ESG disclosure.

In addition, participation is a form of identity work and empowerment for consumers, an opportunity for people to 'be the change' through their everyday habits and for establishing a shared moral identity (De Moor, 2017). Exit-based activism is based on political consumerism, which considers consumption as a "voting with the wallet" (Eli et al., 2016), and the institutional theory perspective that considers activists as "institutional entrepreneurs" King &

Pearce (2010) who attempt to "deinstitutionalize" damaging practices of the market. Moreover, the social identity theory is proposed as a rationale for consumer activism, through activation of the in-group affiliation and common moral schemas (Mulyono & Rolando, 2025). The Stimulus-Organism-Response framework is a micro perspective on the process of activation of internal cognitive-emotional appraisals by external stimuli, which lead to market rejection (Narayanan & Singh, 2025).

2.2. Voice-Based Activism

Voice-based activism is a communicative, political form of engagement in the growing field of marketplace governance whereby consumers affect corporate behavior, market norms, and public policy by means of discourse and digital signaling without necessarily cutting off the commercial relationship (Legocki et al., 2020). Apart from the economic justification of "exit," voice-based activism is a "discursive" market strategy that intends to articulate dissatisfaction to authorities or the public sphere to drive organizational reform (Legocki et al., 2020). Based on Hirschman (1970), current research has solely determined three analytically legitimate modes of this construct: social media activism (Middleton et al., 2022), digital petitions (Minocher, 2019), and collective mobilization (Yu, 2021), which serve as a form of "institutional work" (Lawrence et al., 2011) that aims to challenge the status quo of marketplace practices and redefine the symbolic meanings of brands (Middleton et al., 2022).

Voice-based activism is essentially triggered when a consumer identifies corporate transgressions (e.g., human rights violations, environmental deterioration, or labor injustice) that are perceived as breaches of the psychological contract between the firm and its stakeholders (Narayanan & Singh, 2025). This belief is strategically pushed by the "platformization" of the economy, where information and communication technologies (ICT) turn the market into the primary arena for "lifestyle politics" (De Moor, 2017). Today's voice-based initiatives frequently lack formal leadership, juxtaposed with traditional hierarchical movements, and function through "connective action," wherein individual grievances build into a collective "distributed sensor network" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) facilitated by the dissemination of personalized action frames through social networks. Generation Z, as digital natives, contributes to the increasing prevalence of a "no permission necessary culture," perceiving social media as a platform for civic engagement while exhibiting rising skepticism regarding governmental efficacy in addressing global issues (Kozinets & Jenkins, 2022). The origins of voice-based engagement involve a complex interaction of individual cognitive-emotional assessments and situational inputs (Narayanan & Singh, 2025). At the micro-level, the principal catalyst is moral outrage, an instinctive reaction to perceived injustice that compels individuals to uphold their self-esteem and reinforce their affiliation with an activist in-group.

Participation is significantly moderated by issue salience (the perceived importance of the problem), group efficacy beliefs (the belief that joint effort can achieve group goals), and internal mechanisms of influence through which voice-based activism governs markets are both material and symbolic.

Institutionalized activist groups such as consumer advocacy organizations use a "value-translation model" to transform abstract environmental locus of control (Cleveland et al., 2012). Furthermore, the likelihood of engagement increases when the consumer's political or ethical values are congruent with the activist cause, yet it may be inhibited by "choice overload" or "small-agent rationalization" (Yuksel et al., 2020), where individuals feel their single voice is too insignificant to effect change (Johnson et al., 2022). The underlying values into concrete "trials of value" to modify consumer choice through comparative evaluations and assessment tools (Nøjgaard, 2023). On digital platforms individual comments aggregate to form "doppelganger brand images" (Minocher, 2019), critical, often parodic re-imaginings of a brand identity that challenge a company's carefully constructed public image. Rhetorical methods like logos (logical appeals), ethos (moral appeals), pathos (emotional appeals) and kairos (timeliness) are used to explain the process which helps delegitimize contested institutional logics (Middleton et al., 2022). The mainstream media often serves as a 'loudspeaker', magnifying these digital 'firestorms' in the public domain and urging companies to modify their behavior to defend their sustainable brand equity and license to operate (Lekakis, 2022).

Regarding businesses and consumers, the implications are complex and far-reaching. For firms, the effective mobilization of voice can lead to rapid reputational damage, stock price fluctuations, and significantly negative anomalous returns after activist announcements (Mulyono & Rolando, 2025). In contrast, companies that participate in "responsible lobbying" or communicate with coalesced activist groups can mitigate these negative implications and potentially strengthen consumer-brand relationships through co-creation (Johnson et al., 2022). Consumer engagement builds identity and empowerment, serving as a channel for 'civic regeneration' and a means for expressing a collective 'moral identity' (Narayanan & Singh, 2025). However, the "dark side" of this activism such as digital vigilantism and "doxing" poses significant threats to personal privacy and may lead to online harassment

(Legocki et al., 2020). Voice-based activism is based on political consumerism, which sees consumption as a way of "voting with the wallet" (Eli et al., 2016) and social identity theory, which explains mobilization through in-group membership and collective moral frameworks (Mulyono & Rolando, 2025). The social identity model of collective action provides a broad framework to understand identification with a marginalized group and group-based rage as predictors of intentions for environmental and social protest (Troy et al., 2023). Another strand of literature, signaling theory, suggests that activism and corporate responses serve as informative signals that reduce information asymmetry with respect to corporate virtue or customer preferences (Connelly et al., 2011).

2.3. Loyalty-Based Activism

Loyalty-based activism, also called "positive buying" or "buycotting," is a strategy-oriented, incentivizing way of engaging with the current marketplace governance, where consumers leverage their buying power to support and reward organizational practices seen as ethically or politically commendable (Nonomura, 2017). In contrast to the "colder" punitive logic of exit-based activism, loyalty-based activism is characterized by "vote-for" behavior that fuses the routine fabric of consumption with sociopolitical values (McGinnis & Gentry, 2009). This construct signifies a type of "individualized collective action" in which personal purchasing choices are consolidated into a proactive support for Environmental, Social, and Governance principles, or socially responsible business behavior (Neilson, 2010). Boycotts are intended to halt the harm of corporate practices, while buycotts seek to raise standards by highlighting best practices, and by setting new institutional standards of sustainability (Schmelzer, 2010).

Simultaneously, the rise of loyalty-based activism is driven strategically by the move to "lifestyle politics" or "subpolitics," where the market is a key venue for expressing civic identity in the face of perceived inadequacy of government (Johnson et al., 2022). The phenomenon is also compounded by the "platformization" of the economy where digital tools such as the Buycott app and targeted social media movements eliminate barriers to participation and reconfigure information, allowing consumers to "vote with their wallets" with an unprecedented level of precision and scale (Eli et al., 2016).

Furthermore, consumer expectations have been significantly changed, especially among Gen Z and Millennials, for whom consumption has become an important site of moral agency and "civic regeneration" (Wicaksono et al., 2025).

Consumers' willingness to engage in loyalty-based activism is not a random event; rather, it results from multiple levels of influencing factors. One of the most important is existing customer loyalty. Consumers with a strong brand relationship are more likely to defend the brand and become advocates for it in public discussions. In this sense, loyalty is a starting point and a goal for activism. However, the level of involvement depends on the consumer's perception of the congruence between the brand's values and their own and the consumer's intrinsic value of the issue (Johnson et al., 2022). And company perceptions matter at the larger scale, too. Strong environmental, social, and governance (ESG) performance and perceptions of authenticity can foster trust and reduce cynicism towards corporate activism. These factors act as a kind of "goodwill buffer" that improves consumers' willingness to believe and endorse the brand's actions (Mulyono & Rolando, 2025).

Different theoretical perspectives can partially explain this kind of activism. The costly environmental practices or trustworthy ethical certifications companies adopt can function as robust signals of their values and reduce uncertainty for consumers, according to signaling theory (Waites, 2025). Social identity theory also argues that activism is a form of self-expression. When consumers profess to be ethical brands, they affirm their identity as members of moral responsibility or "green" groups (Su & Teo, 2026). The value-translation model, therefore, explains how abstract values such as sustainability are translated into everyday decisions so that consumers can act on their beliefs through practical choices (Nøjgaard, 2023). From a social exchange perspective, consumers offer time, attention, and advocacy in exchange for the brand continuing to provide social and environmental value (Johnson et al., 2022).

Loyalty-based activism has important implications for business and consumers. This leads to increased sales, greater financial stability, and reduced risk for companies. Moreover, it increases brand equity and stimulates the growth of "green brand evangelists" who are loyal customers that support and advocate for the brand (Narayanan & Singh, 2025). This kind of activism allows consumers to feel that they are part of a positive change. It provides a sense of purpose and moral satisfaction for consumers in everyday life (De Moor, 2017).

3. Consumer Activism as a Governance Mechanism in Sustainable Markets

Sustainability in the marketplace is viewed as a multidimensional governance issue comprising the environmental, social and economic pillars, often in the form of the “triple bottom line” of people, planet and profit (Hauschild et al., 2020). Sustainability is defined as meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987). It is shifting from short term financial objectives to long term value creation. We are changing how we consume and sustainability is now a part of many consumption areas. This is particularly the case for the area of sustainable branding, where businesses like Patagonia and Ben & Jerry’s integrate their core identities with ecological and social activism to create strong attachment for consumers (Agarwal et al., 2025; Wicaksono et al., 2025). Circular economy is a paradigm shift from a linear “take-make-dispose” system to a regenerative based system of resource efficiency, extended product life cycle and waste minimization (Agarwal et al., 2025). This embedding is based on environmental, social and governance standards that have changed from fringe corporate social responsibility programs to a core framework for assessing firm resilience and legitimacy for both investors and customers (Waites, 2025). Mechanisms for transparency and traceability such as third-party certifications, eco-labels and blockchain based supply chain monitoring are becoming increasingly relevant to reduce information asymmetry and to support corporate claims in an increasingly distrustful market of “greenwashing” (Zervoudi et al., 2025).

The growing environmental crises and scarcity of resources are making the public aware of the effects of mass consumption. The global increase in environmental awareness is thus a strategic advantage for sustainability as a consumer issue. Prevalence is also growing through lifestyle politics where choices made around everyday consumption are used as political statements or ‘voting with the wallet’ to affect global production cycles (Eli et al., 2016; Mulyono & Rolando, 2025). But there is a fundamental tension in this area, consumers tend to have strong sustainable values, but their marketplace behavior tends to be inconsistent. This gap has been analytically characterized as the attitude–behavior gap, or value–action gap, in which ethical intentions do not translate into purchase actions because of complex situational and psychological constraints (Carrington et al., 2014; García-Arrizabalaga et al., 2025). Consumers may choose convenience over ethics when they feel that the personal sacrifices they have to make, such as time, higher costs or less functionality of the product, are greater than their prosocial motivations (Inês & Moreira, 2025; Young et al., 2010). Furthermore, they may be prone to moral licensing, a psychological mechanism that allows people to feel they have “earned the right” to act less sustainably in one domain after engaging in prosocial behavior in another domain, or they may use neutralization strategies to justify self-interested choices (Gholamzadehmir et al., 2019).

Sustainable consumption relies on the engagement of individuals, collectives, and institutions. Environmental concern, personal responsibility, and internal environmental locus of control, the belief that one's personal choices can effectively reduce ecological degradation (Cleveland et al., 2012), are assumed to influence participation. The availability of sustainable alternatives and strong regulatory frameworks such as the EU Green Deal reduce the friction for consumer participation (Agarwal et al., 2025). These stimuli work based on the stimulus-organism-response (SOR) model where external market stimuli regulate internal cognitive-emotional evaluations (organism) that lead to sustainable behavioral outcomes (response) (Su & Teo, 2026). These interactions are based on signaling theory, where the costly environmental commitments and transparent reporting are credible signals of organizational integrity that provide the brand trust to build consumer loyalty (Waites, 2025).

The implications of this consumer driven movement are far reaching for firms and consumers alike. "Sustainability is no longer an ethical choice but a strategic imperative for businesses to remain competitive. It is associated with better financial performance, lower equity financing and higher brand equity (Waites, 2025). Failure to meet these evolving expectations results in substantial reputational risk, consumer boycotts, and adverse abnormal stock returns (Narayanan & Singh, 2025) Conversely, successful engagement results in green brand evangelism, where committed consumers serve as active brand advocates and promoters and the brand becomes embedded in their moral self (Su & Teo, 2026). Sustainable engagement is an identity work and empowerment of consumers to align their consumption habits with a vision of "good life" and "be the change" they want to see in the world (De Moor, 2017).

4. The Nexus Between Consumer Activism and Sustainability Enforcement

Consumer activism and sustainability as a transformative and informal governance mechanism can regulate ethical standards in markets where formal regulation is perceived to be lacking or to be insufficient (Lekakis, 2022). This phenomenon is conceptualized as an agentic, theoretically based construct, in which individuals and collectives contest institutional logics and right power inequities through marketplace relations (Lekakis, 2022). Sustainability enforcement motivated by consumer activism is part of the core of brand identity and communication, positioning the consumer as an institutional entrepreneur, unlike the traditional corporate social responsibility which is often at the periphery of strategy (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). This synthesis investigates consumer activism as a regulatory force. The core thesis is that activism is a 'market sensor' that translates social moral outrage into actual change at the organizational and systemic levels (Nøjgaard, 2023).

The rise of consumer activism as a tool for enforcing sustainability is triggered by consumer awareness of corporate violations, such as labor rights issues or environmental destruction, as a violation of the psychological contract (Gemeda et al., 2025). The increasing environmental consciousness across the world is strategically affecting growth. The growing climate crises have made the masses aware of the impacts of mass consumption. Moreover, the "platformization" of activism via social media has lowered participation thresholds, enabling individual grievances to rapidly aggregate into a collective "distributed sensor network" that monitors corporate conduct in real time (Vrikki & Lekakis, 2024). The bottom line is that activism is picking up steam as consumers increasingly believe that brands are better positioned to address social issues than political institutions. This leads to the politicisation of everyday consumption (Eli et al., 2016; Mulyono & Rolando, 2025).

The literature refers to a hierarchy of individual and contextual antecedents that trigger enforcement actions. Triggers at the individual level include moral outrage, perceptions of hypocrisy and a sense of 'individualized collective responsibility' for world problems (García-Arrizabalaga et al., 2025). Also, participation is moderated by internal environmental locus of control (Cleveland et al., 2012) and perceived salience of the issue such as accusations of greenwashing in fashion industry or environmental scandals in energy sector (Zervoudi et al., 2025). These antecedents are embedded in the stimulus-organism-response-outcome paradigm where external stimuli lead to internal cognitive evaluations and then to either punitive or rewarding market reactions (Narayanan & Singh, 2025).

The primary mechanism of influence is reputational pressure, in which activists use a "naming and shaming" strategy to symbolically undermine the firm's license to operate (King & Pearce, 2010). This works in two ways; the logic of material damage that aims to diminish sales and stock value (Narayanan & Singh, 2025) and the logic of numbers that uses media amplification to develop a 'doppelgänger brand image' (Minocher, 2019) that challenges corporate legitimacy. For example, the #PayUp campaign addresses the issue of labour justice, exposing illegal underpayment in supply chains and urging companies such as Boohoo to improve supplier audits and commitments to transparency (Legocki et al., 2022). Similarly, environmental scandals such as the emissions cheating of Volkswagen instigate viral outrage that extends the crisis and transform local tragedies into global symbols of corporate irresponsibility (Ai et al., 2025).

When consumer activism leads to successful enforcement actions, corporations face real financial consequences. For example, the boycott of Brent Spar resulted in Shell losing 20-50% of its revenue, negative abnormal stock returns and significant financial losses (Zasuwa, 2019). Persistent pressure may also be a regulatory push, bringing conflicts out of the private market and into the public policy arena, and leading to formal legislative reform, such as the EU's Green Claims directive, or mandatory ESG reporting (Inês & Moreira, 2025). Engagement provides a vehicle for "civic regeneration" and identity work for consumers who "be the change" by aligning their everyday habits with a shared moral identity (Kozinets & Jenkins, 2022). However, frictions still exist, e.g., attitude-behavior gap, where price sensitivity or convenience-ethics trade-offs mean that ethical intentions alone are not sufficient to prevent purchase (Carrington et al., 2014; García-Arrizabalaga et al., 2025; Nonomura, 2017).

Theoretical frameworks of consumer activism as enforcement are based on institutional theory (King & Pearce, 2010) that considers activists as destabilizers of field logics and stakeholder theory (Den Hond & De Bakker, 2007) which considers consumers as powerful secondary stakeholders able to enforce accountability. Additionally, based on social identity theory, mobilization is explained by in-group affiliation (Mulyono & Rolando, 2025). Signaling theory explains the activism and reaction of companies as information-rich signals to reduce asymmetry of information (Connelly et al., 2011). The value-translation model also points to the governance function of formalized activist actors, such as consumer watchdogs (Nøjgaard, 2023), who translate abstract values into concrete "trials of value" to reformat consumer choice.

5. Managerial and Policy Implications

Consumer activism has managerial and policy implications that are congruent with the strategic and regulatory changes required for operating in a marketplace where consumers act as informal governance agents (Lekakis, 2022). This is a space directed to the legitimacy claims of firms and to the reframing of consumption patterns by political actors to align market behaviors with socio-environmental goals (García-Arrizabalaga et al., 2025). The dual imperatives for companies to strive for authenticity and preparedness and for policymakers to build transparency and educational infrastructures based on the changing dynamics of institutional and stakeholder power.

The natural increase in environmental awareness and decline in institutional trust make these implications a necessity. Consumers increasingly believe that brands are better equipped to handle global crisis than governments (Johnson et al., 2022). This rise is the result of the deliberate "platformization" of activism, where digital services are reshaping the market into a decentralized sensor network where corporate silence on controversial issues is complicity (Narayanan & Singh, 2025; Wicaksono et al., 2025). Antecedents for intervention at the firm level include perceived corporate social irresponsibility, "moral harm crises" and violations of "psychological contracts" (Alyahya et al., 2023; Liao & Liu, 2022). Policy interventions have been driven by the mounting climate risks and the lack of credible ESG data in voluntary corporate reporting (Arvidsson & Dumay, 2022).

The main concern of the managers for the company is the search for authenticity, that is the coherence between the communication of the brand and the real business practices (Cammarota et al., 2023). Signaling theory suggests that firms will engage in "costly signals" to build their reputation. However, consumers are becoming better at detecting "opportunistic" signals such as greenwashing or "woke washing" (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Because concrete changes in supply chains have a much higher potential to restore reputation than pure communicative actions (Christis & Wang, 2021), managers should not only focus on symbolic actions, but rather implement transparent sustainability communication and concrete operational changes to reduce these risks. Companies are also required to shift from a one way communication to a two-way dialogue with stakeholders and to involve consumers and non-governmental organizations in "responsible lobbying" and participatory development processes to prove legitimacy (Doh & Guay, 2006). This leads to an increased readiness to act, for example, by developing digital surveillance systems that can detect possible triggers for boycotts before they happen and by training managers at all levels to respond to online crises with empathy and a values-based decision-making process (Van Den Broek et al., 2017).

The focus of the policymakers should be on restructuring market information to reduce asymmetries and increase the capabilities of the 'responsible consumer' (Soneryd & Uggla, 2015; Zervoudi et al., 2025). One important avenue is the creation of rigorous labeling schemes and disclosure obligations such as the EU Green Deal and mandatory ESG reporting (Stern & Valero, 2021) that require firms to internalize environmental externalities and report comparable, verifiable metrics (Carberry et al., 2019). The literature indicates that policies cannot rely only on green consumers and that policymakers need to create incentives for sustainable consumption, for example, green taxes, subsidies for renewable technologies, and tax incentives for companies with verified sustainability practices (Khanchel et al., 2023).

Additionally, consumer education should be integrated into the high school curriculum to promote a "critical awareness" of unsustainable practices and to combat "uncensored learnings of the marketplace" (Galleli & Amaral, 2026). The multi-actor approach allows legislation to be a strategic tool to promote eco-innovation and to align the incentives of business with the long-term health of the planet (Alyahya et al., 2023).

The risks of this change are severe. Firms that do not manage activist pressure encounter immediate financial losses, with sales dropping around 8% after activist statements, and long-term erosion of their licence to operate (Mulyono & Rolando, 2025). In contrast, those brands that integrate ESG as a strategic emotional asset into their core identity can turn the exposure into green brand advocacy where loyal customers proactively protect the brand against reputational threats (Su & Teo, 2026).

6. Conclusion

Consumer activism has shifted from the periphery of market behavior to the heart of sustainability governance. It has become a key – if informal – form of accountability. Today's consumers support the good companies and avoid the irresponsible ones, and they also share their opinions on digital platforms which can have an impact at the corporate level. This creates a feedback loop where everyday behaviors of buying and talking influence business decisions and broader societal and environmental changes.

This change has a wider implication, which is a redistribution of roles. Sustainability is no longer only the prerogative of governments or businesses. Consumers are political, ethical and economic actors in a digitally interconnected economy and their collective decisions determine how companies establish responsibility, transparency and legitimacy. On their own, individual actions may seem small. But combined they put a lot of market pressure on companies to move to cleaner production, fairer labor practices and more open communication. This influence is conditional, consumer activism is affected by social identification, moral outrage, internet connectivity and access to viable alternatives that are not evenly distributed among populations. There is an underlying tension that makes the problem worse. "Many customers want to be sustainable and don't do it." Constraints of cost, convenience, and routine, daily, get in the way of action. The gap between attitude and behavior that results is not a marginal oddity, but an inherent characteristic of the phenomena. It constrains the extent to which activism can substitute for institutional regulation. Consumer advocacy should complement rather than substitute for official regulation. When consumers, firms and policymakers work constructively together, the impact can enhance transparency, reduce greenwashing and build long-term commitments that no single entity can sustain alone. Activism is a key element in these arrangements for the making of the regime of sustainability.

The creation of sustainable markets will depend on the awareness, organization and involvement of consumers. Digital platforms, activist networks and sustainability labels enhance the visibility of business behaviour and boost consumers' ability to respond. Environmental and social pressures are mounting, and consumer activism is likely to remain a potent force for accountability, innovation and change in sustainable governance. There are many ways in which this story can be studied. A more fine-grained examination of the ways that digital platforms and algorithmic visibility influence the scope and success of activism across contexts will illuminate the conditions under which mobilization can produce tangible corporate response. The existing literature is dominated by singular national contexts, but cross-cultural and longitudinal approaches are needed to map the development of activism over time and in institutional contexts. The ongoing attitude-behaviour gap requires additional research into the processes that convert ethical intentions into sustained behaviour, including habit, decision architecture and identity reinforcement. Beyond the overarching question of what interdisciplinary cooperation between marketing, sociology and political economy can offer to a more thoroughgoing understanding of the part consumer activism plays in sustainability governance than any single discipline alone, misinformation, greenwashing and the calibration of trust in sustainability claims deserve equal attention.

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