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## Integrating Ethics into Marketing

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### Abstract

Nowadays, society pays great attention to ethical marketing, which also has an impact on organisation. In recent years, especially Generation Z, has paid great concern to whether the brand applies ethics and sustainability to the product. For these reasons, organisations must focus on ethical marketing rather than profit. Due to the digital age, consumers can find information and more choices on relevant products and organisations on social media and search engines, which makes it necessary for marketers to be transparent and sustainable in their marketing of products or services. This research paper will examine the benefits of ethical marketing and the impacts of ethical issues on customer, organisation, and the environment. Theories, concepts, and models will be applied to the research to provide marketers with a better way to incorporate ethics. Additionally, Shein will be used as an example, and SWOT analysis will analyse the internal and external environment of the organisation. Last but not least, recommendations will be given based on Shein's weaknesses.

### Keywords

Ethical marketing, SWOT analysis, Generation Z, Shein

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## 1.0 Introduction

The term ethical marketing is becoming more and more important in today's society and business environment. This is because, in the 21st century, more options and information are available to customers than ever before, and they seek appropriate products and prefer to support organisations that align with their values (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Ethical marketing has been a topic of discussion for more than a decade, and the emergence of social media has given consumers a stronger voice, allowing them to quickly expose brands' ethical or unethical behaviour around the world (Wellman et al., 2020). Ethical marketing means that marketers integrate ethics into product marketing. For example, product transparency means honest disclosure of product-related information, price transparency, provide manufacturing material information, responsible to environmental and social, and the organisation must maintain internal transparency (Kim et al., 2020). Ethical marketing is very important for organisations because consumers need to know whether the behaviour of the organisation that supports the brand is ethical, which can build a relationship of trust with customers and also gain a competitive advantage. Nowadays, many organisations still pollute the environment and society in their production processes, which is why the Sustainable Development Goals have been introduced (Mondejar et al., 2021). This is to enable organisations and marketers to apply these goals when producing products to make some contribution to society and the environment. Therefore, this study will be divided into three parts: a literature review, discussion, and recommendations. The benefits of ethical marketing to organisations and the impacts of ethical issues will be discussed in depth, and Shein will be used as an example.

## 2.0 Literature Review

In ethical marketing, organisations are trying to ensure that the product or service is authentic and socially responsible. However, there are still some marketers in society who promote false product information, plagiarism, the use of environmentally unfriendly materials and unethical advertisements (TechTarget, 2022). As a result, there are effects on consumers, organisations, and the environment. Therefore, the literature review will focus on the comparison between traditional and digital marketing practices, the impacts of unethical marketing on various aspects and the theories, concept and model used in this paper.

### 2.1 Definition of Ethical Marketing

Ethical is defined as whether the actions or values of a person or organisation are right according to ethical principles. Ethical principles include honesty, integrity, transparency, respect and social responsibility (NIEHS, 2020). Ethical can guide individuals or organisations to make good decisions. While marketing refers to activities carried out by an organisation to promote exposure and sales of a product or service. To create the value of a product, marketers will conduct some marketing practices to ensure that the public and potential customers are aware of the existence of the product and receive the relevant product information (Contreras and Ramos, 2016). In short, ethical marketing refers to the ethical criteria adopted by the organisation in the decision-making process to carry out the activity (Dole, 2019). Nowadays, organisations are globalising, and they must be transparent and socially responsible in their marketing practices. This is because today's society is very concerned about whether organisations have ethical standards for their products or services. Therefore, to determine the needs and wants of the target market, the organisation should make an effort to improve and maintain customer satisfaction and social well-being with ethical marketing practices to create more value for customers (Malik, 2023).

### 2.2 Comparison Between Traditional and Digital Marketing Practices

Before 1990, traditional marketing was used to introduce products to the public only (Kellgg Insight, 2022). After 1990, with the invention of the Internet, the rise of digital marketing focused on understanding consumer needs and wants to create value (Dsouza & Panakaje, 2023). Traditional marketing practices use billboards, television, newspapers, and telephone calls in one-way communication. While digital marketing practices use social media, search engines, and email to provide two-way communication and improvement on the product or service (Yasmin et al., 2015). Additionally, according to Paşcalău & Urziceanu (2020), traditional marketing channels are limited to local areas and are expensive, while digital marketing channels are global, allowing marketers to promote products to people worldwide at lower publicity costs. Today, marketers are combining traditional and digital marketing to conduct marketing practices more effectively (AMA, 2022). As more brands face negative ethical issues in the news, consumers are becoming more concerned about ethical marketing practices and products. When consumers become

more aware of ethical marketing, marketers and organisations must make ethical decisions in their marketing practices (Dole, 2019).

## **2.3 Impacts of Ethical Issues in Marketing Practices**

### **2.3.1 Customer Loyalty**

Customer loyalty is whether the customer's purchase of the brand's products or services is long-term and sustainable (Muhammad Alshurideh et al., 2016). Maintaining customer loyalty is the main purpose of organisational marketing. Organisations have a great impact on customers when promoting products, especially in ethical marketing. A study conducted by Lee & Jin (2019) showed that when comparing similar products, customers tend to choose products with higher prices and a good brand reputation. In addition, from the point of view of customers, the transparency of the product and price, advertisement and the evaluation or feedback of the product and brand have an absolute impact on the purchasing process (Zhao et al., 2021). When the brand's products involve unreasonable prices, unethical advertising and the use of unethical materials, this will reduce customer loyalty, and the organisation will subsequently reduce customers and generate a negative brand reputation (Forbes, 2019).

### **2.3.2 Organisational Performance**

Organisational performance is the effective use of resources to achieve goals and accomplishments and is measured through metrics such as employee engagement and customer satisfaction (Taouab & Issor, 2019). Ethical marketing helps organisation to improve reputation and customer satisfaction, while unethical marketing can affect credibility and sales (Wang et al., 2015). However, in addition to marketers being transparent about their marketing practices, ethics also play an important role within the organisation, such as no plagiarism and corruption. Also, the organisation must treat its employees ethically, such as by giving them fair treatment, providing more training related ethical and continuously improving their skills (CIPD, 2024). These can help improve employee engagement, retain talent and be more ethical. On the other hand, unethical organisations may affect shareholder trust in the organisation and reduce employee engagement (Tang et al., 2022).

### **2.3.3 Environmental Sustainability**

Environmental sustainability is a great concern to society. It refers to the ability to meet current needs without damaging the natural environment so that future generations can also meet their well-being (Summers & Smith, 2014). For this reason, the United Nations has launched the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs provide a framework for organisations to earn profits without harming the environment (Shayan et al., 2022). Environmental sustainability is a necessary consideration in ethical marketing practices. Environmental sustainability, such as avoiding plastics, using recyclable resources and using renewable energy. However, some unethical organisations practice such as disposing of toxic waste in the sea, cutting down trees in large numbers and open burning (Ferronato & Torretta, 2019). These actions can lead to climate action, the destruction of animal shelters and harm to the earth. With that, organisations and marketers must consider environmental sustainability when making decisions.

## **2.4 Theories, Concept and Model to be Applied**

### **2.4.1 Hunt-Vitell Theory**

Hunt-Vitell theory provides criteria to measure the moral behaviour of individuals when they encounter problems. The theory mainly provides marketers and organisations with ethical criteria to use when decision-making (Vitell & Hunt, 2015). Hunt-Vitell theory provides two criteria, such as deontology and teleology considerations, to measure individual ethical behaviour. Deontology consideration means that when decision-making, organisations mainly follow ethical principles and do not pay much attention to whether they make money. On the contrary, teleology consideration means that when decision-making, organisations mainly consider the outcome, maximise profits minimise damage, and do not pay too much attention to ethics. Vitell (2021) states that all decisions marketers make affect society, and society affects the organisation. Therefore, the theory can help marketers measure whether these two criteria are beneficial for society and organisations when making decisions.

### 2.4.2 Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder theory refers to the interconnected relationship between an organisation and its employees, suppliers, customers, and other stakeholders. The theory suggests that organisations should create more value for stakeholders than just shareholders. In ethics, Barney & Harrison (2018) mentioned that employee behaviour can affect the organisation's reputation and performance. Managers must adopt ethical standards in decision-making, setting an example for employees to apply moral standards. Hence, the theory helps organisations provide stakeholders with the measurement of ethical standards in behaviour and decision-making, which can enhance moral awareness and create more beneficial value for stakeholders (Mahajan et al., 2023).

### 2.4.3 Triple Bottom Line

Triple Bottom Line (TBL) is the concept that organisations should not only focus on profits but also pay attention to social and environmental issues (Książak & Fischbach, 2017). It comprises three components: people, profit, and the planet. People is an organisation that encourages employees to volunteer and form partnerships with non-profit organisations, while profit ensures ethical and fair revenue earned. Planet is an organisation that strategically uses sustainability approaches to reduce environmental harm. Moreover, TBL plays a significant role in ethical marketing practices, helping marketers measure whether decisions meet the criteria of protecting the society and environment (Dyck & Manchanda, 2021). This ensures that the organisation's performance and environmental protection are balanced.

### 2.4.4 Marketing Mix

Marketing mix is a model that helps an organisation analyse the way a product or service is brought to market (Madhani, 2016). The model is mainly composed of 4Ps, such as product, price, place and promotion. Product refers to the accountability of the product; price refers to the transparency of the product price; place refers to the fairness of the distribution channel; and promotion is honest advertising of the product. This model plays an important role for marketers in analysing the needs and wants of customers instead of just producing products. When marketer understands the needs of customers, they can meet the needs of customers and create value for customers when developing marketing strategies (Ellitan, 2021).

## 3.0 Discussion

Transparency and respect for products and services are critical to society, and 88% of marketers value ethical marketing. However, 22% feel pressure and shame for unethical practices (Fogel, 2019). This paper will discuss the benefits of ethical marketing for organisations and go into depth about its impact on various aspects.

### 3.1 Benefits of Ethical Marketing

Most of the organisation's revenue comes from the marketing department. Marketers' honesty and transparency about their products and services are extremely important in advertising. Some examples of the benefits of ethical marketing to organisations are discussed below.

#### 3.1.1 Set an Example in the Industry

In the past, organisations prioritised profit over ethics, but now organisations have shifted their focus to ethics. One of the authors Pratt (2023) states that the energy industry contributes to environmental pollution and climate change. By 2023, industry-generated carbon emission from fossil fuels exceeded 14 billion metric tons a year (refer to Appendix 1), which means people rely heavily on electricity. Furthermore, one of the examples of ethical practices in the industry is Ørsted, a Danish company that converts fossil fuels into renewable energy. It is a global leader in climate action (Ørsted, 2021). Their marketing practices promote renewable energy use, reduce environmental impact, and set an example for the industry to adopt renewable energy instead of relying on fossil fuels (Ørsted, 2023). The organisation is a set of examples in the industry; thus, it can increase its brand reputation, customer numbers, and sales.

### 3.1.2 Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is crucial for organisations as the customer is their primary revenue source (Bhattacharya et al., 2020). Nowadays, the Internet has enabled consumers to share their experiences around the world, which allows marketers to pay attention to customer needs and feedback (Satyanarayana et al., 2018). Some of the customers have their own blogs or social media accounts to express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a brand, which can spread positive or negative word of mouth (Kakalejcik et al., 2021). For instance, The Body Shop is a skin and body care company known for being against animal testing and environmentally friendly (Ganatra et al., 2021). The customer reviews of the brand can be searched in the search engine, and most of the comments are positive (refer to Appendix 2). This positive feedback can help The Body Shop maintain customer satisfaction and retention and also can add value to its products and customers.

### 3.1.3 Gain Competitive Advantage

A competitive advantage is a strategic advantage that gives an organisation an advantage over its competitors. According to Madhani (2016), ethical marketing practices provide long-term competitive advantages, as customers are likely to be loyal and trust the organisation. This helps differentiate the organisation from competitors in the market and attract more customers and investors (Kenyon & Sen, 2015). For example, IKEA has the competitive advantage of staying competitive by promoting environmentally friendly practices. Namely, IKEA encourages consumers to buy eco-friendly bags and reuse them for groceries (refer to Appendix 3) and also encourages customers to sell furniture back to IKEA, allowing those in need to buy it at a low price (Mahalakshmi et al., 2024). These environmentally friendly practices give IKEA a competitive advantage in the market.

## 3.2 Impacts of Ethical Issues in Marketing Practices

### 3.2.1 Customer Loyalty

Marketing is a crucial aspect of business, aiming to satisfy customers' needs and desires. However, it is now essential to integrate ethics into marketing, as 53% of Generation Y and Z are willing to spend more money on ethical products (Asanache, 2023). Nevertheless, many organisations in the market are still engaging in unethical marketing. Unethical marketing practices, such as exaggerated products, non-transparency product information, discriminatory advertising, and disclosure of customer data, can lead to customer loss of loyalty and competition (Maksuti, 2023). For instance, Peloton, a fitness equipment company, faced losses after posting a sexist advertisement in 2019 (refer to Appendix 4) (The Guardian, 2019). Moreover, the Marketing Mix, Madhani (2021) mentioned that the 4Ps can help marketers integrate ethics, such as transparency and honesty, step by step from product to launch, ensuring customer loyalty and creating more value for customers and products. For example, in TOMS' marketing practices, for every pair of shoes a customer buys, the organisation donates the shoes to children in need (Wydick et al., 2014). This transparency maintains customer loyalty and enhances the brand's reputation.

### 3.2.2 Organisational Performance

Organisational performance measurement is influenced both by customers and by the organisation itself. While organisations incorporate ethics in marketing to retain brand loyalty and improve performance, customers also look to search engines to understand the organisation's transparency and ethical treatment of employees (Smith, 2016). The stakeholder theory suggests that organisations ensure consistent benefits and treatment for employees and managers (Laplume et al., 2021). However, unethical behaviours like plagiarism, being unethical to employees, neglecting safety, and corruption can negatively impact customer loyalty and performance (Chron, 2018). For instance, Shein was involved in plagiarism designs (refer to Appendix 5), employing child labour, and forcing employees to work over eight hours (Nield, 2022), which negatively affected its reputation and performance. On the other hand, the United Services Automobile Association has a high satisfaction rate of 80% among employees, with the organisation providing ethical training, development opportunities, and rich compensation (Great Place To Work, 2022). This can enhance the organisation's reputation and performance.

### 3.2.3 Environmental Sustainability

Ethical marketing primarily focuses on environmental responsibility, with 73% of Generation Z willing to buy sustainable products (CNBC, 2021). The launch of the SDGs provides organisations with a sustainable framework for society and the environment. The Triple Bottom Line concept allows organisations to integrate SDGs into the planet,

people, and profit, contributing to the environment (Nogueira et al., 2023). However, some organisations still engage in unethical behaviour, such as heavy use of chemicals, plastics, felling, and open burning, which can harm the environment and society. The examples of Coca-Cola and PepsiCo are the world's largest plastic polluters (refer to Appendix 6), contributing to the climate crisis (Statista, 2020). Compared to those organisations, Patagonia is an outdoor clothes organisation that works to protect the environment, prioritises the use of recycled materials in its products and donates 1% of its sales to environmental organisations (Shourkaei et al., 2023). This raises public awareness of environmental issues and sets an example for other organisations.

### 3.3 Comparison of Patagonia and Shein using SWOT Analysis

SWOT analysis is used to evaluate both strengths and weaknesses of internal organisations and opportunities and threats of external organisations. SWOT analysis helps organisations develop successful and effective strategies to compete with competitors in the market (Gurel, 2017). Shein will be used as a main example in this section.

#### Strengths

Patagonia has long been known for its environmentally sustainable efforts. This organisation has a strong brand reputation in the market for ethical awareness and environmental responsibility. In 2023, Patagonia was named the best remaining brand with a score of 83.5 (Aten, 2023). In Hunt-Vitell theory, Patagonia applied deontology consideration, which mainly focused on ethical practices rather than profit. The organisation exists to protect the planet and is adept at using existing resources to combat the climate crisis and reduce natural disasters (World Economic Forum, 2022). Patagonia is also transparent to the public. The organisation is open about the inherent environmental impact of its products, but it is also actively looking for ways to reduce it (O'Rourke & Strand, 2017). This honesty was enough to gain the trust and loyalty of Patagonia's customers. Furthermore, Shein is an online clothing company, where the advantage is that the organisation offers extremely low prices and a wide range of clothing. In addition, Shein has a large online customer base. In 2023, more than 20 million users have downloaded the app (Sukhanova, 2024). Due to its products are low-priced and the clothes keep up with the trend, users like to shop and buy from Shein.

#### Weaknesses

All of Patagonia's products are made of sustainable materials. Compared with Shein, the price of Patagonia's products is high. Some of Patagonia's products are made from recycled materials, which need to be processed before they can be reused, so the product price is somewhat expensive (Foxfield, 2023). In addition, Patagonia's product options are limited compared to Shein's, as the organisation focuses primarily on using ethically considered materials and producing its products. But some products are not made from sustainable materials, so the customer base for Patagonia is limited (Forbes, 2023). Moreover, in Hunt-Vitell theory, Shein applies teleology consideration, that is, focusing on profit rather than morality. Shein involves the lack of transparency of organisational information, and it is also difficult to obtain information on the organisation's contribution to the environment and society and information on employee welfare on the Internet (Rajvanshi, 2023). Because of the non-transparency, this prevents an environmentally friendly customer base from buying from Shein. In addition, Shein involved violations of employee practices, including forcing employees to work 18 hours, unequal pay, and the use of child labour (Jackson, 2022). These ethical violations have again reduced the public's trust in Shein.

#### Opportunities

Patagonia does not have physical stores around the world, and at this stage, it has only a small public awareness. But because of the brand's reputation and its aggressive marketing ethic, Patagonia is able to invest in new technologies. This is because today's people use the Internet to communicate and shop, and it takes a lot of money to set up a physical store (Reinartz et al., 2019). Introducing new technology, such as developing an application or online platform, helps Patagonia quickly expand its brand around the world and reduce expenses. Similarly, Patagonia could offer more diversified clothing options, such as indoor clothing, to compete with other competitors. This can help find new markets and attract more customers. While Shein can highlight sustainable practices, Shein can use recycled materials to integrate them into its products and reduce the use of plastic wrapping paper (Shein, n.d.). These ways can restore customer confidence in Shein and increase the brand's reputation. Shein can also provide capable consumers with high-quality, high-price products. Shein can keep prices low to gain a competitive advantage, but it

also needs to launch some high-price products to attract consumers who like high-quality products, which can increase the profits and popularity of the organisation (Giovanni & Zaccour, 2019).

### Threats

Patagonia's products are made from sustainable materials and are expensive. This could lead to threats to the organisation due to its high price. There are many competitors in the market with products made of sustainable materials at low prices. Patagonia's customers will be attracted by other competitors offering similar products at low prices, and the sales of the organisation will decline (Toni et al., 2017). In addition, counterfeit products could pose a significant threat to Patagonia. Because Patagonia has a good reputation, there will be many small and medium-sized enterprises in the market that may imitate the organisation's products with inferior materials, which will cause damage to Patagonia's reputation and reduce the trust of customers (Muhammad Maaz & Tahir Ali, 2020). On the other hand, the threat to Shein is growing consumer awareness of ethics. Consumers are aware that the fashion industry has a certain impact on the environment and society, and if Shein does not pay attention to this and change its production, this may lead to a decline in sales and reduced customer loyalty. Also, with the increase of electronic stores, Shein may suffer a major threat. With a lot of competitors in e-commerce, and the competitors have applied ethical marketing and transparency, Shein may face losing market competition and customer numbers (CBS News, 2023).

### 4.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, ethical marketing has become a common topic among the society. In this society, consumers also attach great importance to the source of products, especially Generation Z, who attaches great importance to the transparency of products and brands, while the transparency of organisations will have an impact on Generation Z's selection and purchase of products. Although ethical marketing is good for organisations, there are also some organisations that continue to produce products without regard to ethics and sustainability. For example, expanding products and discriminatory advertising will affect customer loyalty; plagiarising designs and treating employees unethically can affect organisational performance; and the continuous use of plastics and chemicals can cause serious harm to the environment. These unethical practices will cause the organisation to be unable to continue to compete in the market; the number of customers will be reduced, and the brand reputation will be affected. While in the SWOT analysis, Shein is used as the main example. This is because the fashion industry is one of the industries that cause serious harm to the environment, and Shein also has numerous negative news, such as not being completely transparent about products and brands, illegal labour policies, and not implementing sustainability. As a result, many customers have gradually lost trust in Shein. In a nutshell, organisations must integrate ethics into marketing to increase customer confidence and be environmentally responsible.

### 5.0 Recommendations

#### 5.1 Increase Transparency

Brand transparency is the foundation of trust, and product transparency is to achieve trust by honestly providing product-related information. The two transparency Shein were not completely transparent. Transparency helps increase consumer trust in an organisation and its performance; however, research shows that 22% of Generation Z state that a lack of transparency in brands and products reduces interest in and perception of the product (CM Group, 2022). Because of the Internet era, more and more people like to shop online; 75% of Generation Z prefer to shop online (CM Group, 2022), and Shein is one of the electronic stores, which may make Generation Z have a negative view of Shein because the organisation does not make the brand and product transparent. So, Shein needed to share the organisation's labour policies, manufacturing processes, and operating model. In addition, Shein also needs to clearly communicate the materials used, the potential shortcomings of the product, and relevant information on the product. Transparency allows consumers to have a deep understanding of Shein, which helps Shein build a strong relationship with customers and gain trust and loyalty (Zakutniaia & Hayriyan, 2017).

#### 5.2 Promote Sustainability

Sustainability is a major concern for everyone. Sustainability helps to protect the environment and social peace, as well as the well-being of future generations. Shein is an ultra-fast fashion business that develops very quickly and forces suppliers to deliver products to customers around the world quickly (Liu, 2022). Although Shein claims to

practice sustainability, it seems to focus more on sales than sustainable behaviour. According to research, Shein is able to quickly produce products that contain dangerous chemicals, which are harmful to the environment and consumer safety (Pavarini, 2022). Therefore, Shein must adopt more sustainable strategies in the future instead of focusing only on profits and harming the environment. Implementing sustainable actions such as reducing the use of plastics, banning the use of chemicals, producing products from sustainable materials and follow SDGs framework can help Shein regain the public's confidence, continue to compete in the market and increase the brand's reputation (Gong et al., 2023).

### 5.3 Increase Employee Well-Being

The most important asset of an organisation is its employees, without whom the organisation cannot run the business. Employees help organisations achieve goals and improve organisational performance, while employee well-being is very important to employees, and the more well-being employees have, the more efficient and loyal they are (Gu et al., 2022). However, according to Mirror (2023), due to Shein is an ultra-fast fashion business, employees in its China factories are forced to work more than 12 hours and given unfair pay, making employees use chemicals to make products and not have fixed days off. This results in harm to employees' physical and mental health and reduced efficiency. Therefore, Shein must prioritise employee well-being, such as providing a positive working environment, modifying working hours, providing psychological counselling, and providing more basic employee well-being. By increasing employee well-being, employee job satisfaction can be improved, work will be more efficient, and employees will be more loyal to the organisation.

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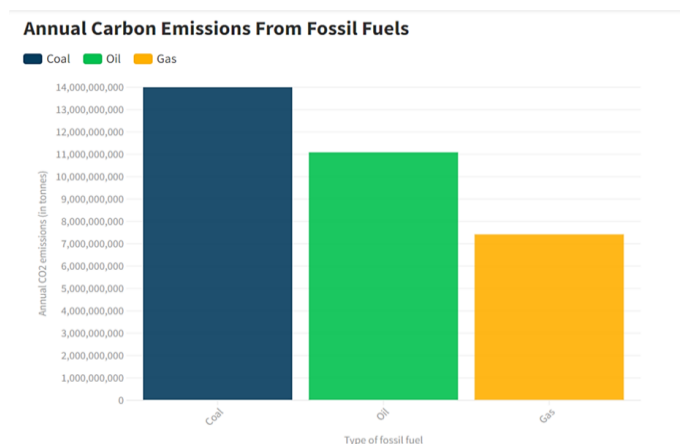
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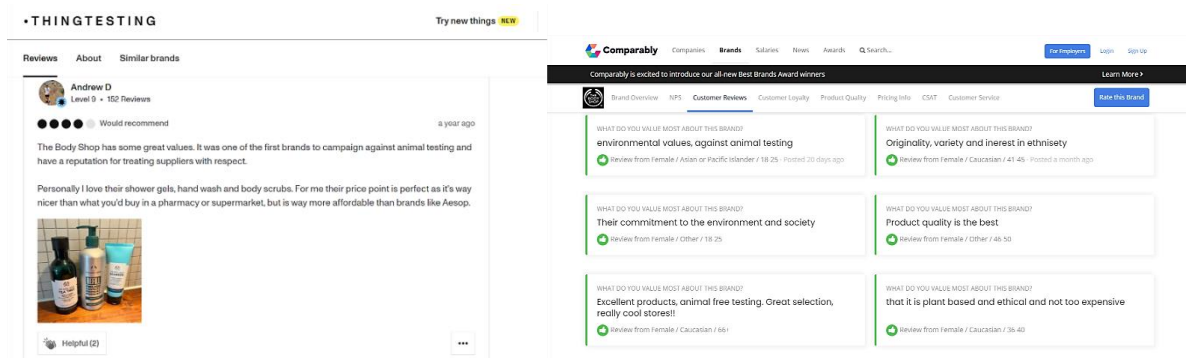
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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: The world's annual greenhouse gas emissions (Howell, 2023)



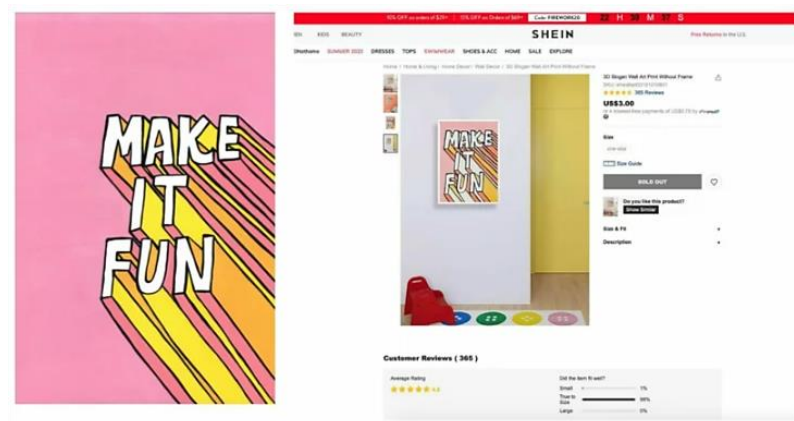
## Appendix 2: Customer review for The Body Shop (Comparably, n.d., & Thing Testing, n.d.)



## Appendix 3: IKEA reusable bag (Strategy, 2020)



## Appendix 4: In the advertisement, a husband buys an exercise bike for his wife for Christmas, and the husband forces his wife to make videos every day. The audiences think this is sexist against women (The Guardian, 2019)



**Appendix 5: Krista Perry's design is on the left, and Shein's design is on the right (Archie, 2023)****Appendix 6: Worst Plastic Polluters in 2020 (Statista, 2020)**

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