

## **Sustainable Communication Through Instagram: An Investigation of Fast Fashion Brands**

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### **Abstract**

**Background scientific research:** Fast fashion encourages over consumption by providing low-cost clothing to consumers through rapid production cycle and in excessive quantities (Joy et al., 2012; Zhang et al. 2021). In the pursuit of profit, fast fashion relies upon growth, speed and obsolesce (Ertekin and Atik, 2015). However, the lockdown imposed because of the COVID-19 outbreak allowed consumers an opportunity to reflect on their social responsibilities regarding fashion clothing and concerns of the impact on the global environment (McNeill and Venter, 2019). Young fashion consumers (Gen Z and younger Millennials) have demonstrated growing consideration and importance of sustainability when buying fashion items (Mintel, 2021). Many fashion brands now use social media channels and in particular Instagram, to address issues around sustainability (Dovleac, 2015). Fashion companies are placing more emphasis on branding and collections focusing on sustainability (Zhang et al., 2021), however, there is a lack of research on how fast fashion retailers are communicating and their sustainable initiatives through Instagram.

**Research issue to be addressed:** Currently, there exists is a lack of trust in fashion brands with their sustainability claims due to the use of images and greenwashing practices (Schmuck et al., 2018). Most brands focus their communication on environmental efforts (Kwon and Lee, 2021) with limited consideration towards social and economic impact when evaluating sustainability in fashion (Stahle and Muller, 2017). Fast fashion retailers such as Zara, H&M and Gap are recognized for putting effort into sustainable initiatives (Zhang et al., 2021) whilst others such as Primark and BooHoo are perceived by consumers to be less sustainable (Mintel, 2021). This indicates that opportunity for fast fashion brands to present and communicate their sustainability initiatives on Instagram. To date, research has in the main focused on sustainable brands with a small number of brands investigated (Milanesi et al. 2022; Testa et al. 2021).

From a consumer perspective, there is increasing consumer awareness of the environmental impact of the fashion industry and a growing willingness to pay more for sustainable clothing (Nayak et al., 2019). However, young female consumers are not sensitive to fast fashion products with sustainability features (Zhang et al.,

2021). There remains an inherent dissonance amongst consumers who share a concern for the environment even as they indulge in consumer patterns unethical to ecological practices (Joy et al., 2012). Therefore, it is challenging to make consumers understand the ethical and environmental concerns because their fashion goals take priority (Harris et al., 2016). Brands need to make their messages explicit and avoid information overload, boring performances and misinformation (Carrascosa et al., 2015). Gen Z consumers continued to shop online for fashion clothing at an increased pace throughout the lockdown down period (Siddiqui et al., 2021) highlighting a need for clear communication on sustainable fashion consumption.

Hence, this research seeks to respond to two research questions: (i) how do fast fashion brands communicate their sustainability initiatives through Instagram and (ii) how do their fans (consumers) respond to content focused on sustainability compared with content focused on brand lifestyles. We spotlight attention on fast fashion brands who focused on low prices, high volume and turnover and only recently adopted sustainable initiatives.

**Methodology:** This data collection adopts a mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative) content analysis which is consistent with previous studies (Milanesi et al., 2022; Testa et al., 2021). A coding document has been developed with a focus on sustainable and brand lifestyle content consistent with relevant studies (e.g. Kwon and Li, 2021). By applying a software tool (K4 Stogram) relevant images and text are captured within an elected timeframe (Milanesi et al., 2022). Thematic analysis will identify the themes expressed within the text data. Statistical analysis will be undertaken via SPSS to explore frequencies, percentages and Chi-square analysis to compare difference within online and multi-channel brands (e.g., Acuti, 2018).

The positioning of this research differs in the following ways: (i) a focus on 30 fast fashion brands; (ii) a comparison of brand lifestyle and sustainability communication (iii) a focus on both visual and text-based communication within one study.

**Results anticipated:** This is currently a work in progress. Full results will be presented and discussed at the conference presentation. It is anticipated that the results will reveal insights into how fast fashion brands are communicating their sustainability initiative and how consumers engage with such content. The fast fashion perspective will build upon knowledge from studies that have focused on sustainable fashion brands (Creange, 2019; Milanesi et al., 2022). From a consumer perspective, the results will reveal how consumer engage with brand lifestyle and sustainable content and identify posts that receive higher levels of engagement. The results will extend current understanding of sustainable communication through Instagram and provide direction on the type of content that is more likely to engage consumers. Finally, the will results will be of interest to the wider industry sector as they evaluate their attempts to become more sustainable and transparent within their fashion practice.

**Keywords:** sustainability, Instagram, fast fashion.

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