

SCHOOL OF
ECONOMICS AND
MANAGEMENT

Like it or Leave it:

Identity and Engagement: Consumers' Interpretation of Sustainability
Messages From Fast Fashion Brands on Social Media

by

Group 6

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Abstract

Despite growing interest in sustainable communication, current research provides limited insights into how consumers perceive sustainable communication from fast fashion brands. Existing studies broadly address sustainable communication on social media but rarely focus on specific industries. White et al. (2017) noted that consumer reactions to CSR initiatives remain underexplored, particularly in the fashion sector. Our research aims to address this gap by investigating how consumers express their identities related to sustainability on social media, specifically in response to sustainability initiatives by fast fashion brands. Using qualitative methods, we seek to understand the nuances of authentic sustainable communication and consumer reactions. More specifically, we executed netnography and thematic content analysis, leveraging Instagram posts from the fast fashion brands and Reddit forums related to our research topic. To analyze this data, we performed thematic content analysis. This study aims to enrich both academic research and industry practices by highlighting the significant role of language and communication in shaping consumer identities in the digital age. More specifically, this research paper aims to explore how consumers communicate and shape their identities related to sustainability on social media, focusing on their engagement with sustainability efforts by fast fashion brands. The fast fashion industry, known for its significant societal and environmental impact, was chosen due to its influence on consumer behavior and attitudes. Fast fashion brands, with their rapid production cycles and mass marketing, play a crucial role in shaping consumer perceptions. Economically, they create jobs, especially in developing countries, and contribute to the global economy. They also democratize fashion by making it accessible and affordable, influencing cultural norms and identities worldwide. However, the industry's environmental and ethical practices have come under scrutiny, making it an ideal subject for studying sustainability messaging. This study examines how consumers engage with sustainability messages from fast fashion brands on social media, aiming to illuminate the intersection of consumer culture, corporate responsibility, and digital communication. The fast fashion industry faces a dilemma in balancing authentic sustainability efforts with effective communication to avoid greenwashing and maintain credibility. Social media plays a dual role as a powerful communication tool and a potential source of skepticism. Brands like Zara and H&M must navigate the challenge of conveying genuine sustainability efforts amidst heightened consumer scrutiny. Ultimately, this research seeks to provide insights into *how consumers engage with and interpret sustainability messages from fast fashion brands on social media platforms while shaping and expressing their identity*. The limitations of this paper stem from the qualitative netnographic approach, which potentially limits the generalizability of the findings and using netnography highlights communicative content within online communities but not all consumer actions. Moreover, focusing only on Zara and H&M excludes broader market dynamics, and omitting TikTok overlooks emerging trends. However, this thesis lays a foundation for future research to build upon, aiding in steering the sustainability debate and the world towards a greener future.

Keywords: Communication, Fast Fashion, Social Media, Consumer Engagement, Social Identity Theory, Sustainability, eWOM, Responsibility, Language, Consumption, Netnography

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Table of Contents

Contents

Table of Contents.....	4
1 Introduction.....	6
1.1 Background.....	6
1.2 Aim and Objectives.....	7
1.3 Research Purpose and Problematization	8
1.3.1 Research Question.....	9
1.4 Delimitations.....	9
1.5 Outline of the thesis	10
2 Literature Review.....	11
2.1 Sustainable communication and social media	11
2.2 Consumer Responsibilization	12
2.3 Perception and Interpretation of Sustainability Messages	12
2.4 Communication and text production.....	14
2.4.1 Language calling for action.....	14
2.4.2 Word of mouth and Electronic Word of Mouth.....	14
2.5 Theoretical development.....	14
3 Methodology.....	17
3.1 Research Approach	17
3.2 Research Design.....	18
3.2.1 Data.....	18
3.2.2 Method	18
3.2.3 Reddit time frame.....	19
3.2.4 Instagram time frame	20
3.3 Data Collection Method.....	20
3.3.1 Online (community) sample.....	21
3.3.2 Fast fashion brands.....	29
3.4 Quality of data.....	30
3.5 Thematic Content Analysis.....	31
3.6 Limitations	33
3.7 Ethical Conduct.....	34
4 Consumer engagement with sustainability messages	35
4.1 Insights from former employees of the fast fashion brands	35
4.2 Consumers as defenders and supporters of fast fashion.....	37

4.2.1 Instagram posts	37
4.2.2 Reddit forums.....	37
4.3 Sustainability terms confusion	38
4.4 Disbelief in fast fashion sustainability claims.....	40
4.4.1 Instagram posts	40
4.4.2 Reddit forums.....	43
4.5 Action versus attitude	44
4.6 Increasing consumer responsibility.....	46
4.6.1 Instagram posts	46
4.6.2 Reddit forums.....	46
4.7 Social sustainability	48
5 Discussion	53
5.1 Findings.....	53
5.2 Summary of theme findings.....	54
5.3 General findings.....	55
5.4 Discussion on thematic content analysis.....	56
5.5 Theoretical Discussion.....	57
6 Conclusion	60
6.1 Practical Implications.....	61
6.2 Future Research	61
References.....	63
Appendices.....	68
Appendix 1 Forums from Reddit	69

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The fast fashion industry is undergoing a paradigm shift, fueled by rising consumer awareness and demand for sustainable practices. Whereas some sources indicate that Zara and H&M have been increasingly offering environmentally sustainable products as part of their efforts to enhance their image as environmentally responsible companies (Gerretsen and Kottasova, 2020; Goodwin, 2019), other sources argue that this phenomenon is only due to the increasing EU laws related to the fashion industry (Wright, 2023). Regardless of the angle of analysis, in today's fast-paced fashion industry, brands face a compelling obligation to communicate their sustainability efforts. Avoiding the green category trend could be detrimental to any brand (Olsen et al., 2014), as consumers increasingly prioritize eco-friendly options. Embracing sustainability not only aligns with ethical imperatives, but it also has tangible benefits. Introducing green products can positively shift consumer attitudes toward the brand, fostering a stronger sense of trust and loyalty (Olsen et al., 2014). However, managers of established brands must approach this change with caution. Adhering to the industry trend of green products may not always improve brand perception (Olsen et al., 2014), necessitating a nuanced approach informed by the brand's distinct identity and customer base.

Mintel (2023), a UK-based private market research firm, states that although shoppers will always value a good bargain, their willingness to support conventional fast fashion is decreasing. The importance of sustainability to clothing shoppers, with two-thirds of women in agreement, is only expected to increase. Nowadays, sustainability plays a significant role in the clothing shopping journey, with almost 6 out of 10 Gen Z women stating that retailers' and brands' sustainability efforts impact their decision to shop there (Mintel, 2023). This can be either good or bad for fast fashion brands, depending on their evaluation of the sustainability communication by these entities. Overall consumers are becoming less accepting of the drawbacks associated with fast fashion, prompting many fast fashion retailers to encounter heightened scrutiny and resistance from customers. This pressure is compelling them to adapt and reimagine their identities and product offerings (Mintel, 2023). Fast fashion brands already responded to this publicity and consumer awareness shift by improving their supply chain and products. Well-known fast fashion giants like H&M and Zara have introduced several sustainable apparel ranges in order to appeal to customers who prioritize ethical shopping practices. They also set sustainable ambitions or goals which they communicate on their websites. Nevertheless, these sustainability efforts have faced skepticism. Expressions like "eco-friendly," "sustainable," and "recycled" are frequently seen as ambiguous or vague assertions by brands, resulting in accusations of greenwashing, which pertains to the practice of deceiving consumers by highlighting only certain environmentally friendly aspects of a brand, aiming to cultivate a favorable corporate image and boost sales (Daniel et al., 2021). Overall, the textile industry has faced significant criticism regarding its environmental footprint and concerns about human health due to the presence of residues from substances used in both products and production processes (Grechi et al., 2020).

Understanding consumer interpretation and engagement with sustainable social media messages is critical for fast fashion companies looking to avoid greenwashing perceptions and build genuine relationships with an increasingly discerning consumer base. Fast fashion brands face the delicate task of effectively communicating their sustainability efforts on social media platforms while avoiding the risk of greenwashing allegations. Striking a balance between transparency and building trust is crucial,

especially when the existing social media presence, which is a highly dependable source of information, may need to adequately convey sustainable initiatives.

World events such as the pandemic, quarantines, restrictions, war and other impactful events, have affected consumers buying habits and made them turn to digital platforms and social media usage more than ever, shifting more and more to online shopping. According to the RetailX Global Fashion 2023 report, Google search has slipped from being the primary source of inspiration for fashion and other shoppers to being surpassed by Instagram and Facebook. According to RetailX's data (2023), 52.4% of fashion buyers worldwide currently make use of Instagram, 51.6% Facebook, and 49.8% Google search. The remaining two spots in the top five are occupied by social media platforms TikTok (28.1%) and YouTube (41.2%), which clearly indicates social media's role as a major fashion discovery route. The social media context is used in this study to show the relevance and importance consumers give to social media as a medium and also how consumers change their consumption behavior and attitudes toward fast fashion brands. We also noticed little research exploring social media's impact and effect on consumers' sustainability interpretation regarding fast fashion brands, therefore this study focuses on social media and how these medium shapes consumer culture.

To clarify the scope and content of our research the following definitions of the most important terms are used:

- Fast fashion describes low-priced but stylish clothing that moves quickly from design to retail stores to meet trends, with new collections being introduced continuously.
- Greenwashing: the intersection between poor environmental performance and positive communication about environmental performance (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).
- Sustainable communication: the act of consciously integrating sustainability into a communication strategy by telling stakeholders about a company's sustainability goals and efforts (Evelyne, 2022).
- Consumers: in this study, the term "consumers" does not exclusively refer to individuals patronizing a specific brand but encompasses a broader audience engaged with sustainability communication materials.

1.2 Aim and Objectives

Despite the predominant interest in sustainable communication, existing research offers limited insight into the specific dynamics of consumer perception of sustainable communication by fast fashion brands. While studies have examined broader aspects of sustainable communication through social media platforms, they are limited and mostly not focused on a specific industry. White et al. (2017) also conclude that the exploration of consumer reactions and responses to CSR initiatives and communication remains relatively understudied. Areas such as stakeholder and societal perspectives, along with the communicative aspect of involving stakeholders in dialogue, have yet to receive focused attention within the fashion and apparel industry.

We aim to explore how consumers communicate their identities in relation to sustainability through social media platforms, focusing on their engagement with sustainability initiatives promoted by fast fashion brands. Additionally, we detected a gap in research regarding how consumers use social media channels to express their identities in relation to sustainability. This research aims to fill these gaps by leveraging qualitative methods to unfold the complexities of authentically perceived sustainable communications by fast fashion brands on social media and consumers' reactions to them. By bridging theoretical insights with empirical data, our research aims to provide a richer understanding of the

dynamic relationship between consumers, fast fashion brands and sustainability in the digital age. This study aims to contribute valuable insights to both academic research and industry practices, highlighting the complex and crucial role of language and communication in shaping consumer identities.

1.3 Research Purpose and Problematization

The purpose of this research paper is to investigate how consumers communicate and shape their identities in relation to sustainability through social media channels, with a specific focus on their engagement with sustainability efforts promoted by fast fashion brands.

The fast fashion industry was chosen as the focus of this study because of its significant societal and environmental impact, as well as its growing influence on consumer behavior and attitudes. Fast fashion brands operate in a unique environment characterized by short production cycles, mass consumption, and pervasive marketing strategies, making them key players in shaping consumer perceptions and behaviors. The fast fashion industry serves a purpose to both society and consumers considering its societal, economic, and cultural implications. From the economic perspective, fast fashion brands create new job placements particularly in developing countries and contribute to the global economy through manufacturing and retail sectors (Taplin, 2014). Accessibility and affordability are critical pillars for democratizing fashion and allowing diverse socio-economic groups to participate and get involved with fast fashion and trends. Additionally, its rapid innovation and trend adaptation encourage creativity and push boundaries in the fashion industry by influencing cultural norms and changing identities all over the world (Crasnitchi, 2024). Furthermore, the fast fashion industry is increasingly being scrutinized for its environmental and ethical practices, making it an ideal setting for studying the effectiveness of sustainability messaging.

By investigating consumer engagement with sustainability messages from fast fashion brands on social media platforms, we hope to shed light on a critical intersection of consumer culture, corporate responsibility, and digital communication, with implications for both academic research and industry practice. Furthermore, the fast fashion industry is facing an existential dilemma: how to authentically incorporate sustainability into their operations while effectively communicating these efforts to customers. While major players such as Zara and H&M are taking steps toward sustainability, questions remain about the sincerity of their efforts. Are these shifts motivated by genuine ethical considerations, or are they simply a response to external pressures such as regulatory requirements? This conflict between authenticity and perception is exacerbated by the widespread threat of greenwashing, especially in an industry known for its environmental and ethical challenges. Brands need to be careful while communicating virtually, especially when it comes to sustainability efforts. Any discrepancies or insincerities in sustainable initiatives can swiftly harm a brand's reputation in the face of increased customer knowledge and scrutiny. In the digital sphere, where false information circulates quickly and customer opinion can change drastically, authenticity, openness, and consistency are critical to preserving credibility and trustworthiness.

The role of social media as both a powerful communication tool and a potential breeding ground for skepticism complicates matters further. Social media is essential to modern communication because it allows brands to interact with consumers, create communities, and promote their principles. It amplifies marketing messages and fosters brand loyalty by offering unmatched reach and direct consumer connection. While platforms like Instagram provide brands with unprecedented opportunities to engage with customers and promote their sustainability initiatives, they also increase the risk of scrutiny and

backlash. Despite the growing importance of social media in shaping consumer perceptions, there needs to be more comprehensive research into how consumers interpret sustainability messages from fast fashion brands on these platforms.

1.3.1 Research Question

Based on the world and market needs, fast fashion brands actively pursue consumers with sustainable communications and claims, encouraging consumer interaction and shaping brand-consumer relationships. This phenomenon is largely discussed in academic literature, which includes extensive studies on corporate sustainability communication, branding dynamics, greenwashing and consumer responsibility. However, a critical gap remains: understanding how consumers use language through social media to create their identities in relation to sustainability. Therefore, our research question is: *“How do consumers engage with and interpret sustainability messages from fast fashion brands on social media platforms while shaping and expressing their identity?”*

Our study seeks to bridge this gap by exploring the communication strategies and language employed by fast fashion brands and how consumers interpret and respond to these communications. Understanding how consumers use social media to form their identities around sustainability can lead to more effective communication strategies, meanwhile the role of social media has become a focused channel for consumer-brand interactions, where consumers are not just passive recipients but active participants in shaping their identities.

The literature review examines sustainable communication on social media and consumer responsabilization. Social Identity Theory is incorporated as a theoretical perspective to understand consumer interactions with sustainability messages. However, its application in fast fashion sustainability communication is rather unexplored. By integrating Social Identity Theory and thematic content analysis into our analysis, we aspire to gain a deeper understanding of how consumers engage with sustainability narratives and construct their identities around these interactions.

The outcomes of the study that will be executed to answer this question could provide recommendations to consider regarding future research and organizational decisions issued with this topic. Based on our theoretical discussions and findings, we will offer guidance to policymakers and social marketers on crafting sustainable communication strategies for social media platforms. These recommendations aim to enhance consumer perceptions, increase positive engagement, and elicit favorable reactions toward such communication.

1.4 Delimitations

Since the research aims to have a consumer-centric approach the brands and related subjects such as brand attitude or brand identity will not be the focus of this research, for it has little relation to our research topic and it also has been frequently and exhaustively discussed in earlier studies. This study does not provide a complete literature review of consumer behavior. Instead, it draws on selected pertinent studies regarding consumer identity, perception, interpretations, feelings and engagement, thus consumer purchase behavior is excluded from the research. Moreover, when referring to ‘sustainability messages’ the researchers indicate organic sustainable communication by the fast fashion brand itself. According to the typology of CSR communication by Seele and Lock (2015), social media is seen as deliberative published communication. Thus, this study will not concentrate on sustainability messages through social advertising.

1.5 Outline of the thesis

The following section briefly outlines the chapters in the thesis. This chapter introduces the research background, the aim and objectives, the research purpose and the delimitations. Chapter 2 ‘Literature Review’ provides an overview of related literature and presents useful theories. In Chapter 3 the methodology is presented. This is followed by Chapter 4, where we introduce our analysis, and this chapter is followed by the discussion in Chapter 5. The paper ends with Chapter 6. In this chapter the research question will be answered, the implications of the research are mentioned, the limitations of the research are addressed and suggestions for further research are made.

2 Literature Review

The initial section of the chapter undertakes a comprehensive review of existing literature on sustainable communication on Social Media and consumer responsabilization. Subsequently, it delves into an analysis of prior research concerning consumer engagement, perceptions, and the interpretation of sustainability messages. Moreover, the study incorporates Social Identity Theory as a pertinent framework for understanding the subject matter.

2.1 Sustainable communication and social media

Brydges et al. (2022) highlight that instead of concealing, organizations should openly and truthfully communicate the sustainability measures they've implemented. Specifically for Instagram, an enabler of dialogic communication, concerns associated with managing transparency persist. Dunn and Harness (2018) also acknowledge the role of social media content in the perception of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) attributions. Seele and Lock (2015) argue that CSR encompasses economic, social, and environmental responsibilities. Therefore, communication involving sustainability is seen as a form of CSR communication. Dunn and Harness (2018) argue that when CSR is communicated through social media, User Generated Content (UGC) develops, which can impact skepticism. This social media green advertising skepticism is one of the causes of negative sentiments (word of mouth) on social media according to Farhat et al. (2021). The misleading claim of social media advertising produces this high level of green skepticism on social media. In line with Brydges et al. (2022), Farhat et al. (2021) therefore suggest that marketers should provide relevant, clear and truthful communication. The study of Min Kong et al. (2021) further emphasizes this by setting a prerequisite for positive sustainable brand evaluations, namely trust. By leveraging trust, the chance that a brand is seen as ethical and transparent will increase. Thus, if advertising material's claims are unclear, lacking details on the enforcement of sustainability, potentially leads consumers to perceive implicit deception due to vague or ambiguous statements that are challenging to verify. On the other hand, Brydges et al. (2022) surprisingly showed that there is also such a thing as being too transparent, since consumers will then highlight failure or greenwashing. Furthermore, Kwon et al. (2024) suggest that green advertising is an important marketing strategy that needs to be implemented on social media. However, managers tend not to adopt a proper understanding of what "greenwashing" comprises. Blazkova et al. (2023) further mention that greenwashing debates on social media are often inseminated by small groups of participants, NGOs and media outlets. Moreover, they use stakeholder theory to interpret the debates between the actors in greenwashing debates, as they believe this theory has played an insignificant role in green claims analysis. Ktisti et al. (2022) further argue that traditional advertising for green products cannot be the best approach, therefore green advertising is needed for corporations to carefully position themselves in the market by using proper social media platform selection and green communication. Green advertising is preferred over traditional marketing because it resonates with consumers' growing concern for sustainability, promoting not only eco-friendly products but also a responsible lifestyle and production methods. Furthermore, with billions of active social media users, green advertising effectively leverages these platforms to influence consumer behavior and purchasing decisions (Ktisti et al., 2022).

2.2 Consumer Responsibilization

According to Humphreys and Thompson (2014), the conventional roles of companies, governments, and NGOs in spearheading solutions and addressing social issues have shifted. Instead, consumers are increasingly seen as the primary agents for problem-solving, wielding perceived influence through their purchasing decisions. This consumer responsibilization is one main theme that is highly attached to sustainability. It is important to acknowledge that individuals often attempt to comprehend their own actions and responsibilities. Some individuals grapple with sentiments of guilt and endeavor to reconcile this by renegotiating their identity concerning others. This suggests that consumer responsibility involves the personal introspection of the individual, not solely as responsible for addressing environmental issues but also as a contributor to pollution (Soneryd and Uggla, 2015). Gonzales- Arcos et al. (2021) mention ‘responsibilization battles’, addressing the event when people argue with each other about who is responsible for a certain action.

This is illustrated today by citizens having different views on who should take responsibility regarding a more sustainable planet, the companies versus the consumers. This is not without risk, according to Plé and Demangeot (2020) when these conflicts manifest in public domains like social media, they could intensify consumer opposition and indignation towards sustainability initiatives, possibly spreading through social contagion mechanisms, thereby disrupting other social norms and behaviors. Developing successful communication strategies for sustainability projects requires an understanding of the mechanics of responsibilization battles. When consumers perceive sustainability messages as additional demands rather than sincere attempts at group action, they may become disengaged or resistive to them if they believe that their responsibilities are too great. However, consumers may be more open to messages that encourage them to take action if they believe they have agency and can make significant contributions to sustainability. Thus, the question that remains is whether the level of consumer responsibilization that individual citizens experience can influence the engagement with or the interpretation of sustainability messages and if so, in what way.

Gonzales-Arcos et al. (2021) discuss consumer resistance as one of the forms of engaging with sustainable communication. More generally Gonzales- Arcos et al. (2021, p.53) underline that consumers tend to have a broader look, thus taking other practices and their elements into account as well. They highlight the following quote: “I don’t understand how they can talk about #ByePlasticBags while still allowing tires.” This can also be seen as a form of consumer resistance, which is tied closely to responsibilization. Similar comments are being placed below Instagram posts regarding sustainability by fast fashion brands.

2.3 Perception and Interpretation of Sustainability Messages

Engaging with and interpreting messages regarding sustainability can take on many different forms. Besides Gonzales- Arcos et al. (2021), White et al. (2017) also address this ‘broader look’ in how consumers criticize fashion companies; consumers assess the fashion company’s social responsibility (CSR) based on the social responsibility level of the other companies in the same supply chain. They provide this as the reason why those companies should execute strategic communication about their CSR practices. Evans & Peirson-Smith (2018) focused on the wording in sustainable communication and the related perceptions and consequences of these wordings. They suggest that using terms that suggest tangible and achievable sustainable actions, like “fair trade” or “eco,” rather than “organic” or “sustainability,” could lower user skepticism, avoidance, and indifference, while simultaneously enhancing consumer involvement with sustainable fashion. On top of that they emphasize that even

though there is an increase in the acknowledgment that a couple of fashion brands engage in constructive action, the constant inundation of superficial, impractical environmental messages has instilled frustration in both fashion brands and government bodies. Therefore, their advice for fashion brands is to focus on a single sustainability theme and incorporate it into their promotional storytelling. It's essential to ensure that consumers grasp how these benefits positively affect all stakeholders.

Apart from that, Wagner et al. (2018) state that not only the text is important but also the visual content, since they concluded that the more basic the design is, the more sustainable the ranking by consumers is. On the contrary, the more elaborate and trendy designs are assumed to have a greater environmental impact. In more detail, the fabric of a product itself (either displayed as a visual or stated as text) provokes various sentiments. Organic and BCI cotton is perceived as the most luxurious, with recycled polyester perceived even more luxurious (Wagner et al. 2018). Thus, it is important when analyzing perception and evaluations to not only focus on text, but also on the visual itself; what value do consumers attach to each wording and design element? Another dependent element is the direction that the CSR information that is communicated is taking; negative CSR information elicits a negative response from all consumers, while positive CSR information resonates positively only with those who strongly support the CSR initiatives (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001).

Apart from the influence on the content side, there is also the consumer itself that needs to be considered according to Sen and Bhattacharya (2001). They emphasize that similar to how the consumer perceptions of brand alignment are highly based on self-relevant characteristics, their perceptions of alignment between their own personalities and those of relevant companies (as demonstrated by their CSR initiatives) can also influence self-definition. Therefore, perceptions of sustainable messages are highly dependent on brand-consumer identification. This is later referred to as company-consumer identification by Sen and Bhattacharya (2003). A high level of company-consumer identification is accompanied by the following sentiments: it makes consumers more psychologically connected to and caring for the company, consumers are more likely to engage in company promotion, recruiting new customers and defending a brand when it comes under adverse scrutiny in the media or is attacked by other consumers. Moreover, consumers will display resilience to negative information about the brand they identify with, and they will become more forgiving when the brand makes mistakes (Sen and Bhattacharya, 2003).

White et al. (2019) developed the SHIFT framework, where the authors emphasize the five psychological factors: social influence, habit formation, individual self, feelings and cognition and tangibility, through which consumers might be motivated to engage in environmental behaviors when these factors are leveraged in the right manner or approach. The most interesting aspect of this framework is 'Feelings and cognition', which is often not expanded thoroughly in other papers and literature streams regarding habit changes in introducing new sustainability practices to consumers. Besides that, White et al. (2019) stress the function of shared emotions in sustainable consumer behavior. Hence, the collectivism and social side of emotions should not be underestimated.

When zooming in on emotion and communication, we want to take a look at the use of humor and irony. Joshua (2020) states that for centuries, various prevalent forms of humor, including parody, irony, and satire, have been geared towards shaping and reshaping personal, political, and social dynamics at both individual and societal levels. In our research this applies to the relationship between consumer and company or brand. The type of irony used in our study is verbal irony. According to Joshua (2020) this is the type of irony that is always executed on purpose. Irony in the broader sense is an expression of satire. Since satire is a literary tool utilized by authors to unveil and censure the folly and misconduct

of individuals or societies through humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule (Joshua, 2020). As Simpson and Mayr (2010) state; humor can serve various purposes: as a means of oppression wielded by the powerful, as a mode of resistance for marginalized individuals, or as a tool to foster solidarity within marginalized communities.

2.4 Communication and text production

2.4.1 Language calling for action

Communication is a key component of marketing. Within communication there are different agents. Firstly, customers are agents that communicate and interact not only with businesses but also with one another. Furthermore, business entities interact with investors and society exchanges ideas and morals to the general public through movies, newspapers, and now mainly social media channels. All these conversations generate text and have text transcription capabilities, as mentioned by Berger et al. (2020). In their article, Berger et al. (2020) make an interesting comparison between cultural producers and consumers, where the first create movies, books and digital artifacts that individuals and organizations consume, whereas the latter write online reviews that other consumers read. This demonstrates that there is a difference between a text producer and a text receiver. Moreover, it is noteworthy to consider the strategic utilization of language by brands on social media platforms. In our study, language emerges as a potent tool not merely to communicate a message but also for invoking action. For instance, fast fashion brands often leverage descriptive language alongside visually appealing images on Instagram to highlight their sustainability initiatives. These posts serve not only to inform consumers but to also force them to buy responsibly, therefore advertising their sustainability clothing lines as pure and environmentally responsible. This language used as a call for action demonstrates how the interplay between language and visuals cultivates involvement and compels the consumers to actively participate in advancing sustainable objectives and foster a sense of collective responsibility towards bettering the environmental state of our planet.

2.4.2 Word of mouth and Electronic Word of Mouth

In the dynamic field of consumer communication, two distinct yet powerful channels emerge: Word of Mouth (WOM) and Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM). While rooted in different mediums, these channels share the common goal of shaping consumer behavior. WOM is rooted in interpersonal connections and thrives on trust and authenticity ignited through face-to-face interactions. Conversely, eWOM uses digital platforms as a medium to disseminate opinions and recommendations to large audiences (Serra Cantalops and Salvi, 2014). This duality presents different challenges and opportunities for brands, where traditional WOM offers unfiltered communication beyond brand control, while eWOM demands for active participation and accountability from brands and consumers in the digital world (Lee and Youn, 2009) state the importance of brands navigating the complexities of consumer influences while maintaining ethical and environmentally conscious practices. Our study focuses on the digital aspect of social media channels and platforms and by delving deeper into the role of eWOM, we uncover eWOM's role and impact within sustainable communication practices presented on social media.

2.5 Theoretical development

In this paragraph, we will introduce the theories that guided our analysis, offering their theoretical perspectives. Our primary inquiry revolves around the perceptions, interpretation and engagement of

sustainability messages on social media by fast fashion brands. We use Social Identity Theory as a theoretical lens through which to understand the fluidity of consumer engagement, interpretation and reaction. Social identity theory explores how individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups. Among others this is discussed by Belk (1988), addressing the Extended Self and by Goffman (1959) exploring Symbolic Interactionism. In the context of sustainability messages, we can investigate how consumers' identification with environmental or socially conscious groups influences their interpretation and engagement with fast fashion brands' sustainability messages on social media. This importance of social context is also highlighted by Gonzales-Arcos et al. (2021). They state that all practice theory perspectives collectively acknowledge that individuals, animals, materials, equipment, activities, norms, rules, values, and understandings are interconnected components that shape social practices and their execution. Therefore, the social aspect of the eventual consumer engagement, interpretation or reaction should not be underestimated when executing a study.

Tajfel and Turner's (1979) theory of intergroup conflict offers valuable insights into the dynamics of consumer skepticism and distrust. Their theory states that membership in social groups provides individuals with a sense of identity, further fueling their self-belonging and self-esteem. For some consumers, identification with environmental values is a crucial part of their social identity, as for some other groups of consumers buying fast fashion and looking fashionable is important for their identity and social status. If consumers perceive inconsistencies between the brand's sustainability claims and their ingroup's environmental or ethical standards, it may result in intergroup conflict. The intergroup conflict theory provides a framework for understanding the complex dynamics between consumer identities and sustainability claims in the fast fashion industry (Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

If we zoom in on consumer and identity, identity involves consuming ideas where individuals actively choose and engage in activities to align their "self" concept with the identity they present to others. This ongoing process of self-refinement and development is in constant flux (Mick and Buhl, 1992). To strengthen their self-constructed identity as environmentalists and achieve consistency between their core identity and personal image, consumers often emphasize their ecological awareness. They construct their identity (Schroeder, 2022) by participating in activities and making choices recognized as environmentally responsible. Consumers use eco-identity to explain their consumption and resistance actions in contemporary society (Arnould et al., 2023, p. 18). Thus, sustainably aware consumers will do what is right for their perceived identity, such as buying less or no new clothes to prevent textile waste and other environmental consequences of over-consumption. Meanwhile, consumers showcase and express these significant identity markers in various ways in their daily lives while competing or neglecting others (Arnould et al., 2023, p. 17). Within our analysis we will evaluate our data to see if and how consumers are constructing their identity by expressing identity markers.

Overall, it can be concluded that emotions play a significant role in the realm of fashion, with trust and authenticity as the most important elements (Solér et al., 2015). Generally, fashion holds significant symbolism, enabling individuals to convey their self-identity, reflecting not just their present selves, but also their aspirations or idealized selves (Valor, 2007). The proliferation of diverse identities is facilitated, particularly by accessible fashion options. With a combination of low costs and instant satisfaction fast fashion provides an attractive opportunity to create temporary identities (Joyet al., 2012). Moreover, consumers are reluctant to sacrifice this symbolic value to adopt more sustainable consumption habits (Joy et al., 2012). Thus, while their perception or interpretation of sustainable messages might be negative, their purchase behavior could remain unchanged.

Related to social identity and consumption is social distinction and taste, Bourdieu (1984) addressed these concepts, and coined the concept 'capitals'. The capitals entail three different components; economic capital (referring to resources and wealth), cultural capital (containing skills and knowledge) and social capital, in which the latter is the total of all capitals. Bourdieu (1984) stresses that the various capitals often overlap. Apart from that, he coined the concept 'consumer taste', in which he refers to the way people consume. Moreover, he also highlights that this can lead to 'symbolic violence', which encompasses a form of emotional judgment where people criticize other people's taste based on their own cultural and social standards. This theory will provide a lens through which we can examine if we see this reflected in our data and how it reflects consumers interactions with fast fashion brands.

3 Methodology

Having gathered and discussed the relevant literature and frameworks, we now present and give attention to the methodology of our study. The following section outlines the research design, data collection methods, time frame, sample used, and analytical approaches employed to investigate our research question.

3.1 Research Approach

Given that the purpose of this research is to explore consumer perceptions of sustainable communication from fast fashion brands on social media, an exploratory methodology is essential to facilitate contextual data gathering. Hence, the selected methodology is qualitative rather than quantitative. Given its capacity to delve deeply into individuals' complex views, attitudes, and behaviors, a qualitative method is used to investigate consumers' engagement and interpretation of sustainability messaging from fast fashion firms on social media platforms. Qualitative methods enable us as researchers to capture the dynamic nature of consumer discourse and the evolving meanings attributed to sustainability within the fast fashion context, providing valuable insights for both theory development and practical implications for marketers and policymakers (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the thesis took on a social constructionist view. According to Berger & Luckmann (1966) social constructionism is based on relativism and nominalism, where reality is not objective but socially constructed and given meaning by people in social interactions. Along with social constructionism, our study takes a nominalist position which suggests and is open to multiple perspectives being taken for a particular phenomenon (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Moreover, **this position corresponds with our method which is digital ethnography (netnography) and thematic content analysis, as we explore the voice of online communities and embrace the individual opinions and contextual arguments in order to understand the origins of participants' interactions in the digital realm.** Moreover, the research question proposed in paragraph 1.3.1 is a “how” question. According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) all these matters indicate a nominalist point of view.

This study undertakes an abductive approach. This means the study combines induction and deduction, but it is closer to induction than deduction. Moreover, abduction focuses on refining or developing existing theories rather than generating new ones. Abduction also involves iteratively adjusting the central framework based on empirical evidence and theoretical understanding (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). All these features can be found in our research. As we collected and analyzed the data, we employed inductive reasoning to let the data speak to us. We observed new themes and patterns emerging from the consumers' discussions on social media, particularly on Reddit forums. These insights prompted us to revisit and refine our theoretical framework, aligning it more closely with our empirical findings. This iterative process of going back and forth between theory and data embodies the abductive approach. For instance, when we observed that former employees were particularly vocal and critical about sustainability claims, we integrated these insights into our theoretical understanding of consumer engagement and skepticism. This adjustment enriched our analysis, allowing us to develop a more nuanced interpretation of how sustainable communication is perceived and critiqued by different consumer groups. Thus, the abductive approach in our research involved a continuous dialogue between theory and data. Theories informed our initial exploration, and empirical data inspired theoretical refinements, resulting in a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under study. This approach

provided the flexibility needed to capture the complexity of consumer perceptions and the dynamic nature of online discourse about sustainability in the fast fashion industry.

3.2 Research Design

3.2.1 Data

The data that is needed to answer the research question is consumer perceptions through forums and social media platforms. This is needed to analyze how consumers view sustainability communications through Instagram and Reddit Forums and how they express their identities. Paragraph 3.3 will provide more details regarding the data collection.

3.2.2 Method

We will use a qualitative research design consisting of netnography. Netnography, a form of online ethnography, is a novel qualitative research method that applies ethnographic techniques to investigate the cultures and communities evolving through computer-mediated communication. This method concerns utilizing publicly available information from online forums, it discerns and comprehends the requirements and influencers guiding relevant online consumer segments (Kozinets, 2002). We found this method particularly useful for understanding and interpreting consumers' online behavior, opinions, and past experiences of individuals with fast fashion brands exposed to digital spaces, considering the fact that we are conducting this study in a social media aspect.

To complement our netnographic approach, we also employed thematic content analysis (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). This method enabled us to systematically identify, analyze, and report themes within our data. Thematic content analysis helped us delve deeper into the qualitative data collected, providing a structured interpretation and uncover of underlying messages and themes within online conversations. This dual approach of thematic content analysis and netnography enhanced the rigor and depth of our research, providing a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of online communities' interactions.

Instagram and Reddit both provide an option for consumers to participate in the debate around sustainability communication, as stated in the literature review. Moreover, Instagram accounts of the brands and Reddit forums are not only easily accessible and free to use, but also provide unique advantages that make them ideal for our study. Instagram posts and comments provide a great amount of data and unfiltered content, thus contributing rich data for our analysis. The visual content found on Instagram accounts adds depth to the analysis, capturing textual and visual aspects of user experiences and offers insights into how brands visually communicate their sustainability efforts online. Reddit, on the other hand, has structured forums or "subreddits" dedicated to specific topics, including sustainability. Reddit is also considered as a social medium and it is highly focused on communities, rather than having an emphasis on the individual as Instagram might convey. The anonymity of Reddit forums encourages more honest and candid discussions, thus offering unfiltered views and perceptions of public opinion.

Additionally, users in the digital space express themselves in a more natural light and authentic manner compared to traditional surveys, questionnaires, or interviews. Observing this interaction online gives us a better understanding of the everyday experiences and everyday life of the consumers. Online communities often provide a space for individuals to express themselves more freely and candidly,

reducing the observer effect where participants might alter their behavior due to the presence of the researcher. **In contrast to other methods such as conventional market-oriented ethnography, netnography is a quicker and less complex alternative and can be conducted unobtrusively and in a naturalistic manner** (Kozinets, 2002). This naturalistic touch is also addressed by Potter (1997) as 'naturally occurring talk'. Naturally occurring talk refers to spoken language generated independently of any researcher intervention, such as everyday telephone conversations. It is 'natural' in that it is not prompted or structured by the researcher through tools like interview schedules, questionnaires, experimental protocols, or similar social research methodologies (Potter, 1997).

Furthermore, we explore the community dynamics (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), observing how people interact in their intergroups and share information with one another. Reddit forums and Instagram provide a global reach and provide a platform for global discussions, thus allowing us to reach different cultural backgrounds and perceptions. The real-time update of trends and conversations in social media and forums allows us to capture reactions as they unfold, which would not be possible with another research method. Lastly, conducting netnography made it possible for us to have a global reach, despite the absence of resources to collect all data in person.

3.2.3 Reddit time frame

The selected time frame for this research for Reddit forums is the last 5 years, ranging from 2019 to 2023. It was an intentional decision to capture a period marked by significant world events and developments. During this time, the world faced an emergence of pivotal sociopolitical, environmental and economic events that shaped public discourse and generally transformed consumers' perceptions. Mental health practitioners are observing an increase in patients presenting symptoms of anxiety related to climate change (Yale Sustainability, 2023). Amid the crisis of war between Russia and Ukraine, consumers exhibited panic buying behavior driven by concerns over potential product shortages. Additionally, the escalation of tensions during the Palestine-Israel conflict further has fueled global uncertainty, impacting consumer sentiment. Furthermore, consumer perceptions regarding purchasing decisions during this period are crucial and can contribute to demand-side risks (Yassin, 2022). Apart from the economic consequences of wars, worldwide events such as the pandemic and economic crisis have made consumers and businesses look after their sustainability efforts and reflect on protecting and polluting the environment less. According to Leal Filho et al. (2022), the COVID-19 pandemic abruptly changed the world economy dynamics, along with the psychological distress that resulted from the restrictions which caused serious changes in consumer consumption patterns. The authors mention the revival of "retail therapy" which is seen as a way for consumers to find some serenity and psychological ease when buying and splurging on online and offline shopping. Concerning their study, Leal Filho et al. (2022) provide interesting results regarding higher sensitivity to consumption by consumers after the COVID-19 era, indicating that consumers have paid higher prices for sustainable products. This stems from the high awareness of consumers regarding their health and lifestyle. The COVID-19 pandemic made consumers all over the world reflect on their consumption patterns, but it is worth noting that people who possess greater ecological consciousness are more motivated to comprehend environmental issues, which leads them to take pro-environmental action. Lastly, **we limited the scope to this particular time frame because we argue that the data collected remains relevant and reflective of the recent trends and sentiments within the online community in the light of answering our proposed research question.**

3.2.4 Instagram time frame

Although the term greenwashing was already coined in 1986 by Jay Westerveld, the term became popular among citizens and media (Becker-Olsen & Potucek, 2013) at the end of the 20th century. Amidst numerous greenwashing scandals, with Volkswagen standing out as one of the most well-known examples, the period from the 2000s to 2010s witnessed the solidification of greenwashing as a recognized malpractice. In the current milieu, we're inundated with messages from various sources. Amidst the multitude of content—both online and offline—clarity becomes essential for the public to discern between superficial gestures and genuine efforts. Correspondingly, searches for greenwashing and associated information reached their peak around the same period (Macesar, 2024). Therefore, for Instagram, we went back to posts originating from 2017 to 2024 (see paragraph 3.3.1) talking about sustainability and receiving comments and backlash about greenwashing from Instagram users. We used this time frame for the same reasons as we did for Reddit posts, but also these are the years that emerged throughout our Google search (see paragraph 3.3.1 for a more detailed description on this). Moreover, when covering several years, we could discover interesting differences regarding the comments and sentiments when comparing the data from these years. From around 2020 on both Zara and H&M have been suffering backlash from consumers regarding their stance on the Ukraine war and supporting Israel. Posts are flooded with negative comments boycotting the company because consumers believe the brand allegedly supports the genocide and Israel, due to lack of support for Palestine and also due to a highly controversial campaign from Zara, showcasing a mockery of photoshoots similar to war zones and victims from Gaza. Since these comments and sentiments are not relevant to our study and topic, we excluded them from our study.

It is interesting to mention that we also searched manually for Instagram posts regarding sustainability in the most recent years, 2023 and 2024, and discovered that the number of posts was very slim. This could indicate a change of strategy by the fast fashion brands, indicating a stagnant period of explicitly addressing sustainability in any way in their social media communication to avoid greenwashing accusations.

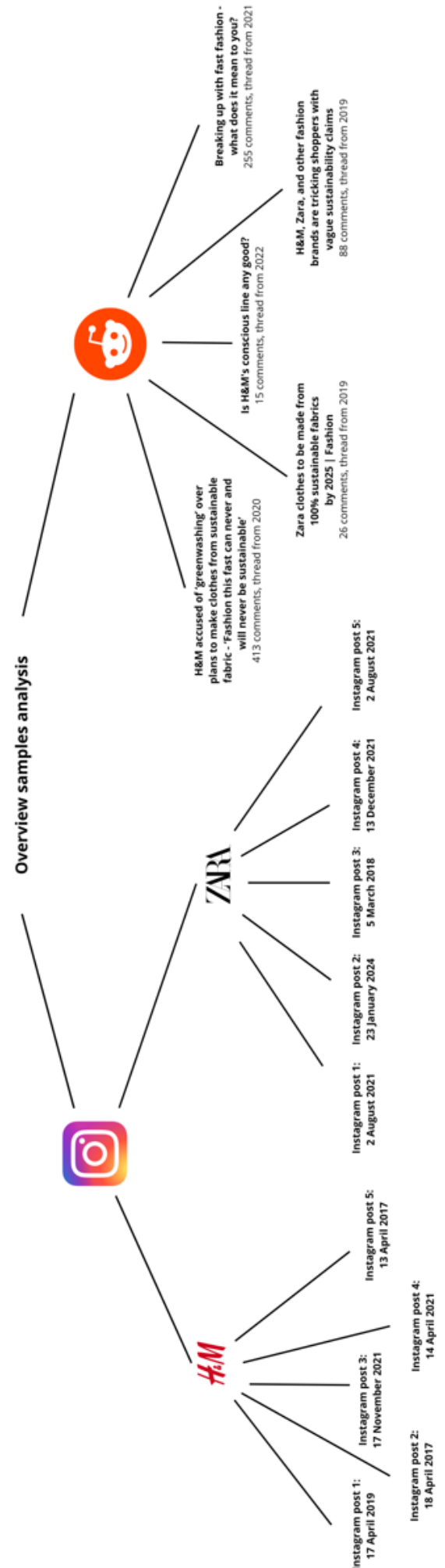
3.3 Data Collection Method

As previously indicated, netnography—a research methodology that entails watching and evaluating online interactions to learn about customer behavior and attitudes—was our method of choice for gathering data. To be more precise, we looked closely at several social media sites run by well-known fast fashion companies, such as the official Zara and H&M Instagram pages. To assess consumer views, attitudes, and experiences about fashion firms' sustainability efforts expressed through social media channels required sifting through comments, postings, and discussions. Furthermore, we looked at fashion-focused consumer forums and chat rooms, where conversations around sustainability in the fast fashion sector frequently occur. We wanted to get a detailed picture of how customers react to and perceive fast fashion businesses' sustainability marketing, so we immersed ourselves in these online forums. In our analysis, we focused on credibility and perceived value in sustainable fashion communications. Through this comprehensive approach, we hope to add valuable insights to the ongoing discussion about sustainability in the fast fashion industry.

3.3.1 Online (community) sample

The chosen online communities as samples for this qualitative study are the official Instagram accounts of fast fashion brands, namely Zara and H&M, and Reddit forums with discussions related to sustainability and trust in the above-mentioned brands' practices. An overview of the platforms, posts and Reddit forums used for the data analysis is presented in Figure 1. This figure is an overview of the sample analysis as a visual representation of the samples used for the analysis which is created by this paper's researchers. The eventual data corpus entails five Reddit forums, five Instagram posts from the Instagram account of H&M and five Instagram posts from the Instagram account of Zara.

Figure 1: Overview samples analysis



Instagram accounts

The official Instagram accounts from fast fashion brands Zara and H&M are used to detect how brands use social media to communicate with consumers about their sustainability practices and reveal how consumers interact with such content and what their opinions are about such practices. This study focuses on Instagram for several reasons. Firstly, Instagram is number 5 in the ranking of most popular social networks worldwide as of January 2024, ranked by number of monthly active users (Dixon, 2024). Therefore, we expected to gain rich data from this platform. When focusing specifically on the brands itself, for Zara the platform with the biggest number of social media followers in 2022 was Instagram (Smith, 2024). Nowadays their Instagram account is still the social media platform with the most followers. For H&M, the number of social media followers on Facebook exceeds the number of followers on their Instagram account, 40 million versus 38.3 million, though not drastically. The other social media platform option would have been TikTok, given its high popularity in recent years: in 2023 U.S. users spent the most time per day on this social platform in comparison to others (Dixon, 2024). However, while searching for data, we could not find sustainability-related content from Zara or H&M on this platform.

For this study, we have chosen specific posts and pictures from Instagram accounts related to sustainability. The distinction between a regular post and a sustainable one was made by linguistic factors, e.g. the use of words like ‘sustainability’, ‘recycled’, ‘environment’ etc. Our initial search for these posts was on the Instagram accounts of Zara and H&M, scanning for these linguistic cues. We scraped through their Instagram posts of 2024 and 2023, but only found limited posts regarding sustainability. Therefore, a second step to search for more data was undertaken. This step involved a Google search. We used the following search terms; ‘zara instagram sustainability’, respectively ‘h&m instagram sustainability’. This second attempt turned out to be more fruitful. We focused on the first five Google search results regarding H&M, respectively Zara Instagram posts links. We selected these search terms due to their apparent suitability and relevance to our inquiry. Below one will find each selected Instagram post, their assigned number which we use to refer to the post in the analysis section and a short description. We gathered a total number of 100 Instagram posts, both from Zara and H&M, from which we selected ten posts for our analysis. We choose these posts based on the Google search as described above. We selected five Instagram posts for each brand to further analyze in order to illustrate the themes and the way consumers identify themselves. This strategy ensured that the posts we selected were reflective of broader consumer interactions and perceptions. Moreover, these posts were chosen based on strong engagement metrics such as likes, comments, shares and shared date, to ensure it reflects our chosen time frame. Using these posts as illustrative examples offers valuable insights for studying consumer identity and all the other thematic elements that come along with this study.

Zara Instagram posts selection:

Zara Instagram post 1: <https://www.instagram.com/zara/p/CSEaie7tnne/> - this post is related to sustainability since Zara communicates this in the corresponding text on the Instagram post by saying: *‘Working towards sustainability. At Zara, we understand sustainability as an ongoing effort. We develop specific programs from a holistic approach. Emphasizing social and environmental sustainability and the safety and health of our products.’* This post is dated 2 August 2021.



ZARA zara • Volgen

ZARA zara JOIN LIFE. Working towards sustainability.

At Zara, we understand sustainability as an ongoing effort. We develop specific programs from a holistic approach. Emphasizing social and environmental sustainability and the safety and health of our products. #JOINLIFE

141 w. Vertaling weergeven

diliyarr 🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷
120 w. Reageren

jamesalexander1 hey do you tag the photographer?
131 w. Reageren
Vertaling weergeven

34.087 vind-ik-leuks
2 augustus 2021

Zara Instagram post 2: <https://www.instagram.com/zara/p/C2b9q15Krb0> - this post is related to sustainability since Zara communicates this in the corresponding text on the Instagram post by saying 'The Sustainability Innovation Hub' and by using the word 'recycled' multiple times. This post is dated 23 January 2024.



ZARA zara • Volgen

ZARA zara LOOPAMID X ZARA. The Sustainability Innovation Hub was born out of our spirit of collaboration – our belief in joining forces with innovators to bring change in our industry.

loopamid® is an innovation that utilizes textile waste as a feedstock to create a like-new material. Through a chemical recycling process, polyamide 6 (PA6) is recovered from textile waste to produce new recycled fiber.

This jacket was designed in collaboration with several companies to create a fully recycled, single-material garment in all its parts #innovation

Bewerkt · 12 w. Vertaling weergeven

127.083 vind-ik-leuks
23 januari

Zara Instagram post 3: <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bf8WPrBAiW2/> - this post communicates sustainability by saying; 'A sustainable story. Under the label Join Life, we categorise all garments that have been produced using the best sustainable processes and raw materials that help us take care of the environment'. This post is dated 5 March 2018.



ZARA zara • Volgen

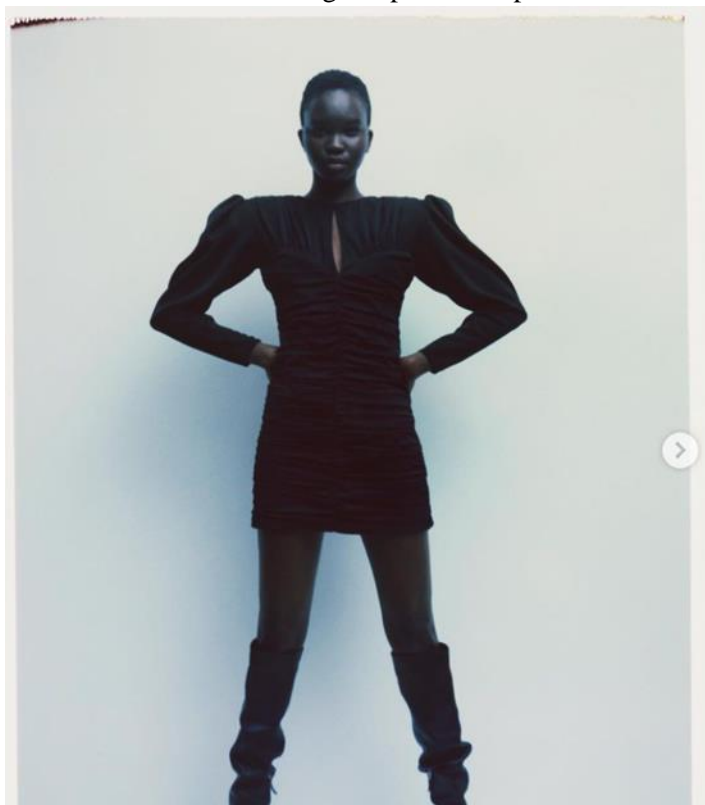
ZARA zara 319 w.
Join life | A sustainable story. Under the label Join Life, we categorise all garments that have been produced using the best sustainable processes and raw materials that help us take care of the environment
Vertaling bekijken

mai_syp 286 w.
@pobreotalora 🍷🍷
Reageren

itzzlucy 289 w.
why not your entire clothing range, why does this have to be limited to one label?
Reageren Vertaling bekijken

370.285 weergaven
5 maart 2018

Zara Instagram post 4: https://www.instagram.com/zara/p/CXboflANOr/?img_index=1 - this post indicates sustainability communication since Zara mentions the 'Sustainability Innovation Hub' in their textual content on the Instagram post. This post is dated 13 December 2021.



ZARA zara • Volgen

ZARA zara Through the Sustainability Innovation Hub we are collaborating with different partners to bring more innovation into our products and to support them to scaleup their initiatives. We believe innovation and collaboration is key in moving forward in this journey.
#INNOVATION #JOINLIFE
122 w. Vertaling weergeven

vicdelepine @julialaloum on a loupé ça
89 w. Reageren Vertaling weergeven

julia_xdp Send Your Pic 📷
@insponova
96 w. Reageren

45.950 vind-ik-leuks
13 december 2021

Zara Instagram post 5: <https://www.instagram.com/zara/p/CSFKSFYt6ai/> - this post addresses sustainability by saying; *'We are working to make both our physical and online stores increasingly more sustainable'*. This post is dated 2 August 2021.

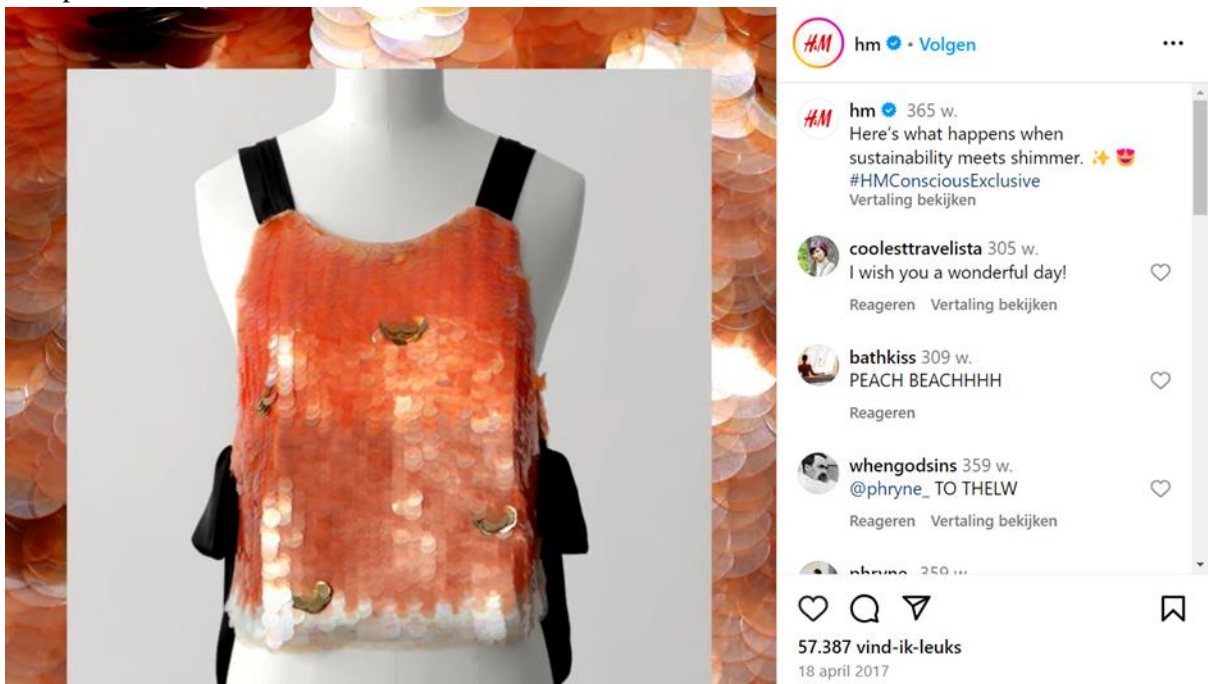


H&M Instagram posts selection:

H&M Instagram post 1: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BwW9H3ll7vc/> - this post is communicating sustainability by saying *'When fabulousness meet sustainability.'* This post is dated 17 April 2019.



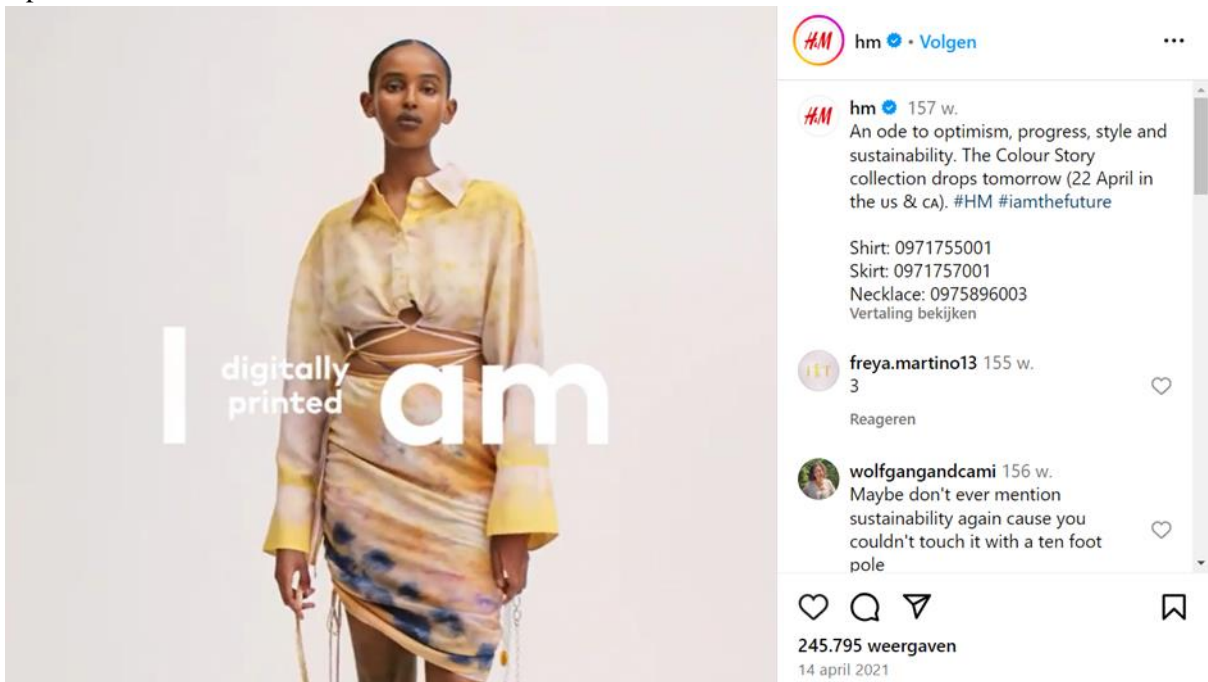
H&M Instagram post 2: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BTAKXfHgTxx/> - this post relates to sustainability by saying 'Here's what happens when sustainability meets shimmer'. This post is dated 18 April 2017.



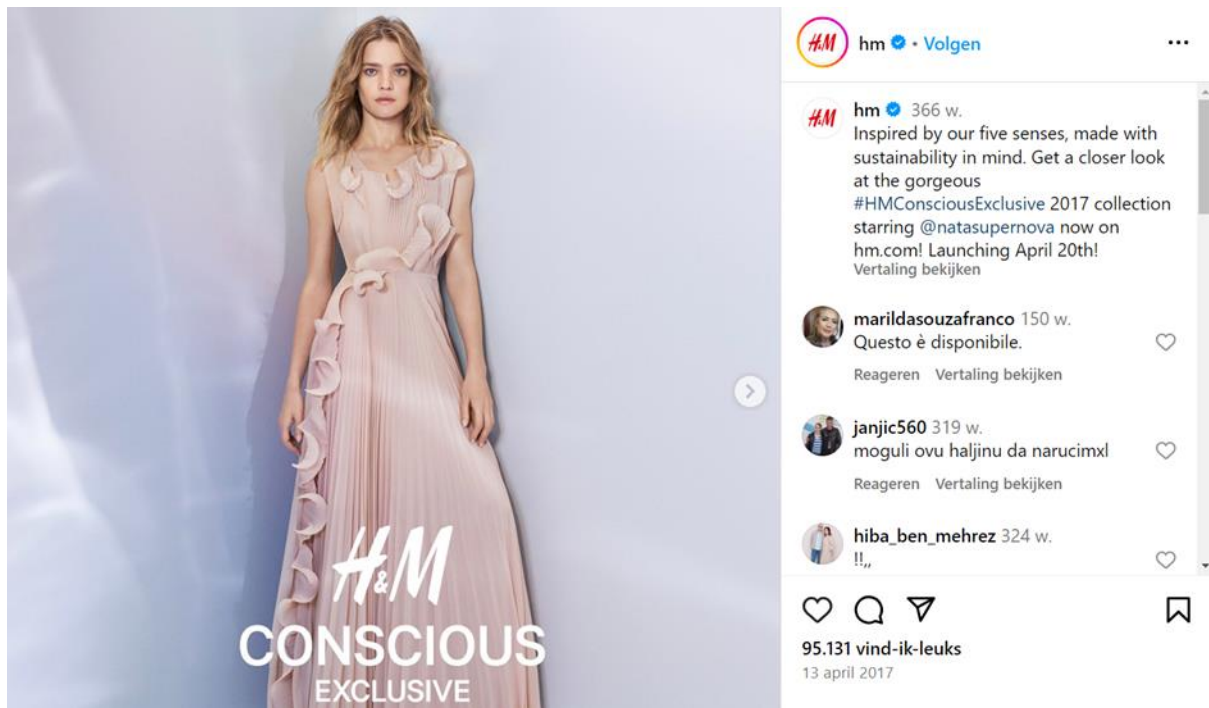
H&M Instagram post 3: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CWYGGuSqHgt/> - in this post H&M communicates sustainability by saying 'Twinning in a more sustainable way is winning' and by using the word 'circular'. This post is dated 17 November 2021.



H&M Instagram post 4: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CNozQYyhpG/> - this post indicates sustainability by saying 'An ode to optimism, progress, style and sustainability'. This post is dated 14 April 2021.



H&M Instagram post 5: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BS0JtjEg45u/> - in this post H&M reflects sustainability by saying 'made with sustainability in mind'. This post is dated 13 April 2017.



We noticed that for all Instagram posts, from both Zara and H&M, sustainability was only reflected within the text, all the visuals did not indicate sustainability in any way.

Reddit forums

Secondly, in order to find relevant forums and discussions on Reddit, it was necessary to use specific and relevant keywords related to our topic. This was our initial coding phase, where we observed closely and looked for certain keywords, yet we were open to new themes we might find along the way. We are aware that our research topic is broad and concerns different forms of ethics, therefore we focused on the environmental and sustainable ethical aspects and used keywords such as “greenwashing and fast fashion brands”, “sustainability claims”, “eco-friendly claims”, “legit sustainable brands”. In addition, we used certain keywords for fast fashion brands in order to find specific and relevant fast fashion discussions. The terms used were “Zara and H&M sustainability”, “Zara sustainability”, “h&m sustainability”. The specific Reddit forums eventually chosen as samples for analysis were selected based on the number of comments, the richness of discussion, the time frame criteria and the variety of topics. Thus, we selected 5 forums out of 10, where below the reader will find each selected Reddit forum, their assigned number which we use to refer to the forum in the analysis section and a short description.

Reddit forums:

Forum 1 is titled “H&M accused of ‘greenwashing’ over plans to make clothes from sustainable fabric - ‘Fashion this fast can never and will never be sustainable’”, where the main focus is on consumers questioning H&M’s sustainability and accusations of greenwashing. The discussion forum started in 2020.

Forum 2 is titled “Zara clothes to be made from 100% sustainable fabrics by 2025”, in which the focus is on Zara and the discussions range from Zara’s sustainability efforts to sustainability definitions which

apparently make the consumers feel confused and not knowledgeable about. This forum started back in 2019.

Forum 3 is titled “Is H&M’s conscious line any good?”, in which consumers have conflicted views on H&M’s conscious line, debating whether this brand’s sustainability efforts are authentic or pure “greenwashing”. This discussion started back in 2022.

Forum 4 is titled “H&M, Zara and other fashion brands are tricking shoppers with vague sustainability claims”, where apart from consumers discussing sustainability claims of the brands, we also captured former employees from fast fashion brands giving their opinions and “exposing” their former workplace. This discussion started back in 2019.

Forum 5 is titled “Breaking up with Fast Fashion - what does it mean to you?”, in which users discuss if discontinuing purchasing from fast fashion brands is possible and attainable for them. This discussion started back in 2021.

3.3.2 Fast fashion brands

This study selected the fast fashion brands Zara and H&M. Focusing on Zara and H&M for the study on consumer engagement with sustainability messages in fast fashion brands on social media platforms offers several compelling reasons. Firstly, Zara and H&M are two of the largest and most influential fast fashion retailers globally, with a significant presence on social media platforms where they actively promote their sustainability initiatives. As such, they represent pertinent case studies for examining how consumers interact with and interpret sustainability messaging within the context of fast fashion. In recent years, these two brands have competed for the position of market leader, with the title of highest brand value changing hands several times (Statista, 2024). Zara was estimated to be worth 16.5 billion dollars in 2023 and H&M was valued at slightly less than 13.65 billion dollars that same year (Statista, 2024). This shows how highly valuable and successful these two brands are in the fast fashion industry, consisting of millions of customers from all around the world. To further illustrate, according to Smith (2024), with net sales of more than 26 billion euros globally in 2023; Zara, which comprises the Zara Home division, had the greatest net sales from the biggest fast fashion group companies called “Inditex Group”. The H&M Group had global net sales of around 236,014 billion Swedish kronor in the fiscal year 2023 (The H&M Group, 2023). Furthermore, both Zara and H&M have made public commitments to sustainability and have launched several initiatives to reduce their environmental impact and improve their ethical practices. These efforts include using sustainable materials, implementing recycling programs, and establishing targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, as demonstrated on their websites and social media accounts on Instagram. Thus, studying these brands allows for an investigation into how consumers perceive and respond to these sustainability initiatives when communicated via social media channels. Additionally, Zara and H&M’s sustainability strategies and messaging may differ, providing valuable insights into the effectiveness of different approaches in engaging consumers and cultivating positive perceptions. By comparing and contrasting these two well-known brands, the study can identify patterns and trends in consumer behavior and attitudes toward sustainability messaging in the fast fashion sector. Zara and H&M’s widespread popularity and diverse customer base make them representative of the broader fast fashion market, increasing the generalizability of the study’s findings. Understanding how consumers interact with these brands’ sustainability messages can provide valuable insights for other fast fashion retailers who face similar challenges in effectively communicating their sustainability efforts. To sum up, choosing Zara and H&M as focal points for the study allows for a thorough examination of consumer engagement with

sustainability messages in fast fashion brands on social media platforms, providing insights that can inform both theoretical understanding and practical industry strategy.

3.4 Quality of data

In qualitative research, it is imperative to ensure the validity, reliability and generalizability of the data collected in order to maintain the integrity and precision of the study we are conducting. As mentioned above, we utilized netnography as the primary method for data collection, focusing on the official Instagram accounts of fast fashion brands, namely Zara and H&M and discussions on Reddit forums regarding sustainability messages.

Validity in qualitative research is closely tied to the authenticity of the study and the accuracy of the findings, ensuring that they truly represent the studied phenomenon. A fundamental aspect of validity in qualitative research is the inclusion of diverse and sufficient perspectives to capture the complexity and broadness of the study (Leung, 2015). **We provided diverse voices and viewpoints of consumers, disregarding their race, ethnicity, age or gender.** Sampling responses from Instagram posts and Reddit forums, we chose not to include any names or profile pictures from the respondents so as not to invade their privacy. Moreover, the selection of the posts and forums was guided by the criteria designed to capture a diverse range of consumer perspectives, including demographic backgrounds, geographical locations and levels of engagement with sustainability and fast fashion. By incorporating posts and discussions from various users with diverse backgrounds and interests, the study aims to cover a wide range of perspectives, thereby enhancing the validity of the findings.

Reliability refers to the consistency of research findings (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). We ensured reliability in this study by following a systematic approach to data collection and analysis. **The way we achieved this is by developing clear criteria for selecting reliable Instagram posts and Reddit discussions related to sustainability messages, minimizing the likelihood of arbitrary inclusion of content.** Additionally, we applied multiple coding words to independently analyze data, thus enhancing the reliability of our study. Even though both forums and social media provide open dialogue there is a key issue in reliability. Hong and Kim (2021) demonstrated that a significant motivator for engaging in online civic activism is an ‘intrinsic human motivation to express ideas’, disseminate them among peers, and connect with communities that share similar perspectives. Whether this participation is in a forum or on social media, people with strong opinions and thus a high motivation to articulate ideas will be more likely to share these opinions in the virtual world. Therefore, the people with less strong opinions are not included in the study. Any discrepancies in coding were resolved by discussion and communication, further boosting the reliability of our findings.

According to Leung (2015), the majority of qualitative research studies aim to investigate a particular problem or phenomenon in a particular community or ethnic group, of a targeted region, in a specific environment; as such, the generalizability of qualitative research findings is typically not expected. The question of generalizability arises regarding the extent to which findings can be generalized and applied beyond the studied sample, which in this case would be other fast fashion brands and other consumer reactions regarding sustainability claims. In the context of this study, which focuses on consumer **engagement with Zara and H&M’s sustainability messages on social media platforms, the generalizability of the findings should be carefully considered.** The findings derived from the analysis of Instagram posts and Reddit discussions imply how consumers interpret and engage with sustainability content from these brands. While such findings may not be directly applicable to all

consumers and all other fast fashion brands globally, they contribute to the broader understanding of consumer behaviors and attitudes towards sustainability communication from the fast fashion industry. Another point worth mentioning is that **qualitative research mostly focuses on depth over breadth**, allowing us as researchers to uncover complex patterns that might be overlooked in bigger-scale studies accompanied by wider samples. Although the findings of this study might not be statistically generalizable to the entire population of the fast fashion industry, they still offer valuable insights into the complexities of consumer engagement with sustainability messages on social media platforms. Kozinets (2002) stresses that the method of netnography in particular also proposes an issue with generalizability. He acknowledges that it is difficult to generalize results to groups outside the online community sample. Nevertheless, he argues that by applying careful evaluations of similarity, generalizability can still be accomplished. Plus, generalizability is not something we aimed for when executing this research, since we are focusing on online communities, making netnography pertinent and confining our focus within the specified time frame. Moreover, Flyvbjerg (2011) objects that using a single case is not generalizable. He argues that the generalizability varies depending on the specific case being discussed and the criteria. And even if knowledge cannot be formally generalized, it doesn't imply it cannot contribute to the collective accumulation of knowledge within a specific field or society (Flyvbjerg, 2011). Although we didn't use a case study in particular, we conducted a single study. Therefore, we think Flyvbjerg arguments are applicable for our research too.

Reflexivity is one of the backbones of qualitative research, which relates to the degree of influence the researcher has applied unintentionally or intentionally to the study and findings (Jootun et al., 2009). Reflexivity shaped our approach to data collection, interpretation and analysis. From the beginning, we realized the influence of our perspectives, perceptions and biases regarding sustainability, fast fashion and consumer behavior. We understand that not all consumers are aware of the sustainability terms or sustainability practices that fast fashion brands execute, therefore we encouraged self-awareness and openness to new perspectives along the way. Moreover, engaging with data was a reflective and active process, where we could also reflect on the topic and dive further into the consumers' perceptions of sustainability practices. This led to the changing of our perceptions and perspectives while trying to understand the data and its complexity. Through transparent reporting of the findings, we intend to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of our study, in which we transparently reflect the complex reality of consumer engagement with fast fashion brands.

3.5 Thematic Content Analysis

By analyzing different types of online communities, we gain a holistic understanding of consumer preferences regarding sustainable perceptions. We will perform a passive non-participant study to gain more unbiased insights into the community's behaviors. Thus, we identify and analyze recurring themes in qualitative data through thematic content analysis. The process of qualitative analysis involves four different steps. According to Rennstam and Wäterfors (2018) these steps are gathering the qualitative data through interviews, observations, document studies, sorting, reducing and arguing. Since step one is already executed and explained, below stage two, three and four will be explained further.

Sorting

This step regards dealing with the problem of chaos, by putting the data in piles. These piles are themes. This step requires getting 'intimate' with the material, engaging with it and categorizing it. The categorizing step refers to coding, labeling; giving names to what is observed and trying to grasp what this means (Charmaz, 2006). Regarding the coding, we used focused, selective coding. According to

Charmaz (2006), this concerns creating more general labels to illustrate what is going on in the data. Thus, we will start close to the initial material and then create more abstract labels that may represent larger amounts of data. In doing this we will look for repetitions, similarities and differences, metaphors and analogies and linguistic connectors as suggested by Ryan and Bernard (2003). Thus, we will investigate what people are talking about, plus how they are talking about it. Sorting in our research involved reading all the comments and discussions. Moreover, we used Vivo coding, which is a form of qualitative data analysis that puts importance on the actual speech of the consumers (Manning, 2017). By using this we place the exact words as codes to reflect the authentic language used by consumers. This way, we gain a further understanding of consumers' stories and focus on the verbal part of social interaction between participants in a relaxed manner and setting where they express themselves freely.

Reducing

This step involves dealing with the problem of representation. This step starts where 'sorting' ends, namely categories. Choosing and excluding categories (themes or insights) is critical in the analysis to create focus. This step is about expanding upon "dialogue" with the material, as well as with prior research (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018). Regarding the reducing stage, we transformed the raw qualitative data into a more focused and structured form, and we intertwined findings from prior research, as discussed in chapter 2, in this step. We didn't focus solely on the most common categories, but rather on the most intriguing ones.

Arguing

According to Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), this stage involves dealing with the problem of authority. He also highlights the importance of establishing autonomy in relation to established authorities. Furthermore, he stresses that analysis involves more than merely presenting data; it entails crafting arguments supported by the data. This stage is about incorporating concepts, more specifically establishing concepts that represent the research findings and infusing them with significance and expanding the scope through connections to other concepts, in or to enhance the theoretical significance. Regarding the arguing we aimed to argue with theory and relevant literature, developing explanations from findings.

To examine the sample, we conducted a thematic content analysis of the corpus manually using sheets to present all data, enabling us to meticulously categorize themes using predefined criteria and, when applicable, incorporate themes emerging from field data. To identify themes and categorize them in our study, we relied on existing theory and literature as foundational guidance. Our approach included predefined themes such as consumer responsabilization, action versus attitude, social identity and irony. However, we also remained open to emerging new themes and consumer perspectives from the gathered data to capture authentic consumer language and allow discovery of new insights on the matter. This dynamic process ensured our thematic analysis was both theoretically informed and empirically grounded, resulting in comprehensive understanding of consumers' perception of and engagement with sustainability communication by fast fashion brands.

We maintained consistency in the coding process by involving two authors to uphold the integrity of the research design. The coding process was three-folded. In the first place we examined the source of the text, inspecting whether it derived from a Reddit forum or an Instagram post. This initial step was crucial in understanding the context and potential biases inherent from the source. Secondly, we defined the producer of the text; detecting whether the text was generated by an ordinary consumer, the official brand entity or even former employees of the brands under discussion. This step was pivotal in

unlocking the underlying factors and motivations driving the narrative of the text. Lastly, we zoomed in on the textual content itself, analyzing the language and subtext to ascertain the intended message and the associated action it sought to evoke. We further investigated if the text was aimed at critiquing, informing, educating or defending its audience. This critical analysis created the pathway for our thematic analysis and detected “themes”.

3.6 Limitations

This study exclusively uses a qualitative research method. By using only a qualitative research method, interesting findings deriving from quantitative research could have been missed out on. On top of that, as also stated in paragraph 3.4, the generalizability of qualitative research in general is rather low (Atieno, 2009). Thus, when using quantitative research for the purpose of this study the generalizability would have been better. Therefore, by enhancing this study with quantitative research the generalizability of the findings could be improved.

Although using netnography provides advantages (see paragraph 3.2.2), the limitations of this method should also be acknowledged. Kozinets (2002) stresses that marketing researchers need to recognize that they are analyzing the communicative content within an online community, rather than the entirety of observed consumer actions within that community.

The absence of other fashion retailers presents quite a limitation when restricting the research study to including exclusively Zara and H&M as subjects. In the fast fashion business, Zara and H&M are well-known firms, but concentrating only on these two companies could result in the loss of information that could be discovered by looking at a wider range of rivals and market dynamics. This limitation may limit the study's capacity to offer a thorough grasp of the market environment, consumer behavior, and developing trends, which will constrain how broadly and practically the results may be applied.

Furthermore, limiting the sample to the use of Instagram posts and Reddit forums and the exclusion of TikTok as an emerging social media channel might have restricted our findings on a broader scale. By not including TikTok in our analysis, we may have overlooked valuable insights and perspectives, which future researchers can benefit from in their future studies. Another limitation concerning the sample of analysis is, when selecting the samples of analysis we focused on a particular time frame. Since we argue that the answer to the research question is highly time-sensitive, it would be most relevant to study this research question by analyzing recent data. Hence, we opted for a time frame spanning from 2017 to 2024 to deliver contemporary and pertinent findings and analysis. However, this also implies that the study findings are highly time dependent. By studying debates and comments within this defined time and place, our research offers a snapshot of the evolving discourse around sustainability in the fast fashion industry. This contextual focus allows us to connect our data to relevant events and trends, offering a clearer explanation for certain outcomes. Embracing these limitations, our method delivers a targeted and relevant analysis that future studies can expand upon to explore broader trends.

Relating to the selection of the sample of analysis, there is another limitation in the data collection search process. We decided to use the search terms ‘Zara Instagram sustainability’ and ‘H&M Instagram sustainability’ in our Google search to find Instagram posts by the brand regarding sustainability. However, we have to acknowledge that the results of this Google search might have been different if

other search terms were used in the process. Consequently, different Instagram posts might have been selected for analysis, which could have impacted the eventual findings too.

Last but not least, since the analytical aspect of this study heavily relies on the author's interpretations, there could be arguments regarding bias stemming from the author's personal experiences. Nevertheless, to mitigate this concern to some extent, we deliberately provided transparent descriptions of the research processes undertaken in all phases. This approach was undertaken with the primary aim of enabling readers to validate the analytical interpretations and conclusions presented in this study.

3.7 Ethical Conduct

Ethical considerations play a pivotal role in the conduct of consumer research. Kozinets (2002) raises a specific important question regarding ethical concerns about netnography, namely, should online forums be categorized as private or public spaces? And, what defines "informed consent" in the context of cyberspace? Due to the absence of a clear consensus on these issues, ethical procedures regarding this matter have not been established. Therefore, we had to rely on our ethical awareness and judgment. The Cyber Age Privacy Doctrine (CAPD) by Etzioni (2015) provided us with some guidelines, where he addresses the fact that in the digital era, the widespread secondary use of legally obtained information has raised significant concerns about when such practices should be restricted to safeguard privacy. With vast amounts of personal data legally collected and stored by third parties, the extent of our privacy often hinges on these secondary uses. And this secondary use is exactly what we included in our research. Etzioni (2015) describes the CAPD in three dimensions, volume, sensitivity and cybernation. Considering our research volume is not an issue for us since our research samples are not substantial, the informational bandwidth is not extensive. Regarding sensitivity, we argue that the information included in our study is not sensitive, since it doesn't involve personal information about the individuals, such as finances or health. The final dimension 'cybernation' encompasses the storage, aggregation (including dossier creation), analysis, retrieval, and dissemination of individual pieces of information in coordination with one another (Etzioni, 2015). Etzioni (2015) declares that privacy is more effectively safeguarded when the collected information is not retained. Therefore, we deleted the data after the analysis and guaranteed that solely we had access to the data throughout the research. Since none of the 'participants' in our study were aware of the fact that their input was used in a research study, we had to safeguard their privacy. Although both Instagram users and Reddit forum users did not explicitly permit us to use their linguistic input, the majority of the users included in this study did not have a directly traceable account name. Nevertheless, we made sure to anonymize account names to prevent invasion of privacy. Therefore, we believe to have safeguarded the privacy of users throughout the study. Moreover, we have no associations with the brands Zara or H&M, nor have we received any financial support for this research. Therefore, our analysis was not constrained to protect the Zara or H&M brand, allowing us the freedom to critically assess their operations. Similarly, there was no bias against the brands from either researcher, ensuring that our evaluation was not unduly influenced by personal beliefs.

4 Consumer engagement with sustainability messages

Using the coding analysis technique outlined by Rennstam and Wäterfors (2018) as described in the preceding chapter, empirical data were gathered, coded, and categorized. Throughout the data collection process, discernible patterns emerged from the various subjects depicted in the forums and accompanying discussions, respectively comments on the brands Instagram posts. Despite the posts concerning H&M and Zara being presented in a uniform composition and communicative style, the perceived message by users varied. As a result, these stories and the central themes of the posts served as a framework for coding, leading to their categorization into seven distinct themes: ex-employees, fast fashion lovers, sustainability confusion, disbelief, action vs. attitude, responsible consumption and social sustainability. All seven themes were not present in both Instagram and Reddit data. Therefore, this argues for our method to include both data platforms, since we found some diverse themes in each of them. We have used examples derived from the platforms in order to argue for the detected themes and to further analyze the matter. In this chapter we will present a thorough description and analysis of the various themes.

4.1 Insights from former employees of the fast fashion brands

Amongst the online text producers there is a special group of individuals that relates to our research topic, former employees of the fast fashion brands. How do they perceive sustainable communication from the brands they worked for? Do they advocate for their former workplace, or do they critically evaluate their environmental endeavors? We collected interesting data regarding this theme as illustrated below. Overall, we see consumers exposing and defending brands.

A surprise factor for this study was the comments and discussions commenced by self-proclaimed ex-employees of fast fashion brands, namely H&M. Their opinions on their past workplace and the practices that were taking place turned out to be thought provoking and sparked many discussions in the forums, giving their “insider views” to the users. We can take this discussion here from forum 4: “H&M, Zara and other fashion brands are tricking shoppers with vague sustainability claims” as an example:

Ex-Employee: *“Having worked for H&M, you should see the amount of non recyclable plastic their clothes are delivered in.”*

User replies: *“Less clothing related, but Target uses a crazy amount of plastic packaging. ”*

Another ex-employee replies: *“I also worked for H&M and while they definitely could be doing more, most plastic and other packaging is indeed recycle able.”*

Both ex-employees highlight the issue of plastic packaging usage by the brands’ stores, which creates a paradox of their sustainability claims and their actual practices. Two ex-workers mention the excessive use of non-recyclable plastic, while the other ex-worker from Target, which is an American retail corporation, mentions the same practices by his/hers former workplace. This indicates a broader concern about the fast fashion industry’s waste management and environmental sustainability. We notice how the second ex-employee from H&M admits that there is room for improvement for the brand, as the majority of the packaging is recyclable. This discussion highlights a potential misalignment between company policies and employee perceptions, as well as the complexities of sustainability efforts within larger corporations. Despite acknowledging current practices, this discussion emphasizes the need for fast fashion brands to prioritize sustainable practices and address the environmental concerns raised by not only consumers, but employees and now ex-employees.

Another ex-employee criticizes H&M openly in another discussion from Forum 3: “Is H&M’s conscious line any good?” by replying to a user’s comment:

User 1: *“No, its rubbish and H&M is 100% greenwashing There is no way to shop responsibly at H&M. Even with the limited funds, there are ways to shop sustainably and responsibly still. H&M is never the answer in this scenario though.”*

Ex-employee responds: *“I used to work there. The main goal of the coupons we gave out for clothes donation was to encourage people to come back and shop more. H&M only sees ethicality and environmentalism as a means to sell things.”*

From this discussion, we can infer that the user is against the brand’s sustainability claims and strongly disagrees with the fact that fast fashion can be sustainable. The ex-employee’s response supports this criticism by indicating that certain initiatives, such as clothes donations coupons, serve as marketing tactics to create customer retention rather than showing actual sustainability efforts. Both the user’s comments and the former employee’s response raise concerns about H&M’s ethical and environmental practices. Therefore, we witness a broader skepticism among consumers and former employees regarding the sincerity of the company’s sustainability initiatives.

A textile producer that has worked for some fashion brands such as Asos, Hugo Boss and Guess shares his point of view about ethicality of the brands:

“I’m a textile producer for Asos, Hugo Boss, Guess and some other brands. I would say Asos and Hugo Boss are really trying to be sustainable and ethical. We’ve been working with Hugo Boss for nearly two decades and they keep increasing the standards while still being fair on our profit Margins. Asos has very good systems for testing & social audits, etc.”

Unlike the criticism raised in previous discussions, this textile producer emphasizes Asos and Hugo Boss’ efforts to be ethical and sustainable. Such acts of exposing former workplaces are called “whistleblowing” as Berg (2020) defines it as an ethical related act which represents an individual’s or group’s recognition that certain actions in their organization are detrimental to the public, therefore they “expose” the companies’ unfair practices. Berg (2020) states that the reveal of the whistleblower’s identity might result dangerous for the person, therefore it is perceivable that former employees use online platforms, such as Reddit, where they present themselves as anonymous and use unidentified usernames in order to not get identifies and recognized by their former employers and remain undetected by possible legal ramifications.

By depending on their “insider” status, the self-proclaimed ex-employees appear to seek a higher credibility perception by other Reddit discussants, by strategically positioning themselves as authoritative voices. Their deliberate incorporation of “former employee status” serves a dual purpose: not only does it signal their insider perspective, but it also underscores their commitment to being transparent with the public, in this case consumers and users in Reddit forums. Belk (1988) states that the extended self also entails personal identification traits, such as one’s job. The self-proclaimed ex-employees showcase their expert identity by addressing their ex-employee status in order to gain more trust from other Reddit users, so that their message will be perceived as more reliable.

When analyzing the selected Instagram posts from the accounts of Zara and H&M we did not detect any comment related to this theme.

4.2 Consumers as defenders and supporters of fast fashion

While the sustainability issues regarding fast fashion are on the rise, the fast fashion business is still booming. This indicates that there are still many fast fashion lovers all around the globe. We can see this reflected in our data collection as below. The consumers are being supportive towards the brand and their sustainability practices and/or expressing their love for the brand, while defending their practices and aims to be responsible for the consumers and the planet.

4.2.1 Instagram posts

Overall Instagram commenters were really positive about the message and the visual Zara, respectively H&M used in their communication. They used emojis that indicate a highly positive attitude towards the communication and the product(s) displayed in the visual that is used by the brand, with ❤️, 😊, 🍌 and 🍌 being the most common ones used, not rarely in plural. Moreover, there were several Instagram users who expressed a supportive attitude towards their sustainability communication by explicitly referring to that in their comments, as illustrated by the following comments: “@ at least Zara agree with my new interest for sustainability” and “So good you’ve start thinking about the environment”. We acknowledge that it is hard to define whether these comments reflect a true message or that the comment is meant in an ironic or sarcastic way. Overall, we can conclude that based on the majority of the comments being positive towards the brands and their communication, there are still a lot of fast fashion lovers out there.

4.2.2 Reddit forums

Despite growing awareness of the detrimental effects of fast fashion on the environment, there exists a steadfast devotion to this industry among consumers. This paradoxical phenomenon raises questions about the intersection of consumer behavior, sustainability and environmental consciousness. We can infer from these comments that some consumers continue to support specific brands based on personal style preferences, perceived value and brand image.

According to Belk (1988) theory of extended self, possessions make a significant contribution to our identities. In this context, brands like H&M and Zara are not just retailers and clothing providers but might also be perceived as extensions of the consumers’ self-concept. Belk’s (1988) theory explains why some consumers remain devoted to fast fashion brands despite their known environmental impacts. To illustrate, here are some comments from fast fashion lovers from forum 1:

User 1: *“My H&M purchases have been quite long lasting, warm, classic looking, well designed etc. Definitely not the cliché of cheap flashy stuff I want to later throw away. I’d take H&M pants over Levi’s, say, any day.”*

User 1’s comment sheds a light on the perception of H&M products as being of good quality, well designed and durable. This perception challenges the stereotype of fast fashion items as disposable or low quality, suggesting that some consumers view H&M as offering value beyond affordability solely.

User 2: *“ Idc, I love H&M.”*

User 2’s concise comment and declaration of love for H&M suggests a deep emotional attachment to the brand that rises above rational considerations. Although the comment is very concise and can be interpreted in some ways, we can infer this emotional connection may be influenced by factors such as positive past experiences, alignment with personal identity, brand image and so on. While this emotional

attachment with the brand appears straightforward, it embodies a deeper ambiguity that mirrors the complex nature of sustainability discourse. As we detect ambiguity in this user's comment, we see similarities with Christensen et al, (2015) "license to critique" approach, which acknowledges the ambiguity of sustainability statements where stakeholders are encouraged to critically reflect beyond superficial statements. Similarly to how the above-mentioned statement can be interpreted in a variety of ways, the "license to critique" recognizes that sustainability is not a singular concept but rather a field open to diverse perspectives and interpretations. By acknowledging ambiguity inherent in personal attachments and sustainability communications, we may encourage a more distinctive understanding of consumers' consumption patterns and their motivations for engaging with sustainability communication.

Within this theme, consumers overall seem to identify with the brand or fast fashion in general. This relates to the company-consumer identification by Sen and Bhattacharya (2003) mentioned in the literature review. As they stated, a strong sense of company-consumer identification will result in consumers becoming more psychologically connected to and caring for the company and defending the brand when it faces negative media scrutiny or criticism from other consumers. That is exactly what our data illustrates: consumers are expressing their care for the company by showing love and they are defending the brand or fast fashion in general by coming up with counter arguments. Therefore, it seems that these consumers identify as fast fashion lovers or promoters and are not afraid to showcase that online.

In addition, Bourdieu's (1984) theory of taste provides a deeper understanding of this phenomenon. Consumer preferences (taste) in buying fast fashion clothes such as in this case, extend beyond personal preferences, as they are intertwined and shaped by cultural and social capital. In the context of fast fashion, consumers' preferences are influenced by their desire to align with certain social groups and lifestyles. The appeal of fast fashion retailers offering trendy and affordable clothing extends to consumers who prioritize economic pragmatism as well as those seeking fast adaptability with the latest trends. These choices are not entirely about fashion preferences but also serve as expressions of social identity and status.

4.3 Sustainability terms confusion

Although the popularity of the vocabulary around the topic sustainability has risen, it is not clear to everyone what is truly meant by every sustainability related word used in sustainable communication. We observe on Instagram people requesting more clarity and more information, while on Reddit we see people educating and expressing interest and/or asking questions.

From all the Instagram comments we collected (over 2000 in total) only three Instagram users were asking for clarification in some way. They expressed this directly by asking for elucidation, like in the following quotes; *"Please explain some more of what you're saying I do not fully understand"* and *"tolong klarifikasi nya"* - the translation of this quote provided by Google Translate* is; *"Please clarify it' (hard to interpret, clarify what?)"* and *"Where is sustainability"*.

*To translate text we used Google Translate, since this is a trustworthy and widely used translation tool.

Confusion was detected in some Reddit forums regarding the sustainability terms used by brands or between discussants themselves. Here are some examples to illustrate the conversations that happened

in the discussion, this particular one from forum 1 “H&M accused of ‘greenwashing’ over plans to make clothes from sustainable fabric - ‘Fashion this fast can never and will never be sustainable’”:

User 1: *“I’m REALLY lost here. What the hell is greenwashing and why should I be cautious?”*
And another user answers: *“It’s the act of making your products/company look much more environmentally friendly than they actually are.”*; to which User 1 answered: *“Thank you. I really appreciate the info.”*

Another example is this user who is looking for a legal definition of the word “sustainability”, from forum 2 “Zara clothes to be made from 100% sustainable fabrics by 2025”. The conversation goes as follows:

User 1: *“Very interested to know the legal definition of ‘sustainable’ in these sort of industries.”*
;
to which another user replies: *“I do research on this. Inshort, there are not really legal definitions of sustainability - they are self defined and voluntary.”*

This suggests that consumers may encounter sustainability terminology without fully understanding its significance or meaning, which leads to confusion and unclarity. The response from the other user not only provides a concise explanation of the term greenwashing but demonstrates the role of consumer-to-consumer education within online forums, where users share knowledge and insights to help clarify complex concepts for one another. This particular conversation underscores the importance of addressing and clarifying misconceptions surrounding sustainability practices within the fashion industry. When there is lack of information, consumers may struggle to make informed decisions and hold brands accountable for their environmental claims.

Another conversation revolves around greenwashing from forum 3: “Is H&M’s conscious line any good?”

User 1: *“What’s greenwashing?”*

User 2 replies: *“Companies making misleading claims to deceive customers into believing that the products are environmentally friendly.”*

The recurrence of greenwashing discussions suggests that there is an ongoing dialogue within online forums about the ethical and environmental dimensions of fashion consumption.

We notice a notable difference between the discussions which take place in Reddit forums and Instagram comments section. In this Reddit forum, users often engage in deeper discussions, where they seek clarification on sustainability terms, such as “sustainability”, “greenwashing”, and so on. It is obvious that seeking for clarity in the matter moreover demonstrates consumers’ genuine interest in learning and educating others. Users tend to share knowledge, studies and articles to support their arguments, as the above-mentioned example from Reddit illustrates. This promotes a community where critical thinking and exchange of knowledge are valued.

According to Tajfel and Turner (1979) Social Identity Theory, individuals derive a sense of self from their group memberships, leading them to adopt and advocate for the values and characteristics of their in-group. If we closely examine identity within this theme, we can see consumers identifying with what we call ‘sustainability terminology enthusiasts’. They want to know more about what these terms entail and get further clarification on certain sustainability terms and are not holding back in expressing that. Moreover, we see a Reddit user stating that they are a researcher within the sustainability field. According to Belk (1988) occupation is one of the personal identifying characteristics and is therefore part of the extended self. In addition, according to Bourdieu (1984) this user is expressing its cultural

capital, namely the knowledge it gained by research. Thus, identification as sustainability expert can be withdrawn from this quote. The user highlights their knowledgeable and insider view in order to be perceived as credible by other Reddit users. Therefore, by being a self-proclaimed researcher this user plausibly sees itself as an expert within this topic and wants to showcase their reputability and validity through their profession.

4.4 Disbelief in fast fashion sustainability claims

One of the biggest themes extracted from our data concerned the disbelief in fast fashion sustainability claims. The reason for this disbelief varied among consumers as one can read below. In general consumers perform various actions within this theme, while some are criticizing, others are making fun of the brand (by using irony). Moreover, there are consumers requesting more information from the brand or making suggestions for improvements.

4.4.1 Instagram posts

When analyzing the Instagram posts regarding this theme we could identify three sub themes based on the comments collected: greenwashing, irony and addressing the perceived mismatch between sustainability and fast fashion

Greenwashing

The term greenwashing is used by a lot of ‘negative’ commenters. Although we recognize that we should see this relatively. Out of more than 2000 comments, around 10 comments were ‘greenwashing’ related comments. Some greenwashing related quotes below address the greenwashing directly but do not elaborate on why they perceive it as greenwashing, like: “*Absolute greenwashing. 🤢*”. They did not explain themselves addressing the greenwashing practices by the brand. But there are other quotes that coin the term greenwashing and elaborate on it by raising the practices from the brand that the authors of the comment perceive as not sustainable, best illustrated by this comment: “*Greenwashing 🤢 your business model is based on treating clothes as disposable, constantly buying new crap made from synthetic fibers covered in chemicals, stained with the sweat of garment workers not being paid enough.*”. The term greenwashing was mostly coined in Zara post 2 and 4. These are also the most recent posts from our selection sample. This confirms that the interest in Greenwashing and sustainability in general has become more widespread in the last years, as mentioned in paragraph 3.2.4.

Zara Instagram post 2



ZARA zara • Volgen

ZARA zara LOOPAMID X ZARA. The Sustainability Innovation Hub was born out of our spirit of collaboration – our belief in joining forces with innovators to bring change in our industry.

loopamid® is an innovation that utilizes textile waste as a feedstock to create a like-new material. Through a chemical recycling process, polyamide 6 (PA6) is recovered from textile waste to produce new recycled fiber.

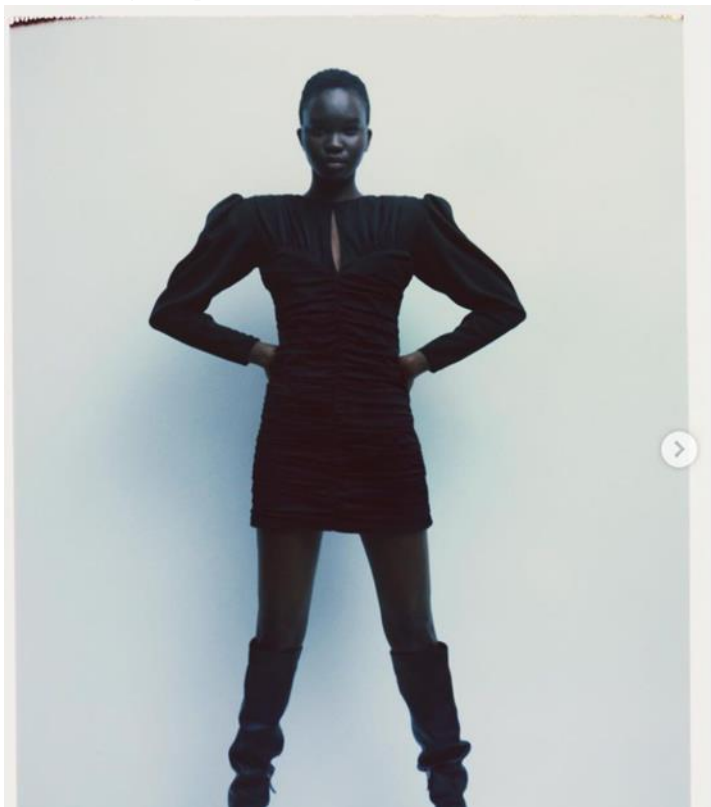
This jacket was designed in collaboration with several companies to create a fully recycled, single-material garment in all its parts #innovation

Bewerkt · 12 w. Vertaling weergeven



127.083 vind-ik-leuks
23 januari

Zara Instagram post 4



ZARA zara • Volgen

ZARA zara Through the Sustainability Innovation Hub we are collaborating with different partners to bring more innovation into our products and to support them to scaleup their initiatives. We believe innovation and collaboration is key in moving forward in this journey.

#INNOVATION #JOINLIFE
122 w. Vertaling weergeven

vicdelepine @julialaloum on a loupé ça
89 w. Reageren Vertaling weergeven

julia_xdp Send Your Pic @insponova
06 w. Reageren



45.950 vind-ik-leuks
13 december 2021

Irony

The irony was detected based on the ‘face with tears of joy’ emoji, which is interpreted as ‘laughing and crying at the same time’, like in the following comment: “When nothing meets nothing 😂” - In

this comment the author refers to the caption of the post ‘When fabulousness meets sustainability’. By replacing both ‘fabulousness’ and ‘sustainability’ with the word ‘nothing’, the author seems to indicate that the use of the word sustainability is hollow to him or her. Thus, the author does not perceive the use of the word sustainability by the brand as authentic or true. Also, irony was detected based on the use of praise, which was followed by critique, as seen in the following comment: *"wow, beautiful, truly unique, original, creative.... you probably want to hear this and we would like to hear that your workers have a decent salary for their work or that you are REALLY doing something for our Earth."* - The author of this comment starts off with complementing the communication, because he or she assumes that this is what the brand wants to hear or generate as a comment on the Instagram post. This is the ironic part of the comment. But then this is followed by a critical note, addressing what it is that the consumers or customers would like to see. By putting the word ‘really’ in caps she might be touching upon greenwashing too. Thus, for some Instagram users the sustainable communication by fast fashion brands on social media evokes an ironic reaction. At the same time, we should see this in the context of the complete sample and then we can conclude that these reactions are not very common.

Fast fashion

Among the more critical consumers there were several Instagram users pointing out the perceived mismatch between fast fashion and sustainability. The quotes indicate that the authors do not believe that fast fashion can be sustainable in any way. That is what they express quite worldily within their comments. Some quotes just state the perceived mismatch: *"Fast fashion is not sustainable."*, while others address the mismatch, but also elaborate more on why they perceive this as a mismatch, like the following comment: *"Fast fashion can never get sustainable! @hm this is not sustainable per definition!!! Sustainability means sufficiency and ethical production - fair paid workers, working under save and fair conditions. There is nothing about this in your collections. #whomademyclothes #hmdrehdichum #fashionrevolution"*. They highlight the practices by the brand that are not sustainable in their opinion.

Critics

Apart from the three themes discussed above, there were also a lot of Instagram users posting critical comments, by pointing towards the practices of the brands that they perceive as not sustainable, like seen in this comment: *"With emphasis on the ‘working towards’ - still selling plenty of plastic jumpers in the new collection, sadly."*), suggesting what they should do, as shown in this comment: *"I think the best way to be sustainable is to not release 50 collections a year?"*, requesting more information on sustainability and related topics, as illustrated by this comment: *"When your conscious items say made from ‘partly’ recycled material how much does that typically mean is recycle?"* and communicating ‘hypocrisy’, as demonstrated by this comment: *"Hipocrisia pura"* - the translation of this quote provided by Google Translate is: *"Pure hypocrisy"*. However, since this comment only posted the hypocrisy, without any further explanation of why they think it is hypocrisy and what they think is hypocrite, it is hard to define exactly what it is that they are referring to. It can be interpreted as related to greenwashing.

As stated in 4.3.1 the majority of the comments posted had a positive outlet. It was interesting to discover that some posts (H&M post 2 and 5) didn’t generate comments regarding sustainability at all. But even more interesting to see was that these posts were the oldest posts of our selection sample. Therefore, this confirms the thought that the awareness regarding sustainability grew in the last few years, as mentioned in the time frame justification in chapter 3.

4.4.2 Reddit forums

The discussions below are extracted from forum 1: “H&M accused of ‘greenwashing’ over plans to make clothes from sustainable fabric - ‘Fashion this fast can never and will never be sustainable’”. By the forum title, we can immediately predict that users share their uncensored and honest opinions regarding brands’ green efforts.

User 1: *“The fashion industry isn’t sustainable anyway, nobody needs a whole new wardrobe every season, period.”*

User 2 replies: *“How is the “industry” responsible for the frequency one shops for clothes? That’s your own personal choice to be made upon your own considerations.”*

By asserting that “the fashion industry isn’t sustainable anyway”, the user questions the validity of claims made by the brands regarding environmental practices. This skepticism may stem from a perception of greenwashing or even a lack of transparency within the industry. “Nobody needs a whole new wardrobe every season” is a sentence that challenges the mindset of consumers and also the fast fashion endless cycles or new or old styles that try to encourage excessive consumption. The response of User 2 emphasizes personal responsibility in consumer choices, implying that the frequency of shopping is entirely up to the consumer. This viewpoint puts the burden on the consumer to make informed decisions rather than holding fast fashion brands responsible for unsustainable practices.

User 1: *“Anything that’s not sustainable is doomed by definition. What is sustainable really? Who does it sustain? Not the environment.”*

User 2 replies: *“Or perhaps it is dooming others or the world. The only way it is itself doomed is if it is held accountable.”*

The first user replies: *“Wrong. Unsustainable means it cannot be sustained. It means there is a built in expiration date no matter what.”*

This conversation implicitly criticizes greenwashing in the fashion industry and emphasizes the gap between sustainability claims and actual environmental impact. User 1’s claim calls into question the legitimacy of sustainability efforts in fast fashion and other industries.

User 1: *“Companies make products for you. You consume them. If you want there to be less waste in the world then consume less. Shaming H&M for trying to make a move, even if it is a pure marketing, is absurd. ‘Greenwashing’ among companies maybe is becoming a trend now, but ‘greenwashing’ among individuals account for almost all of those concerned about the climate”*

User 2: *“Am I the only one that will buy stuff from h&m and wear it for years? I’m wearing an 8 year old H&M cardigan right now”*

Another user supports: *“I’m wearing a 6 year old H&M shirt right now.”*

And last but not least, another one states: *“I have several dresses, tops and jackets from H&M that I’ve worn for at least 8 years.”*

User 1 starts the conversation by strongly claiming that individual consumption habits have a greater effect on environmental concerns and somehow normalizes “greenwashing” as a practice of the modern world nowadays. The “greenwashing” skepticism is countered by the other users’ comments which advocate the durability and longevity of H&M’s materials and apparel, with the argument of having these clothes owned for years now. Their testimonials challenge the widely accepted opinion that fast fashion clothes are not sustainable, suggesting that some clothes from this brand can withstand the test of time.

The next discussion is extracted from forum 4: “H&M, Zara and other fashion brands are tricking shoppers with vague sustainability claims.”:

User 1: *“Does it even count as sustainable when it falls apart in a week?”*

User 2 replies: *“Wanna bet they’d call it biodegradable?”*

This ironic conversation between the users calls into question the legitimacy of fast fashion brands’ sustainability claims, implying that true sustainability includes not only materials, but also durability and longevity. User 1 questions the validity of labeling a product sustainable when it deteriorates quickly, while User 2’s response implies that some brands might label products as “biodegradable” as a marketing tactic, even in cases when they are not truly environmentally friendly. This conversation once again demonstrates lack of trust in fast fashion brands’ sustainability claims.

Focusing on identity within this theme, shows us that most data illustrate consumers who identify as ‘sustainability critics’. This phenomenon can be understood through the framework of Social Identity Theory, as proposed by Tajfel and Turner (1979). According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), Social Identity Theory posits that individuals derive a sense of pride and self-esteem from their group memberships. They are showcasing this identity by expressing their criticism, irony, and greenwashing accusations. By aligning themselves with the identity of “sustainability critics”, these consumers are not only expressing their values but also reinforcing their belonging to a group that prioritizes environmental responsibility and ethical consumption. Nevertheless, as shown by the Reddit data, other consumers oppose these ‘sustainability critics’ by demonstrating a ‘fast fashion lover’ identity as also detected in paragraph 4.2.

4.5 Action versus attitude

The collected data also reflected the attitude behavior gap in some way. With community users expressing that their attitude does not (always) match with their actions. Within this theme we see consumers explaining why people in general still buy fast fashion and making suggestions to consume more sustainably (what we also saw in paragraph 4.4 reflected by the Instagram comments).

When analyzing the selected Instagram posts from the accounts of Zara and H&M we did not detect any comment related to this theme. On the other hand, this theme was detected in the reddit forums. The following discussions are transcribed from forum 5: “Breaking up with Fast Fashion - what does it mean to you?”.

User 1: *“I’m sure people feel that way about sustainable fashion being an investment. That’s how i try to see it, but I’m also a grad student on a budget and have been experiencing some weight fluctuations that makes me hesitant to invest in something that might not fit for long....There is a big difference between consumers wanting to behave a certain way and that way of behaving being realistic for the average person...”*

User 2 replies: *“Agree with this. Weight fluctuations have been a huge challenge for my clothing purchases over the last three years. In my case, pregnancy, breastfeeding, limited budget.”*

Both users express positive feelings and attitudes towards sustainable fashion as an investment. User 1 mentions seeing sustainable fashion as an investment despite being on a budget, meanwhile User 2 seems to agree with that perspective. However, despite their positive attitude regarding sustainability, both users face real world constraints that affect their actions in another way. While they believe in the concept of sustainable fashion, their real-life circumstances such as weight fluctuations, limited budget

and body changes prevent them from changing their consumption habits, thus making it impossible to “break up” with fast fashion. Users' issues with limited budget and body weight fluctuations represent a broader societal issue. By sharing their personal experiences, the collective nature of the issue is brought to the surface, emphasizing economic factors and biological changes of the human body which affect the consumers' degree of sustainability.

The other discussion takes place in the same forum. Let's take a look at the users' discussion below:

User 1: *“I dont think people care about the ethics of fast fashion enough to stop purchasing from places like Zara or H&M. It's like becoming vegan or zero waste. People say one thing but their shopping habits prove otherwise...”*

User 2 replies: *“Piggybacking. I dont think most people care enough about the planet to buy less, regardless of where they are buying from. Buying a weekly haul from Luisa Via Roma is no better than buying a weekly haul from H&M. Regardless of where you are buying from, your consumption habits will have to change, and people dont like that. people are buying enough that 80% of their clothes is worn less than once a year, co clearly people are buying too MUCH clothes.”*

Another user replies: *“My take on this is people dont need to do it perfectly. It's better to have more people do SOMETHING (like maybe shop less often at Zara or H&M), than a handful doing it 'perfectly and the rest doing nothing at all.”*

Users 1 and 2 express skepticisms about the general public's concern about the ethical consequences of fast fashion. They argue that while individuals may be vocal and supportive of ethical practices, their actual purchase habits contradict these sentiments. Despite the users' concerns about fast fashion ethics, they highlight the overconsumption issue, regardless of the retailers' ethical status. This gap in attitude and action exemplifies the difficulty of turning ethical understanding into actual and concrete action. The last user introduces a pragmatic perspective, advocating for incremental changes in consumer purchasing rather than striving for unattainable ethical perfection. This viewpoint acknowledges the complexities of behavioral change and the varied capacities of individuals to adhere to ethical standards. Here it is suggested that instead of expecting flawless obedience to ethical principles, the focus might shift to encouraging incremental changes in purchasing habits as a step towards a sustainable future.

When understanding identities within this theme, we could detect a consumer identifying as a graduate student. This user identifies as a graduate student living on a limited budget, which aligns them with a demographic known for financial constraints. This user signals a high awareness of priorities and values of certain social groups within the discussion, by acknowledging the perspective of viewing sustainable fashion as an investment. The user implicitly differentiates themselves from individuals with greater financial resources and prioritizes long term sustainability over short term affordability. This differentiation and the individual's hesitancy to invest in sustainable fashion due to budget constraints and body fluctuations reflects a negotiation between socioeconomic status and personal values (Belk, 1988). However, the individual's personal circumstances as a budget limited graduate student can certainly influence their ability to fully adopt a sustainable lifestyle and perspective. Moreover, there are consumers who expose why the gap still exists. Another user highlights the importance of incremental improvements (*“It's better to have more people do SOMETHING”*). Again, these consumers demonstrate their knowledge regarding this topic and therefore display their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984).

4.6 Increasing consumer responsibility

With the theme ‘responsible consumption’ we refer to consumers discussing how to consume in a responsible way and expressing their worries about consumption. Within this theme we see consumers educating other consumers and suggesting others how to consume responsibly or act sustainable in the world of fashion by sharing experiences.

4.6.1 Instagram posts

The Instagram comments displaying the theme of responsible consumption were nearly non-existent. The only comment that would fit this theme is; *“Where are these made/produced?”* In this comment ‘these’ referred to the products displayed in the visual from the Instagram post. Thus, the comments didn’t entail worries about responsible consumption, or people discussing responsible consumption amongst each other.

4.6.2 Reddit forums

In forum 5 “Breaking up with Fast Fashion - what does it mean to you?”; we detected responsible consumers who give each other advice on how to be sustainable and encourage responsible consumption, with or without having to break up with fast fashion as follows:

User 1: *“We arent going to shop our way out of wasteful over-consumption. I think it would be a better use of time to learn how to take care of clothes so they last longer. How to properly wash/dry, how to mend and later, how to dye clothes...If your clothes are well maintained they are more likely to find a new home through second hand stores”*

User 2: *“Agree, I see so many people discard clothing for ‘flaws’ that can be easily prevented or amended. A fabric shaver can add years to the lids of a sweater. Hand washing and using garment bags can extend the life of delicate fabrics. Shoe care is especially important if you only have a few pairs in rotation.... With the rise of social media, people have become lazy and complacent with purchasing whatever crazy micro-trend is being spoon-fed to them by a 100lb 22 years old ‘influencer’. 2 weeks later they have to figure out what to do with a pair of neo green vinyl hot shorts that are no longer trendy. We can all be more sustainable if we start dressing for our authentic selves.”*

We can excerpt from this discussion some key points regarding sustainable and responsible consumption, where both users criticize overconsumption. User 1’s comment focuses on taking care and maintenance, arguing that taking care of the clothes one already owns is more beneficial than continuously buying new pieces. Proper care such as washing at certain conditions, drying, mending and even dyeing clothes can significantly extend their lifespan according to this user, making them eligible to be used even after a few years by people who shop in second-hand stores. User 2 expands on this idea by suggesting fabric shavers for sweaters and repairing clothes instead of throwing them away because of minor flaws. In addition, this user criticizes the influence of social media and influencers in promoting unsustainable purchasing habits and advocates for dressing authentically rather than chasing after “die-fast” trends. Last but not least, both users recognize the value of the second-hand market in extending and continuing clothes usage for a longer lifespan. With proper clothes maintenance, these pieces are more likely to find a new home through secondhand stores, contributing to waste reduction and promoting a circular economy where resources are utilized more efficiently. This shift toward a circular fashion system conserves valuable resources and fosters a more sustainable fashion industry for future generations, as Corona et al. (2019) expect a circular economy to be the most favorable way to sustainable development.

Another discussion takes place in this forum as follows:

User 1: *“I’ve sworn off fast fashion and can’t afford ethical/sustainable fashion, so I literally buy things used, other than swimsuits and underwear. Goodwill, crossroads, Plato’s Buffalo exchange, depop, poshmark, eBay. It seems like the middle ground of being a conscious consumer with a budget that a lot of people don’t consider.”*

User 2: *“Same! I buy very very few new items that aren’t undies. One thing I noticed after reading the Elizabeth Cline book ‘Overdressed’, was how bad fast fashion looks second hand- it pills, is misshapen, has elastic that hasn’t survived...It kind of edits itself out of the resale market. So the things I end up with tend to be vintage pieces of higher quality garments.”*

User 3: *“Totally agree! I used to almost only buy fast fashion before I really knew all the details, and in addition to them falling apart relatively quickly, they just never fit well. I always thought it was me, that I had some kind of weird body and everything just looked bad on me. When I finally started buying higher quality secondhand things I was shocked at how much better it looked.”*

In this discussion, we are observing a shift towards secondhand shopping, similar to the previous discussion. Users 1 and 2 express preferences for buying used items as a conscious alternative to fast fashion. As User 1 mentions various platforms and shops where they source their clothes, such as “Goodwill”, “eBay” and so on; they highlight affordability and accessibility to secondhand options. Furthermore, User 2 underlines the decline in quality of fast fashion clothes and cites issues such as pilling, poor elastic retention and misshaping. This observation highlights the unsustainable nature of fast fashion production, which favors low-cost manufacturing over durability and quality. Thus, the user prefers to find high-quality vintage clothing in secondhand stores, which provide better longevity and value for money spent. Additionally, User 3 shares their personal experience transitioning from fast fashion to higher quality secondhand clothing stores, where they observe a great improvement in their appearance and fit. This emphasizes the significance of taking into account unique body shapes and sizes in the fashion industry and most importantly, demonstrates that investing in higher-quality products might boost individuals’ confidence and pleasure with their clothing selections.

When it comes to identity within this theme, overall, one can easily see users identifying as ‘sustainability educator’. Reddit users share experiences and opinions regarding responsible consumption with the goal of inspiring other consumers to act in the same way. Furthermore, we would like to further zoom in on one particular quote from the data:

“I’ve sworn off fast fashion and cant afford ethical/sustainable fashion, so i literally buy used things...”

This user identifies themselves as someone who has made a conscious decision to avoid fast fashion, aligning with a value-driven stance against unsustainable consumption patterns. This identification serves as a foundation of their social identity in the discussion. By adopting second hand or “used items” as the user states, the user demonstrates a preference for sustainable practices despite financial limitations. This aligns with the values of individuals who prioritize sustainability over affordability. Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) concept of in-group favoritism is reflected in this user’s sense of belonging and positive regard towards their own group. By consciously avoiding fast fashion and embracing sustainable consumption practices instead, this user reinforces their identity as a member of the sustainability community, exhibiting favoritism towards this group over those who engage in unsustainable patterns of consumption. This highlights the role of social identity in shaping individual’s preferences and behavior as they seek to align themselves with groups that share their values and beliefs.

Moreover, we see users expressing their identity through their capitals (Bourdieu, 1984). They address their resources and wealth by mentioning their ‘budget’, thus referring to economic capitals. In addition, they showcase their cultural capital, by displaying their knowledge and skills related to (sustainable) consumption and garment care. This behavior reflects their familiarity with sustainable practices and commitment to responsible consumption. Furthermore, this engagement also relates to ‘consumer taste’, coined by Bourdieu (1984), where discussion revolves around preferred consumption practices. Users debate various solutions and advocate for what they consider to be “the best” methods of consuming sustainably. These interactions now only highlight individual preferences but also create a shared space where community standards and taste are negotiated.

4.7 Social sustainability

When we address social sustainability, we refer to all data that is related to the working conditions of the people manufacturing the clothes that the brands sell in some way. In terms of action, we see that Instagram users call to action and criticize when it comes to this theme. This theme was not detected in any way in the Reddit forums of the selection sample.

One of the more surprising themes extracted from the Instagram data was social sustainability. We collected many comments regarding the workers behind the brands. Especially in H&M post 4, since half of the comments on that post are about fair wages. Therefore, we tracked down if at the time of the post (April 2021) H&M was in the news regarding this topic. The comment of one author helped us in this process by saying “*The BHRRC busted you - #payyourworkers !*”. The BHRRC is an organization that publishes the Fashion Transparency Index every year. H&M and Zara are both brands that are featured in this report. Therefore, the outcomes of this report could have fueled these reactions. Accompanied by the report of the Clean Clothes Campaign, ‘How the garment industry failed to pay its workers during the pandemic’ that was published in 2021. This report gained a lot of media attention, amongst others by the Guardian. However, we also see similar comments in the Zara post 1, 4 and 5. Although not as many as in the H&M post 4. Besides that, a lot of people are also tagging the brand. Like in this comment: “*@zara does this mean you are fully committed to the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety? #garmentworkerrights*”. By tagging another account the account you are tagging will receive a notification. Thus, the people tagging the brand were addressing them directly, presumably hoping for H&M, respectively Zara to read their comment and to act on it.

Zara Instagram post 1



ZARA zara • Volgen

ZARA zara JOIN LIFE. Working towards sustainability.

At Zara, we understand sustainability as an ongoing effort. We develop specific programs from a holistic approach. Emphasizing social and environmental sustainability and the safety and health of our products. #JOINLIFE

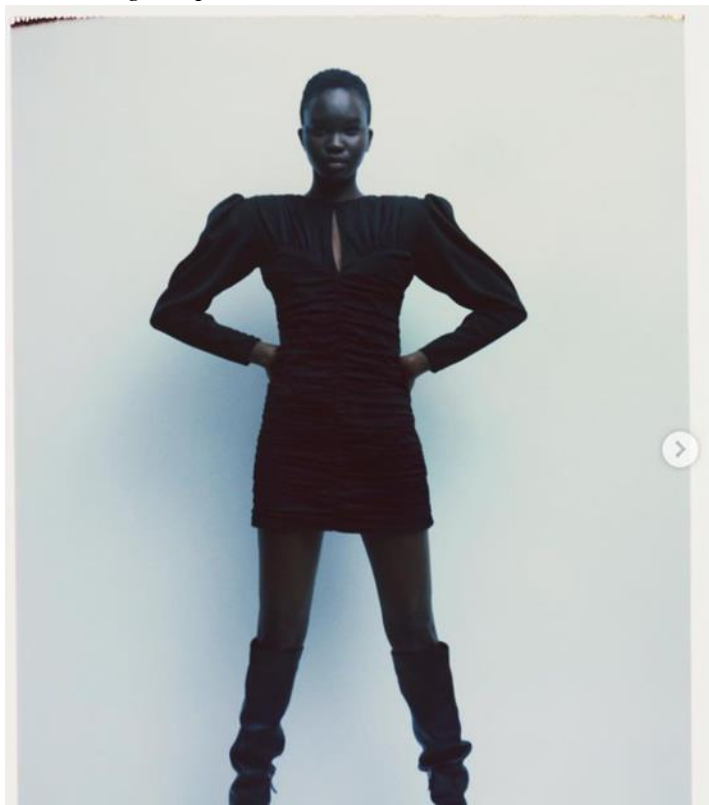
141 w. Vertaling weergeven

diliyarr 🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷
120 w. Reageren

jamesalexander1 hey do you tag the photographer?
131 w. Reageren
Vertaling weergeven

34.087 vind-ik-leuks
2 augustus 2021

Zara Instagram post 4



ZARA zara • Volgen

ZARA zara Through the Sustainability Innovation Hub we are collaborating with different partners to bring more innovation into our products and to support them to scaleup their initiatives. We believe innovation and collaboration is key in moving forward in this journey.

#INNOVATION #JOINLIFE

122 w. Vertaling weergeven

vicdelepine @julialaloum on a loupé ça
89 w. Reageren Vertaling weergeven

julia_xdp Send Your Pic @insponova
06 w. Reageren

45.950 vind-ik-leuks
13 december 2021

Zara Instagram post 5



ZARA zara • Volgen

ZARA JOIN LIFE. We are working to make both our physical and online stores increasingly more sustainable. To this end, we are developing specific programs to design, build and manage our stores efficiently and with a lower environmental impact. Our goal is that by 2022, 10% of the energy in all our headquarters logistics centres and stores will come from renewable sources #JOINLIFE

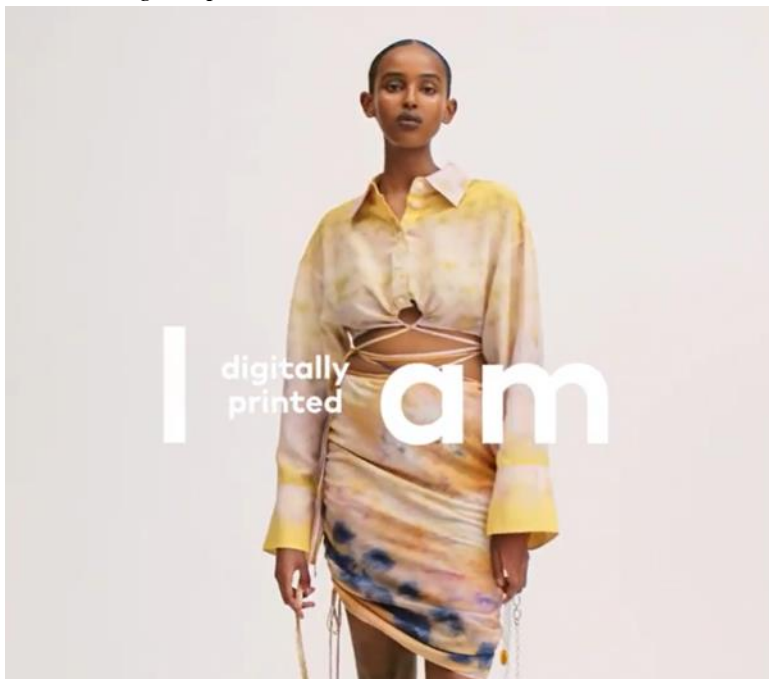
141 w. Vertaling weergeven

abdullah_speaks Ye kiaaa ha?.. Araaay.. Ye kia dekh lya main ne.. Ruko Aik min.. Aankhain dho kay aon main... 🤔🤔🤔

95 w. Reageren Vertaling weergeven

36.723 vind-ik-leuks
2 augustus 2021

H&M Instagram post 4



hm hm • Volgen

hm 157 w. An ode to optimism, progress, style and sustainability. The Colour Story collection drops tomorrow (22 April in the us & ca). #HM #iamthefuture

Shirt: 0971755001
Skirt: 0971757001
Necklace: 0975896003
Vertaling bekijken

freya.martino13 155 w. 3 Reageren

wolfgangandcami 156 w. Maybe don't ever mention sustainability again cause you couldn't touch it with a ten foot pole

245.795 weergaven
14 april 2021

Like mentioned before there were a lot of social sustainability related comments on the posts from the selection sample, relatively even more than about environmental sustainability. Therefore, the question arises; do people care more about people than the environment? Some quotes illustrate that this might be the case for some consumers. Let's take a look at the following comments; "Understand sustainability but not humanity obviously". There is a comment from another account on this one saying "They don't understand sustainability, their entire business model is built around fast fashion. The

safety and health of workers in their supply chain should be the priority. Zara is an unethical company posing as a sustainable one. Not buying from them.” - by using the words ‘should be the priority’ this commenter states that he or she believes that the humans behind the brand should go before the environment. The following quote also argues for prioritizing social sustainability (by using the word ‘priority’): *“The safety and health of workers in your supply chain should be the priority. Zara is an unethical company posing as a sustainable one. Not buying it!”*, but this is also followed by an indirect mention of ‘greenwashing’ (‘zara is an unethical company posing as a sustainable one’) and a firm expression of disbelief (‘not buying it’). In a particular case people educated or corrected each other, like in these comments; *“So good you’ve start thinking about the environment”*, on this comment someone else commented; *this weeks news is that @hm are paying \$24 per month in its factories ! Slave labour- they do not care, This account responded; @ they don’t care about humans but the environment, that is much more important than us. I’m not saying is right to pay that but I’m saying that I prefer the nature than the humans :)*”. Thus, there is a short discussion between two commenters about what is more important; social sustainability (addressed by the mention of the words ‘slave labour’) or environmental sustainability (addressed by the mention of the words ‘environment’ and ‘nature’). One other quote, namely *“Who made these clothes? Being sustainable is not just a matter of fabric and environment. Social sustainability is also important. #whomademyclothes”*, reflects the opinion that sustainability is not just about environmental sustainability (by using the words ‘not just a matter’ and ‘environment’), but that it is also about social sustainability (by using the words ‘social sustainability’). Therefore, this author argues that it is not about one or the other, but the brands should address both. Moreover, the quote *“Too bad you are not working towards accountability and basic human decency”* is an expression of the author's disappointment in the brand by highlighting what Zara is still lacking to do in the sustainability area, which also matches with the ‘critics’ comments in paragraph 4.5.1.

We also saw many comments using the #payyourworkers, like this one for example; *“Please stop #greenwashing, you should better #payyourworkers instead”*. The #payyourworkers was part of a campaign by a coalition of 285 trade unions and labor rights organizations worldwide that have united in a global initiative to urge prompt aid for garment workers and reform within the apparel industry (Payyourworkers, n.d.). This campaign was set up based on a report by the Clean Clothes Campaign. The report concludes that no laws were violated, but brands neglected to ensure proper payment for workers during the pandemic (Johnson, 2021). One of these brands was H&M. In a lot of the comments containing the hashtag people also used the word ‘greenwashing’. This is interesting to see, since our perception of greenwashing might be connected to environmental sustainability in the first place. There were also quotes that directly refer to the report of the Clean Clothes Campaign, since the topic of the report is ‘wage theft’, which is mentioned in the report multiple times. This is used in the comments by the hashtag #worstwagetheft, like the following: *“STOP THE #worstwagetheft PAY YOUR GARMENT WORKERS A LIVING WAGE STOP MAKING CLOTHES USING STOLEN LABOR”*. Apart from using the hashtag, people who placed comments on the post related to social sustainability also addressed the fair wages in other ways, like illustrated by the following comment: *“What about paying your workers their fair share?”*

Furthermore, Instagram users are pressuring the brands to ‘sign the accord’. Combining this within their comments with the word ‘Bangladesh’ they seem to address the ‘new’ accord; the International Accord for Health and Safety in the Textile and Garment Industry (Chan, 2021). This is best shown in the following comment: *“COMMIT TO PROTECT YOUR BANGLADESHI WORKERS' SAFETY NOW @cleanclothescampaign”*. Instagram users also tag the Instagram account of the Clean Clothes Campaign as seen in this comment: *“How about paying your garments makers a living wage and*

respecting their human rights!? @cleanclothescampaign". Tagging the campaign organization implies that the Instagram users want to add credibility to their comments, want to be part of the campaign and are serious about addressing the issue to the brand. They directly call the brands to action. They clearly state what they want the brand to do, as illustrated by this comment: "🔥🔥 *Protect your workers in Bangladesh and sign the accord on fire and building safety!* 🔥🔥".

Apart from that there are some comments regarding the working conditions of the people in the factories of these brands, like the following: "*Y matar a millones de niñas al producir sus "prendas sostenibles"*" - the translation of this quote provided by Google Translate is: "And kill millions of girls by producing their "sustainable garments"". And "*A Zara le encanta los niños sobre todo si pueden abusar de ellos trabajándoles 14 horas al día*" - the translation of this quote provided by Google Translate is "Zara loves children especially if they can abuse them by working on them 14 hours a day". The comments are directly addressing the poor working conditions, by using words such as 'kill' and 'abuse', as seen in the quotes below.

Connecting the data to identity we can see that consumers identify as 'human activists', since they advocate for human rights, in this case fair working wages and conditions. In the Instagram comments we saw a large group of climate activists, but also a big group of what we could call human rights activists; the group that highly sympathizes with the workers behind the brands. As Tajfel and Turner (1979) state, competition and animosity among groups stem not just from vying for resources, such as jobs, but also from conflicting identities. In our data this is illustrated by the following user comments.

User 1: "*So good you've start thinking about the environment*"

User 2: "*this weeks news is that @hm are paying \$24 per month in its factories! Slave labour- they do not care*"

User 1 replied: "*they don't care about humans but the environment, that is much more important than us. I'm not saying is right to pay that but I'm saying that I prefer the nature than the humans :)*". Where user 1 identifies as environmental activist, user 2 identifies as human rights activist. Although we do not detect pure hostility within this discussion, there seems to be a bit of friction as a result of competing identities.

5 Discussion

In this chapter we introduce our findings of the study, alongside the summary and discussion of the detected themes. Moreover, we introduce our thematic content analysis, followed by the theoretical discussion where we discuss how our research findings relate to existing theories, literature and framework in our field.

5.1 Findings

The aim of this research was to examine consumer perception and interpretation and social interactions on Instagram & Reddit, exploring sustainable communication by fast fashion brands. By drawing on insights from online communities and social identity, this study seeks to offer readers an analysis of consumer perception, interpretation and engagement on the sustainable communication from Zara and H&M using a netnographic approach and thematic content analysis. We conclude that consumers engage with and interpret sustainability messages from fast fashion brands on social media platforms in diverse ways. While some remain enthusiastic about the products regardless of sustainability concerns, others express skepticism and critique, urging brands to improve their practices. Social media platforms like Instagram and Reddit serve as avenues for these discussions, with Instagram being visually driven and Reddit fostering deeper conversations. Our study found that consumers often see themselves as advocates for environmental and social causes, calling for brands to adopt more sustainable practices, while brands aim to portray themselves as environmentally conscious entities. The responsibility for sustainability is seen as shared between consumers, brands, and government entities, requiring active engagement, dialogue, and collective action to address effectively.

Our objective was to investigate how consumers perceive their role as representatives in the sustainability efforts of the fast fashion industry and how they view their involvement in sustainability initiatives promoted by brands on social media platforms. The study revealed a divided perspective among consumers: some view themselves as active stakeholders in sustainability efforts, while others prioritize the working conditions and wages of factory workers over their direct involvement in sustainability initiatives. This division extends to opinions on who holds primary responsibility for sustainability—whether it should be the consumers themselves or the brands.

Furthermore, with this research we aimed to fill a gap in research regarding how fast fashion brands use social media effectively as a tool to communicate sustainability efforts while avoiding greenwashing speculations by consumers. As illustrated by the collected data, avoiding greenwashing presents a significant challenge for fast fashion brands. Interesting to note, as mentioned in paragraph 3.2.4, is that the number of Instagram posts mentioning sustainability in any way was very slim in the two most recent years, 2023 and 2024. It is unclear whether this signifies a shift in strategy among fast fashion brands to refrain from directly addressing sustainability in their social media communication to mitigate accusations of greenwashing.

It is worth noting that when comparing Instagram and Reddit, these platforms differ significantly in their design and user experience. The discussions on Reddit forums show the raw and honest opinions of consumers and non-consumers of fast fashion brands' efforts regarding the brands' sustainability efforts. We observed that individuals pay attention to brands' campaigns and posts on Instagram; however, the majority of users do not engage and share their thoughts on the posts. Instead, they prefer

to take the discussion to Reddit forums, where they express their opinions more freely by engaging and discussing with other users.

Overall, there was a great amount of “greenwashing” allegations, where consumers were expressing their dissatisfaction with the brands’ claims for being sustainable. Fast fashion brands claim to help the environment by using improved recycled materials, using organic cotton and natural fibers and engage in waste reduction by implementing zero waste principles, which aim in using every piece of the fabric in the production process. Another contributing factor to sustainability is the use of eco-friendly packaging, which helps in reducing plastic use and adopting biodegradable packaging materials. The widespread use of greenwashing allegations highlights a critical area for brands to address.

5.2 Summary of theme findings

Accusing or defending brands by using employment as argument

As shown by the data, former employees' responses indicate concerns about H&M's ethical and environmental practices, fueling broader skepticism about the sincerity of the company's sustainability initiatives. However, other ex-employees argue some brands in the industry are genuinely striving to improve their practices and reduce environmental impact. Therefore, we can conclude that the perception of former employees also highly depends on the brand they say they worked for in the past.

Defending brands by using consumer experience

Despite the previously mentioned rising criticism and awareness, the majority of consumers engaging and interpreting with the brand’s sustainable communication continue to love the brand and express that. Moreover, some even go as far as explicitly mentioning that they don’t care about greenwashing accusations since they love the brand so much. While others argue for the quality of the clothing, communicating a counter argument for the non-durability arguments related to H&M. Reddit forums provide a platform for more nuanced and informed discussions about fashion sustainability, allowing users to delve into complex topics and engage in constructive debates, whereas Instagram comments may serve as a space for quick reactions and expressions of opinion in a visually-driven context.

Educating sustainability on social media

Concluding from the Instagram data we cannot say that many individuals perceive the sustainability communication from Zara, respectively H&M on social media unclear. Nevertheless, for the brands it is of importance that their communication is clear to everyone and that the message comes across as meant in the first place, thus they should not overlook the minority of people that do experience the communication as fuzzy or vague. Furthermore, Reddit discussions do emphasize the need to clarify misconceptions about fashion industry sustainability. Without clear information, consumers struggle to make informed choices and hold brands accountable for environmental claims, although they do educate each other as well.

Questioning sustainable consumption

As illustrated by the comments and discussion, disbelief can result in various perceptions and forms of engagement. It can evoke irony, it can generate ideas to act in a more sustainable way, it can provoke the perception that fast fashion cannot be sustainable in any way, and it can evoke a feeling of hypocrisy. With none of these outcomes being profitable for the brands who published the communication.

Recycling the attitude-behavior gap

Attitude versus action: while this struggle is not seen in Instagram data, it is a hot topic within the Reddit forums. This theme does not only provide evidence for the attitude-behavior gap, but also provides more insight why this gap exists, by shedding light on the collective side of the issue, economic influences and biological shifts in the human body that impact consumers' sustainability levels. Moreover, it is proposed to promote gradual shifts in purchasing behavior as a pathway to sustainability.

Addressing consumer responsibility

Within this theme, we see an exchange between consumers of ways to consume in a more responsible way. Thus, the consumer takes on the responsibility. By suggesting taking better care of one's clothes and not following the latest trends fueled by social media and influencers, but also buying vintage clothes because of higher quality. In this way, consumers inspire each other to act in a more sustainable way. On Instagram this theme is nearly non-existent, possibly due to the platform's nature of short, non-discursive comments.

Advocating for social sustainability

The amount of Instagram comments related to working conditions for the workers behind the brand H&M, respectively Zara illustrates that this is a big concern for consumers. They try to address it to the brands by tagging the brand in the comment itself. And for some this social sustainability seems to be even more important than environmental sustainability. Therefore, brands need to take into account that consumers also interpret social sustainability as a part of sustainability when communicated by the brand.

5.3 General findings

Within the Instagram post data, we could detect if there was a difference between both brands, Zara and H&M, as coined in paragraph 3.3.2. As illustrated in the previous paragraphs both brands generated comments on their Instagram posts with various themes. Although if we zoom in on the theme discussed in paragraph 4.5, we see that Zara generated around two times more comments related to this topic in comparison to H&M. One of the reasons behind this could be that overall, the Instagram posts of Zara selected for this research are more recent, with only one post from before the year 2021 in comparison to H&M's selection sample of all posts being of 2021 or earlier. This could be linked to the rise of green awareness as discussed in paragraph 3.2.4. People have become more aware of the term greenwashing and are more critical in the most recent years.

If we look at the differences in comments between the 'older' posts and the 'newer' posts from both brands we also see the same sentiment. Whereas in older posts people were always supportive and loving towards the brand and their communication, this has changed in recent years. Not drastically, because as said in paragraph 4.5.1, the majority of generated comments on the Instagram posts by the fast fashion brands still have a positive sentiment. On the Reddit platforms we see the contrary, a higher ratio of negative comments over positive comments. This happens for various reasons, such as users criticizing fast fashion brands (namely Zara and H&M), accusing them of "greenwashing" and switching for real sustainable options such as secondhand stores or at times tailoring their own clothes. The positive comments from users mention how they cannot stop buying fast fashion due to the affordability and accessibility of the stores. The love for the brands is also noticeable in cases when consumers refuse to give up on the brands simply because they love the products and are loyal to the

brands, no matter the sustainability concern or involvement they have or pretend to show to the public eye.

As discussed in the various themes, not all themes were visible on both platforms, Instagram posts and Reddit forums. We argue that this underlines the importance of analyzing different platforms as mentioned in paragraph 3.2.2. We believe that in our research the extracted data of each platform was complementary to the other, since the findings differ. Moreover, within the Instagram data we just saw a few discussions, but within the Reddit data this was more common. This is due to the nature of the platform. Where Instagram has a more rhetorical nature and expression, Reddit is a discourse platform in its pure essence. In the next paragraph we will go further into detail regarding this topic.

5.4 Discussion on thematic content analysis

While Instagram provides visually driven content with limited discussions, Reddit emerged as a platform where we observe how users take the discussion a step further and dive deeper into their thoughts and sentiments. This divergence can be attributed to the fundamental nature of each platform: Instagram has a focus on visual rhetoric and expression and tends to prioritize aesthetic appeal and brand promotion, whereas Reddit forums serve as a discourse platform, which stimulates deeper conversations and exchanges of opinions between users. In addition to assessing the content of these discussions, we investigated the linguistic and situational context in which they occurred. Drawing on Song's (2010) conceptualization of linguistic context, we explored the relationship between sentences, phrases, words and paragraphs within the discussion, seeking to uncover patterns of language use and communication styles. As we dive deeper into the discourse and language used, we carefully examined not only the explicit meaning brought about by the words themselves, but also the implicit messages conveyed by tone, syntax and emojis. Emojis are a big part of everyday online communication, whether that is through text messages or on social media. Therefore, the interpretation of these emojis is significant as they serve as expressive tools, conveying sentiments of approval, skepticism, agreement, indifference and so on. To interpret the emojis the researchers utilized their own capability of estimating the true meaning of the one who used the emoji(s) in the comment. The meaning of emojis is not universal, Chen et al. (2024) state that the interpretation is not only culture dependent, but also depends on age and gender. Therefore, it is important to note that we used our own 'Western culture' view to interpret the emojis used in the Instagram comments and that both researchers are in their twenties and women. Besides emojis, every sentence, phrase and word were carefully examined for its ability to contribute to the overall texture and tone of the discourse, revealing underlying themes, attitudes and intentions. Our investigation focused on identifying and exploring patterns of interactions and themes between fast fashion brands and consumers. This required closely observing discussion in which consumers questioned or criticized the brand's sustainability claims, digging deeper into uncovering the underlying motivations and reasoning behind such challenges. Additionally, we found moments of alignment in which consumers expressed support for the brand's sustainability initiatives, pointing out that any active involvement with sustainability reaps more than not taking action at all. The lively debates, information exchange, constructive criticism and moments of mutual affirmation regarding sustainability efforts of the brands shape the collective consciousness of consumers or non-consumers of fast fashion. While Instagram's visual nature encourages straightforwardness in communication and the visual driven content often lacks depth in discussions and in comments, our analysis reveals Reddit as a platform where discourse thrives with lively discussions and thoughts. Our thematic content analysis revealed a spectrum of sentiments and emotions expressed through these discussions, ranging from blind support for the fast fashion brands to heavy critiques of their sustainability efforts. Along

the discourse, expressions of brand loyalty emerged in multiple cases, with consumers passionately advocating for their favorite brands despite sustainability concerns.

5.5 Theoretical Discussion

Language as a practice

As demonstrated in our empirical research, we have different agents who play a certain role in social media and in the sustainability realm. In our study we have the brands/companies and the consumers/citizens and in some way third parties are occasionally raised as well (see paragraph 4.7). These agents can also be addressed as market actors, or in our case, online actors. To be more precise, in our research these were ex-employees, citizens, brands, consumers of the brands and environmental or social organizations. The ex-employees, the citizens and the consumers of the brands are consumers of text according to Berger et al. (2020), as they contribute online reviews that are read by other consumers. The brands are the text producers, since they create digital artifacts in the form of an Instagram post or any other form of sustainability communication. However, consumers can also be seen as text producers since they produce text in the form of publishing discussions on Reddit forums and replying to other people's comments via Instagram. Moreover, brands can also be viewed as text consumers when they review the brand sentiments in online consumer communication. Thus, we argue that both main actors in our study, consumers and brands, are text producers as well as text consumers, interchangeably.

The importance of eWOM

As mentioned by Lee and Youn (2009) eWOM necessitates active engagement and responsibility from both brands and consumers in the digital realm. Nevertheless, we did not detect active participation from the brands on their Instagram accounts. While consumers' comments are a call to action to prevent greenwashing and to pay workers a higher wage, the brands in our study did not reply to any of these comments on their Instagram posts. Moreover, as also addressed by Lee and Youn (2009), it is significant for brands to navigate the intricate landscape of consumer influences. If the majority of Instagram comments on a post highlight the current unfair payment of workers, this and the absence of a reply of the brand itself, could impact their brand image in a negative way. In this duality, brands face different challenges and opportunities. In e-WOM, companies have the ability to disguise themselves and clandestinely observe consumer discussions, gathering insights while remaining incognito. This differs from traditional WOM, where the companies' involvement is restricted and gives them no power to interfere or interact with consumers. There are cases when companies try to manipulate information online by using bots to write positive comments under their online posts, in order to hide the negative and critiques expressed by online users. Nonetheless, we did not detect any indication (such as unfamiliar or odd Instagram account names or multiple similar comments in a row) that H&M or Zara used bots to comment on the selected Instagram posts.

The use of humor and irony

We detected the use of humor and irony in our findings. Several consumers used irony within their communication. Taking Simpson and Mayr's (2010) statement into account, this can be seen as a form of resistance by the less powerful party, the consumers and the powerful in this case being the company or brands. Thus, consumers can be resistant to sustainability communication by the brand.

Attitude behavior gap

Although we did not research the attitude behavior gap, as proposed by Carrington et al. (2010), within our research, the findings lightly touch upon this phenomenon. Especially in the ‘action versus attitude’ theme. Generally, we observe that consumers not only acknowledge the existence of this gap but also respond in various ways. We see consumers defending their behavior and therefore explaining why the gap still exists. Furthermore, we see consumers educating others in an attempt to make the gap less wide. Thus, while extensive research already provides us with several reasons why the gap exists, our research not only confirms these reasons but also provides new insights into the causes of this gap.

Social identity theory

Within our analysis we detected several ways in which consumers express their identity in relation to sustainability (communication), both on an individual level and on a social or group level. We could apply several (social) identity theories to the different ways of expressions consumers used in their comments or discussions. Since we already extensively discussed this in the analysis of the diverse themes in chapter 4, we argue we continue with the other theoretical discussions.

Consumer responsibility

Some quotes from the Instagram comments data underline that consumers do feel responsible to advocate for planet earth as illustrated by the following Instagram comment: *“Fast fashion in itself is not sustainable...it takes more to save our planet...stop the greed & mindless consumerism...it is killing our planet people!! 😞😞😞”*. While other consumers prioritize humans, as illustrated by the following comment: *“The safety and health of workers in your supply chain should be the priority. Zara is an unethical company posing as a sustainable one. Not buying it!”*. This doesn’t exclude them from feeling responsible for planet earth but does imply that they might not feel as the biggest party that is responsible in relation to planet earth. On the other hand, there are also consumers who point to the companies or brands when it comes to responsibility. As illustrated by many comments suggesting how these brands can act in a sustainable way, like the following: *“Note on how to REALLY be sustainable: don’t release collections every week, when a huge bulk of your clothes end up in landfills anyway.”* In Reddit forums, there are different points of view, as directly addressed by this comment (among others); *“How is the “industry” responsible for the frequency one shops for clothes? That’s your own personal choice to be made upon your own considerations.”* Moreover, the Reddit comments in paragraph 4.6.2 also point towards consumers responsibility by using words as *‘your consumptions habits will have to change’*, and in a more optimistic point of view *‘it’s better to have more people do SOMETHING (like maybe shop less often at Zara or H&M)’*. One of the Reddit users even highlights the essence of the attitude behavior gap by saying *“People say one thing but their shopping habits prove otherwise...”*. Thus, it seems that the responsibility falls on both the consumer and the brands. Hence, we notice, while some consumers do feel as main actors in taking care of planet earth, this can unfold into two ways; addressing their own responsibility towards this stakeholder or pointing towards the brands to cry out for a call to action. We observe that consumers express this in various ways, discussing the environmental and social implications of fast fashion, exploring the concept of fashion waste and its impact on the planet and people, and examining strategies for promoting more sustainable consumption patterns, such as supporting second-hand markets and advocating for greater transparency and accountability in the fashion industry.

Representatives of nature

If we focus closely on consumers who do feel personal responsibility towards sustainability and environmental issues, the question that arises would be: are consumers representing themselves by taking on this responsibility or nature? And if consumers are representing nature in what way is that different from an organization that acts in the same way, like Greenpeace?

To address the first proposed question, an analysis of Instagram content reveals that consumers frequently use nature-representative language, such as using words like ‘our’ (as in the quotes ‘our planet’ or ‘our earth’). The widespread usage of these words implies that individuals view themselves as representatives of Earth, aligning their identity with environmental advocacy. This form of nature representation mirrors the mission of environmental organizations.

However, there are notable differences with such organizations. Environmental organizations are known for their intensive campaigns and broad reaching messages, leveraging their structured and well-organized teams to influence public opinion. By contrast, consumers might view their online comments as their form of activism, taking a personal yet public stance on environmental issues. Lastly, while an organization’s actions are usually coordinated and strategic, consumers’ individual comments might not be as impactful and powerful, since their online activism is only one aspect of their overall involvement with environmental issues.

6 Conclusion

To address our research question: *“How do consumers engage with and interpret sustainability messages from fast fashion brands on social media platforms while shaping and expressing their identity?”*; our study found that there are still many consumers who remain enthusiastic about fast fashion products, regardless of the brand’s sustainability. In some cases, consumers develop a greater attachment to fast fashion due to their sustainable communication and efforts. Nevertheless, with the growing ‘green’ awareness more and more consumers express their critique on these sustainability messages by fast fashion brands. They express their critique in various ways, ranging from outright disbelief to offering suggestions for how these brands could improve their sustainability efforts. Moreover, consumers on Instagram were also predominantly concerned with social sustainability, even though this topic was not addressed in the visual or the accompanying text by the Instagram posts. Despite consumer engagement and calls for action, brands often remain passive in responding to comments on their Instagram posts, potentially impacting their brand image. This underscores the importance of active engagement and responsibility from both brands and consumers in the digital realm. Also, the terms need to be explained to the public who are not aware and knowledgeable about sustainability terms. Moreover, the use of humor and irony in consumer communication reflects a form of resistance against sustainability communication by brands, suggesting a nuanced response from consumers to brand messaging.

Our study highlights the differences between Instagram and Reddit as platforms for discourse on sustainability and fast fashion. Instagram is characterized by visual content and limited discussions, while Reddit fosters deeper conversations and exchanges of opinions. These discussions on social media platforms reveal how individuals negotiate their identities based on socio-economic status, values, and norms, aligning themselves with groups that share similar values and beliefs, such as sustainability advocates. Additionally, while consumers acknowledge the existence of the attitude-behavior gap, they respond in various ways, including defending their behavior, educating others, and advocating for change, illustrating the complexity of consumer attitudes and actions.

Our research suggests that both consumers and brands play their respective role in presenting nature. Based on the data found, consumers often see themselves as advocates for environmental and social causes, urging brands to adopt more sustainable practices and be transparent with their consumers. Thus, expressing a sense of stakeholder responsibility towards the planet. Some consumers represent themselves as representatives of nature in their comments, aligning with environmental organizations' messages and actions. However, the individual nature of consumer comments differs from the broader actions and messages of organizations like Greenpeace. Brands, on the other hand, portray themselves as environmentally conscious entities through their sustainability messages which are delivered through social media such as Instagram. Nevertheless, it is still unclear and debatable who is responsible. Does the responsibility fall on the consumer or the brand? Or is it the government that should take action in the first place? Sustainability responsibility appears to be shared between consumers and brands. Consumers call for brands to take meaningful actions towards sustainability, and brands are expected to respond to these demands. However, discussions on Reddit also highlight that some consumers believe the government should play a primary role in enforcing sustainable practices, with brands and consumers following suit. This perspective suggests a multi-faceted approach to sustainability, where regulatory frameworks, corporate actions, and consumer behaviors all contribute to the overall effort. Overall, our study highlights the need for active engagement, dialogue, and collective action to address these challenges effectively.

6.1 Practical Implications

Given that our study revealed perceptions of sustainability claims as often hollow or controversial, fast fashion brands face a choice: either reduce their sustainability communications to avoid skepticism or enhance the transparency and authenticity of their messaging by providing measurable and credible information. Brands should focus on educating consumers about sustainability terms and practices. Clear and consistent messaging can help consumers make informed decisions and reduce confusion about what constitutes genuine sustainable practices. In addition, brands must actively engage with consumers on social media, especially in response to comments and concerns related to sustainability. By addressing consumer feedback, brands can build trust and demonstrate their commitment to ethical practices. Moreover, fast fashion brands can also benefit from incorporating consumer suggestions to improve their sustainability practices and communication strategies. Additionally, brands should address social sustainability, such as fair wages and working conditions in a transparent, accessible and easily understandable way. This dual focus will resonate with a broader audience and address multiple consumer concerns, by building consumer trust and aligning with growing consumer demand for ethical practices. By implementing these practical implications, fast fashion brands can better navigate the complexities of consumer influences, enhance their sustainability communications, and build stronger, more trustful relationships with their consumers. Apart from fast fashion brands, policymakers can use the insights provided by our study to develop regulations and guidelines that ensure more genuine sustainability practices within the fast fashion industry. Besides policymakers, marketers can apply the findings to refine their strategies, ensuring that sustainability communications are both effective and credible. Transparency and genuine efforts must be prioritized in order to establish trust and credibility. Brands should consider taking a more proactive and transparent approach, possibly by incorporating more detailed and verifiable information about their sustainability practices across their social media platforms. Furthermore, engaging more with critical voices and thinkers on Reddit forums may demonstrate a commitment to accountability and continuous improvement of the brands in the sustainability realm. Overall, our findings also confirmed that greenwashing accusations are a prevalent issue that brands need to address proactively.

6.2 Future Research

Future research could adopt a more branding-focused perspective, exploring which specific words or visuals provoke critical comments from consumers. Comparing different texts and visuals used in branding could yield valuable insights into what is perceived as genuinely sustainable versus greenwashing. Such findings could help brands craft more effective sustainability communications. Moreover, recognizing the time constraints of this study, future research could expand beyond H&M and Zara to include other fast fashion brands and even brands from different fashion sectors (e.g. luxury fashion) to compare consumer perceptions and engagement across a broader spectrum. Furthermore, a cross-industry comparison can be made; investigating how sustainability communications in other industries (e.g., electronics, food and beverage) are perceived and how these industries handle greenwashing accusations. Additionally, conducting more in-depth studies, focusing on various social media platforms (e.g. TikTok, X), or incorporating more Reddit forums could provide more understanding of the nuances of consumer engagement and discourse on each platform regarding sustainability. By implementing longitudinal studies to track changes in consumer sentiment and engagement over time on different platforms it can be considered how new features or changes in platform policies might affect discussions. Another topic of research could be the brand response of eWOM, the impact of brands actively engaging with consumer comments and feedback on social media platforms can be studied, particularly in relation to managing their reputation and addressing

greenwashing accusations. Besides that, in paragraph 5.1 was questioned whether the decrease in sustainability related Instagram posts indicates a shift in strategy among fast fashion brands to avoid directly addressing sustainability in their social media communication to mitigate accusations of greenwashing. Thus, this can be a research direction too. One other angle of research can be found in the following area; as concluded, some consumers represent themselves as representatives of nature in their comments, aligning with environmental organizations' messages and actions. However, the individual nature of consumer comments differs from the broader actions and messages of organizations like Greenpeace. This suggests another angle for future research, because how does this differ, and which feelings or perceptions are involved in this process or representativeness? These could be research questions for future studies.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Forums from Reddit

Forum 1:

The screenshot shows a Reddit post in the r/worldnews subreddit. The post title is "H&M accused of 'greenwashing' over plans to make clothes from sustainable fabric - 'Fashion this fast can never and will never be sustainable'". The post includes a video thumbnail showing the H&M logo. The post is archived, and the text below the video reads: "Archived post. New comments cannot be posted and votes cannot be cast." The post has 6.7K upvotes and 413 comments. Below the post, there are several comments from users like Wilber4562, TechniGREYSCALE, masfejal, ThaiChiMate, FIREnebaby, Million2026, and bustthelock. The comments discuss the concept of greenwashing and the impact of fast fashion.

Post Title: H&M accused of 'greenwashing' over plans to make clothes from sustainable fabric - 'Fashion this fast can never and will never be sustainable'

Source: independent.co.uk


Archived post. New comments cannot be posted and votes cannot be cast.

Engagement: 6.7K upvotes, 413 comments


Comments:

- u/HoodedHorse** (Promoted): You are the Captain. store.steampowered.com
- Sort by:** Best
- Wilber4562** (4y ago): If you're not ready to change your shopping habits and completely boycott the high street, La Manna suggests simply trying to shop less frequently. 749 upvotes, 50 more replies.
- [deleted]** (4y ago)
- [deleted]** (4y ago)
- TechniGREYSCALE** (4y ago): Don't buy their clothes then Jesus. 13 upvotes.
- masfejal** (4y ago): Lol buyers dont want to be blamed. 24 upvotes, 3 more replies.
- ThaiChiMate** (4y ago): Thanks Patriotact and Hasan Minhaj fir showing this months ago. 32 upvotes, 1 more reply.
- FIREnebaby** (4y ago): Companies make products for you. You consume them. If you want there to be less waste in the world then consume less. Shaming H&M for trying to make a move, even if it is pure marketing, is absurd. "Greenwashing" among companies maybe is becoming a trend now, but "greenwashing" among individuals account for almost all of those concerned about the climate. 47 upvotes, 8 more replies.
- [deleted]** (4y ago): Anything that's not sustainable is doomed by definition. 34 upvotes, 3 more replies.
- Million2026** (4y ago): Many people just psychologically don't want to wear clothes someone else has worn if they have the option. So the green ideal of everyone shopping at the vintage shop is unlikely to catch on. Good can't be the enemy of the great. Environmentalists insisting on this narrative and acting to thwart nuclear power taking up more of power generation capacity over the past few decades is the most salient example of environmentalism purity causing far more damage than good. 62 upvotes, 21 more replies.
- bustthelock** (4y ago): My H&M purchases have been quite low: leather, warm, classic, low-key, well designed etc.

1. Discussion comments

 **masfejai** • 4y ago
Lol buyers dont want to be blamed


  24   Share ...

 **Alfus** • 4y ago

Because blaming everything on buyers instead of pointing out a company got a lot of responsibility too is exactly what companies want, making people feeling mad or ashamed and then the company trying to find a "solution" for this and comes up with greenwashing and such. It's like the whole big meat story, but then milder then big meat.

If we really want to make steps forward in this area then try to simulate second-use clothes and enforce more to recycle clothes, and ban the sale of clothes who don't can be recycled somehow.

You would be serious surprised how many clothes are just thrown away instead of being used longer, gets a second life by someone else or gets recycled.

  5   Share ...

2. Another comment from the forum where an individual is stating their opinion.



[deleted] • 4y ago

Anything that's not sustainable is doomed by definition.

 34   Share ...

 5 more replies

3. A positive comment for H&M



bustthelock • 4y ago

My H&M purchases have been quite long lasting, warm, classic looking, well designed etc.

Definitely not the cliché of cheap flashy stuff I want to later throw away.

I'd take H&M pants over Levi's, say, any day.


4. Another comment where the user shows his/her internal love for the brand.



[deleted] • 4y ago

Idc I love H&M

 4   Share ...

 4 more replies

r/sustainability • 5 yr. ago SEEWheelers

Zara clothes to be made from 100% sustainable fabrics by 2025 | Fashion

Archived post. New comments cannot be posted and votes cannot be cast.

224 26 Share

Sort by: Best

[deleted] • 5y ago
Very interested to know the legal definition of "sustainable" in these sorts of industries

81 Share

MetaRift • 5y ago
I do research on this. In short, there are not really legal definitions of sustainability - they are self defined and voluntary. This is not to say they don't have impact, but it is a very "soft sustainability".

33 Share

4 more replies

3 more replies

[deleted] • 5y ago

poyup • 5y ago
There are two main problems with the current fashion industry. The first is the materials themselves being used. These are unsustainable, and as this greeneashing example shows, the industry has caught up with this fact and knows it needs to change, even if current attempts to convince the public are rather just veiled attempts to hide the problem of use of unsustainable materials. They could have said they would start use only natural and easily biodegradable fabrics, if they had really intended to be sustainable.

There is a second problem, being the rate of production. In this case, the fast fashion cycles sees to clothes being produced at a rate faster than necessary, not to mention more than the environment can easily assimilate. The problem here is what is being called the "rebound effects". That is, even if these companies produced clothes from sustainable materials but did so at the current fast fashion rate, which churns out more than is needed, the benefits of the sustainable materials will be overwhelmed by the sheer volume that is being produced. Thus the industry will remain unsustainable. The rough equivalent of eating too much good food and getting sick.

Two things then. First we need to produce clothing from truly sustainable materials (natural and biodegradable fabrics). And while doing that, we need to reduce the sheer volume of production and consumption of fashion.

I haven't even touched on the point that all this excessive fashion is not even making us any happier!

9 Share

tman12371 • 5y ago
I don't know the last time I bought new clothes. As long as it's clean and has no holes in it (that weren't there in the first place) then it's good to wear. I wish more people would stop buying clothes when they don't need them.

5 Share

1 more reply

Gorokowsky • 5y ago
Sustainable and fast fashion does not make sense to me. It would be sustainable not to buy as many clothes and repair what one already has. If everybody acted this way Zara would have problems actually making profits.

7 Share

thestorysofar • 5y ago

Source?
5 Share

raccoontails • 5y ago

Empty promises
5 Share

[deleted] • 5y ago

We still have to consume less
4 Share

blackxd187 • 5y ago

In comparison to other fast fashion retailers, Zara has been trying really hard to push the sustainability angle. I don't know if

1. Conversation between users regarding the term "sustainability".

r/sustainability

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Sustainability: The Capacity to Endure
Sustainability is the ability of system to endure. While most people associate the term with the environment, true longevity...

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r/malefashionadvice


Dump of H&M Product materials and factories they're made in.

1.8K upvotes · 121 comments




r/singapore


The true cost of demand for cheap clothes, to you and the...






 [deleted] • 5y ago


Very interested to know the legal definition of "sustainable" in these sorts of industries

 81   Share ...




 **MetaRift** • 5y ago


I do research on this. In short, there are not really legal definitions of sustainability - they are self defined and voluntary. This is not to say they don't have impact, but it is a very "soft sustainability".

 33   Share ...




 [deleted] • 5y ago

Self defined and voluntary? I am most intrigued to learn about this myself. Are there some businesses then that claim to be sustainable and actually do as they say? Or is it often a marketing thing?


 9   Share ...

 **MetaRift** • 5y ago




Well there are plenty of cases of "green washing" and companies will certainly overemphasize their dedication to sustainability to improve their brand. However, there are genuine efforts to become more sustainable in general - it's just often fighting an uphill battle of overconsumption and the demand for economic growth.

 11   Share ...


2. The user is reflecting on how fast fashion brands, such as Zara would not make profits if they were fully sustainable.

 **Gorokowsky** • 5y ago




Sustainable and fast fashion does not make sense to me. It would be sustainable not to buy as many clothes and repair what one already has. If everybody acted this way Zara would have problems actually making profits.

 7   Share ...


3. This user appreciates the effort of Zara to practice sustainability either way.

 **blackgxd187** • 5y ago




In comparison to other fast fashion retailers, Zara has been trying really hard to push the sustainability angle. I don't know if they're still using sweatshops and what not, but I suppose I appreciate the effort.

 3   Share ...

4. This user questions the time frame and also the definition of sustainability.

 **guesswhat8** • 5y ago

That's 5 years from now. What's taking so long? Also define sustainable. Do they pay their workers fairly?

 3   Share ...

r/ethicalfashion • 2 yr. ago

Is H&M's conscious line any good?

I know H&M is fast fashion, but is their conscious line reputable? I read into it and it sounds like they're trying to work towards good, I just can't tell if they're greenwashing or not. I don't have that much money so I'm trying to look for sustainable items that aren't hard on my bank account.

Archived post. New comments cannot be posted and votes cannot be cast.

21 15 Share

Sort by: Best

Smidge • 2y ago
Definitely greenwashing.
132 Share

informalory • 2y ago
One of the hardest parts of being sustainable as a consumer is not finding ethical brands it's learning to consume less. It is not how most of us are raised, it's not an easy process.

I don't make a ton of money either and learning to simply not consume instead of searching for "cheap" ethical companies/items was something that was very challenging to me. Wanting to buy something new, not having a lot of money, wanting to support ethical business but couldn't justify the price (because I didn't really need anything new anyway) ended up getting something cheap and regretting it.

Save up for the items you actually might need, thrift, do some research on consuming less!

In the future though, any brand that has a specific "sustainable" line or sub brand is never good. If they were truly ethical they wouldn't be promoting a certain line within their stores they'd be doing throughout their whole business.
86 Share

escapeman20 • 2y ago
Greenwashing. Fast fashion is inherently unsustainable and unethical.
72 Share

losthomesinspace • 2y ago
Thrifting is always my recommendation for someone looking for cool pieces at a cheaper price. Since you're giving second life to clothes that would otherwise be thrown out, it's good for the planet too!
18 Share

Wazell • 2y ago
No, it's rubbish and H&M is 100% greenwashing. There is no way to shop responsibly at H&M. Even with limited funds, there are ways to shop sustainably and responsibly still. H&M is never the answer in this scenario though.
36 Share

lppon1 • 2y ago • Edited 2y ago
The Lie in the statement is "trying to work towards"... they are not. If they were, their business model would not work.
15 Share

omgforeal • 2y ago
No
10 Share

dontuniquenonit • 2y ago
Definitely greenwashing
10 Share

dandyshaman • 2y ago
No such thing as cheap sustainable products. They exploit people in their factories.
6 Share

wepizza • 2y ago
No fast fashion brand can make a line that is ethical. That is greenwashing
4 Share

Abusy-Ballerina • 2y ago
What's green washing?
3 Share

colbilyn • 2y ago
Companies making misleading claims to deceive customers into believing that the products are environmentally friendly.
8 Share

hezore • 2y ago
No
3 Share

r/ethicalfashion Join
Ethical Fashion
74K Members 9 Online
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- r/Etsy**
Is it really that bad?
53 upvotes · 60 comments
- r/ValueInvesting**
Why Robinhood suck so much as a broker?
1 upvote · 50 comments
- r/Baystreetbets**
Nuvei Stock is actually a great buy (lspd.to)

1. Discussions regarding greenwashing take place between users, questioning the practices of H&M.



WaZeil • 2y ago

No, it's rubbish and H&M is 100% greenwashing. There is no way to shop responsibly at H&M. Even with limited funds, there are ways to shop sustainably and responsibly still. H&M is never the answer in this scenario though.

⊖ ↑ 36 ↓ ↗ Share ...



mcandrewz • 2y ago

I used to work there. The main goal of the coupons we gave out for clothes donation was to encourage people to come back and shop more.

H&M only sees ethicality and environmentalism as a means to sell things.

↑ 6 ↓ ↗ Share ...

2. This user shows his doubts about the line and also argues about how the business model would not work the same if sustainable practices were to come into the equation.



ippon1 • 2y ago • Edited 2y ago

The Lie in the statement is "trying to work towards"... they are not. if they were, their business model would not work.

↑ 15 ↓ ↗ Share ...

3. Another comment shows that consumers are unfamiliar with the terms used in sustainability.



Abusty-Ballerina- • 2y ago

What's green washing ?

⊖ ↑ 3 ↓ ↗ Share ...

r/malefashionadvice • 5 yr. ago
Tyrant_Flycatcher

H&M, Zara, and other fashion brands are tricking shoppers with vague sustainability claims

Article



fastcompany.com

Open

Archived post. New comments cannot be posted and votes cannot be cast.

2.5K 88 Share

w/ONTHATASS_ Promoted



These boxer shorts are completely FREE! You can sign up in a minute and more than 550,000 members have already done so!

onthatass.com

Shop Now

Sort by: Best

Tyrant_Flycatcher OP • 5y ago

The headline is a bit heavy worded, but I thought this was an interesting evaluation of how unclear some of these companies production methods are, even if they parade around saying they are green/clean.

Mind you: this is **not** about H&M being sustainable or not they are not, it's about how they don't properly inform the consumer on exactly how they are sustainable.

In this case, a Norwegian regulator is warning H&M about how they promote their sustainable line.

If you want to read more into transparency in company processes, check out this report:
<https://www.fashionrevolution.org/about/transparency/>

343 Share

9 more replies

DornishBride • 5y ago

can't say I am surprised. Lately I saw a bunch of Zara stuff on sale, with recycled/sustainable/other green related tags.. mostly for their button shirts.

I'm guilty of buying a bit of fast fashion since the designs are nice and its cheap (only to regret it 2-3 months later when it falls apart.. I'm looking at you Zara). Perhaps I should move on to more ethical brands?

googling a list, these tend to be outdoor brands. Anyone try Patagonia or North Face's non outdoorsy clothes? like their button shirts, sweaters, etc? North face at least, sells quite a bit of casual wear as well.

180 Share

35 more replies

sundowntg • 5y ago

From reading the article, it's hard to tell what they want. Do you need to attach a small essay to each garment? Recycled Polyester and Organic Cotton are recognized by the Sustainable Apparel Coalition and the Textile Exchange as preferred fibers for environmental impact.

23 Share

1 more reply

dodosi • 5y ago

I'm a textile producer for Asos, Hugo boss, Guess and some other brands. I would say asos and hugo boss are really trying to be sustainable & ethical.

We've been working with hugo boss for nearly 2 decades and they keep increasing the standards while still being fair on our profit margins.

Asos has very good systems for testings & social audits etc.

36 Share

12 more replies

d.bo • 5y ago

Having worked for H&M, you should see the amount of nonrecyclable plastic their clothes are delivered in.

32 Share

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Reddit's largest men's fashion community. Making clothing less intimidating and helping you develop your own style. We...

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Related Fashion Fashion & Beauty

r/ethicalfashion

After six months of hard work I finally finished creating my ow...

151 updates 21 comments

1. A textile producer shares his experience with some brands and how some of the brands truly try to be sustainable and profitable simultaneously.



dodosi • 5y ago

I'm a textile producer for Asos, Hugo boss, Guess and some other brands.
I would say asos and hugo boss are really trying to be sustainable & ethical.

We've been working with hugo boss for nearly 2 decades and they keep increasing the standards while still being fair on our profit margins.

Asos has very good systems for testings & social audits etc.

↑ 36 ↓ ↑ Share ...

2. Additionally, an ex-employee of H&M shares their experience.



d_bo • 5y ago

Having worked for H&M, you should see the amount of nonrecyclable plastic their clothes are delivered in.

↑ 32 ↓ ↑ Share ...

⊕ 3 more replies

3. Another user questions not only the sustainable fabric, but also the quality of the clothes.



brokeneckblues • 5y ago

Does it even count as sustainable when it falls apart in a week?

↑ 41 ↓ ↑ Share ...

⊕ 4 more replies

r/femalefashionadvice • 3 yr. ago

Breaking up with fast fashion - what does it mean to you?

There are so many posts and research articles that talk about consumers wanting to invest in sustainable and ethical fashion, particularly after the pandemic, but fast fashion companies like Boohoo and Asos keep turning profits, with increasing share prices (compared to 12 months ago). I was just interested to see if there are others on FFA who are looking to move away from fast fashion and what might be keeping you from making the switch (if at all)? Is it availability of styles, costs or maybe the generous delivery / returns offered by the big conglomerates that keep us glued?

I'm in the infancy of my journey to living more sustainably and trying to be more conscious in my habits and sometimes I do struggle. Particularly with fashion, as I feel there is an added layer of research that's required before I purchase something from an ethical producer or brand, to make sure that the company I'm buying from is really doing the right thing and not simply saying they are... so for me it's more of a time investment. Do others feel this way about the effort or is it something else?

553 255 Share

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bxt • 3y ago • Edited 3y ago

I have a hard time finding clothes in styles I like from ethical companies. Lots of them specialize in basics, which I have found are the easiest items to locate secondhand, and not really my style anyways. I've had luck with thrifting in the past (which doesn't work for everyone), and I'm decently skilled at sewing so I have the extra benefit of being able to alter thrifted clothes or make clothes instead of buying new if possible (even using secondhand fabric to make clothing with).

One of the best lines I heard about sustainable clothing choices is "the most sustainable wardrobe is the one you already have." Even if someone can't afford to buy a \$60 white tee from an ethical producer, they can still lessen their impact by not buying anything at all and wearing the items they already own. Examining our own wasteful behaviours and shopping with intention is key - it's an easy (and more fun) switch to say you're only buying stuff from Everlane instead of H&M from now on, but it's a harder adjustment to realize you buy too many clothes and need to reevaluate your shopping altogether.

So I guess for me the approach is two-pronged in that I primarily shop secondhand as the starting point, but above that I prioritize being intentional about acquiring clothes, whether that's from the thrift store, the mall, or making it myself.

628 Reply Share

OpinionatedWaffles • 3y ago

I also find it hard to find clothes in the style I like from ethical companies. It's a struggle.

177 Reply Share

26 more replies

celolex • 3y ago

I definitely agree that it's hard to find clothes that fit my style from ethical brands. Most ethical brands are so... unsexy? Like, is it so hard to make an ethical bodycon dress? Or something with a cute, colorful print?

127 Reply Share

12 more replies

5 more replies

battybatt • 3y ago • Edited 3y ago

I do want to be a thoughtful consumer. But I'm a little disenchanted with the idea of ethical and sustainable companies whose goal is ultimately still to get you to purchase from them.

Your comment about spending a lot of time researching "ethical" brands definitely resonates. They're probably better options than fast fashion, sure. But I don't want to fall into the mindset of thinking that me buying stuff is actually somehow a positive for the environment.

So I mostly focus on repairing what I already have and buying secondhand when possible, instead of putting my energy into figuring out which brand is the most ethical. I still buy things new occasionally.

Side note: I think it's flawed to think of a purchase as an "investment," no matter how well the companies market themselves. This particular language shift is a pet peeve of mine. Ok, sure, the idea is that the extra money is worth it because it returns more value to you in nontangible ways. But shouldn't all successful purchases do that? I feel like the word investment has been co-opted as a sort of vague catch-all for any expensive clothing item, as a way to imply high quality.

I also have thoughts about how insidious it is that the burden of saving the environment has been placed on the individual as a consumer, rather than changing the systems we have. And how it's kind of a mindfuck, but despite all my efforts and time, purchasing carbon offsets is the simplest and probably most effective thing I've been able to do. That and voting. Doesn't mean I'm giving up responsibility as an individual. But it's just weird to think about.

425 Reply Share

DemocraticPeas • 3y ago

YES to the weird shift to calling goods investment pieces. Literally the only "investment piece" I've ever bought is my house, lol - even my favorite, most expensive clothes are NOT gaining value over time.

198 Reply Share

11 more replies

r/femalefashionadvice

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Welcome to Female Fashion Advice. Here we discuss anything related Fashion. Make sure to read the rules carefully before...

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r/woodworking

Well...its finished...kinda. Door is not closing properly. To tired...



97 upvotes • 22 comments

1. The user explains how hard it is to break up with fast fashion due to financial struggles and also the desire to look and feel trendy and young.



catmos • 3y ago

Honestly, purchasing 100% ethically is HARD for me at the moment. I'm 21, but I have a professional office job. This requires two wardrobes - a work wardrobe, and a "hey I'm still young and I like crop tops and ripped jeans" wardrobe. The two don't overlap a lot- when I'm not at work I don't WANT to look mature and put together all the time, I want to look young and trendy.

The problem is I definitely don't make enough money to sustain two entirely different styles and purchase only from ethical companies. I try to thrift as much as possible, but it's much more time consuming to comb through Goodwill or Depop and I work 45 hours a week and go to college online. It's so much easier to see a cute Zara dress on Instagram and just quickly order it.

2. It is mentioned by this user that ethical brands are not that attractive and do not produce clothes that make them look and feel good, therefore they stay loyal to fast fashion brands.



celolex • 3y ago

I definitely agree that it's hard to find clothes that fit my style from ethical brands. Most ethical brands are so... unsexy? Like, is it so hard to make an ethical bodycon dress? Or something with a cute, colorful print?

👍 127 📄 Reply 📤 Share ...

3. This user points out that the responsibility starts from the government rather than the consumer. This is an interesting point to start our discussion on who the responsibility falls upon.



DemocraticPeas • 3y ago

I'll be honest - I like the idea of being sustainable in general, but at this point, I think that the responsibility lies with governments to regulate their own in-country industries, rather than the consumer. That's the only way that real, significant change is going to happen. I did try to buy more from "ethical" brands a few years ago, and was largely disappointed - the quality, fit, and design was not up to par with the price point.

4. This user points out that breaking up with fast fashion is a 'privilege', insinuating how the financial state of a consumer affects his attachment to fast fashion.



MatchaLobster • 3y ago

Honestly I do try, but it has been very difficult to break up with fast fashion when I am very much a maximalist living in a student budget. I appreciate the minimalist aesthetic, but my own style goals are a lot more in line with the likes of Iris Apfel or Vivienne Westwood with a nice ethnic flair, and I simply can't afford that at the kind of price point that something like Everlane might offer. I am also South Asian, and buying traditional clothing for events and family stuff certainly makes a dent in my purse and that's not terribly helpful.

The way I see it though, being able to break up with fast fashion is a privilege on many levels, and doing what you can within your means is the most important thing! Personally, I wear all of my clothes to death, or resell/donate them. I also often thrift or buy fast fashion clothing second hand :)