Convincing fashion consumers to go green: a brand communication problem?

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Abstract

If it is true that in recent years the concern with climate change has been growing (Bell, Poushter, Fagan & Huang, 2021), there is still a long way to go to make our lifestyles more sustainable. Several companies and brands have been thinking of strategies that allow them to become more sustainable (Hodgson, 2021), albeit with very different levels of success.

The fashion industry is, in this context, a very paradigmatic case since it is responsible for the emission of more than "1.2 billion tons of greenhouse gases each year, accounting for more than 10% of the world's carbon footprint" (Motif, 2021). With such a large footprint, several brands and designers have sought to transition to more sustainable fashion. However, despite the efforts made, the truth is that the message does not always reach consumers. Thus, if, in fact, consumers' awareness of the environment and sustainability has grown in recent years, if it is true that consumers have become more demanding in relation to the processes used by brands, we still continue to see a gap between the willingness to buy more sustainable brands and the effective purchase of these brands (Wong, 2021).

In this context, consumers are looking for more transparent and sustainable processes and where brands are already working in this direction. For a long time, it was believed that the price prevented the effective purchase of more sustainable products. Still, this idea has been removed in recent years, which leads us to question whether the problem is not in the communication strategies developed by brands to communicate their processes and products. Are consumers aware of what sustainable fashion really means? How have brands been able to convey and explain the difference between concepts such as Ethical Fashion, Circular Fashion, Slow Fashion or Conscious Fashion?

Unsure about the effectiveness of this communication, in this work, we seek precisely to analyse how some of the leading brands that are assumed to be sustainable (Abbas & Shipin, 2021; The Good Trade, 2021) have communicated, particularly in social media, spaces that aggregate a large number of consumers, but above all capable of defining trends and habits. On the other hand, these are also the platforms where the new generations are present, gaining even more importance in conveying the message to those who are the consumers of tomorrow and the guarantors of the planet's future.

Author keywords

Fashion, Sustainability, Communication, Brands, Social Media.

Introduction

According to "The Pulse of the Fashion Industry 2019 Update" report, the efforts made by the fashion industry in terms of sustainability are slowing down. The document, created by the Global Fashion Agenda and Sustainable Apparel Coalition in partnership with Boston Consulting Group, reveals that "the fashion industry has improved its social and environmental performance in the past year (2018) but at a slower rate than the previous year (2017)" (Pulse of the Fashion Industry, 2019, p. 1). Following an indicator created to evaluate the goals and sustainable practices by entities of the fashion industry, the report alerts to the fact that "fashion companies are not implementing sustainable solutions fast enough to counterbalance negative environmental and social impacts of the rapidly growing fashion industry" (ibidem). However, the problem no longer resides only in fashion companies, it is also a cultural matter. Thus, only can we comprehend the fact that consumers continue to adopt fast-consumption habits. As the report also states, "the question is no longer whether it is necessary to improve sustainable business practices, but rather how long it will take before consumers stop buying from brands that do not act responsibly" (op cit. 2019, p. 11).

This situation is clearly aggravated by our society's way of normalizing extreme consumerism, promoting wasteful lifestyles, and following online trends such as "clothing hauls" or "beauty empties" videos, where YouTubers display their newest acquisitions until their next binge-purchases to their followers. In this sense, we found ourselves in a paradox since social media are used to promote fast fashion, yet these platforms are also used to build consciousness among consumers. Customers are using digital means to interact with their brands. Therefore social media is highly important to a new fashion brand (Scheide & Marques, 2018).

The report finds that "mentions of sustainability in social media increased a third faster than overall social media growth between 2015 and 2018" (op cit. 2019, p. 2). However, sustainability is still not a priority during buying decisions. If quality and aesthetics truly dominate consumers' decisions, as "Pulse of the Fashion Industry" indicates. In that case, it is up to the industry to transition to a more sustainable world. Following this logic, this study seeks to collect several examples of Portuguese brands with sustainable motivations, both in production and culture. Our proposal is to identify these brands, their products, and their communication strategy, namely taking into account their interaction with social media users. In terms of methodology, this research uses content analysis of the brands' websites and their social media pages.

With this work, we attempt to reflect not only on fashion industry problems but also on how these issues are intrinsically linked to lifestyles, culture and communication habits. Per Byrum (2017, p. 219), "the connection between mass communications messages disseminated via social media and the diffusion of information among environmentally conscious consumers requires further study". Considering the Portuguese sustainable fashion market, the current paper is structured as follows: the next section provides the literature review, and then we present the methodology and results in sections. Finally, conclusions, implications, and further research are presented.

Communicating sustainability through social media

Per The State of Fashion, consumer behaviours and social media transform fashion industry communication.

> (...) the attitudes of executives also reflect evolving consumer behaviours that are forcing industry players to "self-disrupt" (the #1 trend identified by executives for 2019.) (...) Social media has an increasingly important voice in dictating consumer demand, helping small brands grow explosively. Across the industry, speed-to-market and responsiveness to consumer needs are becoming critical success facts (2019, p. 12).

The report is clearly highlighting the recent decisions and moves made by fashion industry players, who recognized the need to disrupt the system with new ways of thinking and communicating, using social media as a platform to touch consumers directly and obtain data, a trend also approached by The State of Fashion the year prior, as executives considered "mobile obsessed" consumers as the most important prediction made by the 2018 report (The State of Fashion, 2019, pp. 12-13).

Fashion brands also need to recover from bad press and communicate better with their consumer; the fashion industry has ignored sustainability and ethical practice for a long time, this is mainly due to the lack of information and transparency from fashion brands, and therefore, the need for brands to communicate about sustainability and ethical measures is more-than-ever crucial. Yet, in this case, transparency is much more important for consumers than sporadic "good public actions" from brands. Generations that are now the main target as consumers, both Gen Z and Millennials, have been defined by their quest for more sustainable economies and industries based on their preferences for digital solutions and their concerns about our planet's fate. In the quest for sustainability, however, emerging brands seem to have more success with these generations (especially Millennials), than established brands, as they are capable of relating with these generations through social media and have a more approachable and conscious image than their counterparts. These smaller companies are, for the most part, being very careful with production by choosing national manufacturers, and keeping a close look on their supply chain by producing less, preferring quality over quantity, thus allowing them to transparently communicate their brand's values to their consumer through social media live streams from their factories. Per The State of Fashion (2019, p. 74), "digital technology gives small brands an easy way to engage with consumers, who are increasingly glued to their smartphones and the internet".

Social media is more than a communication system; modern consumers have used it to praise brands and destroy them (Byrum, 2017). Consequently, brands have to be very cautious when advertising on social media, as their every move is captured, and a simple comment by an angry customer can make headlights. Consumers are now more informed about the actual cost of their fashion statements. They can no longer ignore what this industry has done to the planet and its inhabitants over the last roughly 100 years of industrialized production of garments, and since the apparition and escalation of fast fashion over the last 50 and 30 years (Dopico and Crofton, 2007).

Social media phenomena and trends such as Fashion Hauls, GRWM (Get Ready With Me), OOTDs (Outfit Of The Day) or Unboxing Videos have also contributed to this "buy now, think later" mechanism. The popular demand for "influencer's merch" (merchandising pieces, such as t-shirts or hoodies with an influencer's brand or catchphrase), sometimes sold at high-end prices, still made from cheap materials and produced in non-audited Chinese manufacturers, is also part of the problem.

On the other hand, new lifestyle trends have appeared on social media, such as minimalism (a modern re-take on the late XXth century movement), the Zero-Waste movement and methods to buy less, and influencers of these movements have been praised for their way of living. Emerging brands have clearly used social media to their advantage, challenging established players by getting closer to customers and taking the time to explain and be as transparent as possible to their followers. According to Minton, Lee, Orth, Kim and Kahle (2012), "sustainability is inherently social", which could explain why brands have chosen social media platforms to communicate their sustainable practices, as well as the 50% annual growth of advertisement spent on Instagram by brands (The State of Fashion 2019, 71).

Exploring businesses and their online influence on consumers, Loureiro, Serra and Guerreiro (2019, 375), found that the brands' interaction with consumers, their consistency in posting and updating content, as well as their product's endorsement by celebrities and influencers were the main factors of their online success. As per Byrum (2017, p. 210):

> the consumer who chooses to engage in environmental purchasing may be influenced by multiple motivations, including social pressures and the desire to escalate in status. These desires, fulfilled through eco-purchasing involvement, may further contribute to the consumer's willingness to share information with a corresponding peer set via social media.

Hence, social media platforms are a weapon of choice for emerging sustainable brands (Huang, Clarke, Heldsinger & Tian, 2019), as they allow tight communication and a relatable environment for consumers, who are also the best at communicating and spreading their love for a brand via their social media accounts.

In their 2020 Fashion Transparency Index, Fashion Revolution ranked 250 of the world's most prominent and established fashion brands on their environmental and ethical practices (Fashion Revolution, 2020). The organization concluded that "most brands and retailers lack transparency on social and environmental issues. More than half (54%) of brands score 20% or less". However, compared to the year prior, the report was also pointing at silver linings, "there are fewer low-scoring brands this year compared to 2019, 28% of brands score 10% or less, compared to 36% of brands last year", the report also shows that "of the new brands added to the Index in 2020, 15 brands score 5% or less, including Canada Goose, Fashion Nova, Pepe Jeans and DKNY" (Fashion Revolution, 2020, p. 4). Nevertheless, it is essential to note that transparency does not guarantee sustainability, as fast-fashion brands such as H&M ranked in the best brands in 2021 and 2022 (Fashion Revolution, 2021; 2022).

In general, the report also related that brand needs to communicate their efforts better and improve on transparency, as well as international policies such as the Paris Climate Agreement, as "only 16% of brands publish Science Based Targets, which means their environmental goals are aligned with the Paris Agreement's aim to limit global heating to below 2°C above pre-industrial levels" (Fashion Revolution, 2020, p. 6). So, who is to blame for the continuous success of fast fashion and the non-sensical "buy now, think later" logic still happening?

Social media is a powerful tool for fashion brands. As consumers are now more than ever informed about the fashion industry's toll on the planet (Mosca, Civera & Casalegno, 2018), brands have understood that they can use social media to their advantage to communicate their changes and environmental policies more efficiently. Yet, they are not the only ones who need to inform their consumers, as social media influencers have a great responsibility when endorsing products and advertising their lifestyles. Influencers have a real duty to educate themselves on the products they recommend, even if a brand does not pay them. By sharing products and services, they influence others to try something they might not need to feel closer to an influencer's lifestyle. Finally, consumers have a right to know and an obligation to search for better alternatives, answers, and solutions to buy smarter.

Methods

The present work fits in the line of the case studies since it is an empirical investigation that explores "(...) a contemporary phenomenon (the "case") in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident and (...) relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulation fashion" (Yin, 2018, pp. 45-46). Since our work is centred on the online environment and in particular on the online social networks of a set of specific brands, but also in the analysis of their way of communicating sustainability, we believe that this strategy was the one that best suited our purpose, since we:

> might favour choosing case study research, compared with others, when (1) your main research questions are "how" or "why" questions, (2) you have little or no control over behavioural events, and (3) your focus of the study is a contemporary (as opposed to entirely historical) phenomenon - "a case" (Yin, 2018, p. 32). The strong descriptive dimension of the case studies and the fact that the researcher is involved in the investigation means they are normally associated with qualitative plans. But the case study in this article ends up appearing in the context of a mixed investigation plan (Coutinho, 2015), as in addition to the descriptive and qualitative dimension, it will be considered a quantitative dimension, namely in the identification of terms used by the brands to communicate sustainability on social networking sites.

Considering that the main objective of the work is to analyse how fashion brands communicate sustainability on their websites, especially on social networking sites, we decided to use multiple sources of data; that is, we decided to collect data using different techniques, following the principles of Yin which state that "one principle is to use multiple sources of evidence (evidence from two or more sources, converging on the same findings)" (2018, p. 153).

In this work, we decided to make a direct observation of recording patterns in terms of the brands' websites and social media networks, trying to understand what aspects are used in these online spaces to communicate the sustainable purposes of the brand.

The selection of the brands that we analyzed in this work was made in a completely random manner. Still, following the indications of some magazines in the fashion area, articles specialized in generalist magazines and also the indication of associations and organizations that promote sustainable consumption. Thus, different sources were considered, and an analysis was made of articles that in different media refer to various brands as models in terms of sustainability. Although the selection process was random, as we mentioned, without concern for representativeness, we tried to select at least one brand per product type, thus trying to avoid over-representing specific sectors. The selection resulted in choosing 24 Portuguese brands, which we will present briefly later in the presentation of the main results (see Figure 1).

On the other hand, since "the data obtained with this type of instrument are quantitative (numerical) and their analysis

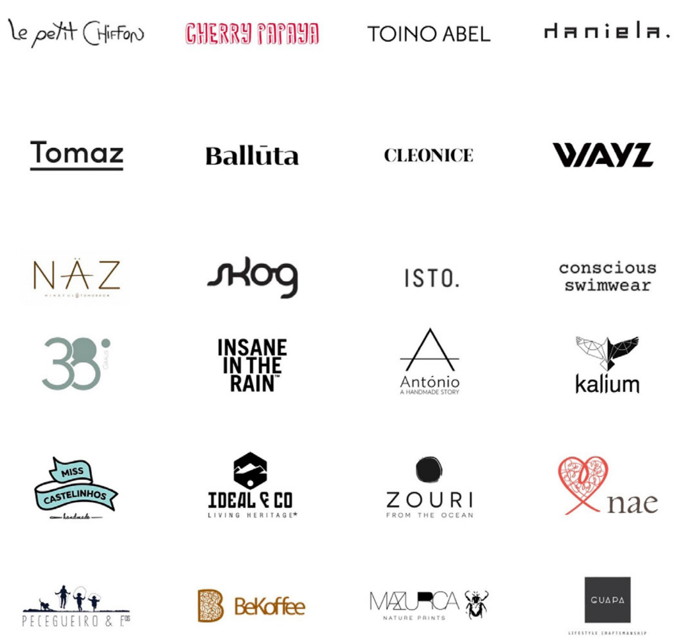

Figure 1. Brands analysed in this study
(Source: Made by the authors from the brands' websites or social media pages)

is carried out using descriptive and even inferential statistical analysis techniques" (Coutinho, 2015, p. 137), in part dedicated to results, we will present the main trends registered for each brand in the form of percentages, to display and discuss precise numbers (see table 1).

Discussion of the results

In table 1, we inserted the main data collected. At this point, we will try to summarize the principal aspects that caught our attention in the observation made and through the notes we were taking during that observation. Based on the gathered data, we can verify that only 16% of the brands studied are older than five years. It can indicate that the creation of brands in the fashion area with concerns in relation to sustainability is a recent trend, or at least it has been a gamble of recent years. On the other hand, we must highlight that one person founded 64% of the brands, an aspect that also helps to understand the context of brand development, that is, with small teams and structures often supported by the families themselves (table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of the brand's social media pages/webpages at the time of the study.

Brand Name	DoC	Market	Founder	Online presence		Social media followers			
				Website	*Social media*	*Facebook*		*Instagram*	
						Likes	*Followers*	*Posts*	*Followers*
38 Graus	2017	Womens Beachwear	Marta Oliveira	Yes	Yes	6309	6418	620	40,1k
Antonio Handmade	2017	Accessories	Ana & Sara Mateus	Yes	Yes	2269	2358	380	5396
Balluta Shoes	2018	Footwear	Catarina Pedroso	Yes	Yes	1485	1525	564	8629
Bekoffee	2018	Jewellery	Fernando Duarte	Yes	Yes	967	1149	765	683
Cherry Papaya Kids	2014	Kidswear	Sandra & Vera Barradas	Yes	Yes	10642	10845	1830	13,3k
Cleonice	2016	Womenswear	Kaleigh Tirone Nunes	No	Yes	1858	1878	335	5636
Conscious	2019	Womens Beachwear	Joana Silva	Yes	Yes	1090	1143	1086	44,8k
Daniela PontoFinal	2010	Unisexwear	Daniela Duarte	Yes	Yes	4845	4991	3287	3097
Guapa_Co	2016	Accessories	Tom Williams & Fábio Gião	Yes	Yes	2358	2412	1289	14,3k
Ideal & Co.	2012	Accessories	Rute Vieira & José Lima	Yes	Yes	31911	32112	1017	3827
Insane In the Rain	2017	Unisex Rain-wear/ Kids Rainwear	Hannah Edwards	Yes	Yes	2347	2395	351	8326
Isto	2017	Menswear/Wo-menswear	Vasco Mendonça, Pedro Palha & Pedro Gaspar	Yes	Yes	5021	5280	934	34,2k
Kalium	2017	Womenswear	Kátia Almeida	Yes	Yes	1097	1130	181	941
Le Petit Chiffon	2015	Kidswear	Rita De La Bletière	Yes	Yes	6917	6998	2136	14,6k
Mazurca Handmade	2019	Accessories + Womenswear	Sara Esteves	No	Yes	3795	4010	1351	6181
Miss Castelinhos	2017	Kidswear	Diana Pais	Yes	Yes	1108	1156	1199	2714
Nae Vegan	2008	Footwear + Accessories	Paula Pérez	Yes	Yes	49859	49859	459	53,1k
Naz	2016	Womenswear	Cristiana Costa	Yes	Yes	7000	7332	754	18,1k
Pecegueiro & F.os	2017	Kidswear	Sara Lamúrias & Pedro Noronha Feio	Yes	Yes	7101	7186	510	7307
Skog Eyewear	2014	Eyewear	Nuno Pinto, Afonso Caldeira & Hugo Janes	No	Yes	24660	24557	290	2723
Toino Abel	2010	Bags	Nuno Henriques	Yes	Yes	-	-	595	14,5k
Tomaz	2015	Lifestyle Accessories	Eliana Tomaz	Yes	Yes	2319	2389	1284	3076
Wayz	2018	Footwear	Pedro Maçana & Daniel Gonçalves	Yes	Yes	1560	1612	546	4401
Zouri Shoes	2017	Footwear	Adriana Mano	Yes	Yes	21048	21795	1263	40k

The brands analysed, which, as mentioned above, were chosen at random and from a set of articles that highlight them as being sustainable, working in specific sectors and having well-defined targets. The data collected allowed us to verify that 20% sell kidswear, 16% produce footwear. These aspects should be highlighted since they help to prove how sustainability has expanded to various sectors and is not exclusive to clothing production. On the other hand, we cannot fail to mention that 44% of the brands target specifically women, relevant data not only because women remain at the top of the biggest consumers, but above all, it also tells us that brands most often direct their messages to women. This aspect is also interesting because men are less challenged by brands, which can also be explained by the fact that women created 71% of the brands analysed.

Looking in particular at the online presence, we can see that the totality of brands owns a website, in addition to being present on different social media, but above all in two: Facebook and Instagram. Most brands bet mainly on these two social media platforms, although some are on other platforms, such as Pinterest, Youtube, Twitter, Vimeo and Linkedin. We also found that 60% of the brands concentrate their social media following on Instagram, which is assumed as the platform of choice for brands to communicate. This fact is evident not only at the level of followers but also in updating publications. Most brands have posts from the last two days or the last week on Instagram, which is no longer valid on Facebook pages. So, we can consider that Instagram, due to its characteristics, is the social medium privileged by brands to disseminate news about their products. However, it seems that in terms of transmitting messages related to sustainability, both the website and the Facebook accounts play an important role. In this regard, we must emphasize that many brands even dedicate specific separators in their websites to explain the sustainable dimensions of the brand, both in terms of production and distribution.

At this point, it is also important to remember that a small number of brands that are part of the sample, and that was considered when we started this work, meanwhile interrupted their activity or have at least paused the projects they were developing, mainly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, they were considered because of the analysis that had already been carried out, but also because despite having temporarily interrupted their projects, the ideas presented helped us to understand the importance of the communication and positioning of a brand, which claims to be sustainable.

Observing in particular how brands present themselves, we tried to register which are the main terms used, that is, which words and expressions are privileged by brands to make themselves known as sustainable brands. It is, therefore, at the level of sustainability communication that we are located at the level of the brands' own identity. Thus, considering the previously established categories, we can observe that 63% of the brands refer they are local and producing in Portugal, 50% declare they produce "premium" or "high quality" and 50% claim to be sustainable. It is interesting to see that there is a bet in local production by these brands and that this is a fact highlighted in terms of the presentation of brands and also in the communication of products, at the same time that it is associated with high-quality, on the one hand, and with a reduction in the number of products that are made. These dimensions are necessarily related to sustainability, but above all, to how sustainability is communicated. By highlighting the national production and the quality of the products, the brands try to make themselves known as sustainable brands. It is not just about asserting themselves as sustainable, but about showing, namely through local producers and the durability of products.

Directly linked to the issue of sustainability, we also find that 46% of the brands consider themselves "ethical", with 38% re-using materials/excess supply and 29% even producing "vegan" products, even if "vegan" derived leathers and products cannot be necessary considered sustainable (Minh & Ngan, 2021), and many examples of greenwashing derive from the use of "vegan" in fashion. It is also worth mentioning that the brands are concerned with presenting themselves as ethical brands which respect not only the workers but also the raw materials and the entire production process. Also standing out in communication, the bet on reusing materials and even using new materials to create innovative and differentiated products in ecological terms. It is, therefore, not just a matter of using a label but of embracing and communicating the adoption of a whole set of responsible practices in sustainability during all phases of production.

Finally, it is also worth mentioning that 38% of the brands use terms such as "heritage", "tradition" or "tribute" in their presentation and in the communications they establish with consumers and society as a whole, which is relevant from the point of view of the brand's identity, since it is not just communicating the way you decide to face the market. Still, it is something deeper rooted in the history of brands.

Conclusions

The fashion industry is far from sustainable, despite recent improvements and consumers' higher level of information. Findings show that fashion companies are not implementing sustainable solutions fast enough to counterbalance the rapidly growing fashion industry's negative environmental and social impacts. In Portugal, recently created SMEs try to improve their consumers' and collaborators' quality of life. However, 23% of consumers prioritize quality, and only 7% purchase with sustainable goals, although good quality can also mean fewer purchases in the long run (The Pulse of Fashion, 2019). Among the brands observed in this study, 84% were created in the last five years. Not only do they try to create sustainable fashion pieces, but they also aim to influence consumers on social media by showing the importance of sustainable practices and adopting a lifestyle respectful of the environment.

These creators try to send this message through other vehicles in the creation of associations, workshops, courses, podcasts, and other activities. We can say that although mass culture and fast fashion continue to dominate, the idea of a sustainable society is slowly beginning to grow, with designers who have already realized the need to convey this lifestyle on social media, not just as a marketing tool.

This study aimed to comprehend how sustainability is communicated online by fashion brands. Through our observations of the brands' online websites and social media accounts, we observed that sustainable brands mostly use social media to communicate their mission and values and raise consumer awareness. We also found that 60% of the brands concentrate their social media following on Instagram, which is also in line with the target audience and following of these brands.

Further research is encouraged on this topic by gathering more information on sustainable brands and their communication, observing different countries, and still focusing on emerging brands through ethnographic methodologies. On the other hand, it could also be highly interesting to perceive how consumers receive the information and how influencers can be real game-changers in disseminating conscious messages and sustainable awareness.

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