

Exploring Consumer Engagement in Response to Sustainable Social Media Content and Brand Identity of Fashion Brands

Arianna Masse
Le Moyne College

Magdoleen Ierlan
Le Moyne College

Social media posts are a good way for organizations to show their sustainability and good deeds. This paper investigates the effects of sustainable posts on consumer engagement in the fashion industry. We will show social media posts alone will not be enough to engage a consumer with a brand. Brands that are known to be sustainable brands will have more engagement with sustainable content. The purpose of this study is to identify the impact content type, brand identity, and brand price-point have on social media engagement and social value.

Keywords: social media content, sustainability, engagement, fashion industry

INTRODUCTION

It has become common knowledge that the fashion industry is one of the most polluting industries in the world and is responsible for a wide variety of human rights violations (Meier, 2021). Fast fashion brands have largely contributed to overproduction and perpetuated a “throwaway culture”, as they have been touted for their low prices, trendiness, and quick product selection turnover (Kim & Oh, 2020). With this, natural resources have been exploited excessively and usage of poor quality materials have resulted in environmental and health dangers. Eleven million tons of textiles end up in landfills yearly (Grechko, 2021) and half a million tons of plastic microfibers are released into the ocean each year just from laundry. This happens as a result of limited capacity at water treatment plants where they actually end up releasing around 40% of the microfibers they receive into different waterways (UNEP, 2019). Recent studies reveal microplastics are causing a variety of health concerns through inhalation, ingestion, and dermal contact as well (Periyasamy & Tehrani-Bagha, 2022). Furthermore, fast fashion has long been a perpetrator of low wages and poor working conditions (Kim & Oh, 2020). Many popular fashion brands have been cited for using forced or child labor in their supply chains (Suhrawardi, 2019). Industrial tragedies like the 2013 collapse of the Rana Plaza in Bangladesh have shed light on the unjust treatment of garment workers and led stakeholders to develop a greater concern for social responsibility (Kusá & Marianna, 2020). With the influx of environmental and social issues coming to the forefront, consumers are actively searching for more environmentally friendly brands to give their money to (Pulse of the Industry). Fashion brands have responded to this consumer trend with more sustainable operations and sustainable marketing strategies (Kim & Oh, 2020). In recent years, brands have used social media to cultivate brand loyalty and foster

ongoing relationships with consumers (Wang, Ahmed, Deng, & Wang, 2019). Many brands are now attempting to do so through communicating their sustainability efforts.

The purpose of this study is to determine consumer response to sustainable social media marketing of fashion brands of varying sustainability and price identities. The sample was made up of a diverse group of 60 apparel and accessory brands. The data was first collected via *Zoomph*, a social audience measurement platform, then statistically analyzed to identify the significance of the impact of content sustainability, brand identity sustainability, and brand price point. Sustainable content refers to social media content relating to social or environmental causes. Sustainable brands include brands that implement sustainable practices throughout their brand operations. A diverse and vast group of clothing brands have incorporated sustainability buzzwords like “eco-friendly”, “green”, and “recycling” into their marketing efforts (Kim & Oh, 2020). Many non-sustainable brands have engaged in creating and sharing sustainable content; however, their operations may not reflect a holistic approach to sustainability. Some consumers consider small sustainability efforts by historically unsustainable brands a step in the right direction. A growing number of empowered consumers are in-tune to false or misleading claims and view sustainable marketing by brands with generally unsustainable practices as a form of greenwashing (Mandarić, Hunjet, & Kozina, 2021). This study is concerned only with consumer response to sustainable marketing, not the accuracy of the claims in the posts. However, consumer response to posts from sustainable brands versus non-sustainable brands should indicate how sustainable marketing is perceived in each context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Consumer Demand for Sustainable Fashion & Brand Identity

Throughout the previous decade, consumers have come to expect brands to operate with socially and environmentally conscious practices, and the fashion industry has begun to progressively embrace the consumer-led trend of sustainability (Corá, 2021). Consumer data suggests it is becoming imperative for brands to adopt sustainability as a core value, as media in particular has allowed consumers to become increasingly educated about environmental and social causes (Balderjahn, Payer, Seegebarth, Wiedmann, & Weber, 2018). The 2019 update to the Pulse of the Fashion Industry Report included a survey of consumers from five different countries and found that 75% of participants viewed sustainability as extremely or very important. Therefore, the sustainability, or lack thereof, of brands’ operations is a determining factor in consumer perception and opinion of fashion brands. Many consumers have begun to actively seek brands that exhibit a model of transparency and that are at least making strides toward more sustainable and ethical practices (Empowered Consumers Call for Sustainability Transformation, 2021). Furthermore, research shows that embracing sustainable marketing activities in the economic, environmental, and cultural spheres improves the brand image of organizations in the traditional fashion market (Jung, Kim, & Kim, 2020). As consumer sensitivity to environmental and social issues grows, it is critical to brands’ longevity to develop sustainability strategies (Empowered Consumers Call for Sustainability Transformation, 2021).

Expectations for brands have expanded beyond sustainable internal company practices to the support of global socially conscious initiatives (Corá, 2021). Brands’ involvement in social and environmental causes outside of the firm further contribute to a more favorable brand identity and help define the brand experience for consumers. The brand experience has the potential to establish emotional bonds and lasting impressions, therefore it is beneficial for companies to craft a positive brand experience through emotional branding strategies (Kim & Sullivan, 2019). Cause branding is a form of emotional branding that gives consumers the opportunity to make purchases that support a cause. This strategy allows customers to feel that they are contributing to a greater good, increasing their incentive to purchase from the brand, while simultaneously forming a personal connection to it. Additionally, consumers are drawn to brands they believe reflect themselves (Kim & Sullivan, 2019) and associating with certain social causes is a way for brands to convey that their values align with their customers’ values. Another emotional branding strategy, empowerment, aims to improve consumers’ self-efficacy and self-esteem (Kim & Sullivan, 2019). Brands have used empowerment campaigns to promote self-acceptance, self-care, and self-confidence and

consequently create a more personalized and genuine brand image. Cause branding and empowerment marketing exemplify how, “when a brand addresses relevant social issues, it can build emotional bonds with its customers” (Kim & Sullivan, 2019). Section 2.3 will discuss how such bonds translate to brand loyalty.

With the slow fashion movement has come the emergence of fashion brands marketed as wholly sustainable. Contrary to fast fashion brands with singular sustainability campaigns or collections, these brands have made sustainability the primary feature of their brand identity. Fair wages paid to workers, limited water usage, and waste reduction are some of the benchmarks of sustainable brands. Some existing fashion brands have pivoted their business model to make the ethical treatment of people and planet a core consideration at every step of their operations. Mara Hoffman was one of the first brands to make this shift. Founder Mara Hoffman decided to change the brands’ methods in 2015 after learning about the harmful effects of the fashion industry on the environment. The company reportedly faced difficulty during the time convincing wholesalers that consumers would still be interested in the brand. However, Hoffman said consumer shopping habits reflected an increasing interest in sustainable fashion in the following years that worked to the brand’s favor (Grechko, 2021). Recent years have also seen a rise in newly founded sustainable brands (Pirkani, 2021). New brands, like Girlfriend Collective, have entered the scene with the goal of fulfilling the sustainability gap in the apparel market. Girlfriend Collective gained popularity in a short amount of time by offering size-inclusive activewear made from recycled materials like post-consumer bottles (Grechko, 2021). These new sustainable brands have attracted millennials and gen-zers in particular, as they are generally more in-tune to the social and environmental impacts the fashion industry has and will continue to have on their futures (Pirkani, 2021). Therefore, brands that are working to promote causes like environmentalism, animal rights, and representation are especially attractive to younger generations who are attempting to eliminate previously established harmful practices. “Sustainable fashion brands not only improved their environmental and social impact; they also made their supply chains much more transparent than fast fashion ever did. This helped them earn the trust of the masses” (Pirkani, 2021).

Social Media & the Consumer-Brand Relationship

The growing consumer interest in environmental and social causes has led sustainability-focussed marketing messages to become exponentially more popular among fashion brands. Social media mentions of sustainability increased a third faster than overall social media growth between the years 2015 and 2018 (Pulse of the Industry, 2019). According to a study by Kim & Oh (2020) eco-friendly keywords significantly contribute to a positive brand image, proving the use of sustainable messaging is beneficial for brands. For most brands, social media serves as an important tool used to understand and communicate with consumers. Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok give brands access to a virtually limitless potential audience. Social media is spreading trends more rapidly today than ever before, and in the context of the fashion industry, consumers’ tastes are rapidly and consistently influenced as a result. Therefore, it is within brands’ best interest to connect with consumers via the digital and social media initiatives they are engaged with (Pulse of the Industry, 2019). Social media marketing is the primary or sole strategy for many companies to convey brand messages today, however; social media is also a very intuitive resource for brands. “Marketers use social media to determine the implicit and explicit needs of actual and potential consumers” (Wang, Ahmed, Deng, & Wang, 2019). Social media trends among a brand’s target market are reflective of consumer interests and therefore may influence brands’ operations from product development to marketing strategy. Fashion brands can examine social media activity to gain insight into consumer perceptions of sustainable fashion, and then use strategic advertising to address identified barriers to purchase intent that may exist (Mandarić, Hunjet, & Kozina, 2021). Social media can also be utilized to inform consumers about social and environmental issues, empowering them to make more informed buying decisions and creating a space for discussion. Many brands have used social media to devise and deliver sustainability campaigns and initiatives. By creating sustainability-focussed content and encouraging conversation about it, brands can simultaneously increase awareness and improve their brand image (Mandarić, Hunjet, & Kozina, 2021).

In addition to allowing brands to understand consumer desires and cultivate more personal relationships, social media also helps brands track their success through key performance indicators like engagement and exposure rates. Consumer perception of brand efforts for sustainability was found to positively influence electronic word of mouth (eWOM), as positive attitudes toward a brand's social media presence drive intentions to share their content (Kong, Witmaier, & Ko, 2021). These findings suggest the perceived sustainability of a brand is a determining factor of social media engagement. According to Cao, Meadows, Wong, & Xia (2021), there are three types of engagement behaviors: consumption (viewing content), contribution (commenting, liking, sharing, etc.), and creation (producing original content). Generally, any type of consumer engagement is helpful to brands because it increases the chances that their marketing message will reach more people. However, creation engagement, or user generated content (UGC), is often most valuable to brands because it has the added benefit of trend-setting and can facilitate long-term relationships between consumers and organizations (Hasbullah, Sulaiman, Mas'od, 2020). All three levels of consumer engagement behavior are positively affected by media richness in different capacities. Platforms with richer response tools like Facebook and Twitter allow for instant feedback and live interaction (Cao, Meadows, Wong, & Xia, 2021). Social media marketers should choose the platforms with the features that are most relevant to the brand's intended marketing activities. Additionally, the way sustainability content is presented on social media has been found to have an effect on consumer response. Kong, Witmaier, & Ko's (2021) findings indicated that eWOM for luxury brands was motivated by posts that contained economic and social sustainability information, while eWOM for non-luxury brands was motivated by cultural and environmental sustainability content. In general, sustainable fashion marketing is better received when the content is presented in an informative way, as doing so builds trust, which in turn will promote social media engagement (Cao, Meadows, Wong, & Xia, 2021). Studies have revealed that the use of social media has had positive effects on financial performance of firms as well (Tajvidi & Karami, 2021). This is supported by research conducted by Khan, Wang, Ehsan, Nurunnabi, & Hashmi (2019), which identified that "social media is significant in promoting the business so that huge numbers of consumers could be attracted for increasing their revenues". Social value allows brands to determine the financial gain from specific social media marketing activities. It calculates the value of social posts using impressions, video views, and engagements (Zoomph). By identifying which strategies produce the most or least financial gain, brands can fine-tune their social media strategies to produce the best results.

Purchase Intention, Trust, & Brand Loyalty

Sustainability is becoming an increasingly important driver of purchasing decisions as more and more consumers are considering sustainability when buying from fashion brands. The 2019 "Pulse of the Fashion Industry" report identified that 38% of consumers reported switching from their previously preferred brand to one that operates with positive environmental and/or social practices, and 50% of consumers plan to switch from preferred brands to ones that operate in more environmentally and socially friendly ways. Even brands with historically large loyal customer bases are being impacted. Many shoppers aren't ready to abandon their favorite brands altogether, but want them to become more sustainable. This presents an opportunity for brands to maintain their loyal customer bases by incorporating sustainability efforts and accompanying marketing (Cernansky, 2021). This is supported by Jung, Kim, & Kim's (2020) findings which suggest that sustainable marketing activities improve brand image, which, along with customer satisfaction and trust, promote loyalty. While this is good news for sustainable brands, the saturation of the clothing market has made brand loyalty more difficult for brands to attain and maintain. However, employing emotional branding strategies can help brands connect to consumers' emotions and secure loyalty and sales (Kim & Sullivan, 2019). Intention to purchase sustainable fashion is often motivated by two intrinsic values; self acceptance and community feeling (Hasbullah, Sulaiman, Mas'od, 2020). Purchasing sustainably causes consumers to feel that they have done something good and contributed to a greater mission. The satisfaction consumers get from contributing to a higher cause will incentivise them to become loyal customers (Kim & Sullivan, 2019).

In addition to encouraging brand loyalty, conveying an image of social consciousness leads consumers to perceive the brand as trustworthy. Consumer trust is a requirement for brand loyalty, therefore in order

to be successful, brands need consumers to perceive them as trustworthy (Jung, Kim, & Kim, 2020). Today, social media is the most used medium for brands to convey trustworthiness to consumers. Greater perceived content trustworthiness is associated with increased content consumption and contribution (Cao, Meadows, Wong, & Xia, 2021). Therefore, content that promotes brand trust will in turn promote the sharing of the brand, allowing marketing efforts to be more far-reaching. Additionally, social media marketing efforts can influence brand preference and attachment, two strong determinants of consumer decision making (Wang, Ahmed, Deng, & Wang, 2019). Online peers have mutual influence on each others' brand associations and buying decisions via online reviews and social media posts (Johnstone & Lindh, 2022). Consumers may have an implicit trust in peers because there is usually an understanding that they have no stake in the company, so their opinions are sincere. Contradictory, Cao, Meadows, Wong, & Xia (2021) claim that peer-generated content can be perceived as less trustworthy due to a lack of expertise. Influencers are valuable tools for brands because they maintain a sense of relatability while exhibiting some sort of expertise. Johnstone and Lindh (2022) found that influencers play a major role in communicating the value of corporate social responsibility. The perceived expertise of social media influencers, or opinion leaders, helps to present brand-trustworthiness (Cao, Meadows, Wong, & Xia, 2021). Content created by consumers, influencers, and brands themselves all contribute to the goal of creating the trust that leads to intent to purchase and continuing brand loyalty.

Brand Price Point & Consumer Response to Sustainability

Fashion brands of various price points have recognized consumers' demand for sustainability and responded with new initiatives. Many initiatives have been developed as a result of scrutiny from stakeholders about unsustainable practices, while others have been developed to preemptively improve consumer perception. In recent years, both luxury and non-luxury brands have come out with sustainability campaigns in an effort to make environmental and social consciousness part of their brand identity (Corá, 2021). Notably, luxury brands including Gucci, Versace, and Burberry have announced that they will be going fur-free in response to protests by animal activists (Van, Heerde, 2018). Levi's launched a "Buy Better, Wear Longer" campaign in 2021, with Jaden Smith as the face of the campaign to inspire younger generations to rethink their clothing choices (Corá, 2021). While both fashion brands with affordable and luxury price points have engaged in sustainability marketing, research has shown varying results in consumer response among the two categories. The different operational models of luxury and non-luxury or fast fashion brands require different approaches to sustainability and therefore are perceived differently by consumers. However, prior research on the topic has produced conflicting results as to what those perceptions are (Grazzini, Acuti & Aiello). A study by Kong, Witmaier, & Ko (2021) found that increased sustainability perceptions positively influenced purchase intentions for non-luxury brands, but had the inverse effect on luxury brands. It has been asserted that the reason for these results is likely the firmly established identity of luxury brands. Luxury fashion brands receive a high degree of brand loyalty due to their prestige and quality (Kong, Witmaier, & Ko, 2021), therefore sustainability claims may be unnecessary or even contradictory to the appeal of high-quality non-sustainable materials used in production. On the other hand, some consumers argue that luxury brands are inherently more sustainable than fast fashion and other large-quantity producing brands. The attributes of luxury are synonymous with the values of sustainability (Hasbullah, Sulaiman & Mas'od, 2020). Luxury brands focus on limited product quantities, combating overproduction, and high quality materials that last over time, limiting the need for repurchase. Hence, consumers who favor luxury brands do so for reasons that closely align with conscious consumerism. The findings of Grazzini, Acuti & Aiello (2021) support this, as results indicated consumers show more positive implicit attitudes toward luxury brand associations with sustainability than fast fashion brand associations with sustainability. Similarly, a study by Amatulli, Angelis & Donato (2020) found that sustainability-focussed marketing increased purchase intention for luxury products, but not for mass-market ones. Further research found that sustainability associations were beneficial for luxury brands in the context of social media. The promotion of UGC sources was associated with long-term relationships between luxury companies and consumers, ultimately motivating sustainable luxury fashion consumption (Hasbullah, Sulaiman & Mas'od, 2020).

HYPOTHESES AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to identify the impact content type, brand identity, and brand price-point have on social media engagement and social value. The following relevant words and phrases are defined as follows:

- Engagement: the amount of comments, likes, shares, and other interactions on social media
- Social Value: the estimated financial value of posts calculated by the number of social media impressions, views, and engagements
- Sustainability-focused: the use of wording that includes terms associated with environmental or social justice issues

Engagement Rate and Content Sustainability

The use of sustainable buzzwords and phrases has benefited both brands' social media relevancy and overall brand identity. Mandarić, Hunjet, & Kozina's (2021) findings revealed that the use of sustainability-focused social media content increased brand awareness and improved brand image. This was supported by a study of keyword associations, in the context of sustainability campaigns for a group of popular US apparel brands, which revealed that terms like "eco-friendly" and "recycling" had significant effects on creating a sustainable brand image for consumers (Kim & Oh, 2020). It has also been asserted that a positive brand identity contributes to a greater perceived trustworthiness, which is associated with increased content consumption and contribution (Cao, Meadows, Wong, & Xia, 2021). Positive consumer perception of brands' sustainable social media marketing was found to positively influence electronic word of mouth, allowing content to reach more consumers and improving brand awareness (Kong, Witmaier, & Ko, 2021). These findings suggest that the higher perceived sustainability of a brand, the more exposure it will receive. To summarize, content that includes sustainability will improve brand image, promote trust, increase engagement, and encourage sharing. Based on this line of reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed:

***H1:** Social media content that contains sustainability-focused wording receives more engagement than content that does not.*

Engagement Rate and Brand Sustainability

It has been established that transparent and sustainable brand operations lead to more positive consumer perceptions and opinions of clothing brands (Pulse of the Industry, 2019). Furthermore, a growing number of empowered consumers are holding brands to a higher standard, expecting a more holistic approach to sustainability, rather than minimal isolated efforts (Mandarić, Hunjet, & Kozina, 2021). With this shift in consumer values has come the emergence of sustainable brands who have crafted their brand identity around ethical operations. The findings of Kong, Witmaier, & Ko (2021) suggest that brands perceived to be more sustainable by consumers were more likely to be shared and discussed online. Therefore, it can be reasonably inferred that sustainable brands receive more social media engagement than brands that are perceived as primarily non-sustainable. Furthermore, brands marketed as predominantly sustainable are more popular among millennials and gen-z (Pirkani, 2021) and media has positively influenced conscious consumption among younger generations (Johnstone & Lindh, 2022). This serves as further evidence to support the assumption that social media engagement and exposure is higher for sustainable brands than non-sustainable brands. Considering all of this, the following hypothesis is proposed:

***H2:** Social media content from sustainable brands receives more engagement than social media content from non-sustainable brands.*

Engagement Rate and Brand Price Point

The attributes of luxury brands, like limited production quantities and durability, are closely aligned with sustainable values (Hasbullah, Sulaiman & Mas'od, 2020). Therefore, it can be asserted that luxury and sustainability are not in conflict but implicitly associated with one another. In line with this,

sustainability is more positively received in relation to luxury brands than brands with lower price points (Grazzini, Acuti & Aiello, 2021). Purchase intention has also been found to be positively impacted by sustainability-focussed marketing for luxury brands (Amatulli, Angelis & Donato, 2020). Additionally, educational social media content related to sustainability was closely correlated to creating UGC (Hasbullah, Sulaiman & Mas'od, 2020). Considering the relationships between luxury brands and sustainability, the following hypotheses are established:

H3a: Sustainable social media content regarding luxury brands will receive higher engagement than non-sustainable social media content regarding luxury brands.

H3b: Sustainable luxury brands receive higher engagement rates than non-sustainable luxury brands.

H3c: Brand sustainability has a greater positive effect on luxury brand engagement than it does on non-luxury brand engagement.

Research Model

A group of sixty popular apparel and accessory brands were selected and analyzed on the basis of their social media marketing efforts. This data was collected using Zoomph, a digital measurement platform for social audience intelligence. The platform provided the number of “posts”, “impressions”, “reach”, “social value”, “engagement”, and “follower interaction rate” for each brand over about a two month period. These values served as metrics for the objectives: to discover a relationship between sustainability and consumer engagement. The brands studied included a mix of luxury and non-luxury brands, as well as sustainable and non-sustainable brands. General product price point and degree of sustainable brand operations were used as metrics for these categorizations.

For each brand, data was collected from the sustainable content associated with the brand and the non-sustainable content associated with the brand. The two content types were separated using content filters. 24 hashtags and 89 messages including a variety of relevant key words and phrases associated with social and environmental sustainability were included in a “sustainable” filter. An inverse “non-sustainable” filter identified posts that did not include any of the same key words and phrases. Both filters were separately applied to each brand to attain the data. The specific hashtags and messages included in the filters are listed below.

The following workflow conditions were used.

- Sustainable: all of the following conditions are met.
- Non-sustainable: none of the following conditions are met.

TABLE 1

Hashtags contain...			
#climatechange	#climateaction	#climatesolutions	#climatecrisis
#sustainability	#sustainablefashion	#ethicalfashion	#shopsustainable
#woventogether	#slowfashion	#whomakesitmatters	#dressclean
#bcorporations	#bcorpmonth	#worldautismawarenessday	#worldwaterday
#whomademyclothes	#powerofshe	#blacklivesmatter	#womenshistorymonth
#saynotofastfashion	#veganleather	#internationalwomensday	#blackhistorymonth

TABLE 2

Message contains...				
ethical	sustainable	sustainability	Indigenous people	Naturally dyed
empowerment	Women's rights	Women's day	LGBTQIA	Repurposed materials
LGBTQ+	BIPOC	World water day	humanitarian	non-toxic
communities	Black history	Autism awareness	inclusion	Wear plants, not plastic
donation	donate	donating	donations	Celebrate women
charity	End hunger	Ukraine	Acts of good	Women's history
Individuals in need	protections	nature	Natural resources	responsibility
Fossil fuels	crises	advocacy	movement	Acts of kindness
Climate change	Climate crisis	Climate agenda	racial	advocate
gender	Climate solutions	environmentalism	tencel	plant-based
organic	recycle	recycled	poverty	RWS
consciously	Animal rights	Our planet	vegan	community
Positive change	Water conservation	Greenhouse gas	People make clothes	Sustainable brands
Worker's rights	artisan	Garment workers	Fair trade	linen
Mental health	Sustainable materials	Female empowerment	consciousness	Land stewardship
Sustainable practices	Equitable tomorrow	ecosystems	Organic cotton	cost-per-wear
GOTS certified	OEKO-TEX certified	deadstock	earth	Textile exchange
Farm-to-closet	Plant dyed	Support women		

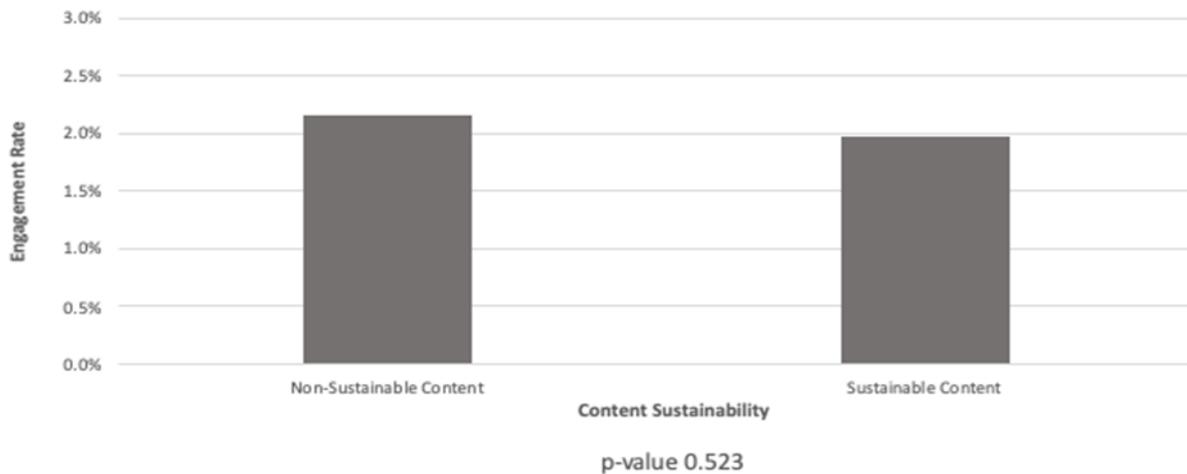
The second metric was the sustainability of the brands themselves. bcorporation.net and goodonyou.eco were utilized to categorize the brands as sustainable or unsustainable. B-corporation certifications are received by companies only after they go through a screening process to ensure they are meeting the marks on environmental performance, legal accountability, and transparency (BCorp). Good On You is an organization that specializes in rating brands on the basis of their impact on people, planet, and animals. A 'good' score means the brands have "adopted policies and practices to manage multiple material issues across their supply chain and often demonstrate leadership in one or more areas". A 'great' score means "brands demonstrate leadership in all three areas (people, planet, animals). They are typically very transparent and have both strong policies and strong assurance (from relevant certifications or standards systems like b-corp) to address the most material issues across their supply chain" (GoodOnYou).

The third metric was brand price point. The brands were separated into two price groupings: luxury and non-luxury. This was done using a widely accepted fashion price point classification system. There are seven categories in the system: budget, contemporary, moderate, better, bridge, designer, and couture. For the purposes of this study, brands that fell into the 'budget', 'moderate', and 'contemporary' categories were considered 'non-luxury' and brands that fell into the 'better', 'bridge', 'designer', and 'couture' categories were considered 'luxury'.

DATA ANALYSIS

The first test used a Two-Sample t-Test Assuming Equal Variances to compare the engagement rates for sustainable and non-sustainable content among all 60 fashion brands in the study. The mean engagement rate for sustainable content was 1.97%, while the mean engagement rate for non-sustainable content was 2.16%. Therefore, the average engagement rate for non-sustainable content was greater than the engagement rate for sustainable content. However, with a p-value of 0.5234, the difference in engagement rate between sustainability-focused content and non-sustainability-focused content was also not significant. Due to these findings, hypothesis 1a is not supported.

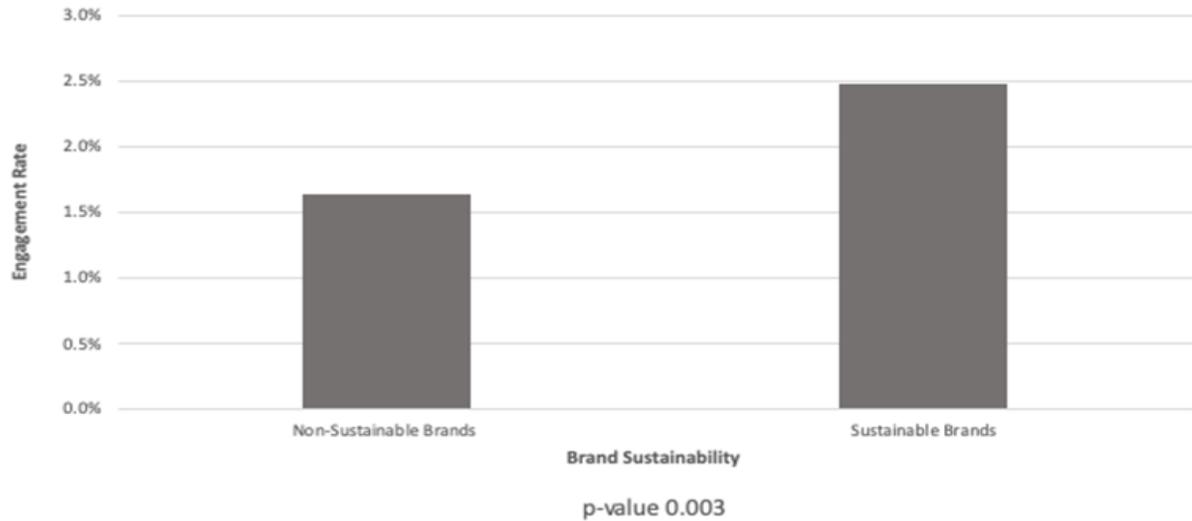
FIGURE 1
ENGAGEMENT RATE VS. CONTENT SUSTAINABILITY



H1a: *Social media content that contains sustainability wording receives more engagement than content that does not. ~Not supported*

The second test used a Two-Sample t-Test Assuming Equal Variances to compare engagement rates among sustainable brands and non-sustainable brands. The mean engagement rate for non-sustainable brands was 1.63% and the mean engagement rate for sustainable brands was 2.48%. Therefore, the average engagement rate for sustainable brands was greater than the average engagement rate for non-sustainable brands. With a p-value of 0.003, the difference was considerably significant. Therefore, hypothesis 2 is supported.

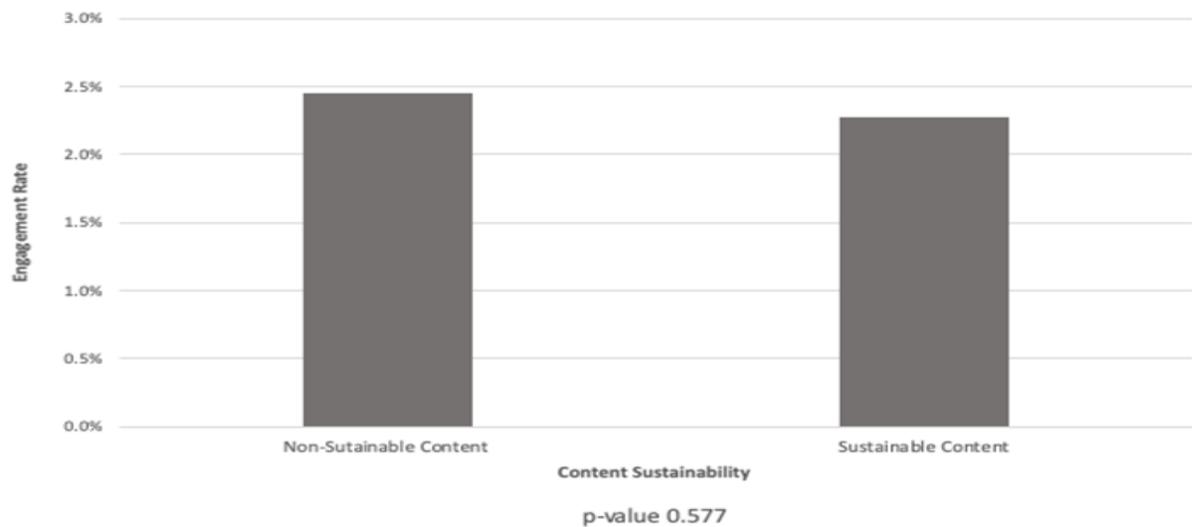
FIGURE 2
ENGAGEMENT RATE VS. BRAND SUSTAINABILITY



H1b: Sustainable brands receive more social media engagement than non-sustainable brands. ~Supported

The third test used a Two-Sample t-Test Assuming Equal Variances to compare engagement rates between non-sustainable content and sustainable content specifically for luxury brands. The average engagement rate for luxury brand non-sustainable content was 2.45% and the average engagement rate for luxury sustainable content was 2.27%. The p-value was 0.557. Hypothesis 3a is not supported.

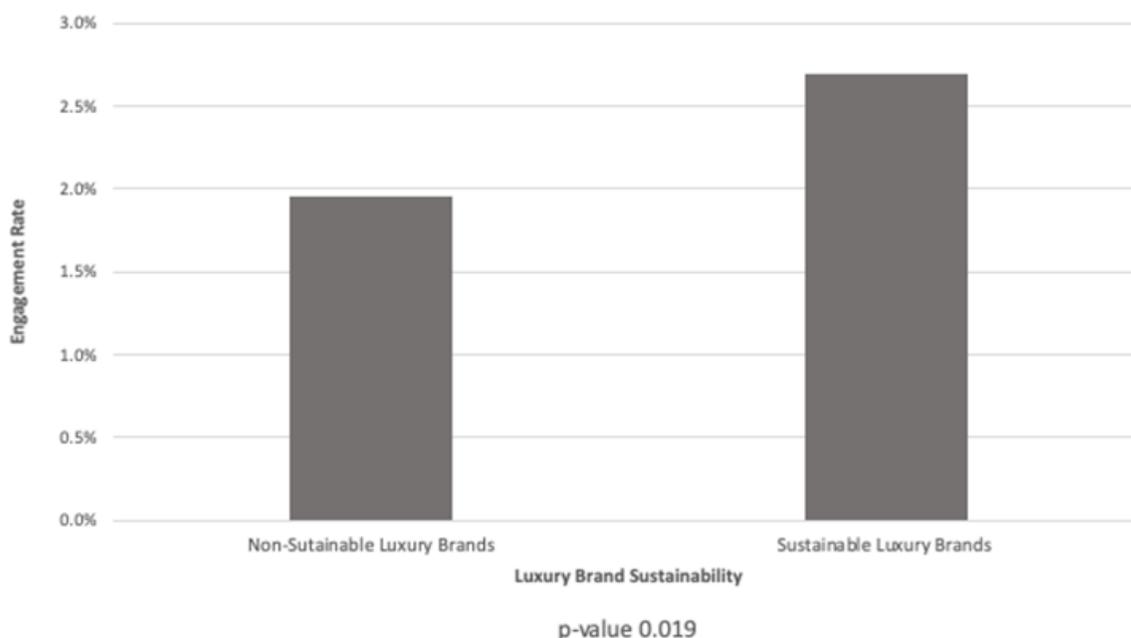
FIGURE 3
ENGAGEMENT RATE VS. LUXURY BRAND CONTENT SUSTAINABILITY



H3a: Sustainable social media content regarding luxury brands will receive higher engagement than non-sustainable social media content regarding luxury brands. ~Not supported

The fourth test used a Two-Sample t-Test Assuming Equal Variances to compare engagement rates between non-sustainable brand identities and sustainable brand identities specifically for luxury brands. The average engagement rate for luxury brands with non-sustainable business operations was 1.95% and the average engagement rate for luxury brands with sustainable business operations was 2.69%. Since the p-value was 0.019, it indicated the difference between brand sustainability was a significant factor in engagement rate. This finding indicates that luxury sustainable brands receive higher engagement rates than luxury non-sustainable brands. Therefore, hypothesis 3b is supported.

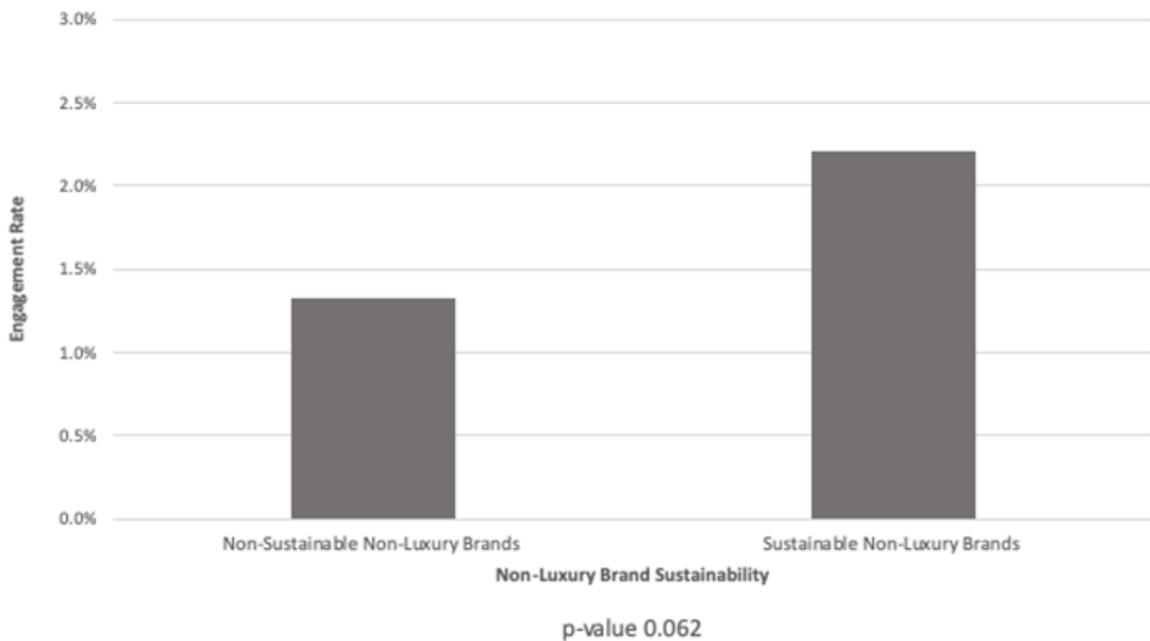
FIGURE 4
ENGAGEMENT RATE VS. LUXURY BRAND SUSTAINABILITY



H3b: Sustainable luxury brands receive higher engagement rates than non-sustainable luxury brands.
~Supported

The fifth and final test compared the results of the previous hypothesis with engagement rates between non-sustainable brand identities and sustainable brand identities specifically for non-luxury brands. A Two-Sample t-Test Assuming Equal Variances was used to compare the average engagement rate for non-luxury brands with non-sustainable business operations with the average engagement rate for non-luxury brands with sustainable business operations. The mean engagement rate for non-luxury sustainable brands was 1.32% and the mean engagement rate for non-luxury non-sustainable brands was 2.27%. This proved a higher average engagement rate for sustainable non-luxury brands compared to unsustainable non-luxury brands. However, the p-value was 0.062, indicating only a marginal significance. When compared to the 0.019 p-value for the difference between sustainable luxury brands and non-sustainable luxury brands, it is clear that brand sustainability has greater significance for luxury brand engagement than it does for non-luxury brand engagement. Hypothesis 3c is supported.

FIGURE 5
ENGAGEMENT RATE VS. NON-LUXURY BRAND SUSTAINABILITY



H3c: Brand sustainability has a greater positive effect on luxury brand engagement than it does on non-luxury brand engagement. ~Supported

CONCLUSION

The time period in which the study was conducted, and the resulting relatively small pool of data, served as a limitation to this work. A longer data collection period would have provided a more comprehensive sample and potentially resulted in more definitive findings. However, this study provides an interesting insight into the effect of content sustainability, brand sustainability, and brand price point on social media engagement.

According to the data analysis, sustainability-focused social media content did not result in higher engagement rates or social values for a mix of sustainable, non-sustainable, luxury, and non-luxury brands. These findings contradicted the studies conducted by Kong, Witmaier, & Ko (2021) that found sustainability-focussed content to be a contributing factor to increased eWOM. The results from this study did reveal significant effects of brand sustainability on engagement rates, particularly for brands with higher price points. Essentially, content sustainability was not effective in increasing engagement rate, but brand sustainability was effective. This suggests that sustainability marketing is only effective if it is backed up by socially and environmentally responsible business operations. One reason for the discrepancy between content sustainability and brand sustainability effectiveness may be due to consumers' savviness to greenwashing. It would be reasonable to infer that sustainable social media marketing is not well-received when consumers have an external understanding of the brands' unsustainable practices. Future research could be conducted in order to confirm or deny this.

Luxury brands in particular should implement sustainability well-rounded strategies in order to increase social media engagement and further cultivate brand community. An implication of the supported hypothesis is that consumers are more engaging with brands that have a strong sustainability identity. This is consistent with the findings of Mandarić, Hunjet, & Kozina (2021) and Kong, Witmaier, & Ko (2021). Managers may consider this when determining sustainability strategies. Since singular sustainability efforts

are not as well received as consistent sustainable messaging that is reflective of brand operations, managers should implement social and environmental consciousness in all aspects of the company. These findings also serve as evidence that social media marketing is an effective strategy for brands with an established sustainable brand identity, as it successfully facilitates multi-level communication and encourages brand recognition through digital sharing.

REFERENCES

- Abbas, J., Mahmood, S., Ali, H., Ali Raza, M., Ali, G., Aman, J., . . . Nurunnabi M. (2019). The Effects of Corporate Social Responsibility Practices and Environmental Factors through a Moderating Role of Social Media Marketing on Sustainable Performance of Business Firms. *Sustainability*, *11*(12), 3434.
- Apparel Search. (n.d.). *Apparel Industry Price Point Definitions - Terms of Interest to the Fashion Industry*. Retrieved from https://www.apparelsearch.com/terms/a/apparel_industry_price_point_definitions.html
- Balderjahn, I., Payer, M., Seegebarth, B., Wiedmann, K.P., & Weber, A. (2018). The many faces of sustainability-conscious consumers: A category-independent typology. *Journal of Business Research*, *91*, 83–93.
- B Corporation. (n.d.). *B Corp Certification demonstrates a company's entire social and environmental impact*. Retrieved from <https://www.bcorporation.net/en-us/certification>.
- Cao, D., Meadows, M., Wong, D., & Xia, S. (2021). Understanding consumer's social media engagement behaviour: An examination of the moderation effect of social media context. *Journal of Business Research*, *122*, 835–846.
- Castillo-Abdul, B., Pérez-Escoda, A., & Núñez-Barriopedro, E. (2022). Promoting Social Media Engagement Via Branded Content Communication: A Fashion Brands Study on Instagram. *Cogitatio*, *10*(1), X–X.
- Cernansky, R. (2021). Customers care more about sustainability post-lockdowns. Now what? *Vogue Business, Sustainability*.
- Cora, A. (2021, October 27). The green side: The most iconic sustainable fashion campaigns. *The Italian Reve*.
- Forbes. (2021). *Empowered Consumers Call for Sustainability Transformation*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forrester/2021/01/21/empowered-consumers-call-for-sustainability-transformation/?sh=7f6785222042>
- Good On You. (2022). *How We Rate Fashion Brand Ethics*. Retrieved from <https://goodonyou.eco/how-we-rate/>
- Goworek, H., Oxborrow, L., Claxton, S., McLaren, A., Cooper, T., & Hill, H. (2020) Managing sustainability in the fashion business: Challenges in product development for clothing Longevity in the UK. *Journal of Business Research*, *117*, 629–641.
- Grazzini, L., Acuti, D., & Aiello, G. (2021). Solving the puzzle of sustainable fashion consumption: The role of consumers' implicit attitudes and perceived warmth. *Journal of Cleaner Production, Marketing*, *287*.
- Gretchko, I. (2021). Here's what it takes for fashion brands to be sustainable. Can the industry be saved? *Refinery 29*.
- Hasbullah, N.N., Sulaiman, Z., & Mas'od, A. (2020). User-generated content sources: The use of social media in motivating sustainable luxury fashion consumptions. *International Journal of Scientific and Technology Research*, *9*(3).
- Howland, D. (2021). Fast fashion faces steep declines in the next decade or sooner, UBS warns. *Retail Dive*.
- Johnstone, L., & Lindh, C. (2022). Sustainably sustaining (online) fashion consumption: Using influencers to promote sustainable (un)planned behaviour in Europe's millennials. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, *16*.

- Jung, J., Kim, S.J., & Kim, K.H. (2020). Sustainable marketing activities of traditional fashion market and brand loyalty. *Journal of Business Research*, 120, 294–301.
- Kim, Y., & Oh, K.W. (2020). Which consumer associations can build a sustainable fashion brand image? Evidence from fast fashion brands. *Sustainability*, 12(5), 1703.
- Kim, Y.K., & Sullivan, P. (2019). Emotional branding speaks to consumers' heart: The case of fashion brands. *Fashion and Textiles*, 6(2), 1–16.
- Kong, M.H., Witmaier, A., & Ko, E. (2021). Sustainability and social media communication: How consumers respond to marketing efforts of luxury and non-luxury fashion brands. *Journal of Business Research*, 131, 640–651.
- Kusá, A., & Urmínová, M. (2020). Communication as a Part of Identity of Sustainable Subjects in Fashion. *Risk and Financial Management*, 13(12), 305.
- Luxiders. (n.d.). *Luxury Brands Moving Toward Sustainability*. Retrieved from <https://luxiders.com/luxury-brands-moving-sustainability/>
- Mandarić, D., Hunjet, A., & Kozina, G. (2021). Perception of consumers' awareness about sustainability of fashion brands. *Journal of Risk and Financial Management*, 14.
- Meier, L. (2021). Synthesis Report of United Nations System-wide Initiatives related to Fashion. *UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion*.
- Periyasamy, A., & Tehrani-Bagha, A. (2022). A review of microplastic emission from textile materials and its reduction techniques. *Polymer Degradation and Sustainability*, 119.
- Pirkani. (2021). *The trend of sustainable fashion: Why is it becoming so popular with millennial and gen Z shoppers?* Retrieved from <https://pirkani.eco/blogs/journal/the-trend-of-sustainable-fashion-why-is-it-becoming-so-popular-with-millennial-and-gen-z-shoppers>
- Pulse of the Industry — GLOBAL FASHION AGENDA. (2019). *Boston Consulting Group, Inc. and Sustainable Apparel Coalition*.
- Sachs, L. (2020). *Best Sustainable Fashion Brands You Can Actually Trust*. Good Housekeeping Institute.
- Suhrawardi, R. (2019). The Big Issues Facing Fashion in 2019. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/reccasuhrawardi/2019/01/16/the-big-issues-facing-fashion-in-2019/?sh=1de3597023a9>
- UNEP. (2022). Fashion's tiny hidden secret. *Environment Programme*. Retrieved from <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/fashions-tiny-hidden-secret>
- Wang, Y., Ahmed, S.C., Deng, S., & Wang, H. (2019). Success of social media marketing efforts in retaining sustainable online consumers: An empirical analysis on the online fashion retail market. *Sustainability*, 11(13), 3596.
- Zhao, L., Lee, S.H., Li, M., & Sun, P. (2022). The Use of Social Media to Promote Sustainable Fashion and Benefit Communications: A Data-Mining Approach. *Sustainability*, 14(3), 1178.
- Zoomph. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://zoomph.com>