
#Burnberry: A case study of consumer backlash through social media

Kajsa Hallberg and Rachel Eike, Iowa State University

Keywords: Social media, sustainability, incineration, deadstock, luxury fashion

In the world of luxury fashion, over \$600 million worth of merchandise deadstock (inventory that was not used or sold for its designated season) is incinerated each year (Napier & Sanguineti, 2018). This attempt to continue the illusion of scarcity has resulted in a catastrophically high environmental footprint for the apparel industry (Napier & Sanguineti, 2018). Maintaining this idea of scarcity helps luxury brands justify their eliteness and likewise, high retail price point. The practice of incinerating deadstock has proven to be the easiest way to achieve this goal (Napier & Sanguineti, 2018). Incineration of deadstock waste has been a popular practice in the apparel industry since the 1980s, and the lack of requirements for transparency around manufacturing and disposal practices has made it easy for these policies to go unnoticed by the general public (Elia, 2020), until recent exposure.

Over the past two decades, many luxury fashion brands have been exposed for using incineration as their means for dealing with the issue of unsold product deadstock. While there are alternative options to processing deadstock, such as selling at discount or second-hand stores and upcycling/repurposing (Ingram, 2019), incineration is a fairly swift and inexpensive option (Choudhury, 2017). However, incineration practices have never played well with the general public and sustainability activists (Elia, 2020). The most famous of these instances was in 2018, when Burberry was exposed for incinerating a multitude of unsold season-specific goods. Nearly \$38 million worth of deadstock was found to be burned in the previous year, equating to tons of merchandise completely destroyed and turned into toxic air pollution (Napier & Sanguineti, 2018). The consumer backlash to the scandal, as evidenced through social media using the #Burnberry, was so severe that Burberry ended up changing their policies and announced new sustainability initiatives in the same year. Additionally, fearful of similar backlash and reputation damage, other luxury fashion brands followed suit and announced their own sustainability policies (Napier & Sanguineti, 2018). The vast majority of the #Burnberry conversation happened on Twitter in the months from when the controversy first broke in July 2018 until Burberry announced their policy change in September 2018. Many users marked their tweets that voiced frustration with the policy using #Burnberry to help link their tweets as part of the larger conversation (Siegle, 2018). The consumer social media use was so widespread that #Burnberry was trending for days, much longer than the typical keyword or hashtag on a trending page. This was evidence of how discontent and unhappy consumers were with incineration policies that Burberry, and many other luxury brands, had been known to hold (Siegle, 2018).

It is well known that comments on social media can have a huge impact on promotion or discouragement of products, services, and consumer purchase intentions (Paquette, 2013). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to analyze the #Burnberry conversation on Twitter following Burberry's clothing incineration scandal and identify common social media user engagement tactics to speculate how user influence impacted sustainability policy changes. The

findings of this research study may be beneficial for future studies on consumer influence via social media in relation to sustainability messaging and brand engagement.

To understand consumer comments and engagement tactics, in the case of Burberry's deadstock management, a qualitative social media analysis was conducted. Looking at Twitter from the time the story broke to when the company announced the new changes in deadstock policy, tweets that used "#Burnberry" were collected and analyzed through case study content analysis (Creswell, 2007). Case study research involves "the study of an issue explored through one of more cases within a bounded system (i.e., a setting, a context)" (Creswell, 2007, p. 73), where in this study, the issue of deadstock incineration is explored in the case of Burberry within the context of social media engagement. Additionally, other tweets that contributed to the conversation were also gathered for analysis and organization to identify themes that potentially impacted sustainability policy changes. These tweets included comments to the articles about the 2018 scandal, tweets in response to Burberry's social media presence following release of the news, and independent statements. Keywords used to locate tweets included "#Burnberry", "clothing waste", "sustainability", "incineration", "sustainable fashion", and "Burberry".

While there never was a single #Burnberry tweet that went 'viral', meaning receiving response and engagement from thousands within hours of going online, the conversation surrounding sustainable fashion and deadstock policies was far reaching after the general public learned about Burberry's incineration policies. Many heated comments from consumers could be found under the articles about the incident. The online thrifting chain ThredUp released their own statement that helped make the hashtag widely popular (Philipkoski, 2018), leaving Burberry seemingly ineffective at avoiding any online backlash from upset consumers (via Twitter tweets) (Paton, 2018). Content analysis of tweeted comments and shared content connected to the #Burnberry identified specific themes that suggest impact from social networking. The backlash online did not slow down until Burberry announced a new change in policy that would allow for more sustainable ways to deal with their deadstock (Paton, 2018). After consumers made their preference for sustainable fashion so clear, other luxury brands gained positive reputation by publicly announcing support for sustainable practices within their own companies and likewise, adjusted policies. Following the reveal of this trend, Burberry, along with other luxury brands such as Stella McCartney, joined the Ellen MacArthur Foundation's initiative Make Fashion Circular (Kaixin, 2017). The goal of this program is to encourage fashion companies to switch to a more circular economy to reduce clothing waste and environmental footprint (Kaixin, 2017). The incineration of deadstock in order to preserve the elite reputation of luxury fashion brands (Kaixin, 2017) has proven to be environmentally unsustainable, socially irresponsible, and unpopular with environmentally concerned consumers (Claudio, 2007). The 2018 #Burnberry scandal made it very evident that consumers have gained a strong voice online when it comes to speaking out against policies they do not agree with to the point that it can influence positive policy change. The findings of this study may be considered by fashion brands to showcase sustainable practices employed via social media to connect with digital consumers in light of value changes, such as sustainability. Future studies that expand this research may involve interviewing officials at Burberry to understand the company's process in mitigating backlash, replenishing reputation, and crafting sustainability policies. Expanding this research outside of Burberry and investigating other instances of consumer-led sustainable policy change.

References

- Choudhury, A. K. R. (2017). Sustainable chemical technologies for textile production. In S. S. Muthu (Ed.), *Sustainable Fibres and Textiles* (pp. 267–322). Woodhead Publishing: Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-102041-8.00010-X>
- Claudio, L. (2007). Waste couture: Environmental impact of the clothing industry. *Environmental Health Perspectives*, 115(9), A448-A454. <https://doi.org/10.1289/ehp.115-a449>
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Elia, A. (2020). Fashion's destruction of unsold goods: Responsible solutions for an environmentally conscious future. *Fordham Intellectual Property, Media & Entertainment Law Journal*, 30(2), 539-592. <https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/frdipm30&div=19&id=&page=>
- Ingram, J. (2019). *Innovating the apparel industry in the United States: Designers and small brands purchasing sustainable textiles* [Iowa State University]. <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/etd/17470/>
- Kaixin, F. (2017). *Recycling of the high-end brands' leftovers. A product service system research for high-end brands' leftovers recycling* [Master's thesis, ARC III - School of Design]. POLITesi. <http://hdl.handle.net/10589/138254>
- Napier, E., & Sanguineti, F. (2018). Fashion merchandisers' slash and burn dilemma: A consequence of over production and excessive waste? *Rutgers Business Review*, 3(2). <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3289411>
- Paquette, H. (2013). Social media as a marketing tool: A literature review. *Major Papers by Master of Science Students, Paper 2*. http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/tmd_major_papers/2
- Paton, E. (2018, September 6). *Burberry to stop burning clothing and other goods it can't sell*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/06/business/burberry-burning-unsold-stock.html>
- Philipkoski, K. (2018, August 7). *ThredUp's brand director on calling out Burberry's \$37.8M clothing burn*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kristenphilipkoski/2018/08/07/thredups-brand-director-on-calling-out-burberrys-37-8m-clothing-burn/?sh=537132386033>
- Siegle, L. (2018, September 28). *Destroying unsold clothes is fashion's dirty secret. And we're complicit*. HuffPost. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/burberry-burn-clothes-fashion-industry-waste_n_5bad1ef2e4b09d41eb9f7bb0