

## Engaging with Sustainability: Comparing Consumers Visually-Based and Text-Based Social Media Engagement with Fashion Brands

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**Introduction.** Retail brands are increasingly using social media to communicate key brand values, such as sustainability to consumers (Amed et al., 2018; Kareh, 2018; Nelson et al., 2019; Wolny & Mueller, 2013). However, individual brand commitment to sustainability varies (Johnson & Chattaraman, 2018; Johnstone & Lindh, 2017), and it has not yet been established how sustainable representation on social media impacts consumer engagement. This study examined how brand sustainability, both as a core value and through social media representation, impacted consumer engagement on social media.

Various social media platforms exist, such as Instagram and Twitter, which communicate with consumers in varied ways. Instagram is a visually-based platform engaging consumers primarily through photos and videos while Twitter is a text-based platform primarily engaging consumers through text. The purpose of this study was to explore consumer engagement via Likes and Comments with sustainable fashion brands (SFB), sustainability-aware fashion brands (SAB), and traditional fashion brands (TFB) across Instagram and Twitter, exploring how consumers interact differently with different brand types across channels and content.

**Theoretical research model.** Through reflection on the integrative nature of a social media experience, the study aimed to examine the relationship between brands and consumer experiences through a stimulus-response (S-R) framework (Procter & Vu, 2006). In this study, consumer engagement was measured by evaluating the relationship between the various types of social media messages and consumer's response. Specifically, the study explored consumer engagement with social media posts (stimulus) measured through Likes and Comments (response) on social media. Additional moderating variables in this framework existed including brand sustainability and platform. Interpreting brand type and message type with consumer response allowed for analysis of how consumer engagement varied based on brand sustainability.

**Methods.** A mixed methods approach was utilized in this study. Twenty-five fashion brands with strong social media presence were identified across three groups including: (a) SFB, (b) SAB, and (c) TFB. In the first phase of analysis, a qualitative approach (i.e., content analysis) was performed to capitalize on the richness of details included in social media experiences, such as emotions and attitudes, and to extract thematic content from social media posts (Esterberg, 2002). Next, consumer engagement was recorded through total Likes and Comments per post in order to understand consumer engagement (Stieglitz et al., 2018). Descriptive statistics were generated for each theme and the distribution of posts across Instagram and Twitter platforms (Stieglitz et al., 2018). Finally, multiple regression analysis was utilized to address the four hypotheses (See Figure 1).

**Results.** Across the brand groups, Instagram posts yielded 239 posts from SFB (31%), 195 from SAB (25%), and 336 posts from TFB (44%); totaling 772 total posts for analyses. The high quantity of posts in TFB was a result of the high post frequency, averaging 2.29 times per day. This was in comparison to SFB which posted an average 1.14 times per day and SAB which posted an average of 1.16 times per day. Comparatively, Twitter posts were composed of 196 posts from SFB, 133 posts from SAB, and 190 posts from TFB. Thematic content analysis resulted in a total of six themes including

Sustainability [Social Sustainability (ethics, workforce, society), Environmental Sustainability (natural resource use, materials, pollution), and general sustainability)], Philanthropy (deeds, charity, and fundraising), Fashion (apparel, accessories, footwear and beauty products), Lifestyle (life imagery, 'how-to's, daily life representation, and celebrity happenings), Current Events (political, social, economic events) and Branding (including the promotion of the brand, merchandise, stores, or events). Figure 1 summarizes the quantitatively results as H1a, H1b, H2a, and H2b is supported and H3a, H3b, H4a, and H4b were partially supported.

**Discussion.** It was expected that SFB would post more sustainable content while TFB would post less sustainable content. The finding that

Sustainability post themes would vary by group was consistent with the authors expectations. Further, since sustainable brands tend to be socially and environmentally aware, it was also expected that they would have high posts frequency regarding Current Events. This result was also consistent with the authors expectations. However, it was found that consumer engagement via Likes and Comments varied for Sustainability, with consumers engaging more on Instagram than Twitter. This may have to do with the photos and visual elements related to sustainability not being as easily accessible through Twitter (Testa et al., 2021). Engagement with sustainability posts was not the only contrasting thematic area.

Consumer engagement consistently varied by theme across engagement method (Likes versus Comments) and platform (Twitter versus Instagram). It was found that Lifestyle was not a significant predictor of consumer engagement via Likes, while it was a significant predictor of consumer engagement via Comments. This could relate to the different ways in which consumers engage through Likes versus Comments (Lee et al., 2015); individuals may be interested in sharing personal experiences and connect with the brand via written text when it comes to Lifestyle content. Consumer engagement via Comments was also significantly different by platform for Lifestyle, with consumers engaging more on Twitter than Instagram. This may be because consumers are interested in engaging in conversation regarding personal experiences, life events and other Lifestyle topics. Further, consumer engagement via Comments was significantly different by platform for Fashion, with consumers engaging more on Instagram than Twitter. This is likely because these were visually oriented posts emphasizing garments and collections which can more easily be purchased through a visual platform.

**Implications & future studies.** The findings of this study can be valuable for industry professionals and academia in the context of sustainable branding and general social media strategy. The results can provide a valuable guide for fashion brands and companies by giving them insights into the ways they can manage their social media channels and presenting their brand values to maximize consumer-brand engagement. This study invites future research by recommending study replication applied to other social media channels and brand values beyond a sustainable orientation. Utilizing different data collection methods (e.g., brand interviews, social network analysis) is also suggested for future studies.

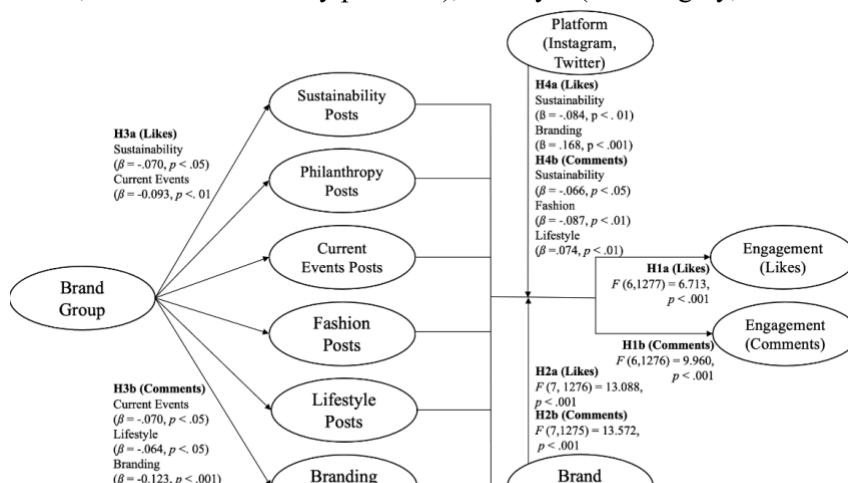


Figure 1. Research model of this study.

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