

Sustainable Fashion Hashtag Activism: The Case of #FashionRevolution on Instagram

Helena Chan · Yhe-Young Lee

Department of Human Ecology, Graduate School, Korea University

Keywords: agency, hashtag activism, Instagram, sustainable fashion

1. Introduction

Recently, a number of citizens have participated in hashtag activism on social media platforms as a way to support a movement and to push for social changes. One in particular is the hashtag campaign that was started by the Fashion Revolution organization as a way to raise awareness about the environmental and social costs of fast fashion. This research considered understanding the sustainable fashion discourse citizens are contributing and to what extent citizens are able to exercise agency through the Instagram hashtag #fashionrevolution. A qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the emerging sustainable fashion narrative themes that citizens consider to be relevant to current and future conceptions of what sustainable fashion entails. These narratives were compared with aspects of agency (Hodson et al., 2018; Ling & Dale, 2013; Yang, 2016) to determine if citizens were able to exercise their power for change within the fashion industry.

2. Social Media as Facilitator in Activism and Citizen Agency

Hashtag activism occurs when a large number of posts appear on social media under a hashtagged word or phrase with a social or political claim (Yang, 2016). This folksonomy system allows for citizens to contribute narratives to public discourse while exercising their agency, or ability to exert one's voice and to resist power relations. According to Yang (2016), narrative agency is an integral part that drives hashtag activism. Narrative agency is communal, invented, skillful, and protean. Ling and Dale (2013) argue that agency must first be present amongst individuals before social capital can be activated to create meaningful change. If agency is not present at the individual level, the community as a group cannot respond to sustainable development challenges. Community agency is present when the community can collaborate and work together for common goals (Hodson et al., 2018).

3. Method

Social media monitoring tool Brand24 was used to gather Instagram posts with the hashtag #fashionrevolution from March 28, 2019 to April 9, 2019. Criteria for post selection were created to ensure posts were relevant to understanding sustainable fashion narratives. When a given post satisfied the criteria, images and text captions from the posts were screen captured and recorded with brief descriptions on the image content and role of the citizen. Following this data collection process, 710 unique Instagram users and their 1,076 posts were selected. A qualitative content analysis was used to examine the emerging sustainable fashion narrative themes of the Instagram posts. Concepts of agency were referenced to determine the extent in which Instagram supports the agency of citizens who contributed to the hashtag.

4. Results

The four main narrative themes of sustainable fashion that emerged were practicing forms of sustainable fashion, beliefs and values of what sustainable fashion consists of, emotions related to fashioning sustainably, and spreading knowledge and information about sustainable fashion (Table 1). These narrative themes are followed by sub-narratives such as identifying people in production processes. While citizens took on roles of consumer, designer, manufacturer, or social enterprise, some citizens challenged traditional roles of producer and consumer by taking on hybrid roles such as “maker”. Citizens in this study believed that consumers had buying power and had the duty of becoming a conscious consumer. They were actively trying to find creative ways to fashion sustainably by experimenting with different styles, capsule closets, and hashtag challenges. Designers, manufacturer, and social enterprises on the other hand were focused on incorporating sustainable productions processes such as upcycled materials, sustainably grown materials, or working with certain artisans and local communities.

Citizens displayed communal, invented, skillful, and protean aspects of narrative agency. Citizens authored and articulated specific experiences through text captions, contributed to discourse, participated in communal events, created symbolic images or material forms of sustainable fashion, and criticized current methods of fast fashion production methods. Aspects of individual agency were present in some consumers who believed that their participation in secondhand shopping or hashtag challenges could impact the industry. Citizens who posted information about sustainable fashion events and invited citizens to clothing swaps and documentary screenings displayed aspects of communal agency.

Table 1. Sustainable Fashion Narratives of Hashtag #FashionRevolution

Narrative Themes	Practicing Forms of Sustainable Fashion	Sharing Beliefs and Values of Sustainable Fashion	Expressing Emotions Related to Fashioning Sustainably	Spreading Sustainable Fashion Knowledge and Information
Sub-Narratives	Uses sustainable production processes (ie. upcycled fabric, natural dyes, etc.)	Expresses values regarding sustainable fashion system	Describes emotions related to design/making/production process of sustainable fashion	Reports on designer/brand/entity sustainability information
	Works with local or artisan communities	Explains design processes and concepts	Describes emotions related to a sustainable fashion lifestyle	Recommends sustainable designer/brand/app/media sources
	Mends or customizes clothing/accessories	Identifies people who take part in sustainable production processes		Shares information and purpose for upcoming sustainable fashion event
	Participates in forms of sustainable fashion (ie. shopping vintage, styling challenges, etc.)			

References

- Hodson, J., Dale, A., & Petersen, B. (2018). The Instagram #climatechange hashtag community: Does it impact social capital and community agency? *The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Environmental Studies*, 12(3), 17–35.
- Ling, C., & Dale, A. (2013). Agency and social capital: characteristics and dynamics. *Community Development Journal*, 49(1), 4-20.
- Yang, G. (2016). Narrative agency in hashtag activism: The case of #BlackLivesMatter. *The Media and Communication*, 4(4), 13-17.