Engaging consumers with sustainable fashion on Instagram

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this study was to explore drivers of consumer engagement with sustainable fashion brands on Instagram to specifically answer the research question: what drives popularity of sustainable fashion among digital consumers?
Design/methodology/approach – Twenty-five global fashion retailers were identified and categorized as either (a) sustainable fashion brands (SFB), (b) sustainably aware mainstream brands (SAB) or (c) traditional fashion brands (TFB). Content analysis of the 25 retailer’s Instagram posts over a three-week period was analyzed and categorized according to content theme. Data were analyzed for quantity of Likes and Comments (engagement) to identify engagement strategies with each of the brand groups.
Findings – It was found that different strategies may be taken regarding social media strategy for SFB, SAB or TFB. Consumers were engaged with unfamiliar content, for instance, sustainability to a consumer unfamiliar with the topic or how it applies to a specific brand. Digital consumers were looking for exciting and aesthetically pleasing posts. Specifically, all consumers were engaged with posts about Fashion and Lifestyle.
Practical implications – As the result of this study, sustainable fashion best practices and social media strategies were presented for the three brand categories of fashion retailers.
Originality/value – This study analyzed a cross-section of global fashion brands and identified “best practices” for digital consumer engagement with sustainable messages through Instagram. The findings provide original value, specifically in the area of fashion marketing via social media to communicate brand identity to digital consumers for brand growth.

Keywords Instagram, Brands, Sustainability, Social media, Consumer engagement, Digital consumers

Paper type Research paper

Introduction
In the fashion industry brands with a focus on sustainability have gained esteem among consumer which has incentivized more brands to place emphasis on sustainable efforts (Rosmarin, 2020). These efforts align with consumers increased willingness to purchase from brands that support a social or environmental cause (Amel et al., 2009; Shen et al., 2013). Consumers are increasingly sustainably aware including increased awareness of fashion consumption and disposal (Amel et al., 2009; Shen et al., 2013; Rosmarin, 2020). Millennials (28%) and Gen-Z consumers (31%) consider protecting the environment to be their top concern than any other issues (Deloitte, 2020).

As brands develop sustainability initiatives, many are using social media to communicate intentions to consumers (Onete et al., 2013; Li and Dou, 2017). Social media refers to “[n]ew media technologies facilitating interactivity and co-creation that allow for the development and sharing of user-generated content among and between organizations and individuals”
Social media aligns with the present-day digital climate as a medium where posts may be used to communicate sustainable messages (Amed et al., 2017). Social media allows brands to engage with consumers directly and capture immediate feedback through likes, shares and comments (Nelson et al., 2019).

At the beginning of 2020, there were 3.8-billion social media users worldwide (an increase of about 9% from the year prior) (Kemp, 2020a), and by October, social media users grew to 4-billion, adding 2-million new users each day (Kemp, 2020b). As of October 2020, the average social media user was spending about 15% of their waking time on social media (Kemp, 2020b).

Purpose
Social media is used to communicate a variety of branding messages (Briggs, 2010). As brands navigate social media communications, it is essential to understand effective engagement techniques with consumers for growth, particularly involving messaging of “sustainability”. However, engagement may differ across different types of brands, such as those focused on sustainability and those to which sustainability is peripheral to the core brand message. While previous studies have explored social media as a platform for sustainability (Reilly and Hynan, 2014; Li and Dou, 2017), a cross-section analysis of global fashion brands sustainability messaging via social media, to determine best practices to consumer engagement, has yet to be conducted. Further, while sustainable fashion brands communicate both fashion and sustainability messages, it is unknown which category of messaging receives a stronger response from consumers.

The purpose of this study was to explore drivers of consumer engagement (detailed in methods section: Phase 2) with sustainable and sustainably aware fashion brands via social media. Engagement in this study was operationalized through quantitative terms and is discussed in the methods section under the heading “Phase 2: Consumer Engagement through Likes and Comments”. The study sought to specifically answer the following research questions:

- **RQ1a.** What messaging practices are utilized by fashion brands to engage with consumers?
- **RQ1b.** What messaging practices are utilized by fashion brands to engage consumers with sustainability?
- **RQ2.** How are consumers engaging with sustainable messages from fashion brands?

Literature review

Social media communication

Content-based social media advertising continues to be a key opportunity to reach consumers (Ramanathan et al., 2017). Social media communication platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok exist. Several studies have focused on consumer engagement through Facebook (e.g. Escobar-Rodríguez and Bonsón-Fernández, 2017; Jin and Rye, 2019a; Nelson et al., 2019), while further studies have explored consumer engagement on Instagram (e.g. Bakhshi et al., 2014; Jang et al., 2015; Li et al., 2018; Jin and Rye, 2019b). However, an opportunity exists to explore consumer engagement with sustainable messaging via social media, particularly Instagram, to identify best practices for fashion brand marketing. This opportunity is appropriate since consumers have stated increased interests in environmental and social sustainability topics (Chery, 2020).

Instagram. Instagram allows users to share images or videos with other account holders via posts. With more than 1-billion monthly users (Kemp, 2020a), more than 200-million Instagram users access at least one business-profile on Instagram every day (Instagram
While it is not the largest social media platform, Instagram is frequently considered the most influential social media source for fashion brand messaging (O'Connor, 2018). It accounts for 50% of fashion posts made through all social media platforms. The prevalence of Instagram reflects the necessity of conducting fashion marketing research on this specific platform. Therefore, this study will specifically address consumer engagement with sustainable brand messages via Instagram.

Instagram users interact through functions of “Likes” and “Comments”. Users can double-click on a post by another user to show they “Like” it, or they can add a specific “Comment” in response to the post. Further, posts on Instagram can be in various formats, including single photo, multiple photos, videos, [image of] text, text-embedded photos or text-embedded videos. According to Gandomi and Haider (2015), post format impacts consumer engagement. Therefore, within this study, the post format was recorded as it may further impact overall consumer engagement.

Sustainable social media engagement

Delivery methods of sustainable messaging to consumers have been researched. Reilly and Hynan (2014) explored how companies addressed sustainability through review Chief Executive Officer (CEO) letters and annual Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reports of diverse global corporations. They found significant differences in communication of sustainability across industries, particularly between those that labeled themselves as “green” companies. Dovleac (2015) studied the appropriateness of social media as a tool for spreading information about sustainability issues and found it to be an appropriate and impactful tool. Rettie et al. (2013) suggested that portraying sustainability within standard marketing messages may normalize concepts. Johnstone and Lindh (2017) found that social media influencers (i.e. individuals) impacted consumers’ sustainability awareness.

While research exploring sustainability-engagement has been conducted in academia, best practices for communicating brands’ sustainable values and actions through social media have yet to be formally researched. Furthermore, a lack of research exists involving the social media messaging practices of brands focused on sustainability compared to brands to which sustainability is a peripheral message in order to identify industry marketing best practices for optimal consumer engagement. Therefore, this study will explore consumer engagement with sustainability messaging via Instagram posts to identify best practices for sustainable fashion brands, sustainably aware fashion brands and traditional fashion brands.

Theoretical foundation

Researchers have highlighted the unique role and impact of the paid, owned and earned media (POEM) framework. As social media has emerged as a key channel of communication (Jackson and Deckers, 2013), POEM was selected as the ideal framework to guide this study. Paid media refers to media purchased by the company and includes advertising, such as promoted posts, social media banners and collaboration with influencers. Owned media belongs to and is controlled by the company, such as websites and social media accounts. Earned media refers to free media, publicity and user-generated content. In the realm of marketing, owned media has been found to be increasingly influential (Jackson and Deckers, 2013). Further, researchers have found that consumers trust created content on social media over paid social media advertisements (Coker et al., 2017). Therefore, this study specifically explores social media posts generated by brands as general posts for their followers – people who elect to see media created by the brand, rather than paid advertisements visible to non-followers.
Methodology
A mixed methods approach was used in this study (Shekhar et al., 2019). Thematic, qualitative, content analysis was used to analyze the visual content of social media post (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Additionally, quantitative analysis was utilized to interpret consumer engagement through Likes and Comments across post types, brands and brand groups. This method is supported for social network analysis by Stieglitz et al. (2018) who identified three critical areas of social media analysis including the identification of trend or topic, the sentiment and statistical analysis. Therefore, this study was conducted in three phases.

In Phase 1, two coders qualitatively evaluated content of Instagram posts across the three groups of brands (i.e. sustainable fashion brands, sustainably aware fashion brands and traditional fashion brands) to identify central themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In Phase 2, an instrument was developed to measure and compare consumer engagement across brand types and social media message types. This included Like-ratio which is discussed at length in the “Phase 2” section below. In Phase 3, qualitative and quantitative findings were triangulated for aggregated results (Jick, 1979; Carter et al., 2014).

Data source and data selection
Fashion brands were purposefully selected to represent diverse sustainability interests. Brands were categorized into three groups: sustainable fashion brands, sustainably aware fashion brands and traditional fashion brands. Sustainable fashion brands (SFB) were defined as brands founded based on one or more sustainable principle. Sustainably aware fashion brands (SAB) were defined as brands that did not originate from sustainable principles but have made a public sustainability effort. Traditional fashion brands (TFB) were defined as brands that have not identified sustainability as a public initiative. Posts were analyzed over a 3-week period in the beginning of November 2018. This timeframe was selected to capture high post frequency and consumer engagement leading into the holiday season.

Twenty-five fashion brands were sought through news articles, magazine and blog posts, global ranking of top retailers and independent company websites (Deloitte and Stores Magazine, 2017). For inclusion in the study, a strong social media presence of at least 50,000 followers and verified Instagram account, demonstrating a confirmed account of a public figure, celebrity or global brand, was required.

An initial list of brands in equal quantity by brand type was created. Then, a review of Instagram posts was conducted to reduce the number of total brands while maintaining similar quantity of total Instagram posts by each brand group. Due to varying frequency of posts by brand group, during the group reduction phase, more brands were retained in the SFB and SAB groups than in the TFB group. However, this allotted a comparable number of total posts across groups for both qualitative and quantitative analysis. The review of brands resulted in a total of ten sustainable fashion brands, nine sustainably aware brands and six traditional fashion brands (Table 1). Followers ranged from 57,000 to 80,000,000 within each brand group. During the identification of brands, specifically within the SFB group, many brands had more than 50,000 followers and numerous magazine and blog reviews; however, they did not have a verified status and therefore were excluded from the study.

Phase 1: Thematic content analysis
In the first phase of analysis, thematic content analysis of the 25 brand’s Instagram posts was performed. Content analysis allowed researchers to describe and analyze the content of written, spoken and pictorial communication in a methodical, impartial and measurable manner (Vogt, 1999; Neuendorf, 2002; Braun and Clarke, 2006). Each coder reviewed and
recorded themes from posts within each of the three groups: SFB, SAB and TFB. All posts and themes were then validated by the second coder. This development of themes through content analysis is referenced in the study as “thematic data.”

### Table 1.
Sustainable Brands (group one), Sustainably Aware Brands (group two) and Traditional Brands (group three) along with Instagram Handle and number of approximate followers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand</th>
<th>Instagram Handle</th>
<th>Followers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group 1: Sustainable fashion brands</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Stella McCartney</td>
<td>stellamccartney</td>
<td>5,200,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Patagonia</td>
<td>patagonia</td>
<td>3,600,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Reformation</td>
<td>reformation</td>
<td>1,100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Everlane</td>
<td>everlane</td>
<td>557,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. ThredUp</td>
<td>thredup</td>
<td>254,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. All Birds</td>
<td>allbirds</td>
<td>207,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Edun</td>
<td>edun</td>
<td>77,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Tome</td>
<td>tomenyc</td>
<td>64,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Eileen Fisher</td>
<td>eileenfisherny</td>
<td>59300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. A Day</td>
<td>thisisaday</td>
<td>57100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total SFB followers</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>11,176,100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Group 2: Sustainably aware brands** |                                   |             |
| 1. H&M                         | h&m                               | 27,000,000  |
| 2. Mango                       | mango                             | 9,000,000   |
| 3. Levi’s                      | levis                             | 4,400,000   |
| 4. Alo Yoga                    | aloyogo                           | 1,600,000   |
| 5. Re/Done                     | shopredone                        | 311,600     |
| 6. ASOS Marketplace            | asosmarketplace                   | 264,000     |
| 7. Rachel Comey                | rachelcomey                       | 170,000     |
| 8. Kering                      | kering_official                   | 66,700      |
| **Total SAB followers**        |                                   | 42,811,700  |

| **Group 3: Traditional fashion brands (control group)** |                                   |             |
| 1. Forever 21, Inc.            | forever21                         | 15,300,000  |
| 2. Chanel                      | chanelofficial                    | 25,300,000  |
| 3. Alexander McQueen           | alexandermcqueen                  | 6,500,000   |
| 4. Free People                 | freepeple                         | 3,400,000   |
| 5. Teva                        | teva                              | 266,000     |
| 6. Converse                    | converse                          | 8,200,000   |
| **Total TFB followers**        |                                   | 58,966,000  |
| **Grand total followers**      |                                   | 112,953,800 |

Phase 2: Consumer engagement through Likes and Comments

Quantity of Likes and Comments were recorded for each post. Thematic data were quantitatively analyzed for frequency of themes and follower engagement. Followers were considered to be representative of each brand’s current and sought consumer base. Follower engagement was analyzed as a ratio of responses, in which Likes ($L$) and Comments ($C$) for a single post were measured as a portion of total Likes or Comments for all of the Brand’s (or Group’s) posts. The quantity of individual post Likes was taken as a ratio of total Likes to interpret the relative engagement in relation to theme frequency across brand groups. Comments were likewise rationed. These engagement proportions are henceforth referred to as Like-ratio and Comment-ratio. In this study, Likes and Comments were analyzed separately and engagement via Likes was emphasized for two reasons: (1) due to the larger and more interpretable figures and (2) because Comment responses were skewed due to taglines such as “Comment for a chance to win”.

By comparing engagement as a portion of Likes, each post’s reach could be evaluated in a manner that allowed comparison of engagement by theme. Additionally, to interpret highest potential engagement, maximum response rates for single posts were analyzed. Maximum response rates referred to the highest amount of Likes on an individual post. For each brand group, total posts, Likes sums, Likes means, standard deviation, maximum response rate, and the Likes-ratio were calculated and analyzed. Further, engagement by format was recorded as a portion of total for each group to identify similarities and differences across groups.

Brand-level analysis. Total consumer engagement across brands were compared. Likes as a portion of total followers were analyzed in this phase of the study. This was referred to as follower response. This allowed researchers to address which theme had the highest engagement for the brand or group as a portion of followers.

Phase 3: Triangulation

The final phase of the study included method triangulation of qualitative and quantitative results (Jick, 1979; Carter et al., 2014). The qualitative coding and quantitative insights were combined and examined to understand when individuals were most engaged with SFB, SAB and TBF. In addition, by combining qualitative and quantitative insights, additional insights regarding post frequency and post formats (i.e. video, photo) were identified.

Findings

Sample results

Across the three brand groups, 772 total posts were analyzed consisting of 239 posts from SFB (31%), 195 from SAB (25%) and 336 posts from TFB (44%). SFB posted on average 1.14 times per day, SAB posted an average of 1.16 times per day and TFB posted an average of 2.29 times per day (Table 2). On average, each post received 38,573 Likes. SFB averaged 10,302 Likes per post. SAB averaged 51,903 Likes per post and TFB averaged 51,673 Likes per post.

Emergent themes

Nineteen themes including Sustainability, Philanthropy, Social Awareness, Fashion, Lifestyle, Current Events, General Branding, Promotion/Sale, Celebrity, Meme, Art/Creative, Animals, Food and Beauty emerged from thematic content analysis (Table 2).

Sustainability. Eight original themes emerged in the realm of sustainability. These included General Sustainability, Social Sustainability, Environmental Sustainability, Philanthropy, Social Awareness and Current Events. A brief description of each theme is outlined in Table 2.
Lifestyle. Eleven lifestyle related themes emerged. These included Fashion, Lifestyle, Celebrity, Meme, General Branding, Promotion/Sale, Art/Creative, Animal, Beauty and Food (Table 2). Art/Creative, Animal, Beauty and Food emerged but had minimal results and were therefore excluded from the analysis.

**Group 1: Sustainable fashion brands (SFB)**

**Frequent themes.** Fashion was the most prevalent theme for SFB with 138 posts, 2.5-times as many posts as any other theme (Table 3). The next most frequent theme was Lifestyle with 53 posts. Promotion/Sale and Environmental Sustainability were the third and fourth most common themes with 39 and 31 posts respectively.

**Engaging themes.** Comprehensive results for SFB showed the highest engagement came from posts regarding Lifestyle. This theme was present in 53 post, less than 40% as often as Fashion posts, but had a higher response rate and portion of Likes. Lifestyle had a 42.3% Like-ratio in contrast to Fashion, which had a 19.1% Like-ratio. Similarly, while Promotion/Sale was the third most frequent theme, it ranked fourth in engagement based on both Like-ratio and portion of Likes. Environmental Sustainability had higher engagement receiving 15.9% of Likes.

**Single post engagement.** The maximum Like-ratio was 52.2% originating from a video post from EDUN regarding Social Sustainability and Environmental Sustainability. It received 4,821 Likes out of 9,230 Likes for the brand in total. The highest ranked post in terms of quantity of Likes was also a video, posted by Patagonia and received 184,467 Likes. This was a follower response (L) of 21.3% for the brand. The post was themed Social Sustainability and Lifestyle.

The post with the maximum Comment-ratio was also the post the highest quantity of Comments for SFB. The post came from an Eileen Fisher and was promoting a sale (Promotion/Sale). It received 2,265 Comments which received was a 75.5% Comment-ratio and 15% of SFB total Comments.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>a</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>c</th>
<th>d</th>
<th>e</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>h</th>
<th>i</th>
<th>j</th>
<th>k</th>
<th>l</th>
<th>m</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>o</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>SFB total</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total posts</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likes sum</td>
<td>136,007</td>
<td>386,046</td>
<td>190,110</td>
<td>186,702</td>
<td>53,809</td>
<td>1,001,373</td>
<td>253,672</td>
<td>265,622</td>
<td>61,425</td>
<td>51,115</td>
<td>65,594</td>
<td>11,738</td>
<td>6,196</td>
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<tr>
<td>Likes mean</td>
<td>527</td>
<td>1,615</td>
<td>795</td>
<td>781</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>4,190</td>
<td>10,693</td>
<td>17,157</td>
<td>4,573</td>
<td>6,215</td>
<td>2,148</td>
<td>1,991</td>
<td>1,626</td>
<td>536</td>
<td>401</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follower resp. (L)</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
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<td>0.3%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like-ratio</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>41.2%</td>
<td>47.8%</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>25.7%</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>26%</td>
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<td><strong>SAB total</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Total posts</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likes sum</td>
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<td>234,691</td>
<td>1,237</td>
<td>54,991</td>
<td>2,369</td>
<td>862,639</td>
<td>556,273</td>
<td>615,719</td>
<td>171,225</td>
<td>4,273,064</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>92,940</td>
<td>45,659</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likes mean</td>
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<td>82</td>
<td>1,311</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>48,506</td>
<td>34,401</td>
<td>957</td>
<td>1,502</td>
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<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
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<td>232</td>
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<tr>
<td>Follower resp. (L)</td>
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<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like-ratio</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>95.1%</td>
<td>61.0%</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
<td>46.8%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
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<td>0.0%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
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<td><strong>TFB total</strong></td>
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<td>Total posts</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>67</td>
<td>43</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>11</td>
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<td>Likes sum</td>
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<td>41,547</td>
<td>250,719</td>
<td>42,269</td>
<td>64,226</td>
<td>11,200,618</td>
<td>33,947,709</td>
<td>2,802,406</td>
<td>1,700,032</td>
<td>1,816,913</td>
<td>2,284,905</td>
<td>677,369</td>
<td>259,415</td>
<td>900,183</td>
<td>450,954</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likes mean</td>
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<td>132</td>
<td>996</td>
<td>598</td>
<td>3,982</td>
<td>534</td>
<td>273,961</td>
<td>46,131</td>
<td>120,581</td>
<td>15,882</td>
<td>43,445</td>
<td>15,688</td>
<td>15,482</td>
<td>1,601</td>
<td>32,225</td>
<td>4,576</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follower resp. (L)</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like-ratio</td>
<td>0.81%</td>
<td>0.06%</td>
<td>0.25%</td>
<td>1.53%</td>
<td>0.14%</td>
<td>0.39%</td>
<td>72.16%</td>
<td>20.72%</td>
<td>17.11%</td>
<td>10.43%</td>
<td>11.09%</td>
<td>4.26%</td>
<td>1.58%</td>
<td>0.75%</td>
<td>30.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note(s):** Letters a – p represent the emergent themes as follows: (a) General Sustainability, (b) Environmental Sustainability, (c) Social Sustainability, (d) Philanthropy, (e) Social Awareness, (f) Current Events, (g) Fashion, (h) Lifestyle, (i) General Branding, (j) Promotion / Sale, (k) Celebrity, (l) Meme, (m) Art / Creative, (n) Food, (o) Beauty, and (p) Animals. Portion of Likes (B) refers to the portion of likes out of total likes for the brand, whereas Portion of Likes (T) refers to the total portion of likes that theme garnered out of all likes for the group (SFB). Portion of Likes percentages may not add up to 100% because each post may have more than 1 theme, but each like was counted only once.
Brand-level results. Brand level results were measured through follower response. The SFBs with the highest engagement in Likes and Comments were Eileen Fisher and Reformation. Eileen Fisher had an average of 2.0% follower response (L) to posts and Reformation had an average 1.7% follower response (L). Both brands focused on Fashion and Lifestyle with infrequent posts regarding sustainability.

Group 2: Sustainably aware brands (SAB)
The average Like-ratio for sustainably aware brands was 4.1% with a maximum Like-ratio of 30.7% of Likes for a single post. While average response rate for SAB is comparable to SFB, the maximum response rate is significantly lower. SFB’s maximum Like-ratio was 40% higher than SABs.

Frequent themes. The highest frequency of posts was in the Fashion and General Branding with 163 and 71 posts respectively. Posts were typically consolidated around five themes including: Fashion, General Branding, Lifestyle, Social Sustainability and Promotion/Sale.

Engaging themes. The highest engagement in SAB came from the most common themes of Fashion and General Branding with response rates (L) of 95.1% and 65.8% respectively. Lifestyle was also a very engaging theme with a Like-ratio of 18.1%.

Single post engagement. The post with the most Likes overall was a video post from H&M themed Fashion and General Branding. It received 454,590 Likes which was a 5.4% Like-ratio for the brand. The post with the highest response (L) for SAB brands was a photo post from Rachel Comey themed Fashion, General Branding and Celebrity and included a photo of Michelle Obama. It received a Like-ratio of 30.7% for the brand which equated to 7,724 Likes.

The post with the most Comments was a photo from H&M themed General Branding and Fashion which received 723 Comments, a 5.6% Comment-ratio. The highest Comment-ratio came from a Re/Done post regarding Fashion and Lifestyle which obtained 3,016 Comments equating a 13.2% Comment-ratio for the brand.

Brand-level results. At the brand level within SAB, there was diversity across themes. Examining SAB Likes as a portion of brand followers to identify which brands were able to most engage their consumers, Alo Yoga and Re/Done had the highest rates of engagement as a percent of their followers.

Alo Yoga’s had an average 1.0% follower response (L) with a maximum of 1.9% follower response (L) to a single post. Followers were highly engaged in posts regarding Fashion, Lifestyle and Social Sustainability. Follower response ranged from 1.4% to 1.9% per post. Re/Done had an average of 0.9% follower response (L) with a maximum of 3.1% follower response (L) for a single post. All Re/Done posts were primarily themed Fashion.

Group 3: Traditional fashion brands (TFB)
The average Like-ratio for TFB was 1.8% with a maximum Like-ratio of 16.3% for a single post. Average and maximum Like-ratio for TFB was significantly lower than that of SFB or SAB. However, the quantity of Likes from TFB are higher with 16,380,251 total Likes verse 9,809,721 SAB Likes and 2,431,60 total SFB Likes.

Frequent themes. Fashion was the most posted theme with 241 posts followed by Lifestyle with 60 posts. All eight sustainability themes were posted least frequently with only Philanthropy (6 posts) and Social Awareness (3 posts) having three or more posts.

Engaging themes. TFBs had an overall average Like-ratio of 1.8% which was lower than the average response rate of SFB and SAB. The most engaging themes coincided with the most frequently posted themes and included Fashion, and Lifestyle with response rates (L) of 68.2% and 19.5% respectively. The next most frequently posted themes, such as General Branding and Meme received consistent engagement through Like-ratio (Table 3).
Single post engagement. The maximum Like-ratio for a single TFB post was 16.3% which was lower than posts from SFB and SAB. This maximum brand engagement came from a Teva photo post themed Lifestyle. It received 9,660 Likes. The highest quantity of Likes came from a Forever 21 text-embedded video post themed Meme which received 610,158 Likes. This was a video clip from the pop culture movie, Mean Girls. The same two brands received the maximum response rates (C). The maximum Comment-ratio for a single TFB post was 74.6% for a Teva photo post themed Fashion which received 4,590 Comments. This was a post with a “Comment for a chance to win” tagline. The highest quantity of Comments was for a Forever 21 post themed Lifestyle, Meme and Celebrity which received 127,038 Comments. This Forever 21 post was also a pop culture movie reference, Sex and the City.

Brand-level results. The TFBs with the highest follower engagement were Converse and Alexander McQueen. On average, Converse received a 1.1% follower response (L) to posts with a maximum of 2.5% follower response (L) for a single post. Most posts for the brand regarded Fashion. The brand had minimal posts regarding sustainability, but performance of these posts was strong with an average 1.4% follower response (L).

Alexander McQueen had an average of 0.9% follower response (L) with a maximum of 2.6% follower response (L) for a single post. Most frequent posts themes were Fashion with occasional Art/Creative content. No posts referenced sustainability. The strongest performing posts were in video format, averaging a 1.2% follower response (L).

Free People had successful engagement with posts referencing general sustainability and social sustainability, particularly in reference to craft makers of their product. These posts had strong follower response averaging 0.7% (L) which was consistent with the 0.7% brand average. The posts had increased engagement through Comments with an average of 0.009% follower response (C) versus the brand average of 0.003% follower response (C).

Phase 3: Aggregate results

Consumer engagement. SFB had the highest average follower response (L) with an average of 4.2% and the highest maximum follower response (L) of 52.2% for a single post. Across the three groups, the average follower response (L) was 3.1% with a maximum follower rate (L) of 52.2% for a single post. The follower response (C) was also highest in SFB with an average of 4.2% and a maximum follower response (C) of 75.5% for a single post.

Sustainability. Following individual brand and group-level analysis, engagement in sustainable themed posts across the three brand groups were compared. It was found that General Sustainability posts engaged followers with TFB (average 1.0% follower response (L)) but not through SFB and SAB. SFB and SAB had some of their lowest overall engagement through General Sustainability posts (averaging 0.6% follower response (L) each) but where highly engaged with Environmental Sustainability (3.0% and 0.8% follower Like-ratio) and Social Sustainability (2.0% and 0.9% follower response (L)) posts. Follower response (L) comparison by group can be viewed graphically in Figure 1.

Environmental sustainability was the most engaging sustainability topic for SFB with high frequency and engagement (Table 3). SFBs posted 31 total posts regarding environmental sustainability in contrast to 20 posts regarding other sustainability topics. Further, the group had consistent follower engagement averaging 3.0% follower response (L) with a maximum of 23.9% for a single post. While consumers across groups responded (L) to photos of “cute” animals, photos posted by SFBs of animals related to sustainability (garment production, wool, anti-animal cruelty) had low response rates (L) (C). Followers were more engaged (L) with sustainability messages in video and text-embedded video formats than in photo format, however, they were more likely to share sustainable photos with friends through Comments than they were videos.
Social sustainability was the most engaging sustainability topic for SAB with high frequency and engagement. SAB posted 24 total posts regarding social sustainability in contrast to 16 posts regarding other sustainability topics. Further, the group had consistent follower engagement averaging 0.9% follower response ($L$) with a maximum of 2.4% for a single post. Across SAB, followers responded to sustainable messages most when they were combined with fashion or lifestyle content or had a personal element.

**Format.** Six formats were presented during the analysis of brand's Instagram posts including photo, multiple photo, video, text, text-embedded photo and text-embedded video. Multiple photo referred to a single post that has more than one photo, text-embedded photos referred to photos with text written over the image and text-embedded videos refer to videos that have written text within the video content. In all groups, photo and video had the highest average Like-ratio (Table 4). The maximum Like-ratio posts were also typically videos. Overall, videos had a 2.4% follower response ($L$). Followers were more likely to Comment on photos, text and text-embedded photos. Variation in format engagement was minimal across SFB, SAB and TFB.

![Figure 1. Average follower response ($L$) per theme across groups](image)

### Table 4. Engagement by post format

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Format</th>
<th>Likes</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SFB</td>
<td>SAB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photo</td>
<td>56.5%</td>
<td>50.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photo multiple</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video</td>
<td>33.9%</td>
<td>45.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photo/text</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video/text</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note(s):** Measured in Like-ratio, each column equals approximately 100% of total Likes (any deviation from 100% is due to rounding)
Likes versus comments
Engagement through Likes were highest with photos, accounting for 56.3% of all Likes, and videos, accounting for 32.5% of Likes. Multiple photo format and text-embedded options had the lowest engagement via Likes. Comments engagement was much lower for video formats (9.6% of Comments) with followers engaging most with photo formats (Table 4). Single-photo posts accounted for the majority of Comments, with 71.7% of all Comments, but text-embedded photos had much higher rates of Comments (8.8% of Comments) than of Likes (3.6%).

Implications
In the following section, the research questions are addressed through posts made on Instagram, owned media, as a part of the POEM framework. Implications address consumer engagement with sustainability across various brand types. Additionally, insights for boosting social media engagement across message types are outline.

Engaging consumers with sustainability
Sustainable fashion brands with the highest follower engagement did not directly claim “sustainability” within their posts. This finding built upon the research of Amel et al. (2009), who found only partial support between “acting and awareness” regarding sustainability. In the present study, separation existed between sustainable aware individuals and sustainable post engagement. Therefore, when comparing across fashion and sustainability, our results are in contrast to those of Jin and Rye (2019a), who found significant interactions between social identification and fashion involvement, presenting an opportunity for further research.

It is possible that followers of sustainable brands are consciously aware of sustainability issues and by supporting such brands are demonstrating their activism, therefore eliminating the need for a persistent sustainability message via social media. In contrast, although there were significantly fewer posts regarding sustainability among the sustainably aware and traditional fashion brands, the responses to sustainability-themed posts were typically higher than the average response rate. It may be inferred that these consumers were less familiar with sustainability and/or were not expecting to see it from the brands; thereby finding the message more engaging.

Best practices. (1) Be unpredictable. Focus content according to brand type, engage consumers with content that is new, exciting and outside of their zone of familiarity. Include sustainable messaging if it is not within the brands normal messaging; if is within the brands normal messaging find a way to make it new and unique.

Align platform structure with consumer mentality
Followers were highly engaged with Fashion and Lifestyle themed posts from all groups. While extant research was not found that explored such themes, these findings align with those of Kim et al. (2020), who found that content types and brand intentions impacted follower e-WOM intentions. These findings consistently portray brand communication strategies impacting follower engagement. Furthermore, the present study found that followers engaged with General Branding messages when the message was consistent with the founding principles of the brand (i.e. SFB). Therefore, it may be interpreted that the response to General Branding messages on social media is specific to the brand–follower relationship, inherent in its authenticity.

Best practices. (1) Feel the consumers vibe, speak their language. On Instagram, keep posts aesthetically engaging and/or entertaining even when communicating a sustainable message. (2) Display authenticity. Branding messages should simulate an authentic conversation.
Boosting engagement

Across brand types, consumers were most engaged with single photo posts. Differences in engagement were also identified between Likes and Comments. The study found that Comments were low for video posts while Likes were high. Comparably, Likes were low for multiple photo posts, while Comments were comparably high. These were unique findings as extant literature has explored the role of Likes and Comments in boosting engagement (e.g. Jang et al., 2015; Li et al., 2018), as well image curation for increased responses (e.g. Bakhshi et al., 2014; Lindell, 2019), but no past studies were found that explored the post format in comparison to engagement.

The difference in engagement may be explained by followers’ intentions. Likes tended to reach existing consumers while Comments extended to new consumers (through @). While Likes are a positive and brief affirmation of approval, Comments engage for a longer period of time by creating a continued conversation, either positively or negatively. Therefore, brands may choose to evaluate the goals of a social media campaign to optimize engagement outcomes.

Best practices. (1) Brands should identify their engagement intentions (i.e. immediacy or extended conversation) and utilize formats that will engage consumers accordingly (i.e. Likes or Comments). (2) For maximum engagement with sustainable content, post a single photo or video. (3) Utilize video format to increase excitement regarding sustainable messages and when attempting to increase longevity of consumer engagement. (4) Regardless of brand type, photos should be presented as individual images, rather than numerous photos in a single post for maximum engagement.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore consumer engagement with sustainability and sustainable fashion brands on Instagram. This study identified emergent, engaging themes of sustainable fashion brands as well as specific formats for general and sustainable messages to engage followers. In short, while it was found that different strategies may be taken regarding social media strategy for SFB, SAB or TFB, followers on Instagram are looking for exciting and aesthetically pleasing posts. Specifically, all followers were engaged with posts about Fashion and Lifestyle, and unfamiliar or atypical content. Sustainability was highly engaging to a consumer unfamiliar with the topic or how it applied to the brand, while consumers familiar with a brands sustainable message engaged through new exciting information or when it was presented in a unique manner.

The findings of this study may be useful to academicians, industry professionals, sustainable fashion brands and brands interested in sustainable initiatives. This study may benefit sustainable fashion brands by showcasing consumer engagement “best practices” and provide academicians with a baseline for measuring fashion sustainability social media engagement on a broader scale. This study provides further insights on how follower engagement with sustainable fashion brands varies from traditional fashion brands.

Future research opportunities exist to continue exploring best practices regarding sustainability. In this study, most of the analysis focused on Likes due to potential skewed responses by Comments, such as “Comment for a chance to win!”; therefore, differences between engagement through Likes and Comments may be explored in future studies. Best practices across other social media channels may also be identified for comparison. Of particular interest is the comparison of Instagram, a visual social media platform, with a verbally engaging platform such as Twitter.

This was a general fashion study, considering any retailer within apparel, footwear or fashion accessories, therefore the opportunity exists to explore specific sectors of the fashion industry. Further, as technology continues to advance, and consumer preferences continue to
evolve, it will be necessary for researchers and business professionals to continually revisit engagement preferences of consumers and adjust practices accordingly.

Originality
This study analyzed a cross-section of global fashion brands and identified “best practices” for follower engagement with sustainable messages through Instagram. The findings of this study provide original value, specifically in the area of sustainable fashion marketing via social media.

References


Further reading


About the authors

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