

Luxury and fast fashion brands' sustainability journey: Two paths, one goal?

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Introduction

Sustainability has become a significant trend in the fashion industry, and as a result, many fashion brands are now promoting their sustainability initiatives through green advertising strategies. While two representatives of fashion markets—luxury and fast fashion—have been trying to embrace sustainability, they have distinct differences in their approach to pursuing sustainability and in the way they highlight it in their advertising. This research seeks to contribute to the literature by examining and comparing the green advertising strategies of luxury and fast fashion brands. The study aims to provide insight into the unique characteristics of each market and how they pursue sustainability in their own distinctive ways, while also respecting and acknowledging their individual approaches. By adopting text-mining analysis, this research will shed light on the similarities and differences in the marketing strategies used by luxury and fast fashion brands to highlight their sustainability initiatives, providing valuable information for researchers, fashion brands, and consumers.

Literature Review

Luxury fashion and fast fashion are two major markets in the fashion industry that have significant impacts on the environment. Fast fashion has been criticized for its detrimental effects on the environment, such as chemical production and waste. Meanwhile, luxury fashion has faced criticism for poor labour conditions and animal cruelty (Joy et al., 2012). However, as consumers are gaining more environmental sensibilities, both luxury and fast fashion brands have started to advertise their sustainable efforts as part of their marketing strategies (Teona et al., 2020). Brands are developing adequate communication strategies to convey their business approach to corporate social responsibility (CSR) values and sustainability. In this context, a company's website has become a critical communication tool for transmitting sustainability initiatives and corporate statements in a direct and visual way to consumers (SanMiguel et al., 2021). Therefore, studying how brands transmit their sustainability messages through their website is important because it directly reaches consumers.

Construal level theory (CLT) explains how people perceive and interpret information based on its psychological distance. Trope and Liberman (2010) found that high-level construals (i.e., abstract thinking) were linked with more positive attitudes towards high-level brands, while low-level construals (i.e., concrete thinking) were linked with more positive attitudes toward low-level brands. Given the importance of a company's website as a critical communication tool

for conveying sustainability initiatives to consumers, it is crucial to investigate how fashion brands transmit their sustainability messages through their website, particularly in relation to the psychological distance of consumers, as explained by the CLT.

Methods

To examine sustainability efforts in the luxury and fast fashion sectors, four luxury brands, namely Chanel, Hermès, Dior, and Burberry, and four fast fashion brands, namely H&M, Mango, Zara, and C&A, were selected according to their global presence and relevance in the fashion industry (Statista, 2021; 2022). To assess the green advertisement, all the texts from each brand's official website, newsletter, and report were collected for the analysis. Then, a keyword analysis was employed to identify the sustainability characteristics in fashion brands. The text data underwent basic text processing, including tokenization, stop words removal, and lemmatization, to eliminate irrelevant words, symbols, or characters. Then, the resulting text documents were merged to form a corpus (i.e., the body of text used for further statistical analysis) (Feinerer et al., 2008). Python programming language (Version 3) was used for algorithm development and analysis.

Results & Discussion

TF-IDF is a natural language processing technique that is useful for extracting important keywords from a set of documents. The following keywords had high TF-IDF values for luxury brands: 'policy,' 'global,' 'supply-chain,' 'energy,' 'committee,' 'sustainability,' 'climate,' 'diversity,' 'employee,' 'renewable,' 'colleague,' 'inclusion,' and 'carbon.' In contrast, the following keywords had high TF-IDF values for fast fashion brands: 'sustainability,' 'cotton,' 'supply-chain,' 'water,' 'waste,' 'animal,' 'environment,' 'cradle-to-cradle,' 'collaboration,' 'goal,' 'organic,' 'global,' and 'textile.' Although luxury and fast fashion brands shared some top keywords, they differed in specific keywords. Some words existed independently in each field, highlighting the differences between them. Only luxury brands had keywords such as 'métiers,' 'luxury,' 'workshop,' 'exceptional,' and 'crafts,' which suggest high and professional quality and value. Crafts were linked with words such as craftsmen or craftsmanship, and métiers were related to art professions. Other keywords such as 'senior,' 'disability,' 'patient,' and 'slavery' ensured human rights, diversity, and inclusivity. Luxury brands tend to embrace diverse employees who are aged or have a disability by pursuing fair hiring practices. Slavery stands for Modern Slavery Act, which is an act to make provision about modern slavery, including cannabis farming or sexual exploitation. Additionally, 'volunteer' and 'charity' show consideration for others. Employees and foundations participated in diverse volunteering works, increased volunteering opportunities, and donated to charity. 'Trench-coat' was one of the representative items in luxury brands that could be repaired and made with a carbon-neutral process, extending its life. 'Crocodile' was linked with associations that tried to prevent animal cruelty and not use animal leather anymore. Finally, 'Scientist' and 'third-party' increased the credibility of sustainable movements by collaborating or partnering with scientists and third-party institutions. The keyword that had higher centrality compared to TF-IDF in luxury brands

was ‘colleague.’ Colleague represented one’s brand associates and highlighted the whole community, confirming the brand’s diversity, representation, and inclusion. In contrast, keywords that were specific to fast fashion brands, such as ‘cellulose,’ ‘lyocell,’ ‘linen,’ and ‘mohair,’ showed what eco-friendly textiles they used. Additionally, ‘shirt,’ ‘knitwear,’ ‘trouser,’ ‘footwear,’ and ‘outwear’ were main items that were regarded as cradle-to-cradle and sustainable products, or could be recycled. ‘Pesticide’ showed how they used bio-cotton or lyocell that requires little to no pesticides, preserving the soil. ‘Canopy’ and ‘non-profit’ are linked with an organization that is dedicated to protecting the world’s forests, climate, and species. Finally, fast fashion brands tried to extend the clothing’s life-cycle and make it durable by preventing the ‘color’ fade. ‘Carbon’ was the keyword that had higher centrality compared to TF-IDF, which was linked to diverse words such as decarbonization, zero-carbon future, and carbon offset, suggesting climate protection.

In conclusion, the luxury brands focused more on the broader values of people, diversity, inclusion, and professionalism, while fast fashion brands were more concerned with narrower topics like specific textiles, products, and materials. This finding can be related to the construal level theory; it is more efficient to link abstract messages with brands that have bigger psychological distance like luxury brands and concrete messages with brands with closer psychological distance, such as fast fashion brands. Overall, the study highlights the importance of considering sustainability practices in fashion brands and provides insight into the keywords that are frequently used in this context. Consumers can make informed choices based on the different approaches of luxury and fast fashion brands. It also provides insight for brands to improve their sustainability practices and communicate them to consumers.

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