



How to Inform Consumers About My Green Products?: Exploring Denim Brands' Strategies Communicating Sustainability Practices

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Background and Research Purpose. The fashion business is one of the most controversial fields with respect to sustainability. Under pressure, most fashion brands have announced sustainable initiatives (Liu et al., 2020) and use social media to communicate their efforts and engage consumers (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016). Yet, consumer adoption of “green” products remains relatively low (McNeill & Moore, 2015). Therefore, fashion brands need to engage consumers in sustainable consumption effectively. To assist these firms in creating successful social media marketing and communication strategies, it is crucial to examine how fashion brands use social media to promote their products and interact with customers.

Only a few studies examined the use of social media to depict sustainable fashion (Haque & Park-Poaps, 2019; Zhao et al., 2022). These studies focused on how fashion brands' sustainable identity and values are communicated through different colors in their visual posts (Zhao et al., 2022) and descriptions in textual posts (Milanesi et al., 2022). Extant research in the fashion domain has not explored what communication strategies fashion brands use to promote their sustainability initiatives. Therefore, this study will address the research gap by examining fashion brands' current communication approaches to convey sustainability-related actions.

Denim is one of the fashion items that have earned a consistent appeal among consumers. It is suitable for many occasions and loved by consumers of different demographics (Annappoorani, 2017). However, denim is one of the most significant contributors to environmental pollution among fashion goods. To address denim's environmental impact, brands are developing sustainable manufacturing processes to produce fabric and finish jeans. For example, Levi Strauss & Co. develops sustainable denim products by incorporating rain-fed cottoned hemp, waterless technology, and recycled materials. This study focuses on denim brands to examine how they communicate their sustainability-related efforts to consumers. Therefore, the **purpose of this study** was to explore communication strategies used by denim brands to engage and inform consumers about their sustainable initiatives using social media.

Communication Strategies. Research across various disciplines, including consumer marketing, tourism, psychology, and environmental science, has discussed different communication strategies with respect to sustainability. For example, Yan et al. (2012) found that using explicit information about eco-friendly apparel leads to stronger consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. In contrast, Lee et al. (2020) suggest that an implicit strategy is more successful. Furthermore, construal level theory, which considers psychological distances and levels of abstraction in messages, has been used to explain sustainability communication strategies across different disciplines (Trope & Liberman, 2003). Our study examines whether denim brands employ any of these strategies to communicate their sustainability efforts.

Method. Eight denim brands were selected for this study. We included three big brands with a large market share and prominent history (Levi's, Lee, and Wrangler) and five small, newer brands (Nudie Jeans, DL1961, Outland Denim, Triarchy, and Kayuchi). The five small denim brands were selected because they started their business focusing on sustainability. All eight brands are primarily known for their denim products and have active sustainability programs. Next, three social media platforms were selected for data collection (Instagram, Facebook, and X) because all eight brands have active accounts on all three platforms.

The data were collected over three months when all three official social media accounts for the eight brands were monitored daily for any posted content. In addition, all text-based content, which was posted on the 24 accounts (8 brands x 3 media accounts) and mentioned social or environmental aspects of sustainability, were collected. A total of 609 social media content posts were collected and used for data analysis. Each post was coded based on what communication strategies were used to create it.

Results. Our analysis identified seven patterns in sustainability communication strategies: abstract and concrete communication approaches, product and process-oriented information, benefit appeal, and explicit and implicit approaches. Big brands were more conservative in their sustainability-related communication on social media than small ones and used more process-oriented messaging for environmental issues. In contrast, small brands favored product-oriented information and abstract communication approaches. Additionally, big brands tended to use concrete information approaches more frequently than small brands (Table 1).

Table 1. *Communication strategies practiced by denim brands on social media*

Content	Denim Brands							
	Levi's	Lee	Wrangler	Nudie Jeans	DL1961	Outland Denim	Triarchy	Kuyichi
Followers	8M	497K	778k	247K	80.7K	57K	24K	17K
Total number of posts	117	93	69	63	72	63	84	48
Sustainability posts, %	23.1	2.1	0	38.1	29.2	41.3	81	60.4
Benefit appeal posts, %	81.50	100	0	66.60	61.50	88.50	86.70	93.10
Product-oriented posts, %	14.8	0	0	45.8	33	65.4	69.1	72.4
Process-oriented posts, %	67	100	0	20.8	28.5	23.1	17.6	20.7
Explicit approach%	83.48	100	0	91.30	80.95	84.61	88.23	86.20
Implicit approach%	16.52	0	0	8.70	19.05	15.39	11.77	13.8
Abstract posts, %	21.2	0	0	79.2	71.4	50%	75%	75.9
Concrete posts, %	78	100	0	20.8	28.5	34.6	25%	24.1

In **product-oriented messages**, brands primarily focus on product features such as “organic cotton” or “natural dyes.” In **process-oriented messages**, denim brands highlight how they incorporate sustainable processes in manufacturing denim products to achieve environmental benefits such as “waterless” technology. Along with **explicitly** highlighting sustainability initiatives, brands use **implicit communication**, focusing on the functional features of products and providing only subtle sustainability information instead of emphasizing it. Most of the posts by small brands provided **abstract** messages (a very general description of sustainability initiatives); however, Levi's focused on **concrete** messages (a detailed description specifying environmental impact using facts).

Small denim brands posted more about sustainability on social media than big brands. This could be because big brands are publicly traded companies with greater bureaucracy and a complex approval process for any public communications. Big brands used more concrete and process-oriented information, whereas small brands used more abstract and product-oriented information. This can be because big brands have more resources than small brands to collect factual information from their research and development teams.

Conclusions and Implications. This was the first study that examined fashion brands' current communication strategies to inform consumers about their sustainability initiatives. The results highlight different communication strategies used by the denim brands. It is unclear which communication approach is more effective, so further research is needed to develop a comprehensive framework for denim brands to guide their communication strategies. The findings are important for fashion companies to examine their communication strategies on social media to inform consumers about their efforts to reduce the industry's environmental footprint.

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