

## Sustainability Education: Exploring How Apparel Brands Teach Consumers

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The consciousness of consumers regarding the environmental impact of their consumption choices is increasing (Marko & Kusá, 2023). To cater to their consumers' needs, and to create their niche in the market, fashion brands have become conscious of sustainability as a pressing issue and started to acknowledge the social, and environmental impact of their offerings. Many fashion brands now have started to embed sustainable product lines, and still others have holistically embedded sustainability in their core business models. However, sustainability of apparel products is a credence attribute, that is, it is difficult to understand just by looking, if the product is made using responsible labor practices, or dyed with vegetable dye and so on (Mandarić et al., 2021). Thus, many consumers fail to partake in sustainable consumption owing to lack of knowledge and education about the importance of sustainable consumption, as well as information about brands' sustainable initiatives (Pereira et al., 2021). They are also often skeptical about brands' sustainability efforts and question the credibility of the same (Yu, J., 2020). Therefore, to inform and educate consumers about their sustainable initiatives, many fashion brands communicate their efforts through marketing/ advertising efforts.

Research indicates that education is the greatest factor contributing to consumer's attitudes towards pro-environmental consumption (Al-Nuaimi & Al-Ghamdi, 2022). It empowers people in their consumer role (McGregor, 2005) to understand both the long-term benefits of sustainable practices and the negative impacts of not adopting these changes (La Rosa & Johnson Jorgensen, 2021). Therefore, brands can leverage their marketing initiatives as a form of communication about sustainability to effect change, foster trust amongst consumers and support their sustainable business models (Mandarić et al., 2021). Nowadays, with increase in online shopping, many brands are informing and educating their consumers through their websites including sustainability reports, traceability metrics, and even showing how to care for the products in order to prolong their life span. Several brands like Everlane, Patagonia, Oliver Cabell, and Arket are meeting consumers' demands for transparency by sharing information on cost breakdowns and manufacturing processes. The online apparel retailer Everlane stands out from the fast fashion industry by devoting its marketing efforts to promoting transparency in its factories, besides sharing price details, and giving voice to their manufacturing workers (Kim et al., 2020). However, these are stand alone efforts and there is lack of systematic understanding of how brands can effectively communicate their sustainability efforts with consumers. Research indicates that educating consumers can be done via brands' marketing strategies that go beyond regular item promotion focus on providing knowledge about sustainable business practices (Mandarić et al., 2021). In addition, literature suggests that: "To identify the key factors that should be used by businesses for promotion and educating consumers, managers are looking towards academics." (Kumar et al., 2020 p.2). Given, there is limited research regarding what

actions brands have been taking to educate their consumers about sustainability efforts, the present study focuses on understanding how brands educate consumers about sustainable practices, including the key factors they focus on and the key strategies they use.

For the purpose of this exploratory study, a content analysis of fashion brands' websites was conducted (Devi Prasad, 2019). Fashion brands which are highly ranked for their sustainable initiatives were identified suitable for this study as the goal was to see how brands who undertake sustainable initiatives educate their consumers. Eight top fashion brands identified as "Great" (five) and "Good" were selected from Good on You list of ethical brands (<https://goodonyou.eco/>). In this light, all the eight brands selected from this list was privately held. They each had up to 50 employees and less than 15 years in operation. In order to increase generalizability of the data, four highest ranked publicly traded sustainable fashion companies were identified from the list compiled by Just Capital (Just Capital, 2023). These companies had more than 500 employees and over 15 years in business. This resulted in a total of nine brands' and three publicly traded corporations' websites. Both visual and textual information was analyzed using a codebook which enabled us to pinpoint and categorize strategies, certifications, and content types used by the brands to educate consumers about their commitment to sustainability.

Through this analysis, it was possible to gain valuable insights into the brands' efforts to inform and engage their customers, whether through informative articles, care instructions on product pages, traceability information, and/or other means. Based on the data, the study identified three major themes. First, there seemed to be a difference between how privately traded brands educate their consumers versus publicly traded brands. Based on analyses of brand websites, privately traded brands had sustainability as their core business policy and hence, all of their products are developed using some form of sustainable practices. Further, sustainability related information about each product was integrated into the product page, thereby making it easy to access for consumers. It is also possible to find dedicated sections on the websites about general sustainability, including information about materials, products, impact, people, planet, and the brands' actions to be sustainable. In addition, privately traded brands seemed to partner with third-party transparency platforms (such as Renoon). These independent platforms verify the information provided by the brands, making it possible to ensure authenticity for consumers. Through this partnership, consumers can be educated about where and how the products were made and their overall social and environmental impact. For example, one of the brands used the platform to provide a "mapped journey" of their products, including traceability of trims, components, manufacturing, and packaging. On each product page, customers can access information about the product's sustainable impacts such as, environmental impact of raw materials and eco-packaging, and, social impact related to ethical labor, as well as size inclusivity. Yet another brand used the platform as a way to show the garment's positive impact, providing information about raw materials, support of climate transition, ethical labor, and eco-packaging. In addition to sustainability impact on each product page and collaboration with a third-party transparency platform, these privately traded brands also provide transparency and sustainability reports that can be easily accessed from their website. Therefore, they made sustainability information accessible and available at multiple places on their website to allow consumers to access related information easily and holistically.

On the other hand, analyses of publicly traded brands' sustainability initiatives seemed to reveal they do not have sustainability as their core business focus. Instead, sustainability efforts were implemented in isolated line(s) of products. For those brands, the information about sustainability efforts such as climate actions, human rights, and environmental impacts were in separate sections or pages instead of being embedded on each product page. None of these brands had partnerships with any transparency platforms, making it difficult to verify the authenticity of their sustainability efforts. Only one publicly traded company provided reports on their sustainability progress over the years, along with their future goals. Additionally, these companies offered numerous articles related to sustainability, thus providing a resource for consumers. Some brands also had a Sustainability Governance program in place.

Therefore, brands, both privately held and publicly held, employed several strategies to educate consumers about their sustainable practices, primarily through their websites. Nowadays, brands use their online presence to provide transparency and in-depth information on various sustainability matters such as reducing environmental impact, social responsibility, creating sustainable products, and promoting sustainable innovation. Thus, by sharing this valuable information on their websites, brands enable consumers to make informed decisions, thus supporting a more sustainable and eco-friendly future.

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