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# Co-creating sustainability: transformative power of the brand

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## ABSTRACT

We explore marketing activity at the micro level as it contributes to the co-creation of sustainability and leads to transformational shifts towards sustainable futures. Utilising a value co-creation lens our study implements a novel four phase case research process. Three sustainable fashion brands are analysed via brand-generated content on their Instagram accounts, through interviews with thirty self-confessed brand enthusiasts and using consumer focus groups. Analysis provides insights into how sustainability is co-created between brands and consumers demonstrating that marketing and brands have the power to harness sustainability and instigate change. The paper contributes an innovative 'Co-creating sustainable futures' framework providing a platform to implement marketing activity and future research by marketing/brand managers and researchers committed to sustainability and initiating transformation towards sustainable futures.

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## Introduction

The current social, cultural, and environmental landscape is characterised by challenges that extend from climate change, poverty, poor working conditions, social diversity, and sustainability to pandemics. Market systems, traditionally held accountable for perpetuating such problems, are increasingly called on to action social goals that provide solutions to problems that remain seemingly unsolvable (Swaminathan et al., 2020). There have been urgent appeals for transformation in business and society that promote sustainable futures, though it is not always clear how such transformation might be facilitated (Moore & Milkoreit, 2020). What we do know is that business practices around production within the market system are often not sustainable, and current levels of consumption are untenable.

One industry often accused of being unsustainable is fashion, due to both production and consumption issues (Todeschini et al., 2017), such as use of fabrics from non-renewable resources, driving impulse buying and encouraging frequent consumption through the 'marketing of acceleration and proliferation of "newness"' (Pucker, 2022, p. 1), and fast fashion greenwashing (Chan, 2022). Despite this poor record, sustainable fashion

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(SF) is emerging as a remedy for the harms of the fashion industry (Bly et al., 2015; Boström & Micheletti, 2016; Park & Lin, 2020). An emphasis on responsible production and consumption speaks to UN Sustainable Development Goal 12 (SDG12), requiring transformational shifts towards sustainable production and consumption patterns (Palakshappa & Dodds, 2020).

Organisations have been increasingly visible in articulating a stance on issues relating to grand challenges such as sustainability (Lahtinen & Närvänen, 2020). More recently, marketing has been highlighted as having the potential to forge greater levels of sustainability (Lim, 2016; White et al., 2019). Among other marketing practices, purpose-driven brand management can be considered in terms of its potential to catalyse real change (Swaminathan et al., 2020). Our paper answers a call to explore the power of brands to create a more sustainable future and respond to grand challenges of our time such as sustainability (Davies et al., 2020). In doing so we reflect the growing need for marketing to consider managerial implications of the 'micro' within a holistic focus on the 'macro' relationships between marketing and the wider environment within which it functions (McDonagh & Prothero, 2014).

Creating real transformation requires a multi-level perspective that addresses the ways in which brand marketing shapes and is in turn shaped by society. We adopt the definition of brand transformation by Spry et al. (2021, p. 532) 'as a dynamic capability deployed by firms as a pro social process to facilitate stakeholder co-created brand meaning that draws on hybrid market and social logics'. Inherent in such an approach is a focus that connects how micro-level marketing, for instance, value co-creation (VCC) at the brand level, might be used to propel change at a macro level. Marketing practices that embed sustainability into the broader ecosystem of an organisation and its core purpose provide a strong foundation for change, offering a bridge between macro and micro marketing interventions (Spry et al., 2021; Wajid et al., 2019).

There is growing awareness that consumers and brands are deeply intertwined in a global hyper-connected world (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2016) as consumers increasingly consider the impact of their consumption (Iglesias & Ind, 2020). With the increase of social media platforms, the locus of control has altered between the brand and the consumer – indicative of a more co-created approach to brand engagement (France et al., 2015). Though VCC is well established in the literature as a useful tool to create value for and with customers (Saarijärvi et al., 2013), few studies reveal how VCC can be harnessed for good by brands in the context of promoting broader macro-level changes such as sustainability (Palakshappa & Dodds, 2020; Vargo, 2021).

The purpose of this research is to explore how VCC between sustainable brands and consumers at the micro level contributes to the co-creation of sustainability and leads to transformational shifts towards sustainable futures at the macro level. Specifically, we investigate how consumers and sustainable fashion brands co-create value through marketing practices and activities. We study Instagram accounts to understand how consumers interpret brand messaging around sustainability and identify with brand values. Instagram is used to highlight what Swaminathan et al. (2020) refer to as a 'blurring' and 'broadening' of branding boundaries in relation to non-traditional marketing activity associated with brands, how they create value for and with stakeholders, and ultimately how brands can be managed for societal 'good'. The growing sector of sustainable fashion is focused on ensuring sustainable futures and the highly visual nature

of marketing communication in fashion lends itself to the study of Instagram messaging and VCC. It is in this sense that brands integrate the views of brand, consumer, and society.

We make an important contribution by developing a framework that draws together VCC and sustainability, to show how sustainability is co-created. Our paper answers calls for research to understand ‘sustainable value co-creation’ and organisational activities and practices of ‘conscientious’ brands that can create benefits for multiple stakeholders from a social, environmental and economic perspective (Apostolidis et al., 2021; Iglesias & Ind, 2020). In doing so, we provide empirical evidence of the power that both brands and consumers have for co-creating sustainable futures. Importantly, we shed light on how brands have the power to instigate change towards sustainability through their purpose-driven stance and consequent marketing practices on digital platforms. The paper is structured as follows. We begin by discussing literature on sustainability, sustainable consumption and VCC. The sustainable fashion context is introduced, and our methodology is outlined. Research findings form the basis of our discussion and the ‘Co-creating sustainable futures framework’. We conclude with managerial implications and avenues for future research.

## **Sustainability and sustainable consumption**

Attention to ‘sustainability’ arguably covers the ‘triple bottom line’ with care for people, planet and prosperity (Elkington, 1997; Lelieveld, 2012). Although the term sustainability is complex (B. Barone et al., 2020), it is often encapsulated in three key aspects – environmental (preservation of natural resources), social (improving living conditions and promoting equal opportunities), and economic (economic viability that ensures wellbeing for people and planet) (Hanss & Böhm, 2012). Broader definitions of sustainability per se are context specific and embedded in diverse disciplinary lenses. Such definitional diversity is often problematic when large-scale sustainability issues require holistic solutions. From an organisational perspective, sustainability considerations extend from production to consumption, through to how an organisation’s sustainability marketing efforts are communicated to stakeholders, including consumers.

There is a need for marketing to move towards an orientation that ‘drives markets for sustainable products and services and builds sustainable societies’ (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2021, p. 150) forming realistic holistic solutions to sustainability issues (Thomas, 2018). Sustainability marketing is a growing field of study that still requires research to understand the nuances of what constitutes sustainable marketing practices and management (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019). Lunde (2018, p. 10) offers a definition that resonates with acknowledged articulations of marketing:

Sustainab[ility] marketing is the strategic creation, communication, delivery, and exchange of offerings that produce value through consumption behaviours, business practices, and the marketplace, while lowering harm to the environment and ethically and equitably increasing the quality of life and well-being of consumers and global stakeholders, presently and for future generations.

Central to Lunde’s definition is that sustainability marketing involves an exchange of value between stakeholders that ensures protection of the environment for

existing and future generations, thereby forging a positive connection between marketing and sustainability. How sustainability marketing has been conceptualised continues to demonstrate differences in views of sustainability and the consequent role that marketing plays (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019). Within the marketing literature there is a continued focus on a compartmentalised and differentiation-driven search for attributes that encourage sustainable consumption. While this style of research predominates, there has been little progress in encouraging a positive trajectory in our understanding of marketing, consumer behaviour and sustainability (Davies et al., 2020). Our stance indicates the importance of moving away from compartmentalised individual responsibility for sustainability to a shared and collective response. Dolan (2002) mooted the significance of understanding sustainable consumption for ensuring sustainable development – this early call for macromarketing input into consumption is still being teased out in the literature. Knowledge gaps remain regarding the interplay between attitudes, values and behaviour and their power to initiate collective societal action with regard to sustainability (Varey, 2010).

Essentially, the ability to lead change through consumption creates a new form of social action. Good consumption is an enabler in consumer-driven participatory action designed to solve the unsolvable (Adams & Raisborough, 2010). Consumers are increasingly aware of the negative impact that production and consumption have, influencing their decision-making towards responsible consumption (Ingenbleek et al., 2015). An important facet of understanding how consumers can make a difference is recognising that the dominant frame of marketing thought has to expand – a holistic view needs to be adopted (i.e. consider how companies, governments and non-government organisations can strengthen consumers' responsible consumption) to solve the current problems that are faced in order to harness the transformative capacity of consumers to create a more sustainable society (Davies et al., 2020; Ingenbleek et al., 2015). Such a view represents an articulation of sustainable consumption that examines the necessary connection between individual consumption and macro understanding of aggregated consumption (Schaefer & Crane, 2005).

A traditional individual-level focus in itself is not sufficient to create broad societal shifts – research indicates that marketing and policy efforts are needed to influence consumers' sense of responsibility (Luchs et al., 2015). What is required is a holistic lens that takes into account how value is created among key stakeholders, particularly those operating in the consumer and market spaces (Palazzo & Basu, 2007). In short, the greater synergy offered by a holistic approach offers greater possibility for real transformation (Thomas, 2018).

Significantly, any move towards sustainable transformation will need to consider how such change reconnects and re-creates the meanings of relationships between people, and between people and the ecosystems in which they are embedded (Abson et al., 2017; Moore & Milkoreit, 2020). Specifically, what is essential is a shift in the practices and processes that reflect and reproduce those systems (Haxeltine et al., 2017; Howaldt & Schwarz, 2017) and the values and beliefs that reinforce them (Antadze & McGowan, 2017). In the context of brand management, what this highlights is the importance of aligning contemporary socio political issues with a brand's initiatives in ways that harness

positive change (Swaminathan et al., 2020). We discuss VCC as a means to connect business, society, and consumer perspectives to achieve broader social goals.

## Value co-creation

The concept of VCC has evolved and is consistently described as an interactive and dynamic process where engaged actors (e.g. consumers, firms) co-create value during the consumption experience (Galvagno et al., 2014; Saha et al., 2021; Vargo & Lusch, 2008). Common themes in extant literature include value-in-use, co-production and conceptualisations of a dynamic and experiential exchange process, where relationships and personalisation are important (see, e.g. Cova et al., 2011; Grönroos, 2011; Madhavaram & Hunt, 2008; Vargo & Lusch, 2008). We take a 'value-in-use' perspective whereby 'value is co-created with and determined by the user in the "consumption" process' (Lusch & Vargo, 2006, p. 284). In this sense, we advocate the notion that 'co-creation of value can take place only if interactions between the firm and the customer occur' (Grönroos, 2011, p. 290).

However, to understand how VCC can create sustainable transformation within the system, it is necessary to 'understand the underlying mechanisms of value co-creation at the micro level' (Wajid et al., 2019, p. 276). Value co-creation provides an approach to sustainability and sustainable futures by positing that value is obtained by integrating resources from a wide range of social systems and stakeholders (Vargo, 2021). Micro level VCC focuses on how actors, for example consumers and brands, interact within a system to co-create value for themselves (Storbacka et al., 2016).

Brand VCC activities and practices at the micro level can potentially herald sustainable transformation because they initiate incremental changes towards more sustainability activities through brand engagement, shared values, knowledge, and resources (Arnold, 2017; Voorberg et al., 2015). Furthermore, implementing co-creation tactics around sustainability can enhance awareness of sustainable practices and behaviours (Arnold, 2017). Brands adopting a stance that reflects a strong purpose face a higher level of scrutiny – emphasising the need for authentic marketing practice to support the prosocial shared values of consumer and organisation (Vredenburg et al., 2020). A brand can foster sustainability through facilitating VCC by providing sustainable products and services and promoting sustainability while engaging consumers with the brand's core values (Biggemann et al., 2014; Lusch & Webster, 2011).

Brands play a vital role in enabling firms to positively engage with sustainability and create sustainable markets (Lehner & Halliday, 2014). Therefore, firms that create brand identity around sustainability must ensure they deliver on their promise and have sustainability embedded in their marketing practices (Olsen & Peretz, 2011; Vallaster et al., 2012). Co-creating value to achieve sustainability through an organisation's processes and activities may be enacted by embedding sustainable practices, such as, offering sustainable products/services, ensuring a responsible and transparent supply chain, and actively promoting sustainable consumption (Dentoni et al., 2021; Palakshappa & Dodds, 2020). Value co-creation processes therefore focus on the entire value chain, integrating different stakeholders (including consumers) to foster sustainability through the transformation of the various actors (Saviano et al., 2017). For example, sustainable value co-creation between suppliers and firms leads to enhanced value being created at the end of the

value chain, highlighting the importance of sustainability being embedded in a firm's (brand's) marketing activities from production to consumption (Lacoste, 2016). Likewise, consumers, as key stakeholders, are engaged and interactive participants who co-create meaning and value with products and services (Kao et al., 2016). Therefore, it is critical that brands co-create value around sustainability, by ensuring that they have sustainability embedded in all their marketing practices.

A consumer's desire to participate in the co-creation of a brand often stems from an alignment of shared values between the consumer and brand (France et al., 2015). Accordingly, consumers' sense of unity with a brand not only leads to word-of-mouth about the brand (Hur et al., 2011), but has the potential to be transformative by engaging consumers cognitively and emotionally through the brand experience (Merrilees, 2016). This meaningful engagement can lead to collective value creation practices within brand communities, such as social networking with other members, impression management within and beyond the brand community, reinforcing members' engagement, and enhanced use of the brand (Schau et al., 2009). Furthermore, individual self-concept is a factor that can have a strong effect on sustainability behaviours (White et al., 2019) and pro-environmental self-identity can play an important role in such things as sustainable buying, sustainable curtailment and product lifetime extension (Zhao et al., 2024). Given this, there should be potential for brands to co-create value around sustainability and drive sustainability forward in consumer consciousness making it a fashionable consideration.

From a consumer's perspective, successful VCC strategies at the micro level have been reported as increasing consumer satisfaction (Hoyer et al., 2010; Jouny-Rivier et al., 2017), enhancing consumer engagement (Brodie et al., 2011; Van Doorn et al., 2010), benefitting consumers and/or enabling them to achieve their consumption goals (Lanier & Schau, 2007), and importantly, leading to evangelistic behaviours and brand advocacy (Harrigan et al., 2020). When customers are committed and engaged with a brand, they identify themselves with the brand's vision and value. Ultimately, what a consumer values influences attitudes towards a brand (Kumar, 2020).

The consumer co-creates value around sustainability by actively engaging with the brand during the consumption process. This provides impetus to create lasting, sustainable consumption practices (Lehner & Halliday, 2014). Since a VCC strategy considers the consumer as a key value co-creator who integrates firm-supplied resources in order to solve problems and ultimately enhance their wellbeing (Lusch & Webster, 2011) sustainability can potentially be co-created during interactions and engagement with a brand, especially on digital platforms (Palakshappa & Dodds, 2020).

Engagement and experience with brands are increasingly facilitated digitally, through social media and sharing platforms enabling VCC through brand engagement between brands and consumers (Harrigan et al., 2020). Brand-hosted social media also provide a social platform for consumers to connect with each other around the brand, enhancing brand loyalty (Helme-Guizon & Magnoni, 2019). Social media has the potential to influence positive sustainable behaviours by making visible what others are doing and changing behaviour as consumers implement consistency with social norms (White et al., 2019). Online brand community value co-creation practices such as sharing stories, participating in impression management, and brand use have been found to enhance the legitimacy of a brand. More importantly, value co-creation practices at the online

community micro-level can impact on the meso-level organisational context and ultimately the macro-level societal context, and vice versa (Hakala et al., 2017). Therefore, understanding how brands use digital platforms to influence engagement and co-create value for consumers has not only become critical in brand management (Dhaoui & Webster, 2021; Hollebeek et al., 2014), but has the potential to forge societal change at the macro-level. Therefore, research that addresses how social media platforms can be used to harness the power of brands to co-create value around sustainability and sustainable consumption is warranted.

## The sustainable fashion context

The fashion industry, often criticised for promoting unbridled consumption, unethical production issues, and unfair employment practices (Colucci & Vecchi, 2021) provides the context for this research. In many respects the fashion landscape changed post-Rana Plaza. The scale of the 2013 Bangladeshi Rana Plaza garment factory collapse placed the fashion industry under intense scrutiny, bringing issues of sustainability further to the fore. Pressure on resources, pollution and degradation of the natural environment (Rashidi-Sabet & Madhavaram, 2022), exploitation, poor working conditions (Stringer et al., 2022) and the precarity of value chains linking consumption in the Global North to production in the Global South (Hammer & Plugor, 2019) have now come front and centre. The ongoing human and environmental cost concerns have prompted calls in public forums and scholarship for finding new ways of fashion production and consumption (Ozdamar Ertekin et al., 2020).

In recent years there have been many efforts made by marketers to change practices and perceptions including some positive initiatives as well as others labelled as green-washing (Adamkiewicz et al., 2022) and relatedly, woke-washing (Sobande, 2019). Underpinning the problems is the underlying force of a consumer culture that perpetuates large-scale garment consumption (Ozdamar Ertekin & Atik, 2015). However, as an integral part of a system contributing to unsustainable practices, the fashion industry can also be situated to facilitate the United Nations' sustainable development agenda (Henninger et al., 2016; Todeschini et al., 2017). Such potential value creation via social media and marketing includes helping inform consumers about more sustainable alternatives, prompting them to 'interrogate the provenance of the things they buy, and think about the impact . . . so that customers become more emotionally involved' (UNDP, 2021).

Whilst some see sustainable fashion as a panacea for the 'ills' of the textile and clothing sector, it is still generating consumption – however SF demonstrates a conscious effort to move towards a more sustainable future. We offer the following definition of sustainable fashion (SF) – fashion businesses that have sustainability at the core of their business ethos and implement sustainable practices that actively (co)create transformation throughout the retail service ecosystem, including, creating and offering sustainable products, ensuring ethical and transparent supply chains, collaborating with suppliers and competitors and actively promoting sustainable practices and behaviour with stakeholders (Dodds et al., 2022).

The sustainable fashion sector of the fashion industry encompasses a spectrum of players. At one end are those brands that 'walk the talk' regarding sustainability goals. At the other end are fast fashion brands that now offer ranges that are positioned as

sustainable – for instance, made using BCI (Better Cotton Initiative) sourced materials. The key to understanding sustainable fashion is acknowledging the tensions that are created when a brand wants to be truly sustainable. This is particularly the case if they have an operational model that requires large scale, such as fast fashion. Many of the organisations that have reduced their carbon footprint and cut emissions throughout their supply chain are actually achieving their goal of being more sustainable because they price at a point which reflects the value accorded along the value chain from production to consumption. However, other mainstream brands can't necessarily increase their price, use sustainably sourced products, meet sustainability goals, and still meet the needs of their consumer groups.

Mukendi et al. (2020) call for a deeper investigation of how sustainable fashion plays a role in the lived experience of consumers and for research that surfaces alternative modes of fashion consumption. While fashion houses are increasingly ensuring their production practices are sustainable, this imperative needs to be matched with impactful consumer responses. More recently, the pandemic has catalysed a focus on issues of sustainability in the fashion industry. Two key trends were evident during the first months of the pandemic – during lockdown there was high consumer engagement on digital platforms and organisational messaging was being altered as a direct response to the pandemic. Although the pandemic was not central to our research, we were interested to know how brands responded to this new wicked problem, where in some cases there were changes in consumer needs and logistics disruptions. Our research is motivated by the nexus of these trends extending the work of Palakshappa and Dodds (2020), Harrigan et al. (2020) and Wajid et al. (2019). The argument for connecting brands, co-creation of value and sustainability lies in recognising the potential of sustainable fashion brands to initiate transformational shifts through sustainable marketing practices, especially utilising digital platforms.

We explore how SF brands, and their consumers can co-create sustainability leading to societal transformation, through marketing practices, particularly the use of Instagram, using the following key questions:

- How do SF brands and consumers co-create sustainability through marketing practices and consumption?
- What messages do brands employ to facilitate the co-creation of sustainability and sustainable transformation on Instagram?
- How does consumption practice at the individual level provide potential for change at the community and/or societal level?

## Methodology

We adopted a qualitative approach to investigate how SF brands and consumers co-create value around sustainability, leading to potential sustainable transformation. To understand this complex and understudied phenomenon – sustainable co-creation and sustainable transformation – we implemented an in-depth case study methodology. Our in-depth case study method and multiple sources of data are beneficial for unpacking how SF brands and consumers co-create sustainability through marketing practices and consumption. Fundamentally, an in-depth qualitative case study methodology enables

theory building in this critical area (Eisenhardt et al., 2016; Gehman et al., 2018). We developed a novel four-phase research process enabling us to gain insights into the power of sustainable brands and their marketing practices, especially the use of Instagram, to transform towards sustainable futures. We now outline each of the four phases.

### ***Phase one – case analysis***

Phase one involved case analysis of three brands using secondary data sources from company websites and publicly available reports to determine how sustainability is co-created from a brand's perspective. Case brands were selected according to their ability to provide new insights in theory development (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 2021). Brands were theoretically selected using five key criteria: 1) each brand was an established fashion apparel/footwear brand with retail outlets; 2) brands had sustainability embedded in their core values and marketing practices, including, either offering sustainable products and/or transparent marketing practices, and importantly, actively promoting sustainability on digital platforms; 3) there was a mix of different sustainable pillars and issues (i.e. environmental, social, wellbeing) underpinned by strong purpose among the selected brands; 4) brands posted content regularly on their Instagram account; and 5) there was a mix of global and local retailers among the selected brands. The three brands chosen – Allbirds, Kowtow and Lululemon (see descriptions below) were analysed deductively, using three key areas identified in the literature deemed important to how brands can co-create value, including offering sustainable products/services, ensuring transparent marketing practices (e.g. transparent supply chain, commitment to social causes), and actively promoting sustainable consumption, especially on digital platforms (Dentoni et al., 2021; Palakshappa & Dodds, 2020).

### ***Phase two – brand-generated content on instagram***

Phase two involved analysing all the brand-generated content on three Instagram accounts over a 6-month period (1 January 2020 to 30 June 2020). Research on Instagram to date has focused on the impact of content and engagement due to influencers (Silva et al., 2020), selfies and user-generated content (Mayrhofer et al., 2020), and to a lesser extent brand-generated content (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Yet, brand-generated content on Instagram is potentially a powerful social media marketing platform and was chosen because it is the most popular 'visual' social media platform with particular importance to fashion brands (Bonilla et al., 2019). Instagram is a key digital marketing communications tool, with 60% of businesses planning annual increases to their Instagram budget (Hootsuite, 2021).

Data collection involved recording all publicly available brand-generated content Instagram posts by each brand in the date range, including descriptions of the text and images in each post (video, still shots, and multiple still shots in a loop) and date. All 359 brand-generated content Instagram posts over six months on the three official brand accounts were recorded and examined – Allbirds 127, Kowtow 120, and Lululemon 112 posts. Visual descriptions of the images and text were analysed by one of the authors using content analysis and a code-recode procedure (Krefting, 1991) where initial codes

relating to sustainability were generated. We used a data-driven inductive approach and open coded all data looking for patterns, similarities, and differences within and across the three brands (Miles & Huberman, 1994). All three authors generated four key themes of interest using a deductive approach to analyse the data, based on the initial codes, and informed by the literature.

### ***Phase three – brand enthusiast consumer interviews***

Phases one and two provided the foundation for phase three in which a semi-structured auto-driving interviewing technique for collecting data was implemented. Thirty self-confessed enthusiasts of the three brands (i.e. ten participants per brand) were recruited through snowball sampling and purposively selected to ensure that they followed the brand on Instagram and claimed that consuming sustainably was central to their identity. Recruiting participants who were active followers and enthusiasts of sustainable brands maximised the chances of uncovering insights into how consumers co-create value with brands to move towards sustainable futures. A summary of the 30 research participants' profiles highlighting which brand they were fans of, and their age and occupation follows in Table 1. The participants have been allocated pseudonyms.

**Table 1.** Pseudonyms and profile of participants.

Pseudonym	Brand	Participant profile
Mike	Allbirds	early 30s male, marketing manager
Zoe	Allbirds	early 30s female, communications manager
Jason	Allbirds	early 30s male, self-employed content, and social media strategist
Sid	Allbirds	mid 20s, male, data analytics student, social entrepreneur
Daisy	Allbirds	mid 20s, female, ex model, actress, small-time entrepreneur, returned from NY during pandemic
Sally	Allbirds	50s, female, property developer
Chloe	Allbirds	mid 20s female, project manager
John	Allbirds	early 50s, male, tertiary educator
Steve	Allbirds	late 40s, male, tertiary educator employed in USA, returned to NZ during pandemic
Anita	Allbirds	late 50s, female, entrepreneur
Angela	Kowtow	mid 20s, female, creative industries student
Alisha	Kowtow	mid 20s, female, fashion business student, arrived from India before lockdown
Ella	Kowtow	mid 20s, female, management consultant, employed in Australia, returned during pandemic
Sasha	Kowtow	50, female, self-employed transformation and strategy consultant, part time resident in USA
Kayla	Kowtow	mid 30s, female, marketing manager
Zinnia	Kowtow	late 30s female, self-employed social media/digital marketing sector
Hannah	Kowtow	mid 50s, female, senior manager
Marisa	Kowtow	late 20s, female, political consultant
Nina	Kowtow	30, female, senior communications advisor, state sector
Becs	Kowtow	mid 20s, female, textile buyer
Emma	Lululemon	30, female, interior designer
Izzy	Lululemon	40, female, brand marketer
Mandy	Lululemon	late 20s, female, social entrepreneurship student
Grace	Lululemon	mid 40s, female, manager state sector
Bart	Lululemon	mid 20s, male, physiotherapist
Niamh	Lululemon	mid 20s, female, lawyer
Heidi	Lululemon	30, female, self-employed marketing consultant
Geena	Lululemon	late 20s, female, youth worker
Sonia	Lululemon	mid 50s, female, dentist
Aanya	Lululemon	early 20s, female, pharmacist

Hour-long Zoom interviews were carried out between September 2020 and February 2021. Interviewing via Zoom is a useful technique for qualitative research and during the pandemic was an appropriate way to obtain data (Dodds & Hess, 2020). Participants were asked about their shopping and social media habits, and views on sustainability. The interview focused on knowledge of their chosen brand and how they interact with the brand. Four sample posts from each brand were selected for use as auto-drivers for the study. Participants were shown Instagram posts and asked about their opinions/feelings and what they thought each post was trying to communicate as the starting point for gaining insights into how consumers co-create value with brands. This technique enabled research participants to articulate insights that would not be easily elicited by interview alone. Furthermore, combining visual imagery with interviews has the potential to create new knowledge in an area previously unexplored (Pink, 2007). Selections for each brand were made so that all major themes identified in phase two were represented among the four posts used in phase three. This methodology utilises a direct approach to understanding consumer VCC and moves beyond inferring responses on Instagram via likes and comments. The process was repeated until all four posts had been shared via PowerPoint on screen by the interviewer. Finally, we solicited each participant's vision for the future in terms of sustainable consumption.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed resulting in 393 pages of transcripts. Data analysis involved an iterative process that included multiple readings of the transcripts by each of the three researchers, followed by individual open coding and axial coding. Subsequently, the researchers compared notes and collaborated to produce a single set of themes from the data set (Spiggle, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

### ***Phase four – focus groups***

Analysis of phases one, two and three informed the development of a draft 'Co-creating sustainable futures' framework. Consumers from phase three were invited to participate in one of four online focus groups that were designed to discuss and consider the framework. Feedback was gathered from 14 participants who reflected and elaborated on what they had previously discussed and on how brands had the power to create sustainable futures. This process acted as a form of member checking to ensure the correct portrayal of participant voices by allowing participants to comment on the accuracy and interpretations of data (Candela, 2019). Minor refinements were made to the draft framework. The audio-recorded sessions were used to refine the framework and text units from the focus groups were analysed as part of the overall dataset for the study.

### ***Case studies***

A brief case study summary is provided next for each brand.

#### ***Allbirds***

Allbirds is a leading New Zealand-American shoe company committed to sustainability and high quality, comfortable products. Their website details a three-step approach to 'better business' specifically designed to reverse climate change – 'making better things in a better way' is a core guiding vision (Allbirds, 2021). Natural materials, regenerative

practices, clean energy, and carbon offset projects are central to their sustainability initiatives. Allbirds are B Corp certified and are working towards innovations in material use.

### ***Kowtow***

Kowtow is a New Zealand-based organic cotton clothing organisation specialising in contemporary designs. Their seed-to-garment positioning offers transparency within the value chain and provides a strong 'to market' proposition (Kowtow, 2021). Kowtow have an A grade in the 2018 Ethical Fashion Report (Nimbalkar et al., 2018) and are committed to fair and ethical practices for all their stakeholders.

### ***Lululemon***

Lululemon is a global athletic apparel organisation. Healthy living, mindfulness and sustainability are key to Lululemon's communication with consumers. Their vision embraces social, environmental and economic health in order to create opportunities to lead 'happy and fulfilling' lives (Lululemon, 2021). Lululemon are proponents of community-led sustainability, engaging with their broad stakeholder base to drive this aspirational purpose. Lululemon have an A grade in the 2018 Ethical Fashion Report (Nimbalkar et al., 2018).

## **Findings**

We identify three key overarching themes – SF brand co-creation, messaging on digital platforms and SF consumer co-creation. Each of these themes and corresponding sub-themes are discussed next.

### ***Sustainable fashion brand co-creation***

Analysis of secondary data to identify how the three SF brands facilitate the co-creation of sustainability through their marketing informed Table 2 and resulted in three key themes that enable us to confirm that SF brands can co-create sustainability – by offering sustainable products, ensuring transparent marketing practices, and importantly, via promoting sustainability, especially on social media platforms like Instagram.

An overview of each co-creation theme identified from secondary data sources follows.

*Sustainable products* – a commitment to designing and developing sustainable products was apparent in all three cases. Both Allbirds and Kowtow are B Corp certified, demonstrating rigour in their sustainability practices. These two brands are also dedicated to using sustainable fabrics such as organic cotton, and use sustainably sourced wool, whereas Lululemon is working towards developing innovative materials that are more sustainable. All three brands demonstrate an awareness that providing sustainable products to their consumers is key to achieving a more sustainable future.

*Sustainable marketing practices* – working to deliver increased value to consumers and leveraging their sustainability to target markets was evident in all three cases. Adding value through repair/resale/take back circular economy initiatives and using the power of their B Corp certification to show that they align their operations and

**Table 2.** Sustainable fashion brand co-creation activities.

Theme	Examples of sustainable fashion brand co-creation activities
Sustainable products	<p><i>Allbirds</i>: Products are made from sustainable and renewable materials. Committed to be carbon zero by 2030, already 60% towards this goal. Certified B Corp.</p> <p><i>Kowtow</i>: Products are made from 100% certified Fairtrade cotton, traced from seed-to-garment. Committed to being 100% sustainable through sustainable components – buttons, natural threads, natural labels, recyclable packaging. Committed to circular design. Certified B Corporation. Third-party certification programs, for example, Fairtrade, GOTS, NPOP</p> <p><i>Lululemon (LLL)</i>: Working towards developing innovative, more sustainable materials. Goals: Achieve 75% sustainable materials by 2025. Make 100% of products with sustainable materials and end of use solutions to advance circular ecosystem by 2023. By 2025 offer consumers options to resell, repair, and/or recycle their products</p>
Sustainable marketing practices	<p><i>Allbirds</i>: Transparent supply chain – committed to traceability and a responsible supply chain and providing consumers with the ability to trace their products; committed to animal welfare, human rights, and environmental practices. Launched a shoe resale platform ‘Rerun’ as part of circular economy efforts.</p> <p><i>Kowtow</i>: Transparent supply chain – committed to being open and transparent about every part of their business, from material sourcing and production to wellbeing of people. Repair and Take-Back programs – offer free repairs, repair workshops, return garment at the end of their life. Provide clear instructions for consumers on the best ways to dispose of packaging, and end-of-life solutions for garments.</p> <p><i>LLL</i>: Committed to regular reporting on their environmental and social commitments via annual Impact Report. Committed to social sustainability initiatives – Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, ad Action (IDEA) – employ diverse staff that reflect the community, develop inclusive product range. Transparent supply chains – support wellbeing of people, create safe, healthy, and equitable environments. Collaborate with industry groups, NGOs, and Governments to create change.</p>
Promoting sustainability	<p><i>Allbirds</i>: Commitment to leverage platforms to educate consumers about environmental sustainability. Partnered with Selfridges to create a unique pop-up centred around journey to net zero carbon</p> <p><i>Kowtow</i>: Commitment to leverage sustainability issues on social media platforms. Hosted community beach clean-ups with customers. Regularly create fundraising campaigns to support charities. Committed to supporting the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).</p> <p><i>LLL</i>: Committed to leveraging their platforms to communicate and inspire their community about social sustainability - diversity, equity, and inclusivity; and supporting physical, mental, and social wellbeing across their communities. By 2025 invest US\$75 million to advance equity in wellbeing. Established a Lululemon centre of excellence for social impact</p>

strategies with their values was apparent in two cases. Ensuring transparency in supply chains was an important aspect of their marketing practice, and for Allbirds and Kowtow, this required an emphasis on all aspects of production to consumption, encompassing human rights, animal welfare and environmental impact. LLL showed a strong social sustainability focus with a heightened emphasis on individuals, community, and wellbeing, which fully aligns with their products that facilitate consumer wellbeing.

*Promoting sustainability* – all three brands regularly promote sustainability, speaking to society about the greater good rather than just their products alone. They all share sustainability content in their advertising, fostering learning and increasing awareness about social and environmental issues. Other promotional activities included in-store events and community activities that promoted education about sustainability issues linked to the SDGs were evident. Partnerships with non-profits in the sustainability space played a part in their promotional strategy. Documentary evidence highlighted that these three exemplar brands facilitate the co-creation of sustainability by promoting supply chain

transparency, importance of the circular economy, social responsibility, community empowerment and social equity.

In summary, the analysis indicated that the focal cases had a strong commitment to offering sustainable products, using marketing practices that help co-create sustainability with consumers, and leveraging their social media platforms to communicate with their community and inform, educate, and inspire consumers on sustainability issues relevant to the core intent of their organisation.

### **Messaging on digital platforms**

Analysis of messaging on Instagram revealed content classified into four themes of interest: Values and change, Sustainability, Wellbeing, and Conscious consumption. Theme descriptions and exemplars of themes within posts are provided in [Table 3](#) and

**Table 3.** Sustainable fashion brand messaging on digital platforms.

Theme	Brand Post %	Description	Post Exemplars: Image and Text Excerpts
Values and Change	Allbirds: 29.9 Kowtow: 20.8 Lululemon: 2.7	Corporate philosophy, brand values, change, taking action, making improvements	<i>Image:</i> Alpine scene with blue sky, snow peaks and forest. <i>Text:</i> ... businesses ... need to do better ... we believe ... climate change ... challenging ourselves ... to raise the bar ... less impact on our planet
Sustainability	Allbirds: 48.1 Kowtow: 41.6 Lululemon: 6.3	Environmental protection, environmental degradation, planet, earth, climate crisis, cause, inequality, justice, rights, poverty	<i>Image:</i> Woman in black swimsuit. <i>Text:</i> Sustainable swimwear ... crafted in ECONYL® regenerated nylon, from fishing nets ... worked with Healthy Seas to remove from the world's oceans and turn into yarn. ... closed loop ... recycled infinitely ... Feel good about what you wear in the water <i>Image:</i> Display card featuring five lapel pins with Pride themes. <i>Text:</i> We've joined forces with queer artists in our communities to celebrate Pride ...
Wellbeing	Allbirds: 16.6 Kowtow: 10.9 Lululemon: 73.2	Spiritual, peace, meditation, wellness, physical health, mental, psychological, collective good, prosperity	<i>Image:</i> Yoga class and guru. <i>Text:</i> With the help of our friends, teachers, and spiritual practices ... lean courageously into uncertainty ... yoga meditations from tension release to loving kindness practices ... need right now ... keeping our distance physically ... staying connected <i>Image:</i> Woman wearing fluffy jumper. <i>Text:</i> artisanal crafts ... hand knitted by women in India ... refugee backgrounds ... empowered to use their traditional skills to create livelihood for themselves and families ... natural and biodegradable fibres ... highest grade of animal welfare, environmental care, and social responsibility
Conscious consumption	Allbirds: 0.8 Kowtow: 20.8 Lululemon: 0	Ethical consumption, Fairtrade	<i>Image:</i> Young Indian woman in blazer. <i>Text:</i> ... clothes are ethically made in India ... built on sustainable, eco conscious & fairtrade practices

an overview of each theme follows. The percentage of all official brand posts presenting each theme within the sampling period is also provided.

*Values and change* – this theme was most apparent in posts from Allbirds and Kowtow who expressed their philosophy and ethos relating to sustainability and the improvements they were making particularly regarding sustainable materials and product design innovations. All three brands used Instagram as a platform to communicate their brand values around key sustainability issues – Kowtow and Allbirds on the natural environment and Lululemon focused on individual and community wellbeing, and social sustainability.

*Sustainability* – this theme relates to both environmental and social sustainability (and the interconnectedness of the protection of people and planet). Issues around environmental sustainability were prominent and mostly posted by Allbirds, followed closely by Kowtow. Allbirds highlighted efforts to offer sustainable products made from wool, tree fibres and sugar cane, and to reduce their carbon footprint. Allbirds promoted sustainability in all its forms and challenged followers to think more deeply about issues, e.g. ‘please take a moment to look through our stories for more info about why this is happening, the long-term impact it will have, and how together we can help’ and to take action, ‘there are some other steps you can take to demand justice’. Kowtow posts incorporated information about their transparent supply chain commitment in relation to environmental issues, and along with design and style backstories about their clothing, they emphasised social and environmental sustainability. Lululemon was not strong on environmental sustainability, however, they did have a few posts on social sustainability issues related to inequality, human rights and injustices happening to marginalised communities (e.g. racial violence, Women’s Day).

*Wellbeing* – this theme relates to messages that promote and encourage individual and community wellbeing. Kowtow and Allbirds’ wellbeing posts tended to focus on collective good and prosperity and, although all three brands had wellbeing posts, Lululemon’s posts were most illustrative of this theme as the wellbeing economy is their primary focus. Lululemon strongly promoted the importance of looking after the self, individual wellbeing, maintaining mental and physical health before, during and after COVID lockdowns, as well as advocating for community wellbeing. Lululemon favoured posts that showcased people that customers can admire, involved in physical activity and meditative pursuits.

*Conscious consumption* – this theme relates to consuming ethically and promoting fairtrade. Kowtow was the main brand that emphasised ethical consumption. Allbirds’ posts frequently had clear marketing and sales intent combined with promoting their B Corp certification calling for ethical consumption and fairtrade.

Overall, we found that brands posted brand-generated content most days and commonly embedded images and commentary on Instagram that communicated messages about their philosophies, actions, and support for a range of sustainable transformations. Despite Instagram being a visual medium and each brand having a strong visual identity, all three brands utilised lengthy text in some of their brand-generated content. Many posts incorporated multi-themed messages, and between 60–75% had a clear ‘marketing and sales’ dimension in addition to the themes of relevance to this study. Each of the fashion brands provided images and text in their

posts that offered consumers resources and insights, more than ‘just displaying their products using visually pleasing and appealing content’ (Casaló et al., 2020, p. 417). What was clearly evident in our analysis was that Instagram was used as a platform to re-orient consumers towards sustainability and sustainable futures, enabling consumers to co-create sustainability.

### **Consumer co-creation**

Three themes relating to how consumers co-create sustainability were identified through our analysis of consumer interviews and subsequently confirmed through our consumer focus groups: *reorientating for a sustainable future*, *aligning values*, and *consuming consciously*. Within each of the three themes VCC practices and activities were evident. See Table 4 for an overview of the three themes and corresponding VCC practices and activities associated with each. We explore these in the context of the phase one and two insights. Collectively, these themes inform how consumers co-create sustainability and how Instagram facilitated adoption of consumption practices that create a movement towards sustainable futures.

#### **Reorientating for a sustainable future**

The first theme signals the initial part of an evolving process of value co-creation with regards to sustainability from a consumer’s perspective. *Knowledge co-creation* through knowledge dissemination (brand side) and knowledge acquisition (consumer side) represents the fundamental basis for how re-orientation begins. The brands were perceived as having power to create change through dissemination of knowledge, especially on social media, about sustainability and sustainability issues:

They absolutely do have the power to create change, especially because we consume a lot of social media ... They are actively marketing themselves to be a sustainable company ... I assume that they are doing community-minded, community-oriented activities ...

**Table 4.** Overview of consumer VCC sustainability practices and activities.

Main Themes	VCC sustainability practices and activities
Reorientating for a sustainable future	<p><b>Knowledge co-creation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– brands have power to <i>disseminate knowledge</i> on social media</li> <li>– consumers <i>acquiring knowledge</i>, providing a holistic view, and inspiring to be more sustainable</li> </ul> <p><b>Seeking collective transformation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– supporting a culture of consumer activism</li> </ul>
Aligning Values	<p><b>Consciously aligning</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– personal values and brand values</li> </ul> <p><b>Belonging to Brand Community</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– being part of the brand community</li> </ul>
Consuming Consciously	<p><b>Conscious choice</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– making purchase decisions that are mindful, e.g. buying less, being aware of where product comes from</li> </ul> <p><b>Self-education</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– responsibility to educate self</li> </ul> <p><b>Renewed focus</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– socio-political issues provided a renewed focus on sustainable brands and stronger voices</li> </ul>

supporting the programmes and initiatives that support the community ... they have to back up their actions ... they can't just say they are sustainable. (Chloe, Allbirds)

We also noted tacit assumptions that brands make good on their promise of doing good and that they have an obligation to speak out on sustainability issues and educate consumers, as Ella suggests:

They have some kind of some obligation to speak on certain matters ... because they have the platform to do so ... they have that ability to educate their followers. (Ella, Kowtow)

The process of consumers acquiring knowledge and being inspired to take action is central to understanding how co-creation has been important in encouraging transformation. *Knowledge co-creation* through knowledge acquisition enabled a more informed view of sustainability that was a precursor to co-creation. Participants believed brands needed to promote sustainability and highlight the issues, as Izzy and Steve discuss:

[It is important to rely] on brands like Lululemon to keep promoting those messages ... people get buy-in ... from hearing the same thing multiple times until it gets through in different ways. (Izzy, Lululemon)

[Allbirds have] been spotlighting issues, talking about justice, democracy. Progressive social values and sustainability is really important to them. That comes across ... it's clear that they're doing things ... that they take it seriously. That's good. (Steve, Allbirds)

Knowledge acquisition, particularly via Instagram, enabled participants to view sustainability more holistically. Participants identified aspects of environmental and social sustainability that they registered on Instagram and recognised an emphasis on wellbeing. Brands were not seen as solely focused on what might be termed traditional sustainability issues – they had individual, community, and societal wellbeing firmly within their frame of messaging.

What you're buying, that impacts the environment, impacts people ... Where [has food come] from ... how have they made it? If I can put money back into my community [buying locally made], I feel like that's better, [but] it doesn't always work. (Sonia, Lululemon)

Their environmental and sustainability ethos ... was quite new ... sustainably sourced materials ... paying their workers proper wages [and] the environment. They care about sustainability ... They [are] genuine and caring about their community, and people focused. (Marisa, Kowtow)

[They convey] the fragility of the environment ... The crisis mode and what we can do to get a better control of that. How we can influence that and how we can support our own wellbeing ... And what Lululemon can do to engage and help you with that. (Grace, Lululemon)

Such comments were typical across the three brands and underpinned a belief that each was based on a core sustainability-driven purpose.

Issues of sustainability included accessibility and diversity, providing evidence of how our participants viewed the scope of sustainability:

It makes a big difference ... to see someone that looks even slightly like [oneself] on social media ... it's important to see diversity on their feeds ... Kowtow posted this young New Zealand model. She's Indian, but she's also a scientist ... they've posted a lot about her ... it seemed a much more genuine way of bringing people of colour on board. (Marisa, Kowtow)

They're definitely an inclusive brand [on] Instagram, which I quite like ... lots of different body types, shapes. (Aanya, Lululemon)

One of the notable insights was that knowledge acquisition helped shift consumers from being sustainable at an individual level to actively *seeking a collective transformation* towards sustainable futures, whereby consumers collectively engage in activism to change systemic issues:

We have to have a culture of ... consumer activism rather than just being an ethical consumer ... try to change systemic issues in society so everyone benefits rather than telling corporations to be transparent about how they do things. (Sid, Allbirds)

[We all] need to go out of our way to ... help and support others. (Geena, Lululemon)

This notion of the collective is central to how consumers are able to adopt a stronger level of action based on greater depth of definitional understanding.

### *Aligning values*

The second theme highlighted the importance of alignment between brand values and participants' personal values and fit between the values of brands and the causes they posted about – consumers are co-creating sustainability by *consciously aligning*. Participants noted the importance of a match, talking about their personal values and how these values were congruent with the brand. This alignment resonated with participants:

They're all ... sustainable materials and good for the planet. [Allbirds' initiatives of supporting developing communities] aligns with the principles of what I support and what I feel we should do for other communities ... round the world. [It] resonates with things that I stand for. (Anita, Allbirds)

[Kowtow] sticks close to their morals ... actually walk the walk as well as talking the talk ... they have align[ed] with my own values. They've taken a social and political stance ... [posting] more about those things rather than trying to sell their clothing, which I appreciate. (Angela, Kowtow)

Co-creation was also demonstrated through participants *belonging to a brand community* which was evident when a strong alignment was present. The feelings of belonging that were engendered by being part of a brand following reinforced value associated with brand community promoting a sense of ' ... belonging and community [among] people with similar life goals and aspirations'. An overall brand image is seen by many as centred on ' ... collectivism, acceptance, teamwork, community ... '.

Where participants viewed a lack of brand to cause alignment, Instagram posts failed to resonate e.g. when a brand posted about Black Lives Matter (#BLM). Participants were annoyed with the brand for getting involved in issues that they believed were not aligned with the brand as Sasha comments:

[#BLM post was] a nice idea but ... it's full of tokenism and trying to leverage an important moment ... feels like this is a lecture [rather] than constructive encouragement ... trying to make a progressive statement. Actually, maybe it would have been better to post a black square. (Sasha, Kowtow)

Or that they were only superficially involved and needed to be held accountable, as Mandy points out:

[Re #BLM post] Lululemon [says] they're committed to the movement. They're going to [do] better ... hiring and promoting diversity. It could be seen as virtue signalling. But I could also look at it as something that the public are really pushing for ... brands are at least becoming aware ... we still need to hold them accountable, otherwise they will just post the black box to feel good for the week and then not do anything. (Mandy, Lululemon)

Our insights highlight the importance of personal values and brand values aligning with the cause(s) that the brand posts about. There needs to be a brand-cause fit for real change to be realised.

### *Consuming consciously*

The third key theme related to consuming consciously, which appears to be enhanced through a re-orientation towards sustainability and aligning values. Our participants repeatedly articulated the notion of co-creating sustainability through *conscious choice*, *self-education*, and having a *renewed focus* on sustainable brands and sustainability issues. *Conscious choice* was about making purchase decisions that were mindful and making changes to their own behaviour. For example, being conscious about materials used by fashion brands, shopping less, and shopping ethically as these participants describe:

There's a sense of conscious choice ... about the kind of materials that I consume ... purchasing [Kowtow's] products allows me to do that ... I try and be a very conscious consumer ... I make fewer, usually more expensive purchases that fit within those values ... I'm quite socially justice minded. (Sasha, Kowtow)

I don't really want to support [a brand] if they don't have good ethics ... I do the best that I can to shop ethically. (Kayla, Kowtow)

The importance that participants ascribed to making individual *conscious choices* about purchases was indicative of how they saw potential for a real shift in individual mindset and behaviour:

I need to do my bit. I'm not anywhere close to perfect, but I try to be careful and aware when I'm making choices. (Anita, Allbirds)

Significantly, *conscious choices* to be more sustainable at home was a consequence of brands being committed to changes, for example reducing plastic, demonstrating the power of brands to facilitate consumers' mindset and subsequent behaviour shifts:

Little things that supermarkets [do] ... getting rid of plastic bags, committing to not packing vegetables in plastic. ... seems like small changes, and might not have a big effect. But it [has] a big shift in people mentally ... [and has] a roll-on effect of people suddenly making more conscious choices at home without realising. (Jason, Allbirds)

Interestingly, participants believe they have the responsibility to *self-educate* themselves because information is readily available, as Kayla suggests:

We can educate ourselves. [We have everything] at our fingertips now ... to know where something comes from, how it ends up on your body, what chemicals they used ... how

[things] get on your plate, [about] clothes ... you can find that. I want people to become aware and want to know because ... it should change the way we do things. (Kayla, Kowtow)

Ultimately, participants articulated that individual shifts in mindset and behaviour can lead to better communities highlighting the potential for consumers to co-create sustainability through consuming consciously, leading to sustainable futures:

I really like New Zealand consumers [saying] ... 'if we buy less ... it's better for our communities'. (Chloe, Allbirds)

Additionally, many of our participants signalled the significant impact that COVID-19 and other globally centred socio-political issues (#BLM; #MeToo; US Elections) had in encouraging a *renewed focus* on sustainable brands that are connected to sustainability and social issues as highlighted by Sid and stronger views on sustainability as outlined by Grace:

My approach to purchasing things has changed ... I have a larger appetite [for] brands and stories. [connected to sustainability and social issues] (Sid, Allbirds)

People are more acutely aware of the impact we're having on the environment. And what's been interesting recently ... more demonstrations ... are happening now. People are much more passionate and have stronger views. (Grace, Lululemon)

Overall, phases three and four provided insights concentrated on aspects of consumption informed by marketing practice and activity. The centrality of the consumer in co-creating sustainability informed aspects of the framework discussed next.

## Discussion

Our findings and literature review are combined to develop a framework (Figure 1) that establishes how sustainability can potentially be co-created via sustainable brands and

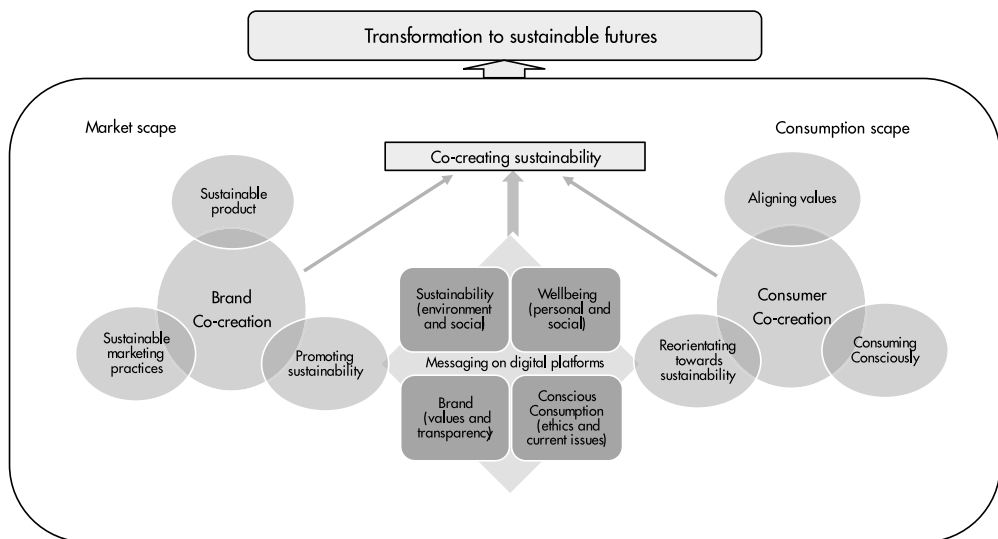


Figure 1. Co-creating sustainable futures framework.

consumers. Overall, the framework demonstrates that sustainable brands can *facilitate* the co-creation of sustainability through three major marketing practices – creating and delivering sustainable products, ensuring sustainable practices, for example, transparent supply chains, and importantly promoting sustainability, particularly on digital platforms. Our study indicates that sustainability messaging on digital platforms enables consumers to co-create value with the brand by engaging with the brand online and purchasing and using the brand. We propose that consumers can co-create sustainability through engaging with sustainable brands on digital platforms via reorientating towards sustainability, consciously aligning their values with sustainable brands, and consuming more consciously. A discussion of the key elements of the framework follows.

### ***How brands co-create sustainability***

Our findings from the case analysis help answer our first research question about how SF brands co-create sustainability through marketing practices. We find that SF Brands can be significant facilitators of sustainability within the market space by 1) offering sustainable products, 2) working towards sustainable and transparent marketing practices and 3) promoting sustainability through various platforms (Palakshappa & Dodds, 2020). Our findings showed that Allbirds and Kowtow were implementing all three facilitators of sustainability by living up to the values of their brand and ensuring there is a brand-cause fit (Biggemann et al., 2014; Champlin et al., 2019). Lululemon, on the other hand, focuses on transparency around social issues and promoting social sustainability through wellbeing, diversity, and mindfulness. A strong purpose-driven brand stance was inherent to brand-cause fit, and a persistent and consistent voice in messaging engendered greater engagement among consumers (Stanley, 2020).

Findings from the brand-generated content answer our second research question – What messages do brands employ to facilitate the co-creation of sustainability and sustainable transformation on Instagram? All three brands demonstrated the power to promote sustainability via brand-generated content on Instagram, leading to sustainable transformation. Our findings reveal that their brand messages on Instagram fell into four key categories: 1) *Sustainability* including brand initiatives and discussion of broad environmental and social sustainability issues e.g. carbon footprint, transparent supply chains, and diversity; 2) *Wellbeing* factors including taking care of personal mental and physical wellbeing and promotion of collective wellbeing (related to pandemic); 3) *Brand* values, transparency, and ethics, and 4) *Conscious consumption* promotion about purchasing ethical products, buying local (related to pandemic), and supporting causes such as #BLM. Through digital platforms, brands offer a positive actionable approach to co-create sustainability by moving consumers, and potentially communities and societies, towards sustainable futures (Arnold, 2017). In this sense brands adopted the role of a strong purpose-driven entity reinforcing the ties between brand, organisation and society (Swaminathan et al., 2020).

### ***Consumer co-creation of sustainability***

Findings from the consumer interviews and focus groups answer our first research question related to how consumers co-create sustainability, and our third question

about how consumption practices at the individual level provide potential for change at the community and/or societal level. We find that consumers who actively follow brands (brand enthusiasts) co-create sustainability through 1) *Reorientating for a sustainable future*, 2) *Aligning values*, and 3) *Consuming consciously*. Within each of these areas we identify specific VCC activities and practices.

*Reorientating for a sustainable future* – sustainable brands appear to help reorientate consumers towards more collective transformation concerning sustainable (Abson et al., 2017; Moore & Milkoreit, 2020), via knowledge co-creation and seeking collective transformation. Knowledge co-creation is evident through brands disseminating information on sustainability and sustainability issues on social media and consumers acquiring knowledge, which enables reorientation. While brands have the power to facilitate knowledge co-creation around sustainability, transformation is achieved when brand communities collectively respond to purpose-driven brand activity and support a culture of consumer activism. For example, responses to messages around social sustainability issues, such as diversity, engendered support at both an individual and brand community level. Consumers who support and actively follow sustainable brands responded to these messages (that went beyond issues of environment and climate change) with strong sentiments and intentions.

*Aligning values* – consumers co-create sustainability through the practice of consciously aligning their personal values with sustainable brand values and by belonging to sustainable brand communities. Consumers who actively follow sustainability-led purpose-driven brands want to know that a brand's values align with their own. Congruence of values and brand-cause fit are generally important strategic considerations for firms and imperative in the move towards sustainable futures. Brand followers often responded positively to sustainability issues and causes. Conversely, negative reactions were evident when brands supported #BLM and promoted diversity in a superficial way, and their intent was met with scepticism and judged as tokenistic as also reported by Yang et al. (2021). Apparently, the brands had not adequately considered the degree and type of fit with the issue (Bigné et al., 2012). It was clear that consumers' engagement with sustainable brands lead to value co-creation practices within brand communities, such as connecting with other members, reinforcing members' enthusiasm, and enhanced use of the brand (Hakala et al., 2017; Schau et al., 2009).

*Consuming consciously* – consumers co-create sustainability by making conscious choices, self-education and having a renewed focus. Our findings point to changes in purchase behaviour around conscious consumption as a result of engaging with sustainable brands. Consumers alluded to making a conscious choice to purchasing with purpose and identifying which products are unnecessary. These behaviours represent conscious consumption, i.e. a mindful frame of thinking and purposeful decision making about products and services for social, economic and environmental change (Kevany, 2019; Sheth et al., 2011). The desire to consume consciously involved having greater care for what money is spent on and a reprioritisation of what is purchased. This was coupled with purchasing purposively and ethically for the greater collective good and an emphasis on individual self-care and wellbeing. Consumers also articulated their responsibility to educate themselves about sustainability and sustainability issues. They also commented that engaging with sustainable brands on socio-political issues not only gave them a renewed focus towards sustainable brands but also a stronger voice to promote

sustainable futures. These consumer co-creation approaches (and VCC practices and activities) to sustainability are partially a result of individual VCC through interacting with the brand on digital platforms resulting in brand loyalty and in some cases evangelism (Harrigan et al., 2020). Ultimately, this micro VCC provides an impetus and foundation for macro sustainable transformation by embedding sustainable values and behaviours which in turn positively impacts other consumers, brands and organisations in consumer and market scapes (Wajid et al., 2019). Therefore, we propose that the co-creation of sustainability happens with the market and consumption scapes, whereby multiple actors and stakeholders are involved to co-create sustainability, ultimately leading to sustainable futures within the market and consumption scape which can support transformation to sustainable futures. Our data provides foundational knowledge that informs the market and consumption spaces (or scapes), within which marketing practice and activities function, as discussed by Spry et al. (2021) who reported transformative branding where brand management as a micro level process can contribute to macro systems (consumer, market and society).

The framework of scapes (Palazzo & Basu, 2007) was originally developed to highlight how Corporate Social Responsibility forms a bridge in terms of brand perception and this provides inspiration for our framework, depicting the transformative power of brands. The scapes terminology enables the inclusion of inherently complex, interrelated, and linked concepts spanning the macro and micro (Appadurai 1990, cited in Palazzo & Basu, 2007). Metaphors of scapes, spaces, or a landscape, afford depth and scope to solutions that, at their core, address wicked problems such as sustainability.

### ***Theoretical contributions***

The overall purpose of this research was to explore how VCC between SF brands and consumers at the micro level contribute to the co-creation of sustainability leading to transformational shifts towards sustainable futures at the macro level. Our research and subsequent framework reveal the power of brands, through marketing practices and tools such as digital platforms, to ignite transformational shifts towards sustainability. The notion of brands and marketing having such power has only been alluded to in previous research. Our research moves the Sustainable Fashion literature forward by providing empirical evidence from brands and consumers that highlights the enormous potential for 'authentic brand management activity' to harness sustainability and instigate positive change that reconnects people and the ecosystems they operate in (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Specifically, we build knowledge in the SF space.

Our framework extends VCC and sustainability literature, in three important ways. First, by demonstrating how sustainability is co-created within market and consumer scapes among two key stakeholders, brands and consumers, and considering the important role of online brand engagement and activities we extend work by Palakshappa and Dodds (2020) and Harrigan et al. (2020). Second, our framework links the macro and micro processes of marketing to understand how micro-level marketing can influence change at a macro-level providing empirical evidence for the conceptualisation of Wajid et al. (2019). Third, we build on Arnold's (2017) idea of fostering sustainability through co-creation by providing evidence for the power of the brand to help co-create sustainability and sustainable futures.

Our findings support Nan and Heo (2007), in that positive brand-cause fit improves brand image and enhances consumer response, and M. J. Barone et al. (2007) in that poor brand-cause fit has negative consequences on consumer responses. Brands that support causes and advocate for sustainability through brand management activity need to be conscious of ensuring association with issues and causes that resonate with consumers and align with consumer values (Champlin et al., 2019).

### **Managerial implications, future research and conclusions**

Two crucial insights provide rationale for this work – accusations of unsustainable and unethical practices that continue to plague the fashion industry, and the role of marketing in addressing the wicked problems of today. A key managerial contribution of this work is in understanding the duality of responsibility – brand and consumer – that is required to co-create sustainable futures. Brands with an active and engaged following have a captive audience. They have the power to create transformation through positive purpose-driven brand management activity and managers should recognise their responsibility to use the captive brand audience to do good. In the fashion context, managers need to understand what sustainable fashion means for their own brand followers if effective co-creation is to take place.

As a visual social medium, Instagram provides brands with opportunities for effecting change, through the sharing of regular interesting brand-generated content. Instagram as a site for value co-creation is very important for directing consumers towards the sustainability agenda. Instagram is also a space for creating social norms within society and instigating the importance of identity and status which are often said to be a driver for conspicuous consumption where fashion plays a strong role, as well as in the SF space. Brands should consider which social media content will be most effective in terms of education as well as harnessing network effects and driving their consumers towards revealing aspects of sustainable identity, practices within communities that matter to individual consumers. The digital media landscape enables more frequent and diverse interactions with followers than could ever be achieved with traditional media campaigns, and therefore the sustainable fashion sector that relies heavily on Instagram is well placed to build transformational shifts towards sustainability.

Our work provides impetus for future exploration to extend the contribution of marketing to society. In the first instance we highlight the importance of studying consumers who are brand enthusiasts and for whom sustainable consumption is central to their self-identity because of the power they have to affect others. If fashion brands can align with their consumers to co-create value towards sustainable futures, then this is a promising step towards addressing a wicked problem that is worthy of further exploration. Additionally, the 'co-creating sustainable futures framework' invites further research to test relationships proposed in the model.

Our purposeful selection of exemplar SF brands enables consideration of best practice – what is possible when intent, scale and consumer values are aligned. Future studies need to explore the entire ecosystem if we are to arrive at sufficiently robust solutions for

a sustainable future. While our focus has been on sustainable fashion brands with a purpose-driven stance and their consumers, we see value in further research examining other sectors, such as healthcare and food. The power of the brand to initiate some of the transformation required to ensure a sustainable future is recognised but currently under-explored and inadequately utilised. This paper answers important questions as to how purpose-driven brands can co-create positive momentum towards sustainable futures and opens avenues for more research.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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