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Engaging Instagram content for sustainability: A framework from sustainable fashion brands

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ABSTRACT

The impact of the sustainability imperative on social media marketing communications remains poorly understood, particularly in how brand-generated Instagram content can foster engaging consumer experiences that actively promote sustainability. This study investigates how sustainable fashion brands use Instagram to create engaging content to communicate sustainability and encourage sustainable futures. Using an interpretive qualitative case study approach, we analysed 343 Instagram posts from three global sustainable fashion brands over a six-month period. Thematic content analysis identified four distinct types of posts focused on organisational change, sustainability issues, wellbeing, and conscious consumption. Furthermore, three co-existing dimensions were identified – consumption/production action, individual/universal scope, and aesthetic pleasure/knowledge approach – and these informed the development of a framework illustrating how Instagram post executions foster consumer brand engagement (CBE) for sustainability purposes. The findings provide empirical evidence of how exemplary brands strategically use Instagram to influence consumer awareness and behaviour, contributing to broader sustainability goals. This research offers both theoretical and practical insights into the role of social media in shaping sustainable consumption through engaging brand experiences.

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Introduction

Understanding how marketers use digital platforms to influence engagement with brands has become critical in marketing (Dhaoui and Webster 2021; Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie 2014). Studies have focused on the impact of digital content and engagement as a result of influencers (de Brito Silva et al. 2020; Odoom 2023), selfies and user-generated content (Mayrhofer et al. 2020), and to a lesser extent brand-generated content (Djafarova and Bowes 2021), particularly on Instagram. Research into social media use highlights a growing need to understand how digital branded content can not only engage consumers but also catalyse behavioural change toward sustainability and sustainable futures (Palakshappa, Bulmer, and Dodds 2024). This includes deeper investigation into

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the cognitive, affective, behavioural, and social dimensions of consumer engagement (Bowden and Mirzaei 2021) and effectiveness of sustainability messaging (Rathee and Milfeld 2024).

Brands are increasingly expected to deliver profit while simultaneously contributing to societal and environmental sustainability (Bulmer et al. 2024). Although research supports corporate sustainability efforts—such as reducing carbon footprints, improving water usage, and addressing packaging and supply chain issues—there remains limited guidance for marketing communication professionals regarding their role in promoting sustainability (Palakshappa and Dodds 2020). There is a lack of clarity around how brands can or should communicate sustainability values and sustainable futures to consumers through strategic messaging (Palakshappa, Bulmer, and Dodds 2024). While the effects of the sustainability imperative on social media marketing communications and promotional strategy are beginning to emerge, relatively few studies have examined how brand-generated content (BGC) is intentionally designed to offer engaging brand experiences that drive change around sustainability (Golob, Podnar, and Zabkar 2023; Rathee and Milfeld 2024).

There is limited insight into how visual and narrative elements within brand-generated Instagram posts are used to foster consumer engagement with sustainability, such as those articulated in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Given the call for marketing to address global challenges and SDGs, consumer engagement has become an imperative (Grewal, Kopalle, and Hulland 2024). This lack of focused research on brand-led sustainability communications via social media highlights the need for deeper exploration into how brands can leverage digital platforms, such as Instagram, to influence consumer attitudes and behaviours toward more sustainable consumption (Bulmer et al. 2024; White, Habib, and Hardisty 2019).

Instagram, as a visually driven platform, plays a pivotal role in marketing communications, particularly with fashion brands. Brands across the sustainable, luxury, and fast fashion sectors use Instagram not only to showcase products but also to engage consumers in conversations around sustainability (Yoo 2023). For sustainable fashion brands—those committed to eco-friendly practices, ethical labour, and transparent supply chains—Instagram offers a unique opportunity to provide engaging content and promote sustainability (Palakshappa and Dodds 2020).

To date, little attention has been paid to how sustainable fashion brands use Instagram to foster engaging experiences that encourage consumers to reflect, act, and participate in social and environmental change. This qualitative study addresses that gap by examining how digital marketing communications are designed to build, manage, and sustain brand engagement experiences while promoting broader societal and environmental impact capable of forging sustainable futures. We examine Instagram marketing communications in official brand posts of three sustainable fashion brands that have a strategy of emphasising sustainability messaging. Our research poses two key questions: 1) What message content do sustainable fashion brands post on Instagram? 2) How do sustainable fashion brands create and execute engaging Instagram content?

This paper contributes to the literature by developing a guiding framework and practical toolkit that outlines how Instagram post executions can be designed to create engaging consumer experiences around sustainability. Drawing on the analysis of exemplary sustainable fashion brands, the study identifies key execution dimensions that shape

how sustainability messages are communicated and experienced on Instagram. In doing so, the paper provides empirical insight into how brands can potentially engage consumers in ways that encourage reflection on sustainability issues and support more sustainable patterns of consumption, thereby contributing to broader sustainability goals.

Literature

We organise the review to build a narrative around brand experience operation as a precursor to consumer brand engagement (CBE) and how Instagram's features shape brand experiences. Our discussion then shifts to how sustainability messaging and Instagram use as a tool to communicate sustainability, leverages those dynamics in engaging consumers toward sustainable futures.

Brand experience, consumer brand engagement, and Instagram

Brand experience provides the foundation for understanding how consumers begin to form deeper relationships with brands, particularly in digital environments. It captures the sensory, affective, cognitive, and behavioural responses that arise when individuals encounter brand-related stimuli (Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello 2009). When these experiences are intentionally designed to be aesthetically appealing, emotionally resonant, or thought-provoking, they become engaging brand experiences that draw consumers in and hold their attention throughout the customer journey (Lemon and Verhoef 2016; Nysveen, Pedersen, and Skard 2013). Engaging brand experiences are particularly salient in social media contexts, where aesthetically appealing and emotionally resonant brand content can stimulate consumers' affective, cognitive, and behavioural engagement while encouraging interaction and sustained attention to brand-related communications (Dessart, Veloutsou, and Morgan-Thomas 2015; Schivinski, Christodoulides, and Dabrowski 2016).

Engaging brand experiences underpin and precede Consumer Brand Engagement (CBE) (Paramita et al. 2021) as they activate the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural processes through which consumers develop meaningful involvement and connection with a brand (Dwivedi 2015; Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie 2014). CBE is understood to be the consumer's favourable cognitive, emotional, and behavioural involvement that occurs during, or is prompted by, interactions with a brand (Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie 2014). CBE is of increasing interest to researchers and practitioners because of its importance in social media marketing (Wang, Limbu, and Fang 2022). Consumers and brands may interact through CBE, creating value for themselves (Storbacka et al. 2016), increasing consumer satisfaction (Hoyer et al. 2010; Jouny-Rivier, Reynoso, and Edvardsson 2017) and benefitting consumers and/or enabling them to achieve their consumption goals (Wang, Limbu, and Fang 2022). These experiential foundations are particularly relevant in social media environments, where brands rely on visual and narrative elements to stimulate meaningful consumer responses (Aljukhadar, Senecal, and Bériault Poirier 2020; Batra and Lane Keller 2016).

CBE that is facilitated digitally (Harrigan, Roy, and Chen 2020) through social media and sharing platforms such as Instagram can be enhanced by Digital Content Marketing (DCM), particularly with an information, entertainment, commercial, and emotional

focus (Odoom 2023). Brands design their DCM with relevant content that resonates with consumers in an interesting and engaging way, for example, via text, photos, stories, videos, graphics (Hollebeek and Macky 2019; Rattan 2019). CBE on social media can be transformative by engaging consumers cognitively and emotionally (Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie 2014; Merrilees 2016). Studies have reported that it enables consumer evangelistic behaviours including sharing positive recommendations through word-of-mouth (Hur, Ahn, and Kim 2011) and brand advocacy (Harrigan, Roy, and Chen 2020; Obilo, Chefor, and Saleh 2021).

In particular, Instagram provides a highly aesthetic, image-driven setting where brands can craft sensory and emotionally resonant content that supports both brand experience and engagement (Bulmer et al. 2024). Through features that enable visual storytelling, short-form video, and lightweight interactions, the platform allows brands to translate experience-based strategies into moments that prompt cognitive elaboration, emotional connection, and behavioural participation, key components of CBE (Hollebeek and Macky 2019; Rattan 2019). Instagram serves as a natural extension of the brand experience–engagement pathway, offering the tools through which engaging brand experiences can be expressed and amplified. Brands are increasingly creating and managing their official Instagram accounts as part of their marketing communications strategy to build and nurture online brand communities with consumers due to its reported ability to inspire followers (Oltra, Camarero, and San Jose Cabezudo 2022), encourage customers to engage and interact (Ibrahim and Aljarah 2023), increase brand exposure, attract website traffic, and develop loyal fans (Kim, Hong, and Lee 2021).

Instagram and other social media offer opportunities to post new and varied content very frequently, giving followers the feeling that they are keeping up with latest developments and ideas. As reported by Rietveld et al. (2020) brand-generated social media content engages customers differently to paid advertising for various reasons. There are hedonic rewards and benefits for the Instagram account viewer in the form of entertainment value, aesthetic excitement and pleasure (Nedra, Hadhri, and Mezrani 2019). Social media often relies on one-off unique and attractive content and stories that keep followers lingering and engaging with the account. Furthermore, ‘good’ content makes its way into other users’ feeds via Instagram’s algorithms. In this way content dissemination continues under the auspices of advocates, missionaries, and social media mavens to whom many people listen and respond (Aljukhadar, Senecal, and Bériault Poirier 2020; Batra and Lane Keller 2016). There is also potential for engaging brand experiences on Instagram to contribute to a brand’s sustainability connected agenda because of the features of the social media platform.

Engaging consumers with sustainability messages on Instagram

There are increasing opportunities for brands to communicate sustainability messages through digital platforms such as Instagram, where visually rich and interactive content can engage consumers and potentially influence attitudes and behaviours towards more sustainable practices (Palakshappa, Bulmer, and Dodds 2024; White, Habib, and Hardisty 2019). Sustainability communication in these environments is particularly significant given the growing expectations placed on brands to contribute to broader societal and environmental goals. While the concept of sustainability

has a long intellectual history, contemporary discussions of a sustainable future are commonly traced to the definition of sustainable development articulated in the Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987) which emphasised meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own. Building on this foundation, the notion of sustainable futures recognises that multiple pathways exist toward achieving more sustainable societies rather than a single predetermined trajectory. In this study, we adopt the term sustainable futures to reflect the potential transformative outcomes of engaging sustainability messaging, particularly when brands use platforms such as Instagram to stimulate awareness, reflection, and engagement with sustainability issues.

Recent scholarship focusing on sustainability messaging has been touted to have the power to motivate consumers towards sustainability and sustainable behaviour (Dodds et al. 2024; Palakshappa, Bulmer, and Dodds 2024). Golob, Podnar, and Zabkar (2023) provide a useful overview of sustainability communication and messaging, identifying five key forms: transmitting information to inform and raise awareness; critical, deliberative, and transformative communication; disclosure-based reporting; persuasive or commercial communication; and misleading communication such as greenwashing. They note that existing research predominantly focuses on persuasive 'green advertising', which promotes product-level benefits or competitive advantages. Whereas research that examines the transmission of sustainability information with the aim of informing consumers and raising broader awareness, rather than promoting specific green products, is less common in the marketing communications literature and tends to be situated in sociology or communication studies. This highlights a gap in understanding how brands can use sustainability messages to educate, inform, and build awareness in ways that contribute to sustainability goals.

Although studies of communications designed to stimulate thinking and raise consciousness about sustainable futures are less common, there is a stream of research into the effectiveness of 'sustainability advertising', defined as advertising promoting sustainable initiatives, practices, products, or behaviours (see Rathee and Milfeld 2024 for a comprehensive literature review). Rathee and Milfeld (2024) examined studies of sustainability advertising effectiveness and proposed future research opportunities. One of the key directions for future research is deeper examination of different contexts and advertising formats in sustainability advertising, for example messaging on social media platforms, and examining how engaging brand experiences are presented by brands with an agenda of contributing to sustainable futures.

Effective brand communication strategies supporting sustainability in the widest sense are crucial and must reach the hearts and minds of brand consumers (and the broader social network of brand consumers) if they are to have positive impact. By creating and using official social media accounts, brands can position themselves as agents for sustainability (Kong, Witmaier, and Ko 2021) whether or not their goal is to directly promote consumption of specific sustainable products and services, or to raise awareness of broader issues of sustainability. Digital content marketing (DCM) has been found to be effective in engaging consumers (Odoom 2023). This is especially the case in visual-based social media platforms such as Instagram (Zhou and Xue 2021) which are commonly used

in the promotion of clothing and footwear brands that have sustainability at the heart of their corporate mission.

Studies have shown that digital media is an effective tool for building brand image around sustainability (Ahmed et al. 2019), suggesting that social media such as Instagram used for CBE are vital platforms for sustainability with the capability to 'generate environmental discussions and encourage people to be greener' (Zafar et al. 2021, 4). A feature of CBE for purpose-driven sustainable brands is alignment of values between consumers and brands. If consumers connect with a sustainable brand, CBE can be used to promote sustainability (Kumar and Christodouloupoulou 2014) by changing attitudes and behaviours towards sustainability and sustainable consumption (P. Jones, Comfort, and Hillier 2018). Recent research has also demonstrated the power of brands to facilitate transformations towards sustainable futures using Instagram posts (Bulmer et al. 2024; Palakshappa, Bulmer, and Dodds 2024). However, while Instagram offers brands opportunities for regular CBE about sustainability, to promote and share their corporate social responsibility initiatives with their audiences (Han and Lee 2022), and encourage followers to consume more consciously (Arnold 2017), there is little research that offers insights into engaging Instagram content that leads to engaging brand experiences by exemplary brands that are attempting to encourage engagement and create change as part of their strategic commitment to the practice of sustainability.

Building on CBE literature and the work of Lee and Cho (2022), Dodds et al. (2024), and Bulmer et al. (2024), we define engaging Instagram content related to sustainability as brand-generated posts that are visually compelling, narratively rich, and thematically focused on sustainability, designed to stimulate dialogue, reflection, and action among followers, with the aim to elicit meaningful consumer interaction – such as likes, comments, shares, saves, and direct messages – and foster emotional, cognitive, or behavioural responses aligned with sustainability values (Lee and Cho 2022; Testa, Bakhshian, and Eike 2021). This definition guides our work related to engaging Instagram content created by sustainable fashion brands.

The sustainable fashion context

Fashion marketing as a whole has often been criticised for promoting and perpetuating a consumer culture of unrestrained garment consumption (Colucci and Vecchi 2021; Ozdamar Ertekin and Atik 2015) that has been linked to a range of negative environmental and social consequences. Since the 2013 Rana Plaza garment factory disaster, issues of sustainability have gained prominence in the fashion sector and sustainable fashion has emerged as a broad term for 'clothing and behaviours that are in some way less damaging to people and/or the planet' (Mukendi et al. 2020, 2873).

As sustainability becomes increasingly central to brand identity and strategy, fashion brands are challenged not only to reduce their environmental impact but also to communicate their sustainability commitments in ways that inspire and mobilise consumers. The challenge for brands is to keep consumers engaged on visual digital platforms – producing relevant, interesting, and shareable content that is true to the brand, positively contributing to their sustainability agenda and promoting sustainable futures (Fuchs and Frederike 2018).

Given Instagram's capacity to deliver visually rich, emotionally resonant, and interactive brand experiences, it has become a central platform for brand marketing communications—particularly in the fashion industry, where aesthetic appeal, lifestyle alignment, and rapid content dissemination are key drivers of consumer engagement (A. R. Jones and Lee 2022). Instagram, with its emphasis on visual storytelling and lifestyle curation, offers a unique platform for brands to shape narratives around sustainable futures—encouraging consumers to reimagine fashion consumption as a more ethical, mindful, and socially responsible practice. Through carefully crafted content that highlights sustainable materials, transparent production processes, and other sustainability initiatives, brands can foster deeper engagement and contribute to shifting consumer norms toward sustainability (Palakshappa, Bulmer, and Dodds 2024). This communicative function is particularly powerful when brand messaging aligns with broader sustainability goals, such as those articulated in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and when it resonates emotionally and socially with audiences seeking purpose-driven consumption (Palakshappa and Dodds 2020).

Despite growing interest in sustainable fashion and digital engagement, research at the intersection of consumer brand engagement (CBE), sustainability messaging, and engaging Instagram content remains limited. Existing studies have largely focused on outcomes such as brand popularity and growth (see, for example, Testa, Bakhshian, and Eike 2021), rather than exploring how brand-generated content can promote broader sustainability goals.

Materials and methods

Overview

An interpretive qualitative exploratory case study approach was implemented to study how Instagram feed posts are used to create engaging consumer experiences by leisure clothing and footwear brands with a strong sustainability agenda. We adopted the 'Eisenhardt Method' (EM) which is a multi-case theory-building approach (Eisenhardt 2021). The investigation process involved identifying and isolating brands and their Instagram posts with sustainability-related themes that were appropriate for inclusion in the study. These posts were then analysed to reveal recurring themes in the sustainability messaging. An additional layer of analysis focused on subjectively categorising the ways in which brands created engaging experiences through their Instagram content. Bias in the analysis process was controlled for using multiple investigators familiar with the geographical market context to assess the coding. The assurance of trustworthiness rests on the availability of quality data from leading brands and opportunities to triangulate data sourced via different collection methods, secondary sourced case material, and official brand posts on Instagram. The use of multiple investigators enhances the creative potential of the study, and the convergence of multiple investigators enhances confidence in the findings according to Eisenhardt (1989).

Case selection and post selection

Purposive sampling was used to single out cases that are actively committed to building awareness and consumer engagement with a variety of sustainability issues on their Instagram account. While many brands post about sustainability as a sales or marketing tactic, our study was focused on investigating brands with deeply embedded values relating to sustainability and sustainability marketing practices on Instagram. This research strategy was chosen because of its potential to generate theoretical insights into engaging brand experiences supporting of sustainable futures, a relatively new phenomenon requiring deep exploration within a specific context (Miles and Michael Huberman 1994; Yin 2017).

In order to identify the most suitable brands for the study, we consulted with a public relations and marketing industry expert with an interest in sustainable brands. This process allowed us to narrow the list of potential brands with engaging Instagram content available to consumers in our market (New Zealand). Since studying local cases can enhance a study's relevance and provide deeper, more nuanced insights by leveraging the researchers' familiarity with the context, the Instagram accounts selected were all ones that New Zealand consumers could engage with. After considering the expert advice regarding the reputation of sustainable clothing/footwear brands that are engaging with consumers on Instagram, three contrasting brands were selected for the study. Three global brands, with local retail outlets selling their own range of apparel/footwear were selected – all have sustainability at the heart of their brand, have active Instagram accounts and post content almost every day, and they each promote one or more environmental, social, and wellbeing sustainability issues.

Data collection

Detailed written case descriptions were developed for the selected brands using multiple data sources to expose and understand the brands' sustainability mission, strategy, values, marketing practices, and potential motivations for creating sustainability-related DCM Instagram posts. Our development of written case studies involved a process of data collection from 1) Google Scholar, with searches for the brand names to identify journal articles about the cases; 2) publicly available reports available through our institution's library databases; 3) blogs and other news articles available through Google search; and 4) the brands' own official webpages. Our case studies confirmed that each of the chosen brands 1) offer sustainable products or are strongly working towards using sustainable materials (e.g., certified organic cotton), 2) are committed to being 'transparent' about their marketing practices (e.g., transparent supply chain, commitment to environmental/social causes), and importantly, 3) are actively promoting sustainability issues and sustainable consumption, especially on social media platforms like Instagram.

Following the broader case investigation, we systematically gathered and analysed every post on the official Instagram accounts of the focal brands during a six-month period. Clothing and footwear retailing is highly seasonal (Tyler, Heeley, and Bhamra 2006) and a six-month data collection timeframe was chosen to avoid short-term effects and capture a wide variety of post content. A total of 343 posts were posted on the three focal brand Instagram accounts that were available to New Zealand consumers–

Patagonia's official US account @patagonia, Lululemon's Australia/New Zealand account @lululemonausnz and Allbirds English language account @allbirds—from July to December 2021. Full details of each post were recorded, including the date of each post and descriptions of the text and images in each post (including video, still shots, and multiple still shots in a loop). The dataset of posts is available to view by logging on to Instagram.

Overview of cases

We provide critical details on each of our three cases below. Patagonia, a designer of outdoor clothing and gear for the silent sports, claims that 'We're in business to save our home planet'. As an accredited founding member of the Fair Labor Association, and certified B Corp, Patagonia consistently receives outstanding grades in the Ethical Fashion Report (Keegan et al. 2021). They rarely use their Instagram account for product/retail promotions, and do not use shoppable posts or social media influencers. Patagonia employs high-quality images to elicit emotional responses emphasising the beauty of the planet linked to solo sporting pursuits, engendering a sense of connection, challenge, and exhilaration. Patagonia uses lengthy narrative texts alongside video and still imagery. More than 50% of posts highlight people taking action and doing good at a micro/local level to counter specific environmental, social, Indigenous, cultural, or community issues. Some posts include details of public protests and politicised action, showing that the brand is not risk averse.

Patagonia uses Instagram as a platform to promote sustainability and engage consumers' minds with key issues, creating meaningful associations for the brand (Fernández, Hartmann, and Apaolaza 2022). They adopt strong (sometimes controversial) positions and actively encourage consumer engagement with issues to create positive change. Patagonia creates authentic and inspirational content that directly advocates for environmental and social causes, promotes activism, and offers engaging Instagram experiences for their target audience. Patagonia does not shy away from posting content that is designed to drive thinking and conversations about difficult environmental and social sustainability problems and to provoke emotional responses from both brand lovers and detractors.

Lululemon, a yoga wear and lifestyle apparel brand, has the betterment of the community, environment, and economy as its founding principle. It has a history of sustainability activities, including partnerships that advance wellbeing, the use of sustainable materials and pay equity for employees (Ell 2020). It achieved an A grade in the 2021 Ethical Fashion Report (Keegan et al. 2021). In contrast to the sometimes-strident approach of Patagonia, Lululemon's posts connect with consumers on multiple levels of heart and mind and are designed to arouse feel-good experiences that promote social sustainability. Their Impact Agenda emphasises improving the well-being of their internal and external community, which reflects their vision to advance equity in physical, mental, and social well-being, and create environments that are equitable and inclusive for its ambassadors, employees, and supply-chain workers.

Lululemon's posts highlight organised events and inspirational people/practices with a local flavour interspersed with promotion of specific products. Their posts have consistent positive sentiment, with uplifting and motivating stories relating to mindfulness

and physical activity, including yoga and other sports. Lululemon's diverse posts reveal a gentle attempt to create a place online where consumers can experience connection and being part of something bigger than themselves. Their Instagram posts are used to proactively support human well-being through community connection, a key facet of social sustainability (Minton et al. 2022).

Allbirds, the sustainable shoe and apparel company, has strong ties to New Zealand through brands founders and the use of New Zealand merino wool in their runners/casual sneakers. It offers an alternative approach to brand communication in support of consumer engagement with sustainability. Allbirds is 'on a mission to prove that comfort, good design, and sustainability don't have to be mutually exclusive . . . the environment is a stakeholder. We believe we can be a global leader that inspires others to do good' (Allbirds 2021). They are B Corp certified; natural materials, regenerative practices, clean energy, and carbon offset projects are central to their sustainability initiatives and their posts often reference these matters. Aside from the brand's commitment to protecting the environment, it is distinguished by a whimsical sense of humour and style on Instagram that is juxtaposed with the more serious content of their messages.

Allbirds evidence their eco-credentials in fun, light-hearted and visually attractive ways. Most posts have an explicit product/sales focus, many with backstories relating to their environmental initiatives. However, it is their use of humour and strong visual brand identity in combination with testimony about their own plans and actions that offers a consistent flow of entertaining content and valuable experiences for Allbirds' Instagram viewers and account followers.

Analysis and findings

Thematic, qualitative, content analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was conducted to identify what and how sustainability messaging was operationalised and executed by brands, following conventional Instagram interpretive content analysis approaches reported in the literature (see, e.g., Laestadius et al. 2019; Vassallo et al. 2018). The Instagram posts under investigation combined text, static imagery and audiovisual content which called for a data-driven inductive interpretive approach to analysing this type of material. While still imagery and video play a vital role in messaging, and Instagram is a social medium based on photos, the accompanying textual content was also expected to play a significant role (Alwan, Fazl-Ersi, and Vahedian 2020) particularly where sustainability messaging is involved. The video, images and text were firstly analysed by one of the authors using a code–recode procedure (Krefting 1991) and initial codes were generated with reference to post message content. At this stage we also identified posts whose content had a solely sales/marketing agenda and did not reference anything to do with sustainability. These were eliminated from our study, leaving a total of 242 posts for further analysis. We note that some posts had both a sales/marketing message and a sustainability story; these posts were retained in the dataset for analysis.

Thematic analysis: post message content

From our cross-case analysis, we identified 29 first order themes and determined that the content of posts could be grouped into four second order themes relating to

Table 1. Sustainability post message content themes.

First Order Themes	Second Order Themes
sustainability mission, taking action, making improvements, corporate reputation and philosophy, brand values, change	Organisational change (brand values and actions)
environmental protection, environmental degradation, planet, earth, climate crisis, cause, inequality, justice, rights, poverty	Sustainability issues (interlinked SDG issues)
spiritual, peace, meditation, wellness, physical health, mental, psychological, collective good, prosperity, COVID-19 related issues	Wellbeing (positive and life affirming ideas)
ethical consumption, collective action	Conscious Consumption (consumer efforts to become more sustainable)

sustainability issues. The four overarching message content themes being used in communication relating to sustainable futures were about organisational change; environmental and social sustainability issues; wellbeing; and conscious consumption (see Table 1). Many posts incorporated several second order themes simultaneously, e.g., brand values/change and sustainability (Allbirds posting about the problems of climate change and vowing to start sharing the carbon footprint of their products, holding themselves accountable).

Thematic analysis: engaging experiences via post-executions

Another layer of analysis was undertaken to assess and categorise how the brands posts help the reader engage with sustainability issues. We each open coded the data looking for patterns, similarities, and differences within and across the three brands (Miles and Michael Huberman 1994) related to engaging viewers via the post execution. Particular attention was paid to coding elements relating to post execution, analysing how images, language, narrative structures, and other communicative devices were being used in ways that might lead to engaging consumer experiences. We then compared coding structures and negotiated a single amalgamated set of codes before proposing three higher order execution themes related to engagement with Instagram posts: action, scope, and approach. A description of each execution theme in this section is followed by a discussion in which our findings and literature review are combined to develop a framework (Figure 1) that proposes how Instagram feed post executions are used to create engaging consumer experiences for sustainability purposes.

Action: The execution of some posts highlights action towards sustainable futures—both through initiatives and role models—showing what individuals and organisations are doing to make a difference regarding social and environmental sustainability issues. Text is key to execution for this theme and is used to stimulate, challenge, and motivate the reader to consider how others are already taking action and doing good. Imagery is used to highlight individuals through testimonial-style ‘case study’ content, aiming to generate interest and provide ideas on how to make the world a better place. Posts with this theme feel very motivating and open the viewer to ideas about what actions they might do themselves. These posts may aid people in finding some action that they can get behind and that aligns with their values and personal situation. This includes such things as changing consumption behaviours of reusing/recycling/repairing, making lifestyle/wellbeing changes, volunteering, protesting, lobbying, and leading local and community change.

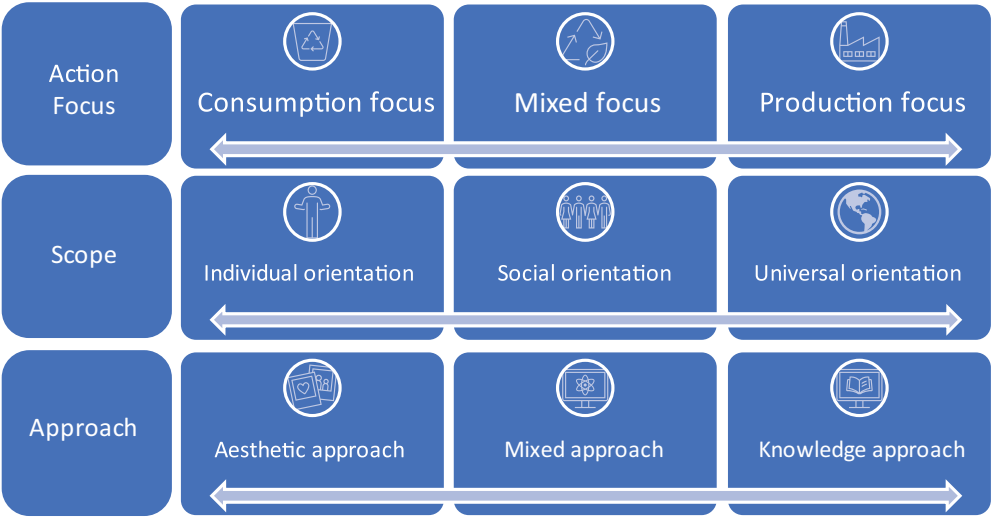


Figure 1. Creating engaging Instagram content around sustainability.

Scope: The execution of some posts draws attention to the scope of problems and the risks of unsustainable consumption. They are designed to create personal, emotional connections showing different scenarios that may strongly resonate with the viewer, highlighting what may be lost and who may suffer. The scope of problems ranges from those that could directly and personally impact the individual, to difficulties that particularly affect other people in society, through to universal concerns facing the planet as a whole.

At the individual level imagery and messages are used to highlight the embeddedness of humans in the outdoor environment, and the personal experiences of wonder, joy, and euphoria that can come from being and playing in special places. Such posts employ first-person view photographic techniques that reflect the human experience of flow, being in the zone, fully engaged and absorbed in nature, engendering an emotional response to the embedded ideas. Interesting narrative text and authentic storytelling audiovisual clips are also used to stimulate engagement, particularly emphasising positive and restorative wellbeing experiences at a personal level.

Engaging messaging is also used to cultivate empathy for others relating to social and community sustainability issues. Text combined with imagery featuring people under duress, emphasising the real, human experience of unsustainable development and the impact on people, prosperity, and peace is used to share and understand emotional experiences. Examples include highlighting the obstacles faced by diverse individuals, such as those in the LGBTQI+ community, and of loss of traditional ways of life for Indigenous communities due to climate change. These posts reveal human experiences that a viewer may not have had in their own life, thus raising consciousness about the plight of others and increasing awareness of other potential sustainable futures.

Posts showcasing the planet’s vast and diverse environments and beauty are used to engage consumers with global issues. High-quality images are used to emphasise the broad scope of issues relating to planetary boundaries and environmental sustainability in

the natural environment, such as climate change, pollution, and plastics. This post content is designed to provoke strong reactions, create controversy, and set an agenda for public debate and consciousness raising about various hard hitting sustainability issues.

Approach: The execution of some posts relies on aesthetic approaches to engaging consumers about sustainability while others adopt a knowledge building approach. Posts that are aesthetically pleasing often use highly vivid, dramatic, and emotional images to elicit sensorially rich experiences. These visually perfect Instagram posts often set the sustainability agenda and engage consumers by indirectly highlighting the stakes involved in environmental unsustainability, incorporating diverse scenes, and creating a ‘big picture’ of planetary boundaries. Dramatic depictions are key to the impact of these posts; words play little part in the engagement with viewers.

Another type of approach is to specifically focus on knowledge and create informative insights into initiatives that impact waste, carbon footprint, and resource consumption. In this approach, posts evidence how brands are playing a part towards meeting sustainability targets. They try to engage consumers with the idea that change on the part of both producers and consumers is necessary to address sustainability challenges. Sometimes, humorous, fun, and playful communicative devices are used to create memorable knowledge-based posts. Eye catching and amusing imagery, infographics, word-play, and surprising texts, such as ‘Oil is stupid and so are we’ are used to gain attention and entertain viewers, while simultaneously communicating serious facts. This approach is typically strong on production and manufacturing facts, e.g., relating to sustainable and transparent sourcing of materials or technical innovations in product engineering and design.

Discussion

Sustainability messaging on Instagram

This study identified four overarching message content themes used by sustainable fashion brands on Instagram to communicate and promote sustainable futures: organisational change, environmental and social sustainability issues, wellbeing, and conscious consumption. *Organisational change* messaging centred on brand values, corporate philosophy, and visible actions taken to improve sustainability performance. These communications often reflected a brand’s sustainability mission and efforts to build corporate reputation through transparency and accountability—echoing literature that positions brand-led change as a strategic response to stakeholder expectations and legitimacy pressures (Bulmer et al. 2024; Golob, Podnar, and Zabkar 2023).

Environmental and social sustainability issues were frequently framed in alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with posts addressing topics such as climate crisis, environmental degradation, inequality, justice, and poverty. This aligns with research that highlights the growing role of brands in advertising and promoting sustainability (Rathee and Milfeld 2024) and advocating for systemic change and using marketing to raise awareness of global sustainability challenges (Grewal, Kopalle, and Hulland 2024).

Wellbeing emerged as a distinct theme, with content promoting mental and physical health, spiritual practices, and collective prosperity. These messages reflect a broader shift in marketing communications toward holistic wellbeing and purpose-driven branding (Dodds et al. 2024). *Conscious consumption* was promoted through content encouraging ethical purchasing decisions, sustainable lifestyle choices, and collective consumer action. This theme resonates with literature on sustainable consumption, particularly in fashion, and the role of marketing in shaping more responsible consumption patterns (Colucci and Vecchi 2021; Ozdamar Ertekin and Atik 2015). Together, these themes illustrate how sustainable fashion brands use Instagram not only to market products but also to engage consumers in narratives that support sustainable futures (Palakshappa, Bulmer, and Dodds 2024).

Creating engaging sustainability Instagram content

We draw on three interrelated themes—action, scope, and approach—to develop a framework (Figure 1) that illustrates how Instagram feed post executions can foster engaging consumer experiences for sustainability purposes. The framework proposes that exemplary brand posts facilitate consumer brand engagement (CBE) across three co-existing execution continuums: *consumption/production action*, which reflects the degree to which posts encourage either consumer reflection or brand-led sustainability initiatives (Palakshappa and Dodds 2020); *individual/universal scope*, which captures whether messaging targets personal lifestyle choices or broader societal and planetary concerns (Dodds et al. 2024); and *aesthetic pleasure/knowledge approach*, which distinguishes between content designed to evoke emotional and sensory appeal versus that intended to inform and educate (Bulmer et al. 2024). Together, these dimensions offer a nuanced understanding of how Instagram content can be strategically crafted to promote sustainable futures through meaningful consumer engagement. Each is now discussed.

On the *action* focus continuum, we identified that sustainability action ranged from internal consumer/consumption to external brand/firm-based production issues. *Action* posts engender CBE through a portfolio of varied messages that are stimulating, motivating, and challenging. They reference particular initiatives and activations and there is a strong sense of evangelism, where the purpose is to convert consumers so that they believe that actions can be taken to be more sustainable and reduce the impact on people, planet, prosperity, and peace. The *action* continuum is anchored at one end by brand supported consumer and citizen action, through product/brand consumption and wellbeing practices, product/brand feature improvements, through to systemic organisational change and action at the other end. Our study indicates that exemplary brands seek to drive change through customer brand engagement (CBE) by presenting a range of action-oriented choices designed to align with the diverse needs and values of their consumers (Green and Peloza 2014), role modelling behaviour change (Brace-Govan 2013) and use of exemplars (Ki, Park, and Kim 2022). Aside from personal and societal sustainability benefits, we believe that *action* CBE potentially leads to brand-related outcomes, such as brand advocacy which may indirectly impact the bottom line (Sweeney et al. 2020; Wong and Merrilees 2015).

Second, on the *scope* continuum we identified that the sustainability scope ranged from individual people to a universal and planetary focus. The *scope* continuum engendered CBE by invoking people and locations involved with sustainability in a context related to the brand

or the causes it supports. One end of the continuum is anchored with an individual orientation, moving to a wider social orientation including families, communities, and society as a whole with a focus on people and wellbeing. The other anchor is a vision of planetary boundaries, landscape, and the natural world (rather than human created environment), which is the backdrop to human existence and sustainable life. Our findings suggest that brands offer a humbling view of the majestic natural world that is romantic and sublime, and delivers engaging and valuable consumer experiences (Harrigan, Roy, and Chen 2020). CBE is also facilitated by showcasing exemplary people and places underpinned by social learning theory (Bandura and Walters 1977) and the belief that consumers rely on evidence of what others are thinking and doing—social proof—to make adoption decisions (Sanak-Kosmowska 2021) that impact sustainable futures.

On the *approach* continuum we identified that sustainability CBE was facilitated in many different ways, from post-communications that offered purely aesthetic pleasure through to serious knowledge building and the opportunity for consumers to generate new ideas. At one end of the continuum we see creative and imaginative imagery and video content employing visual humour, cute and attractive material, vivid and engaging storytelling that is designed to entertain, engender emotional responses, and CBE. At the other end of the continuum we see confronting and disturbing facts, and new knowledge about issues, activations, technologies, and impacts being offered as evidence of change that is happening in connection with un/sustainable development. The literature supports the notion of positive CBE through consuming shocking content (Moraes, Kerrigan, and McCann 2020), along with narrative transportation through storytelling (Lim and Childs 2020) and from the pleasurable interplay between visual content and design elements (Hauser et al. 2022).

The exemplary brands with a strong sustainability agenda all used a variety of ‘head and heart’ approaches in their posts that seemed to be engendering positive CBE with sustainability issues. The combinations of different consumption/production action, individual/universal *scope*, and aesthetic pleasure/knowledge *approach* seem to be important to consumer brand experiences that can impact on consumers and the sustainability agenda. We believe that such post executions encourage followers (and other consumers) to linger and interact with brands, with each other and with sustainability initiatives, leading ideally towards sustainable futures.

Our findings highlight aspects of the marketing communication activities of three exemplary fashion brands as they focus on both environmental and social sustainability SDG goals and use their position of influence to promote sustainable futures to their consumers and brand followers. Overall, our continuum-based execution approach to understanding how sustainable fashion brands facilitate CBE enables a more nuanced picture of what facets are crucial to engendering consumer experiences for sustainability purposes.

Theoretical contributions

Our study contributes to the literature on marketing communications and sustainability by identifying three execution continuums that characterise how sustainable fashion brands design engaging sustainability communication on Instagram. While prior studies on Instagram have explored visual and content strategies through various theoretical

lenses, for example, Zhou and Xue's (2021) investigation into visual themes and viewer perspectives, there remains limited research that offers guidance on how marketing communication activities on Instagram can create engaging content capable of stimulating interest in sustainability issues. We contribute to addressing this gap by analysing the Instagram content of exemplary sustainable fashion brands and identifying how these brands use the platform to create emotionally resonant and cognitively stimulating experiences that encourage consumers to linger, interact, and engage with both the brand and its sustainability initiatives. We contribute to literature in four key ways.

First, we develop a guiding framework for scholars and practitioners on 'creating engaging Instagram content around sustainability'. Rather than presenting a prescriptive managerial model, our framework provides a platform for understanding how sustainability messages are constructed to generate engaging brand experiences that may stimulate consumer brand engagement (CBE). In doing so, our study highlights how brand-generated social media content can create aesthetically appealing and emotionally resonant brand content that has potential to stimulate consumers' affective, cognitive, and behavioural engagement, with the brand (Dessart, Veloutsou, and Morgan-Thomas 2015; Schivinski, Christodoulides, and Dabrowski 2016).

Second, our research extends emerging scholarship on sustainability communication (SC) in marketing by examining how sustainability messages are executed within digital platform environments. Building on the work of Golob, Podnar, and Zabkar (2023) and Rathee and Milfeld (2024), the study provides a more focused understanding of how sustainability messaging is operationalised in brand-generated social media content. The three execution continuums identified in this study—action focus, scope of sustainability concern, and communicative approach—illustrate how brands balance informational and experiential elements in their messaging. In doing so, the findings reinforce the importance of different manifestations of sustainability communication (Golob, Podnar, and Zabkar 2023), particularly in relation to its role as a vehicle for transmitting sustainability knowledge, stimulating critical reflection, and encouraging deliberative engagement with sustainability issues.

Third, our exemplary cases suggest that diverse and holistic sustainability messaging on Instagram can promote narratives centred on caring for people, planet, and prosperity. We build on prior research that highlights how brand-generated social media content can serve as a powerful vehicle for communicating purpose-driven brand values and fostering consumer engagement with sustainability issues. For example, research on sustainability-focused Instagram messaging demonstrates how authentic sustainability communication can stimulate consumer responses and dialogue around environmental and social issues (Bulmer et al. 2024). Similarly, studies of transformative advertising show that brand messaging on Instagram can inspire reflection, promote well-being narratives, and encourage deeper engagement with social and societal concerns (Dodds et al. 2024). Sustainability communication on social media can create meaningful brand experiences that combine emotionally engaging storytelling with informational content, potentially encouraging consumers to reflect on sustainability and engage in conversations about responsible consumption.

Lastly, our findings suggest that the broader impact of sustainability messaging on Instagram lies in its ability to extend beyond individual consumer responses through networked forms of engagement such as sharing, commenting, and participation in

online conversations. Prior research highlights how digital platforms enable brands and consumers to co-create sustainability narratives, with brand messaging acting as a catalyst for dialogue and collective engagement around sustainability issues (Palakshappa, Bulmer, and Dodds 2024). Through these interactions, sustainability communication can contribute to raising awareness, encouraging community conversations, and fostering shared commitments to sustainable futures. This networked engagement is particularly important in social media environments where consumer interactions with brand content can amplify sustainability narratives and contribute to broader societal conversations about responsible consumption and sustainable lifestyles (White, Habib, and Hardisty 2019).

Managerial contributions

The guiding framework developed in this study can be used as a practical toolkit to support the design and evaluation of sustainability-related Instagram content. The toolkit identifies three key execution dimensions – action focus, scope, and communicative approach – that marketing practitioners can use to reflect on how sustainability messages are framed and how they may encourage consumer engagement. By considering these dimensions, marketing teams can more intentionally align Instagram post executions with both brand values and consumer expectations. For example, posts that emphasise *production-led action* and *universal scope* may be effective for communicating corporate sustainability commitments and broader environmental challenges, while posts highlighting *consumption-led action* and *individual scope* may resonate more strongly with consumers seeking personal relevance and lifestyle alignment.

The toolkit also helps practitioners balance *aesthetic appeal with informational depth*, enabling brands to craft content that is not only visually engaging but also educative and purpose-driven. This balance is particularly important in sustainability messaging, where emotional resonance and credibility are both critical to fostering trust and long-term engagement. By understanding how different execution strategies map onto consumer engagement outcomes, marketing teams can make more informed decisions about content planning, campaign design, and resource allocation. For instance, brands aiming to build advocacy around sustainability issues may prioritise posts that fall toward the *knowledge* end of the aesthetic/knowledge continuum, while those focused on brand affinity and lifestyle positioning may lean into *aesthetic pleasure*. To further illustrate how the toolkit can be applied in practice, Table 2 provides examples of how the three execution dimensions can inform the design of sustainability-related Instagram content.

More broadly, the toolkit encourages marketing communication professionals to view Instagram not simply as a promotional channel but as a platform for creating engaging brand experiences that support sustainability narratives. By combining aesthetic storytelling, informative messaging, and calls to action, brands can stimulate conversation, encourage content sharing, and foster community dialogue around sustainability initiatives. Sustainability messaging on Instagram can move beyond transactional marketing and instead contribute to broader engagement with sustainability issues among online communities.

Table 2. Applying the sustainability communication toolkit in Instagram content.

Execution Dimension	Managerial Questions	Example Instagram Content
Action Focus: Production led	How can we demonstrate the brand’s sustainability actions and practices?	Behind-the-scenes videos of sustainable manufacturing, posts explaining ethical sourcing, factory transparency stories, supply chain maps, or “meet the maker” features showing artisans and workers.
Action Focus: Consumption led	How can we encourage consumers to participate in sustainable behaviours?	Styling posts showing how to wear garments multiple ways, repair tutorials, clothing care tips to extend garment life, “buy less wear more” challenges, or consumer-generated sustainable outfit posts.
Scope: Universal	How can we link the brand to wider sustainability issues?	Posts highlighting global environmental issues such as textile waste, water use in fashion, or climate impacts, supported by infographics or educational reels explaining industry challenges.
Scope: Individual	How can we make sustainability personally relevant to consumers?	“Small changes” posts showing simple lifestyle actions (e.g., choosing slow fashion, clothing swaps), customer stories about sustainable wardrobes, or “your impact” calculators.
Communication Approach: Aesthetic	How can sustainability be communicated through visual storytelling?	Highly curated imagery highlighting nature-inspired design, slow-fashion lifestyle photography, minimalist wardrobes, or emotionally evocative storytelling about conscious living.
Communication Approach: Knowledge	How can we educate consumers about sustainability?	Carousel posts explaining fabric sustainability, short educational reels on circular fashion, transparent sustainability reports translated into digestible graphics, or myth-busting sustainability facts.

Limitations and future research

This study offers valuable insights into how sustainable fashion brands use Instagram to foster engaging consumer experiences around sustainability. However, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the research is based on a small sample of three exemplary brands, which limits the generalisability of the findings across the broader fashion industry or other sectors with sustainability agendas. While these brands were selected for their leadership in sustainability communications, their practices may not reflect the diversity of approaches used by smaller or less established brands.

Second, the study focuses exclusively on brand-generated content, without incorporating consumer responses beyond post engagement metrics. This limits our understanding of how consumers interpret, internalise, and act upon sustainability messaging. Future research could address this gap by incorporating sentiment analysis or qualitative analysis of consumer comments to examine how sustainability narratives are received and discussed within online brand communities.

Third, the study does not measure behavioural outcomes, such as changes in consumer attitudes or purchasing decisions. While the framework proposes how Instagram content may foster engagement, it does not establish causal links between content execution and sustainable consumer behaviour. Identifying methods to measure the real-world impact of brand posts on sustainability-related actions remains a critical challenge—and a potential ‘Holy Grail’ for marketing communications research. Additionally, the study is limited to Instagram as a platform. While Instagram is highly visual and influential in fashion marketing, other platforms such as TikTok, Pinterest, and YouTube may offer different affordances and engagement dynamics that warrant exploration. Cross-platform

comparisons could yield richer insights into how sustainability messaging is adapted and received across digital ecosystems.

Future research could also extend the framework by applying it to other product categories with explicit sustainability agendas, such as beauty, food, or travel. Moreover, investigating how brands encourage, and curate consumer-generated sustainability content could shed light on participatory communication strategies and the co-creation of sustainability narratives. Finally, emerging technologies such as machine learning and natural language processing offer promising avenues for analysing large-scale social media data. These tools could be used to identify patterns in sustainability messaging, track sentiment over time, and assess the evolution of consumer engagement with sustainability issues.

In sum, while this study provides a foundational framework for understanding engaging sustainability communications on Instagram, further research is needed to validate and extend its applicability, examine consumer responses in greater depth, and develop robust methods for assessing the behavioural impact of sustainability messaging.

Disclosure statement

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

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