

COMMUNICATING ON ETHICS IN THE TEXTILE MARKET: RESULTS OF AN  
EXPLORATORY STUDY ON CORPORATE COMMUNICATION AND  
COMMUNICATION ON SOCIAL NETWORKS OF FAST FASHION AND ETHICAL  
FASHION ACTORS

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**COMMUNICATING ON ETHICS IN THE TEXTILE MARKET: RESULTS OF AN  
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Abstract: The fashion industry is now considered as the second most polluting industry in the world, mainly due to the overproduction of clothes by the fast fashion industry. As people become more aware of these negative consequences, many clothing brands have developed an offer and a proactive communication on sustainability in their activities. However, the challenge of ethical fashion is also based on a reduction in purchases and a longer use of clothes. Faced with the complexity of the subject, it is easy to mislead consumers through greenwashing techniques. Using netnographic methods, this research explores the way clothing brands address ethical fashion on their official websites and on social networks. Differences between the discourses of fast fashion and ethical brands are highlighted and consumers seem to trust more ethical brands but criticize fast fashion actors.

Key words: *sustainable fashion, netnography, consumer behavior*

Track: *Social Responsibility & Ethics*

## 1. Introduction

The fashion industry is currently producing 140 billion items of clothing per year, four times more than in 1980<sup>1</sup>, mainly due to the fast fashion<sup>2</sup> industry. The ecological and social consequences of this excessive production are considerable. Fashion is now the second most polluting industry in the world. In recent years, a collective awareness of the environmental and human damage caused by this industry has emerged. In response, some clothing brands have started to develop an offer and a proactive communication on the themes of sustainability, ecology and/or ethics. Beyond the choice of a clothing product or brand, ethical consumption extends to a reduction in purchases, longer use of wardrobe items and a second life given to clothing. This challenge is all the more important for fast fashion companies as they are strongly criticized by NGOs and consumers. Faced with the complexity of environmental and social sustainability issues, textile companies use sustainable arguments on different communication channels to improve their image or increase their sales, which can be considered as greenwashing (Bradford, 2007) if these announcements are not translated into significant changes in terms of Corporate Social Responsibility policy (CSR).

Our research focuses on the communications of clothing brands on their official websites and on social networks and how clothing brands address ethical fashion in each phase of the consumption cycle. We chose to study two fast fashion brands and two ethical brands. Using the technique of netnography (Kozinets, 2002), this research aims at answering the following questions: (1) Are there differences between the discourses of fast fashion and ethical brands? (2) What is the impact of these communications on brand communities? (3) How do consumers react to ethical fashion communications?

## 2. Literature Review

### *2.1 Sustainable or ethical fashion is still an unclear concept*

The definition of sustainable fashion appeared in the literature around 2008 with the pioneering work of Fletcher (2008), Beard (2008), De Brito et al. (2008) and Clark (2008). More than ten years later, a common definition still seems difficult to develop (Henninger et al., 2016; Reimers et al., 2016). Indeed, the concept of sustainable fashion encompasses a variety of terms such as organic, green, fair trade, sustainable, slow, ecological (Cervellon et al., 2010). Each of

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<sup>1</sup> « The price of fast-fashion », [www.nature.com](http://www.nature.com), 2017

<sup>2</sup> Fast fashion is defined as "a very rapid turnover of collections within a globalized distribution network" (Joy et al., 2012), e.g. ZARA, H&M, PRIMARK, MANGO, SHEIN

these definitions attempts to highlight or correct a variety of perceived injustices in the fashion industry, including animal cruelty, environmental damage and worker exploitation (Bray, 2009; Bianchi and Birtwistle, 2010; Blanchard, 2013). For example, Joergens (2006, p:361) defines ethical fashion as "*fashionable clothing that incorporates fair trade principles with sweatshop-free working conditions, without harming the environment or workers by using biodegradable and organic cotton,*" while Cervellon and Wernerfelt (2012) use the term "*green fashion*" to refer to the same themes. Therefore, aspects of consumption such as washing, use, reuse and disposal can have a substantial impact on the sustainability of a garment and should not be excluded from the definition (Cervellon et al, 2010). Proposing a precise definition of ethical fashion is difficult for two reasons: the fluid and evolving nature of sustainability in fashion, and also the recognition of the limitations of identifying an '*absolute*' element or practice of sustainable fashion. Sustainability is shrouded in subjectivity, making it a term that is '*intuitively understood, but still lacks a coherent definition*' (Henninger et al., 2016, p. 402). Beyond definition, it is important to explore ways in which social practices are shaped and support sustainable clothing, consumption, washing, reuse and ultimately disposal. Indeed, most current sustainable fashion consumers recognize that not consuming '*new*' is the most sustainable option (Balsiger, 2014; Bly, Gwozdz, and Reisch, 2015; Mukendi, Davies, Glozer, and McDonagh, 2020). Ethical fashion must therefore consider the life cycle, which takes into account all the phases of consumption: design, manufacturing, logistics, retail, use and disposal. Thus, the definition of sustainable fashion seems to be less specific over time, and more malleable because it offers consumers and producers the opportunity to select which aspects of sustainability they wish to implement (Mukendi et al., 2020)

## 2.2 *Greenwashing*

CSR communication concerns the communicated identity of the company. It is supposed to play a crucial role in shaping ethical perceptions of the firm ( Balmer, Fukukawa, and Gray, 2007) and its social legitimacy (Vanhamme and Grobben, 2009; Wæraas and Ihlen, 2009). However, the profusion of CSR claims, whether they are well-founded or not, creates difficulties for consumers trying to distinguish between truly virtuous companies and those that take opportunistic advantage of sustainability trends ( Auld, Bernstein, and Cashore, 2008; Balmer et al.,2007). In response, there is a strong movement against "*greenwashing*" (Bradford, 2007), defined as "*tactics that mislead consumers about a company's environmental practices or the environmental benefits of a product or service*". Under such conditions, the potential

benefits of CSR communication for corporate brand evaluation may be questioned by consumers. This is true for genuinely responsible companies as well.

In order to understand the sustainable fashion approach of fast fashion and ethical brands and how their efforts are perceived by customers, we looked at the communication channels of four ready-to-wear brands.

### **3. Research Methodology**

Retailers' communication channels are important facilitators for ethical fashion consumption and behavior (James and Montgomery, 2017a). As such, we employed non-participatory netnographic techniques (Kozinets, 2002) that use publicly available information online to identify and understand the needs and decision influences of consumer groups in a discrete manner. Our study focused, on the one hand, on two leading fast fashion brands: ZARA and H&M, which are increasingly integrating sustainability into their strategy by launching specialized ranges, such as JOIN LIFE and CONSCIOUS respectively. On the other hand, we chose the brand PATAGONIA, which has placed sustainability principles as a central element of its strategy, and, the French brand HOPAAL, which develops a strategy of local production and use of sustainable raw materials. We carried out two types of data collection. Firstly, we collected more than 433 pages of ethical fashion data from the four corporate websites. Secondly, we studied the exchanges between the four brands and their community on the social network INSTAGRAM between January, 1<sup>st</sup> and July, 1<sup>st</sup> 2021. Given the large number of publications, 635 in total (Table 1), we focused on publications dealing with ethical fashion that received at least 3 comments from Internet users. We thus obtained a final corpus of 77 publications and 1295 comments (Table 1). The corpus was then subjected to a thematic content analysis, following an iterative process (Arsel, 2017). A first reading brought out the themes addressed and then the different pieces of the elements collected were coded using the N'VIVO software. The codes were then grouped together, following a process of categorization and then theorization based on the facts (Paillé and Mucchielli, 2016).

**Table 1- NUMBER OF POSTS AND COMMENTS ON INSTAGRAM  
(from January 1st to July 1st 2021)**

	ZARA	H&M	PATAGONIA	HOPAAL
Number of followers (million)	46,1	37,1	4,6	0,463
Number of posts (Total)	3480	6327	2840	621
Number of posts (01/01/2021 - 07/01/2021)	300	121	107	107
Number of likes (thousand)	16507	28474	4293	77,7
Number of comments	132501	85930	13524	1565
Commitment rate	0,8%	0,3%	0,3%	2,0%
Average number of comments / post	441,7	710,2	126,4	14,6
Number of posts about ethical fashion	7	28	8	34
Number of likes (thousand)	267,3	4629,6	446,8	28
Number of comments	1412	8248	1860	832
Commitment rate	0,5%	0,2%	0,4%	3,0%
Average number of comments / post	201,7	294,6	232,5	24,5
% of posts about ethical fashion / total number of posts	<b>2,3%</b>	<b>23,1%</b>	<b>7,5%</b>	<b>31,8%</b>

## 4. Results

### 4.1 The ethical values of the brands are clearly displayed

On the homepage of the sites, the choices of displaying CSR orientation between ethical brands and fast fashion brands clearly appears. Indeed, as one might expect, ethical fashion brands such as HOPAAL "*Clothes that preserve the planet*" and PATAGONIA "*Our company exists to save the planet*" immediately make the link between clothing and their industrial activity, which aims to be more responsible. The latter use more the lexical field of ethical fashion (environmental, sustainable, responsible, social) in their communication than fast fashion brands (PATAGONIA: 76, HOPAAL: 98, H&M: 53, ZARA: 72, see Table 2). The positioning of fast fashion companies is different. While ZARA makes no reference to ethical or responsible fashion on its homepage, H&M's website writes "*sustainable development*" at the center of its homepage. The fast-fashion sites are full of information about their environmental and social efforts towards sustainability, but it is not easy for the user to find the right information regarding the large number of sections and sub-sections on the sites. Surfing on the two ethical brand sites is more fluent. Moreover, these brands put forward concrete actions rather than future commitments and present far fewer certifications and various labels than the fast fashion brands do.

**Table 2 – NUMBER OF WORDS REFERRING TO ETHICAL FASHION ON THE OFFICIAL SITES OF H&M, ZARA, PATAGONIA and HOPAAL**

SITES	Number of pages	Number of words	Ethical	Sustainable	Responsible	Social / societal	Environmental	TOTAL
H&M	170	33 057	0	20	17	13	3	53
ZARA	29	7 039	0	33	8	5	26	72
HOPAAL	113	19 415	2	8	11	44	33	98
PATAGONIA	118	18 975	1	8	7	33	27	76

#### 4.2 Production is the first topic before purchase and consumption

The analysis of the four brands' websites essentially highlights the theme of ethical manufacturing of clothing (66%): use of sustainable and/or ecological raw materials (20%), manufacturing processes that are less harmful to the environment (16%) as well as care for workers (9%) (Table 3). The brands include consumers in their approach "making you part of the solution" and insist on the importance of individual behavior "If getting dressed is a need, there is no need to do so at the expense of the environment". The efforts consumers can make deal with purchasing, using and the end of life of garments. The four brands invite their customers to use their clothes more ethically by offering tips and tricks on clothes care as well as up-cycling ideas (5% of occurrences). The end of life of clothes is also addressed by the brands (4%) but more significantly by the fast fashion brands that offer in-store clothes collection systems.

**Table 3 - ETHICAL FASHION THEMES ADDRESSED ON OFFICIAL BRAND WEBSITES (From 01/01/2021 to 07/01/2021)**

		TOTAL OCCURRENCES		H&M OCCURRENCES		ZARA OCCURRENCES		PATAGONIA OCCURRENCES		HOPAAL OCCURRENCES	
		NUMBER	%	NUMBER	%	NUMBER	%	NUMBER	%	NUMBER	%
<b>FINDINGS</b>	AWARENESS OF CONSEQUENCES	27	4%	10	5%	0	0%	11	9%	6	3%
	EFFECTIVENESS OF THE RESULTS	35	5%	20	9%	1	1%	4	3%	10	5%
<b>STRATEGY</b>	MISSION / VALUES	56	8%	17	8%	1	1%	9	7%	29	16%
	INNOVATION	31	5%	26	12%	2	2%	1	1%	2	1%
<b>PRODUCTION</b>	RAW MATERIALS	134	20%	30	14%	35	27%	33	26%	36	19%
	PRODUCTION PROCESS	104	16%	8	4%	24	19%	14	11%	58	31%
	PRODUCTS	34	5%	20	9%	1	1%	2	2%	11	6%
	TRANSPORTS	5	1%	3	1%	0	0%	1	1%	1	1%
	WARRANTIES	100	15%	41	19%	25	20%	22	17%	12	6%
	LABOURHOOD	57	9%	19	9%	12	9%	20	16%	6	3%
<b>POINT OF SALES</b>	PHYSICAL STORES	14	2%	4	2%	7	5%	0	0%	3	2%
	ON LINE SALES	6	1%	3	1%	1	1%		0%	2	1%
	PURCHASE	3	0%		0%		0%		0%	3	2%
<b>CONSUMPTION</b>	USE	30	5%	6	3%	11	9%	10	8%	3	2%
<b>END OF LIFE</b>	RECYCLING	26	4%	13	6%	8	6%	2	2%	3	2%
<b>TOTAL</b>		662	100%	220	100%	128	100%	129	100%	185	100%

#### 4.3 Differences between fast fashion and ethical brands are sensible on social networks

Among all the posts made between 01/01 and 01/07, the proportion of messages concerning ethical fashion varies greatly from one brand to another. The strategies used to disseminate the messages are unexpected, in fact we find 32% of publications on ethical fashion for HOPAAL, and only 7% for PATAGONIA (which communicates more on sport or activist practices). These companies, whose environmental positioning is part of their brand identity, are either in search of recognition and legitimacy in the sector due to their recent arrival on the market, as for HOPAAL. PATAGONIA invests political and social fields in its communications through

the institutionalization and managerial embodiment of environmental values. As far as fast fashion groups are concerned, opposing strategies are identified: while H&M reserves 23% of media space for posts relating to ethical fashion issues, ZARA devotes only 2%, which is consistent with the importance of displaying these themes in its corporate communication (Table 1). Secondly, the addressed issues are mostly related to manufacturing: use of raw materials (28%), production processes (26%) and product characteristics (21%) (Table 4).

**Table 4 - THEMES OF THE FOUR BRANDS' ETHICAL FASHION POSTS ON INSTAGRAM (From January, 1<sup>st</sup> to July 1<sup>st</sup>)**

	TOTAL POSTS		H&M POSTS		ZARA POSTS		PATAGONIA POSTS		HOPAAL POSTS	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
AWARENESS OF CONSEQUENCES	4	4%		0%		0%	3	38%	1	2%
MISSIONS VALUES	9	10%		0%		0%	1	13%	8	17%
PRODUCTION PROCESS	23	26%	13	46%	3	38%	1	13%	6	13%
RAW MATERIALS	25	28%	6	21%	4	50%	1	13%	14	30%
PRODUCTION PROCESS	19	21%	3	11%	1	13%	1	13%	14	30%
PACKAGINGS	2	2%		0%		0%		0%	2	4%
PURCHASE	1	1%		0%		0%	0	0%	1	2%
2nde LIFE/RECYCLING	7	8%	6	21%		0%	1	13%	0	0%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>100%</b>

NB : Several posts were coded into two categories

*4.4 Internet users remain above all critical fashion consumers*

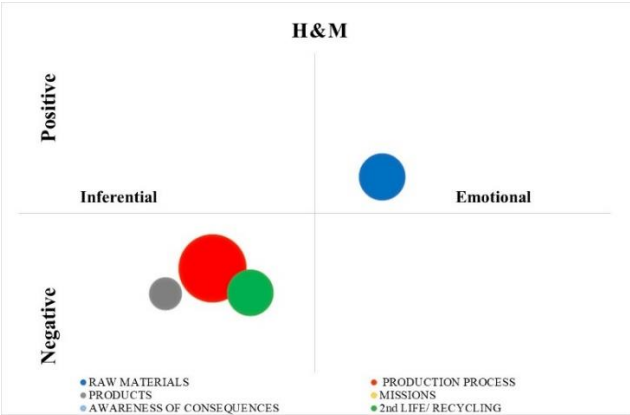
We also studied the reactions of Internet users by observing the number of comments per post dealing with ethical fashion compared to the number of comments on other posts. The number of comments is lower for the fast fashion brands (202 vs. 442 for ZARA; 295 vs. 710 for H&M) whereas it is higher for the ethical brands (233 vs. 126 for PATAGONIA and 25 vs. 15 for HOPAAL, see Table 1). This shows a community that is faithful to its commitments and proofs its involvement by commenting. Furthermore, the aesthetics of the product remains very important. We notice that almost a third of the posts refers to the aesthetics of the clothes. We also observe that the three international brands receive many comments unrelated to the subject of the post from customers just expressing their negative or positive opinion on the brand.

We further categorized the ethical comments received by the brands. This analysis highlights the differences in Internet users' perceptions of brands: positive and negative criticism on the one hand, and emotional or inferential content on the other. Emotional responses focus on an event and are made up of a trigger mechanism based on relevance that shapes a response expressing feelings, while inferential responses refer to the fact that an interlocutor brings

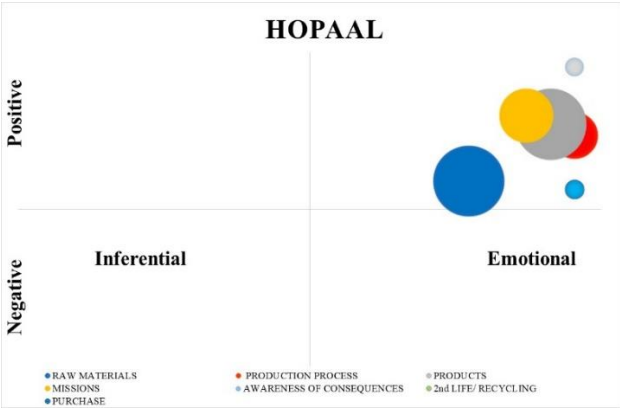


additional information to the initial statement. We note that H&M and ZARA are subject to a greater number of negative criticisms of their publications on ethical fashion than HOPAAL and PATAGONIA. The only exception is the subject of raw materials for H&M. The responses of Internet users are mainly emotional. Users send short messages marked by the use of exclamation marks and emojis for all the discussed topics. H&M is the subject of more inferential comments regarding products, recycling and production processes. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the nature of Internet users' responses to publications on ethical fashion by H&M and HOPAAL which are the two brands communicating the most on ethical fashion.

**Figure 1 - NATURE OF RESPONSES TO H&M POSTS**



**Figure 2 - NATURE OF RESPONSES TO HOPAAL POSTS**



**5. Discussion and conclusion**

The analysis of the websites of the brands ZARA, H&M, PATAGONIA and HOPAAL highlights the important themes of ethical consumption: production, supply, sale, use and end of life. The ethical production of clothing is the main focus of communication. The use and the end of life of clothes are also mentioned by the four brands. Although the two fast fashion giants

seem to be committed in sustainable fashion, the information they provide is neither clear nor fluid. The findings are rather the same for communication on social networks. If the number of posts on ethical fashion remains confidential for H&M and almost insignificant for ZARA, they mostly get negative comments of an inferential nature referring to recent news events. Thus, Internet users show their support for the expression of values strongly anchored in a strategy, but question the ethical commitments of the two fast fashion brands, which suffer from their image of a contractor exploiting an underpaid workforce. These social concerns should not overshadow the large number of comments that reveal only aesthetic considerations regarding a product. Thus, faced with fast fashion brands, "fast consumers" asking for a nice, fashionable garment still remain.

From a managerial point of view, this research invites ready-to-wear brands to highlight their CSR efforts in a clear, concise manner, stating results rather than objectives. The brand's positioning and ethical commitment must be mentioned on the home page in the interests of clarity.

The data collected by the netnographic method shows some limitations. Indeed, we are not able to differentiate the simple "follower" from the real customer of the brand. It would be interesting to continue this research by interviewing consumers of the four brands.

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