

A Sustainable Wor(l)d: Evaluations of Sustainable Fashion Terminology within a Multi-Dimensional Framework for Sustainability

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Abstract

Sustainability, despite the lack of a universal definition, is commonly interpreted as multidimensional, affecting different aspects of life (Berglez and Olausson, 2014; Touri, 2016), and also the realm of consumption (Hornsey et al., 2016; Klaniecki et al., 2016). However, sustainability is often used in a broad and nonspecific manner (Hansen, 2010), and even more so in contexts which are by definition not at all sustainable.

The fashion industry, for example, is considered to be wasteful and unsustainable, generating eminent environmentally and socially harmful effects (Jacobs et al., 2018). Yet, the concept of sustainable fashion as promoting ecological, ethical and reduced consumption is permeating in the clothing sector (Thomas, 2008), as resonated by fashion media and by clothing manufacturers in promotional communication. Despite sustainable fashion branding being on the rise, sustainable fashion consumption has not increased significantly (Furchheim et al., 2019). This apparent attitude-behavior gap is potentially fueled by a lack of knowledge and awareness regarding sustainability, rooted in inconsistency and ambiguity in communication (Ritch, 2020; Henninger et al., 2016). In fashion consumption, sustainability is communicated using many different terms and concepts, with words like “eco”, “green”, “conscious”, “organic” and “ethical” are used synonymously (Peirson-Smith and Evans, 2017).

Thus far, sustainable communication research hardly has focused on of associated meanings and consumer perceptions for sustainable fashion terminology. We will discuss the communicative challenges of sustainability in fashion to review if and how commonly used sustainable fashion terms can eventually stimulate more sustainable behavior. Building on the behavioral change model, with knowledge as a core criterion for forming sustainable attitudes and engaging in sustainable consumption (Steg and Vleck, 2009), the aim is to understand the implications of how sustainable fashion is defined in through communication, and to what extent these signals can be used to impact more sustainable consumption practice.

Findings indicate that current communication efforts seem to be increasing superficial awareness, but are not inherently endorsing a comprehensive view of sustainability, subsequently failing to induce sustainable behavioural change. The communication of sustainability in fashion is both conceptualized and interpreted mainly within the corporate context of consumption, instead of framing sustainability as holistic concept, using coherent and transparent terminology.

Besides offering theoretical contributions to the sustainability communication and eco-fashion literature, as well as managerial implications for the construction of successful awareness campaigns and behavioural interventions, the findings may also offer benefits regarding the broader realization of sustainable development in society. However, future research is needed to confirm and elaborate on our findings to better understand how sustainability can be captured holistically in communication using sustainable fashion terminology.

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