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Shaping the Future of Sustainable Fashion Online – The Role of Sustainable Fashion Influencers in Conceptualizing Sustainable Fashion

A Mukendi, I Davies, P McDonagh & S Glozer, University of Bath, United Kingdom

The UN's 12th sustainable development goal (SDG) is "promoting responsible consumption and production" with the aim of achieving sustainable consumption (United Nations, 2019), but my study focuses specifically on encouraging responsible consumption in fashion. Sustainable fashion (SF) represents varied attempts to reduce the sizeable environmental impact of our clothing consumption through the consumption/production of fewer items. The United Kingdom annually produces 206.456 tonnes of textile waste per year (Labfresh, 2020). Considering the SDG, the question is how can we engage people, on a large scale, to change their consumption behaviours (Kilbourne et al., 1997; Prothero et al., 2011)? Engaging people in the narrative of SF is key to making SF a mainstream practice (Evans and Peirson-Smith, 2018; Blanchet, 2017; Strähle and Graff, 2017). It has been suggested that the concept of green commodity discourse, the idea that sustainable behaviours can be communicated to consumers "...through the mechanism of the market itself" (Prothero and Fitchett, 2000, p.51), may be a way to accomplish this. Although fashion influencers, or people with large followings on social media, are often associated with promoting cheap, low-quality fashion, SF influencers are seen as potential avenues for driving change (BBC, 2018; Beecham, 2019). Stereotypically, the image of SF is of a boring, hippy-esque lifestyle, appealing to those that are *different* (Connell, 2010). However, tapping into the SF community online reveals a rich and varied discourse made up of 'eco innovators' or SF social media influencers who aim to disrupt the boring SF narrative and drive change in SF. Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to analyse how these SF social media innovators conceptualise SF to understand their role in shaping the SF movement. Because of their influence, this study is of the view that the way SF is conceptualised by these popular figures has real implications in what is considered SF; how the boundaries of what is considered SF are set; and what practices people adopt.

To achieve the objective, this qualitative interpretative study employs a multi-method online ethnography including interviews with twenty-six SF social media influencers and the visual and textual analysis of social media content. This study is important because if we can understand the roles and place that SF influencers have over the SF movement, we can drive, shape, or sustain the movement – making it potentially more effective than previous attempts. This research contributes to the literature by looking at the implications of employing the green commodity discourse on social media. This study also brings sustainability conversations into the social media context from a consumer culture perspective, where such a focus is still in its infancy.