

SUSTAINABILITY STRUGGLES: DISCURSIVE TENSIONS IN LATIN AMERICAN COSMETIC INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

In attempting to understand how leading cosmetics brands in Latin America communicate their sustainability initiatives and corporate social responsibility, we ask the following questions: (a) how do social media stakeholders engage with the sustainability content communicated by leading cosmetic brands in Latin America?, (b) what discourses employ these brands to demonstrate their commitment to sustainability?, and (c) what tensions and contradictions are embedded within the sustainability and corporate social responsibility discourses of these brands? In order to address these questions, we focus on the analysis of four well-established brands within the Latin American cosmetic industry: Avon, Natura, O Boticário, and Yanbal. By embracing both qualitative and quantitative analyses, our findings help us to identify the tensions that arise when cosmetic companies strive to conciliate the pursuit of profit while advocating for sustainable development. Specifically, we argue that the discourse on sustainability of leading cosmetic brands in Latin America is especially appealing to audiences when it particularly points out environmental concerns and less so when it refers to social sustainability. Moreover, we show a nuanced interplay of tensions that encompass the juxtaposition of three dialectic relationships in this sustainability discourse: the tension between sustainability and capitalism, between corporate impact and consumer agency, and between empowerment and gender roles.

KEYWORDS

sustainability communication, discursive tensions, cosmetic industry, social responsibility, sustainable brands

MARCAS DE SUSTENTABILIDADE: TENSÕES DISCURSIVAS NA INDÚSTRIA DE COSMÉTICOS DA AMÉRICA LATINA

RESUMO

Na tentativa de compreender como as principais marcas de cosméticos da América Latina comunicam as suas iniciativas de sustentabilidade e responsabilidade social empresarial, levantamos as seguintes questões: (a) como é que os utilizadores das redes sociais interagem com o conteúdo de sustentabilidade divulgado pelas principais marcas de cosméticos da América Latina?, (b) que discursos utilizam essas marcas para evidenciar o seu compromisso com a sustentabilidade?, e (c) quais são as tensões e contradições implícitas nos discursos de sustentabilidade e

responsabilidade social empresarial dessas marcas? Para responder a estas questões, analisamos quatro marcas bem estabelecidas na indústria de cosméticos latino-americana: Avon, Natura, O Boticário e Yanbal. Através de análises qualitativas e quantitativas, os resultados obtidos permitem-nos identificar as tensões decorrentes da tentativa das empresas de cosméticos em conciliar a procura do lucro com a promoção do desenvolvimento sustentável. Mais concretamente, argumentamos que o discurso sobre a sustentabilidade das principais marcas de cosméticos na América Latina é particularmente apelativo para o público quando destaca preocupações ambientais e menos quando se refere à sustentabilidade social. Além disso, demonstramos uma interação complexa de tensões que incluem a justaposição de três relações dialéticas neste discurso de sustentabilidade: a tensão entre sustentabilidade e capitalismo, entre o impacto empresarial e a agência do consumidor, e entre empoderamento e papéis de género.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

comunicação sobre sustentabilidade, tensões discursivas, indústria de cosméticos, responsabilidade social, marcas sustentáveis

1. INTRODUCTION

Love for your beauty, love for the planet! — Yanbal
 More bio-beauty for the future of the jungle. — Natura
 Today we take care of tomorrow's beauty. — O Boticário
 Would you like to earn money by making other
 women feel prettier? Join Avon. — Avon

These slogans illustrate the way in which companies, specifically prominent Latin American cosmetic brands, integrate the discourse on sustainability in their communication strategies when engaging with their stakeholders and society at large. While these organizations embrace commitment and social responsibility towards the environmental and social future, the use of these slogans, among other diverse messages from cosmetic companies, constitutes a compelling *corpus* to critically study the communication of sustainability within an intriguing industry, such as the cosmetic that promotes sustainable ideals while simultaneously relying on resource-intensive raw materials and contributing to a culture of excessive consumption.

The scientific evidence is compelling: there is just over a decade left to prevent global warming from exceeding the 1.5 °C limit set in the 2015 Paris Agreement to avoid falling into the worst-case situation. This scenario has far-reaching implications, not only environmentally but also in terms of its social, economic, and numerous other consequences, as highlighted in the sixth report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (The Core Writing Team et al., 2023). Furthermore, while there is still time, the solution lies in climate-resilient development that integrates measures to adapt to climate change and actions to reduce or mitigate greenhouse gas emissions. To achieve this, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change asserts that transformative behavior must align with our values, perspectives, and knowledge and, we should add, with our life's purpose or organizational mission.

In this context, even though the cosmetics industry is increasingly embracing sustainable practices in response to consumer concerns, it still faces significant challenges that include pollution and the rise in greenhouse gas emissions. Consumers are progressively seeking more natural, eco-friendly, and organic alternatives. Furthermore, there is an awareness of the social challenges intertwined with the industry, such as child labor, as well as environmental concerns regarding synthetic ingredients, deforestation, and animal exploitation (Martins & Marto, 2023). In attempting to understand how leading cosmetics brands in Latin America communicate their sustainability initiatives and corporate social responsibility (CSR), we ask the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: how do social media stakeholders engage with the sustainability content communicated by leading cosmetic brands in Latin America?

RQ2: what discourses and narrative strategies employ these brands to demonstrate their commitment to sustainability?

RQ3: what tensions and contradictions are embedded within the sustainability and CSR discourses of these brands?

In order to address these questions, we draw on the literature on the communication of sustainability and focus our analysis on four leading brands within the Latin American cosmetic industry: Avon, Natura, O Boticário, and Yanbal. Our approach involves a two-fold methodology that aligns with the nature of the communication processes. First, using a Mann-Whitney test, we conduct a quantitative analysis of the most important characteristics of message production and reception within social media. In addition, we performed a critical discourse analysis to explore the messages deeper, particularly focusing on the underlying discourses of sustainability. By combining these two methodologies, we strive to explain the tensions embedded within sustainability discourses in the beauty sector.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptually, we draw on the literature on CSR, sustainability, and purpose-driven companies. Based on CSR, companies should contribute to the betterment of society (Matten & Moon, 2004). From the neo-classical standpoint, CSR primarily entails the provision of jobs and the payment of taxes. More contemporary CSR theories, such as stakeholder, social contract, and legitimacy, advocate for a wider spectrum of responsibilities that encompass ethical conduct, environmental care, and proactive engagement in addressing social issues (Moir, 2001).

From a communication perspective, the stakeholder theory significantly enhances our understanding of CSR. This theory suggests that companies interact and manage relationships with diverse stakeholders who can either influence or be impacted by their operations. According to Morsing and Schultz (2006), this engagement entails communication strategies that have historically evolved. Initially focusing on information dissemination, these strategies then shifted to behavioral approaches, progressed to involvement practices to encourage dialogue and stakeholder participation, and ultimately

evolved into sensemaking and sense-giving strategies. It is in this last set of strategies that this paper focuses on, that is, the discursive frameworks that influence processes of sensemaking related to sustainability.

According to Verk et al. (2021), the evolution of the “CSR” concept has undergone several phases, each of them representing unique communication frameworks. The authors identify three distinct phases: (a) differentiation, which centers on examining the role of communication in reporting information about social and environmental initiatives that companies undertake; (b) mobilization, which expands the scope to encompass stakeholder involvement and specific business cases; and (c) prominence, a stage where CSR gains significant attention in both academia and organizational realms, but also experiences increased fragmentation in its conceptualization, as digital interaction introduces complexity and ambiguity.

Even though the concept of “sustainability” historically emerged after that of “CSR”, it encompasses a broader framework that includes not only responsible practices adopted by companies to benefit society but also a model of development. This model aims to meet current environmental, social, and economic needs without jeopardizing the access of future generations to resources (Livesey, 2002). Scholars such as Signitzer and Prexl (2007) view sustainability as an evolution of the notion of “CSR”. Regardless of the historical relationship between these two concepts, both emphasize the role of individuals, companies, governments, and society at large in shaping a sustainable future. They underscore the collective responsibility to balance economic growth with ecological preservation and social equity.

Sustainability encompasses several dimensions, including economic, social, and environmental aspects. These dimensions are explored from diverse viewpoints, such as sustainable economic models and business designs aimed towards triple impact (Barroso, 2021), the role of communication in fostering a relational and political perspective based on sustainability (Krohling-Kunsch, 2015; Krohling-Kunsch & Oliveira, 2009), and the decolonial approach, which advocates for reclaiming ancient knowledge and the worldviews of Indigenous peoples, social organizations, or overlooked situations (Álvarez-Nobell et al., 2022).

In the context of sustainability, the idea of purpose-driven companies has become increasingly relevant for businesses. In purpose-driven companies, the actions of organizations follow a commitment to enhancing their triple positive impact. In this regard, according to Barroso (2021), such purpose-driven companies embody characteristics like dynamism, responsibility, reliability, transparency, and innovation, among others. They are associated with pro-socio-environmental values such as justice (both social and environmental), cooperation, solidarity, respect, and protection. What sets them apart from traditional companies are attributes like a defined purpose, a continual interest to generate positive social and environmental impact, an impact-driven business model, and their contributions to global and local challenges. These companies might also seek inspiration from nature by applying “biomimicry”, a concept introduced by Benyus (1997/2012), within the realm of communication.

In the study of pro-environmental behaviors among the public, which examines the motivations behind eco-friendly actions, four key perspectives have been identified by Otálora et al. (2022):

- Environmental concern and pro-environmental behaviors;
- The role of organizations in promoting pro-environmental behaviors that lead to social change;
- Individual and collective ethical and political actions; and
- Social norms, consumption patterns, and voluntary behavior.

Furthermore, as individuals are bombarded with information, it has become fundamental for brands to establish a strong and coherent corporate identity capable of building trust. This is where corporate image becomes a strategic intangible asset (Capriotti, 2009). However, it is important to note that all organizations, simply by existing and being visible, communicate, intentionally or unintentionally, messages to their surroundings (Chaves, 2005). Capriotti (2009) also emphasizes that these expressions of corporate identity are no longer only produced from within the organization (corporate communication) but that they reflect the organization's own behavior and its daily evolution, which also communicates.

In the realm of organizational roles, particularly in the context of businesses as catalyzers of citizen activism, purpose-driven companies have emerged as a distinct sector that is often considered the “fourth sector” in the economy. These organizations distinguish themselves from traditional enterprises by operating in the for-profit private sector while simultaneously addressing social and environmental issues (Elkington, 2019; Honeyman & Jana, 2019; Sabeti, 2011). This frame of action constitutes an evolution beyond the traditional CSR approach as it goes beyond specific responsible actions. Within this new frame, social and environmental purposes become the very essence of an organization (Barroso, 2015, 2021; Suárez Monsalve & Álvarez-Nobell, 2022).

Although not directly considered purpose-driven companies, cosmetic brands have recently embraced significant sustainable actions. In fact, we can analyze the impact and relationship of the beauty sector with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For example, in relation to SDG3, that is, global health and well-being, the beauty and personal care industry directly contributes to the physical and emotional well-being of individuals through products and services related to health and personal care. For SDG12, responsible production and consumption, cosmetic companies have adopted diverse eco-friendly practices, and they are also committed to SDG15 — life on land — as they contribute to the preservation of biodiversity.

However, while cosmetic companies embrace these objectives and convey their commitment, the public and society still keep some skepticism as they encounter instances of greenwashing, SDG-washing, and various other forms of deceptive practices. These behaviors hinder access to the essential information that individuals require to make well-informed choices and underscore the growing importance of companies addressing sustainability issues. It is within this general framework of communication that we situate the research study that we present here.

3. METHOD

3.1. STUDYING SUSTAINABILITY DISCOURSES

In order to understand how leading cosmetics brands in Latin America communicate their sustainability initiatives and answer our RQs, we conducted an in-depth study of four prominent cosmetics brands such as Avon, Natura, O Boticário, and Yanbal. Following a similar approach adopted by other researchers (Dalmarco et al., 2015; Kenalemang-Palm et al., 2021; Ourahmoune et al., 2014), the selection of these brands was based on three criteria: (a) scope and reach as the four of them have extensive market coverage and brand recognition across various Latin American countries; (b) sustainability policies as these brands are acknowledged by their commitment to sustainability and responsible corporate practices; and (c) diverse representation as the four brands have demonstrated an interest in addressing a diverse range of social and environmental issues in Latin America where their market is stronger.

According to the Corporate Reputation Business Monitor ranking (see Table 1), the leading corporate monitor in Ibero-America that has been assessing companies' reputations since 2000, three of the brands selected as case studies are among the top 10 most reputable in Ibero-America. Furthermore, in the case of O Boticário, in Merco Brazil, it ranks second in the “cosmetics and perfumery” sector, preceded by Natura and followed by Avon.

| POSITIONS | BRAND |
|-----------|-------------------|
| 1 | Unilever |
| 2 | P&G |
| 3 | Natura |
| 4 | J&J |
| 5 | L'Oréal |
| 6 | Kimberly Clark |
| 7 | Avon |
| 8 | Colgate Palmolive |
| 9 | Yanbal |

Table 1. Companies with the best reputation in Ibero-America in 2021

Note. Information retrieved from Corporate Reputation Business Monitor (<https://www.merco.info>)

Within this group of brands and considering that our primary focus is on communication, we approached it as a complex process that entails production, message, and consumption on behalf of an audience. In order to explore the general characteristics of message production and its reception in social media, we adopted a quantitative approach. To gain deeper insights into the characteristics of these messages — particularly the underlying discourses in sustainability communication — we employed a qualitative approach. In this section, we explain the way in which we performed our analysis through the examination of three different bodies of organizational texts (Atkinson et al., 2008):

Facebook posts published by each of the four studied brands, the sustainability policies also shared by these companies in their websites, and audiovisual content featured in their YouTube channels. As we will explain next, we analyzed this data both quantitatively and qualitatively.

3.2. QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

In order to address the first RQ, that is, to explore how social media audiences engage with the sustainability content communicated by leading Latin American cosmetic brands, we conducted a statistical analysis on social media posts that Avon, Natura, O Boticário, and Yanbal published between July 31, 2019, and July 31, 2023, about the topic of sustainability understood broadly, that is, including its environmental, social, and economic dimensions. Facebook emerged as the primary focus for analyzing sustainability communication because of both the considerable user base of the platform and the proactive engagement of organizations, which has led to their predominant presence on Facebook (Capriotti et al., 2019).

We used the analytical tool Crowdtangle to collect this data and gain insights in relation to engagement metrics, trends, and interactions on Facebook for Avon, Natura, O Boticário, and Yanbal. These insights allowed us to explore the content of the communication and the interactions between these four brands and their Facebook audiences. To ensure this broad approach to sustainability, we employed search terms in the Crowdtangle platform that encompassed diverse facets of sustainability, including “sustainability”, “sustainable”, “social sustainability”, “environmental”, and “equity”. To perform the statistical analysis, we used the R programming language.

3.3. QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

In addition, and as done in other studies (Hartono et al., 2022), we also conducted a qualitative analysis that complemented the overview provided by the quantitative study, and that allowed us to address the other two guiding questions of our study — namely, to explore the discourses used by these brands to demonstrate their commitment to sustainability, and to identify the tensions and contradictions within these discourses. This qualitative approach encompassed not only the assessment of Facebook posts but also extended to the inclusion of two supplementary datasets: the sustainability policies published by the companies on their websites and the audiovisual content presented on their YouTube channels.

For each of these three types of organizational texts, we applied the following samples: we analyzed the four sustainability policies of each of the brands studied. All of them were accessed through their websites on the same date (July 27, 2023) to ensure equitable data collection. Audiovisual content was chosen regardless of its format (promotional, training, webinars, etc.) and duration.

However, given the substantial number of pieces and the qualitative purpose of this methodology, we followed a purposive sampling criterion to select those videos most

pertinent to our RQs. In total, we thoroughly examined 20 representative videos — five from each company — until we reached methodological saturation in such a way that distinct content demonstrated evident discursive trends. The videos available on each brand's YouTube channel were accessed on a consistent date (July 13, 2023) with a focus on identifying materials related to sustainability (we used the same set of search terms employed for the quantitative sample). Finally, following the same purposive sampling criteria, we analyzed the Facebook posts and their comments that were relevant to the second and third RQ.

Once we collected the sustainability policies and videos as well as the relevant Facebook posts along with their corresponding comments, we transcribed the material in order to analyze them through a discourse analysis whose main purpose was to critically examine the systems of meaning that those organizational texts created and reproduced. Guided by a methodological critical standpoint (Merrigan et al., 2009), we aimed to deconstruct the contradictions within the sustainability discourses of the studied brands. Considering the multifaceted nature of discourses and their emergence from diverse and conflicting contexts, our focus was on exploring the tensions that shape them (Tracy & Geist-Martin, 2014). This approach aligns with the broader paradigm of paradox studies, which encompasses concepts like “tension”, “contradiction”, “dualism”, “duality”, and “dialectic” (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008; Putnam et al., 2016).

Our particular emphasis lies on tensions as an analytical framework for deconstructing discourses on sustainability. Studying these tensions is crucial because previous research (Chang, 2011; Leonidou et al., 2011) indicates that consumers, even if environmentally conscious, tend to be skeptical of products labeled as “green” due to concerns about greenwashing. However, research also shows that this skepticism can be countered based on the design (both in form and content) of the message in sustainability communication. Therefore, our focus lies in the design of these messages and the underlying tensions that can either amplify or alleviate such skepticism.

Finally, it is important to highlight that by drawing on Potter's (1996) concept of “methodological relativism”, our analysis does not aim to assess the alignment between reality and discourse. In other words, we do not attempt to verify whether the sustainability claims made by cosmetic brands truly match their actions. Instead, we focus on the realm of discourse to explore the tensions embedded within that communication.

4. RESULTS

4.1. ENGAGING SUSTAINABILITY

As explained, in order to explore how audiences engage with sustainability content published on Facebook by brands such as Avon, Natura, O Boticário, and Yanbal, we examined social media posts using Crowdtangle. Surprisingly, we were able to retrieve 113 posts during the analyzed period, with 106 of them being valid for statistical analysis.

This finding is intriguing, considering the strong commitment to sustainability that these brands exhibit and communicate through other channels, as we will discuss in the following section. Nevertheless, this limited number of posts does not diminish the usability of our sample for statistical analysis. It successfully fulfills the preliminary purpose of our study as it helps us to have a general overview of how sustainability is addressed. Furthermore, as we will discuss, the comparatively modest social media communication itself is a noteworthy aspect, as it contrasts with other platforms.

Among the four analyzed brands, Natura stands out as the most active communicator of sustainability, with 53% of the total Facebook posts. Following Natura, Yanbal represents 20%, Avon contributes 17%, and O Boticário represents 10% of the posts. Videos account for 59% of the shared content, while the remaining 41% showcase images related to sustainability. Figure 1 shows the type of sustainability that these brands prefer to communicate.

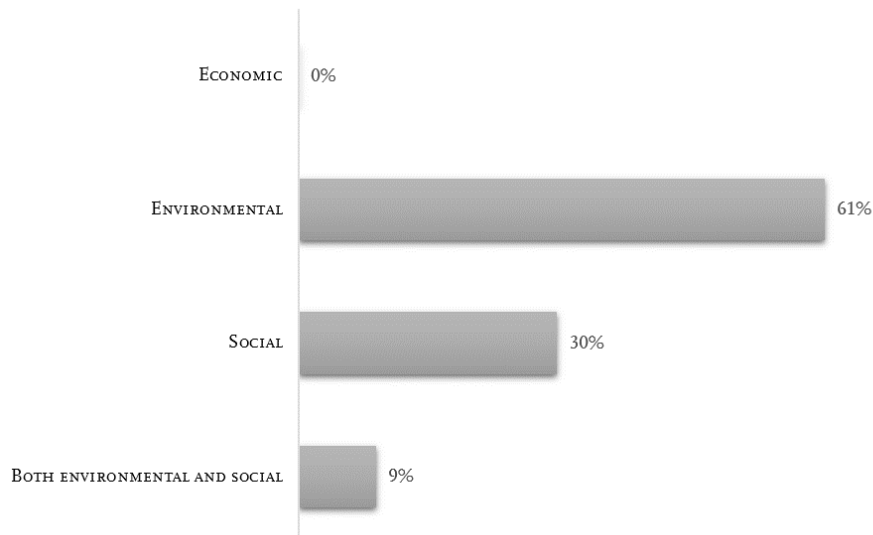


Figure 1. Type of sustainability communicated

As can be seen, a significant portion (61%) is dedicated to environmental sustainability, that is, to address concerns associated with minimizing the cosmetic industry's ecological impact. Additionally, 30% of the posts emphasize social sustainability as they refer to equitable conditions that enhance well-being, human rights, and quality of life for present and future generations. Interestingly, 9% of the content intersects both environmental and social sustainability themes. It is worth noting that none of the messages directly address economic sustainability. This absence could be attributed to the brands' reluctance to openly discuss their economic structures, which contribute to long-term growth, stability, and efficient resource management.

Audiences place significant value on the communication from these brands, in part because of their favorable pre-existing perceptions of them. Notably, unlike findings from similar studies on sustainability communication via social media (Angel, 2023), our

analysis of Avon, Natura, O Boticário, and Yanbal did not reveal a negative reaction from consumers towards sustainability messages when they held unfavorable opinions about the brand delivering the message.

In fact, among the 1,898 Facebook comments analyzed, 8% of them were positive in the sense that users wrote optimistic messages about the specific content being communicated by the brands; 82% of the comments were also positive, but these responses were not directly linked to the specific post, but rather to the users' favorable perceptions of the brands or to their roles as consultants engaged in catalog sales (as we will elaborate later); only 2% of the comments were negative as they accuse the companies of advocating environmental causes while simultaneously employing excessive packaging and paper wastage; and, finally, 8% of the comments were not connected to the post or the brand, appearing as unrelated icons, non-contextual responses, or blank entries.

In addition to the metrics provided by Crowdtangle, we introduced two new variables: the "type of communicated sustainability" (such as "environmental", "social", and "economic") and the "nature of the sustainability content" (whether companies communicate sustainability due to winning "awards", commemorating relevant sustainability-related dates or "events", showing sustainable "actions", or engaging in "pedagogical initiatives" with audiences).

All of this was in order to understand if there was a relationship between these new variables and our dependent variable, that is, the audiences' engagement with the posts. We considered the variable "over-performing" (provided by Crowdtangle) as the best metric for audience engagement since it summarizes all other metrics of engagement (i.e., shares, comments, emotions, likes, etc.). This metric is positive when the post's engagement is above average, negative when it is below average, and zero for posts with average engagement.

Due to the numerical nature of our dependent variable, the first step was to perform a normality test. We used Shapiro-Wilk's test (Royston, 1982), whose null hypothesis is that the sample is normally distributed. The result of this test was the strong rejection of the null hypothesis ($W = 0.49149$, $p\text{-value} < 2.2 \times 10^{-16}$). Therefore, we can safely assume that the "over-performing" variable does not follow a normal distribution. With this information and considering that our independent variables are categorical, we proceeded using the Mann-Whitney test (Wackerly et al., 2014), whose main purpose is to detect if there is a difference in medians between two populations.

For the first relationship, we considered the type of sustainability (categorized as "environmental" and "social"). The relationship in our sample between this variable and "over-performing" (dependent variable) is shown in Figure 2, where we can see that, in general, "environmental" posts have better engagement than the "social" ones.

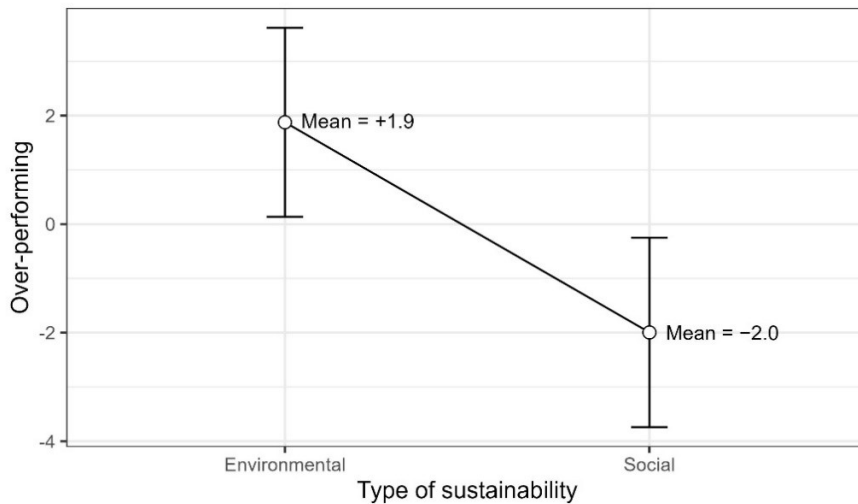


Figure 2. Over-performing by type of sustainability

The results of the Mann-Whitney test ($W = 1,885$, $p\text{-value} = 3.709 \times 10^{-6}$) confirm that, indeed, there is a difference in post-engagement between the two types of sustainability. The statistical estimations allow us to claim that posts related to environmental sustainability achieve, on average, 3 points higher in overperforming compared to those centered around social sustainability (with a 95% confidence interval of [1.6, 3.9]). Perhaps the higher engagement related to the environment is driven by the fact that it fosters a greater sense of identification since the planet constitutes a shared concern. On the other hand, social sustainability is more targeted towards women, as we will elaborate in the next section.

For the second relationship, we considered the content of sustainability (categorized as “awards”, “events”, “action”, or “pedagogy”), and we used the same type of plot to visualize how “over-performing” relates to the type of content in our sample. In Figure 3, we can see that, in general, posts related to “action” tend to have better engagement than “event” posts.

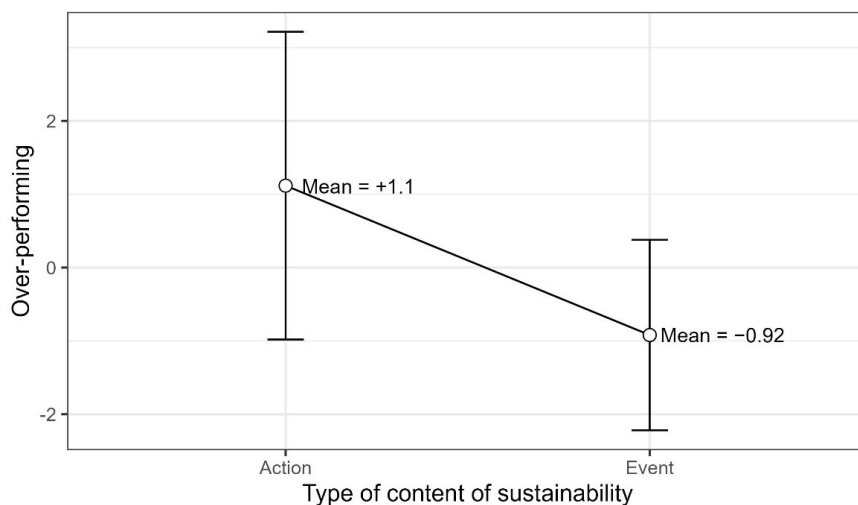


Figure 3. Over-performing by type of content of sustainability

In this case, the results of the Mann-Whitney test ($W = 1,453.5$, p -value = 0.0065) also confirm that there is a difference in post-engagement between the two types of sustainability content. Although we found that the difference is statistically significant (1.3 with a 95% confidence interval of [0.3, 2.9]), this level of difference is irrelevant for communication of sustainability.

4.2. TENSIONS IN THE DISCOURSE ABOUT SUSTAINABILITY

While the quantitative analysis provided valuable insights into the dynamics of message production and consumption, we now focus on the messages themselves and, specifically, on the discourses of sustainability that they communicate. Thus, we performed a qualitative discourse analysis not only on Facebook posts and users' comments but also on the sustainability policies found on the brands' websites and audiovisual content from their YouTube channels. As mentioned, we conducted a discourse analysis of these organizational texts whose purpose was to identify the inherent discursive tensions. In this regard, we considered the vocabularies employed across different organizational texts as terministic screens (Burke, 1969), which not only convey distinct worldviews and values but also reflect the power dynamics and tensions that influence organizational operations (Manuti, 2005; Mumby, 2001). These terminologies reflect distinct ideologies embedded within institutional frameworks (Deetz, 2003).

In order to identify the tensions underlying the sustainability discourse of the studied brands, we followed the approach suggested by Seo et al. (2004), who claim that tensions can be understood in four ways, including selection, separation, integration, and transcendence. A tension addressed through selection involves rejecting one pole of the dichotomy while unintentionally favoring the alternative. Managing tension by separation implies acknowledging both poles of the dichotomy but separating them into different levels of analysis. Integration balances both ends of the continuum as legitimate at once but unfulfilled in their totality. Transcendence entails the reframing of a dichotomy as a whole, creating a synthesis.

The sustainability discourses of Avon, Natura, O Boticário, and Yanbal are built upon the integration tension, where potentially contradictory elements coexist as legitimate. Specifically, after reading all the described organizational texts, we conducted a detailed cluster analysis to categorize tensions identified in the organizational texts. From an initial pool of seven tensions, we were able to narrow these down by identifying overlaps and similarities, thus refining a more focused set of tensions. This systematic process converged on three distinct yet interrelated pairs of tensions: sustainability *versus* capitalism, corporate impact *versus* consumer agency, and empowerment *versus* gender roles. These emerged as the most pronounced in our data, evidenced by recurring patterns that we will describe next.

4.2.1. SUSTAINABILITY AND CAPITALISM

Within the analyzed brands, sustainability is communicated amidst the tension of the capitalist model that underlies their production and consumption practices. This tension is evident in the discourse of these brands, which emphasizes the pursuit, action, and invitation to be responsible in the present in order to protect the future and, at the same time, the need to operate in a capitalist framework based on maximizing production and consumption. In essence, these brands strongly support sustainability, but this support comes alongside the natural requirements of capitalism.

Evidently, this tension echoes findings from previous research that show that a key aspect of the sustainability discourse lies in the businesses' need to communicate a harmony between their material prosperity and sustainable development (Markkula & Moisander, 2012). The following excerpt from Natura Colombia's (2021a) YouTube clip illustrates this tension between sustainability and capitalism in the context of the cosmetic industry: "more beauty, less waste" (00:01:08). The phrase embodies the dichotomy: on one hand, "more beauty" encourages consumption of cosmetic products, inherently aligned with the capitalist model, while on the other, "less waste" points out to the imperative of environmental responsibility and reduction of waste. This tension becomes evident as brands persist in introducing new cosmetic products, which raises questions about the equilibrium between their sustainability commitment and their promotion of mindful consumption.

As analyzed in their sustainability policies, these brands embrace different strategies in their production approaches, including the implementation of renewable energy (oBoticário, n.d.), ecodesign (Yanbal, n.d.), and the adoption of "recyclable, reusable, or compostable" packaging (Avon, n.d., para. 11). Simultaneously, there is a strong emphasis on communicating the role of recycling as a primary path for sustainability among consumers. This emphasis on recycling, however, reveals a tension with the dynamics of capitalism as it implies a surplus of waste generated from excessive production. For example, in a YouTube video, o Boticário (2019) highlights their recycling program as

the Boti Recicla has been around since 2006 and is now the largest recycling program at collection points in Brazil. We are talking about 3,700 points across 1,750 cities, with more than 30 accredited cooperatives and around 28,000 people working for the environment. (00:00:20)

While recycling initiatives are positive steps, they might not fully address the product lifecycle if new products are constantly being produced. Even consumers directly point out this tension between consumption and sustainability as the following Facebook comment to a Natura's post illustrates: "I say this with all due respect, but it's quite absurd how large are the boxes that you use to ship such small products". Even though cosmetic companies constantly promote the collection of empty containers, having to collect a large amount of them indicates that there is still a problem of overproduction and waste generation. The focus on container collection might not fully address the core

problem, but instead, it could be seen as addressing the symptom of waste rather than tackling the root cause of overproduction.

According to the previously explained typology (Seo et al., 2004), this first tension follows the pattern of integration as sustainability and capitalism are both legitimized in the discourse of the brands. Interestingly, the financing of social and environmental projects emerges as a unifying element that reconciles the two poles in tension. Thus, brands communicate their intention to address environmental or social problems that are not the direct outcomes of their actions but rather secondary matters that they aim to alleviate. This shift in discourse redirects attention from the environmental or social challenges that cosmetic companies may trigger to other related issues to which they contribute to helping. In a YouTube promotional video, for example, Yanbal (2021) explains how,

in Latin America and the Caribbean, approximately 43 million children and adolescents live in extreme poverty. The lack of education and gender inequality puts them at a disadvantage and diminishes their chances of advancement. For this reason, Yanbal has established the *Mujer Es Poder* [Power Women], project, which aims to empower girls and teenagers by collaborating with [the organizations] CARE and Peru Woman for Woman, as well as the Juanfe Foundation. This joint initiative seeks to bolster their self-esteem. (00:00:01)

In this video excerpt, we see how the company invests its resources in the *Mujer Es Poder* project to empower disadvantaged girls and teenagers in Latin America and the Caribbean. The focus on a different social issue implies a strategic shift in discourse that emphasizes a secondary initiative unrelated to the potential consequences of Yanbal's practices of resource extraction. This redirection of focus suggests a shift in discourse where the emphasis is on addressing a different societal problem rather than directly engaging with the concerns that could be associated with the company's own practices or impacts on local environments.

4.2.2. CORPORATE IMPACT AND CONSUMER AGENCY

A second tension arises when studying the discourse on sustainability of cosmetic brands, this time between corporate impact and consumer agency. In this context, the communication of sustainability entails a tension between the initiatives undertaken by cosmetic companies to ensure a sustainable future and the agency attributed to consumers in the discourse, making them accountable for these sustainable endeavors. Thus, the discourse follows the narrative where companies, using the pronoun "we", proudly highlight their dedication to safeguarding the future, while consumers, referred to as "you", assume a significant role in fulfilling that commitment.

Two forms of discourse illustrate this transfer of responsibility: discourses that invite consumers to recycle and those that point out that consumption of cosmetic

products generates additional funding to support social initiatives like *Mujer Es Poder*, addressed in the previous section. We have already examined the focus on recycling, which is discursively presented as the solution for overproduction. Within the context of this tension, recycling is depicted as the main way through which companies make consumers responsible for sustainability.

On their YouTube channel, for example, O Boticário features several clips that invite and guide consumers about recycling. In one of the clips (o Boticário, 2019), for example, a woman is shown looking at a display in the brand's store and expressing her surprise when seeing a large container filled with empty and used cosmetic packaging. The video later explains that this display is part of O Boticário's recycling campaign. This video illustrates the company's focus on consumer engagement as it encourages a shift in the viewer's attention from the brand's potential environmental impact to the individual role in recycling. Moreover, as supported by our inferential statistical analysis, videos like this are highly engaging. Not only do cosmetic brands communicate subjects related to environmental sustainability more extensively — and users engage more actively with these issues — but brands also dedicate an important part of their communication to encouraging consumers to recycle, and they capitalize on that effort.

Discourses that depict cosmetic companies engaging in social projects also illustrate this tension and, more precisely, the delegation of agency to consumers. While companies actively select and oversee these projects, the discourse emphasizes consumers who are encouraged to sustain their consumption to facilitate the funding and collaborative efforts behind such initiatives. This dynamic becomes evident in a promotional video by Natura Colombia (2022), where the narrator claims: “you and your purchases can also be part of this beautiful dream [helping the Colombian Amazon] every time you purchase a product. Ekos Natura, the world is more beautiful with you” (00:01:49). This emphasis on addressing the audience directly as “you” exemplifies the delegation of agency in which it is because of the actions of the “client” that Natura can help the Amazonas and can make the world more beautiful.

This discourse is also present in the social media communication of sustainability, as the following Facebook post illustrates: “with every purchase of #NaturaBelieveToSee products, you invest in projects to enhance the quality and equity of education. Because the world will be more beautiful when all girls, boys, and young people are in school” (Natura, 2022a). Within this discourse, Natura positions consumers not only as clients of products but as active participants in broader social and environmental causes.

4.2.3. EMPOWERMENT AND GENDER ROLES

As shown by our quantitative analysis, the examined brands predominantly focus on environmental sustainability in their communication. However, they do conceive sustainability in a broader context that extends beyond just environmental actions. The cosmetic industry highlights its endeavors in the empowerment of women by facilitating their financial independence through opportunities such as becoming sales consultants

through catalog sales. The discourse follows the narrative that cosmetic brands empower women by enabling them to become sales consultants, thus fostering financial autonomy. Nonetheless, this discourse also underlies a tension, according to which while cosmetic brands empower women, this empowerment might inadvertently reinforce certain gender roles. Yanbal (2019) articulates this as follows:

the social aspect is actually very natural for us; it's inherent; it's from our beginning that we started in the social aspect; we have a sales force in the 10 countries where we operate with 500.000 women. We have 500.000 consultants and entrepreneurs, of which 12.000 are entrepreneurs, and we have corporate-level collaborators, a total of 5.000. (00:04:27)

Moreover, Avon (Avon Colombia, 2019) puts it in the following way:

would you like to be part of the company that invests the most in breast cancer prevention and treatment worldwide? Would you like to help other women achieve economic independence? Would you like to earn money by making other women feel prettier? Join Avon. (00:00:01)

Therefore, while this discourse empowers women as workers, it might reinforce conventional gender roles by portraying women in traditional roles like salespeople, caregivers, and bearers of beauty within society. YouTube messages like Avon's and Yanbal's could unintentionally perpetuate the notion that women's empowerment primarily occurs within specific predefined boundaries, reinforcing societal norms rather than challenging them.

Regarding gender representation in the communication of social sustainability by cosmetic brands, we observed how the notion of beauty becomes nuanced and complex as, first, it is predominantly associated with women (who are often expected to embody beauty), and, second, its construction is intricately linked to the concept of "nature". Interestingly, the reference to nature creates a bridge between the idea of beauty and two distinct semantic fields: environment and authenticity. In the former case, beauty is associated with harmony, purity, and ecological balance, while in the latter, beauty is juxtaposed with artificial beauty. Consequently, a sub-tension emerges this time between the notion of "authentic beauty" and the consumerism required to attain such an ideal of prettiness.

Natura's (2022b) reference to "bio-beauty" (biobelleza) exemplifies this tension: "more bio-beauty for the future of the jungle" (00:00:14) or "beauty is only beauty for me if it's also beauty for the world. That idea is stronger than ever. And now Ekos [Natura] is bio-beauty" (Natura Colombia, 2021b, 00:00:00). O Boticário's promotion of a new fragrance also plays with these different vocabularies from distinct semantic fields:

as the rhythm accelerates, it becomes challenging to decelerate until you discover a moment of pause. Introducing our new creation, "Arbo Forest" – immerse yourself in the revitalizing energy of nature. Our fragrance captures the essence of a forest bath, renewing both your vitality and well-being. Now

available with a refill option, experience the rejuvenation of Arbo Forest by O Boticário. (o Boticário, 2022, 00:00:03)

While these discourses emphasize the concept of “inner beauty”, the promotion of beauty products simultaneously reinforces the association between beauty and the use of external products. Video clips like these cited above not only appeal to consumers’ emotions but also suggest a harmonious connection between their individual actions and the broader vision that these brands seek to promote. By linking inner beauty with the consumption of their products, cosmetic brands present their products as a way to enhance personal well-being while also promoting environmental preservation.

Moreover, brands reproduce the idea according to which authentic beauty — that paradoxically requires artificial products — leads to more robust female self-esteem, as the following excerpt illustrates:

because only by valuing themselves and understanding their right to equality [women] achieve their life goals, because a girl with strong self-esteem becomes an empowered woman, and an empowered woman can not only change her own future but also change the world. (Yanbal, 2021, 00:00:31)

This discourse subtly intertwines the notion of “authentic beauty” with the cultivation of self-esteem and social impact as it is based on the interplay between cosmetic consumption, personal well-being, and empowerment. Moreover, as previous research has shown, this tension also illustrates how women’s appearances are constructed as an individual project in which women have to work continuously (Kenalemang-Palm et al., 2021). This serves an ideological purpose as it reinforces the neoliberal ideology of self-management and self-improvement in order to be beautiful, healthy, and successful (Chen & Eriksson, 2022). Overall, this type of communication of sustainability reproduces the idea of an individual’s self-identity project that requires hard work to be maintained (Coupland, 2009).

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

After completing this analysis, we claim that the sustainability discourse of leading Latin American cosmetic brands, including Avon, Natura, O Boticário, and Yanbal, reveal a complex interplay between their commitment to environmental and social well-being and the constraints of capitalist systems, consumer empowerment, and evolving gender roles. By embracing both qualitative and quantitative analyses, our findings help us to identify the tensions that arise when cosmetic companies strive to conciliate the pursuit of profit while advocating for sustainable development.

Specifically, we argue that the discourse on sustainability of leading cosmetic brands in Latin America is especially appealing to audiences when it particularly points out environmental concerns and less so when it refers to social sustainability. The analysis of

the Facebook engagement dynamics has provided us with a comprehensive picture of how sustainability messages from leading Latin American cosmetic brands are communicated, the forms they take, the content they deliver, and the responses they call within their respective online communities. The examination shows a nuanced landscape in which audiences have different degrees of engagement in response to distinct types of sustainability themes and content.

Moreover, we show a nuanced interplay of tensions that encompass the juxtaposition of three dialectic relationships in this sustainability discourse: the tension between sustainability and capitalism, between corporate impact and consumer agency, and between empowerment and gender roles. The first tension, that is, between sustainability and capitalism, highlights how the discourse of the studied cosmetic brands corresponds to what scholars like Ferns and Amaeshi (2019) refer to as a “weak” discourse on sustainability, which advocates for change, but in the context of a pro-growth and market-based paradigm. These opposing poles are the ones that the tension seeks to reconcile or integrate, in contrast to a “strong” discourse of sustainability that is more radical as it seeks structural change.

The second tension, this time between corporate impact and consumer agency, shows how, by aligning their consumption with the company’s initiatives, consumers are positioned to feel a sense of empowerment, as their purchases are presented as necessary to accomplish positive social change. Thus, the invitation for customers to make possible these projects through their purchases underscores the notion that consumption can contribute to a larger purpose that is facilitated by the consumer’s agency (Pelenc et al., 2015).

Finally, the tension between empowerment and gender roles shows how the sustainability communication of cosmetic brands, while emphasizing environmental responsibility and women’s empowerment, can inadvertently reinforce traditional gender roles and perpetuate social norms. This discourse also highlights the complex relationship between beauty ideals, consumerism, and self-identity projects, shaping perceptions of beauty and women’s roles in society.

Our study makes two contributions to the literature. First, we follow the call of authors who invite scholars to transcend the narrow domestic focus in the examination of sustainability communication and embrace a more global or cross-country perspective (Leonidou et al., 2011). In response to the growing international emphasis on sustainable development, we study the role of leading multinational brands within the beauty sector in their collaborative efforts to safeguard the environment. Particularly, we situate our study in the Latin American context, which is not only a scarcely scholarly examined region but also a region considered one of the planet’s lungs that is called to counterbalance the carbon footprint of major northern corporations. Paradoxically, this planetary lung also serves as a primary source of raw materials for the cosmetic industry, an aspect that we develop in our analysis.

The critical perspective, as advocated by several scholars (Angel, 2022; Ferns & Amaeshi, 2019; Mumby, 2016), constitutes our second contribution. We discuss potential

contradictions within the discourse of sustainability of cosmetic companies and challenge assumptions of genuine commitment in order to understand better the discursive ways in which brands engage with their audiences by using specific rhetorics that, in turn, may imply intrinsic tensions. Ultimately, we adopt an ethical stance (Oe & Yamaoka, 2022), according to which greenwashing must not overshadow the genuine pursuit of sustainable development. Finally, by studying the tensions in the discourses of sustainability, we strive to contribute to understanding and suggesting challenges and opportunities that brands face in balancing profit-driven goals with responsible practices (Chang, 2011). Future studies could explore whether different contexts outside Latin America lead to distinct tensions in the communication of sustainability. Adopting a comparative approach, scholars could assess if the three identified tensions here are relevant to sectors beyond the beauty industry. This could provide a broader perspective on sustainability practices and communication strategies in different business sectors. Additionally, by employing a quantitative methodology, future studies could examine the effectiveness of digital communication strategies that cosmetic brands use, especially when addressing tensions perceived by consumers as contradictory content.

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