
NOT VERY INSTAGRAMMABLE: SUSTAINABILITY IN THE DIGITAL COMMUNICATION OF PORTUGUESE DESIGNER FASHION BRANDS

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ABSTRACT

The increasing acknowledgement of the fashion industry's unsustainability underscores the urgent need to encourage approaches to production that respect the environment and human resources. The attributes commonly associated with designer fashion, such as durability, creativity and aesthetics, offer the potential for designer work to position itself at the forefront of sustainable fashion. For this to happen, this message must reach consumers. Given the indispensability of digital communication in reaching brands' audiences, it is imperative to understand the prominence given to sustainability issues on the digital platforms of Portuguese designer fashion brands. Analyses of the reflective themes and content shared on Instagram by 47 designers who showcased their collections at "ModaLisboa" or "Portugal Fashion" demonstrated a general lack of interest in promoting the sustainability factor. After categorising and analysing 2,753 posts, the conclusion was that the digital platform predominantly serves to showcase the final product, overlooking information regarding production processes, raw materials, or labour. These themes were only observed in approximately 10% of the total content and were omitted from a significant number of the designers and fashion brands analysed. This research offers substantial contributions. It pioneers an intersection between Portuguese fashion, sustainability, and digital communication, addressing the scarcity of work in this area. Additionally, it recommends effective communication and educational practices to enhance the sustainability of national designer fashion brands.

KEYWORDS

fashion, sustainability, digital communication, Instagram

POUCO INSTAGRAMÁVEL: A SUSTENTABILIDADE NA COMUNICAÇÃO DIGITAL DA MODA AUTORAL PORTUGUESA

RESUMO

A conceção da insustentabilidade da indústria da moda começa a ser amplamente reconhecida, tornando urgente a necessidade de incentivos de forma a produzir com maior respeito pelo meio ambiente e pelos recursos humanos. Os atributos comumente associados à oferta de moda de autor, como a durabilidade, a criatividade e a estética, vêm possibilitar que o trabalho autoral se posicione na liderança da moda sustentável. Para que tal ocorra, revela-se fundamental que esta mensagem chegue aos consumidores. Com a indispensabilidade da comunicação digital para alcançar o público das marcas, é premente compreender o destaque dado às questões da sustentabilidade nas plataformas digitais da moda autoral portuguesa. As análises temática reflexiva e do conteúdo publicado no Instagram de 47 designers que apresentaram as

suas coleções na “ModaLisboa” ou no “Portugal Fashion” permitiram constatar um desinteresse generalizado pela promoção do fator sustentabilidade. Foram categorizadas e analisadas 2.753 publicações, concluindo que a plataforma digital é, em larga escala, usada para expor o produto final, sendo preteridas as informações relacionadas com os processos produtivos, as matérias-primas ou a mão de obra. Estes temas foram apenas observados em cerca de 10% do total de conteúdos, sendo omissos num conjunto significativo dos designers e das marcas de moda analisados. Esta investigação apresenta importantes contributos: um cruzamento pioneiro entre moda, sustentabilidade e comunicação digital portuguesas, que permite reduzir a escassez de trabalhos na área, bem como a recomendação de boas práticas de comunicação e educação para a sustentabilidade da moda autoral nacional.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

moda, sustentabilidade, comunicação digital, Instagram

1. INTRODUCTION

With a workforce exceeding 300,000,000 individuals across the value chain (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2019), the fashion industry stands out as one of the most environmentally polluting sectors worldwide (Feng & Ngai, 2020). To address this challenge, some fashion producers have prioritised sustainability, implementing more conscientious and waste-free production models (O’Connell, 2020). The inherent characteristics of designer fashion, including the quality of raw materials and original, timeless designs (Barbero & Tarifa, 2023), position it advantageously in terms of sustainability, particularly due to the contrast they offer to fast fashion (Joy et al., 2012).

Since the beginning of the millennium, significant efforts have been made to spread the message of sustainability, both within industry and academia (Williams, 2019). “Sustainability” has become a watchword in this sector, acknowledged as a “fraught” issue (Thomas, 2020, p. 735) and one of the most debated concepts in the fashion community (Fraser & van der Ven, 2022). Even so, the task of ensuring that this concept does not become trivialised and reduced to merely a “buzzword” cannot be overlooked (Williams, 2019, p. 287).

The “digital revolution” (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 2) has enabled brands to establish closer connections with consumers and gather more information about their audiences (Bulović & Čović, 2020). When it comes to sustainable fashion, the tools of the online world are indispensable, as they are needed to dispel the negative perceptions and mistrust typically associated with this sector (Bonini & Oppenheim, 2008; Perry & Chung, 2016). Particularly noteworthy is the effectiveness of social media in disseminating the message of sustainability (Orminski et al., 2021) and the inevitability of this online presence for fashion brands to attain their commercial goals (Ahmad et al., 2015).

It is, therefore, pertinent to understand the emphasis that designer fashion places on sustainability in its online communication processes. That is the purpose of this study, focusing specifically on the Portuguese context. After conducting a reflexive thematic analysis, drawing on the framework established by Testa et al. (2020), all content shared on

the Instagram profiles of 47 designers and labels who showcased their collections at one of the two Portuguese fashion weeks — “ModaLisboa” or “Portugal Fashion” — over six months was scrutinised. From the 16 themes considered for the content analysis, three relate to sustainability, making it possible to conclude the relevance of the “watchword of the season” (Bravo, 2021, p. 253) for fashion designers. Additionally, it allows for comparing the highlights of the two fashion weeks and underscores the practices that illustrate designer fashion’s commitment to sustainable development.

This research identifies both theoretical and practical contributions. Firstly, conceptually, the literature on Portuguese fashion is limited, with virtually no exploration of the potential intersection between fashion, sustainability, and digital communication. Secondly, the analyses provided insights into both effective and ineffective communication and educational practices for sustainability within the realm of national designer fashion. These findings can serve as quick access to communication strategies aimed at enhancing the human and environmental criteria of the fashion proposition.

2. SUSTAINABILITY AND THE FASHION INDUSTRY

With consistent growth, the fashion industry is now one of the largest economies in the world (Orminski et al., 2021). This is largely due to the globalised nature of the market, which is based on a wide variety of products with significant profit margins and short life cycles (Masson et al., 2007). Essentially, these represent some of the fundamental attributes of the fast fashion model, characterised by the rapid and large-scale production of inexpensive, trendy clothing, often manufactured in outsourced facilities and distributed through numerous chain stores (Thomas, 2019).

Presently firmly established (Caro & Martínez-De-Albéniz, 2014) and setting the pace for production standards within the textile and apparel sector (Fletcher, 2014), fast fashion has demonstrated its role in generating significant impacts (Gazzola et al., 2020). From the excessive consumption of natural resources to the carbon footprint associated with a sprawling and intricate global supply chain, the ramifications of this model are becoming progressively apparent (Brewer, 2019).

This gloomy perspective of the fashion industry is further reinforced by the unsustainable nature of the production methods adopted (Williams, 2019), which detrimentally compromise both the human and environmental components of the equation that defines sustainability (Kalambura et al., 2020). Williams (2019) suggests an interpretation that underscores the essential need to integrate sustainability with the fashion sector:

sustainability (...) concerns the balancing our of collective interdependencies as human beings with our simultaneous dependencies on nature. Sustainability today, then, concerns the planetary emergency and the widening wealth-poverty divide, crises acknowledged by world-leading climate scientists, political and religious leaders. Viewing fashion-design through the lens of sustainability situates fashion’s activities in relation to these pertinent issues. (p. 284)

Indeed, as a multifaceted concept (Kakoty, 2018), “sustainability” incorporates the social, environmental, and economic dimensions, as Elkington (1994) proposed in his conceptualisation of the sustainability tripod. Before this theorisation, the *Brundtland Report* (Brundtland, 1987) had already emphasised the need for progressive transformations in the economic and social fields to consecrate sustainable development, defining it as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (p. 41). In fact, when contrasting the current practices of the fashion industry with this approach to sustainability, it is easy to understand how crucial environmental and human elements are in realising a genuinely sustainable trajectory (Brewer, 2019; Ceylan, 2019; Kalambura et al., 2020).

Today, some fashion brands are challenging the principles of durability, considering that the more resistant the product is, the longer its life cycle, the less need for replacement, and, therefore, the lower the rate of sales growth (Guiltinan, 2009). In production, planning for durability is no longer a priority. It has little to do with wear and tear (Burns, 2010) but rather with manufacturing the idea of being “out-of-fashion” (Slade, 2007, p. 53).

So, given the prevalence of production methods that mostly disregard environmental and human concerns, essential for sustainable development, alongside the consolidation of strategies encouraging continuous consumer demand for fashion (Blazquez et al., 2020), Elkington’s (1997) prognoses are confirmed: the sustainability agenda is proving to be more complex than some of the early enthusiasts anticipated — a scenario that is, in fact, a generalised attribute of consumer society, beyond the boundaries of fashion.

3. THE LEADERSHIP OF DESIGNER FASHION

In the first decades of the 21st century, the debate around sustainable fashion has intensified, both theoretically and practically (Williams, 2019), with a notable increase in emphasis on the subject (Bravo, 2021). Even so, the proven lack of awareness regarding sustainable fashion (Blazquez et al., 2020) indicates that its widespread adoption by consumers “is still far from reality” (Tripathi et al., 2021, p. 206). This advocates the well-established idea that prioritising knowledge and education in business development is essential:

businesses first need to think of themselves as educators, not salespeople. And they must expand their lesson plans beyond their own products to the larger issues of pollution, climate change (...) and other environmental problems. (Bonini & Oppenheim, 2008, p. 60)

From the consumer’s perspective, ensuring the validity of sustainable fashion options requires certain attributes to justify their choice (Forney et al., 2005). While sustainable fashion has undeniable merit in advancing the planet’s sustainable development, interest in this offer must extend beyond just environmentally-conscious consumers (Munir, 2020). Thus, factors such as quality, aesthetics, and price cannot be overlooked.

Despite the prevalent emphasis on quantity over quality in today’s era, there has been a noticeable shift in perspective, indicating a reversal of this trend (Magnuson et

al., 2017). Fletcher (2014) suggests that a quality-based agenda “promotes a new model of action that recognises the importance of fashion to our culture but disassociates it from the disengaged indifference that is frequently induced by consumerist fashion” (p. 224). Furthermore, visual appeal and aesthetics play significant roles in driving fashion consumption (Munir, 2020) and are often decisive in attracting new consumers (Davis, 2011). Finally, it is important to address the “price” variable and the need to ensure that consumers are not easily persuaded to pay a higher price for a more sustainable fashion product (Pedersen & Andersen, 2015). As expressed by Shrivastava et al. (2021): “the consumers are more price-conscious than environmentally conscious while shopping for clothes” (p. 2).

It would be erroneous to approach the evolution of the concept of “sustainable fashion” without considering one of its main barriers: fast fashion and its vast array of products at affordable prices (Birtwistle & Moore, 2007). Movements such as slow fashion have emerged as an alternative to mass production, aiming to counteract the detrimental effects of the current fashion system (Blazquez et al., 2020; Kalambura et al., 2020). By adopting the model, the industry makes more conscientious decisions across various dimensions of the supply chain (Little, 2018), recognising that many of the issues linking fashion to sustainability stem from issues of scale, efficiency, and localisation (Fletcher, 2014).

In this context, it is crucial to highlight the potential leading position that designer fashion can assume concerning sustainability principles, especially in contrast to the fast fashion system (Joy et al., 2012). Designer fashion is “a type of fashion whose garments are distinguished by original design and high-quality raw materials, making them timeless and unrelated to specific collections” (Barbero & Tarifa, 2023, p. 3). This advantageous position is largely attributed to quality: designer fashion is synonymous with innovative design elements and meticulous attention to detail, manufacturing, and the resulting durability of the pieces (Joy et al., 2012).

The central concept is that authorial work transcends mere functionality and encompasses abstract values and meanings (Valle Noronha, 2017). This encourages purpose-driven consumption, where apparel holds significance beyond its material form, prompting a reconsideration of disposable in favour of enduring meaning (Niessen, 2020). The concept of “emotional durability”, proposed by Chapman (2005), is based on the principle that products are more easily discarded when there is no emotional connection between them and the consumer. This approach to emotionally durable design promotes the existence of emotional experiences that ultimately dictate the drive for consumption, usage, and disposal of products.

Positioned in contrast to “mass-fashion” (Haug & Busch, 2016, p. 331), it is worth highlighting the need for fashion companies to pivot their strategic approach, leveraging sustainability as an opportunity for competitive advantage (Gazzola et al., 2020): a “new-luxury” (Niessen, 2020, p. 871) rooted in timelessness (Joy et al., 2012) and prioritising more humane design and production processes (Kalambura et al., 2020).

4. THE INDISPENSABILITY OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

The power of the term “sustainability” today is undeniable: not only is it a notable buzzword in the fashion sector (Williams, 2019), but it has also proved to be one of the most distinctive trends of recent years (Gazzola et al., 2020). Embedded within the media agenda (Williams, 2019), sustainability is recognised as a tense and sensitive issue for fashion industry professionals (Thomas, 2020).

Social inequalities, economic crises and political conflicts have led to greater awareness of social and ecological values (Gazzola et al., 2019). However, communication, as a tool for public exposure, plays a crucial role in the “exposure” of intensive production practices (Park & Lennon, 2006). This realisation has prompted questions about the ethics surrounding fashion products, which are sold at low costs to consumers but provide lucrative advantages for producers (Joy et al., 2012).

Adapting communication strategies is crucial for fashion brands to showcase their sustainable credentials to consumers (Business of Fashion & McKinsey & Company, 2023). In this sense, it is worth noting the importance of digital communication in this industry (Bulović & Čović, 2020; Orminski et al., 2021; Shrivastava et al., 2021). The fact is that the fashion industry is increasingly aligned with cyberspace, providing ample opportunities to reach consumers, engage with brands and even reduce costs (Bulović & Čović, 2020). Indeed, with digitalisation (Camacho-Otero et al., 2019), the rapid evolution of information and communication technologies has revolutionised the way people interact and consume information today (Casciani et al., 2022).

In this context, digital platforms emerge as pivotal players in the market (Gazzola et al., 2020): information about fashion products is now more easily disseminated, with platforms like social networks enabling users to actively engage in industry decisions (Norris & Cantoni, 2022). The adoption of digital channels by fashion designers and brands is, therefore, imperative (Bravo, 2021), and the role of social media in the sector’s marketing action plans is already axiomatic (Marcos et al., 2020).

More than ever, companies have extensive knowledge about consumers (Shrivastava et al., 2021), and their communication efforts through owned content have propelled them to a status very similar to media companies (Norris & Cantoni, 2022). As a result, traditional channels such as the press are often overshadowed by digital communication tools (Piazza & Abrahamson, 2020), leading to a blurring of the line between information and advertising (Hanusch, 2019), which traditional media outlets uphold but effective gains in reaching their consumers, transcending spatial and temporal barriers (Shrivastava et al., 2021).

It is important to highlight the social network Instagram for its strong relationship with the fashion business: the most effective channel in brand communication in the sector (Pittman & Reich, 2016; Yoo, 2023). Due to its focus on the creation of images and videos (Crapa et al., 2024), this platform attracts fashion producers when establishing their marketing communication activities, from fast fashion to luxury brands (Yoo, 2023). Guided by a strong visual component and a diminishing reliance on textual descriptions, Instagram seems to be the perfect digital space to promote the industry (Park et al., 2021).

As far as sustainability is concerned, social networks have been the ramp for popularising the topic (Orminski et al., 2021). The truth is that communication is proving critical in driving progress toward sustainable consumption practices: issues such as low

awareness, negative perceptions, or lack of trust are some of the barriers pointed out to more conscious consumption (Bonini & Oppenheim, 2008). The need to overcome the scepticism surrounding this fashion offer (Perry & Chung, 2016) underscores the essential role of digital tools in sustainable fashion marketing strategies (Shen et al., 2014).

5. METHOD

The research seeks to understand the prominence of sustainability issues in the digital communication of Portuguese designer fashion brands. The study focuses its analysis on Instagram, given its status as the primary digital image-sharing platform for promoting apparel (Park et al., 2021; Pittman & Reich, 2016; Yoo, 2023). Using a platform such as Instagram makes it easier to define consistent metrics when analysing different designers, especially when compared to digital structures such as websites. Furthermore, the tool is also validated by its popularity among internet users and widespread adoption by influencers (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021).

This notion is further reinforced by the belief that fashion weeks serve as prime venues for showcasing authorial work: the show conveys avant-gardism, underscoring that fashion creation does not only need to be geared towards consumption but also towards the appreciation of the work (Monteiro, 2023). To this end, we identified the 47 designers or fashion labels that were included in the calendars of the Portuguese fashion weeks — “ModaLisboa” and “Portugal Fashion” — in the October 2022 (spring/summer 2023) or March 2023 (autumn/winter 2023/2024) editions. It is noteworthy that, in Portugal, the authors present their collections at one of the events and that these events take place twice a year. That said, a content analysis was conducted on all materials posted on the Instagram profiles of the 47 designers and brands over six months, spanning from October 2022 to March 2023. Table 1 presents the list of designers and brands analysed and the corresponding number of posts.

EVENT	DESIGNER/BRAND	IDENTIFICATION (@)	POSTS
ModaLisboa (ML)	Arndes	arndes_process	13
ML	Behen	behen.studio	17
ML	Buzina	buzinabrand	120
ML	Call Me Gorgeous	callmegorgeousstore	47
ML	Carlos Gil	carlos_gil_designer	145
ML	Carolina Machado	carolinamachado_official	12
ML	Constança Entrudo	constanca_entrudo	12
ML	Dino Alves	dino_alves_eu	8
ML	Duarte	duartebrand	143
ML	Filipe Augusto	filipeaugusto_studio	45
ML	Fora de Jogo	foradejogo_	42
ML	Gonçalo Peixoto	goncalopeixotooficial	89
ML	HIBU	hibu.studio	16
ML	Ivan Hunga Garcia	ivanhungagarcia	13
ML	João Magalhães	joaomglhs	21
ML	Kolovrat	lidjakolovrat	13

ML	Luís Buchinho	luisbuchinho	29
ML	Luís Carvalho	luiscarvalhoofficial	157
ML	Maria Clara	clarapleca_	31
ML	Mustique	mustique__	94
ML	Nuno Baltazar	nunobaltazarstudio	12
ML	Nuno Gama	ateliernunogama	39
ML	Olga Noronha	olganoronha_official	38
ML	Ricardo Andrez	ricardoandrezstudio	23
ML	Valentim Quaresma	valentimquaresma	43
Portugal Fashion (PF)	Alexandra Moura	alexandra.moura	74
PF	Alves/Gonçalves	m.alves.goncalves	16
PF	Carolina Sobral	carolinasobral	115
PF	David Catalán	davidcatalanbrand	30
PF	Davii	daviiofficial	38
PF	Decenio	decenio	187
PF	Diogo Miranda	diogomirandaofficial	70
PF	Ernest W. Baker	ernest_w_baker	19
PF	Estelita Mendonça	estelitamendonca	59
PF	Huarte	huartebrand	26
PF	Hugo Costa	hugo_costa_label	5
PF	Katty Xiomara	kattyxiomara_official	74
PF	Luís Onofre	luisonofreofficial	91
PF	Maria Gambina	maria_gambina	43
PF	Marques ' Almeida	marques_almeida	118
PF	Miguel Vieira	miguelvieiraofficial	44
PF	Nopin	nopinbrand	139
PF	Nuno Miguel Ramos	nunomiguelramos	87
PF	Pé de Chumbo	pedechumbo_oficial	43
PF	Pedro Pedro	pedropedrostudio	68
PF	Sophia Kah	sophiakah	124
PF	Susana Bettencourt	subettencourt	61

Table 1. Designers and brands analysed

The posts are analysed using the categories defined and applied in Testa et al.'s (2020) work "Engaging Consumers With Sustainable Fashion on Instagram". Seeking to determine the popularity of sustainable fashion among digital consumers, the authors conducted a thematic analysis and identified a number of emerging themes. Table 2 displays all the themes and their corresponding descriptions from that study, alongside information derived from our thematic analysis, guiding decisions on whether to keep, delete, or introduce themes. Employing a reflexive thematic analysis approach, which, according to Braun and Clarke (2021), favours a data-driven orientation. The authors propose a phased methodology that involves familiarising oneself with the data, coding it, defining themes and then reviewing and adjusting them. Leveraging the first stage of the study by Testa et al. (2020) made it possible to define 16 themes, listed below, as observation criteria for "developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset" (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 4).

THEME	DESCRIPTION/EXAMPLES	OUTCOME
Overall sustainability	Messages directly related to sustainability	Kept
Social sustainability	Human resources, ethics, social responsibility	Kept
Environmental sustainability	Natural resources, materials or pollution	Kept
Philanthropy	Philanthropic initiatives, charity, fundraising	Kept
Social awareness	Inequalities or injustices, race and gender	Deleted
Current affairs	Public sphere (forest fires, public elections, etc.)	Deleted
Fashion	Apparel, accessories and footwear products	Kept
Lifestyle	Moments, “how to” and everyday life	Kept
Celebrities	Featuring a famous individual	Kept
Memes	Humorous or poignant images with text	Deleted
Brand	Brand advertising, shops or events	Kept
Deals and sales	Discounts, sales, deals	Kept
Art and creativity	Creative or abstract images	Kept
Animals	Featuring animals	Deleted
Beauty	Beauty products (make-up, cosmetics)	Kept
Food	Featuring food	Deleted
Press	Featuring media content	Added

Table 2. Themes derived from reflective thematic analysis

6. FINDINGS

Within the defined timeframe, 2,753 posts were analysed, sourced from the Instagram profiles of the 47 designers and brands identified in the calendars of the two Portuguese fashion weeks: 25 at “ModaLisboa” (1,222 posts) and 22 at “Portugal Fashion” (1,531 posts).

Testa et al.’s (2020) reflexive thematic analysis served as the basis for this research’s content analysis. All the themes identified by the authors were considered. Still, our thematic analysis of the posts eliminated five unobserved themes — “social awareness”, “current affairs”, “memes”, “animals”, and “food” — and defined a new “press”-related theme — featuring media content — based on the number of references (see Table 2).

Although this research seeks to establish the interest of Portuguese designer fashion in the theme of sustainability, as reflected in their digital activity on Instagram, it is pertinent to start by uncovering the most frequently discussed themes. The most frequent category of posts is “fashion” ($n=2,271$), featuring content that advertises the brands’ products, emphasising product images from marketing campaigns or on the backstage of the events. This is followed by content focused on “brand” ($n=680$), reflected in brand promotion through advertising campaigns, participation in fashion weeks, collection launches and the brands’ physical spaces such as shops or pop-up stores. In the third place, the theme “celebrities” ($n=228$) refers exclusively to public figures wearing the designers’ clothes. Among the posts analysed, 82.49% are related to the “fashion” theme. It is worth noting that the average number of themes per post is 1.32, and the maximum number of themes associated with a post is four. Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the number of posts across each theme, excluding only those related to sustainability, which will be highlighted below.

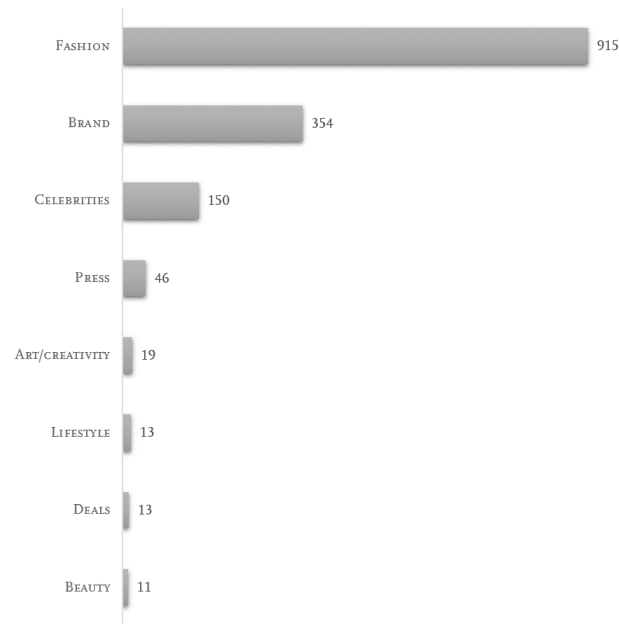


Figure 1. Number of posts per theme in "ModaLisboa"

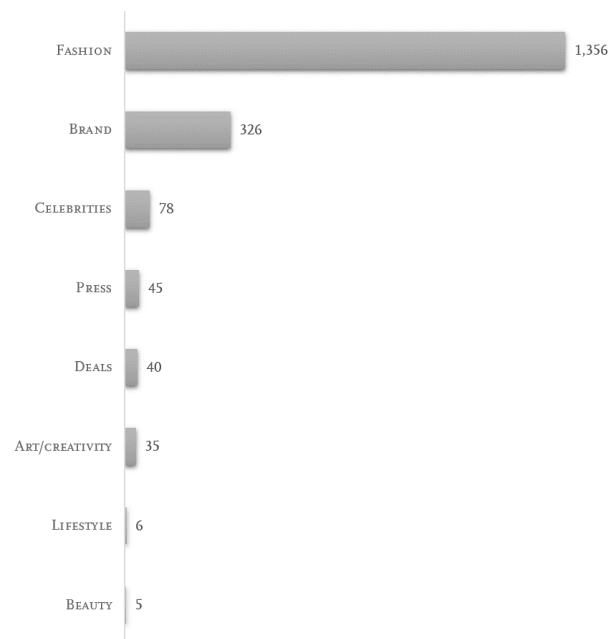


Figure 2. Number of posts per theme in "Portugal Fashion"

Regarding posts related to the theme of sustainability, the analysis focused on three categories linked to conveying sustainable messages: "general sustainability", "social sustainability", and "environmental sustainability". When considering the posts featuring at least one of the three themes above, it becomes apparent that this occurs in 159 posts, representing 5.78% of all posts (2.76% from "ModaLisboa" authors and 3.01% from "Portugal Fashion" authors).

It is also important to analyse the distribution of posts across the different themes identified and, subsequently, observe some relevant examples. First and foremost, it is crucial to highlight the minimal focus on sustainability, which is naturally corroborated

if we also consider the proportion of each of the sustainability themes in relation to the total number of posts: only 0.11% ($n=3$) of the content posted is about “general sustainability”, 3.41% ($n=94$) are interested in “social sustainability”, and 3.92% ($n=108$) in “environmental sustainability”. Figure 3 illustrates the ratio between the number of posts on sustainability and the total number of posts by designer/brand. Ivan Hunga Garcia, Béhen and Carolina Machado, from “ModaLisboa”, and Susana Bettencourt, Nopin and Maria Gambina, from “Portugal Fashion”, are among the designers/brands demonstrating the highest commitment to various sustainability-related topics. Below are selected examples of the content posted, chosen for their clarity and relevance to each sustainability topic. It should also be noted that 17 designers/brands (36.17% of the total) do not post any content on the subject — nine from “ModaLisboa” and eight from “Portugal Fashion”.

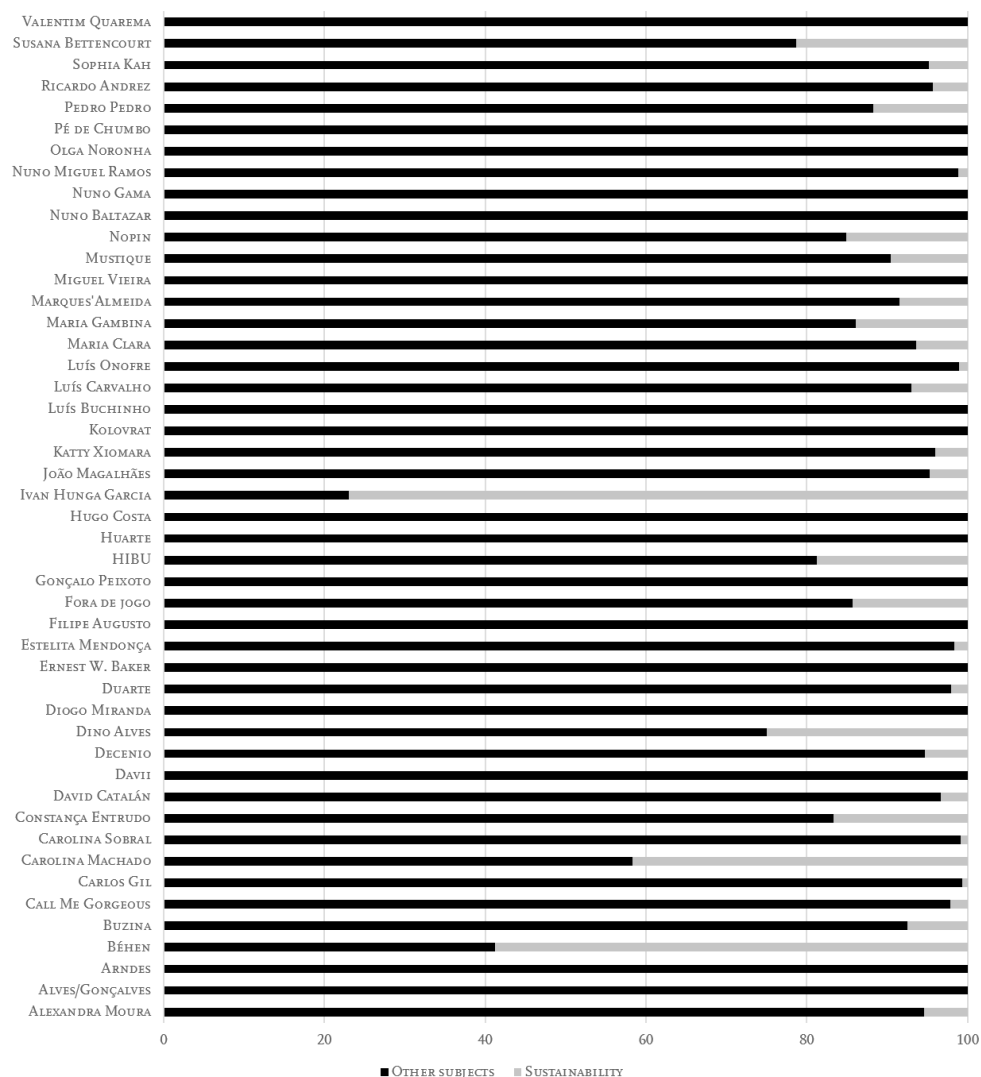


Figure 3. Percentage of posts on sustainability compared to other themes by designer/brand

6.1. OVERALL SUSTAINABILITY

The dissemination of content that directly encompasses the concept of “sustainability” was only observed at the Marques’Almeida brand. It shared a series of three posts

advocating against the shortening of product lifespans and promoting reduced consumption. These posts emphasised the importance of discarding products from past collections to break the cycle and breathe new life into products that are over two years old. The underlying idea conveyed was that the consumer's commitment to higher quality products reduces the need to consume in quantity. Figure 4 depicts one of the three posts.



Figure 4. Post on overall sustainability

Source. From *Today is your last chance to grab your favourite piece from our archive stock* [Photograph], by Marques Almeida [@marques_almeida], 2022, Instagram. (<https://www.instagram.com/p/ClDjb6XlqrS/>)

6.2. SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

There were 94 posts related to the human component of sustainability. Their emphasis is on describing production processes and their connection to the community, localism and human resources. The following are some of the examples: local labour — described as “produced by hand locally in Porto” in a post by designer Carolina Machado (Figure 5); national production — the “produced in Portugal” label coined in the publication by Lisbon-based brand Mustique (Figure 6); valuing collaborations with resources and companies in close geographical proximity — the know-how present in techniques

such as knitting or embroidery with Arraiolos stitch highlighted in the posts by Maria Gambina (Figure 7) or Béhen (Figure 8).



Figure 5. Post on social sustainability — Carolina Machado

Source. From *Bespoke knits carefully handmade locally in Porto, Portugal* [Photograph], by Carolina Machado [@carolinamachado_official], 2022, Instagram. (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CktNvgCsfl1/>)

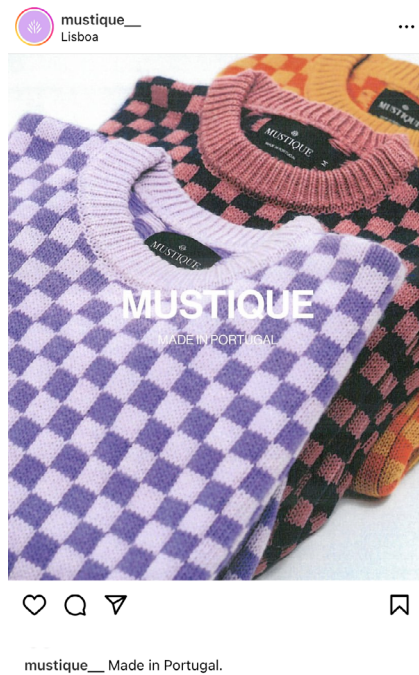


Figure 6. Post on social sustainability — Mustique

Source. From *Made in Portugal* [Photograph], by Mustique [@mustique_], 2023, Instagram. (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CnO3iS2M6gL/>)



maria_gambina Comecei a trabalhar com a D. Ana quando ainda estudava no CITEX, há mais de 30 anos portanto. E ao longo destes anos fui passando o contacto desta Mestre aos meus alunos, muito do que têm visto por aí em tricot nós desfiles foi feito por ela. A D. Ana trabalha em casa, numa garagem, na sua máquina do século passado e rodeada de milhares de pequenos novelos que foi acumulando ao longo da vida. Prometi-lhe que ia "tratar" deles. E assim foi, pegando na ideia da desconstrução de uma bola de futebol foram feitos, um a um, hexágonos coloridos que depois foram unidos, deixando espaços em

Figure 7. Post on social sustainability — Maria Gambina

Source. From *Comecei a trabalhar com a D. Ana quando ainda estudava no CITEX, há mais de 30 anos portanto* [Photograph], by Maria Gambina [@maria_gambina], 2022, Instagram. (https://www.instagram.com/p/C21lmgwMoSp/?img_index=1)

Note. Translation: "I started working with Mrs Ana when I was still studying at CITEX, which was over 30 years ago now. Over the years, I've shared Mrs Ana's contact details with my students, so much of the knitting you've seen on the catwalk shows has been crafted by her. Mrs Ana works at home in a garage, using her knitting machine from the last century, and she is surrounded by thousands of small skeins she has accumulated throughout her life. I promised her that I would "take care" of them.

And so it was, inspired by the idea of deconstructing a football, we created, one by one, colourful hexagons, which were then assembled, leaving gaps in between".



behen.studio AW23 "The God of Small Things" backstage at @lisboafashionweek by @luis.carmmo with @f4b7o @justmodelmanagement

Arraiolos over cork because why not? 🌿 It's such a special technique and we had the pleasure to work with the best team at @sempre_noiva_tapetes in Arraiolos which translates to "always engaged". One of the stitches used is the "ponto pé de flor" that is almost lost in contemporary Arraiolos but used in the veryyy early Arraiolos tapestries.

THE pants. Thank you to Jorge Barros, national treasure who captured Portugal and its traditions and festivities. The one who sends me the most uplifting messages! This photo is of a picnic in a boat to remind about the importance of the small things, big things and everything all together.

Figure 8. Post on social sustainability — Béhen

Source. From AW23 "The God of Small Things" backstage at @lisboafashionweek by @luis.carmmo with @f4b7o @justmodelmanagement [Photograph], Béhen [@behen.studio], 2023, Instagram. (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CqJHcpLNVz4>)

6.3. ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Among the three types of sustainability analysed, environmental sustainability had the highest number of posts ($n=108$). This theme predominantly highlights the materiality of the author's work: whether through recycling materials — such as the pair of HIBU trousers (Figure 9); or using eco-friendly materials — such as the Ecovero viscose used in the manufacture of the Nopin brand blazer (Figure 10); fabric development in the atelier itself — as Constança Entrudo's publication points out (Figure 11); or through partnerships for reusing pieces — as seen in designer Luís Carvalho's collaboration with Kaporal (Figure 12) and designer Dino Alves' collaboration with Mister Man (Figure 13).



hibu.studio Unisex Smock Orange Trousers crafted from discarded material 70% cotton 30% elastane available at HIBU-STUDIO.COM

Figure 9. Post on environmental sustainability — HIBU

Source. From *Unisex Smock Orange Trousers crafted from discarded material 70% cotton 30% elastane available at HIBU.STUDIO.COM* [Photograph], by Hibu. [@hibu.studio], 2022, Instagram. (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CjiTkeCMoYx>)



nopinbrand one of our main purposes is to taking into consideration the quality and sustainability of our fabrics and raw materials.

the fabric os this Bomber Jacket with exclusive laser cut design is Portuguese and has UV protection - the fabric is made with ecovero viscose , which is a more sustainable source of wood, is more environmentally friendly and has less impact on water.

[#LasercutJacket](#) [#PinkJacket](#) [#PortugueFabric](#)
[#PortugueseDesign](#) [#SustainableClothes](#) [#Handmade](#)

Figure 10. Post on environmental sustainability — Nopin

Source. From *one of our main purposes is to taking into consideration the quality and sustainability of our fabrics and raw materials* [Photograph], by NOPIN [@nopinbrand], 2022, Instagram. (<https://www.instagram.com/p/C1CT-ls1rpo/>)

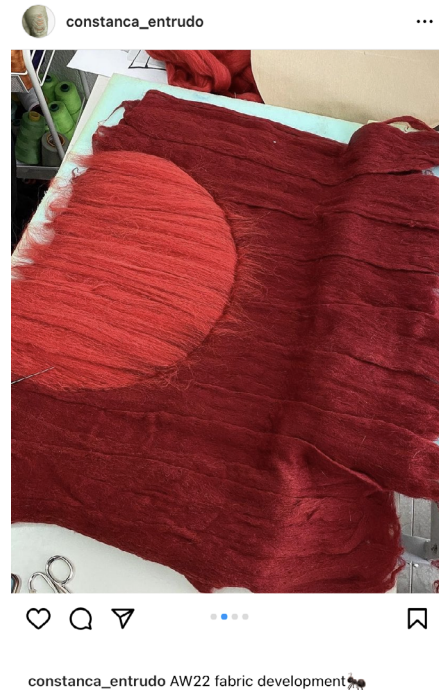


Figure 11. Post on environmental sustainability — Constança Entrudo

Source. From *AW22 fabric development* [Photograph], by Constança Entrudo [@constanca_entrudo], 2022, Instagram. (https://www.instagram.com/p/CktDXQTMkXy/?img_index=2)

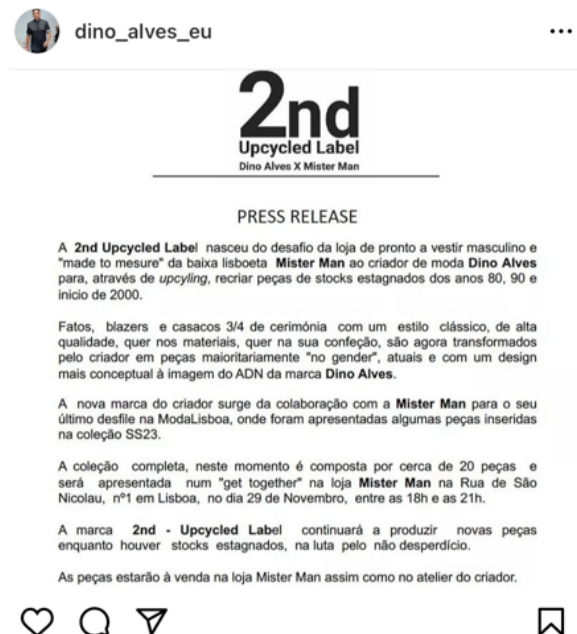


Figure 12. Post on environmental sustainability — a collaboration between designer Dino Alves and Mister Man

Source. From *#dinoalvesatelier #misterman #modanacional #modasustentavel #upcycling* [Photograph], by Dino Alves [@dino_alves_eu], 2022, Instagram. (<https://www.instagram.com/p/ClhT9ymMrz/>)

Note. Translation: "2nd Upcycled Label: Dino Alves X Mister Man. PRESS RELEASE: The 2nd Upcycled Label was born out of a challenge from Mister Man, a men's ready-to-wear and made-to-measure shop in downtown Lisbon, to fashion designer Dino Alves to recreate stagnant stock from the 80s, 90s, and early 2000s through upcycling. Suits, blazers and 3/4 jackets in classic style and high-quality materials and craftsmanship have now been transformed by the designer into mostly gender-neutral, contemporary pieces with a more conceptual design in line with the DNA of the Dino Alves brand. The designer's new brand is the outcome of his collaboration with Mister Man for his latest fashion show at ModaLisboa, where some of the pieces from the SS23 collection were showcased. The full collection consists of approximately 20 pieces and will be unveiled during a "get-together" at the Mister Man shop on Rua de São Nicolau, nº1 in Lisbon, on November 29, between 6 pm and 9 pm. The 2nd - Upcycled Label brand will continue to produce new garments as long as there are stagnant stocks as part of its commitment to fighting waste. The pieces will be available for purchase at both the Mister Man shop and the designer's atelier".



luiscarvalhoofficial @kaporalofficial x @luiscarvalhoofficial
UPcycling capsule collection

80% of the collection is unisex and inspired on the construction-deconstruction in oversize pieces with straight lines combined with different shades of blue that gives a second chance to old jeans and fabrics.

The denim was collected at Kaporal stores thanks to the "Kaporal Impact Recycling" program launched in 2014.

Figure 13. Post on environmental sustainability — a collaboration between designer Luís Carvalho and Kaporal

Source. From @kaporalofficial x @luiscarvalhoofficial Upcycling capsule collection [Photograph], by Luis Carvalho Official [@luiscarvalhoofficial], 2023, Instagram. (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CnXbiBuMpZn>)

7. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This research's objective is to explore the prominence of sustainability themes in the digital communication of Portuguese designer fashion brands. The content posted on Instagram by 47 Portuguese designers and fashion brands was analysed based on 16 themes identified by Testa et al. (2020) — five of which were eventually excluded and another theme added. Over the six-month analysis period, it was possible to identify notable similarities between the themes observed by the authors and the themes exposed by the population under study.

The conducted content analysis not only allowed for the identification of the primary themes addressed but also facilitated a detailed examination of the conveyed messages. Concerning the fashion offer, the aesthetic component was recognised as an incentive for consumption, affirming Munir's (2020) assertion about the importance of

visual appeal in motivating fashion consumption. The focus on the product is evident in the significant proportion of fashion-related content across all the Instagram accounts analysed: approximately 82% of posts focus on apparel, footwear or accessories. In fact, there is a considerable emphasis on the commercial aspect, not only through showcasing products but also in content associated with the brand itself (“brand”), accounting for around 25% of all posts. However, price-related issues are overlooked and only mentioned in the context of deals or discounts. This information is especially important in the sustainable fashion scenario. As Pedersen and Andersen (2015) point out, consumers are unlikely to consider a fashion product more sustainable if it has a higher price tag.

In this context, it is worth mentioning the small number of posts dedicated to sustainability issues (approximately 6%); a significant portion of designers do not refer to the concept of “sustainability” or related ideas (approximately 36%). Nevertheless, the posts of the 30 designers and brands that do focus on these issues reveal an effort to integrate the social, environmental and economic components proposed by Elkington (1994) into the fashion offer through the definition of the triple bottom line. In fact, the content related to the environmental and labour components of designer fashion brands reflects a growing trend toward seeking more ecologically and humanly viable solutions — as observed by authors such as Shrivastava et al. (2021) and Thomas (2020).

When examining the sustainable message within Portuguese designer fashion brands as a whole, indicators emerge, such as handmade or made-to-order production, localism, collaborations with artisans, and the selection of recycled materials or projects to reuse pieces. These observations align with Fletcher’s (2014) reflection that sustainability intersects with considerations of scale, efficiency and localisation. Although this message is conveyed, there is almost no reference to an overarching sustainability message where brands explicitly articulate their commitment to sustainability principles — a fact proven by the small number of posts in the “overall sustainability” category. That jeopardises the path to sustainability, as it is essential for companies to play first an educational role and only then a commercial one (Bonini & Oppenheim, 2008).

With education for sustainability often sidelined, it is important to note that the primary emphasis of the sustainable message lies in the production phases — *where*, *who* and *how* it is produced. The advantages for the consumer in purchasing designer fashion are limited to the aesthetic component, and attention to quality and consequent durability is always undervalued.

Among other motivations, Kozlowski et al. (2012) highlight green marketing, driven by consumer interest in sustainability, as an incentive for companies to incorporate more sustainable processes. It is interesting to observe in the findings of this study that this is not the case, considering the minimal presence of the sustainable message in the Instagram profiles examined. When considering the obstacles to achieving more sustainable consumption as outlined by Bonini and Oppenheim (2008) and their correlation with fundamental communication principles, it becomes apparent that the efforts made to promote Portuguese designer fashion brands have little or no effect on

raising awareness, addressing negative perceptions, or instilling confidence. Overall, there is limited dissemination of the message directly linking designer fashion brands with sustainability.

Despite the literature indicating a strengthening connection between the fashion sector and the digital environment (Bulović & Čović, 2020), this study reveals that all brands and designers have a presence on Instagram. Nevertheless, the content reflects a certain “amateurishness”, which is also evident in some of the figures: approximately 60% ($n=28$) of the accounts posted less than 50 times in the six months analysed; only 24% ($n=11$) of the profiles have more than 20,000 followers and around 34% ($n=15$) have less than 5,000 followers. While this in no way contradicts the advantages of a digital presence, it is worth noting the importance that printed media still represents for the population under study. We are not witnessing a downplaying of traditional channels, as suggested by Piazza and Abrahamson (2020); quite the opposite, since the theme “press” added to the analysis grid almost entirely relates to mentions and exposure of brands in physical publications.

Additionally, it is noteworthy that there is a great deal of parallelism between the groups of authors from the two fashion weeks analysed — “ModaLisboa” and “Portugal Fashion”. The analysis confirmed a significant proximity in the number of designers represented by each of the organisations, the number of posts made and the number of posts relating to sustainability. Furthermore, it is worth emphasising the prominence given to participation in the events, both in the content included in the “brand” theme ($n=113$) and the product photographs and videos, and in “fashion” ($n=208$), which showcases the pieces within the context of a fashion show. It is pertinent to recall that this is a particularly effective environment for exhibiting fashion as a work of art, as Monteiro (2023) suggests. Accepting the representation of fashion as a work of art is one of the main reasons for framing designer fashion brands consumption as consumption with purpose and, therefore, more conscious because it is designed for the long term — in line with Chapman’s (2005) concept of “emotional durability”.

In fact, it is worth noting that the content analysis shows a limited effort by national designer fashion brands to position their offerings as sustainable fashion. The emphasis on sustainability issues in digital communication through Instagram falls short in steering towards the direction of the “new luxury”, as discussed by Niessen (2020). The literature exposes the current media strength of the term “sustainability” (Gazzola et al., 2020; Williams, 2019), but this research suggests a general lack of interest among the authors in communicating the sustainability of their production. It should be noted that this research applies a selective sample and is not representative of the entire universe of Portuguese designer fashion brands. This inherent limitation underscores the potential for different conclusions based on alternative selections of brands.

This study represents a pioneering effort to focus on digital communication and the sustainability of Portuguese designer fashion brands, mainly because national fashion has received relatively limited scholarly attention. The observation that there is little interest in

communicating the sustainability factor of authorial work raises questions that could guide future research. It is worth mentioning the importance of conducting a longitudinal study to compare this scenario, examined in this specific timeframe, with a scenario from a similar period before and after 2022/2023. Hence, it is crucial to ascertain whether the heightened interest in sustainability aligns with the media coverage surrounding it or diverges from the communication strategies adopted by Portuguese designer fashion brands.

Translation: Anabela Delgado

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research is funded by the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (FCT) through a doctoral scholarship with the reference 2021.07379.BD.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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Submitted: 10/10/2023 | Accepted: 04/03/2024



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