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The Role of Social Media in the Fashion Industry: The Case of Eco Luxury in Today's Consumption

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More and more fashion companies are incorporating sustainability into their business model and opting for slow fashion as a formula compatible with consumer interests. However, there is an open debate about the profitability for the industry of this production process and many experts are sceptical and consider that fashion brands are still dependent on hyper-consumption and low prices to achieve their commercial objectives (Fletcher, 2010; Jiménez-Marín, 2016).

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Combating the negative environmental impact linked to fashion-related activities has become a priority for brands, especially for the luxury sector, which considers it a differential factor with respect to fast fashion companies. The concept of sustainable fashion integrates a design philosophy aimed at promoting, through social responsibility strategies, production techniques that avoid environmental damage, animal cruelty and worker exploitation (Lundblad & Davies, 2016).

The development of sustainable products and business practices is a way for fashion companies to react to criticism of their unsustainable behaviour, with negative consequences for environmental quality and human welfare, by producing carbon emissions, poor working conditions, excessive waste and use of chemicals (Han et al., 2017). The study by Pui-Yan Ho and Choi (2012) confirms that many organisations believe that “green” efforts benefit brand reputation and attract new customers. The role of consumers and their purchasing attitude are aspects that do not go unnoticed in communication and marketing strategies as it seems to be demonstrated that social network users are more concerned about who produces and how fashion is produced (Norum & Ha-Brookshire, 2011; Shen, 2014). An increasing number of people prefer to buy fair trade garments, with higher quality and exclusionary clothing, at better prices and produced with less environmentally harmful materials (Puig Torrero, 2017). At the same time, there is increasing interest among experts to analyse ethical, environmental and sustainability issues related to affordable, trend-sensitive and fast fashion (Chen et al., 2011; Joy et al., 2012; Sun et al., 2014). The scrutiny of the fashion industry is undeniable given the increasingly polluting conditions in the supply chain. Despite constant publicity about the environmental impact, the sector continues to grow thanks to the boom in fast fashion. Based on the manufacture, frequent consumption and ephemeral use of garments, it is known as McFashion, due to the speed with which consumer desires are successfully met (Gupta & Gentry, 2018) (Table 7.1).

A change in the fashion business model is therefore urgently needed, including a slowdown in manufacturing and the introduction of sustainable practices throughout the production chain, as well as a change in consumer behaviour. These objectives emphasise the need for a slow

Table 7.1 Differential values between fast fashion and slow fashion

Category	Fast fashion	Slow fashion
Scope of the industry	Turnover \$1.44 trillion dollars annually	Small business firms
Raw materials	Petroleum-based materials	Locally sourced, bio-degradable, organic, natural dyes and natural materials. It also includes recycled, repurposed, upcycled materials
Manufacturing	Cause environmental implications during production	It uses less harmful ingredients and employs eco-friendly traditional methods of production
Protocols involved	Modern and unethical methods	Less harm to the environment as it involves conventional methods
Production	New styles every 2 week and more than 10 seasons in a year	Low volume, handmade, made-on-order and available in limited edition

Source <https://www.fibre2fashion.com/industry-article/author/s-aishwariya/368>

transition back to “fashion”, minimising and mitigating harmful environmental impacts (Niinimäki et al., 2020). The consumer society must be able to observe and understand that there is an alternative to fast fashion, which is slow fashion, which implies the need to empower all the agents involved in the process of manufacturing and acquiring fashion, in order to make human and labour rights effective worldwide (González Romo et al., 2020).

A Necessary Balance Between Luxury and Sustainable Fashion

The production process in the luxury sector is associated with the values of sustainability. Luxury can offer the opportunity to create sustainable

business environments thanks to features such as the use of an artisan model, based on a unique skill that generates high-quality products that last over time (Godart & Seong, 2014).

Both luxury and fashion share the need for social differentiation, but differ in that luxury is timeless, while fashion is ephemeral (Kapferer, 2017). Luxury fashion faces a specific challenge in the search for ecological sustainability, as it is subject to constant pressure for change, a value inherent to the fashion industry. The cyclical mechanism linked to the spring-summer and autumn-winter seasons makes consumers want to replace the still usable fashion products with new garments that are in tune with the season's fashion (Godart & Seong, 2014).

A luxury brand is a means of distinction and social stratification, which is found at the confluence of culture and social success. Luxury brands are not launched; they are built progressively by managing the allocation of resources in a very specific way (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009). They set trends and influence the rest of the industry with their aesthetic value and their innovative but traditional form of business management. They apply innovative styles not only to products, but also to customer management, marketing combinations, customer services, retail strategies and others (Kim & Ko, 2010). In addition to these values, there has been a change in the identity of consumers who, in a context of economic crisis, have opted for social and environmental excellence in an essential dimension of luxury brand products (Girón, 2011). As a result, fashion and luxury brands are increasingly registering actions in favour of ecology (eco luxury), such as those led by Gucci, with the commercialisation of a line of bags made with leather made from soya, or Tiffany's, in the jewellery sector, which stopped using coral to avoid destroying the sea beds (Muñoz Valera & Pérez Curiel, 2014).

Through strategies related to marketing influence on social networks, the luxury sector is reinventing itself and without renouncing its particular idiosyncrasy, it is investigating new formulas and languages to bring sustainable luxury closer to the digital user. It must be borne in mind that traditional marketing strategies cannot be applied to the luxury sector. In this scene, anti-laws rule (Bastien & Kapferer, 2012):

- a. As opposed to positioning the brand and the product to be different from competitors, luxury fashion seeks to be unique in the market because luxury is superlative, never comparative.
- b. Luxury does not have to respond to the increase in demand, nor to the need, nor to mass production, because a customer who longs to live his dream through the products offered by the brand would lose its essence, its uniqueness and its value.
- c. The luxury brand must stand as an advisor and educator of the consumer with a message that emanates identity, culture, art and social status.
- d. Accessing a luxury product must be a difficulty for the customer. Brands are supported by an increase in the product, limited production and longer delivery periods.
- e. Luxury does not respond to the Unique Selling Proposition (USP) put forward by R. Reeves (Rashid & Barnes, 2020) to promote the brand. There is no single selling proposition, the desire comes first, so advertising must recreate that personalised desire of consumers.
- f. Luxury should not be communicated exclusively to its target audience to avoid losing its social value to consumers.
- g. Luxury sets the price and not the other way around. The greater the demand, the greater the increase in the value of the product.
- h. Fashion brand factories should not relocate in order to lower costs because they are no longer considered as “luxury”.
- i. Luxury brands should promote marginal sales on the Internet to avoid collateral damage linked to e-commerce strategies.

In short, if luxury production processes are more sustainable from the outset than those provided by conventional and fast fashion, and if changes in consumer behaviour are accompanied by the backing of policies aimed at organising consumption on a social, cultural and economic level (Niinimäki et al., 2020), it is essential to launch communication and marketing campaigns that will influence companies' corporate social responsibility work and demonstrate that luxury and sustainability are a possible duality.

Characteristics of the Fashion and Eco Luxury Consumer

Personal Characteristics

Today the luxury market is dominated by three generations: Baby Boomers (1945–1964), Generation X (1965–1990) and Millennials (1991–1999). According to the Luxury Goods Worldwide Market Study (D'Arpizio et al., 2017), conducted by Bain & Company, this is the distribution in sales of luxury products.

From the point of view of comparison, we observe differences between Generation Y and Generation Z (the Millennials) in terms of consumption of eco luxury. On the one hand, consumers belonging to Generation Y have been having better sustainable consumption habits than those of Generation Z, as Millennials are usually more interested in transparent brand communication (Garcia Medina et al., 2019). This is particularly interesting as it shows that transparent brand communication is an element of social responsibility activities and, when buying luxury goods, these CSR activities are more important for Generation Y in question (Pasricha et al., 2020). Generation Y buys luxury goods more often (to show their social status), so we can say that this generational group favours luxury brands that have a more personal approach to the customer and a social awareness veneer (Grotts & Johnson, 2013).

On the contrary, Generation Z considers slow fashion to be a competitor of fast fashion, placing them on the same level in the business market, an issue with which we disagree from this area.

On the other hand, while Generation Y tends to consider luxury goods as fast fashion, for Millennials it is usually more important that the brand/fashion company supports certain social values, such as solidarity or ecology (Soh et al., 2017).

These differences can be related to the stage of the life cycle, both of the trends and of the consumers themselves, as Generation Y is bigger than Generation Z and has different values and life goals, ecology being one of them.

Consumer Habits

With regard to the impact of sustainable consumption habits on the purchase of luxury products and brands, we can state that, in line with the contributions of Moorhouse and Moorhouse (2018), for Generation Y it is important to purchase luxury goods and, in this sense, the more these goods are purchased, the less sustainable consumption habits will be observed. Conversely, the sustainable consumption habits of Generation Z have a positive impact on their purchase of luxury products: as social consumption habits increase, so does the purchase of luxury products.

Sustainable marketing does not have to affect the consumer's orientation towards slow fashion, but it does affect sustainable consumption habits, which has an indirect impact on the consumption of luxury products.

Shopping Places

The place of purchase of eco-fashion products is very influential. The fashion and luxury sector is linked to tourism. Many consumers in developing countries, most of them Asian, are forced to buy abroad because in their countries of residence they cannot find the supply that exists in other more mature countries and, although this is changing, it is also the case that buying in Europe or the United States represents an added value (González Romo et al., 2020).

Another reason is that when buying abroad, consumers can sometimes deduct local taxes which only affect residents of the area. Similarly, currency exchange can favour (and depreciate) citizens in both places of the world. Europe is the largest designer and producer of fashion (though not the largest manufacturer, which is Asia). But, equally, Europe is the continent with the highest percentage of sales in the global industry. Interestingly, it is the geographical area most committed to the environment, ecology and social awareness, at government, business and social levels.

Social Networks: From Threat to Opportunity for Eco Luxury

The rise of digital technology has changed the way fashion brands are promoted and social networks have become platforms that have transformed communication (García Medina et al., 2018), behaving as ideal spaces to feed brands and stimulate purchase decisions (Jiyoung & Ko, 2010). We are witnessing a true digital revolution that turns consumers, who are increasingly demanding and informed (Pérez-Curiel & Clavijo Ferreira, 2017), into controllers of the message, given the speed of the changes that are taking place.

Traditionally, the fashion and luxury market has sold its products in off-line shops, in favour of the uniqueness and exclusivity it represents, through strictly controlled distribution (Jin, 2012). The rejection of e-commerce and dissemination on websites has been the dominant trend. However, given the characteristics of interaction, personalisation, entertainment, word of mouth and the trend that identifies social media (Kim & Ko, 2010), luxury companies have turned to communication and digital marketing, valuing the two-way nature of the web.

According to Deloitte, in its report *Global Powers of Luxury Goods* (2019), the future of the global luxury market has been affected by the digital revolution, as well as by technology, the growing global middle class and the influence of Millennials and Generation Z. In the latter case, fashion and luxury brands have reinvented themselves to reach a potential consumer, different from their target audience and generally more inaccessible. Young people are dominating social networks and luxury brands are emphasising a new customer profile, sensitive to sustainability.

There is an extensive scientific literature linked to the sometimes-stereotyped traits (Bolton et al. 2013; Smith et al., 2010) that define this audience. Their high exposure to technology and information has been studied (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Parment, 2011; Prensky, 2001); the excessive use of social networks (Statista, 2016), the marked multiplatform and multitasking behaviour (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Prensky, 2001); the need for socialisation and connection (Barton et al.,

2014; Tuten & Solomon, 2013; Twenge, 2009); or empowerment and its power of decision (Barton et al., 2014; Leung, 2013; Parment, 2011).

We are facing the most demanding and informed generation in history (Yazici, 2016) and this represents a major challenge for fashion brands that have to adapt to the new social scenario.

Generation Y (Millennials), born between 1980 and the mid-1990s, represents 24% of the world's population and identifies with a segment of consumers with growing purchasing power. They are digital, global and hyperconnected (Bolton et al., 2013). According to Sullivan (2019), the difference between Millennials and older generations of consumers lies in the fact that they are three times more likely than Generation X and 12 times more likely than Baby Boomers to respond favourably to sustainability actions. The Press Release Details study (2018) reveals that for 85% of Millennials it is very important for companies to implement programmes to improve the environment; in addition, 75% state that they would definitely or probably change their purchasing habits to reduce their impact on the environment (Nielsen Holdings plc, 2018). On the other hand, Generation Z (also called "iGeneration" or "Post-Millennials"), born between 1995 and 2010, at a time of deep global crisis, is extremely pragmatic, with a powerful entrepreneurial spirit and more sensitive than previous ones to the defence of the environment. While the millennials are waiting to be discovered, Generation Z is ready to work and achieve success (Coni, 2018) and values the relationship with brands that demonstrate their involvement through corporate social responsibility strategies (Arıker & Toksoy, 2017) although their real interest lies in the fact that the products meet the prerequisites of price and quality.

In addition to connecting with these younger profiles, fashion and luxury brands are implementing strategies with influencers (Harmeling et al., 2017; Pedroni, 2016). The dynamic of this new leader has been to move away from the traditional marketing model and focus on showing themselves as ordinary people who awaken greater confidence in the consumer (Díaz Soloaga, 2017) and guarantee them leadership that surpasses that of the brand itself (Sádaba-Garraza & San-Miguel-Arregui, 2014).

Faced with consumer perception of luxury brands as associations concerned with quality, aesthetics or the extraordinary (Pedri Pereira & Schneider, 2017), influencing can lead to misinterpretations of its role as a prescriber, using a dynamic based on its own opinions and advice, unrelated to scientific evidence, which affect the brand's corporate communication.

From this perspective, the new trend in the sector, given the questioned role of influencers in this last stage, is to substitute or complement the function of these opinion leaders through a more active, direct and personal participation by the brands (Sanz Marcos et al., 2020). A new challenge is therefore opening up (Mir-Bernal et al., 2018), which luxury companies are translating into a commitment to bi-directionality, engagement and, above all, knowledge of the culture, tastes and opinion of a new target audience (the millennials), resulting in a change not only in modes of communication but also in modes of production.

Gucci leads a process of renewal and resurgence of luxury, designing campaigns on Instagram, considered the network par excellence for the dissemination of fashion and luxury sector, compared to Twitter, Facebook or YouTube. According to experts, Instagram favours an increase in the company's visibility, the generation of community, loyalty, the creation of brand image, product advertising and utility, the promotion of events or motivation and feedback with clients (Ramos, 2015) as well as the capacity for interaction between brand and user through photography (Caerols et al., 2013). The Italian brand creates new and personalised products (bags embroidered with dragons, sunglasses with pink lenses or belts with double G buckles), contacts with influencers from the world of cinema, music and platforms such as Netflix and HBO, modernises digital marketing strategies (memejacking, fashion films), adds to the rejection of animal skins for its designs and seeks to specialise in a unique and exclusive product that makes copying or replication difficult, as a strategy for other groups and brands (Pérez-Curiel & Sanz-Marcos, 2019).

Without a doubt, a process of renewal in production, communication and digital marketing actions that, independently of increasing brand profits, allows access to a new public, different from past cultures and

generational values, which represents a trend of change where the interrelation of fashion, ecology and sustainability constitute the basis for innovation and the future of sector.

Future Developments: Between Sustainable Production and Responsible Consumption

From a business and marketing point of view, we suggest that luxury brands must pay more attention to issues of sustainability and corporate social responsibility, so that, among their values, they must embrace and approach their companies from an ecology perspective. They must reach a balance between sustainable production and responsible consumption without neglecting the attraction of the target.

How, then, can we design sustainable brands that compete in the luxury fashion market? We propose a series of fundamentals, as a decalogue:

1. Start from the basis of decreasing profit margins in exchange for supporting sustainability and pursuing a social, ecological and value-based purpose before pursuing a growing economic purpose, but always based on profitability.
2. To differentiate strategies and concepts from those of the competition, where sustainable business strategy is based on renewing the brand mission.
3. Evolutionary approach: That brands consider what they can do differently to protect the planet, damage resources less and have as a philosophy the reduction, reuse and recycling of materials.
4. Defend human resources and fossil materials as the main assets and eliminate polluting materials, such as certain chemical dyes which, in addition to being harmful at the time of dyeing and, therefore, of manufacturing and production, are also harmful at the time of consumption.
5. To propose a transparent company, where buyers, consumers and luxury fashion users know at all times the traceability of the

- raw material, its origin and intermediate distribution, and where communication is two-way between the company and fashion users.
6. Incorporate responsible business practices, with design and creativity as a methodology for the advancement of sustainable development.
 7. Support socially just causes, where part (more, less) of the profits can be passed on to society for the common good. That is, in the end, to establish CSR strategies not as a mere image strategy, but as values by which the company and the brand are governed from the beginning and until the end of the manufacturing-distribution chain.
 8. Restructure the internal design and manufacturing processes, so that a climate of research into sustainable resources is created and the culture within the brand is changed.
 9. Creation of new jobs, such as the ecological quality supervisor or the environmental adaptation process manager.
 10. Renewing production strategies to be more environmentally friendly. Here we highlight the philosophy of fur free, a trend where companies are moving away from using animal fur to replace it with synthetic fur.

An aspect that must be taken into account when carrying out the process or evaluation of luxury brands to be, in addition, eco-friendly, is to involve the final consumer through a good communication of what sustainability implies and the benefits it brings in the fashion industry.

Final Considerations

The fashion and luxury sector has experienced great growth in recent years, bringing great economic benefit both on a purely aesthetic and fashion level, and on a tourist level, encouraging the exploration of cities and countries where these types of companies are located, especially Europe and Asia. But this has brought with it negative consequences for society and the environment, both of which are victims of irresponsible practices on the part of the textile, fashion and luxury sectors. Thus, the

luxury industry has particularly contributed to the increase in cases of exploitation and major pollution scandals.

Slow fashion has emerged as a counterbalance. A model based on quality and aimed at a consumer who represents cultural diversity and the need to be informed. Therefore, in order to achieve sustainable production, it is necessary to start from the awareness of both consumers and companies to promote responsible consumption. A necessary change in the durability of products is therefore urgently needed, with higher quality in the long term and free from aesthetic or productive obsolescence.

In the end, it is a question of adding value, and not subtracting it. It is key to remember that companies are created by and to have an impact on people, on society, generating economic benefits. In this context, it might seem that sustainability is the opposite of luxury, even more so in the world of fashion; however, there is a common area for both concepts, often enhancing the positive economic aspects of profit and profitability.

The new trend in the form of production in the fashion sector, where these economic benefits, social benefits and environmental advantages are combined, is slow fashion, which, as opposed to fast fashion, adapts to social reality, evolves. As it is such a recent movement, the offer is very scarce and there are many business opportunities for the companies that bet on a change that, undoubtedly, is not exempt of risk. To this we add that the products are of high quality, with a longer life span than conventional products, resulting in less generation of unnecessary waste and lower economic outlay, in the medium and long term, for consumers.

On the contrary, although slow fashion is a model where social values can be easily integrated, the truth is that this industry represents a real challenge because, although in theory, society is postulated on the margin of sustainability and social and environmental responsibility, it is also true that, from a practical point of view, fast fashion imposes its know-how and acts on an already established and settled economic model.

Today's fashion is more fluid and interactive than ever, changing the way eco luxury brands connect with their core audience. Its dynamics is determined by a new consumer profile, the millennials, which brings

with it a great deal of possibilities and represents an enormous potential for the development of communication and marketing actions.

In this scenario, social network management is still a communication tool used and included in the set of conventional communication strategies of fashion brands. The use of this instrument is an axiom with an intrinsic and necessary value within the business marketing and advertising action plan.

Likewise, in this context, a new mode of consumption arises where the users of social networks act as *adprosumers* (producers and consumers on the net), generating content, interacting with the brand and announcing their experience to inform other consumers. A protocol of seduction is therefore created, weighted by the figure of the influencer, who become ambassadors of the brand. The use of platforms that give brands visibility in the online environment is currently a trend that prosumers naturally perceive. In this sense, the fashion and luxury sector with social, ecological and environmental values does not remain on the sidelines or renounce the consubstantial values of the other variables: price, product and distribution, under the concepts of quality and exclusivity, advocating the presence in social networks.

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