

# **Optimizing Consumer Engagement with Sustainable Fashion on Instagram: The Impact of Product Type and Message Appeal**

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The fashion industry is increasingly pressured to adopt environmentally friendly and ethically sound production practices, and a growing number of consumers now value brands that support environmental sustainability (Rosmarin, 2020; White, Habib, & Hardisty, 2019). Despite the rise in sustainability content on social media (Milanesi, Kyrdoda, & Runfola, 2022), there is a lack of studies examining its effectiveness in terms of consumer engagement. This study investigates consumer engagement with sustainable product messages posted on brand-controlled Instagram pages (i.e., owned media) to determine which types of sustainable product posts generate the most engagement and under what conditions. We focus exclusively on communications related to environmental sustainability, excluding social sustainability content. Based on previous research in sustainable product innovation, we classified sustainable product posts into four categories (Hemonnet-Goujot, Kessous, & Magnoni, 2022; Rese, Baier, & Rausch, 2022; Varadarajan, 2017): repurposed, sustainable alternative, organic, and generic products. These products can be promoted using various message appeals, with functional and emotional appeals being the most studied (Matthes, Wonneberger, & Schmuk, 2014). Given that fashion purchases are often hedonic (Millan & Reynolds, 2014), it is expected that sustainable product messages with emotional appeals would be more effective. However, given that environmentally friendly products are often perceived as credence goods with

associated risks of greenwashing and perceived quality issues (Nuttavuthisit & Thøgersen, 2017; Kim et al., 2014), functional appeals may also be important.

To explore how consumers engage with emotional and functional appeals across different sustainable products, we analyzed 2,250 sustainable product posts from 53 sustainable and sustainably aware fashion brands on Instagram, covering posts from May 12, 2016, to December 29, 2021. The average number of likes per brand post was 6,163.76 ( $SD = 24,506.2$ ), and the average number of comments was 46.18 ( $SD = 272.14$ ).

We created the dependent variable "social media engagement" by summing the number of "likes" and "comments" for each brand post and log-transforming it due to positive skewness. We used PROCESS Model 2 to test the moderating effects of functional and emotional appeal dummies, with product type (0: generic, 1: organic, 2: sustainable alternative, 3: repurposed) as the independent variable. Control variables included message length (log), number of followers (log), weekday posting (1), time elapsed since the post date, share of positive and negative comments, and whether the brand is established (1) or new.

Findings indicate that when no functional or emotional appeal was used, engagement was highest for organic products, followed by sustainable alternative, generic, and repurposed products. When only emotional appeal was used, sustainable alternative products had the highest engagement, followed by generic, organic, and repurposed products. When only functional appeal was used, sustainable alternative products again had the highest engagement. When both emotional and functional appeals were used, sustainable alternative products had the highest engagement, while organic products had the lowest.

The results suggest that sustainable fashion brands should avoid using only emotional appeals for repurposed products and instead use functional appeals. For organic products, functional appeals are recommended. For sustainable alternative products, either functional alone or both functional and emotional appeals should be used. Additionally, brands should monitor and address negative comments on Instagram, as they can lead to increased engagement. Notably, established brands experience lower engagement than new brands in sustainable product communication, likely due to reduced engagement from long-time fans.

As with any empirical research, our study has limitations that open avenues for future research. Further studies could include a larger sample of Instagram posts and employ topic modeling of message content. Future research should also consider the impact of image content in Instagram posts and explore engagement through experimental methods to establish causal relationships.