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Critical discourse analysis of fast fashion companies' legitimation strategies on Instagram

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine how fast fashion companies attempt to build legitimacy for their actions through social media marketing communications. The data are sourced from Lindex's and H&M's Instagram posts to explore how sustainability claims are related to the discursive legitimation strategies of authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation, and mythopoesis. In our critical discourse analysis, we show how visual and verbal components participate in the construction of these discursive legitimation strategies. Our findings allow us to advance discussions of fast fashion as a market institution by critically addressing the role of fast fashion companies and the ways in which they aim to legitimize this unsustainable business model by harnessing sustainability claims. By analyzing visual and verbal components as a part of the discursive construction of legitimacy, our research adds empirical detail to conceptualizations of the mediating role of social media in perpetuating the harmful practices of the fashion industry.

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Fast fashion; legitimation strategy; institutional theory; social media; critical discourse analysis

Introduction

In this study, we explore the social media marketing communication produced by fast fashion companies to discover how discursive legitimation strategies are employed in attempts to lubricate this controversial business model. The concept of fast fashion was coined primarily in reference to this industry's rapid business model – that is, the way the clothing industry produces rapidly-rotating collections that imitate current luxury fashion trends at a low cost, with the aim of selling recurring novelties to the largest possible group of consumers (Bhardwaj and Fairhurst 2010; Joy et al. 2012). It can be argued that fast fashion challenges all aspects of sustainable fashion, defined to include "environmental, social, slow fashion, reuse, recycling, cruelty-free and anti-consumption and production practices" (Mukendi et al. 2020, 2877).

To date, empirical studies addressing the sustainability concerns of (fast) fashion have largely focused on the roles and practices of consumers (e.g. Austgulen 2016; Goworek et al. 2012; Joy et al. 2012; Niinimäki 2010). Taking a more systemic perspective, Ertekin and Atik (2020) acknowledge that consumers indeed are key actors in transforming the fashion system into a more sustainable model, but emphasize the role of other actors, such as designers, retailers, fashion associations, and political decision makers, in maintaining the dominant fashion system. They further argue that especially the big fashion brands and retailers are of utmost importance, as they have the agency to slow down fashion cycles, create awareness of sustainability problems, encourage circular

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production, and improve the environmental footprint and transparency of the entire industry. We participate in this emerging discussion by building on the views that address not only the pivotal role of fast fashion companies but also the significance of social media platforms (Murray 2015; Schöps, Kogler, and Hemetsberger 2020; Soto-Vásquez et al. 2023).

We regard social media as an institutional mediator that wields significant influence within the broader fashion system, shaping its underlying socio-cultural discourses, which encompass established societal norms and stereotypes (Srivastava, Wilska, and Sjöberg 2022). The importance of social media is underscored by studies such as Retail Dive's (2017) survey, which found that 72% of consumers acknowledged being influenced by Instagram content in their fashion, style, and beauty product purchases. Despite the growing scholarly attention, there persists a need for more rigorous analyses of how fast fashion companies leverage social media from a sustainability perspective. Specifically, we contend that without a detailed understanding of how these companies use social media while seeking to legitimize their operations, we are not able to critically evaluate the fashion system.

In response to this, this study draws upon discursive legitimacy theory (e.g. Humphreys and LaTour 2013; Van Leeuwen 2007), and aims to examine *how fast fashion companies mobilize sustainability claims in social media when attempting to build legitimacy for their actions*. We employ the framework of discursive legitimation strategies – authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation, and mythopoesis (Van Leeuwen 2007) – and focus on the agency of fashion companies and the mediating role of social media in perpetuating the legitimation processes of fashion consumption and production (e.g. Atik and Firat 2013; Humphreys and LaTour 2013; Valor, Lloveras, and Papaoikonomou 2020). As legitimacy in the marketplace is deemed fragile, temporary, and constantly negotiated (Humphreys 2010; Valor, Lloveras, and Papaoikonomou 2020), we argue that it is pivotal to explore the ways in which legitimacy is sought, particularly in the case of a controversial business model.

In the empirical analysis, we address two more specific research questions: (1) How do sustainability claims appear in relation to discursive legitimation strategies in fast fashion companies' Instagram postings? and (2) How do visual and verbal components participate in the construction of these discursive legitimation strategies? Aligned with the questions, the empirical study is based on a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1992, 2003; Van Dijk 2015) that is designed to investigate how two internationally operating fast fashion companies, Lindex and H&M, seek to legitimize fast fashion consumption and production in their Instagram publications. As Instagram represents mainly a visual platform, being a place where fashion ideals are negotiated among market actors based on visuality (Schöps, Kogler, and Hemetsberger 2020) our discourse analysis employs both the visual (i.e. pictures and videos) and verbal components included in the Instagram postings.

Theoretically, we contribute to recent discussions on fast fashion as a market institution by examining the role of fast fashion companies' social media communication and how they aim to lubricate this unsustainable business model by harnessing sustainability claims. Building on the discursive assumptions elucidated by Valor, Lloveras, and Papaoikonomou (2020), our research refrains from making claims about how consumers "actually" behave or respond to the legitimacy strategies employed by companies. Instead, it contributes by specifying how the visual and verbal components mediate the discursive legitimation strategies aimed at eliciting responses from target consumers. By analyzing the visual and verbal components as integral parts of the discursive construction of legitimacy on social media, we provide empirical detail and depth to existing studies that address the roles played by various actors in shaping the perception of sustainability within the fashion system (e.g. Ertekin and Atik 2020; Mukendi et al. 2020).

The paper first outlines the premises of fast fashion as an institutionalized system and discusses discursive legitimation strategies. We then describe our methodological approach based on critical discourse analysis. In the findings section, we detail how fast fashion companies employ discursive strategies, utilizing both visual and verbal components to emphasize sustainability claims. Finally, we discuss theoretical contributions and draw conclusions.

Discursive legitimacy of fast fashion

Legitimacy is "a generalized assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within a socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman 1995). It answers the spoken or unspoken question of "why," as in, for example, "Why should we buy new clothes?" or "Why should we buy clothes from a specific brand?" Looking from this viewpoint, the (fast) fashion system forms an institution that is grounded on regulative (i.e. laws, regulations, and guidelines established for the fashion companies), normative (i.e. informal values and beliefs that form the cultural norms of fashion consumption), cultural-cognitive (i.e. taken-for-granted understandings of fashion consumption), and relational (i.e. affirming the social identity and self-worth of individuals or social groups) legitimacy (Scott 1995; Valor, Lloveras, and Papaoikonomou 2020) which together legitimize the system and its actors.

There is a growing body of research adopting the institutional legitimacy approach to analyze fashion consumption and marketing (e.g. Atik and Firat 2013; Ertekin and Atik 2020; Ertekin, Atik, and Murray 2020). Studies have illuminated how different market actors collectively create and disseminate the fashion marketing institution (Atik and Firat 2013; Schöps, Kogler, and Hemetsberger 2020), highlighted the need for a new sustainability logic alongside the traditional logics of art and commerce in the fashion system (Ertekin, Atik, and Murray 2020), and analyzed how stigmatized consumers act as institutional entrepreneurs to legitimize marginalized female bodies in fashion media (Scaraboto and Fischer 2013). Additionally, the roles and capabilities of different institutional constituents (e.g. consumers, luxury brands, retailers, designers, fashion associations, and crises and tragic events) have been explored in relation to the transformation of the fashion system into a more sustainable entity (Ertekin and Atik 2020). Interestingly, the legitimacy of fast fashion companies appears to be two-directional: on the one hand, companies use their voices to advocate for a more sustainable fashion system, while on the other hand, they simultaneously perpetuate the fast fashion cycle for business purposes (Ertekin and Atik 2020).

We build on these insights and analyze how fast fashion companies mobilize sustainability claims when attempting to build legitimacy for their actions. Specifically, we apply Van Leeuwen's (2007) conceptual framework of discursive legitimation strategies defined as "specific, not always intentional or conscious, ways of employing different discourses or discursive resources to establish legitimacy" (Vaara, Tienari, and Laurila 2006, 794). While previous studies have insightfully explored discursive legitimation strategies in mainstream media texts (e.g. Baumann-Pauly, Scherer, and Palazzo 2016; Vaara, Tienari, and Laurila 2006), we focus on the social media communication of these companies serving as an institutional mediator in fashion markets (Murray 2015; Schöps, Kogler, and Hemetsberger 2020; Soto-Vásquez et al. 2023).

The first category of discursive legitimacy is the *authorization strategy,* which according to Van Leeuwen (2007, 92), involves "legitimation by reference to the authority of tradition, custom, law, and persons in whom institutional authority of some kind is vested." He further differentiates between personal and impersonal forms (authority legitimation), experts and role models (commendation legitimation), and the authority of tradition versus that of conformity (custom legitimation). To exemplify, personality-based authority draws from a person's influence, status, or role in a particular institution, such as an expert or role model authority, which in the fashion industry can be a fashion icon or a famous designer. Impersonal authority builds either on traditions or beliefs about how to do the right thing, becoming visible, for example, in the socially shared ideals of buying trendy clothes according to new seasons (e.g. Bhardwaj and Fairhurst 2010).

Second, the *rationalization strategy* aims to legitimize an activity "by reference to the goals and uses of institutionalized social action, and to the knowledge society has constructed to endow them with cognitive validity" (Van Leeuwen 2007, 92). This type of strategy is a common and easily identifiable form of legitimacy (Fairclough 2003), and it may involve, for example, the presentation of numbers to indicate low prices or special offers (Vaara, Tienari, and Laurila 2006). Instrumental rationalization is used when an action is legitimized by referring to concrete objectives, their

uses, and their impacts, while theoretical rationalization, in contrast, legitimizes an action by referring to normalization – "that is how things are" – and emphasizing the natural use or evolution of things (Van Leeuwen 2007). In the fashion context, rationalization is used, for example, by addressing the special features or utility of garments for the consumers.

Third, the *strategy of moral evaluation* refers to the value-based legitimization of actions and their approval (Van Leeuwen 2007). In this case, legitimation is based on moral discourses that are deeply immersed in sociocultural meanings and values, which also makes the interpretation of moral evaluation rhetoric culturally specific. As highlighted by Van Leeuwen (2007), moral evaluation is, in most cases, hidden; for instance, it can be implicitly embedded in subjectively laden attributes, such as "normal," "natural," and "useful." Actors can legitimize their practices by evaluating their goodness in an abstract way that foregrounds their desired and legitimate qualities, and by presenting comparisons that show certain practices in either a positive or a negative light. In the context of the fashion industry, moral evaluation is used, for instance, when companies legitimize fast fashion by addressing their moral actions, such as charity donations, reducing environmental impacts, or enabling anyone to follow the latest trends with their low prices.

The fourth strategy, *mythopoesis*, employs storytelling elements to legitimize an action or practice with narratives in which legitimate actions are rewarded and non-legitimate ones are punished (Van Leeuwen 2007). According to Vaara, Tienari, and Laurila (2006), elements may include dramatic narratives in which actors can be described as winners, losers, heroes, opponents, or guilty ones. They state that mythopoesis may be based on either moral or cautionary stories; moral stories reward actors for following social practices, and cautionary stories depict what happens if social standards are not followed. In the fashion sector, storytelling is applied, for instance, when companies represent themselves as heroes to strengthen the brand's relationships with consumers (e.g. Miotto and Youn 2020). Next, we discuss how the framework of discursive legitimation was applied in the analysis of the current data.

Methodology

The present study is grounded in discourse analytical thought. Discourse analysis is not a unified research method but rather a way of interpreting textual and visual material analytically and critically (Van Dijk 2015, 466). Specifically, we draw on critical discourse analysis, which aims to make visible problems that are often overlooked by society (Vaara, Tienari, and Laurila 2006). In this study, the problems entail complex institutionalized challenges related to the sustainability of the fashion industry, and how – despite these dilemmas – justifications for fast fashion consumption and production are lubricated through the use of discursive resources in social media (cf. Ertekin, Atik, and Murray 2020). According to Van Dijk (2015), the study of discourses precisely focuses on how the use of power is produced or legitimized in texts in different social contexts. The term "text" here encompasses not only written texts but also visual material (i.e. pictures and videos), which collectively constitute "the actual instances of discourse" (Fairclough 2003; Johnstone 2017, 16) that compose the data for the present study.

The data were sourced from Lindex's and H&M's Instagram publications from 2020, which was an exceptionally fruitful year, since due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the usage of social media was emphasized (see also Soto-Vásquez et al. 2023). Instagram was chosen because it's a platform where clothing brands actively engage (Prescott 2020), and it is regarded as "a place where shared understandings of contemporary body aesthetics and beauty are negotiated among market actors – a genre which is firmly connected to the fashion market and which also enjoys massive visibility on Instagram" (Schöps, Kogler, and Hemetsberger 2020, 196; see also Camminga and Lubinsky 2022). Lindex and H&M were chosen due to their similar Swedish origin and operation mode, and because their social media communication provided abundant data on sustainability claims. Despite not self-identifying as fast fashion advocates, they meet the general criteria for fast fashion retailers because they provide affordable, fast-cycling fashion items, with several new collections a

year (e.g. Bhardwaj and Fairhurst 2010; Joy et al. 2012). Our focus was on the so-called organic content, excluding paid advertisements and ephemeral content like Stories, Reels, or Instagram TV publications, and we used only the official image or video publications visible on the companies' Instagram profiles. In total, the data included 401 publications by Lindex and 281 by H&M.

We explicate our chosen analytical approach by drawing on Rose's (2012) framework for visual analysis, although we did not only carry out a visual discourse analysis (cf., Srivastava, Wilska, and Sjöberg 2022). Rose's framework combines three sites of an image – the production, the image itself, and the audiencing – and three modalities of an image – technological, compositional, and social. Regarding sites, our analysis is a combination of the *production* and *the image itself*. This means that, for instance, we did not interview consumers (i.e. site of audiencing) about their views (cf. Soto-Vásquez et al. 2023). Instead, our analytical lens was directed at interpreting the image (i.e. verbal and visual components of the social media postings) in an attempt to understand how fast fashion companies (i.e. site of production) try to build legitimacy through their social media postings (i.e. site of the image).

When it comes to the modalities of our analysis, we followed Schöps, Kogler, and Hemetsberger (2020) and intertwined compositional and social modalities. The *compositional modality* means, according to Rose (2012, 20), the content, colors, and spatial organization of objects in the image and is thereby similar to a visual content analysis, wherein the idea is to analyze the elements of pictures in a rather objective and systematic manner (Schroeder and Borgerson 1998). Nevertheless, it should be noted that it is "the compositional modality of the site of the image that can produce persuasive accounts of a photograph's effects on viewers" (Rose 2012, 28). This is in line with our grounding in the social constructionist approach, which, when intermingling with the idea of a *social modality*, refers to "a range of economic, social and political relations, institutions and practices that surround an image and through which it is seen and used" (Rose 2012, 20). Thus, when moving forward from the merely compositional modality, our interpretive analysis borrowed from Schroeder and Borgerson (1998, 166) in an effort to attend to "both internal and external sources of information about the object, such as context, comparisons, denotation, and connotation."

Our first round of analysis focused mostly on *compositional modality* (i.e. the content of the postings, the kind of colors used, and the spatial organization of the visual and verbal components in the postings) in relation to the texts of the postings to roughly understand what the chosen social media postings were about. In this round, we found that the main themes that emerged in the research material were fashionability (e.g. when posts highlighted that the items are up-to-date, in fashion, stylish etc.), practicality (e.g. when postings highlighted the functional values of items), environmental sustainability (e.g. when benefits for the environment were mentioned explicitly and/or emphasized in pictures such as using green colors or pictures of nature), social sustainability (e.g. when postings included explicit mentions and related pictures of social sustainability actions like donations related to Pride Week or Womens Day), and special offers (e.g. explicit mentions and pictures of special offers and sales). These categories were not mutually exclusive, and postings could include elements of several themes, as shown in the posting by Lindex (*emphasis added*) composed of both fashionability and practicality themes: "The straw bag. A *stylish* yet *practical* summer accessory to carry those small beach *essentials*." As we leaned on Mukendi et al. (2020, 2877) definition of sustainable fashion as "the variety of means by which a fashion item or behavior could be perceived to be more sustainable, including (but not limited to) environmental, social, slow fashion, reuse, recycling, cruelty-free and anti-consumption and production practices," we continued our analysis by focusing on postings that included themes of environmental and social sustainability.

In the second round of analysis, we combined the findings on compositional modality and oriented our focus to *social modality*. Thus, moving more toward interpretation, we included external and internal sources, context, comparisons, denotation, and connotation, as outlined by Schroeder and Borgerson (1998), to deepen the analysis. At this stage, we also connected

the readings of the empirical material with the extant theory on discursive legitimation strategies. Thus, taking the discursive legitimation strategies of Van Leeuwen (2007) as a theoretical framework, we analyzed how the sustainability claims of social media postings appeared and the ways in which different verbal and visual components participated in this legitimation. When analyzing the publications, we looked at the kinds of denotations and connotations that were included and interpreted as to why certain wordings, colors, spatial organizations of people, and things were chosen in the pictures/videos to produce a certain kind of discursive legitimacy. While following the premises of cultural consumer research in making interpretations (Moisander and Valtonen 2006, 24—25), we employed the investigator triangulation not to uncover "the truth" nor to provide validity between our independent conclusions of data, but to make sense of variability of different interpretations related to data extracts. These discussions among the group of authors enabled us to test, debate and finally provide more in-depth understanding of the data. This is particularly important as, especially in visual research, the interpretative nature is an inevitable starting point for the research, as highlighted by Hall (1997, 9) "It is worth emphasizing that there is no single or 'correct' answer to the question, 'What does this image mean?' or 'What is this ad saying?'"

Findings

In this section, we describe our findings in detail by showing how an example from our data connects with each discursive legitimation strategy. The findings show how the Instagram postings produced by H&M and Lindex intertwine the sustainability claims together with visual and verbal components in attempts to lubricate the legitimization of the prevailing fast fashion system.

Authorization strategy

Our analysis shows that the fast fashion companies we studied relied mostly on experts and role models when seeking to legitimize their actions through sustainability claims. For example, the companies used the names and photos of well-known celebrities, designers, and models to present the sustainable branded collections or new clothing materials. One example of an authorization strategy can be seen in Figure 1. This Instagram posting consists of a photo and a video of a model wearing a black dress. The text says, "We're changing our way of designing. We're innovating to create better materials with less impact on our planet. Garments from our Conscious assortment contains [*sic*] at least 50% of sustainably sourced materials – and some are made from even 100%. Like this little black dress."

Regarding the verbal components used in this Instagram posting, H&M presents itself as a proactive and innovative actor that wants to change their ways of designing to be more sustainable. This is a typical example of how the company itself is represented as an expert authority capable of changing the prevalent ways of producing clothing. In addition, the verbal components include numbers and percentages, which are used as means to legitimize the actions of the company, as they strengthen the sustainability claims and make the sustainability targets more concrete. At the same time, the numbers are presented in a rather unclear manner using the terms "at least" and "some." This makes the evaluation of the actual impacts and their realistic scale difficult to determine. Also, the posting does not include any information regarding the present situation, which is why the reader cannot compare these new "changing" ways of designing and innovating with existing or previous ways or present levels of gas house emissions. Finally, the verbal components include a reference to a label entitled "Conscious," which is the company's own term for their sustainable assortment. However, as the label is not qualified by an independent authority, such as an official environmental certificate, it can be interpreted as a rhetorical means to appear sustainable, rather than an actual definition of how sustainable this assortment actually is.

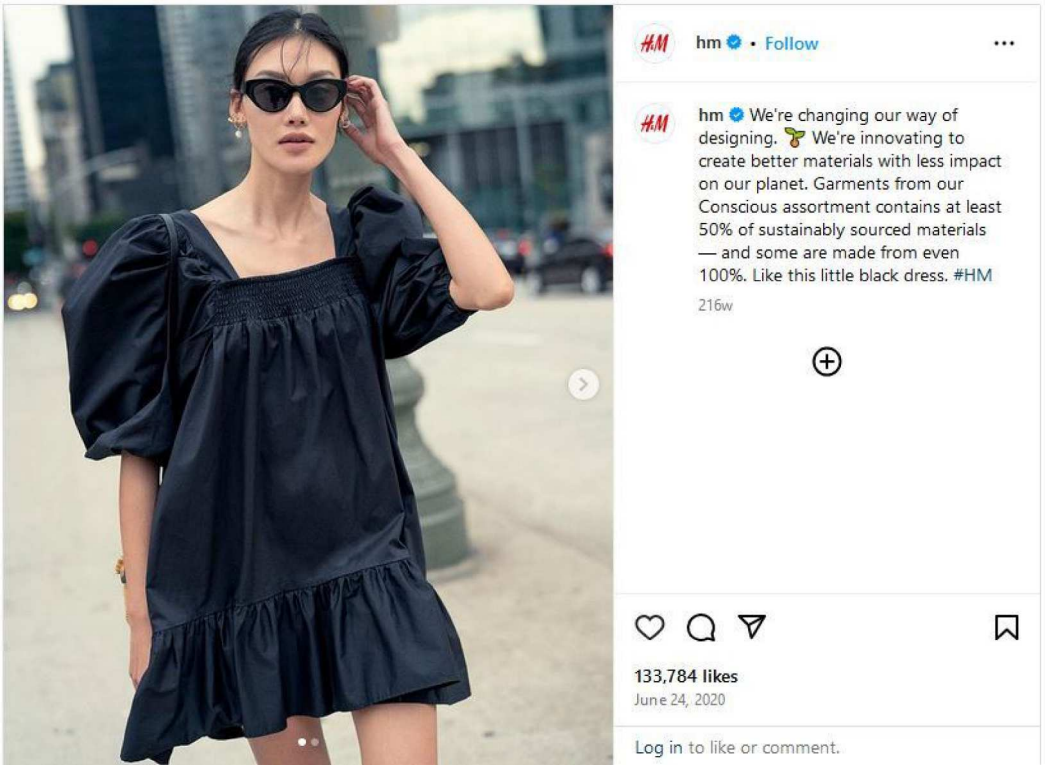

Figure 1. Image URL: https://www.instagram.com/p/CB0SckthLIa. Source: https://www.instagram.com/hm/. Date of access: 24 June 2020. © H&M. Reuse not permitted.

The visual components, particularly the compositional modality of the image, include a female model who is wearing a black dress and sunglasses and who poses in an urban context. The spatial organization depicts the model in the center and the city in the background of the image. The picture is taken in a large city, which can be seen even better in the video, where the model poses on a bridge that crosses over a highway full of cars. Regarding the social modality, the posting connotes the meanings of modernization, innovativeness, and monetary wellbeing, which intertwine the sustainability claims made by H&M with the discourses of how to be a sustainably conscious, trendy, and successful consumer. Thus, the publication legitimizes fast fashion consumption by aiming at constructing an image in which striving for sustainable values does not exclude a modern, well-dressed, and successful city life. According to our interpretation, these visual components (the successful-looking model, the city background) intertwined with the verbal messages (e.g. "conscious"), put forward an association where a consumer can achieve seemingly contradictory goals (monetary wealth and sustainable consumption) at the same time.

Rationalization strategy

The rationalization strategy permeated our data abundantly. Below, Figure 2 by Lindex is a good example of a posting in which the use of both theoretical and instrumental rationalization strategies is evident. Regarding theoretical rationalization, the publication displays buying new seasonal clothes as a normal activity that people customarily do when the clothing season changes. This is justified by the seasonal changes of new apparels, which is highlighted in the verbalization "Switch

Figure 2. Image URL: https://www.instagram.com/p/B-boRUkjm1w. Source: https://www.instagram.com/lindexofficial. Date of access: 1 April 2020. © Lindex. Reuse not permitted.

it up for spring. Introduce bright pops of color. Lighter fabrics," as well as in the visual components, such as the use of light colors that intensify the idea that new clothes are needed for the lighter spring season.

Lindex aims to legitimize the buying of new clothes by rationalizing their repeated use through the verbal component "new styles you'll wear on repeat." The frequent and enduring usage of clothing is indeed the most important way of practicing sustainable fashion consumption (e.g. Vesterinen and Syrjälä 2022). Quite interestingly, this repetition is also evident in the denotative visual components, as this posting includes a video in which the amount of clothes on the coat stand changes rapidly. However, in analyzing the visualization critically and addressing possible connotations (i.e. culturally bound associations), it can be questioned whether the repetitive nature of adding and removing clothes actually participates in constructing a discourse wherein repetitive buying, and not only wearing, is legitimized. This interpretation may be drawn from the context of fast fashion institutions, which, by definition, are based on the idea of rapidly changing garments (e.g. Joy et al. 2012; Mukendi et al. 2020).

Second, the posting also includes an instrumental rationalization strategy, which can be seen in Lindex's hashtag #YourSmartWardrobe at the end. As this strategy legitimates practices by reference to their goals and effects (Van Leeuwen 2007), here Lindex brings forward the connotation of how consumers who buy these clothes are "smart," thus highlighting how buying (more of) these clothes is a rational, goal-oriented action that has positive effects. With this hashtag, Lindex participates in the prevailing discussion in the fashion consumption context regarding the "shop your own closet" ideology, wherein consumers are encouraged to use their current clothes instead of buying new ones (Bly, Wencke, and Reisch 2015). However, even though Lindex aims to create

associations with sustainability by referring to a smart wardrobe, the term is actually used here in the opposite sense to induce more shopping, as the rhetoric used, such as "find more styles" at the very end, is meant to lure consumers into buying new clothes. This kind of conflicting message is an example of how fast fashion companies harness sustainability claims by flipping around their original meaning and instead aim to mobilize more (unsustainable) consumption.

In addition, our analysis also found that the rationalization strategy was employed by referring to the concrete benefits of purchases, such as superior quality, low prices, or special offers (i.e. instrumental rationalization). In many publications, consumers were encouraged to buy clothes because it "just makes sense" due to their low prices or good price/quality ratio, which thereby encouraged consumers to make "good choices." Hence, even though the rationalization may be partly based on sustainability aims, the fast fashion cycle keeps spinning, as the connotation produced is to increase consumption.

Moralization strategy

Our analysis revealed that the fast fashion companies used the moralization strategy, when evaluating their own practices as good and therefore aiming to produce them as morally legitimate. One example of a moralization strategy can be seen in Lindex's publication on their charity work with WaterAid (Figures 3–5). Here, moral legitimation is based on the universal values of equality, women's rights, and human rights. The publication's text says, "758 million people lack access to clean water. Women and kids are affected the most. On March 8 we give 10% of our sales to WaterAid. Shop for every drop at lindex.com or in store on Sunday." The video contains background

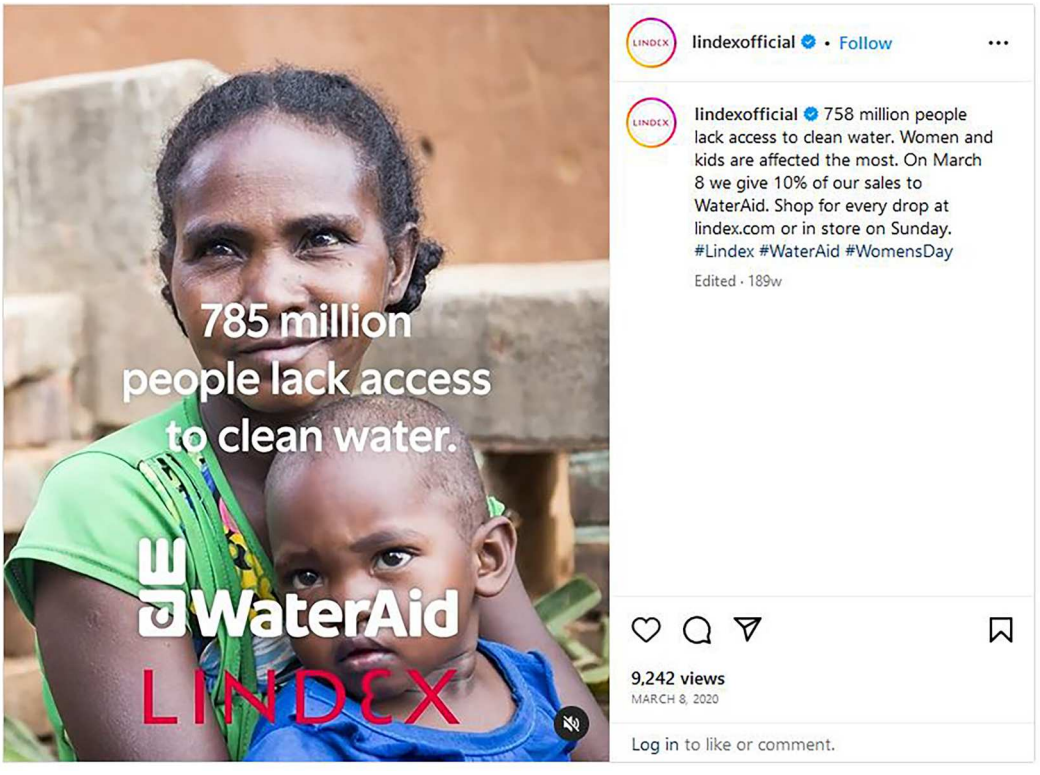

Figure 3. Image URL: https://www.instagram.com/p/B9d7mw1gZLL. Source: https://www.instagram.com/lindexofficial. Date of access: 8 March 2020. © Lindex. Reuse not permitted.

music and a changing info text. The video starts with an introductory picture of how many people lack access to clean water (Figure 3). It continues by showing that getting water is a woman's job in the poorest countries, resulting in women being left without education or income, as they are required to miss school or work, and how the issue has several consequences for women's health (Figure 4). The video ends with a powerful message stating that we can change this together with Lindex (Figure 5).

The compositional modality of this publication shows pictorial snapshots of women's lives in a developing country, with the women either looking directly into the camera or doing chores related to water. The pictures are colorful and sharp, and even though the message is very serious, the women's facial expressions are not entirely sad. Instead, they are either neutral or even slightly smiling. When it comes to interpreting these images from the social modality perspective, the posting positions the women living in developing countries as victims through verbal and visual components that highlight how getting water is women's job in the countries with shortage of clean water. However, both the viewers (consumers) and the company (Lindex) are positioned as heroes and saviors who can participate in this battle by buying more clothes, as highlighted in the verbalization of the posting (*emphasis added*) "On March 8, *we give* 10% of our sales to WaterAid. *Shop for every drop* at lindex.com or in-store on Sunday." According to our interpretation, the connotative association is compelling, fostered by visual components such as content faces and bright colors, leading to the connotation that consumers can be saviors by buying new clothes since a small share of the daily sales will be donated to charity.

This data example shows a typical way of presenting fast fashion consumption as a win-win solution for all. On the one hand, the companies use the moralization strategy with a variety of visual

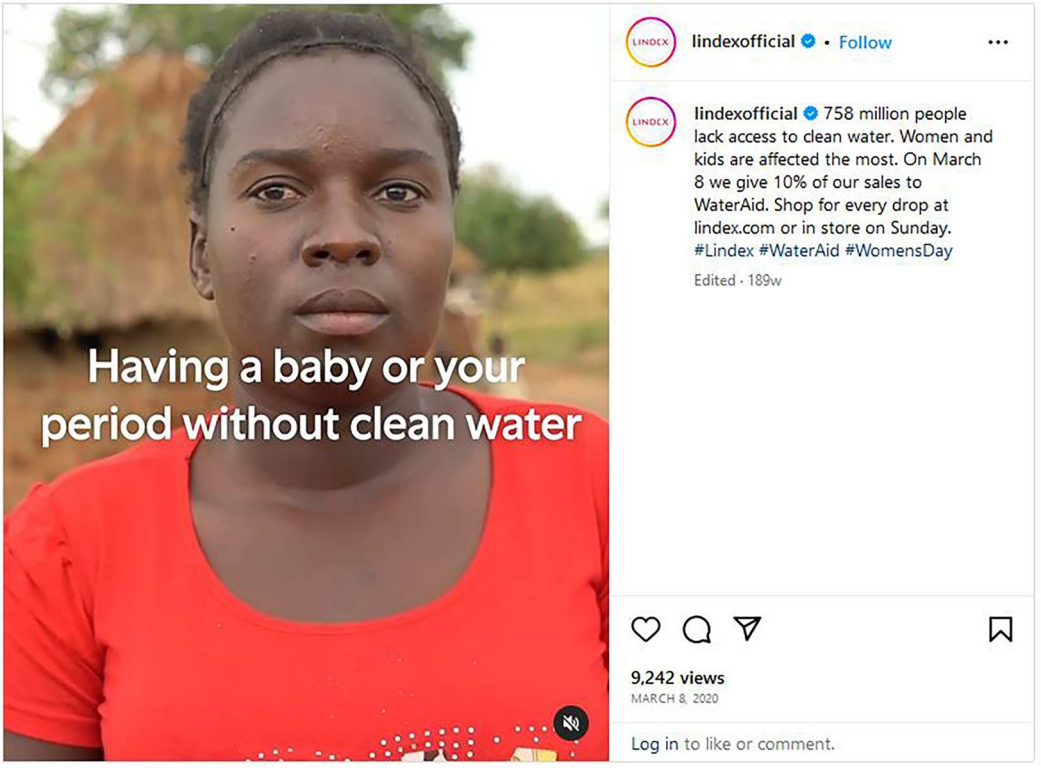

Figure 4. Image URL: https://www.instagram.com/p/B9d7mw1gZLL. Source: https://www.instagram.com/lindexofficial. Date of access: 8 March 2020. © Lindex. Reuse not permitted.

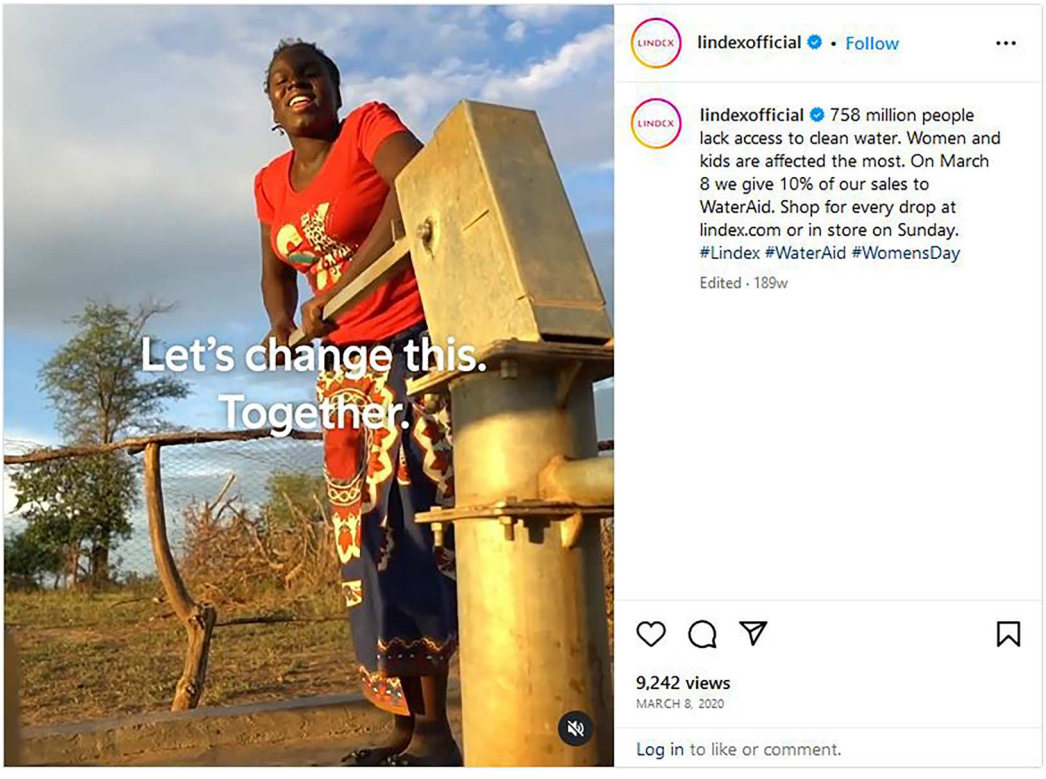

Figure 5. Image URL: https://www.instagram.com/p/B9d7mw1gZLL. Source: https://www.instagram.com/lindexofficial. Date of access: 8 March 2020. © Lindex. Reuse not permitted.

and verbal components to present themselves as good-doers in the developing countries where they actually cause a great deal of harm. On the other hand, consumers are given the entitlement of shopping fast fashion as they are represented as moral agents. This is a problematic argument, because it ultimately normalizes the consumption of new fashion items and supports the practice of "buying" a good conscience. In intertwining the rationalization and authorization strategies, the numbers presented in the posting strengthen the credibility of the discourse, but eventually, there is no evidence that the promised actions are actually carried out, not to mention that the amount is very small when compared to all the harm the fast fashion system causes for developing countries. Thus, the data example is a powerful demonstration of how the fast fashion system may well be presented as a hero, even though the broader fashion market system itself is actually the villain.

Mythopoesis strategy

In the selected postings, pluriverse storytelling elements were included, such as metaphors or narrative styles in which the actor or the product was positioned in a certain role (e.g. a hero or a villain, as in the previous example) or certain symbolic actions were employed (e.g. a warning or a reward). As many Instagram postings are not still images, but videos, a mythopoesis strategy was involved in most of the video postings, although other discursive legitimation strategies might have been more pronounced.

A good example of a publication that leans on the mythopoesis strategy was developed by H&M. In this video publication, the company legitimizes the consumption of fast fashion by creating a narrative of a group of friends spending a New Year's Eve repairing clothes. The compositional modality of the storyline is interesting, as it starts with a group of friends doing craftwork together, sewing and

Figure 6. Image URL:https://www.instagram.com/p/ClscluLHkgd. Source: https://www.instagram.com/hm/. Date of access: 12 December 2020. © H&M. Reuse not permitted.

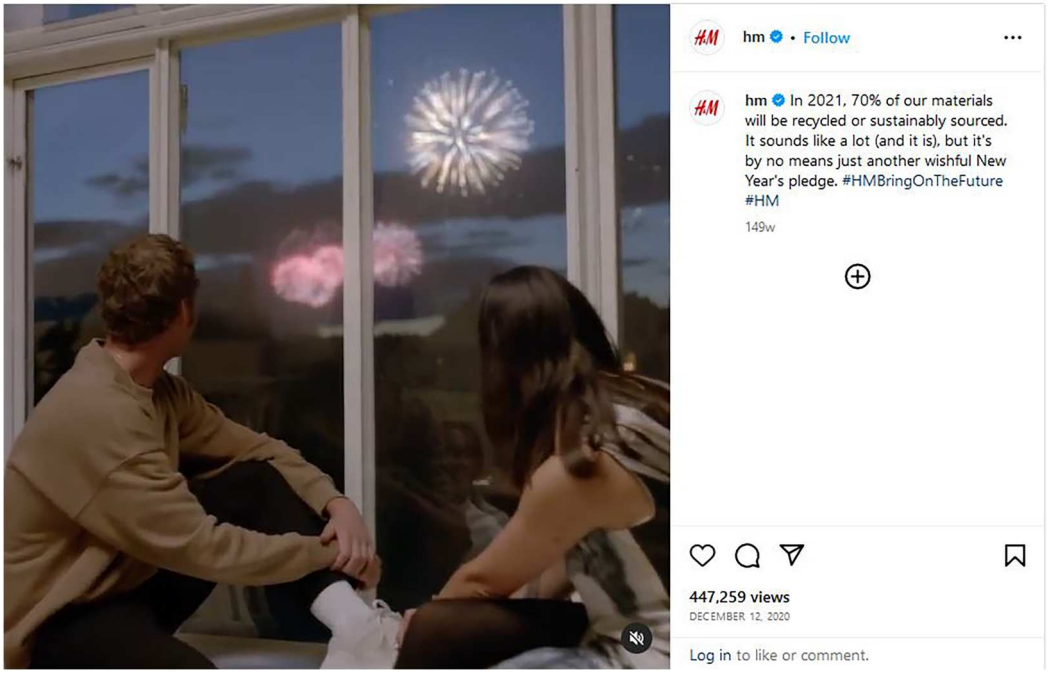

Figure 7. Image URL:https://www.instagram.com/p/ClscluLHkgd. Source: https://www.instagram.com/hm/. Date of access: 12 December 2020. © H&M. Reuse not permitted.

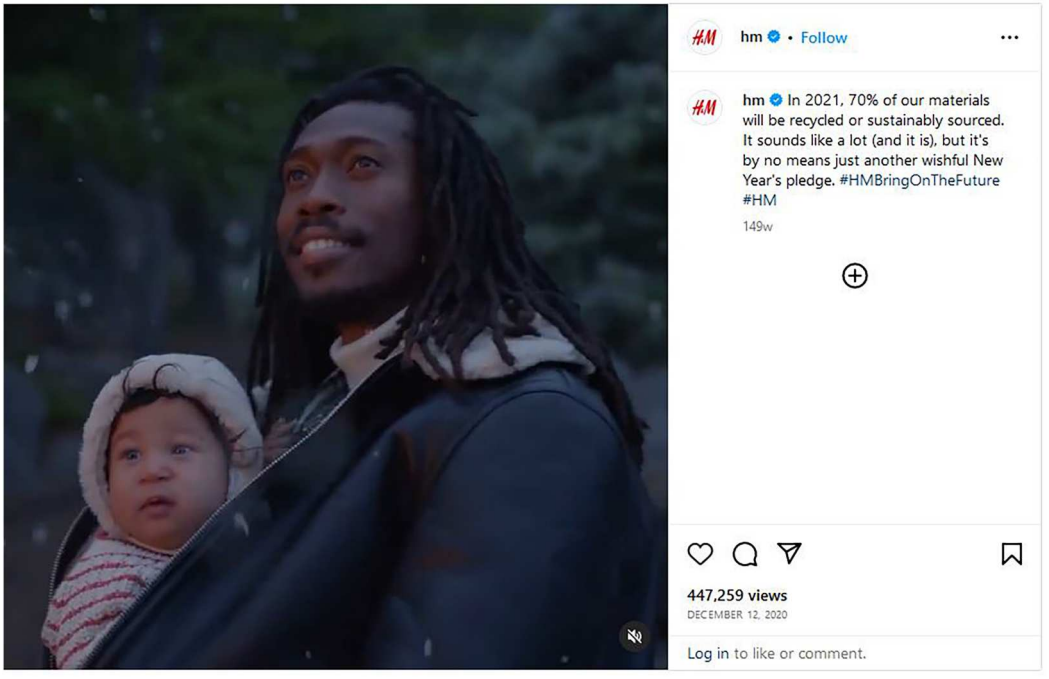

Figure 8. Image URL:https://www.instagram.com/p/CIsclcluLHkgd. Source: https://www.instagram.com/hm/. Date of access: 12 December 2020. © H&M. Reuse not permitted.

matching their clothes with each other's (Figure 6), and then moves to a celebrational phase, which consists of eating snacks and watching fireworks from the window (Figure 7). Finally, the video shows people moving outside, with snowflakes dropping down and fireworks lighting the sky, and toward the end, a man has a baby secured inside his coat to finalize the story (Figure 8). The storyteller of the posting is a low female voice echoing "instill the urgency to mend," "urging how we should", "let things we waste resurrect." The video ends with a toast: "Here's to forever, not the end."

This narrative may be interpreted as a moral story in which the protagonists are rewarded for engaging in legitimate social practices (Van Leeuwen 2007). In the beginning, a group of friends is carrying out a virtuous action (i.e. clothes maintenance), and in the end, they are rewarded with a beautiful night together paving the way towards a better future. Multiple components of the social modality are included in the storyline to ground this interpretation; for example, the actors in the narrative perform these actions as a tribute "to forever." The young child and New Year's Day all bring forward the connotation that the future is saved by these legitimate actions.

The discursive rhetoric of the posting is based on the cultural understanding that while New Year's Eve is often a time when wishful pledges are made, this one is " … by no means just another wishful New Year's pledge." Instead, H&M pictures itself as the hero in the story as it confirms to actualize the recycling targets, instead of only making a wishful promise, "70% of our materials will be recycled or sustainably sourced." In conclusion, although this posting does not directly encourage consumers to buy new clothes, but to maintain the clothes, it ends up aiming at legitimizing the operations of H&M and thereby supports the present-day fast fashion institution.

Discussion

Consumer researchers largely agree that sustainability problems in the fashion industry originate from complicated challenges involving multiple institutional constituents (Atik and Firat 2013).

To date, from the viewpoint of sustainability, the interplay between these constituents has mainly been approached conceptually, highlighting the need for a greater understanding of the roles and actions of the multiple actors and institutions involved in the fast fashion system. This need is underscored by Mukendi et al. (2020) who call for more research on how sustainability changes can occur within the framework of the broader marketing system. Our critical analysis responds to these calls by concentrating on the pivotal role of fast fashion companies with the particular focus on their social media communication.

The study offers two theoretical contributions. Firstly, it demonstrates how fast fashion companies utilize sustainability claims within discursive legitimation strategies to mobilize fashion consumption. Analyzing the empirical material reveals that nearly all dimensions of sustainable fashion – environmental, social, slow fashion, reuse, recycling, cruelty-free, and anti-consumption (Mukendi et al. 2020) – were evident. While the focus wasn't on tallying the frequency of each dimension, the analysis indicates that fast fashion companies widely employ sustainability claims, particularly emphasizing the environmental and social impacts of reusing and recycling clothes. Moreover, the analysis identifies instances of greenwashing, including references to self-authorized eco-certificates and low or ambiguous percentages of recycled materials. These references may cultivate discourses of "smart'" shopping (while subtly encouraging increased buying) and highlight the company's purported commitment to charity through numerical qualifications.

This kind of legitimation process presents several challenges. Firstly, it portrays fast fashion companies as agents capable of and willing to transform the fashion industry into a more sustainable one. While it's crucial to prioritize sustainability concerns, their use as legitimation strategies may create a misleading impression, potentially encouraging unsustainable consumption practices. This notion is corroborated by Miotto and Youn (2020), who found that purportedly sustainable collections from fast fashion retailers positively influenced corporate legitimacy, consumer perceptions of corporate social responsibility (CSR), brand trust, and purchase intentions. Consequently, issues may arise when fast fashion companies attribute themselves legitimate authority to justify consumers' ostensibly more sustainable purchases, when in reality, the end goal may be to drive increased consumption of low-cost clothing. Therefore, we align with previous studies that have critiqued the sustainability communication of fast fashion companies for its lack of clarity in addressing all stages of consumption, including acquisition, using, and disposal (Fischer et al. 2021; Vesterinen and Syrjälä 2022).

Another challenge arises concerning the authoritative role of fast fashion companies in sustainability communication. While the authorization strategy typically involves referring to an external authority (Van Leeuwen 2007), our findings indicate that fast fashion companies may position themselves or their employees as trustworthy authorities. We term this phenomenon "self-created" or "internal authority," akin to the charismatic legitimacy advocated by Arnould and Dion (2022). Unlike charismatic legitimacy, which is associated with individual brand leaders, internal authorization strategies may be embraced by the entire organization. The issue of internal authority raises pertinent questions regarding the power dynamics inherent in the legitimation strategies employed by institutional actors within the fashion industry.

The second contribution lies in integrating verbal and visual elements in the analysis of the discursive construction of legitimacy. This fusion enabled us to pinpoint contradictions between authentic and ostensible sustainability claims in fast fashion companies' social media communication. To illustrate, we observed a lack of transparency regarding the entire production chain of the clothing and shortcoming in the treatment of social sustainability issues, such as not addressing the well-being of employees in developing countries. Consequently, the apparent inclusivity depicted in visual materials overlooks individuals adversely affected by the profit-driven actions of fast fashion companies.

Further, when prices are mentioned in social media posts, they are framed to incentivize purchases based on affordability, without addressing the correlation between higher prices and superior quality, which could reduce the need for excessive consumption. In essence, our findings

underscore the importance of understanding underlying structural powers to critically evaluate the credibility of legitimation discourses. It is crucial for consumers to recognize that such discursive strategies are not neutral but are intertwined with hidden power dynamics. However, it's essential to acknowledge that legitimacy is not permanent (Humphreys 2010; Valor, Lloveras, and Papaoikonomou 2020). As evidenced in public discourse, the fashion industry is continuously subjected to evolving perspectives that can challenge the legitimacy of its operations.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have analyzed the ways companies use discursive legitimation strategies when seeking to justify fast fashion consumption and have shown how sustainability claims are embedded in strategies with visual and verbal components. The clothing industry, especially those companies in the fast fashion sector, has been heavily criticized for its sustainability problems. Therefore, fast fashion companies attempt to legitimize their business models to keep the fast fashion cycle spinning. Accordingly, it is essential to understand how legitimation strategies are used to be able to critically evaluate the fast fashion system. As social media has become an important channel for fast fashion marketing communication (Schöps, Kogler, and Hemetsberger 2020) and thereby a key institutional actor, legitimacy is constantly negotiated there. According to our analysis, each discursive strategy (i.e. authorization, rationalization, moralization, and mythopoesis) includes sustainability claims. Therefore, by making the use of these strategies more transparent, we are in a better position to understand those factors that encourage the unsustainable consumption of fast fashion.

We suggest future studies to explore how different types of companies use legitimation strategies in their communication. For example, it would be interesting to compare fast fashion companies and slow fashion companies in this regard. In addition, future research could analyze how consumers make use of these strategies to legitimize their fashion consumption, thereby showing how well the attempts investigated in the current research actually influence consumers' behavior. Furthermore, it could be explored how the traditional media, as a powerful institutional actor, participates in this legitimation. Additionally, since not all of the companies' sustainability-related actions are present in their social media, generating a more comprehensive picture of the sustainability claims of fast fashion companies would require exploring other types of data. For instance, annual reports and web pages could provide fruitful material for further discourse and other qualitative analyses.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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