How are luxury fashion brands adopting their social media content in alinement with a more sustainable business approach?

Student Name: Lisa Maria Habernik

Student Number: 496691

Supervisor: dr Donagh Horgan

Master Cultural Economics and Entrepreneurship

Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication

Erasmus University Rotterdam

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ABSTRACT

The notion of luxury and the idea of sustainability are regarded as incompatible (Davies et al., 2012; Janssen et al., 2015).

Luxury is associated with an excessive and opulent lifestyle, while sustainability promotes abstinence and modesty (Cvijanovich, 2011; Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau, 2014). At the same time, society expects luxury brands to be committed to sustainable practices and to openly communicate about them. This poses difficulties for luxury brands in terms of sustainability communication. Research has shown that through integrating sustainability narratives into their communication, luxury brands risk alienating luxury consumers (Kong, Witmaier and Ko, 2021). The challenge for luxury brands is therefore to find strategies to maintain a glamorous and exclusive image while meeting consumer demands and informing about sustainable practices. An additional challenge is to communicate about sustainable initiatives in a way, that builds credibility and trust, as consumers have become sceptical of brands' sustainability claims due to increasing greenwashing scandals.

This study aims to identify how luxury fashion brands tackle this challenge and analyses how sustainability communication is done on the most popular social media platform Instagram. The four luxury brands selected for this study are Gucci, Stella McCartney, Chloé and Prada. To conduct the research, 40 sustainability related posts from each brand were analysed using qualitative content analysis. The goal was to identify *what* aspects of their sustainability practices brands communicate and *how* they communicate. The findings are thus divided into two parts: *content topics* and *content style*.

The results show that due to the rising awareness of sustainability all four brands have acknowledged the importance of communicating about their efforts related to sustainable practices. However, they have incorporated this into their social media presence to different degrees and with different approaches. Overall, there is still the tendency to present information on sustainability practices in an abstract and vague way, as identified in previous research. Brands often fail to provide specific details and concrete evidence with their sustainability claims, or overuse sustainability buzzwords, such as 'recycled', 'ethically sourced' or 'raw material' in their communication. These approaches can raise distrust about the actual impact and truth of brands' sustainability efforts and lead to suspicions of greenwashing. In this regard, next to the overuse of sustainability buzzwords, the study also found that on the other hand luxury brands often paraphrase sustainability terms. This helps them to maintain their elevated and sophisticated speech when communicating about the topic sustainability.

Keywords: *luxury fashion, sustainability communication, communication strategies, luxury brand communication*

to the inspiring people I have met during my master studies,

to unexpected possibilities and

to Dr Donagh Horgan

who, with his positive and encouraging attitude, has been the greatest academic support during the course of this research

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1. INTRODUCTION

Rethinking the way we operate in today's world has never been more important. In the face of pressing issues related to climate change, biodiversity and scarcity of resources, more conscious and sustainable actions are required from society at large. This also concerns companies in all industries worldwide. As the world changes, business-as-usual is no longer possible. Governments are steadily introducing more and more new environmental regulations that require companies to adapt. Moreover, consumers and stakeholders are becoming increasingly aware of the risks associated with sustainability, demanding more sustainable choices and expecting companies to operate more environmentally friendly. As a result, companies have started their transition to sustainability to varying degrees and with different motivations and commitments.

This shift, of course, also affects the luxury fashion industry. This industry is part of the larger fashion industry, which is accused to be the second most polluting industry on the planet (United Nations, 2019). As new regulations aim to combat this, fashion brands have no choice but to comply. As opposed to the fast fashion industry which is known for its fast-changing trends, mass production of cheap clothing and huge waste, the luxury industry is associated with timelessness, durability and craftsmanship. Latter are associations that might suggest that the luxury fashion industry faces less difficulties regarding a sustainable business approach. Still, compared to other industries, the luxury industry is accussed to lack behind with its sustainability transition (Hennigs et al., 2013). However, especially for this industry, sustainable development represents an enormous opportunity, as they can act as an industry role model and inspire others to follow their commitment to sustainability. Even more important, they have the power to influence consumers to act in a more sustainable way, as luxury brands create desire and strong emotional connection with their consumers through their communication (Cavender, 2018; Joy et al., 2012; Blendell and Kleanthous, 2007).

Research however has identified that luxury and sustainability are not regarded as a match (Davies et al., 2012; Janssen et al., 2015). While consumers are indeed becoming more environmentally conscious and demand brands to be so as well, they associate luxury with

an excessive lifestyle that is not compatible with the sacrifices a more sustainable life brings (Cvijanovich, 2011; Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau, 2014). Furthermore, luxury items are often purchased with the intention to differentiate oneself from the masses. This idea is conflicting with the principle of sustainability, which aims to achieve well-being of all individuals (Torelli, Monga and Kaikati, 2012).

Being aware of this tension, sustainability communication – which refers to the communication of topics related to sustainability - is a sensitive topic for brands in general, but even more so for luxury brands. While a number of brands are actively talking about their sustainable activities on their communication channels, San Miguel et al. (2021) state that many fashion companies "fail to share their social and environmental practices" (p.8). The communication of luxury brands differs from others as it is always concerned about creating a dream rather than directly promoting a product. Luxury communication is full of symbolism and elevated speech that aims to create a desire in customers to obtain the luxurious lifestyle of the brand and thus differentiate themselves from the rest. This image of a dream certainly crashes with the image of sustainability which is related to a crisis. Therefore, luxury brands seek to contain their prestigious image through their communication rather than communicating about their sustainability efforts. Studies have shown that also consumers perceive luxury brands who communicate their sustainability responsibilities as less than those who do not and that their buying intention for those brands decreases (Torelli, Monga and Kaikati, 2012, Kong, Witmaier and Ko, 2021). In short, the luxury industry thus illustrates an extreme case where efforts to communicate their sustainability measures can actually be harmful which makes them hesitant to participate in sustainability communication. The presented challenge for luxury brands thus is how to communicate about their sustainability practices while maintaining their exclusive allure.

To get a better understanding about how luxury brands are tackling this challenge, the study provides an overview of the sustainability communication practices of four different luxury fashion brands: Gucci, Stella McCartney, Chloé and Prada.
These brands were selected because they display varying commitments to sustainable practices as identified in the rankings of the Business of Fashion Sustainability Index 2022.

The method used for this research was qualitative content analysis, precisely thematic analysis. This was considered to be the most appropriate approach to answer the research question that is formulated as following:

How are luxury fashion brands adopting their social media content in alinement with a more sustainable business approach?

Sub-questions:

1) What do luxury fashion brands communicate on social media with regards to their sustainability practices?

2) How do luxury fashion brands communicate on social media with regards to their sustainability practices?

Academic literature about luxury brand communication in general has historically received only limited attention. However, with the growth of the luxury industry also scholars have started to investigate the field more (Kapferer and Bastien, 2009; Atwal and Williams, 2009; Vickers and Renand, 2003). With regards to luxury fashion brands and their communication of sustainability activities only limited research has been done (San Miguel et al., 2021; Arrigo, 2018; Kong and Ko, 2021; Da Giau et al., 2016; Athwal et al., 2019).
This research builds upon previous research that identified challenges related to sustainability communication in the luxury industry. By examining how brands are dealing with this challenge and offering insights from the brands' perspective, this thesis helps to fill a gap in existing research. The findings of this study thus enrich current literature in the areas of sustainable communication and sustainable luxury fashion.

1.1 Social relevance

The research brings attention to the sustainability efforts of luxury fashion brands. These brands have a great power over consumer behaviour and are especially on social media able to reach a wide audience. Therefore, if sustainability communication is done in the right way, brands can create awareness of issues around sustainability and motivate consumers to take more conscious and sustainable actions.

Research has stated that consumers are more and more sceptical about the sustainability claims of companies and that building trust and being transparent is one of the most crucial

things for brands with regards to sustainability communication (Rahman et al., 2015; Riesgo et al. 2022; Kang and Hustvedt, 2014). This shows the importance for brands to communicate about their sustainability practices in an honest and transparent way.

By critically investigating and outlining the existing approach to sustainability communication of luxury fashion brands, a comprehensive overview of different approaches and tactics can be provided. This helps to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the communication approaches which in turn enables to provide recommendations for improvement. Therefore, the findings of this research can serve as an inspiration for luxury brands to optimise their sustainability communication practice to (re)gain the trust of consumers. Last but not least, it can encourage brands who have not yet integrated sustainability narratives on their social media to do so.

Overall, the study is socially relevant as it raises awareness of sustainability, empowers consumers, holds brands accountable and advocates for a more sustainable and transparent fashion industry as a whole.

1.2 Chapter outline

The research paper begins with the *theoretical framework* (Chapter 2) that provides a critical analysis of existing academic literature in order to conceptualise sustainability communication. The first part focuses on the broader notion of sustainability and how businesses are affected by it. A particular focus hereby is on the (luxury) fashion industry. The second part then illustrates how brands communicate about their sustainable practices. A deeper focus again is on the sustainability communication of luxury brands.
The theoretical framework thus serves as a starting point to provide the reader with an understanding of the importance and the challenges of sustainability communication in the luxury industry.

Afterwards, the *methodology* section (Chapter 3) introduces the research method - qualitative content analysis - and provides a detailed explanation of each step involved in

data sampling, collection, and analysis. This section helps the reader to understand the research and its approach as a whole in order to comprehend the final research results.

The *results and discussion* section (Chapter 4) presents the findings of the qualitative content analysis. Here the social media content related to sustainability communication is described and interpreted for each brand separately. For each brand the results are divided into two parts – content topics and content style - that exist of various sub-categories. The findings give insights into what topics related to sustainability are communicated as well as which communication strategies are applied. At the end of the section, a comparison of the sustainability communication strategies of each brand is provided.

The *conclusion* (Chapter 5) forms the last part of this thesis. Based on the findings from the previous results and discussion section, this section also includes practical recommendations for marketing and communication professionals in the luxury industry. Additionally, the limitations of the research are presented and suggestions for future research are made.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The following section aims to provide a comprehensive exposition of the research theme of sustainability communication in the luxury fashion industry.

The first part of the literature outlined therefore discusses the concept of sustainability as a whole and analyses how this impacts the operation of businesses. It then narrows down to analyse the fashion industry's impact on sustainability and takes a closer look at how especially the luxury fashion industry is tackling the issues related to operating more sustainable.

The second part deals with sustainability communication and shows how companies communicate to their consumers about the sustainability measurements they are undertaking. The focus is then returned to luxury fashion brands and their communication strategies in general are discussed. Finally, it looks at how luxury brands have integrated sustainability communication and identifies the challenges these brands might face in this context.

The theoretical framework provides the reader with an understanding of the broader context and existing literature to fully understand the relevance and impact of this master thesis research.

2.1 Sustainability

Sustainability might seem to be an ambiguous term with many different meanings but no clear singular definition. Amplifying this, many derivatives of this term, such as "social sustainability, environmental sustainability, sustainable development, sustainable living, sustainable future" have emerged (Kopnina, 2017, p.27).

One of the most prominent and most cited definitions of sustainability is implied in the definition of sustainable development by the World Commission on Environment and Development who define it as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (1987, Brundtland report). While this definition might seem convincing at first glance, it has been accused to

not give clear guidelines for (business) implications and to lead to ambiguity due to the lack of a clear method for determining the economic benefits of future generations (Ben-Eli, 2018). Throsby (2017, p.133) argues that the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development "have become so ubiquitous and applied in so many different circumstances that they are in danger of losing any semblance of meaning".

Shearman (1990) writes that "we should be concerned not with the 'meaning' of sustainability but rather the implications of sustainability as they affect the status quo". Mittelstaedt et al. (2014) claim sustainability to be the current "megatrend". However, while trends tend to fade again, sustainability is likely to stay and become an integral part of the way the world operates. But let us first consider the development of the term that has become omnipresent and dominantly discussed in almost all areas of operation (Portney, 2015).

The idea of the term as we use it today first made its appearance in the 1980s, however, the origin of the idea can be traced back much further, to the eighteenth century. This is when the economist Thomas Malthus, who planted the seed of the idea of sustainability, predicted that the growth of the population would exceed the land's ability to feed the population in the not-so-distant future. This would lead to famine and economic collapse. However, briefly after this the industrial revolution started and brought with it technological advances and an increase in production of goods and foods (Elliott, 2005). Malthus prediction then seemed far from reality. It was only after the Second World War that Malthus' theories were taken up again by Kenneth Boulding (1966), who considered them applicable to the modern world. He shared the idea that resources are not infinite and production waste which might be quite dangerous and long lasting should not carelessly be thrown away. Central to this is the idea of fairness in the allocation of resources to future generations. This notion of "the trade-off of current consumption for future consumption" constitutes the definition of sustainability from an economic point of view (Elliott, 2005, p. 263). Coincidingly, the reawakening of Malthus' ideas marks the beginning of the Anthropocene epoch which describes the point in time "when human societies first began to play a significant role in shaping the earth's ecosystems" (Smith and Zeder, 2013, p.8). Shrivastava and Zsolnai (2020) write that the emergence of the Anthropocene era has introduced new existential risks that demand a "radical rethinking of the purpose of business and its dominating working models"

(p. 3). Thus, a rethinking of the common way of working and a shift towards a sustainable business approach is necessary.

2.1.1 Sustainable business approach

Similar to the definition of sustainability, the definition of a sustainable business is not entirely unambiguous and can often be vague and generalizable. The idea of what a sustainable approach entails is defined differently by every company. One is certain, businesses have both the responsibility and the opportunity to play a crucial role in addressing and resolving the sustainability challenges faced by society and the planet (Dyllick and Muff, 2015; Peter Bakker, 2012). True business sustainability means to "solve the sustainability challenges we are collectively facing and thus to create value for the common good" (Dyllick and Muff, 2015, p. 14).

According to Shrivastava and Zsolnai (2020) the three prominent obstacles to a sustainable business approach are firstly the enormous impact of business activities on the planet's ecosystem, secondly the tendency of businesses to prioritize short-term gains over long-term ecological sustainability, and thirdly the inequality resulting from wealth-focused business models that do not prioritize fair wealth distribution. In order to achieve a sustainable business approach, the focus needs to be on conservation and frugality. This means significantly reducing the amount of material resources used and prioritising ecological and social well-being over business efficiency. Next to issues related to climate change, pollution and biodiversity, sustainability in business also refers to ethical issues like paying workers a fair wage, ensuring good working conditions, and complying with human rights (Kopnina, 2017). It is apparent that the concept of sustainability is closely linked to time. (Bansal & Desjardine, 2014). Thus, a sustainable business approach is not a quick fix but requires long-term strategic planning.

With the growing awareness of the environmental crisis and the importance to foster the protection of natural resources the shift in how businesses from all sectors operate is ongoing. Adopting a sustainable business approach is essential and some companies have already made first steps towards their sustainability transition and appointed designated sustainability management teams. This is done motivated by multiple driving forces: For one,

it is important because there are increasingly more environmental regulations emerging that have to be complied with. Furthermore, consumers are becoming more aware about the environmental impact of their consumption and their demand for businesses to operate sustainable is increasing. Additionally, companies face an internal pressure and not only need to comply with external sustainability regulations but also with the interests and demands of their employees and stakeholders.

By implementing energy-efficient technologies, reducing waste and pollution, and sourcing raw materials businesses can not only comply with regulations and meet customer expectations but also gain a competitive advantage by positioning themselves as socially responsible and environmentally conscious organizations. As Dyllick and Muff (2015, p.2) write brands with a sustainable business model can benefit from an "increased brand reputation, increased attractiveness to talent, and increased competitiveness". Sustainability can thus be seen as a business opportunity in disguise. However, Lubin & Etsy, 2010, suggests that sustainability should not be viewed as a mere competitive advantage, but rather as an absolute necessity.

Dyllick and Muff (2015) admit that transforming the purpose of existing commercial businesses to prioritize the common good may be too radical of a change for them to embrace. Commercial businesses drive to increase profits and production while sustainability promotes reduction and fair distribution of resources. Thus, the authors claim that a sustainability transition is easier for social businesses. However, it is still possible for commercially orientated businesses to become truly sustainable through focusing on shared value creation and on "contributing to solving sustainability challenges, even if there are more economically attractive, but unsustainable alternatives available" (p.15).

Ivan et al. (2016) write that adopting a sustainable approach is linked with innovation since many brands have to innovate their business processes. According to Rogers (1995) getting a new idea adopted – in this case sustainability – is challenging, even when the benefits of the idea are very apparent. Rogers (1995) further mentions that "most individuals do not evaluate an innovation on the basis of scientific studies of its consequences, although such objective evaluations are not entirely irrelevant". What appears to be more important is the evaluation and judgement of others. Further, he writes that "how potential adopters view

the change agent affects their willingness to adopt his or her ideas". This means the way in which consumers perceive a brand that promotes sustainability can have an impact on their eagerness to introduce sustainable changes themselves.

Hereby transparency is a key factor in the success of a business' sustainability transition (Dyllick and Muff, 2015). Not only the decisions and actions taken by companies with regards to sustainability but also the impacts and effects of those actions need to be transparent. Further, Dyllick and Muff (2015) state that next to transparency "an effective assessment of the business contributions to sustainability issues requires adequate metrics and measures to assess and compare their impact" (p. 15). However, the authors also emphasis that there is still lack of reliable metrics to indicate sustainability improvements and compare them across industries.

To summarise, a sustainable business approach requires strong leadership that moves away from the "business-as-usual" mindset. The challenges faced are not limited to one country or industry, and thus need global solutions. When working hand in hand with policymakers, innovators, researchers as well as consumers businesses have the power to achieve actual change. The most important aspect of adopting a sustainable business approach is that the intentions behind it need to be genuine. To cite Dyllick and Muff (2015, p.15): "True business sustainability cannot be achieved by solving sustainability issues incidentally or opportunistically, as such initiatives are typically cancelled as soon as the prospects for economic gain diminish."

Let us now zoom in on the fashion industry, especially luxury fashion, and consider what impact this industry has on sustainability and which measures are taken to minimise this impact.

2.2 The Luxury Fashion Industry

2.2.1 The fashion industry

All of us wear clothes, regardless of which part of the world we inhabit. Clothes can be a way for us to express ourselves and our identity. Fashion can represent how we view ourselves

and who we want to become (Henninger et al., 2020). With an increase in population also the production and consumption of clothes has increased. Between 2000 and 2014 the production of clothes saw a doubling in numbers (United Nations, 2019). People buy more clothes than ever, hence also the „average global annual consumption of textiles has doubled (from 7 to 13 kg per person)" (Shirvanimoghaddam et al., 2020, p.2). The United Nations (2019) state that the fashion industry now is considered to be "the second most polluting industry in the world". This industry alone produces 20% of the world's wastewater and 8% of the global green-house gas emission (Adamkiewicz et al., 2022). Every year the fashion industry uses 93 billion cubic metres of water, which would be enough water to keep 5 million people alive (United Nations, 2019). Creating a sustainable fashion industry requires a shift from a fast-paced and growth-oriented way of operating to a more environmentally conscious and less consumption-oriented approach. Henninger, Alevizou, and Oates (2016) write that there is no clear definition of what sustainability means for the fashion industry. However, there are some factors that should be included, such as good working conditions, reduced environmental degradation, shorter supply chains or the inclusion of upcycling, recycling and renewable or organic raw materials.

However, companies are struggling to implement these sustainable changes (Buchel et al., 2022) as they have been operating for years under their current profit-driven model. The largest sector contributing to this is "fast fashion", which promotes a throwaway culture by frequently offering new, very affordable collections. Fast fashion today is synonymous with short-lived trends, mass production and tons of waste.

2.2.2 Luxury Fashion

On the other end of fast fashion is luxury fashion. This industry differentiates itself through offering high end clothing from collections that are launched at greater intervals, usually twice a year (Spring/Summer and Fall/Winter Collections). Luxury fashion is associated with premium prices, high-quality, unique craftmanship, timelessness and production in small quantities (Amatulli & Guido, 2011).

Luxury brands are specialists in selling dreams and aspirations and provide consumers with a sense of exclusivity and prestige. Luxury products are bought with other motives than

functionality. This is especially true for luxury fashion goods. As Jin and Cedrola (2017) write, consumers do not purchase functionality but "styles, dreams, and symbolic images—aspects of their identity that brands can help them project" (p. ix). Likewise, Vickers and Renand (2003) argue that unlike non-luxury goods which primarily have functional attributes, luxury goods distinguish themselves through their symbolic attributes. Therefore, luxury goods can be classified as positional goods. This term was defined by Fred Hirsch (1976) as a composition of "all aspects of goods, services, work positions and other social relationships that are either (1) scarce in some absolute or socially imposed sense or (2) subject to congestion and crowding through more extensive use" (p. 27). This means people value luxury products because of their limited supply and buy them to obtain and signal a high social status. While most scholars agree that luxury products are bought to signal wealth and to differentiate from others, Wang (2022) writes that some can also possess an "intrinsic interest in luxury products and in the nature of luxury itself" (p. 800).

The symbolic meaning of a luxury good shapes the character of a brand (Vickers and Renand, 2003). Phau and Prendergast (2001) accuse luxury brands to "evoke exclusivity, have a well-known brand identity and high brand awareness, perceived high quality and retain sales levels and customer loyalty" (p. 123). The luxury fashion industry is thus considered to be "one of the highest value-added industries and is characterized by dynamic macroeconomic changes, short product cycles, and high marketing costs" (Zollo et al., 2020, p. 257)

2.2.3 Luxury and Sustainability

The associations with timelessness, scarcity and small quantities suggest that luxury fashion could have less of an impact on the environment than fast fashion.

When it comes to the luxury fashion industry, luxury experts have recognized sustainable development as a primary strategic challenge and opportunity for the industry (Cavender, 2018). Joy et al. (2012) even claim that luxury brands possess the capability to "become the leaders in sustainability because of their emphasis on artisanal quality" (p. 291). This longstanding focus on quality and craftmanship equips luxury brands with the potential to combat some of the inherent problems of fast fashion and address sustainability concerns in an effective way (Joy et al., 2012). In line with that, Kunz, May and Schmidt (2020, p. 541)

claim luxury products to "act as industry models" that can set an example and positively influence the entire industry to develop sustainability practices on a larger scale. Furthermore, Blendell and Kleanthous (2007) write that luxury brands are able to shape the desires and behaviours of consumers through their products as well as the distribution and advertising of them. As a result, luxury brands "have both the opportunity and the responsibility to promote sustainable consumption" (p. 3). Since luxury products are reliable on sources that are scarce, it should be even more so in the interest of luxury brands themselves to make sustainability a priority for their functions (Kale and Öztürk, 2016).

In line with the general increase in fashion consumption, Blendell and Kleanthous (2007) report that the number of luxury consumers has grown. This is because luxury brands have become more accessible, and the luxury industry has expanded from the well-developed market in the West to the new rich countries in the East (Kim and Ko, 2012). Thus, they can no longer sufficiently differentiate themselves through their exclusivity and should set themselves apart from the masses through exemplary sustainability practices. However, the authors also state that luxury brands are only slowly understanding their responsibility and potentials regarding sustainability. This links to the writings of Hennigs et al. (2013) who write that while other industries are already tackling the issue and increasingly adopt a sustainable business model, the luxury industry is accused to still lack behind. Thus, luxury brands are under increasing pressure to create more sustainable business operations (Li and Leonas, 2019; Ivan et al., 2016). Khan and Ahmed (2017) state that some luxury companies are responding to the sustainability movement by adopting a proactive approach to meet customers' increasing demand for sustainability. This is consistent with other research (Osburg et al., 2016; Todeschini et al., 2017; Kapferer, 2018; Olsanová et al., 2018) that shows that sustainability and circular economy are emerging trends that present possibilities for brands.

As identified by Mauer (2014, p. 18) there are four categories that luxury brands and their sustainability commitments could fall under. „Activist brands" which describes luxury brands whose sustainability strategies are recognised worldwide. Sustainability is a core value of their mission and integral to all their operations. The second group is "Eco-born brands". Those are new luxury brands that have sustainability as a core element of their operations

since the beginning. While they still represent a small number, they increasingly could become a competition for traditional luxury brands, especially for those belonging to the third group that is the "Stakeholder focused brands". The "Stakeholder focused brands" represent the traditional brands and are the big players in the luxury industry. Sustainability did not play a role when they were found, however, due to the pressure of stakeholders and governments and demands of consumers they have started to implement sustainability practices into their business operations. The last category is "Savoir-faire brands" which according to Mauer (2014) associate luxury with hand-made products from highly skilled artists, long-standing traditions and the preservation of their know-how. This is where those brands see their contribution to sustainability.

The brands that will be analysed in the course of this research fall under the category "Activist brands" and "Stakeholder focused brands".

2.2.4 Consumer perception of sustainable luxury

As previously stated, research has shown that in the recent years the consumer awareness of issues connected to sustainability and the demand for green products has increased. Consumerism has increasingly shifted from decadent to more conscious consumption (Hennigs et al., 2013). However, the findings of Joy et al. (2012) show that while consumers value sustainability, it is not important for them when it comes to clothing. Bonini and Oppenheim (2008) write that consumers' ethical beliefs often do not align with their purchasing decisions. Someone may be concerned about the environment and recognise the importance of sustainability, but this may not influence him or her to actually buy sustainable products. A reason for the indifference to buying sustainable clothing, according to Petit (2007), is the fact that while clothes play a vital role to the body and the formation of identity, they are not connected to health issues. Thus, consumers are likely to buy sustainable products when their consumption can bring them a health benefit for their body, e.g. organic food or organic skincare.

This notion is even more intensified when it comes to luxury products. Various research on sustainable luxury has suggested that consumers do not regard luxury and sustainability as

compatible. The studies of Achabou and Dekhili (2013) and Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau (2014) suggest that only between 30% and 40% of all luxury consumers are sustainable luxury consumers, meaning that consuming sustainable products is important to them. Cvijanovich (2011) believes that the repugnance towards sustainable luxury is due to many luxury costumers fearing that they will have to significantly change their entire lifestyle in order to live a sustainable life. In fact, 33.8% of luxury buyers believe that luxury promotes a superficial lifestyle and further adds to sustainability problems (Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau, 2014). Also Hennigs et al. (2013) write that consumers historically associate luxury goods with "excess, indulgence and waste" (p. 25) as opposed to sustainable goods that are associated with "altruism, sobriety, moderation and ethics" (Achabou and Dekhili, 2013, p.1896). This is also reinforced in the writings of Torelli, Monga and Kaikati (2012) who state that the concept of luxury, which is based on segregating oneself from the masses, is in conflict with the concept of sustainability, which is based on the common good for all. This conflict can then lead to "unfavourable brand evaluations" (p. 956) as shown in the study, in which participants rated luxury brands that communicated their social responsibility measures lower than those that did not (Torelli, Monga and Kaikati, 2012).

Further research on the compatibility of sustainability and luxury shows that consumers do believe that recycling helps the environment, however, they are sceptical towards recycled material in luxury products (Achabou and Dekhili, 2013). They emphasise that the quality of a luxury product should not be compromised by a sustainable approach. Recycled packaging is the only accepted form of recycling. Thus, regarding the buying decision of luxury products "product quality" and "brand reputation" are still the decisive factors.

In another research on luxury consumers Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau (2015) write that while sustainability only plays a minor role in the buying decision of luxury goods, a growing number of luxury buyers is still expecting luxury businesses to adopt a sustainable development. The authors emphasis that it is increasingly important for luxury brands to shift their focus on sustainability, especially because they are easily exposed to criticism due to their visibility. Thereby the demand is not to become the most sustainable brand in the market but to make changes towards a more sustainable approach.

2.3 Communication

2.3.1 Sustainability Communication

Sustainability communication as a discipline emerged in the early 2000s, which combines principles of corporate sustainability management and marketing (Pakseresht and Mark-Herbert, 2016) and aims to build and maintain sustainable relationships with customers and the environment (Belz, 2006). The triple bottom line framework that measures the financial, social, and environmental performance and success of a company over time is thereby at the center of sustainability communication (Brady, 2003). The aim of sustainability communication for businesses is to communicate about their dedication to promoting social and environmental welfare through the business practices they implement (Shrivastava and Zsolnai, 2020).

In the context of this study, sustainability communication refers to any information related to the topic of sustainability that is shared by a company on their various channels. This information can contain sustainability measurements the company is taking, climate change awareness messages or green product information, for instance.

According to research, some brands are actively communicating their involvement in sustainable practices while others tend to quietly make contributions towards the cause. Da et al. (2016) have distinguished between four different types of business and their sustainability communication. Firstly, there are "low commitment" companies that have few sustainability measures in place and provide little information about them to consumers. Most often those sustainability practices are a response to external pressures and market demands. Secondly, there are "High marketing" companies that lack an honest commitment and only take little actions towards sustainability but promote those few actions extensively to the consumers. Thirdly, "Low disclosure" companies are convinced of the necessity of a sustainable business approach and have actively implemented a sustainability transition, however, they hardly communicate about it due to avoid any damage to the image of the brand. Fourthly, companies with a "High commitment" have implemented several sustainability measurements and are also communicating actively about it.

Therefore, as more and more companies claim to be sustainable, it becomes important to distinguish between those that are making an actual contribution to sustainability and those who are doing it for branding and PR reasons. (Dyllick and Muff, 2015; Shrivastava and Zsolnai, 2020). This is where the term greenwashing comes into play.

2.3.1.1 Greenwashing

Greenwashing refers to "the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service" (Rahman et al., 2015, p.1057). Simply said, greenwashing occurs when a brand's sustainability claims do not align with their actual actions. This is often done with the motive to enhance a brand's image (Matthes et al., 2014).

In the case of the fashion industry, greenwashing refers, for instance, to claims about sustainability that actually only apply to a small fraction of a brand's collections, or the use of downcycling instead of fibre-to-fibre recycling. It is often part of a company's public relation tactic, that aims to polish the green image of a brand through cooperating with external green partners (Seele, 2007). Adamkiewicz et al. (2022) accuse especially the fashion industry to heavily rely on greenwashing as a tactic to alleviate the increasing pressure to operate more sustainable and offer environmentally friendly products.

Corpwatch describes greenwashing as a „phenomenon of socially and environmentally destructive corporations attempting to preserve and expand their markets by posing as friends of the environment and leaders in the struggle to eradicate poverty". In this definition, the profit driven motive of greenwashing is emphasized. By making false claims about their sustainability commitments, brands often mislead and capitalise on consumers who are prepared to spend more on sustainable products. In fact, a recent investigation of the European Commission (2020) that covered a broad range of product categories within the EU revealed that "a considerable share of environmental claims (53.3%) provide vague, misleading or unfounded information about products' environmental characteristics".

This poses a challenge for consumers who are often confused and left in the dark about the actual sustainability measurements of a brand. Consequently, consumers' trust in a brand is declining while the level of "suspicion and skepticism about green claims" (Rahman et al.,

2015, p.1057) is increasing. This could even lead to consumers refraining from buying sustainable products altogether, as a study by Riesgo et al. (2022) has shown. This highlights the importance of building trustworthy relationships with consumers as this will determine a brand's image and influence consumers' opinions about the credibility of its green claims (Kang and Hustvedt, 2014).

Therefore, greenwashing affairs can have an impactful effect on the image of a brand and its business. To avoid this, businesses need "to better communicate their offerings and clearly highlight what makes their collections "sustainable" (Henninger et al., 2016, p. 406).

2.3.2 Luxury Communication

Through marketing and communication strategies, luxury brands tell the story about their products. Kapferer and Bastien (2009) argue that marketing and communication strategies of luxury brands differ from those of any other brands. Luxury brand communication is illusive and aims to create a dream, instead of directly trying to sell a product. Instead of merely stating product facts they apply "richer symbolism, more complex rhetoric, and more storytelling" than non-luxury brands (Gurzki, Schlatter and Woisetschläger, 2019, p. 413). Their wording is more complex and showcases sophisticated and nuanced language. Through storytelling they create emotional narratives that transport consumers to a dream world and stimulate their imagination. They use distancing to create a distinction between the brands world and the everyday lives of consumers which increases the desire for the luxury products and further reinforces the unique position of luxury brands in the market. Communication in the luxury sector is concerned about conveying an image about "quality, performance and authenticity" (Atwal and Williams, 2009, p.338) as well as selling an experience related to a certain lifestyle. The communication channels of luxury brands used therefore are advertising, direct marketing, personal selling, event management, sponsorship, word of mouth, digital media, packaging and public relations.

2.3.2.1 Luxury brands on social media

Social media provides luxury companies with the possibility to strengthen their brand. A brand is essential because it enhances the value of a luxury product even if functionality is missing. Social media has transferred the way brands present themselves online and the way

they empower and interact with costumers (Constantinides, 2014). It has further become easier for them to reach and influence a wide audience (Godey et al., 2016). Constantinides (2014) writes that social media opens the possibility for brand-costumer collaborations. Through encouraging customer engagement brands give customers a chance to be part of their processes and innovations. Regarding the impact of the social media environments Stephen (2016) states that the usage of those platforms influences the consumer behaviour within the digital environment as well as in the non-digital environment. Phan et al. (2011) write that especially for luxury brands social media plays an essential role in their success. Millennials are the most engaged group on social media and amount for approximately 30% of luxury consumers, and this number is expected to further grow to 45% by 2025 (D'Arpizio et al., 2017).

Jin (2012) writes that on the one hand, social media can help luxury brands to reach a wider audience and further create desirability and a sense of exclusivity regarding their products. On the other hand, this reach can also paradoxically have a negative impact on their prestige and exclusivity. Social media can also undermine the exclusivity of luxury brands by making their products seem more accessible and mainstream, as many non-luxury brands also use these platforms.

In their research Kim and Ko (2012) found that the social media marketing efforts of luxury brands include following five areas: entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, and word of mouth (WOM). In other words, consumers follow the social media of luxury brands to be entertained, to interact with the brand and other consumers, to share their experience with others and to keep up to date with the latest trends. This usage of social media platform to seek out relaxation and enjoyable experiences signals that there is a slight hedonic motivation when following luxury brands online. The online presence of luxury brands is focused on creating a glamourous dream world that promotes the pursuit of pleasure. So how does the communication and promotion of sustainability which is less glamourous and more related to a crisis fit into this? The next chapter will investigate what scholars have discovered about the Sustainability communication of luxury brands.

2.3.2.2 Sustainability communication of luxury brands

Previous research states that significant number of high-end brands have not yet integrated narratives and tales that emphasize their sustainability efforts into their brand communication tactics. (Kapferer and Michaut, 2015) Cavender (2018, p.31) defines that the aim of sustainable luxury brand communication is to "inform consumers about a company's internal sustainable developments and corporate social responsibility initiatives, external collaborations and partnerships, and the environmental impact of the industry" across various channels (i.e., online, in-store). The failure of brands to communicate about their sustainability and corporate social responsibility endeavours can be seen as a missed chance to foster consumer awareness and comprehension.

A common critique is that there is also still a huge lack of transparency (Fashion Transparency Index, 2022). When brands are showcasing their planned commitment to become more sustainable to the public, little actual results are recorded. In their communication luxury brands actively seek to preserve their dream image and lack transparency about their operations and functions. Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau (2015) write that "80% of consumers believe that luxury companies do not provide enough information about the conditions of manufacture of their products" (p.4). Another issue that was found in the literature appears to be the notion that if luxury brands promote sustainability, they solely do it to enhance their brand image and to drive sales. This was found, for instance in the study of Achabou and Dekhili (2013) where some respondents accused the promotion of recycling to be just another "form of business marketing".

Joy et al. (2012) write that "presenting luxury brands as fulfilling an ecological need is controversial, in a world where luxury is accessible primarily to only the fortunate" (p. 290). Kong, Witmaier and Ko (2021) name the reason for this to be the conflicting associations of luxury and sustainability. As luxury brands are typically associated with prestige, quality, rarity, and exclusivity, consumers may feel that "luxury brands have less need for sustainability because they are slow fashion" (p.648). As a result, sustainability communication may be regarded as non-genuine and solely as a commercial strategy of luxury brands to boost their sales and enhance their image. This conflict was also shown in the study of Torelli, Monga and Kaikati (2012) where participants rated luxury brands that

communicated their social responsibility measures lower than those that did not. In this context, the value or prestige of a luxury brand is perceived as less due to its engagement in sustainability activities.

Another study revealed that while in general sustainability communication of luxury brands positively affected brand evaluation, a "increased perception of sustainability had a less positive effect and actually diluted the luxury brand" (Kong, Witmaier and Ko, 2021). This means that when sustainability communication increased the willingness to purchase a luxury brand decreased. On the contrary, for non-luxury brands the purchase intentions increased. Hereby the luxury industry demonstrates an extreme case that can actually disadvantage from engaging in the communication of their sustainability measurements.

Luxury brands, with prominent brand recognition and visibility, have the potential to share their Sustainability Development (SD) initiatives more frequently through creative communication strategies to educate their customers. Ivan et al. (2016) write that brands that have SD as a core value may be in a better position to promote the significance of sustainability. However, even luxury brands that have only recently started investing in SD can participate in Sustainable Luxury Communication. Their communication strategy should convey that a "step by step progressive modification and control is taking place" to achieve ambitious goals (Kapferer &Michaut,2015, p. 15).

The brand concept in general plays a role about how consumers perceive the sustainability communication of brands (Torelli, Monga and Kaikati (2012). There is a difference between luxury brands whose brand concept and communication is based on superiority and distinction and those whose brand concept is about openness and preservation. Latter often communicate about the reliability, durability, and tradition of their product and are not valued less when they communicate about sustainability measures. These findings show the potential danger associated with communicating about sustainability and the difference in consumers respond to sustainability communication based on the brand concept.

Studies have shown that not only the brand concept but also the way that messages are communicated has an effect on how consumers perceive, process, understand and react to information. Messages can either be abstract or concrete. With regards to communication

about sustainability measures abstract messages tend to emphasize the broader, long-term sustainability goals and values of a company. An abstract message could for instance be 'protecting the environment for future generations'. On the other hand, concrete messages provide more specific and tangible information that emphasize details, facts, or evidence regarding the sustainability measurements. For instance, "reducing carbon emissions by 20%" is a concrete message about environmental sustainability.

In this context, abstract messages highlight the values and influence the perception of a brand. They help to build an emotional connection with consumers who are desire a more sustainable lifestyle. However, concrete messages provide the necessary evidence to support the brand's sustainability claims. Showing concrete actions and outcomes increases transparency and builds consumer confidence in the brand's commitment to sustainability. This strengthens credibility and minimises the risk of accusations of greenwashing. Therefore, it is advisable to make use of both techniques when communicating to consumers in order to build emotional connection and trust likewise (Lee and Ariely 2006; Court et al. 2009).

A study by Duan, Takahashi and Zwickle (2021) suggests that with regards to promoting sustainability, communicating concrete messages proves to be more effective. Further research on the different way of communicating sustainability in the food production sector has shown that concrete messages are more effective than abstract (Balcetis et al., 2020; Chang et al., 2019; Jaeger and Weber, 2020).

To summarise, luxury brands are hesitant to compromise their image of exclusivity and prestige by openly discussing their sustainability initiatives (Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau, 2014). This results in an information gap, meaning that the majority of consumers is unaware about what sustainability measures a luxury brand actually implements. In line with that, further research has proven that most of the times luxury customers are poorly informed about the sustainability actions taken by luxury brands (Hepner, Chandon and Bakardzhieva, 2020).

3. METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study is to analyse the way luxury fashion brands are adopting their social media content in alinement with a more sustainable business approach. This is done in an effort to understand what role sustainability plays in the social media communication of luxury fashion brands, namely Gucci, Stella McCartney, Chloé and Prada.

The following chapter will outline the development, designing and implementation of the research approach.

3.1 Qualitative Approach

It is important to consider the methodology used for a study in order to understand the research and its process as a whole.

To answer the research question of this particular study, a qualitative approach was employed. This approach is focused on gathering in-depth and rich data from a smaller sample group, often case studies (Robson, 2011). It is best suited for research that aims to answer questions around the "how" and "why" of phenomena (Snape & Spencer, 2003). A qualitative approach provides the researcher with the freedom and flexibility to tailor the analysis to their specific needs "while conforming to the rules of good science" (Neuendorf, 2017, p.7).

For this study, qualitative method is a practical way to discover the differences and/or similarities in sustainability communication on social media between four luxury fashion brands. It also gives an insight into the role sustainability plays for the different brands, meaning whether it is part of their brand philosophy or simply used as a marketing tool.

Therefore, the study aims to identify, firstly, what aspects of the brands' sustainability initiatives are communicated and secondly how this is communicated. To find answers to these questions, textual and visual data derived from the official Instagram accounts of the four luxury fashion brands will be assessed through content analysis.

It is important to remember that this study analyses the communication of sustainability initiatives of four luxury fashion brands, but it is not an analysis of the initiatives per se as

this would require a different methodological approach and would exceed the scope of this thesis.

3.1.1. Content analysis

The qualitative method will take the form of a content analysis, more precisely a thematic content analysis as the research aim is to gain "insights into patterns of meanings across a data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.57). The decision to use content analysis for this research is supported by Villarino and Font (2015, p.330) who claim content analysis to be "the most commonly used method to analyse sustainability claims and website content". Millar and Sammons (2006, p.5) describe content analysis as "a detailed and systematic examination of the contents of a particular body of material for the purpose of identifying patterns, themes, or biases". In qualitative content analysis, the aim is to identify the underlying layers of meaning, also known as "latent meaning" (Bell, 2004). This refers to how words and visual elements within specific contexts convey explicit and implicit messages and thereby shape interpretations.

For this study, content analysis allows to break down a large set of data into smaller pieces which enables to study the meaning of the posts (Neuman, 2011). It enables the researcher to organise images and words derived from the social media posts and to subsequently identify patterns and connections between them. The content can not only be categorised into different themes but also specific words within these themes can be analysed (Julien, 2008). Therefore, the content analysis of this particular thesis in the first step identified *what* content is communicated and in the second step *how* this content is communicated.

Together, the two steps enable to examine the specific sustainability topics addressed by the brands as well as the overall message style used in the sustainability communication. As a result, they provide a comprehensive understanding of how luxury fashion brands have adopted their social media content with regards to sustainability communication.

To summarise, by looking at the Instagram posts of four luxury fashion brands the purpose of qualitative content analysis for this master research is following:

- To determine the extent of sustainability communication of a brand
- To describe the approach to sustainability communication of a brand
- To analyse message characteristics of sustainability communication of a brand
- To identify anomalies of the sustainability communication of a brand
- To draw conclusions about the brand creating sustainability content

3.2 Operationalization

3.2.1 Sample

With regards to the selection of the luxury fashion brands maximum variation sampling was applied. This was done in an effort to capture diverse perspectives by intentionally selecting brands that vary in terms of their sustainability commitments (Morgan, 2008). As qualitative research aims to select a small sample for intensive analysis, the researcher has considered the selection of four different brands as appropriate for this study.

The selected brands were listed in the Business of Fashion Sustainability Index 2022 in the luxury segment. The Business of Fashion Sustainability Index 2022 is a reputable industry resource that ranks the sustainability performance of luxury fashion brands based on publicly available information. It analyses the progress made by fashion companies "towards ambitious environmental and social targets across six impact categories, designed to align with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and efforts to curb global warming by 2030" (BoF, 2022).

		Overall Score (6 categories)	Emissions	Transparency	Water & Chemicals	Materials	Workers' Rights	Waste
1.	Kering	47	43	74	51	48	40	24
2.	Burberry	41	57	44	42	48	33	24
2.	PVH	41	57	52	40	35	39	24
4.	LVMH	36	50	52	33	30	19	30
5.	Ralph Lauren	32	43	33	33	39	23	22
5.	Hermès	32	36	48	26	22	28	32
7.	Tapestry	22	29	26	16	26	21	16
8.	Richemont	20	43	15	7	13	25	16
9.	Capri	18	29	15	23	13	14	14
10.	Prada Group	16	36	15	5	9	16	16
	Segment Average Scores	31	42	37	27	28	26	22
	Index Average Scores	28	38	35	26	25	25	19

Business of Fashion Sustainability Index 2022, Luxury Sector (Source: BoF, 2023)

Through using the Business of Fashion Sustainability Index as a guide for selecting luxury fashion brands, it was ensured that the research included brands with established credibility and recognition. By selecting brands that were ranked as sustainable to varying degrees, the researcher sought to gain a variety of perspectives and increase the chance of diverse and contrasting results. Additionally, the aim was to identify whether the level of sustainability commitment relates to the level of sustainability communication. The brands are following:

Gucci: Gucci belongs to Kering, which ranked 1st in the Business of Fashion Sustainability Index 2022 and is supposed to be among the most sustainable luxury brands.

Stella Mc Cartney: Stella Mc Cartney belongs to LVMH, which ranked 4th in the Business of Fashion Sustainability Index 2022 and is an official vegan brand.

Chloé: belongs to Richemont which ranked 8th in the Business of Fashion Sustainability Index 2022. It is the only luxury fashion brand with B-Corp certification.

Prada: ranked last (10th) in the Business of Fashion Sustainability Index 2022.

3.2.2 Instagram

Instagram was selected as a means of gathering data, as it is one of the most used social media platforms to reach and engage a wide audience (Fleming, 2018). Its focus on image sharing presents the ideal way for luxury brands to convey their prestigious and glamourous image (Kim & Ko, 2012).

With regards to the sampling of the Instagram posts, the study adopted a purposeful sampling approach described by Marshall (1996, p.523) as "actively selecting the most productive sample to answer the research question". Therefore, for each brand 40 Instagram posts that related to sustainability communication were selected. The selection was based on the researchers' judgement and expertise and sought to include representative or impactful examples. Posts posted in the period from 01-2022 to 04-2023 were considered for selection. In total, 160 posts were analysed.

3.2.3. Data Collection

Qualitative content analysis can take an inductive or deductive approach. Inductive approach is referred to as "data-driven" (Schreier, 2012) or "text-driven" (Krippendorff, 2013) and aims to find patterns and themes and generate theories based on those. Hereby, new frameworks are developed based on the collected data. Deductive approach, on the contrary, aims to find patterns and themes based on previous research (Snyder, 2019). By applying existing theoretical frameworks to a particular case, the aim is to verify or falsify the existing theory. This research applied both an inductive and deductive approach. This combination allows to consider existing concepts that have been previously researched in the field of sustainability communication and the luxury industry. Moreover, the inductive approach allowed freedom to identify new concepts thus contributing new findings to an under-researched topic.

As the first step of the data collection, the Instagram accounts of the four brands were examined more closely and screenshots of all posts related to sustainability communication were made. A total of 40 posts were then selected for each brand and organised on a Miro board to streamline the subsequent coding process and ensure its efficiency. The data was collected during a 4-weeks period (May 2023), which was a short period of time that reduced the likelihood that the sustainability content would change.

The Miro board for each brand can be found in Appendix 1.
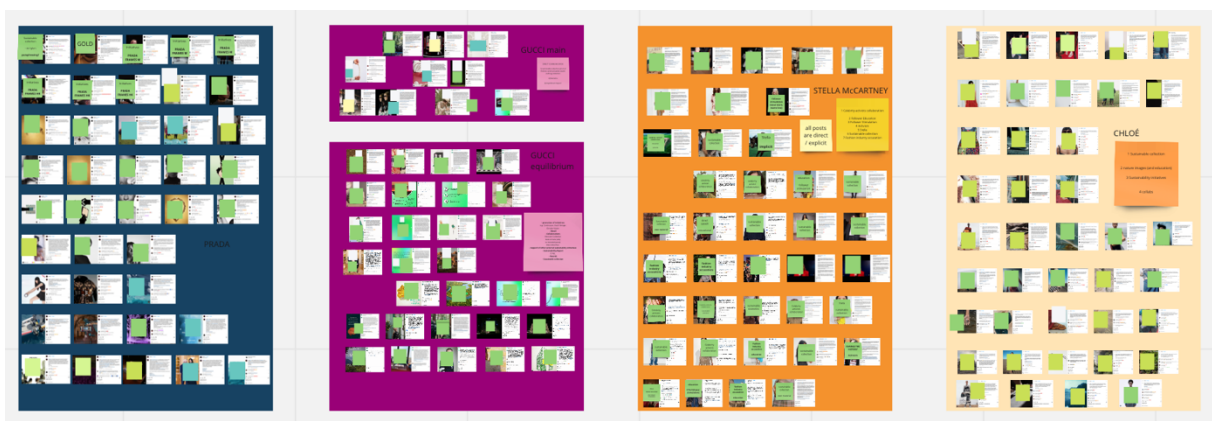
Sustainability Communication posts of Prada, Gucci / Gucci Equilibrium, Stella McCartney and Chloé on a Miro Board (Source: Personal Screenshot)

3.2.4. Data Analysis

After the selection of the posts the "open coding" stage began. (Boeije, 2014). The **first step** of the coding process was to look at each brand separately and examine each post carefully with the aim to identify concepts and patterns. This represented an inductive approach. During this step the focus was on discovering the content topics of the posts related to sustainability communication. Thus, identifying *what* each post communicated.

Following the coding and labelling of the key themes across all brands, their relationship was analysed. Related and similar codes were grouped together into overarching sub-categories that fall under the broader category of *content topics*.

The **second step** of the process was to look over the data set again, this time with the intention to identify the content style. Thus, discovering *how* topics related to sustainability are communicated.

In order to do so, the focus was on identifying the message style and characteristics of each post. For this step, the variables as identified in two previous research were taken as a coding guide, therefore taking on a deductive approach. The first research is by Villarino and Font (2015) who analysed the persuasiveness of 1835 sustainability messages and the second is by Jäger and Weber (2020) who studied how the framing (abstract or concrete) of sustainability messages influences green purchase intentions. To analyse the message structure of the posts following variables were looked at.

Implicit versus explicit: Explicit messages directly convey the intended conclusion, making it less likely for the message to be misunderstood. This is especially useful when communicating important or complex information and facts. The message is clear, and the reader does not need to use his own interpretation.

Implicit messages on the other hand are messages that require the reader to be familiar with a concept because they do not directly state their intended meaning. This leaves the risk of misinterpretation based on the audience's background and perspectives.

Villarino and Font (2015, p.328) write that the "advantage of explicit messages is that audiences who are unfamiliar with sustainability can also understand the message, whereas the advantage of implicit messages is that non-familiar audiences will not be put-off by a sustainability message".

The question asked during the research phase of this thesis was therefore: Does the post directly talk about sustainability or is it indirectly giving hints through the use of certain words and connotations?

Abstract versus concrete: As discussed in the literature review a message can either be abstract or concrete. In relation to sustainability communication abstract means communicating a broad statement about the sustainability commitment without going into detail while concrete communication means stating facts and figures of actual outcomes.

The question asked during the research phase of this thesis was therefore: Does the post clearly communicate facts, figures and outcomes of the brand's sustainability transition or is it only superficially indicating a commitment to sustainability?

Active versus passive: An active message invites the reader to do something, therefore stating a clear Call-to-Action. A passive message communicates information without telling the reader what to do with it. "The more specific the recommendations that a message provides, the more persuasive it will be." (Villarino and Font, 2015, p.328).

The question asked during the research phase of this thesis was therefore: Does the post engage followers to act in a more sustainable way or is it simply sharing information?

When analysing social media posts the visual elements should also be taken into account. From a marketing perspective, colours have a psychological impact and help to effectively communicate concepts and values to consumers (Oludare et al 2021). With regards to sustainability, the colour green is predominantly used to signal environmental friendliness (Pancer, e al., 2017). Labrecque et al. (2013, p. 193) argue that the ''color green has been adopted as a marketing tool for environmentally conscious consumption". Also the colour blue is used as it is associated with trust and safety. In addition, images of nature are common cues for environmental orientation. Therefore, the analysis also took into
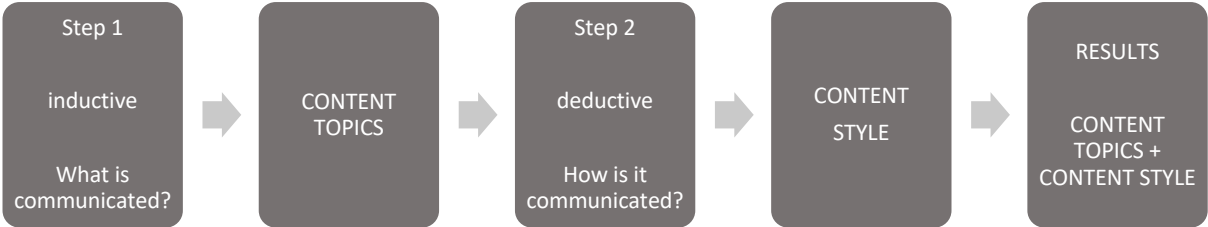
consideration the overall visual representation of the brands Instagram account and whether brands made use of visual elements associated with sustainability.

Following the analysis of the message style of the sustainability communication of each brand based on the above variables, sub-categories were formed that fall under the broad category of *content style*.

After the first and second step the open coding stage was finished. The data had been broken down into codes, reassembled into categories and subsequently merged into broader categories. Thus, the content topics and content style of each brands' sustainability communication was identified.

The coding frame for both steps can be found in Appendix 2.

On the basis of this, the findings of this research were written up and discussed in the results and discussion section.

| Step 1

inductive

What is communicated? | → | CONTENT TOPICS | → | Step 2

deductive

How is it communicated? | → | CONTENT STYLE | → | RESULTS

CONTENT TOPICS + CONTENT STYLE |

Qualitative Content Analysis Coding Process

3.3 Validity and Reliability

To ensure trustworthy research results, the researcher was careful to ensure validity and reliability at every step of the research. It is particularly important when conducting a thematic content analysis to disclose the process of data analysis in detail in order to demonstrate its credibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To ensure that transparency is guaranteed, the researcher disclosed each step of the research process following the step-by-step guideline for conducting trustworthy thematic analysis developed by Nowell et al. (2017). This included repeated immersion with the data set, detailed note-taking and

documentation of process, reflexive journaling, usage of an established coding framework and reviewing themes over and over again. Additionally, the rationales for the decisions on theoretical, methodological and analytical choices throughout the study were stated. Further, especially in qualitative research approaches, the self-reflexivity of the researcher is crucial (Babbie, 2014), although it has to be stated that in this context subjectivity can never be erased entirely.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The aim of this research is to investigate how luxury fashion brands are adopting their communication in alinement with a more sustainable business approach. To answer the research question the focus was on four luxury fashion brands (Gucci, Stella McCartney, Chloé and Prada) and their sustainability communication on the social media platform Instagram.

The content analysis has shown that luxury fashion brands use social media accounts to communicate about their sustainability initiatives and promote a more environmentally conscious way of operating through text and visual elements.

The following section describes and discusses the social media content related to sustainability communication of each individual brand. To analyse and present the results in a comprehensive manner, the description of each brand is structured into two distinctive parts.

Firstly, the **content topic** section which focus on the different topics a brand communicates within its sustainability communication efforts. This section aims to provide a deeper understanding of what is communicated with regards to sustainability. The three key categories within this section are: *Sustainability Initiatives, Sustainable Collection* and *Partnerships*. Depending on each brand those categories are further divided into different sub-categories.

The second part is the **content style** section which revolves around the strategies and approaches each brand employs to communicate its sustainability topics. The aim here is to get a deeper understanding of how sustainability communication is performed.

The three key categories within this section are: *Engagement, Visuals* and *Message Style*.

Lastly, a comparison between the approaches of the different brands within these categories is provided.

4.1 GUCCI

The main channel of the luxury fashion house Gucci (@gucci) has 52 million followers (May 2023) and is used as a tool to communicate about the latest collection, collaborations and events of the brand. A deeper analysis of the posts revealed that the posts about topics related to sustainability on the main channel are few.

Unexpectedly, during the research process a second account of Gucci, called @gucciequilibrium, was discovered. This account counts 88.200 Followers (May 2023) and evolves its communication around "Gucci's ongoing commitment to generate positive change for people and planet." (@gucci).

The following analysis will therefore consider both accounts and will begin with the main channel @gucci.

4.1.1 Main account: Gucci

CONTENT TOPICS

Sustainability Initiatives

Sustainability Report

With regards to informing followers about the steps taken to make its business operations more sustainable, Gucci promotes the publishing of its corporate social responsibility report also termed as "Gucci Equilibrium Impact Report". For instance, this is done in a post (Figure 1) that communicates to the Gucci community the "*ongoing commitment to generate positive change for people and the planet*" (@gucci). Therefore, they use a quote of Marco Bizzarri, the president and CEO of Gucci, where he expresses his devotion to following a sustainable business approach. The brand however does not share any facts from the report but simply points out that the report is linked in the bio for those who are interested. Therefore, this post falls into the category of abstract message since it doesn't feature any further information on the measurements and supporting facts.

The promotion of its sustainability report "Gucci Equilibrium Impact Report" is the only posting on Gucci's main channel that falls under the category *sustainability initiatives*.
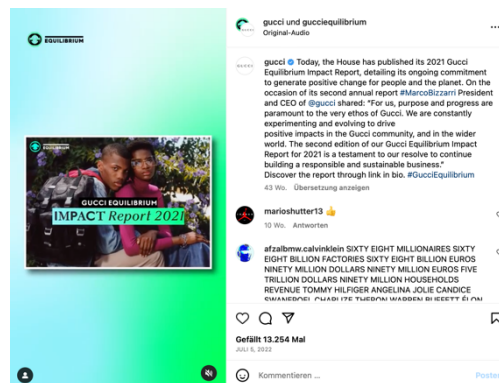
Figure 1 Post retrieved from @gucci

Sustainable Collection

On its main account the fashion house talks about its first sustainable collection named "Gucci Off The Grid" which is promoted as "*the first collection from Gucci Circular Lines, a concept created to support the House's vision for circular production*" (@gucci).

The caption of this post (Figure 2) is loaded with keywords that are related to a sustainable approach such as "*circular production*", "*recycling*", "*recreation*", "*animal-free*", "*raw material*", "*renewable*" and "*bio-based*" (@gucci). The caption describes the collection and highlights the usage of two sustainable materials, ECONYL and DEMETRA. Latter was developed by Gucci itself and is "animal-free and primarily made from sustainable, renewable and bio- based raw materials" (Gucci FAQ, 2021). The analysis, however, found inconsistency between the information communicated about Gucci's own material DEMETRA. In one of its posts, Gucci states that this material is 70% plant-based. But in the FAQ's about DEMETRA on the Gucci website, the brand claims that the material is "up to 77% plant-based" (Gucci FAQ, 2021). This inconsistency in information can create distrust among consumers. As Gucci fails to provide accurate and consistent information this could be interpreted as an approach to greenwashing.

Another post (Figure 3) of Gucci related to the category *sustainable collection* talks about a sustainable addition of the Gucci Dive Watch. In this post the brand aims to communicate its

sustainable mindset stating that the watch is reinvented using "bio-based materials and recycled steel" (@gucci). However, there are no further explanations about what this bio-based material is and to what percentage it is used for the production of the watch. The communication thus seems to be rather abstract and vague.

Figure 2 Post retrieved from @gucci
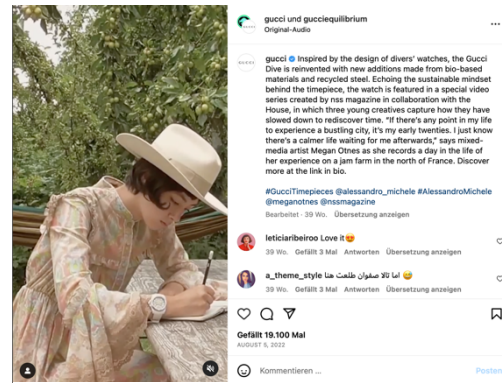
Figure 3 Post retrieved from @gucci

Partnerships

The analysis did not find any posts that promote sustainability related partnerships on the main channel @gucci.

CONTENT STYLE

Visuals

The posts on the main account predominantly feature high-resolution product shoots, advertising campaigns and images from Gucci's bi-annual fashion shows. There is also a noticeable focus on campaigns with Brand Ambassadors and celebrities from primarily the music and film industry (e.g. Harry Styles). Another popular type of post is photographs of celebrities wearing a Gucci outfit at official events like the Academy Awards, Met Gala and Golden Globes.

In the visual elements of their sustainability posts, however, the colour green and blue is predominant as well as images that depict nature scene such as forests, rivers or green

grass. However, as the number of sustainability related posts is few the overall look of the account remains to convey an image of glamour and prestige.

Engagement

With regards to the number of likes per post, the ones about topics related to sustainability portray far less engagement than the average post on Gucci's main channel. Sustainability related posts count on average between 15.000-40.000 likes while the average number of likes for non-sustainability related posts is +100.000. Hereby, the theory (Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau, 2014; Torelli, Monga and Kaikati, 2012) that luxury consumers prefer the communication of glamour over sustainability topics is validated. This would also explain the small number of post related to sustainability on the main account of Gucci.

Message Style

The above analysed posts have shown that Gucci's sustainability communication is done in an abstract and shallow manner that lacks any concrete facts and figures, but, however makes heavy usage of sustainability buzzwords.

There was another sustainability communication style discovered on the account. While most posts talk about sustainability explicitly, a few posts on the Gucci main channel revealed an implicit communication strategy. These posts (Figure 4 & 5) don't necessarily mention any keywords directly related to sustainability but feature words that can be indirectly associated with sustainability. Those would be posts that highlight the theme of heritage and a connection to nature. The captions therefore include phrases such as "*crafted by nature*", "*passing on to future generations*", "*beyond heritage*", "*high quality*" or "*innovative spirit*" (@gucci). With that indirect communication Gucci suggest that its values align with a sustainable approach without directly addressing their commitments to a more sustainable business approach. Thus, this enables them to still use words that are in line with their sophisticated language and avoid the use of words (e.g. recycling, renewable, circular production) that would endanger this type of elevated expression.
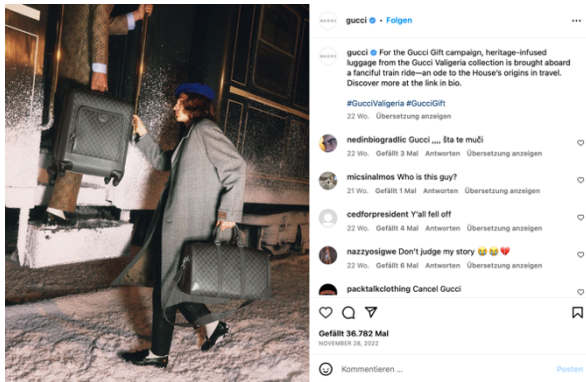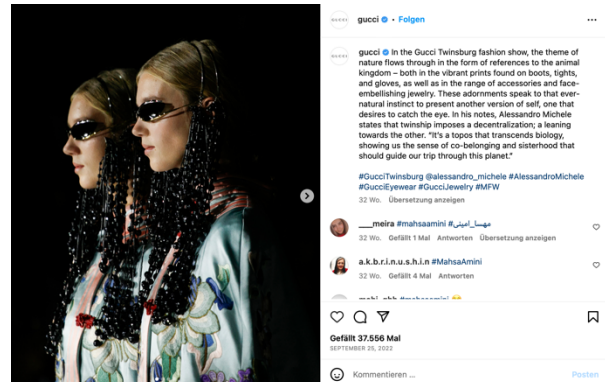
Figure 4 Post retrieved from @gucci

Figure 5 Post retrieved from @gucci

4.1.2 Second account: Gucci Equilibrium

With its second account (@gucciequilibrium) Gucci appears to have realised the impact of the fashion industry on the environment and the importance of sustainability measures and the communication about it. The posts are therefore centred around the various initiatives of the luxury fashion brand that not only relate to sustainability but other socially relevant topics such as social justice, female empowerment, racial diversity, homelessness or disability, for instance.

Since it is not possible to identify the explicit motives of the brand's decision to operate a second Instagram account, it cannot be ruled out that this represents a marketing strategy and response to the demands of the industry.

In relation to this it is further notable that there is no promotion of the second channel on the main channel of Gucci. This might also explain the significant difference in follower numbers between the accounts. With the second channel having approximately 88,200 followers, compared to the main account's 52 million followers, @gucciequilibrium may appear like a secluded island that is difficult for the majority of their followers to discover. If Gucci would feature and highlight @gucciequilibrium on their main account @gucci more frequently, they would be able to attract a bigger number of followers on their second channel. By leveraging the extensive reach and visibility of the main account, Gucci could promote @gucciequilibrium to millions of existing followers who may not be aware of the second channel's existence. Through reaching a wider audience the brand could potentially increase the impact and effectiveness of its sustainability communication.

While there was no indicator of sustainability in the profile description and story highlights on the main channel @gucci, the second channel gives an immediate different first impression as it features story highlights related to sustainable practices and a colour scheme in which green and blue predominate.

CONTENT TOPICS

Sustainability Initiatives

Sustainable business

This section includes all posts that communicate the achievements and measurements in relation to sustainability that the luxury fashion house undertakes. For instance, one of the communicated initiatives is 'Gucci UP' which describes the upcycling of leftover material. Another initiative is 'Vault Vintage' that focuses on Gucci vintage clothing and the repairment of old Gucci pieces (Figure 6). Similar to this initiative is 'Gucci Continuum' where selected young designers get the opportunity to integrate old Gucci garments into their own collection as a way to recycle them. Another measurement towards a sustainable business approach is the Circular HUB which aims to "*facilitate a circular transformation of luxury throughout the design process*" (@gucciequilibrium).
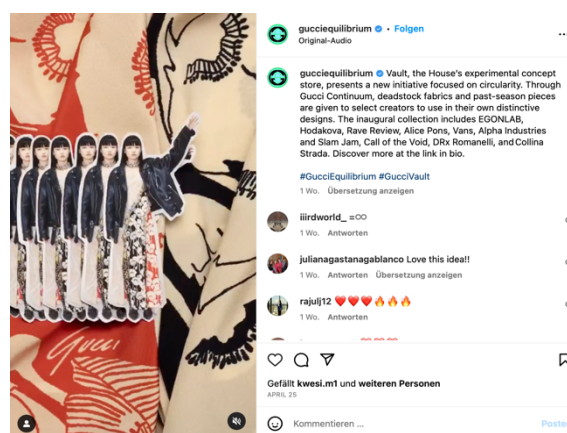
Figure 6 Post retrieved from @gucciequilibrium

An additional type of post that falls under this theme is the laudation of other brands joining the sustainability initiatives of Gucci. The brand congratulates the luxury house Cartier for joining its Carbon Neutral Challenge that was initiated by its CEO Marco Bizzarri. Therefore,

it uses a quote of Marco Bizzarri as well as a quote of Cartier's President and CEO Cyrille Vigneron in which both express their passion and commitment to make a positive impact on the planet. The post ends with the words "*we do hope that additional actors from the private sector will commit to join the challenge.*" (@gucciequilibrium). Incorporating quotes from key individuals of the brands gives the post a human touch and makes it more personal. It can make a caption more impactful and provoke thoughts amongst followers. However, overly relying on quotes takes away the space to provide additional context and speak about specific actions or projects undertaken by the brands.

Sustainability Report

Gucci pays a lot of attention to promote their "Gucci Equilibrium Impact Report" on their @gucciequilibrium account. This is done in an abstract as well as concrete way. For instance, a post (Figure 7) with abstract message would be where Gucci just broadly states its commitment and actions towards a sustainable business approach with statements like "*Gucci is constantly seeking out ways to increase sustainability right from the very beginning*" (@gucciequilibrium). These messages are also loaded with sustainability buzzwords such as "*sustainable*", "*raw production*", "*regenerative farming*", "*organic*", etc. However, they lack any deeper explanation. At the end of each caption the luxury fashion brand refers to the report on its website with a Call-to-Action: "*Discover more in the 2021 Gucci Equilibrium Impact Report through link in bio.*" (@gucciequilibrium).

On the other side, a post with a concrete message would be where Gucci states facts and figures from its report (Figure 8). For instance, "*In 2021, 95% traceability for all its material was reached*", or "*This makes a real dent in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and, in 2021, 28,139 tons were avoided by sourcing metals that were either recycled or …*" (@gucciequilibrium).
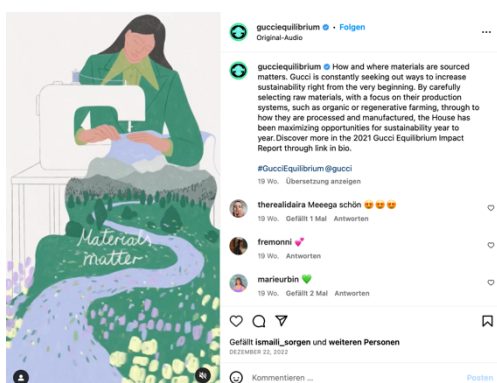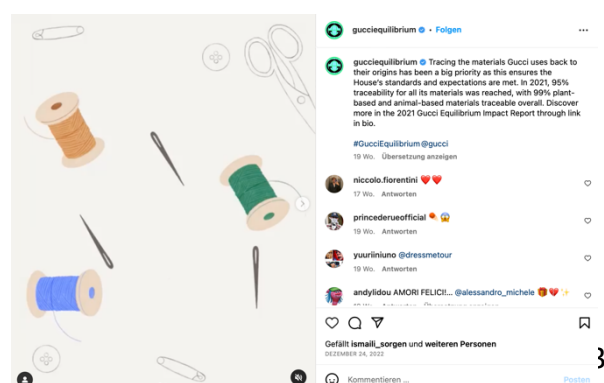

Figure 7 Post retrieved from @gucciequilibrium

Figure 8 Post retrieved from @gucciequilibrium

Awards

Another communicated topic is the receipt of the Climate Action Award at the CNMI Sustainable Fashion Awards. Showing that their initiatives are recognised by others in the industry is one of the greatest ways to increase the credibility in its sustainability commitment. It increases the reputation of the brand and can attract environmentally conscious customers and stakeholders. Additionally, it can inspire others in the industry as well as consumers to take action to become more environmentally aware and sustainable.

Retail

As part of their sustainability communication, Gucci informs followers on their second channel about the sustainability of its stores and boutiques. In a post the brand explicitly states what has been done with regards to operating its retail spaces more environmentally friendly (Figure 9). For instance, "*the house met its target for 100% renewable electricity*" or "*the house has installed Building Management Systems in over 15% of its retail locations*" (Figure 8). This direct and concrete listing provides more precise and measurable information that highlights details regarding the sustainable actions. As discussed in the literature review, communicating concrete actions and tangible results enhances transparency and strengthens consumer trust in the brand's sustainability commitment. It is of course debatable whether the measures are satisfactory, whether the result achieved is the maximum possible or whether more drastic measures could have been possible.
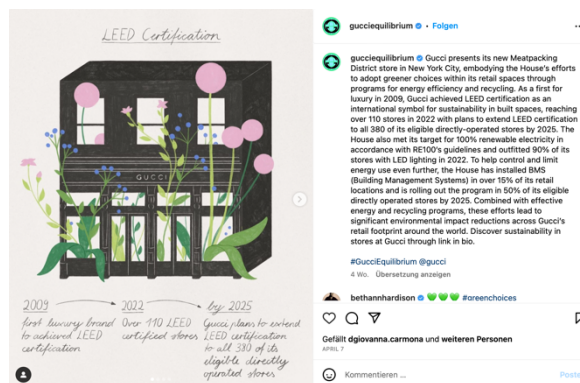
Figure 9 Post retrieved from @gucciequilibrium

Sustainable Collection

Gucci promotes its first sustainable collection called "Gucci Off The Grid" in several posts on its second channel in the same way as it does on its main channel (See *Sustainable Collection* under section 4.1.1)

However, on its second channel, this kind of posting appears repeatedly, which creates the suggestion that Gucci relies a little too much on this one sustainable collection to convey its sustainability thinking. It gives the impression that the company is taking a rather one-sided approach to sustainability, as opposed to a holistic approach.

Partnerships

Sustainability Collaborations

Part of Gucci's sustainability transition is collaborating with external partners that are distinguished through their sustainable practices. On their second Instagram channel Gucci communicates for instance the collaboration with the Ellen MacArthur foundation using a green and blue image with a quote of the President and CEO of Gucci, Marco Bizzarri, that states that this strategic partnership will help to expand the many initiatives the house has already established.

Likewise, the promotion about the collaboration with Nido di Seta, an organisation that supports the house to make their silk production more sustainable, features a green and blue image with a quote of the founder of Nido di Seta (Figure 10). In this post, the house also highlights its innovative nature as the caption writes "sustainability and innovation go hand-in-hand" (@gucciequilibrium).
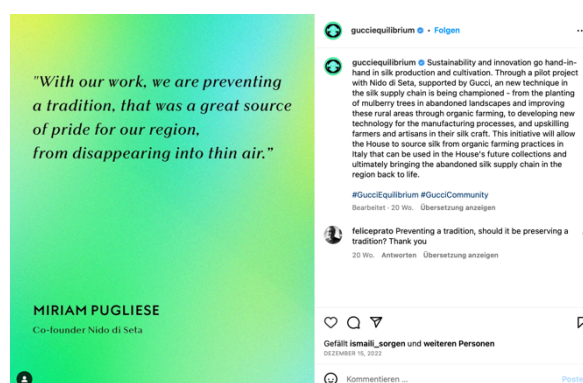
Figure 10 Post retrieved from @gucciequilibrium

Support of External Initiatives

Unlike collaborations, where Gucci works with external partners who help the brand make an aspect of its business more sustainable, e.g. silk production, this theme describes Gucci's support for external partners' sustainability efforts. For instance, they support the project Kariba REDD+ that is dedicated to forest conservation and also the initiative ReWild Yourself that offers educational content and activities to reconnect with nature (Figure 11). Also in relation to its fashion shows, Gucci states that it supports the local communities that live in the location of the fashion show, for instance NGO's committed to sustainability.
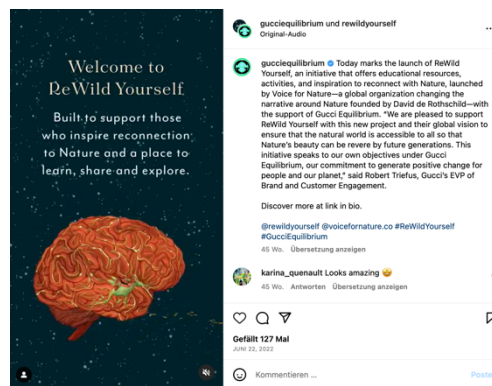
Figure 11 Post retrieved from @gucciequilibrium

It is to expect that the support is monetary, however it is not explicitly stated by the brand. Here is to note that, for instance supporting the initiative ReWild Yourself is rather a philanthropic action that has nothing to do with the very own unsustainable problems of the fashion business. Therefore, it could be argued that this is part of a marketing strategy based on the adage "Adorning oneself with borrowed plumes". It may be easier and more lucrative to improve a brand's sustainability reputation by supporting the sustainable activities of others and heavily communicating about it, rather than tackling the issues of the own industry and implementing these actions in-house.

Influencer Marketing

In one of the posts the brand teams up with influencers and makes use of influencer marketing which has become an integral part of today's marketing strategies of brands.

Influencers are regarded as more authentic and trustworthy, and consumers are able to connect to them stronger than celebrities (Jin et al., 2019; Stefanone et al., 2010). When influencers that followers trust are engaging with a brand, followers are more likely to trust that brand as well. In the context of sustainability trust plays an essential role. Working with influencer can therefore result in consumers having more confidence in a brand's sustainability credentials (Tran and Strutton, 2014).

The post on @gucciequilibrium features three influencers that were invited by Gucci to Tofino in British Columbia "to engage in conscious exploration, connecting with nature and the environment" (@gucciequilibrium) while wearing pieces of the sustainable collection (Figure 12). The content of the three invited influencers focuses, as the brands stated, on topics related to sustainability and lifestyle. However, a brief analysis of the influencers' accounts (@Nathanielatakora, @royhuu, @lexsonator) did not find clear indications about their engagement in sustainability-related activities. Their accounts are more focused on fashion, lifestyle and photography content. It is therefore uncertain whether the brand has actually been able to extend its reach to a new audience that is concerned about sustainability.
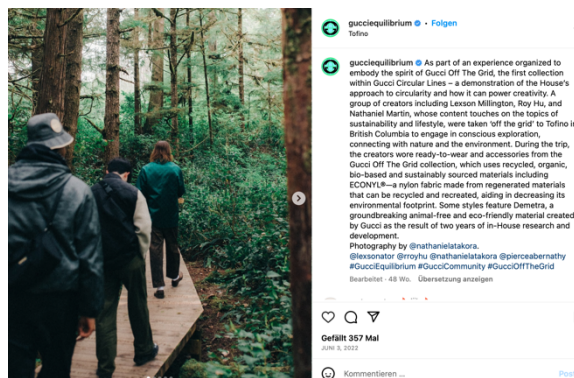
Figure 12 Post retrieved from @gucciequilibrium

CONTENT STYLE

Visuals

The images on the Gucci Equilibrium account demonstrate a blue and green colour scheme together with images that show nature scenes. Hereby, Gucci makes use of these colours to build emotional connection and enhance their sustainability images as discussed in the

theory of the visualisation of sustainability by Pancer et al. (2017) and Labrecque et al. (2013).

Considering the difference in the images featured on Gucci's main and second account, it can be argued that the second channel was launched because while the importance of communicating about sustainability was recognised, Gucci did not want to change its glamorous image on their main channel. As the literature review revealed, luxury consumers are not necessarily interested in the communication of topics related to sustainability and the brand Gucci might have risked losing followers by integrating sustainability related images on the main channel.

Engagement

It is interesting to mention that as opposed to the main channel, Gucci has deactivated the likes count on its second channel. This is a function that Instagram allows, which means that the number of likes on a post are not publicly visible. The analysis of the posts on the main account already revealed that posts that communicated sustainability topics had the least engagement in likes. One could hypothesise that the brand has turned off the likes count as it has received far fewer likes compared to the regular number of likes on the main channel. Receiving a high number of likes is at the forefront of most social media campaigns (LaPointe, 2012) as a high number reflects a high brand popularity and success (De Vries et al., 2012). Additionally, a high number of likes increases credibility of a brand. So Gucci might have seen the risk of being perceived as unpopular and losing credibility, and thus switched off the likes count.

The analysis depicted no particular focus on follower engagement, except the occasional integration of a Call-to-Action that animates followers to visit the sustainability report on the Gucci website.

Message Style

On the second account, all posts are explicit, and are communicated in both, abstract and concrete ways. This refers to messages being broad and general or messages providing

specific details, facts, and figures. With communicating in both, abstract and concrete ways, the brand makes use of the best practice as identified in the literature review. As abstract messages help to build emotional connection with customers while concrete messages increase trust and credibility (Lee and Ariely 2006; Court et al. 2009).

However, it has to be said, that while some posts indeed feature some facts, the majority is rather abstract and only informs about the various initiatives in a shallow way. The brand does not further explain how it is going to achieve its ambitious goals.

To give another example here, a post about the circular vision of Gucci portrays a very shallow and abstract message style as well (Figure 13). In this post the brand lists all different actions it is taking such as transforming design and production, optimizing leather, reducing impact, increasing recycled material, designing out waste etc. in one post. However, while mentioning many keywords related to sustainability, the brand fails to educate followers how they are actually planning to achieve these goals. This gives the impression that the luxury fashion house is doing a lot in terms of sustainability, but it leaves questions open as to how this is actually done and what the actual achievements and outcomes of this are. This causes problems regarding the transparency and might leave followers wondering about the credibility of those statements.

Figure 13 Post retrieved from @gucciequilibrium

Related to the use of elevated language common for luxury brands is the identified paraphrasing of sustainability keywords. For instance, instead of saying 'repairing old pieces' Gucci writes "*putting pieces back into the hands of the House's artisans as each piece is reconditioned where necessary*" (@gucciequilibrium). Or to give another example, instead of

mentioning 'recycling' the brand paraphrases it with "*integrating fabrics and accessories from past Gucci collections into unique pieces*" (Figure 14 & 15).
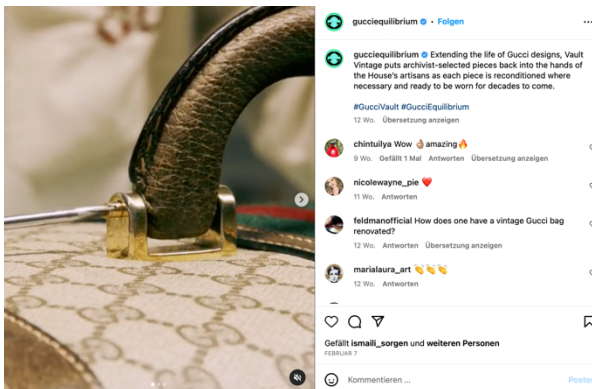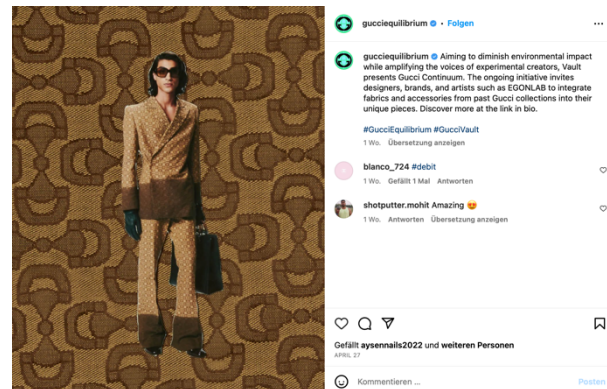

Figure 14 Post retrieved from @gucciequilibrium

Figure 15 Post retrieved from @gucciequilibrium

This paraphrasing can help to create a sense of exclusivity and mystique around sustainability topics and can help to maintain a glamorous images even when communicating about sustainability which is less glamours and more linked to a crisis. Therefore, the brand doesn't risk losing followers who are not interested in or receptive to sustainability-related content.

What is furthermore apparent in the sustainability communication of Gucci is the overuse of sustainability buzzwords such as "sustainable", "raw", "ethically sourced", etc. This overload could lead to the argumentation that this is an attempt of green washing. However, some might argue that even if it was the case that Gucci uses green marketing as a means to capitalise on the growing demand for sustainability, it would still be a positive contribution to drawing attention to the environmental issues as a whole. Any initiative, regardless of the underlying motivation, can help raise awareness and inspire consumers and other companies to do the same.

4.2 STELLA McCARTNEY

The Instagram account of the luxury fashion brand Stella McCartney @stellamccartney counts 7,4 Million followers (May 2023) and already indicates at first glance a commitment to sustainability in the profile description: "*Pioneering a conscious luxury movement*".

A deeper analysis of the posts on the channel revealed a high number of posts that communicate topics related to sustainability.

CONTENT TOPICS

Sustainable Initiatives

Activist Initiatives

Stella McCartney's Instagram account takes on an activist role and displays a great focus on sustainability and animal welfare advocacy. Stella McCartney as a person, has established herself as an advocate for sustainable fashion and animal rights through public activism and interviews (Farra, 2019). Her advocacy has made her a prominent figure in the fashion industry, and she is often cited as the most sustainable luxury brand.

At times the account feels more like an activist account than a luxury brand account. For instance, one post informs followers about Stella's visit to Japan where she organised a protest for a more conscious fashion industry at Tokyo University of the Arts. This protest was part of the activist-actions around her summer 2023 collection 'Change The History'. Related to that the Instagram account featured a video on Earth Day 2023 taken by Stella herself asking her followers what they would do if they were able to change history (Figure 16). As for her answer, she wishes to change animal agriculture, which again shows her personal deep connection to animals and nature.

Furthermore, in celebration of Earth Day, the luxury fashion house organised a march together with students from fashion design schools in London, Milan and Paris aimed at

raising awareness for protecting nature and starting a discussion about conscious fashion. In this particular post (Figure 17), the fashion brand further integrates a direct Call-to-Action by asking the question "*How would you 'Change The History' for animals and Mother Earth?*" (@stellamccartney). With this, Stella McCartney actively involves the new generation whom she calls "change-makers" who have the power to make a change and promote sustainability through their actions.
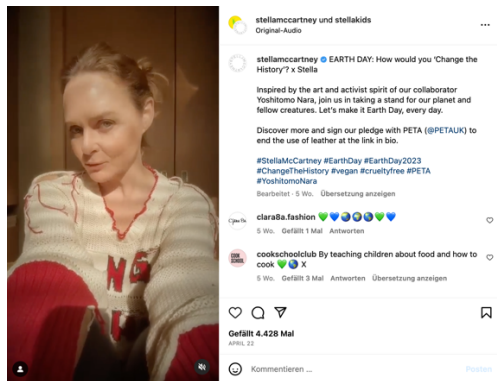

Figure 16 Post retrieved from @stellamccartney
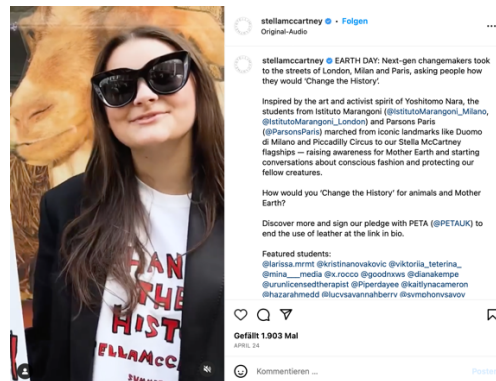
Figure 17 Post retrieved from @stellamccartney

Personal Approach

The analysis revealed a distinctively personal approach to managing the Instagram channel. This is reflected in posts that are very personal which gives the impression that Stella herself is running the account. For instance, several posts are signed in her name with "*Stella x*" or start with "*Shot by Stella*" (Figure 18). The account further features videos of Stella talking to her followers or images from her childhood that show her on the back of a horse, indicating her life-long connection to animals and nature (Figure 19). Giving insight into her work and life and connecting personally with her followers is a way to build trust which is a key component of sustainability communication.
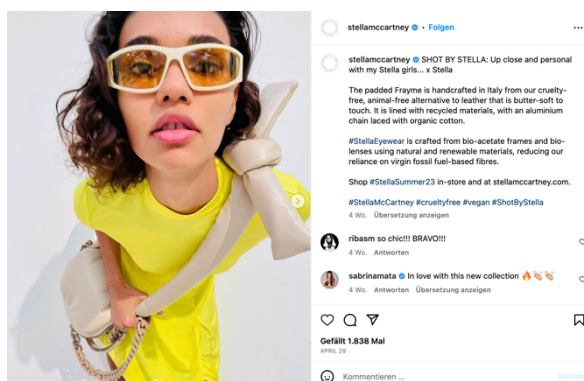

Figure 18 Post retrieved from @stellamccartney

Figure 19 Post retrieved from @stellamccartney

Follower Education

Another approach of the sustainability communication of the brand Stella McCartney is to educate its followers about the fashion industry's impact on climate change. This is done in a concrete style through short caption texts that state one or two facts. Additionally, the brand states how they are tackling this challenge or how different their approach is to other brands in the industry. Following examples taken from the account @ stellamccartney illustrate this approach:

"Every year, over 100 million animals die for fur. Our winter runway show did not kill any."

"Every year, over 1 billion animals die for the leather industry. Our #crueltyfree accessories do not kill any, with an environmental impact up to 10 times less than those made from skins. There is a better way." (Figure 20)

"Every year, 200 million trees are cut down for the fashion industry. Our forest-friendly viscose is traceably sourced from responsibly managed forests in the US and Europe that are not endangered, ancient nor protected." (Figure 21)

With these statements Stella McCartney critiques the fashion industry and puts herself in the role of the best practice example while distinguishing her brand from other luxury fashion brands.

Figure 20 Post retrieved from @stellamccartney

Figure 21 Post retrieved from @stellamccartney

Sustainable Collection

Most of the post on the Instagram account @stellamccartney fall under this category which describes posts that feature images of models wearing Stella McCartney pieces with an accompanying caption that very concretely states a sustainability fact about the collection as visible in the figure below (Figure 22).

Figure 22 Post retrieved from @stellamccartney

Partnerships

Celebrities / Activists Collaborations

What is apparent after a closer investigation of the Instagram account of Stella McCartney is a number of collaborations with celebrity models that are very popular at the moment for instance Bella Hadid, Gigi Hadid or Cara Delevingne. Those celebrities enjoy a high number of followers and fans and thus collaborating with them through photo shoots helps the brand to reach a wider audience while ensuring to stay relevant to their target audience. The models are photographed wearing sustainable clothing from the Stella McCartney collection and are referred to as "Stella girls" in the caption (Figure 23). Calling these celebrity models "Stella girls", creates a desire in the consumer to become a "Stella girl" themselves by wearing sustainably produced pieces from the Stella McCartney collection.

But not only collaborations with celebrities but also environmental activists or celebrity activists are communicated as part of the sustainability communication on Instagram. For instance, the campaign called "Stella Voices" where the brand shares its Instagram platform

with five different women who are well known for their practices in sustainability and their commitment to protecting nature - amongst others the renowned environmental scientist Jane Goodall (Figure 24).

Not only does the brand implement a sustainable approach itself but further supports others in their mission to protect the environment. This creates the impression that sustainability is indeed an important topic for the brand and adds to its credibility, therefore, enhancing consumer perception. However, as criticised with the approach of Gucci already, supporting sustainable actions of others constitutes a philanthropic action which per se does not contribute to minimise the non-sustainable practices of the fashion industry.
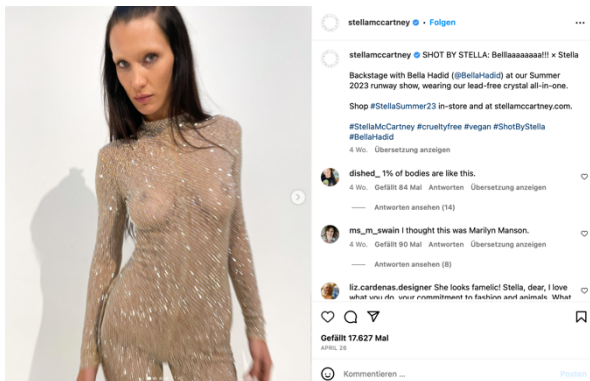
Figure 23 Post retrieved from @stellamccartney

Figure 24 Post retrieved from @stellamccartney

CONTENT STYLE

Visuals

While the Instagram account of Stella McCartney showcases images of celebrities wearing her outfits at prestigious events and high-end product photos, the account also features images that are in contrast to the luxury image of glitz and glamour.

A good example therefore is the campaign of the summer 2023 collection 'Change The History' (Figure 25 & 26). It shows actress Madelyn Cline wearing the collection on a farm, where she is for instance lying in a hayloft surrounded by farm animals or cuddling with rabbits on a meadow. To promote the campaign on their Instagram channel the brand posted a picture of the shoot each day for the duration of one month. In the post caption the promotion of the clothes per se falls more into the background and the focus is rather

on raising awareness about animal rights, conscious consumption and sustainable living. It can be argued that this high frequency of posts that promote sustainability and animal welfare would not work on all luxury brand channels and could be perceived as excessive and rejected by followers.

For Stella McCartney, however, it seems to be working extremely successfully, as some specific posts of this campaign shoot achieve a higher number of likes than the average. The personal brand of Stella and her genuine dedication to sustainability issues may also be the reason why this activism approach is working for the Instagram account. As her account features sustainability communication in almost every post, this indicates a holistic approach to sustainability.
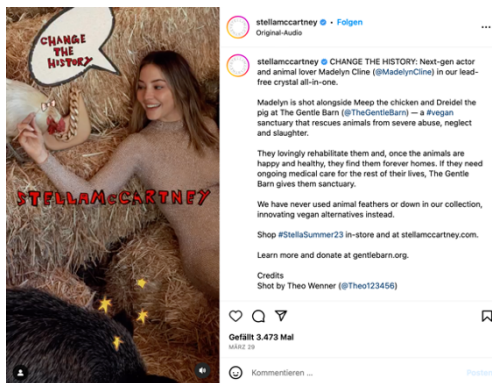
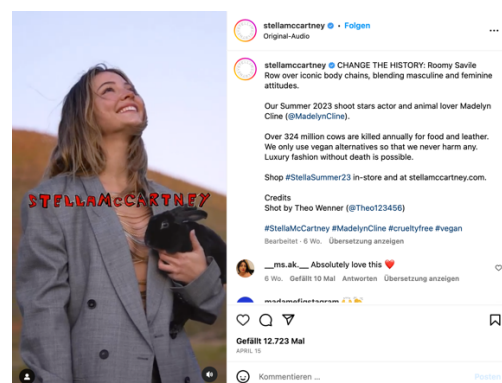Figure 25 Post retrieved from @stellamccartney

Figure 26 Post retrieved from @stellamccartney

Engagement

There is a clear emphasis on follower engagement and activation visible on the Instagram account of the luxury brand. This is visible in Call-to-Actions (CTAs) and questions stated in the post descriptions that are either very concrete or abstract. For instance, a direct CTA that the brand states would be "*Sign our pledge with PETA to end the use of leather at the link in bio*" (Figure 27). Here the followers get told exactly what they should do – sign the pledge.

On the contrary, an abstract CTA suggests an action without using the imperative of the word, therefore leaving more room for interpretation. This is visible in statements such as "*This Earth Day we call upon a new generation to stop buying leather*". Hereby, the luxury fashion house suggests followers to not buy leather but does not directly tell them not to. In

another post the caption suggests followers to plant wildflower seeds in their garden in order to support rewilding.

Another example is the post in which actress Cate Blanchett wears a Stella McCartney suit for the second time at a public event (Figure 28). The brand concludes the post with the CTA "*Wear more, waste less.*". Hereby, Stella McCartney signals genuine commitment to sustainability as this statement goes against the profit model of fashion businesses.
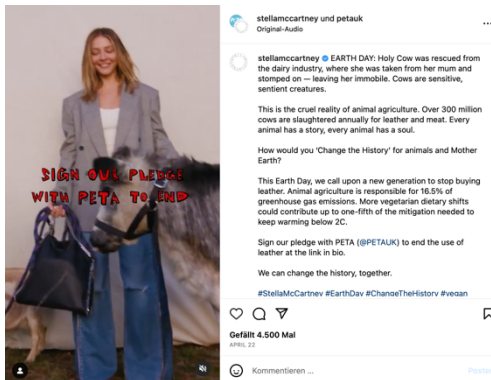

Figure 27 Post retrieved from @stellamccartney

Figure 28 Post retrieved from @stellamccartney

Message Style

As discussed in the above examples already, Stella McCartney communicates in a concrete and straightforward way. Her captions are kept short and the messages are easy to understand. Her communication style does not resemble the elevated language common for luxury brands. To give a few examples of these kind of captions: "*We do not use crystals with lead as it can have a wide range of negative impacts on ecosystems, including biodiversity loss, decreased growth and reproductive rates in plants and animals, and neurological effects in vertebrates*." or "*Stella Eyewear features bio-lenses made using vegetable-based castor oil, reducing our reliance on fossil fuels and carbon emission*." (Figure 29) or "*the ready-to-wear collection is crafted from 92% responsible materials – our most conscious winter offering ever.*" (@stellamccartney).

Figure 29 Post retrieved from @stellamccartney

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4.3 CHLOÉ

The Instagram account of the luxury fashion brand Chloé @chloe counts 10,9 Million followers (May 2023) and indicates a commitment to sustainability in the profile description through stating that the brand is "B-Corp certified". However, this can be regarded as an abstract indication since only followers who are familiar with the B-Corp certificate will be able to link it to a commitment to sustainability. A more detailed explanation of Chloé and its B-Corp certificate can be found in the further analysis below.

An in-depth examination of the posts on the Instagram channel of Chloé revealed a good number of posts that can be classified as sustainability communication.

CONTENT TOPICS

Sustainability Initiatives

Sustainable business

Chloé launched its first collection, called "Chloé Vertical Collection" that provides customers with more transparency about the provenance of each piece. Each item in the collection is equipped with a QR code that enables the tracking of its journey from the factory to the store, providing transparency and insights into the production process. Additionally, it "*grants access to an ownership certificate as well as care and repair information.*" (CHLOÉ, 2023). According to the fashion house the collection is "*crafted from lower impact natural materials including French linen, organic silk and wool, and locally sourced leather.*" (@chloe / Figure 30 & 31).

To promote the drop of the collection and the new traceability feature, the brand posted 6 consecutive posts explaining the QR Code concept with no more than 3 sentences per post.

The new feature is in accordance with Dyllick and Muff (2015) who suggest that transparency is a highly important factor in the success of a business' sustainability

transition. Also, the Fashion Transparency Index from 2022 accuses brands to lack transparency, especially luxury brands (Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau, 2015). Therefore, it is surprising to some extend that Chloé does not further position this feature as unique in the fashion industry and markets it more to differentiate itself from other brands and portray itself as being ahead in the sustainability transformation.
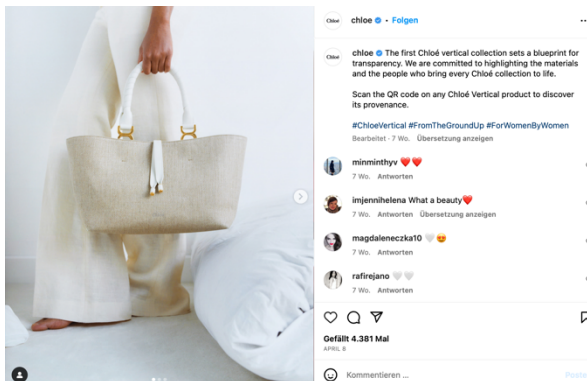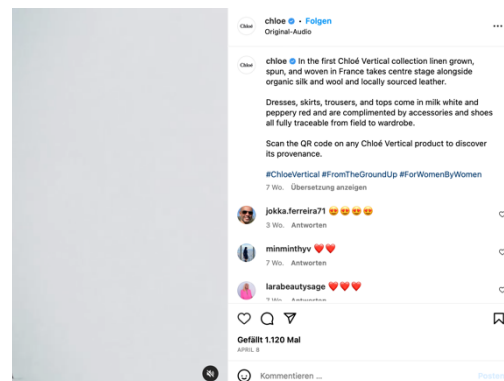

Figure 30 Post retrieved from @chloe

Figure 31 Post retrieved from @chloe

What also became noticeable during the research was that during the analysed time period (01-2022 to 04-2023) the Instagram account featured only one post that referred to Chloé being a certified B-Corp. The brand holds the B-Corp certification since October 2021 (Farra, 2021). B-Corp measures a "company's entire social and environmental impact" and companies with a score higher than 80 get awarded the certificate (bcorporation, 2023). Chloé's B-Corp score is 85,2. The certificate indicates the adoption of ethical and environmentally responsible practices, and helps brands to "build trust with consumers, communities, and suppliers; attract and retain employees; and draw mission-aligned investors" (bcorporation, 2023).

It was against expectations that it was not featured in the posts of the account more prominent, even more so since Chloé is the only luxury fashion brand that is a certified B-Corp. During this time of increased focus on sustainability and growing customer demands for sustainable choices, the certificate is a way for the brand to differentiate itself from other luxury fashion houses and to highlight its certified sustainability commitment. Therefore, it would be a convenient option for Chloé to continuously use its B-Corp certificate to market its sustainability mindset. Since the brand doesn't integrate it more often, this could indicate

a genuine motivation to pursue sustainable practices and a genuine motivation to transform the fashion business, rather than solely doing it for marketing purposes.

Sustainable Collection

The majority of the posts found on the Instagram channel @chloe fall under this theme. All these posts include pictures of models in garments of the Chloé collection and a caption that highlights the sustainability of these items. For instance with statements like "*is made from lower-impact materials*" or "*styled with the mock-neck jumper in recycled cashmere*" (@chloe / Figure 32 & 33).

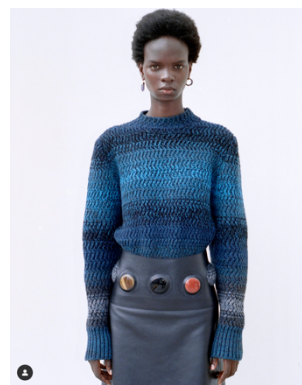Figure 32 Post retrieved from @chloe

Figure 33 Post retrieved from @chloe

The analysis found a reoccurring emphasis on two particular pieces of the collection, namely the Nama Sneaker and the Gayia Havana Glasses (Figure 34 & 35). Those two items are promoted repeatedly and hereby the focus point is truly on their sustainable aspect. According to the fashion house the Nama sneaker is made entirely from lower impact materials and the Gayia Havana sunglasses are made entirely of ReAce, a 100% recycled acetate derived from pre-consumer scraps.
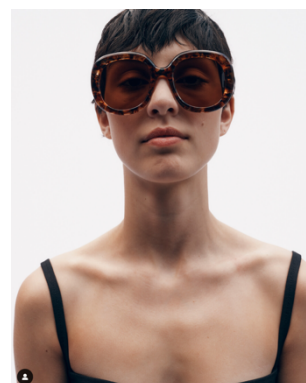

Figure 34 Post retrieved from @chloe

Figure 35 Post retrieved from @chloe

Another interesting find is that the Chloé Autumn-Winter 2022 collection featured a range of garments titled 'Rewilding for Climate Success' (Figure 36 & 37). Those garments are made from recycled materials and illustrate scenarios related to climate catastrophes like wildfires, melting glaciers, and droughts. These scenarios are contrasted with images of landscapes that represent climate successes, such as flourishing forests, polar scenes, and meadows full of flowers.
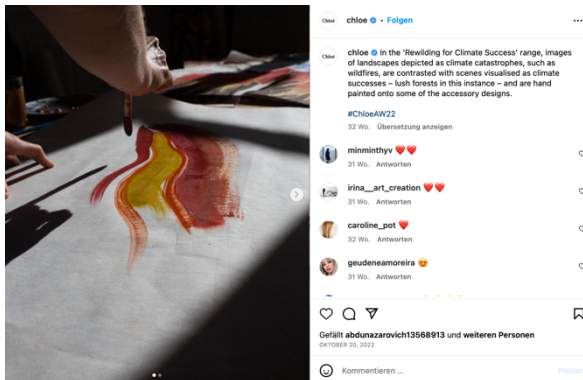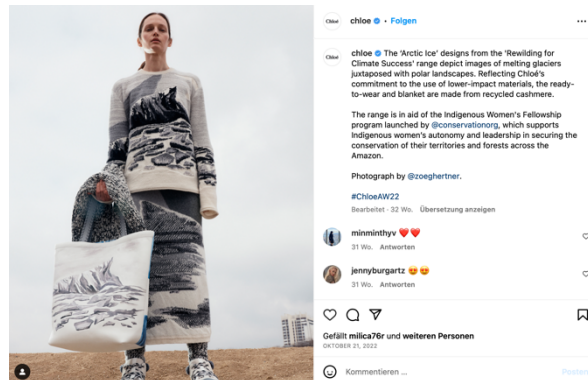

Figure 36 Post retrieved from @chloe

Figure 37 Post retrieved from @chloe

This range of the collection that in the most literal sense has the climate crisis on it stands in contrast with the discoveries of the literature review. As studies have shown, consumers do not regard luxury and sustainability as compatible as the idea of sustainability crashes with the luxurious dream world. Their buying intentions are supposed to decrease the more a luxury brand communicates about issues related to sustainability. Therefore, luxury brands are considered to contain their illusive dream image by not getting too far involved with sustainability communication. (Torelli, Monga and Kaikati, 2012, Kong, Witmaier and Ko, 2021). In other words, this collection by Chloé and the lively communication about it can be considered as very daring.

Partnerships

Sustainability Collaborations

In line with its commitment to environmental responsibility, Chloé showcases its collaboration with external partners that assist the luxury fashion brand with its sustainable approach.

An example for that would be a promotional post that introduces female farmers from the association Terre De Lin who are involved in the plantation of plans used to produce linen: "*Chloé Vertical celebrates women who know that there is no beauty without careful cultivation*." (@chloe / Figure 38). Hereby the brand highlights and celebrates women who are active in sustainability matters related to the fashion industry. In general, the Instagram account of Chloé demonstrates a focus on women and their positive impact on society and the world as a whole.

Another example is the social enterprise Ocean Sole who focuses on the recycling of Styrofoam (Figure 39). For the collaboration with Chloé, they upcycle flip-flops which are then used in the sole of Chloé sandals. To communicate about the collaboration and the produced sandals, Chloé posts images of women working in the enterprise and of the finished products.
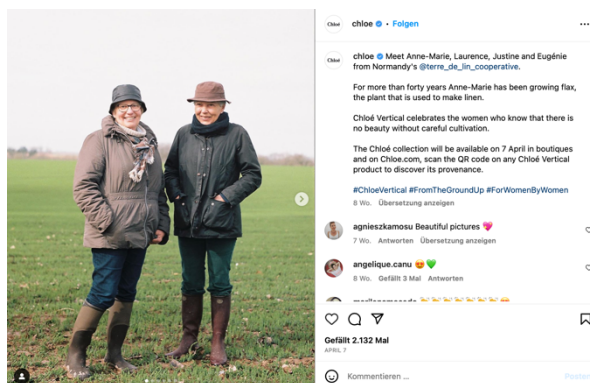

Figure 38 Post retrieved from @chloe

Figure 39 Post retrieved from @chloe

In line with the rest of Chloé's communication, the caption of these posts are brief and abstract. They lack specific details and further indication for followers about where to find more in-depth information if they wish so.

CONTENT STYLE

Visuals

A reoccurring theme depicted in the analysis of the Instagram channel @chloe is the posting of images of natural phenomena and their accompanying short description texts. To give an example, the fashion house posted a close-up image of a geyser and wrote "*Geysers*

continue erupting until all of the water is forced out, or the temperature inside falls below boiling point. Then it will gradually fill with water again and the whole process resumes." (@chloe / Figure 40).

Or on another occasion a post showed the image of a glacier and the caption said *"Collectively all of the earth's glaciers and ice caps amount for more than 5.8 million square miles of ice - around 2% of all the water on the planet is frozen around them."* (@chloe / Figure 41). Other images depicted salt crystallisation, sunsets, spiderwebs or trees.
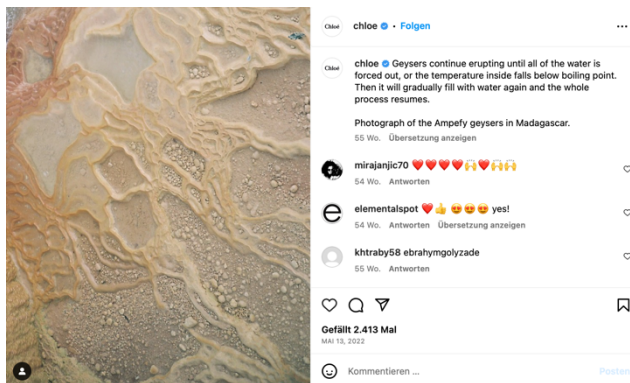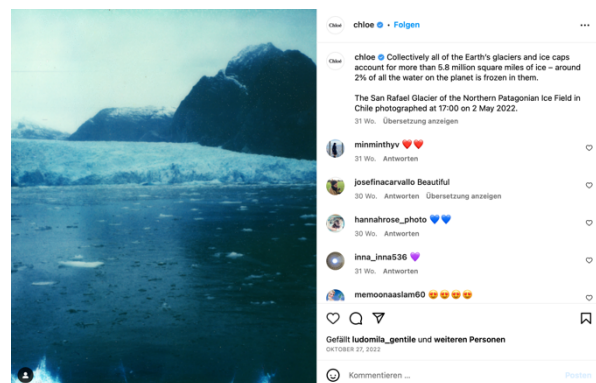

Figure 40 Post retrieved from @chloe

Figure 41 Post retrieved from @chloe

However, while providing facts about those phenomena, Chloé completely fails to mention that these natural environments are greatly endangered - not least because of the fashion industry. It can be quite paradoxical to state facts about, for instance, the extent of the glacier while the fashion industry with its unsustainable operations is in fact heavily contributing to its extinction. Chloé may be striving to make sustainable changes, and may be ahead of others in the industry, but the larger systemic problems within the sector remain.

In addition to that, the brand reinforces its "connected-to-nature" image by conducting photo shoots for its collections in natural settings like beaches, caves, or fields (Figure 42). These images evoke a sense of harmony between fashion and nature and are a way for the brand to signal its respect and appreciation for the environment. Still, while the integration of nature images may be an aesthetically pleasing feature, it does not automatically guarantee sustainable practices or a genuine commitment to environmental responsibility. Further, the brand also integrates images that are "non-luxurious". To illustrate the point,

the post that promotes the collaboration with the social enterprise Ocean Sole depicts old, dirty flip-flops in what looks like a foaming ocean (Figure 43). This post suggests that Chloé's primary focus is not on creating a glamourous image.
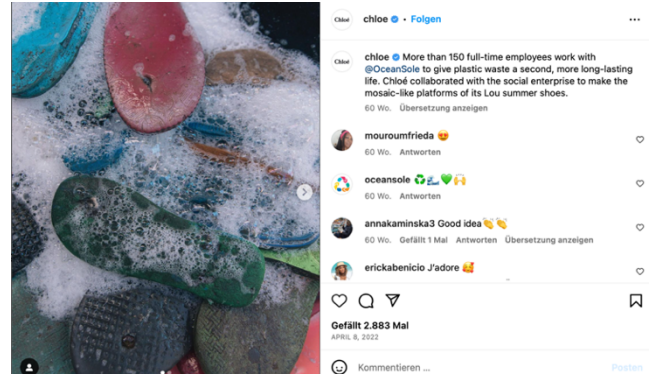

Figure 42 Post retrieved from @chloe

Figure 43 Post retrieved from @chloe

Engagement

There was no particular focus on follower engagement, such as engaging followers with CTA's or questions, visible on the Instagram account of the luxury brand. The only time the brand incorporated a CTA was in the posts about the "Chloé Vertical Collection" which prompted followers to "*scan the QR code on any Chloé Vertical product to discover its provenance.*" (@chloe).

Additionally, it is interesting to note that the analysis suggests that on the Instagram channel there is no meaningful difference in the number of likes between posts that focus on social and environmental responsibility and those that do not specifically address sustainability. A possible reason for this could be, that Chloé's sustainability communication is well-integrated into its overall content strategy and resonates with its followers in a way that seamlessly aligns with their existing interests and preferences.

Message Style

Most of the captions on the account of Chloé are kept short. With regards to posts that feature the collection, the captions include one or two keywords describing the sustainability aspect, for instance with "*is made from recycled nylon*" (@chloe). The sustainability element serves thereby not as the main message but rather as a side fact. This

could be regarded as an attempt to show how pervasive and almost inherent sustainability is to the brand.

A term that is very often used on the account is "lower-impact materials", however there is no further explanation about what "lower-impact" refers to or what it means for this particular brand. This, therefore, signals that while the communication style is explicit the approach is rather abstract and shallow as the sustainability keywords do not provide additional details or explanations about the specific actions or initiatives being indicated.

4.4 PRADA

The Instagram account of the luxury fashion house Prada (@prada) has 32 million followers (May 2023) and predominantly displays glamorous images of celebrities wearing Gucci outfits at prestigious events or high-end campaign shoots. There is no indicator for a commitment to sustainability in the profile bio.

A deeper analysis of the posts on Prada's Instagram channel identified only a few posts that that can be categorised as sustainability communication.

CONTENT TOPICS

Sustainability Initiatives

Sustainable business

On its Instagram account Prada promotes the initiative Prada Frames a "multidisciplinary symposium exploring the complex relationship between design and the environment" (Prada, 2023). The event is organised by the luxury fashion house in Milan and Hong Kong and presents the brand as a thought leader. For Prada Frames Milan 2023, the brand posted three posts on Instagram that inform about the symposium (Figure 44 & 45). One of the texts states following: "*For Prada Frames Milan 2023, Prada has chosen to reflect on its own*

ethical and aesthetic implications: the potential of original creativity and the opportunities for low-impact production opened up by the use of innovative materials." (@prada). Interesting is that the brand does not use the term 'sustainability' in any of the promotional texts. While phrases such as "*low-impact production*", "*relationship between materials and ecosystems*" or "*relationship between design and the environment*" suggest that the symposium addressed topics connected with sustainability, the message style is implicit. The brand does not go further into the reasons nor results of the symposium.

At the end of the post the brand does give a CTA and tells followers to "*Discover more via link in bio.*" (@prada).

Figure 44 Post retrieved from @prada

Figure 45 Post retrieved from @prada

Awards

For its project SEA BEYOND the fashion house received the Ocean Award at the CNMI Sustainable Fashion Awards. The fashion house ensured that this accomplishment was communicated to its followers on Instagram. By sharing this accomplishment, the brand can increase the credibility in its commitment to sustainability and enhance its reputation. It might therefore become more attractive for environmentally conscious consumers and inspire other bands and consumers to implement more sustainable actions in their lives.

Retail

This theme relates to the communication of the sustainability measurements taken in relation to the retail and outlet stores of Prada. The analysis identified one post in this category that positions Prada as a leader in the luxury industry in terms of environmentally

friendly stores: "*Prada is the brand with the highest number of LEED certifications in the high-end luxury sector*" (@prada / Figure 46). With this post, Prada aims to stand out from other luxury brands and present itself as more sustainable than others in the industry.

Figure 46 Post retrieved from @prada

Interesting to mention is that, given the fact that Prada has ranked last place (10th) in the Business of Fashion Sustainability Index 2022 rankings, the brand quite often positions itself as the industry leader in terms of sustainability transition.

Sustainable Collection

This theme describes posts that inform followers about the sustainable elements present in the brand's collection. Prada heavily promotes new drops of their collection on Instagram through visually attractive images. However, the related post texts are kept very short and in a very elevated speech and hardly ever mention whether the items are produced in a sustainable way or made from sustainable materials. Therefore, followers are not informed about the sustainability of Prada products. The analysis revealed only two post on @prada that could indicate a sustainable approach through their captions that said:

"*Taking inspiration from traditionally disposable items, making them last*." (Figure 47)

"*Modernist precepts of reduction and simplicity combine with their apparent contradictions: comfort, exaggeration, intimacy.*" (Figure 48)

However, these messages are very implicit as the intended meaning is not clearly identifiable and leave room for interpretation.

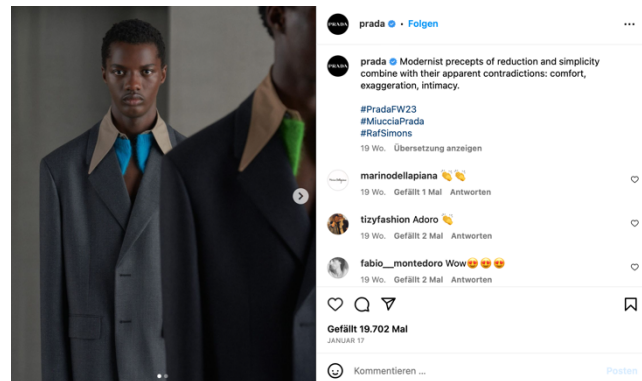Figure 47 Post retrieved from @prada

Figure 48 Post retrieved from @prada

While Prada does not explicitly inform its Instagram followers whether its collection contains any sustainable elements, the brand communicates intensively about its gold jewellery collection 'Prada Eternal Gold', which is crafted entirely from 100% sustainable materials (Figure 49 & 50). According to the brand the 'Prada Eternal Gold' collection is the first fine jewellery collection that is entirely made from recycled gold. Furthermore, in an Instagram post the brands states that "*Every step and incarnation of Prada's responsible gold and diamond production chain is verifiable and traceable - something offered by no other fine jewelry or luxury fashion house in the world.*" (@prada). With this posting Prada differentiates itself from other luxury brands and positions itself as an industry leader with regards to sustainable jewellery.

While the brand may be more reserved in its messaging on other posts, the ones related to the jewellery collection are filled with buzzwords that highlight its sustainability aspect. Some of them are explicit such as "*certified recycled gold*", "*ethically sourced*", "*traceable diamonds*", "*radical transparency*". Others are implicit buzzwords like "*modern consciousness*", "*shifting outdated industry standards*", "*mirroring societal change*".

Moreover, the brand consistently posts a series of photos, typically 4-7 images, from the campaign almost every month. The noticeable focus and regular appearance of this particular campaign on Prada's Instagram suggests that the brand utilizes it for marketing

purposes to showcase its commitment to sustainability and to attract environmentally conscious consumers.

Hence, the 'Prada Eternal Gold' campaign stands out as the most prominent and, simultaneously, the only instance of sustainability communication directly associated with the collection of Prada.
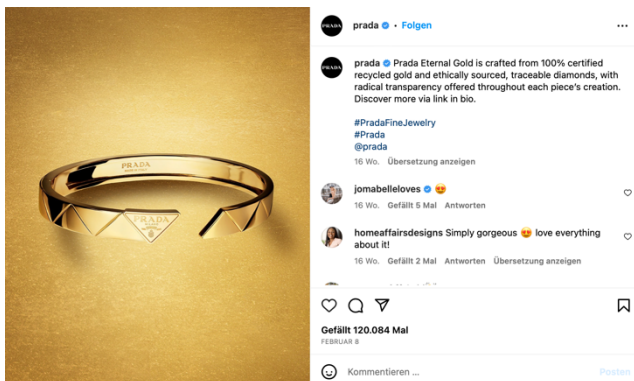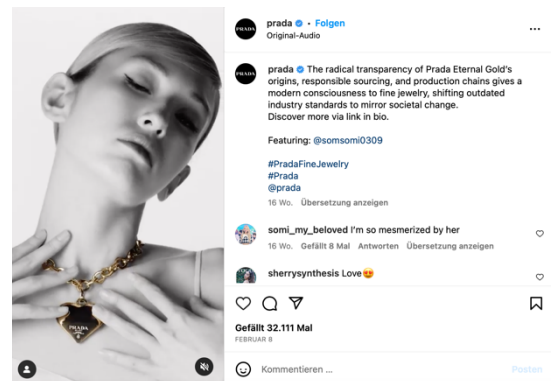

Figure 49 Post retrieved from @prada

Figure 50 Post retrieved from @prada

Partnerships

Sustainability Collaboration

Part of Gucci's sustainability transition is the collaboration with and support of other sustainability initiatives. One of them is SEA BEYOND, an educational program in collaboration with UNESCO's Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC). The program addresses secondary school students and aims to educate them on ocean's preservation and issues related to plastic pollution as well as the fashion industries impact on the maritime environment. Prada supports this initiative with parts of the proceeds from its Re-Nylon collection, a sustainable collection launched in 2019.

It's worth noting that, interestingly, this Re-Nylon collection did not receive specific promotion on Prada's Instagram channel during the analyzed time period (01-2022 to 04-2023). Nonetheless, the SEA BEYOND project is still communicated through various posts on the channel (Figure 51 & 52). While the luxury fashion house explains these projects briefly in the caption of the posts, it does not further inform about the process and outcomes of

SEA BEYOND. Instead, an abstract Call-to-Action is included at the end of each post stating *"Link in bio."* This aims to encourage followers to follow the link in the bio description for more information, should they be interested to learn more about the project.
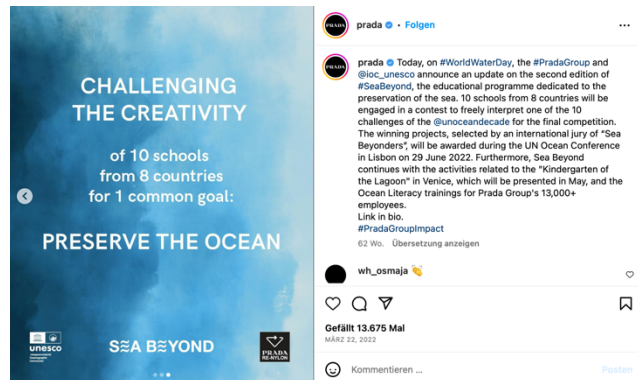

Figure 51 Post retrieved from @prada

Figure 52 Post retrieved from @prada

There are other projects linked to this initiative such as the "Kindergarten of the Lagoon" or the Ocean Literacy Training for all Prada employees. However, similar to the communication approach of the SEA BEYOND project, these initiatives are again communicated in an abstract way. Interested followers are encouraged to follow the link in the bio description to get more information about the project (Figure 53). This concise presentation serves as a gateway for followers who wish to explore the individual initiatives in more detail.

Another collaboration that is also involving the younger generation is an initiative that aims to promote upcycling. Therefore, materials that were used in the runway of Prada were given to Design students of the Royal Academie Den Haag and the Design Academie Eindhoven. The students were provided with these materials to work with and give them a second life. Related to that, Prada posted a video of the designs made by the students out of the Prada materials (Figure 54).
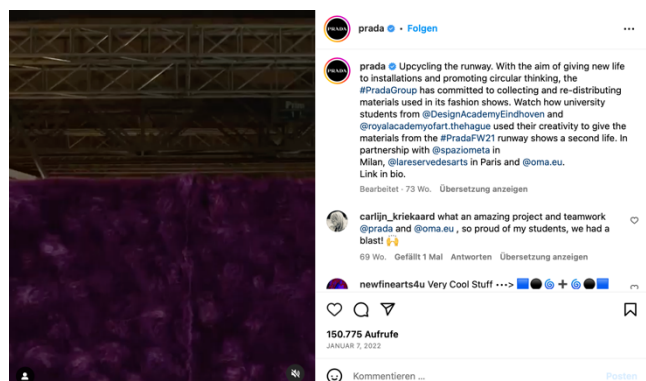

Figure 53 Post retrieved from @prada

Figure 54 Post retrieved from @prada

70

Raising awareness among the younger generation about the importance of environmental sustainability in the fashion industry is a commendable approach as the students will be able to bring about positive change in the future.

CONTENT STYLE

Visuals

The primary colour featured in the posts about SEA BEYOND is blue. Blue is considered a colour that conveys sustainable thinking, but in this case, it could also have been chosen because it is the colour of the sea. Apart from the posts related to the SEA BEYOND projects, other sustainability communication posts do not showcase a colour scheme that is associated with sustainability - the posts about the recycled gold collection 'Prada Eternal Gold' feature the colours gold and grey.

Engagement

Prada occasionally includes a CTA that refers to a link in the bio description but never tries to engage followers in a different way, for instance through questions.

With regards to the likes count, the posts about the 'Prada Eternal Gold' collection perform best among sustainability communication related posts. All the other posts that communicate a sustainability message showcase noticeably less likes.

The ones that achieve the highest like count are posts featuring celebrities wearing Prada or high-end product shoots. These types of posts tend to appeal to a wider audience as they reflect the glamour, status, and lifestyles that luxury consumers strive for.

Message Style

Again, with the message style the focus of the brand is clearly on maintaining its luxury image and glamorous aesthetics. The little sustainability communication that does take place

tends to be very brief and abstract and overuses sustainability buzzwords. This might be an indication of greenwashing.

Prada's messages are lacking specific details and measurable information. Thus, the brand misses out on the possibility to increase the credibility of its sustainability communication. At the same time, through only communicating abstractly and succinctly about its initiatives, Prada is able to raise the interest of environmentally conscious followers without overwhelming or scaring away followers who are less interested in sustainability.

4.5 Comparison

CONTENT TOPICS

Sustainability Initiatives

Gucci is the most active brand in this study in relation to communicating about its actions toward a more sustainable business model, as it is also the only brand who has an own channel purely dedicated to sustainability communication. The brand also stands out as the only brand that uses its sustainability report intensively to market its commitment to sustainability.

On the account of Stella McCartney, almost every post contains some kind of sustainability communication. Additionally, she takes on the role of an educator of sustainability issues and as the only brand analysed in this research informs followers about the impact of the fashion industry on the environment. This is also done in a very personal way as Stella herself often appears on the Instagram account to talk to her followers. However, Stella is the only brand that does not communicate in any of these posts about activities the brand is undertaking to make its business operations more sustainable, for instance like Gucci does with its Gucci Up Initiative.

Chloe communicates little about its initiatives as the only identified posts are around the "Chloé Vertical Collection", that are kept quite short and as a one-off campaign.

Prada's account suggest that the brand does not prioritise explicit sustainability communication on Instagram. Its sustainability communication approach is comparable with the main account of Gucci (@gucci). However, as opposed to Gucci, Prada does not operate a second channel solely for the purpose of sustainability communication.

It can be argued that if the will had been there, the existing sustainability communication could have been much more developed, and the topics could have been discussed more precisely and in more diverse ways. In comparison to the other brands who tend to post a series of consecutive posts on a specific sustainability initiative, Prada mostly just integrates

one sustainability related post between glamorous posts that emphasis a luxury lifestyle. Therefore, the impression that Prada deliberately restrains from communicating too much about sustainability remains.

Sustainable Collection

Gucci heavily promotes its one sustainable collection called "Gucci Off The Grid" on both of its social media accounts. The same approach was identified on the account of Prada who overuses its sustainable 'Prada Eternal Gold' collection for marketing purposes.

In contrast to the other brands, Stella McCartney does not promote (repetitively) only one sustainable collection next to a number of non-sustainable collections. As all her collections showcase sustainable features, every post integrates sustainability communication.

Chloé, although not as much as Stella McCartney, communicates about the sustainable features of its collection in almost every post. However, there is also a clear emphasis on two particular pieces of the collection where the brand highlights its sustainability aspect. In the case of Gucci and Prada, the repeated emphasis on a sustainable part of the collection has raised suspicions of greenwashing. However, this is less the case with Chloé, as the luxury fashion house communicates other sustainable elements of its collection alongside this one. This might suggest a holistic approach to sustainability.

Partnerships

Gucci informs its followers about the many collaborations it is doing with various external players that help the business in its process of becoming more sustainable. Next to that, as the only brand, it also communicates its support for other organisations that are committed to sustainability and are unrelated to the operations of Gucci. Moreover, Gucci is the only brand that cooperates with influencers to market its sustainable collection.

Stella's account features many posts with images of celebrity models wearing her outfits. Another collaboration of the brand is the Stella McCartney's "Stella Voices" campaign, which provides a platform for women who are actively engaged in sustainability to talk about their

work. The featured woman are not influencers in the traditional sense, however, being associated with for instance Jane Goodall, who is famous for her environmental work, enhances the sustainability image of Stella tremendously.

On its Instragram account Chloé introduces collaborations with external partners that assist in its transition towards a more sustainable business. Furthermore, unlike Stella McCartney, Chloé does not work with celebrities or other famous environmental activists. The brand also does not actively communicate its support for the sustainable actions of others. As a result, the criticism of mistaking philanthropic actions for sustainable actions does not apply to Chloé.

Prada's collaborations with SEA BEYOND that addresses secondary school students as well as with Design students of the Royal Academie Den Haag and the Design Academie Eindhoven demonstrate an interest of Prada to teach the younger generation about how to make a positive impact. This is similar to Stella McCartney's collaborations with design students from different universities.

CONTENT STYLE

Visuals

The overall look of the main Instagram accounts of Gucci and Prada emphasise the image of glitter and glamour that luxury fashion houses are accused to convey. However, Gucci's second channel, which is purely about communicating environmental and social issues, predominantly features the colour green and blue in its visuals. For Prada, maintaining its prestigious image on its Instagram account is not difficult anyhow as the number of posts related to sustainability is small.

Stella is the only brand who also integrates sustainability narratives in glamorous posts. These are posts featuring celebrities wearing Stella McCartney at prestigious parties and events or product shoots in sophisticated locations.

Similar to Stella's approach is Chloé's. This brand is also the one that strives the least for a luxurious image. Overall, it can be said that there is less focus on creating an image of glamour and glitter than it is on the accounts of Gucci and Prada. What is distinctive of Chloé's account are the images of nature scenes that aim to convey a sense of harmony between its fashion collection and the environment.

Engagement

As already stated in the results, Gucci has decided to eliminate the likes count on its second channel. With regards to engaging followers in its sustainability communication, Gucci includes a Call-to-Action (CTA) that prompts followers to visit a link in the bio to discover more about their sustainability activities on the Gucci website. The brand, however, does not pose questions to their followers or actively encourages them to act more sustainable.

As the only brand, Stella McCartney engages followers through posing questions that encourage to start a conversation about sustainability. In her CTA's, Stella McCartney even actively urges followers to engage in sustainability and suggest ways for them to act more responsible. Moreover, there is no difference in the likes count that could be attribute to the communication of sustainability topics.

In contrast to all other analysed brands, Chloé hardly ever includes a CTA in its post captions nor engages with its followers on a personal level through asking question. For instance, when Gucci reports abstractly and superficially about a collaboration on their Instagram account, they at least include a call to action at the end that encourages followers to find out more about the collaboration on the website. Therefore, Chloé lacks in both, creating transparency as well as accessibility of information.
Additionally, the account shows a relatively similar like count across all types of posts, regardless of whether they address sustainability issues. This is similar to the account of Stella and in contrast to the main account of Gucci and Prada.

Similar to the approach of Gucci, Prada repeatedly integrates a Call-to-Action that invites followers to discover more about its sustainability engagements through following a link in

the bio. However, no direct engagement through posing questions or suggesting followers ways to act more sustainable takes place.

Unlike Chloé and Stella, Prada's account shows a strikingly large difference in likes between sustainability-related and non-sustainability-related posts,

Message Style

Gucci is the brand that showcases the most diverse message styles to communicate its sustainability mindset to followers. Its accounts feature implicit and explicit sustainability messages, that are communicated in an abstract as well as concrete manner. What is very distinctive for the brand is the paraphrasing of sustainability terms and overuse of sustainability buzzwords.

Stella McCartney's active sustainability advocacy is also reflected in the message style which stands in contrast not only to Gucci but all other luxury brand accounts. Stella McCartney is at the forefront of concrete and explicit sustainability communication. The intended message is conveyed clearly and can therefore not be misunderstood. The brand does not utilise elevated and sophisticated speech nor other communication techniques such as paraphrasing of sustainability terms or the overuse of sustainability buzzwords.

Mostly, Chloé's message style is short and explicit. While the post captions convey a general commitment to sustainability, there is no deeper explanation of what actions the luxury house actually implements to reflect this. Chloé does not make use of communication strategies such as paraphrasing of sustainability terms or the overuse of sustainability buzzwords either.

Prada's main focus is again on maintaining its luxury image through the usage of elevated speech. Prada communicates about sustainability in an explicit as well as implicit way and just like Gucci the brand overuses sustainability buzzwords, which might be an indication of greenwashing. Similar to Chloé, Prada's messages are lacking specific details and measurable information.

4.6 Final Note

The purpose of this study was to investigate the different approaches used by luxury fashion brands to communicate their commitment to and engagement in sustainability practices. In particular, the analysis aimed to identify the content topics of the sustainability communication as well as the content style of the messages shared on the social media platform Instagram.

To answer the research question "How are luxury fashion brands adopting their communication on social media in alinement with a more sustainable business approach?", the qualitative content analysis analysed the sustainability communication practices of four different luxury fashion brands: Gucci, Stella McCartney, Chloé and Prada.

The main topics of the sustainability communication of the brands revolve around sustainability initiatives the brands undertake to operate more sustainable and the sustainable elements of their collections. Moreover, they communicate about collaborations with external parties that support their transition towards more sustainable business operations or about their support for other sustainability initiatives, which helps to improve their sustainability image.

While Gucci's approach is to operate a second Instagram account, apart from its main account, solely dedicated to the communication about its sustainability initiatives, the other three brands have integrated their sustainability communication on their main channels. Stella McCartney's account has taken on more of an activist role that features some sort of sustainability communication in almost every post and prompts followers to act more sustainable. Meanwhile Chloé's approach is quieter and aims to convey a certain connection to nature through the integration of nature-related images. Prada is the least advanced in terms of sustainability communication and integrates posts about sustainability into their Instagram feed only occasionally. Thus, it can be noted that the level of sustainability communication of each brand is in line with its ranking on the Business of Fashion Sustainability Index 2022 (Rankings can be found in section *3.2.1 Sample*).

Overall, there is a tendency of all brands to present information in an abstract and vague manner. This is most apparent in the approach of Prada whose sustainability communication is failing to provide any supporting facts or further information on the impact of its sustainability activities at all. Even Stella McCartney who is regarded as one of the most sustainable luxury fashion brands does not incorporate any communication about the measurements the brand is taking for a more sustainable business approach. The result is a lack of transparency identified across the communication of all brands, that leaves followers with limited information about the actual impacts, outcomes and achievements of the announced sustainability measurements. Consequently, this creates mistrust and scepticism about the trustworthiness of the stated measurements. Further contributing to this scepticism, inconsistencies in the information about the sustainability of Gucci's collection have been discovered in the course of this research.

With regards to the communication strategies, the research identified either excessive use of sustainability buzzwords or, interestingly, the opposite approach of paraphrasing sustainability terms. This is visible predominantly on the accounts of Gucci and Prada. The overuse of sustainability buzzwords such as "organic", "raw" or "ethically sourced" however, creates the impression that a brand might be using greenwashing tactics to enhance its brand image through positioning itself as more sustainable than it really is.
On the other hand, the strategy to paraphrase sustainability terms instead of explicitly stating them can be related to the glamorous image luxury fashion brands aim to convey on their social media accounts. With that they are still able to use their unique complex and sophisticated vocabulary to maintain a level of distinctiveness in their communication and create a sense of exclusivity.

Related to this is the approach of implicitly indicating a sustainable business mindset which was most evident again on the accounts of Prada and Gucci. These posts do not talk about sustainability directly but use associations with luxury brands that might suggest a commitment to sustainability. Therefore, these brands play with the concepts of heritage, small- scale production or longevity through high-quality.

With regards to the visual aspect of the sustainability communication on Instagram all brands utilise visual strategies that are commonly associated with conveying sustainability. This relates to the usage of the colour green and blue as well as the integration of nature-related images.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 Conclusive remarks

To conclude, there is certainly a shift in luxury brand communication visible and the analysed brands have all started to integrate narratives around sustainable business practices. However, this study strengthens the idea that the sustainability communication of brands still lacks a certain authenticity factor. Especially with Prada and Gucci, the suspicion of greenwashing arose several times. The overall impression is that luxury fashion brands incorporate sustainability communication primarily due to the demands and expectations of the industry and for marketing purposes. Perhaps in order to gain the trust of consumers, luxury brands should think about "sacrificing" their exclusive and prestigious image for some parts of their communication and become more transparent and honest about their sustainable actions. Or the narrative could strive to make sustainability an integral part of the prestigious image of luxury brands and to position it as part of the glamorous lifestyle that is desired by consumers.

The future challenge will be not to be afraid of sustainability, but to transform the perception of sustainability into an inherent and desirable characteristic of luxury and glamour. Collaboration and dialogue will be key to driving this change and creating a sustainable future for the luxury fashion industry. The present study has gone some way towards enhancing the understanding of the different ways luxury fashion brands are incorporating sustainability narratives into their social media presence.

This work therefore serves as a starting point for future discussions and as a stimulus for open and honest exchange. The insights gained from this study may be of assistance to marketing and communication specialists working in the luxury sector.

5.2 Recommendations

This part of the research aims to give some recommendations for individuals active in the field of communication and marketing in the luxury industry. Based on the studied literature and the discoveries of the study, the aim is to suggest what could be a good sustainability communication strategy for other brands to adopt and what should rather be avoided. Here is to note, that the recommendations are solely based on the researcher's perception and understanding of the research topic and are not scientifically proven to be effective.

Luxury brands could follow Gucci's example and move their sustainability communication to a separate channel. This way, they can continue to promote their exclusive and glamorous image on the main channel and do not need to fear losing followers who might not be interested in sustainable topics. On the second channel they can then really focus on topic related to sustainability and engage with interested followers. Thereby, brands should be careful to keep their elevated communication style on the main channel and communicate about sustainability in a concrete, authentic and open way. Most importantly, a brand should feature and promote its second channel on its main channel in order to raise awareness about it and attract the most followers.

In order to counteract consumer scepticism about greenwashing, brands can adopt a more personal approach, as exemplified by Stella McCartney's Instagram account. This can include featuring more personal stories, showing the people behind the brand, or openly talking about the challenges a brand is facing regarding its sustainability transition.

Furthermore, trust and authenticity can be built through providing information that is transparent and consistent across all communication channels. If brands are unable to provide specific and concrete information about its sustainable practice, it may be better to refrain from communicating about it altogether.

Another recommendation is not to overuse sustainability buzzwords, as was observed in the posts of Gucci and Prada. This should be avoided especially when sustainability communication is not a consistent part of a brand's communication. The excessive appearance of sustainability buzzwords within one post can give the impression that a brand is trying too hard to convey their sustainability mindset and thus be regarded as

greenwashing. Even if the communicated sustainability activities are genuine, consumers who are alert about the risk of greenwashing might still be triggered.

Additionally, brands should also not overcommunicate one part of their collection that features some sustainable aspect, especially in the absence of any other sustainable offerings in their collection. Highlighting single instances of sustainability without evidence of a broader sustainability commitment can easily convey the impression of greenwashing.

As already mentioned in the results section, a Call-to-Action at the end of a post caption provides a good opportunity to actively engage with customers and influence them to adopt more sustainable behaviours. Especially luxury brands have a great power over consumer behaviour. It would be an ethical consideration to make use of this power when encouraging sustainable action with a CTA. However, this is only a good idea when a brand is truly committed to their sustainability transition as otherwise it creates a double standard where a brand recommends an action without complying with it itself.

Having given those recommendations, it is to say that even if all of them are implemented, sustainability communication can only be successful if the intentions behind the communicated sustainable actions are right and genuine.

5.3 Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study have a number of theoretical implications.
One encouraging finding was that all the studied brands integrated sustainability narratives on their Instagram account. The evidence from this study suggests a contradiction to the writings of Kapferer and Michaut (2015) who state that a high number of luxury brands do not participate in sustainability communication.

However, unfortunately, this research confirmed previous findings about the lack of transparency in the sustainability communication of luxury brands (Fashion Transparency Index, 2022; Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau, 2015). The communication about the brands sustainability activities was rather abstract and shallow and thus, consumers are not informed about the actual facts and figures behind the actions.

As previous research (Kapferer and Bastien, 2009; Atwal and Williams, 2009) has already stated, luxury fashion brands are more concerned about creating a glamorous image on social media than communicating about their sustainable initiatives. This has been proven by the finding of this study. Furthermore, luxury brands apply sophisticated and nuanced language (Gurzki, Schlatter and Woisetschläger, 2019; Atwal and Williams, 2009). This study contributes to this notion and adds to previous research with finding that show that luxury brands often use the technique of paraphrasing sustainability keywords and concepts in sustainability communication instead of explicitly mentioning them. This is because the topic of sustainability contrasts with luxury brands' efforts to tell hedonistic stories that generate pleasure and enjoyment.

Since the results suggested also potential green marketing tactics this could be connected to the research of Achabou and Dekhili (2013). Overall, the impression was that brands integrated sustainability narratives primarily as a marketing strategy to enhance their brand image.

A better understanding of this topic was developed in the course of this research. Theoretical insights on how exactly sustainability communication is integrated on the social media accounts of luxury fashion brands were discussed in depth. Furthermore, the different approaches were compared, and the identified best practices were used as a basis for practical recommendations for marketing and communication specialists in the luxury sector. Therefore, the study situates itself in the broader academic discourse on sustainability communication and contributes to the expansion of this topic in the field of luxury fashion.

5.4 Limitations and future research

The limitations of this research were greatly shaped by the set word count and time frame of the study.

- Investigations into the actual impact and truthfulness of the sustainability claims made by the brands would have allowed to identify greenwashing tactics.

- Examining other communication channels would have enriched the outcome of this study and provided more comprehensive insights to answer the research question.

- Furthermore, this would have allowed to cross-analyse the information communicated on different communication channels and enabled to identify inconsistencies.

- Ideally, more profound research would also include interviews with marketing professionals from the luxury fashion brands. Understanding the challenges they are facing in relation to sustainability communication and what strategies they apply would have provided a broader spectrum of opinions and insights.

- Additionally, future research could further build up on this research and investigate the effectiveness of the different approaches to sustainability communication on consumers through quantitative analysis or focus groups.

Despite these limitations and its exploratory nature, this study offers some insights into the different approaches of sustainability communication adopted by luxury fashion brands on social media. As sustainability communication in the luxury fashion sector is still under-researched, future research could take the above suggestions into account and contribute to the understanding of it. This is especially interesting as in the future, more regulations regarding sustainable business practices might also bring guidelines for brands on how to communicate about their sustainability activities.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1
Miro Boards of Prada, Gucci, Stella McCartney and Chloé

Appendix 2
Coding Frames Step 1 and 2

First Section	Sub-categories	Theme	Gucci	Stella McCartney	Chloé	Prada
CONTENT TOPICS	Sustainability Initiatives	Sustainable business	X		X	X
		Retail	X			X
		Awards	X			X
		Sustainability Report	X			
		Activist Initiatives		X		
		Personal Approach		X		
		Follower Education		X		
	Sustainable collection	Sustainable Collection	X	X	X	X
	Partnerships	Sustainability Collaborations	X		X	X
		Support of External Initiatives	X			
		Celebrities/Activists Collaborations		X		
		Influencer Marketing	X			

Second Section	Sub-categories	Variables	Gucci	Stella McCartney	Chloé	Prada
CONTENT STYLE	Engagement	Active	X	X		X
		Passive	X		X	X
	Visuals	Glamour	X	X		X
		Sustainability	X	X	X	X
	Message Style	Abstract	X		X	X
		Concrete	X	X		
		Implicit	X			X
		Explicit	X	X	X	X