

# Sustainable Fashion on Social Media: Ethical or Conspicuous Consumption?

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## Abstract

The sustainable fashion tribe is interested in ethical and ecological fashion consumption. To inform and reach various people, they use social media networks. However, as fashion consumption is often being used as a representation of wealth and status, the question arises, whether the underlying motives of the tribe to communicate on social media are altruistic or, on the contrary, promote conspicuous consumption. This qualitative study explores the underlying motives of the tribe communicating about sustainable fashion consumption on social media. The analysis of the nine interviews show, that there are four main motives: altruistic, social, egoistic and prestige-related motives. Even though the altruistic motives can be reconciled with the tribes' principal values, the results also show signs of conspicuous consumption in terms of prestige-related motives. When posting on social media the tribe wants to inform about and influence its followers to a more sustainable fashion consumption, but also wants to gain reputation and recognition for it. Still, it is concluded that conspicuous consumption of sustainable fashion on social media can promote sustainable consumption overall and having a positive effect on the environment.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Consumption; Fashion; Tribes; Motives; Social Media

## 1. Introduction

Today, there is a tendency to splurge on expensive goods and show them off. The driver of this tendency is that people are increasingly seeking the satisfaction of social needs, recognition or social affirmation. Status products that express a person's self and convey an image of prestige and wealth have become an integral part of life (Qattan & Al Khasawneh, 2020, p. 1). Veblen (1899) defined this phenomenon as conspicuous consumption, which has been a central construct in the literature on social psychology and consumer behavior (Qattan & Al Khasawneh, 2020, p.2). It describes the intentional display of expensive goods to demonstrate one's wealth and income (O'Cass & McEwan, 2004, p. 28). Since then, conspicuous consumption has become inextricably associated with luxury goods and is becoming more and more entrenched in society (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014, p. 2147 ff.).

At the same time, however, consumers' social and ecological awareness is increasingly influencing consumer behavior. People are trying to make their consumption more sustainable by foregoing some of their consumption or ensuring a sustainable origin (Hammad et al., 2019, p. 538f). One special consumer group focuses on the consumption of sustainable fashion. They are strongly interested in fashion and identify with it, but also want their consumption to be in line with their values regarding sustainable behavior. This paper focuses on this consumer group which will be considered as a tribe with a focus on sustainable fashion. To raise the importance of the topic of sustainability, the tribe tries to inform and reach various people through different ways. In this case, social media is often used to reach and inform others. That is, the tribe shows its sustainable consumption on social media, informs about the benefits and effects.

Based on these considerations, however, a conflict arises in the logical conclusion. As social media networks are characterized as places of self-expression used to generate attention and maintain an overall desirable perception in society, these motives conflict with the supposedly altruistic motives of the sustainable fashion tribe. It must be concluded that different motives are suspected to be the reason for communicating about sustainable fashion on social media by this very tribe. Studies already revealed that environmentally friendly behavior can serve as a status symbol, as it demonstrates that a person has the appropriate resources, like time and money, to purchase goods without exerting a negative impact on the environment (Griskevicius et al., 2010; Johnson, Tariq & Baker, 2008). However, the sustainable fashion tribes' motives to post about sustainable fashion consumption on social media have not been studied yet.

Therefore, this research deals with the question whether there are particular characteristics of the tribe of sustainable fashion and the motives for which tribe members communicate via social media. Even if sustainability includes many areas of consumption, such as food or furniture, this study focuses on sustainable fashion consumption, as fashion is one of the main products that is being used as a representative of a social status (Johnson, Tariq & Baker, 2009, p. 339). In the first step, the method of this work is presented. Then the results of the study are presented, describing the sustainable fashion tribe in more detail with its particular characteristics and examining the tribes' motives to communicate about its consumption on social media. In the last step, the obtained results are discussed as well as incentives for future research are provided.

## 2. Materials and Methods

Instagram was chosen to be the social media channel in the focus of this study because fashion in general is a visible feature of oneself and Instagram is a platform where the communication takes place via visual content. In-depth interviews were conducted to get a deeper understanding of the motives to communicate about sustainable fashion on social media and get a better picture of the tribe interested in sustainable fashion.

By scanning different profiles on Instagram, conducting research on blogs about inspirational Instagram accounts regarding sustainable lifestyles and fashion and using personal contacts, several accounts were contacted. People were considered as possible candidates for the interviews if they were actively communicating about sustainable fashion on their accounts. This means they had several posts in their feed or were posting stories about this topic regularly. In the end, nine participants (five male and four female) were found that were willing to be part of the interviews. The age of the interviewed people was between 23 and 40 years and the follower range of the accounts was distributed between 250 and 15.600 followers.

The interviews approximately took one hour and were recorded to be transcribed afterwards. An interview guide (see appendix) was formulated beforehand. With the help of creative techniques and the laddering method the focus was set on sustainable fashion and social media. It was tried to create an open environment where the interviewees felt safe to share their true motives. To generate information about tribe features and motives to communicate about sustainable fashion inductive as well as deductive methods were used.

The interviews were transcribed with the help of the software MAXQDA (MAXQDA, Software für qualitative Datenanalyse, 1989 – 2021, VERBI Software. Consult. Sozialforschung GmbH, Berlin, Deutschland) (see Appendix). All four interviewers then proceeded to mark the important and most telling parts in the interviews and categories were formed for the tribe features as well as possible motives for communication. It was a rather small-scaled code forming in the beginning which later was simplified by creating main categories in which the subcategories could be placed in. After that, the category-based evaluation and results were analysed.

## 3. Results

The results show significant characteristics of the tribe. One facet mentioned in most of the interviews was the relevance of ethical and moral responsibility felt by the tribe when communicating about sustainable fashion. One interviewee for example said: "Das wichtigste ist [...] die Bekämpfung

von nicht nachhaltigem Leben und der Weg in ein nachhaltiges Leben ist glaube ich unsere größte Aufgabe aktuell [...] dazu gehört eben nachhaltige Mode" (Interview 4), which stresses the tribes' felt responsibility of the task of change. The relevance of the longevity of the clothes was also a topic in most of the interviews and seemed very important to the interviewees. The connection to other tribes in the field of sustainability and the political act connected to the sustainable fashion consumption was mentioned as well. Here statements like "[...] wenn wir uns anschauen, warum ich eingangs angefangen habe [nachhaltige Mode zu konsumieren] ist das die Kapitalismus-Kritik. [...] Deswegen ist es auch super wichtig da Druck auf die Politik auszuüben [...]" (Interview 6) and "Ich finde es ist einfach so eine coole Gegenbewegung." (Interview 1) were made. In over the half of the interviews, creativity and in-depth knowledge about sustainable fashion were described as typical characteristics of the tribe. One proband said "Nachhaltig ist auf jeden Fall kreativ. Das habe ich auf jeden Fall gelernt bei Sachen kreativer zu denken. Was kann man mit einem alten T-Shirt machen?" (Interview 7), stating the creative process of using and reusing clothes. Another one said "Das ist mir wichtig, weil ich vor einigen Jahren herausgefunden habe, was denn eigentlich so in Klamotten drinnen ist. Was da oftmals für toxische Stoffe mitunter drinnen sein können und dass das die Haut ja auch aufnimmt." (Interview 1), showing in-depth knowledge about the toxic fabrics used in cloths. Some probands described sustainable fashion as a way to express their identity and the need to be different from the rest. One proband said: "Nachhaltigkeit gehört zu meiner Identität." (Interview 9).

Being curious about the own consumer behavior is also a characteristic of tribe members, which can be derived from statements like: "Dass man einfach sein Konsumverhalten immer wieder reflektiert, hinterfragt, das auch regelmäßig macht." (Interview 1). In one third of the interviews a certain connection of emotions and feelings with fashion was mentioned. One Interviewee for example stated: "[...] weil ich mag die Sachen von Personen, also von älteren Menschen oder vor allem von jemandem, den ich kenne, dann kommen die oft mit Geschichte und sowas. Und da habe ich dann eine Beziehung mit einem Klamottenteil (Interview 7). Also, on the one hand, it seemed to be important to be recognized as a sustainable person and to be the one who tries something new, as one proband said "Die Menschen sollen wissen, dass ich mich nachhaltig verhalte und kein ethisch kritisches Verhalten aufzeige." (Interview 8). On the other hand, statements like "Nachteil von nachhaltiger Mode sind weiterhin die Klischee Zuschreibungen, dass das Öko ist, dass das alles braun grün gedeckte Erdtöne sind, das herrscht leider immer noch vor." (Interview 3) show that the tribe members face a lot of prejudice and stereotyping they have to cope with. In a few interviews the aspects of Second-hand consumption as a need, minimalism as a lifestyle and the great time investment connected to sustainable fashion were also stated as possible characteristics of the tribe members.

The results regarding the motives of communicating about sustainable fashion on Instagram show various perspectives. Overall, 258 statements could be extracted that are related to motives of communicating. The statements are grouped to 19 different codes (Appendix, table 1). From the 19 codes, 9 categories were formed from which, in turn, 4 upper categories could be generated.

The results show that the tribe wants to inform their followers about aspects of sustainability. One interviewee said regarding the communicating about sustainable fashion on Instagram: "Wenn ich einen Beitrag erstelle, dann geht es mir auch an erster Stelle darum, dass ich Informationen verbreite." (Interview 1). This aspect was most frequently addressed by the subjects and was cited as the most important motive for the communication. To normalize sustainability is also relevant, as the interviewees made statements about how communicating on Instagram can help to make people sensitive to sustainability. Both aspects belong to the category of 'creating awareness'. Regarding the relevance of ecological commitment, one proband answered: "Ich finde es wichtig diesem Übergewicht [...] an Bildern, die von Fast Fashion kommuniziert werden [...] entgegenzuwirken, deswegen ist es wichtig über positive Beispiele in der Modeindustrie zu berichten" (Interview 3). Respondents with such statements indicate that they want to be ecologically engaged with the communication on Instagram and thus want to create an ecological benefit. Resisting fast fashion is also important for the tribe, as it states that the probands want to make a statement against fast fashion to resist it. Highlighting ecological commitment and opposing the fast fashion trend are

aspects that belong to the category of 'ecological motives', because the interviewees are acting from an ecological standpoint. Some probands said they want to influence the behavior of their followers, as one stated: "Ich konnte auch schon Menschen von nachhaltiger Mode überzeugen und gerade das macht es für mich so interessant" (Interview 9). This aspect is categorized as 'behavior changes'. This category includes motives of communication about sustainable fashion, where the interviewees aim to convince their followers to rethink and change their behavior. With the statement "Und ich finde es auch cool, wenn ich mithilfe meines Contents [...] andere Menschen inspiriere, helfen kann, unterhalten kann" (Interview 1) the respondent indicates the motive of inspiring others. This and the intent to show alternative consumption styles are grouped in the category 'inspiration'. This category encompasses the motive that the interviewees want their communication to inspire and stimulate their followers. The four previously mentioned categories 'creating awareness', 'ecological motives', 'behavioral changes' and 'inspiration' form the upper category *altruistic motives*, since these motives of the subjects are not self-interested and focus on ecological benefits. This motive was mentioned the most with 130 of 258 statements.

Furthermore, the results indicate that the tribe wants to get feedback and a reaction to their communication. One interviewee stated: „Also geht es natürlich auch um die Reichweite, also wie viele Menschen konnte ich damit erreichen und auch um das Feedback was kommt" (Interview 2). Exchanging with others was also an important part of motives, so together with the aspect of getting feedback, the category 'social exchange' has been developed. It is the most frequently mentioned category, as it includes 60 statements, and it is forming the upper category *social motives*. This upper category is second by its number of mentions including only statements that have social interactions as a background to communicate about sustainable fashion on Instagram.

Other statements were categorized as 'hedonism'. "Es hat mir ein positives Gefühl gegeben und mich bestätigt bei meiner Arbeit [...]" (Interview 1), is a statement that was categorized as having positive feelings when communicating on Instagram. Enjoying creating content about sustainable fashion, entertaining others, which states that the interviewees want to be entertaining with their contributions, as well as the communication on Instagram as a hobby, which shows that the interviewees do this for the reason to be busy in their free time thus lead to a hedonistic motive of communicating. Here the main reason to communicate on Instagram is the pleasure felt while doing so. Some of the interviewees say that they also want to emphasize sustainable brands and companies: "Die Marken bekommen vielleicht keinen Platz im Regal bei Karstadt oder können sich keinen Werbespot leisten und da ist Social Media dann aber eine sehr schöne Möglichkeit, dass auch solche Marken eine Bekanntheit kommen" (Interview 2). Additionally, the aspect of having an economic benefit was mentioned, too. These two aspects form the category 'economic motives', as the respondents gain economic benefits. 'Hedonism' and 'economic motives' are grouped to the upper category *egoistic motives*, because the subjects communicate about sustainable fashion on Instagram out of self-interest.

Among others, statements that indicate that the tribe wants to stand out and present itself on social media, were present. In response to the question what differentiates their communication on social media versus real life, one interviewee said: "Ich würde sagen, auf Social Media bin ich lauter." (Interview 1). This, as well as the presentation of identity, comprise the category 'self-presentation', because these are all motives from which the interviewee acts to present him or herself. One respondent said "Ich weiß, dass die Inhalte [...] wertgeschätzt werden, dass da Arbeit drinsteckt und dass es viele als einen sinnvollen Beitrag erachten." (Interview 2). This statement can be summarized as receiving recognition and appreciation, as the interviewees communicate about sustainable fashion to receive an expression of acknowledgement from followers. Strengthening self-esteem and receiving recognition and appreciation belong to the category 'perception from the outside' as sustainable fashion tribe members want to be recognized as such. The fourth upper category of the motives of communicating about sustainable fashion on Instagram thus consists of the categories 'self-presentation' and 'perception from the outside' and is called *prestige-related motives*. These underlying motives were, together with the egoistic motives, mentioned the least.

However, the upper category *prestige-related motives* contains motives that are now considered as conspicuous consumption, since they insist to increase a person's reputation or its status.

#### 4. Discussion

The findings of the present research add to the understanding of the sustainable fashion tribe and the motivating factors in communicating about sustainable fashion consumption on social media. Because motives underlying consumption on social media are contrary to the tribes' purported altruistic motives for consuming sustainable fashion, a qualitative study was conducted.

The results show that the tribe can be characterized by people who are concerned with ethical responsibility and have deep knowledge about the fashion industry and subsequent environmental influences. These results can be reconciled with overall tribe-theory (Cova & Cova, 2002) as members of the tribe meet at fashion events and have rituals such as recycling clothes and engaging in activist behavior. The results are also in line with the study by Doran (2009), in which he examines that universalism values, such as world peace and protecting the environment have the strongest influence on the decision to consume fair trade products. Likewise, Karp (1996) evaluates self-transcendence and openness to change as having a positive effect on pro-environmental behavior, which stresses the relevance of the tribes' characteristics of creativity and curiosity. Moreover, the tribe of sustainable fashion can be put in contrast to traditional fashion terms with focus on low-cost production and fast changing fashion trends. Relevant characteristics shift to being different from the rest of ordinary consumers and having an activist mindset. This is consistent with other studies stating that ethically minded consumers modify their sustainable fashion consumption to resist the system and abandon traditional means, which includes incorporating concepts such as uniqueness and resistance (Bly, Gwodzd & Reisch, 2015, p. 132).

The second aim of the study was to differentiate the tribes' underlying motivations for communicating about sustainable fashion consumption on social media. The results suggest four distinct groups of motives that describe why tribe members communicate their consumption on social media: altruistic, egoistic, social and prestige-related motives. The altruistic motives for posting about sustainable fashion consumption support the overarching goal of protecting the environment and shifting consumer behavior towards more sustainable paths. Since this motive is consistent with the fundamental principles and values of the tribe, it was expected to be one of the main reasons for the tribe to communicate on social media. The tribe wants to influence others to behave in a more sustainable way by providing information and inspiration on Instagram. Further, the beforementioned activist behavior is also reflected here because the motivational intentions by posting on Instagram are also to oppose the fast fashion trend. These results can be reconciled with the study by Lundblad and Davies (2016), who examined the values and motivations underpinning sustainable fashion consumption and concluded that ethical values are shown to be important in this context.

Egoistic motives are also reasons for the tribe to post about sustainable fashion consumption on Instagram. This can be explained by the basic idea of social media being a platform where people are having fun with creating content and giving insights into their lives as well as economic offers when advertising products. Even though the tribe only promotes sustainable products, they still get incentivized for postings which stresses economical motivation processes when posting. The results show that egoistic motives tend to be of lower relevance in comparison to the others. The question whether egoistic motives that are reducing distress or altruistic motives of helping are more dominant in environmental consumer behavior has also been discussed in literature (Lee & Holden, 1999). Our results show that this tribe focuses more on altruistic than egoistic motives. The latter rather is an imperative condition on social media platforms.

Similarly, Instagram requires networking, sharing, and communicating with others. Thus, social motives such as the interaction with others and receiving feedback are also relevant for the tribe when communicating on Instagram. The primary focus of the social motives is the basic idea of having a community, which connects people within but also outside the tribe. The tribe posts on Instagram to communicate with their peers and to exchange ideas with the common goal of promoting sustainable

fashion consumption. This is in accordance with recent literature. Mishra et al. (2021) state that the social influence has a moderating effect on the relationship between ecological commitment and sustainable consumption behavior, which indicates that the tribes' behavior on Instagram is influenced by means of their peer group. In addition, Beall et al. (2021) examines that social return, as receiving feedback, is predominant when posting on social media about sustainable tourism.

Finally, addressing the basic assumption underlying this study, motivational factors regarding conspicuous consumption were found. Especially the prestige-related motives can be defined as being a part of conspicuous consumption. The presentation of the tribes' sustainable consumption behavior on Instagram in part intends to lead to appreciation by others but also in part strengthen their self-esteem in approving the correctness of their sustainable consumption style. As defined in the beginning, these motives can be reconciled with the basic concept of conspicuous consumption, as it is a demonstration of one's status. Even though prestige-related motives were not the major part of motives, the tribe wants to present themselves as sustainable individuals and receive recognition for it. These results can be reconciled with the literature in different ways. Johnson, Tariq and Baker (2008) also imply that people consume pro-social products not just for altruistic reasons but also in pursuit of achieving social status and prestige. Likewise, other studies examined that on social media the presentation of status and materialism, having a sense of accomplishment but also the demonstration of identity are factors concerning conspicuous consumption (Bronner & de Hoog, 2018; Lundblad & Davies, 2016; Qattan & Khasawneh, 2020). The results also show that the tribe wants to present its identity and stand out while communicating its sustainable fashion consumption on social media, which can be summarized as conspicuous behavior. The study adds to the literature, however, that posting sustainable fashion on Instagram brings, contrary to the basic idea of conspicuous consumption, less material prestige and more social prestige. The environmental concerns communicated, and the values being signaled are rather 'pro-socialness' (Johnson, Tariq & Baker, 2008, p. 343).

But this research is also subject to few limitations. First, as this research addresses topics that are influenced by social norms, bias due to socially desirable responding behavior can occur. Even though efforts were made to ask questions implicitly and to create a trusting environment, participants may have altered their answers to more socially accepted answers. Second, the sample size of nine is not representative for the whole tribe of sustainable fashion consumers, which can lead to bias in interpreting their answers. Third, as the interviews were conducted by different interviewers, interviewer bias can occur including any bias in results that can be traced back to the person who executed the interview. Lastly, the research was focusing on communication via the platform Instagram, thus the results of the tribes' motives are only applicable on this platform.

The study has added to the marketing literature by exploring a topic that is of current relevance. The theoretical implications of this research are various. A quantitative study could show whether the four extracted motives are representative for the whole investigated tribe. Also, more information about the distribution and intensity of the different motives can help to assess whether prestige-related motives exist predominantly or rather are peripherally represented and which of the motives mostly frame the communication on social media. Moreover, following studies can examine whether the results can be transferred to tribes that are interested in sustainable consumption of different consumer goods, like sustainable food or travelling. It is important to see whether the conflict between altruistic and conspicuous consumption behavior also occurs in similar tribes. The same is true for different social media platforms. It is necessary to assess whether the results are applicable for different social media platforms such as Twitter or Facebook.

The managerial implication of this research is to understand that conspicuous consumption also is a motive when presenting the consumption of sustainable fashion on social media, even though the fundamental reasons for sustainable consumption may be more altruistic. However, conspicuous consumption can also be seen as a driver of sustainable consumption in general, instead of opposing to it. This is also in common with the study by Hammad et al. (2019), who questioned the contradiction between conspicuous and sustainable consumption and found out that conspicuous motives can foster a shift towards sustainable consumption. Thus, instead of evaluating the prestige-

related motives of the tribe as something negative, they can be seen as a chance of influencing other people to more sustainable consumption in appealing to their own status needs. Concluding, ethical and conspicuous consumption are not necessarily contradicting, but can have positive mutual effects on each other.

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