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Environmental activism and sustainable communication of B-Corp fashion brands on Instagram: best practices, emerging opportunities, and remaining challenges

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Born-sustainable fashion brands are gaining increasing visibility within the fashion industry due to their strong commitment to climate neutrality, innovative business models based on recycled and upcycled materials, and the development of circular services that extend garment performance and durability. Equally central to their purpose is raising global awareness of critical environmental challenges. Social media platforms have become key arenas for these brands to showcase sustainability performance while encouraging more responsible consumer behaviors. Building on scholarship in brand activism, circular innovation, and sustainability communication, this study undertakes an exploratory analysis of sustainability communication and environmental activism on Instagram. The research focuses on 7 fashion brands certified as B-Corps for their outstanding commitment to sustainability and is based on a content analysis of 1754 visual and textual posts. Findings underscore the need for sustainability-driven fashion brands to avoid ambiguity and inconsistency in their digital communication strategies. They further highlight the importance of integrating scientific evidence to demonstrate how sustainability is concretely implemented across manufacturing and distribution. Finally, the study emphasizes the role of internal stakeholders in fostering consumer engagement with sustainable mindsets and in amplifying global awareness of critical environmental and societal challenges.

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Introduction

Landfill waste, water pollution, and greenhouse gas emissions are some of the most critical challenges of the fashion industry in the context of raising global concerns about climate change (European Parliament, 2020; McFall-Johnsen, 2020; Nature, 2022; Sadowski et al., 2021). The industry accounts for 10% of global carbon emissions, making it a major contributor to climate change. Additionally, it is the second-largest consumer of water and the second-largest polluter of water resources (Maiti, 2025). Over the past decade, the rapid expansion of the fashion sector has doubled global fashion consumption, significantly exacerbating its environmental footprint (European Parliament, 2020; McKinsey & Company, 2025). Global concerns about the critical environmental impact of the fashion industry underline the need for an urgent transformation of both fashion supply-chain, production, and distribution systems as well as of consumer attitudes to fashion consumption (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2021).

While sustainability and circular economy practices are progressively unfolding in the fashion industry to address climate change challenges (Colucci and Vecchi, 2020; Henninger et al., 2021; López et al., 2023; Mukendi et al., 2020; Pedersen et al., 2018), the most significant transformation within the industry is driven by born-sustainable fashion brands. Unlike the fast fashion's traditional take-make-waste model, which prioritizes volume over value, encourages impulsive consumption, and depletes natural resources (Bocken and Short, 2021; Elf et al., 2022), born-sustainable fashion brands emphasize the use of recycled and upcycled materials and enhanced product care to enable a higher performance and durability of garments, the development of clothing reselling and rental platforms, as well as reduction of consumerism (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2021; Ostermann et al., 2021).

Envisaged as an effective counterbalance to the linear take-make-waste model of fashion production and consumption, born-sustainable fashion brands are driven by circular economies of closed-loop systems, waste as value, and design to re-design approaches (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2021; Korhonen et al., 2018; Murray et al., 2019). The R principles of repairing, reusing, redistributing, recycling, remanufacturing, rethinking, and re-designing shape fashion circular innovation led by these brands (Aramendia-Muneta et al., 2022; Kirchherr et al., 2017; Lüdeke-Freund et al., 2019). Born-sustainable fashion companies were found to be significantly more flexible, anticipatory, and open to innovation in every step of their business cycle than the traditional fashion industry (Prieto-Sandoval et al., 2018; Todeschini et al., 2019). Elf et al. (2022) argue that the agility of short supply chains and of technology adaptations, engaged employees, and a clear focus on the circular economy of micro, small, and medium fashion enterprises allow a higher degree of sustainable innovation.

Additionally, born-sustainable fashion brands have emerged as powerful advocates for a new sustainable fashion mindset and environmental brand activism. Moorman (2020) argues that social change is deeply embedded in the core purpose of these companies, positioning them as key agents of climate action and leaders of disruptive communication campaigns designed to raise global awareness of urgent environmental challenges. A notable example is Patagonia, whose strong environmental stance and impactful communication strategies over its 50-year history have been widely recognized in brand activism and sustainable communication scholarship. The company's strong commitment to sustainability has set a benchmark for environmental activism within the fashion industry (Korschun, 2021; Moorman, 2020; Sarkar and Kotler, 2018; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Both luxury and fast-fashion brands rely on visual content as the most effective format of brand-related conversations on social

media (Yoo, 2023), which have become the most used channels to convey fashion brands' stance towards green and sustainable practices (Han et al., 2017; Mukendi et al., 2020). The interactive and co-creative communication dynamic of social media platforms enables active engagement of consumers and the development of extended online communities of followers. These online forums of followers are used by fashion brands as effective experiential, communication, and marketing platforms (Elf et al., 2022). Additionally, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) from fashion influencers and fashion brands' followers plays a significant role in amplifying the impact of sustainability narratives and engaging new consumers (Milanesi et al., 2022; Shen, 2021a).

The purpose of this study is to explore and systematize best practices, emerging opportunities, and ongoing challenges in environmental activism and sustainable communication on Instagram of born-sustainable fashion brands, recognized by their remarkable sustainable performance as B-Corps. The research question guiding this study is: *How do born-sustainable fashion brands utilize digital channels to raise global awareness of critical climate challenges and engage their followers in environmental activism?* Additionally, the study examines the extent to which the sustainable communication and environmental activism narratives of these brands resonate with their followers.

To address our research question, we engage in an exploratory study of communication on Instagram of seven innovative fashion brands, recognized as B-Corps for their remarkable sustainable and circular business practices. B-Corp certification acknowledges the highest standards in socially and environmentally responsible business innovation (Blasi and Sedita, 2021; Diez-Busto et al., 2021). Since its foundation in 2006 as a nonprofit network aimed at transforming the global economic system into an inclusive, equitable, and regenerative practice, B Lab has become a reference for global standards and a certification system of companies committed to using business as a force for good. Its certification process is grounded in a rigorous evaluation framework overseen by the independent Standards Advisory Council, which comprises scholars, practitioners, policymakers, and social activists with remarkable expertise in responsible and sustainable economies. Business transparency, accountability, and demonstrated commitment to addressing critical environmental and social challenges are some of the initial eligibility requirements for certification. The assessment evaluates companies' performance across social, environmental, and governance impact areas, with a specific focus on business practices aimed at fostering global justice, equity, inclusion, and responsible action. Depending on the size, sector, and industry profile, specific eligibility criteria range from 20 to 124 requirements for companies to fulfill. To achieve B-Corp certification, companies must score at least 80 points on the B Impact Assessment and successfully pass a B Lab risk review. As of 2025, 9775 companies in over 150 industries across 104 countries are listed as B-Corps (B Corporation, 2025).

Instagram was chosen to conduct the study as the most popular photo-and-video sharing global social network with two billion monthly users, and as the main communication and engagement platform for fashion brands (Acuti et al., 2018; Bulmer et al., 2024; Milanesi et al., 2022; Shrivastava et al., 2020; Yoo, 2023).

Despite growing academic interest in fashion sustainability narratives (Da Giau et al., 2016; Díaz-Soloaga et al., 2024; Kim and Kim, 2020; Milanesi et al., 2022; Orminski et al., 2020), comparative analyses of visual and content narratives of born-sustainable B-Corp fashion brands on Instagram remain largely unexplored. With the notable exception of Patagonia, whose strong environmental activism over its 50-year history has been extensively examined in sustainability communication research (Korschun, 2021; Moorman, 2020; Sarkar and Kotler, 2018;

Vredenburg et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2022), the performance of other leading B-Corp brands has received significantly less scholarly attention. A deeper understanding of how born-sustainable fashion brands leverage digital platforms to communicate their commitment to sustainability, raise global awareness of climate change, lead by example in reducing the industry's environmental impact, and foster a more sustainable mindset could offer valuable theoretical insights and managerial implications for other fashion brands on the path driven by sustainable and circular innovation (Shrivastava et al., 2020; Vehmas et al., 2018).

Following this introduction, we review existing scholarship on key dimensions and pillars of brand activism and sustainable communication. We then outline our research methodology and analytical tools used to examine the environmental activism and sustainable communication strategies of seven B-Corp fashion brands, followed by a presentation of the main results of our analysis. Finally, in the discussion and conclusion section, we review key research findings, highlighting best practices, emerging opportunities, and ongoing challenges of sustainability communication and environmental brand activism led by born-sustainable fashion brands.

Literature review

Brand activism as a purpose-driven engagement strategy. The meaningful role of brands in fostering social change by effectively addressing critical social, political, and environmental issues is increasingly prominent in academic scholarship on brand activism (Cammarota et al., 2023). The strong symbolic power of brands (Aaker, 2012; Olins, 2004), and the brands' cultural authority, authenticity, and leadership (Interbrand, 2024; Moorman, 2020) make them relevant catalysts of needed social transformations aimed at the common good, universal justice, and fairness (Sarkar and Kotler, 2018). The categories of brand activism encompass political, economic, business, social, environmental, and legal arenas (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019).

The conceptualization of brand activism highlights its high differentiation market value and its instrumental role in stakeholder engagement (Sarkar and Kotler, 2018; Schmidt et al., 2021). Similarly, Vredenburg et al. (2020, p. 446) define brand activism as "a purpose- and values-driven strategy in which a brand adopts a nonneutral stance on institutionally contested sociopolitical issues, to create social change and marketing success". While Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) underscores the engagement purpose of brand activism as a communication strategy aimed at influencing citizen-consumers by messages and campaigns sustained by political values, Korschun (2021) and Verlegh (2024) highlight two key dimensions of the brand activism construct: a publicly stated position by the brand in their advertising, social media or public relations campaigns and proactive efforts to influence public opinion regarding divisive social or political issues. Accordingly, Podnar and Golob (2024, p. 95) argue that the purpose of activists is to achieve a greater social good through the influence on third parties "to change policies, practices, or conditions that they perceive as problematic or unacceptable". The authors emphasize that brand activism is gaining prominence among large corporations as a key asset of brand management and corporate communications and branding practice. The purpose-driven nature of brand activism is also addressed by Moorman (2020), who defines it as public speech or actions made by or on behalf of a company to challenge the established social conventions or even political institutions and to address climate change initiatives, transgender rights, racial justice, minimum wage increases, or gun control, among other critical topics.

While Vredenburg et al. (2018) argue that corporate neutrality on critical issues is increasingly criticized, and consumers expect

brands to take active stances on social, political, and environmental issues, Eilert and Nappier Cherup (2020) caution that limited public awareness or, conversely, strong polarization around a societal issue can pose significant communication and reputational challenges for activist brands. A consistent corporate strategy across all organizational levels and strong alignment between a brand's purpose, values, and market practices with its activist messages are essential for achieving both social impact and marketing objectives (Podnar and Golob, 2024; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Moreover, as activist brands operate under constant stakeholder scrutiny, any misalignment between their communication strategies and actual practices can lead to serious reputational risks, including accusations of inauthenticity and perceptions of greenwashing, woke washing, or rainbow washing (Verlegh, 2024).

Against this backdrop, the value of authenticity is consistently emphasized as a key feature of brand activism (Cammarota et al., 2024; Key et al., 2021; Zhou and Dong, 2021). Research by Villagra et al. (2022) found that greater perceived authenticity of brands leads to higher acceptance of activism purpose among consumers. The consistency of the brand's efforts, as well as the brand's credibility, integrity, and symbolism, are also highlighted by Bulmer et al. (2024) as authenticity dimensions of brand activism.

Among the types of brand activism, the environmental activism category is aimed at raising awareness about a broad scope of climate-change-related challenges: pollution, recycling, sustainable mobility or smart cities (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). The scholarship on environmental activism highlights its impact on shifting public opinion and media coverage in a pro-climate direction, raising public attention to climate concerns (Thomas-Walters et al., 2025).

Sustainability communication and environmental activism in the fashion industry.

In recent decades, sustainability communication emerged as a powerful tool for raising awareness about the relationship between people and the environment, for changing social attitudes and behavior to address critical environmental challenges, and for promoting a shared commitment to effective solutions (Godemann, 2021; Reilly and Larya, 2018). Research by Bulmer et al. (2024) revealed the focus on the beauty of the planet, facts of environmental impact, human connection with nature, portrayals of people taking action, and social/community sustainability as the most prominent narratives of sustainable activist brands. The focus on eco-friendly actions, the launch of pre-owned collections, or the display of environmental commitment are increasingly common in fashion brand communication strategies and are usually illustrated by inspiring natural landscapes (Han et al., 2017; Milanese et al., 2022; Mukendi et al., 2020). In parallel, research by Golob et al. (2022) highlights a broad range of sustainability communication narratives: from persuasive green advertising strategies; corporate sustainability reporting; environmental awareness campaigns; misleading greenwashing practices; and transformative and deliberative communication linking scientific knowledge with change-making actions, paradigms, and mindsets. Furthermore, among the main purposes of sustainability communication, three main models are commonly identified in scholarship: communication *about*, *of*, and *for* sustainability (Fischer et al., 2016; Genç, 2017; Golob et al., 2022; Newig et al., 2013; Weder et al., 2021). Deliberative communication *about* sustainability aims at disseminating broad knowledge about sustainable development goals and principles. Persuasive communication *of* sustainability usually relates to specific sustainable performance and climate-change-related achievements of companies and brands. Finally, the purpose of transformative communication *for* sustainability is

to foster societal change through cultural and normative action. Reviewing the multiple approaches to sustainability communication, Weder et al. (2021) argue that the focus on sustainability as a disruptive and change-making process of innovation and progress is one of the emerging and most challenging communication practices nowadays.

On the other hand, scholars highlight that the network nature of sustainable and circular innovation requires collaboration and communication with a complex system of interdependent stakeholders to enable a shared commitment to sustainable value creation (Antikainen and Valkokari 2016). The interactive and open forum nature of social media makes them key channels used by both luxury and fast-fashion brands to share their sustainability practices (Chu et al., 2020; Dessart and Standaert, 2023; Han et al., 2017; Kim and Kim, 2020; Michel et al., 2019; Mukendi et al., 2020). Furthermore, the important role of extended online communities of followers enabled by social media is getting increasing attention in brand management scholarship (Llorente-Barroso et al., 2023; Shen, 2021a) as platforms of brand experiential learning, interactive consultation with customers, co-creation of new sustainable products, and labs of innovative services of rental, swapping, repair, or resale to challenge overconsumption (Elf et al., 2022). Boken and Short (2021) highlight the topics of sustainability awareness, conscious consumption, and the focus on sharing, repair, and resale services to maximize garment longevity as the most prominent in online engagement of customers and local communities by fashion brands. On the other hand, Shrivastava et al. (2020) draw attention to the positive impact of celebrities and micro-influencers in raising awareness of innovative circular fashion practices among consumers.

At the same time, scholars raise increasing concerns about the widespread greenwashing communication practices of fashion brands that falsely promote environmental efforts and erode consumer trust and corporate reputation (de Jong et al., 2019; Diaz-Bustamante-Ventisca et al., 2024). A recent screening by the European Commission found that 42% of fashion, cosmetics, and household equipment brands' websites had potentially false, deceptive, or unfair green claims. Vague statements like "conscious," "eco-friendly," and "sustainable," along with insufficient evidence, were identified as the most critical issues (European Commission, 2021). Most common greenwashing narratives in the fashion industry include claims of adoption of low-carbon strategies without changing business models, the use of down-cycled materials instead of fiber-to-fiber recycling, promotion of in-store recycling programs to encourage future purchases, or presentation of synthetic fibers as more sustainable than natural ones (European Union, 2022).

The prevalence of misleading sustainable communication, often lacking clear evidence of a genuine business commitment to transformation, highlights the urgent need to identify and systematize effective communication practices from highly committed fashion brands. These brands, whose core purpose is to drive meaningful change in the environmental impact of fashion production and consumption, offer valuable insights into authentic sustainability messaging. By analyzing the communication strategies of these innovative, flexible, and purpose-driven brands, we can establish a benchmark for best practices and uncover emerging opportunities that can inspire the fashion industry toward more transparent, evidence-based, and impactful sustainability narratives.

Methodology. To address our research question: *How do born-sustainable fashion brands utilize digital channels to raise global awareness of critical climate challenges and engage their followers*

in environmental activism?, we engage in an exploratory multiple-case study to investigate how born-sustainable fashion brands use digital channels to raise global awareness of critical climate challenges and to engage their customers in a sustainable mindset. Multiple-case study methods are suitable in communication research to gain a deeper understanding of the specific social phenomenon and to provide a robust base for theory building using varied empirical evidence (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2009). The cases were chosen with a purposive sampling (Yin, 2009) from a list of sustainable fashion companies certified as B-Corps. The B-Corps certification acknowledges the highest standards in socially and environmentally responsible business innovation (Blasi and Sedita, 2021; Diez-Busto et al., 2021) and designates companies that excel in the inclusive, equitable, and regenerative economy through a verified assessment of a company's social and environmental impact (B Corporation, 2025). Climate action and environmental stewardship and circularity are two of the environmental impact dimensions of the B-Lab impact assessment, both emphasizing a company's commitment to sustainability and innovation throughout the value chain. The climate action dimension highlights the specific requirement for companies to effectively combat climate change and its impact through: (a) an established process to measure annually greenhouse gas emissions; (b) a commitment to keep global warming below 1.5 °C; and (c) to have implemented and make progress on the climate action plan. Meanwhile, the Environmental Stewardship and Circularity dimension requires companies to identify and address their environmental impacts; integrate circularity principles to mitigate environmental impact and reduce waste and resource use; and reduce negative environmental impact across their supply chain (B Corporation, 2025). These specific environmental impact criteria implicitly highlight the growing importance of born-sustainable and innovative companies, driven by circularity and long-term sustainability as their core business principles.

The following B-Corp brands were selected as a research sample of innovative and sustainability-focused fashion brands: ECOALF, Sepiia, Y.O.U, Boody, Kampos, MUD Jeans, and Patagonia. These B-Corp brands feature the highest global scores in the environmental impact category and are headquartered in six different countries: Australia, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States (B Corporation, 2025). The business and communication profiles of each company are outlined below.

Description of the selected cases. ECOALF is a sustainable-born Spanish fashion medium-sized company using waste to create innovative and high-quality recycled fabrics. The first fashion brand in Spain to receive in 2018 the B-Corp certification, in 2022, ECOALF was recognized as one of the Best for the World companies by B Lab due to its high environmental impact. Founded in 2009, the company has over 1200 points of sale in 33 countries. Sustainability, innovation, quality, and timeless design are the core drivers of the company's business model (ECOALF, n.d.).

Sepiia is a sustainable-born Spanish fashion start-up focused on producing anti-stain and anti-wrinkle fabrics that prevent odors and sweat marks. Founded in 2016, in 2022 it was certified as a B-Corp and recognized in the same year as one of the Best for the World companies for its environmental impact. The company operates two stores and distributes online (Sepiia, n.d.).

Y.O.U is a sustainable-born fashion company from the UK, founded by Sarah Jordan in 2016, with the purpose to make underwear universally available to all communities through a buy-one-give-two business model. The brand follows the

principles of Fairtrade, it is a PETA-approved vegan, and all garments are made from 100% GOTS-certified organic cotton by a sustainable manufacturer from India. From 2022, the company has moved to a circular business model aimed at a fiber-to-fiber recycling scheme in partnership with TerraCycle and materialized through the collection and recycling of used underwear, socks, and tights. In December 2021, the brand was certified a B-Corp and in 2022 it was recognized as one of the top performers among the Best for the World B-Corps, due to its community and environmental impact (Y.O.U underwear, 2025).

KAMPOS is an Italian swimwear brand, founded in 2019. All garments are manufactured using 100% sustainable and recycled materials from plastic, fishing nets, nylon, and organic fabrics. Sustainable business model is anchored on four main principles: zero-plastic policy; conscious design and responsible materials; recyclable packaging; and marine ecosystem restoration. The brand was certified B-Corp in 2022 (KAMPOS, 2025).

Boody is an Australian sustainable underwear brand, founded in 2013, that manufactures all their products from organically grown bamboo viscose. The brand was certified B-Corp in 2021. Also, 1% of every brand sale is committed to certified environmental organizations (BOODY, 2023).

MUD Jeans is a circular jeans brand, founded in 2013 in the Netherlands. Circular economy, fair trade, and positive activism are the main pillars of the brand's purpose. All jeans are manufactured with GOTS-certified organic and recycled cotton and contain up to 40% post-consumer recycled denim. The brand has launched a repair service and an innovative "Lease your jeans" circular model, offering consumers an annual lease of jeans for a monthly fee with an option to return, swap, or keep them after the year is over. MUD Jeans is a certified B-Corp since 2014 and has been recognized as Best for the World brand for its environmental impact (MUD JEANS, n.d.).

Patagonia was founded 50 years ago in California, US, as a manufacturer of climbing gear. Since its foundation, the brand has dedicated its purpose to combat the climate crisis through a transformative, sustainable, and circular approach to the manufacturing process, social responsibility programs, and environmental activism. Patagonia has been a certified B-Corp since 2012 (Patagonia, n.d.). Patagonia's remarkable contribution to addressing critical environmental issues and to calling for effective public action has been consistently highlighted in brand activism scholarship (Korschun, 2021; Moorman, 2020; Sarkar and Kotler, 2018; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Method of analysis. A content analysis of visual and textual captions posted on Instagram profiles by seven B-Corp brands was performed to explore the purpose and key topics of sustainability narratives displayed by born-sustainable fashion brands (Neuendorf, 2018). A total number of 1754 Instagram posts published by the B-Corp brands (250 posts on average by each brand) in 2023 and 2022 were downloaded using the 4k Stogram software and analyzed.

With 2 billion monthly users, Instagram is one of the world's most popular photo- and video-sharing social networks, with over 60% of its users aged between 18 and 34 (Statista, 2025a, b). It is a key platform for communication, marketing, customer engagement, and eWOM for fashion brands (Acuti et al., 2018; Bonilla-Quijada et al., 2024; Bulmer et al., 2024; Milanese et al., 2022; Shrivastava et al., 2020; Vladimirova et al., 2023; Yoo, 2023). While Instagram is increasingly used in academic research (Rejeb et al., 2022), it is important to acknowledge the inherent limitations and biases of social media as a research site. Platform recommendation algorithms, paid promotional content, and auto-formatting features can significantly influence the visibility,

framing, and reception of content. In particular, content recommendation algorithms have become a major driver of content virality and user engagement, leading to unpredictability in how and by whom content is seen (Narayanan, 2023). These opaque mechanisms may affect user behavior in ways not fully accessible to researchers, thereby complicating the interpretation of findings (Metzler and Garcia, 2023). Additionally, the interpretive nature of analyzing social media content introduces researcher subjectivity, which has also been identified as a potential source of bias (Chen et al., 2021).

Category development, data coding, and data analysis. The content analysis protocol of visual (pictures and reels) and textual (captions) information was developed for the analysis. A mixed approach was applied to the category formation process. First, 10% of downloaded images were reviewed by authors separately to identify the main featured topics (Neuendorf, 2002; 2018). The theoretical grounding for visual category formation was supported by the study of Milanese et al. (2022), which provided the categories of Nature and Landscapes, Fashion Shoot, and Fashion Item. Additionally, based on the literature review of sustainable and circular business innovation, brand activism, and sustainability communication, seven other thematic categories were identified: Brand Store, Active Lifestyle, Brand Ambassador, Materials and Manufacturing Process, Environmental and Social Challenges, Supply Chain and Factory, and Sustainable and Circular Economy Initiatives. A specific residual category of Visuals not fitting in any of the previous categories was also created. The categories were discussed and refined by the authors through consecutive iterations of comparative coding and described in a coding guidebook with examples.

Table 1 outlines the main categories of the visual analysis and their corresponding details.

The categorization of the captions content analysis was provided by scholarship on prevailing models of sustainability communication (Fischer et al., 2016; Golob et al., 2022; Newig et al., 2013; Weder et al., 2021). For each of the three main categories of sustainable communication: Communication *about* sustainability, Communication *of* Sustainability, and Communication *for* Sustainability, specific content topics were identified following the previous literature review on sustainable and circular business innovation, environmental brand activism, and sustainability communication. Table 2 outlines the main categories of the textual content analysis and their corresponding details. A specific residual category of other content not included in the previous categories was also created. This residual category comprises brand fashion content not related to sustainability topics.

Additionally, for each post the following information was collected: the date of the post; the URL, the classification of visual and content topics and categories, the hashtags and the number of likes to measure its digital engagement with followers and fans. The number of likes is acknowledged as an indicator of interest raised by the brand post and the endorsement of online followers for the specific online content (Li and Xie, 2019; Yoo, 2023).

Each post was considered a single unit of analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) and assigned to a single visual and textual content category to avoid any ambiguity and double categorization. With the purpose of ensuring the internal validity of the coding process, two researchers performed the visual and content analysis separately (Weber, 1990). The results were then compared to identify inter-coder reliability (Cohen, 1960; Lombard et al., 2002). The inter-coder reliability was measured with Cohen's kappa coefficient (Cohen, 1960), which was higher than 0.8 in all visual and textual content categories across the

Table 1 Key categories of visual content analysis of Instagram posts.

Visual category	Description
Fashion Item—FI	Visuals showing clothes, shoes, and accessories
Fashion Shoot—FS	Visuals of models wearing clothes, shoes, and accessories
Brand Store—BS	Visuals of flagship stores
Nature and Landscape—NL	Visuals of nature without fashion items
Active Lifestyle—ALS	Visuals of people engaging in sports and outdoor activities
Brand Ambassador—BA	Visuals of people representing the company (owners, managers, employees), customers, celebrities, and influencers supporting the company
Materials and Manufacturing Process—MM	Visuals of materials used in the manufacturing process
Environmental and Social Challenges—ESC	Visuals of critical environmental and social challenges
Supply Chain and Factory—SF	Visuals of manufacturing facilities
Sustainable and Circular Economy Initiatives—SCI	Visuals of projects and actions
Visuals not fitting in previous sections—OV	Other visuals not related to the previously identified categories of sustainability and circular economy

Table 2 Key categories and topics of the captions content analysis of Instagram posts.

Content categories	Purpose	Topics
Communication <i>about</i> sustainability—CA	Raising global awareness on SDGs and key social challenges	Facts, reports, sustainable and circular innovation, scientific evidence
Communication <i>of</i> sustainability—CO	Reporting brand/company’s sustainable achievements and performance	Sustainable performance, values, and indicators—CO-SPI New product and materials development, upcycling, recycling—CO-PM New circular services of resale, repair, rental—CO-CS
Communication <i>for</i> sustainability—CF	Promoting new sustainable behavior and attitudes; fostering customers’ engagement and commitment	Calls to change behavior and attitudes, or to support sustainable and circular initiatives
Other—O	Other content not included in the previous categories (fashion collections)	

seven brands included in the sample. Furthermore, in 64.3% of the codes, the Cohen’s kappa coefficient was higher than 0.9, evidencing a high degree inter-coder reliability (Hallgren, 2012; Kusumasondjaja, 2019).

The data analysis was performed with SPSS. For each brand and each visual and textual content categories frequencies and percentages were identified. Chi-square and *T* test were also applied to identify differences between brands.

Results

The research question in this paper asks: *How do born-sustainable fashion brands utilize digital channels to raise global awareness of critical climate challenges and engage their followers in environmental activism?*

Dominance of fashion marketing content over sustainability content in visual posts of B-Corp fashion brands. The review of the 11 visual categories of Instagram posts shows the highest rate of 41.1% (*n* = 721) corresponding to the Fashion Shoot (FS) category. At a significant distance, the second and third mainstream visual categories are represented by Brand Ambassador (BA) (14.0%, *n* = 246) and Fashion Item (FI) (11.3%, *n* = 199). Other seven categories show results below 10%, ranging from four niche categories of Supply Chain and Factory (SF) (0.7%, *n* = 13), Materials and Manufacturing Process (MM) (1.4%, *n* = 24), Nature and Landscape (NL) (4.5%, *n* = 79), and Brand Store (BS) (3.0%, *n* = 53), to the emerging categories of Active Lifestyle (ALS) (7.4%, *n* = 129), Environmental and Social Challenges (ESC) (6.1%, *n* = 107), and Sustainable and Circular Initiatives (SCI) (5.1%, *n* = 90), respectively. The results of the visual analysis performed across posts of seven B-Corp brands are

outlined in Table 3, revealing the importance of different visual categories for each brand, and their comparative weight within each visual category. The Chi-square test confirms a significant difference across visual categories used by brands analyzed ($\chi^2 = 1299.898; p < 0.001$). Chi-Square test results are provided in Supplementary Table S1.

Dominant category: Fashion Shoot (FS). The FS category (41.1%, *n* = 721) concentrates the highest number of posts among all brands. Kampos is the leading brand of the FS category with 29.3% of all visual posts, followed by MUD Jeans (19.8%), Sepiia (17.5%), and ECOALF (13.2%).

Mainstream categories: Fashion Item (FI) and Brand Ambassador (BA). Both the BA category (14%, *n* = 246) and the FI category (11.3%, *n* = 199) show the second and the third highest number of posts, respectively. Within the BA category, Patagonia is the leading brand with 25.6% of visuals, closely followed by MUD Jeans (24.4%) and Boody (23.6%). Y.O.U brand with 28.6% displays the highest number of FI visuals, followed by ECOALF (22.6%), Boody (19.6%), and Sepiia (19.1%).

Emerging categories: Active Lifestyle (ALS), Environmental and Social Challenges (ESC), and Sustainable and Circular Economy Initiatives (SCI). The visual categories Active Lifestyle (ALS) (7.4%, *n* = 129), Environmental and Social Challenges (ESC) (6.1%, *n* = 107), and Sustainable and Circular Initiatives (SCI) (5.1%, *n* = 90) collectively represent a low proportion of posts and exhibit uneven brand performance. While all brands engage in the ESC category, Patagonia leads with 47.7% of posts,

Table 3 The use of visual categories in total and for each brand on Instagram (%).

Category	Y.O.U		ECOALF		Sepiia		Boody		Kampos		MUD Jeans		Patagonia		Total	
	% over total category	% over total images	% over total category	% over total images	% over total category	% over total images	% over total category	% over total images	% over total category	% over total images	% over total category	% over total images	% over total category	% over total images	% over total category	% over total images
FI	28.6	22.8	22.6	18.0	19.1	15.6	19.6	4.5	3.6	5.0	4.0	0.5	0.4	100	113	n=199
FS	9.4	27.2	13.2	38.0	17.5	31.2	10.8	29.3	84.4	19.8	57.0	0	0	100	41.1	n=721
BS	50.9	10.8	17.0	6.3	30.2	0	0	0	0	0	0	1.9	0.4	100	3.0	n=53
NL	1.3	0.4	19.0	6.0	15.2	3.6	11.4	6.3	2.0	11.4	3.6	35.4	11.2	100	4.5	n=79
ALS	0	0	20.2	10.4	2.3	0	0	11.6	6.0	3.1	1.6	62.8	32.4	100	7.4	n=129
BA	12.2	12.0	9.3	9.2	4.9	23.2	23.6	0	0	24.4	23.9	25.6	25.2	100	14.0	n=246
MM	0	0	4.2	7.1	75.0	0	0	4.2	0.4	4.2	0.4	12.5	1.2	100	1.4	n=24
ESC	7.5	3.2	23.4	10.0	4.7	0.4	0.9	8.4	3.6	7.5	3.2	47.7	20.4	100	6.1	n=107
SF	53.8	2.8	0	2.0	38.5	0	0	0	0	7.7	0.4	0	0	100	0.7	n=13
SCI	26.7	9.6	11.1	4.0	14.4	4.8	13.3	0	0	11.1	4.0	23.3	8.4	100	5.1	n=90
OV	30.1	11.2	1.1	0.4	5.4	21.2	57.0	0	0	5.4	2.0	1.1	0.4	100	5.3	n=93
Total		100		100		100		100		100		100		100	100	n=1754

followed by ECOALF (23.4%) and Kampos (8.4%). In contrast, the SCI category includes contributions from all brands except Kampos, with Patagonia (23.3%) again at the forefront, followed by Y.O.U (26.7%) and ECOALF (14.4%). The ALS category, however, is more polarized. Patagonia dominates with 62.8% of posts, followed by ECOALF (20.2%) and Kampos (11.6%), whereas the remaining four brands place significantly less emphasis on ALS visuals.

Niche categories: Nature and Landscapes (NL), Brand Store (BS), Materials and Manufacturing Process (MM), and Supply Chain and Factory (SF). The last four categories contain the fewest posts: Nature and Landscape (NL) (4.5%, *n* = 79), Brand Store (BS) (3.0%, *n* = 53), Materials and Manufacturing (MM) (1.4%, *n* = 24), and Supply Chain and Factory (SF) (0.7%, *n* = 13). While all brands engage in the NL category, Patagonia leads with 35.4% of posts, followed by ECOALF (19.0%) and Sepiia (15.2%). In contrast, the BS category shows an uneven distribution. Y.O.U (50.9%), Sepiia (30.2%), and ECOALF (17.0%) prominently feature their flagship stores and in-store experiences, whereas the other four brands do not engage with this category at all. Although the MM category remains under-represented, B-Corp brands are increasingly highlighting their use of innovative and recycled materials. Sepiia dominates this category with 75.0% of the posts, followed by Patagonia (12.5%), MUD Jeans (4.2%), Kampos (4.2%), and ECOALF (4.2%). Similarly, the SF category, which includes visuals of manufacturing facilities, textile factories, and workshops, remains marginal. Only Y.O.U (53.8%), Sepiia (38.5%), and MUD Jeans (7.7%) share content related to their supply chains.

The performance of each brand across 11 visual categories compared to the total performance is illustrated in Fig. 1.

To illustrate some innovative sustainable visual narratives used by B-Corp brands on Instagram, Table 4 outlines the key elements of visual content across two emerging categories (Environmental and Social Challenges (ESC) and Sustainable and Circular Economy Initiatives (SCI)), as well as two niche categories (Materials and Manufacturing Processes (MM) and Supply Chain and Factory (SF)), along with examples of brand posts.

Despite sustainability communication textual content staying below 50%, brands consistently highlight their commitment to sustainability. Among the six sustainability content categories posted by B-Corp fashion brands on Instagram, excluding the “Other Content” category (56.4%, *n* = 989), which is not related to sustainability communication, the highest number of posts fall into two subcategories within Communication of Sustainability (CO-SPI): Communication of Sustainable Performance, Values, and Indicators (CO-SPI)—15.6% (*n* = 274) and Communication of New Product and Materials Development (CO-PM)—15.4% (*n* = 270). Additionally, two other sustainability-focused categories highlight B-Corp brands’ efforts in promoting sustainable behaviors and raising global awareness: Communication for Sustainability (CF)—6.0% (*n* = 105) and Communication about Sustainability (CA)—5.3% (*n* = 93).

These categories emphasize the brands’ role in encouraging sustainable behaviors, commitments, and attitudes among consumers, as well as in raising awareness of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and key social challenges. In contrast, the Communication of Circular Services (CO-CS), which includes resale, repair, rental, and remaking, has a marginal presence, accounting for only 1.3% (*n* = 23) of total posts.

Table 5 presents a detailed breakdown of the content analysis across posts from seven B-Corp brands, illustrating the relative

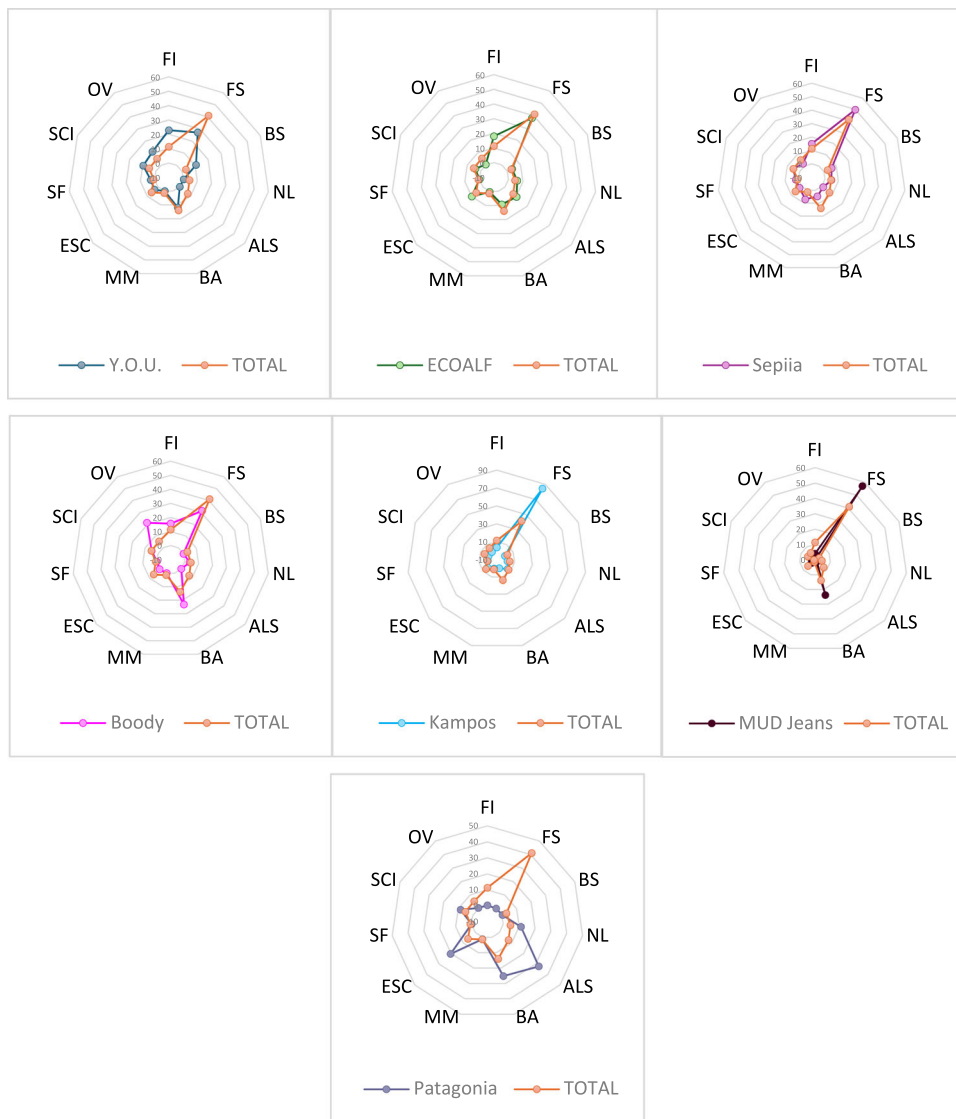


Fig. 1 Brands' performance across eleven visual categories.

importance of each content category and its comparative weight across brands. The Chi-square test confirms a significant difference across textual content categories published by brands analyzed ($\chi^2 = 960.947$; $p < 0.001$). Chi-Square test results are provided in Supplementary Table S2.

Dominant category: O. The O category (56.4%, $n = 989$) concentrates the highest number of posts among all brands. The content featured in this category is not related to sustainability and/or circularity and therefore is not subject to the analysis.

Mainstream categories: Communication of sustainability focused on sustainable brand performance, values, and indicators (CO-SPI) and on new product and materials development, upcycling, and recycling (CO-PM). Both the CO-SPI (15.6%, $n = 274$) and CO-PM (15.4%, $n = 270$) categories feature the second and the third highest number of posts, respectively. Within the CO-SPI category, all brands post content related to their sustainable performance and values, with Y.O.U (25.9%), Sepiia (23.4%), and ECOALF (17.2%) leading the content contribution. All brands, but Kampos, post content on their sustainable and circular approach to the materials used in the

manufacturing process, with ECOALF (44.1%), Sepiia (27.8%), and MUD Jeans (11.1%) as main contributors.

Emerging categories: Communication for sustainability (CF) and Communication about sustainability (CA). Content categories of CF (6.0%, $n = 105$) and CA (5.3%, $n = 93$), respectively, show a low rate of posts and an even performance of brands. All brands, but Kampos, contribute content to the CF category, led by ECOALF (36.2%), Patagonia (25.7%), and Y.O.U (17.1%). Within the CA category, Patagonia significantly outperforms all other brands with 73.1% of the featured content.

Niche category: Communication of sustainability focused on new circular services of resale, repair, and rental (CO-CS). The CS category features the lowest number of posts (1.3%, $n = 23$) and shows an uneven trend with only three brands posting content on their new circular services of resale, repair, rental, and remaking. Y.O.U is the most active brand in this category with 52.2% of posts, followed by MUD Jeans (26.1%) and Patagonia (21.7%).

The performance of each brand across six content categories compared to the total performance is illustrated in Fig. 2.

Table 4 Innovative sustainable visual content used by B-Corp brands on Instagram.

Visual category	Visual narratives	Examples
Environmental and Social Challenges—ESC	Visuals of environmental protests and initiatives; impactful imagery of environmental damage caused by irresponsible human activity and the fashion industry’s footprint; portraits of prominent climate activists; images of unique ecosystems and their indigenous communities	Patagonia shares photos of environmental activist rallies held in Australia, Germany, and the U.S., as well as short previews of documentaries such as <i>Home, Grown; Madre Mar; For the Love of the Sea; Jalpi; Hot Pink Dolphins</i> ; and <i>The Custodians</i> , which document various forms of environmental activism. Both Patagonia and ECOALF use visuals of cut trees, dried riverbeds, bleached coral reefs, melting glaciers, and plastic pollution. MUD Jeans and ECOALF share visual statements opposing Black Friday consumerism, while MUD Jeans also highlights the threat of extreme heat in the UK. KAMPOS features photos of its coral nursery project in the Maldives, and ECOALF, Boody, and Y.O.U post reels, illustrations, and images highlighting small-scale efforts to address environmental issues
Sustainable and Circular Economy Initiatives—SCI	Visuals of innovative sustainable and circular projects led by brands; announcements of collaborative projects with other environmentally committed brands and activists; visual declarations of brands’ commitments to sustainability and circularity	Y.O.U, ECOALF, and MUD Jeans share visual content, highlighting key sustainability milestones and impacts. Y.O.U posts reels showing the recycling of used garments, while Patagonia focuses on plastic recycling, and ECOALF on the transformation of ocean waste and pineapple leaves into textiles. Boody announces a range of initiatives, including the <i>Plastic-Free Challenge</i> , <i>The Goodness Loop</i> textile recycling program, and the <i>Make Your Mark</i> sustainability design competition. MUD Jeans features <i>Messy</i> , a conceptual design piece made from 800 pairs of old jeans, and Patagonia shares repair and mending tips
Supply Chain and Factory—SF	Images of manufacturing facilities, their technologies, and the workers involved; snapshots of supply chain and design teams in action	Y.O.U shares reels from <i>Connoisseur Fashions’</i> facilities in Chennai and Tiruppur, India, and also includes photos of factory workers in India. Patagonia presents images of employees at the <i>GIOTEX</i> factory, which produces recycled cotton yarn. MUD Jeans documents a team visit to their manufacturing facility in Tunisia
Materials and Manufacturing Process—MM	Close-up shots of recycled fabrics, fibers, and yarns; reels of manufacturing process and laboratory tests; imagery depicting the yarn and fabric production process using recycled plastics and textile scraps	ECOALF features reels promoting the benefits of recycled wool and cashmere. KAMPOS shares photos of fabric prints inspired by coral reef ecosystems. MUD Jeans posts reels of the embroidery process for their Van Gogh capsule collection. Patagonia illustrates the transformation of plastic waste into yarn

To illustrate some innovative sustainable and circular economy narratives used by B-Corp brands on Instagram, Table 6 presents the key topics covered across various sustainability communication categories, along with examples of brand posts.

The subsequent analysis of textual content across visual categories, as outlined in Table 7, reveals that narratives highlighting brands’ sustainability commitments, key environmental impacts, and collaborative projects with local communities (CO-SPI) appear across all visual categories. These narratives are most prominent in the Supply Chain and Factory (SF) category (92.3%), followed by Sustainable and Circular Economy Initiatives (SCI) (52.2%), Materials and Manufacturing Process (MM) (50%), and Brand Store (BS) (41.5%).

In parallel, content focused on the use of innovative materials, manufacturing processes involving recycling and upcycling, and their environmental impact (CO-PM) is most visible within the niche MM category (37.5%), the mainstream Fashion Item (FI) category (36.7%), and to a lesser extent, in the Fashion Shoot (FS) category (18.6%).

Furthermore, narratives aimed at raising global awareness about sustainability and the impacts of climate change (CO-CA), as well as calls to join environmental rallies, sign petitions to protect endangered species and habitats, and adopt more sustainable behaviors (CO-CF), show a relatively even

distribution across the Nature and Landscape (NL), Environmental and Social Challenges (ESC), and SCI categories.

Digital engagement of B-Corp brands on Instagram. The digital engagement impact generated by B-Corp brands was measured by the average number of likes received by each post published by B-Corps on Instagram. Table 8 outlines the digital engagement of 11 visual categories for each B-Corp brand and in total. *T* test results for digital engagement across visual categories and brands are provided in Supplementary Table S3.

The analysis of digital engagement among B-Corp fashion brands reveals that Patagonia’s followers exhibit significantly higher interaction levels across all visual categories, except for Fashion Shoot (FS) and Supply Chain and Factory (SF). This impacts the total engagement averages across the analyzed categories. The five visual content categories generating the highest digital impact are: Active Lifestyle (ALS) (8785 average likes), Environmental and Social Challenges (ESC) (5855 average likes), Nature and Landscape (NL) (5647 average likes), Materials and Manufacturing Process (MM) (4415 average likes), and Brand Ambassador (BA) (3723 average likes).

These high-engagement categories correspond to the emerging and niche visual narratives related to sustainability and circular communication, as previously described. Patagonia demonstrates the strongest digital engagement across all visual categories, with

Table 5 Type of sustainability textual content published by B-Corp brands on Instagram (%).

Category	Y.O.U		ECOALF		Sepiia		Boody		Kampos		MUD Jeans		Patagonia		Total		
	% over total category	% over total content	% over total category	% over total content	% over total category	% over total content	% over total category	% over total content	% over total category	% over total content	% over total category	% over total content	% over total category	% over total content	total category	% over total content	
CA	1.1	0.4	5.4	2.0	5.4	1.2	3.2	3.2	2.2	0.8	9.7	3.6	73.1	27.2	100	5.3	
CO SPI	25.9	28.4	17.2	18.8	23.4	4.8	4.4	4.4	3.6	4.0	13.1	14.3	12.4	13.6	100	15.6	
CO PM	11.1	12.0	44.1	47.6	27.8	5.2	4.8	4.8	0	0	11.1	12.0	1.1	1.2	100	15.4	
CO CS	52.2	4.8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	26.1	2.4	21.7	2.0	100	1.3	
CF	17.1	7.2	36.2	15.2	8.6	2.0	4.8	4.8	0	0	7.6	3.2	25.7	10.8	100	6.0	
Other	11.9	47.2	4.1	16.4	10.1	86.8	21.9	21.9	24.1	95.2	16.4	64.5	11.4	45.2	100	56.4	
Total		100%		100		100		100		100		100		100		100	n=1754

exceptionally high interaction in Materials and Manufacturing Process (MM) (18,338 average likes, corresponding to 1.2% of all visual posts) and Nature and Landscape (NL) (14,427 average likes, corresponding to 11.2% of visual posts). Among the other B-Corp brands, Sepiia leads in Fashion Shoot (FS) (684 average likes), BS (Brand Store) (1997 average likes), and BA (Brand Ambassador) (4067 average likes). ECOALF also performs well in the BA category (3414 average likes), and MUD Jeans leads engagement in the Supply Chain and Factory (SF) category (226 average likes).

As for the digital engagement with sustainability textual content posted by B-Corp brands on Instagram, Table 9 outlines the digital engagement of six content categories for each B-Corp brand and in total. *T* test results for digital engagement across content categories and brands are provided in Supplementary Table S4.

The three categories of sustainability communication content that generate the highest digital engagement across all brands are: Communication *about* Sustainability (CA) (7991 average likes), Communication *of* Sustainability-New circular services of resale, repair, rental (CO-CS) (4013 average likes), and Communication *for* Sustainability (CF) (3733 average likes). Patagonia displays the highest digital engagement across the sustainability communication categories. The 2% of the sustainability content published by the brand in the CO-CS category is the ones that generate the highest impact and engagement (14,645 average likes), while the 10.8% of the content published by the brand in the CF category is the third in terms of generating engagement (10,831 average likes). Furthermore, Sepiia offers high engagement in the categories of CA (4423 average likes) and CF (4472 average likes), while ECOALF excels in the CO-PM category (900 average likes).

Discussion and conclusions

Sustainability and circularity have emerged as the main drivers of innovative fashion companies aimed at changing the traditional linear take-make-waste paradigm of the fashion industry. The focus on zero net impact on the environment based on the closed-loop production and responsible consumption approach is materialized through innovative manufacturing practices of using waste as food and extending the life of fashion products with resale, repair, rental, and remaking services.

Fashion brands that make sustainability and circularity their core operating principles develop textual and visual narratives on Instagram aimed to reaffirm their environmental commitment, to engage consumers in a sustainable and circular brand experience, and to foster conscious attitudes and consumption behaviors. However, the complexity of meanings, interpretations, and, especially, the greenwashing concerns facing fashion brands (Godemann, 2021; Reilly and Hynan, 2014) make sustainability communication and environmental activism particularly challenging.

The dedicated review of visual and textual narratives of B-Corp fashion brands on Instagram reveals some important learnings of best practices, emerging opportunities and remaining challenges for brands committed to fashion sustainability.

While all fashion brands included in this study are recognized as B-Corps for their remarkable sustainable and circular business practices, their Instagram communication strategies reveal distinct visual and content approaches to showcasing sustainability and circularity. Substantial differences in business models, market presence, and leadership styles, as outlined in the Method section, may influence each brand’s overall digital communication strategy and engagement priorities. Our analysis of B-Corp fashion brands’ communication highlights the following trends: (a) a

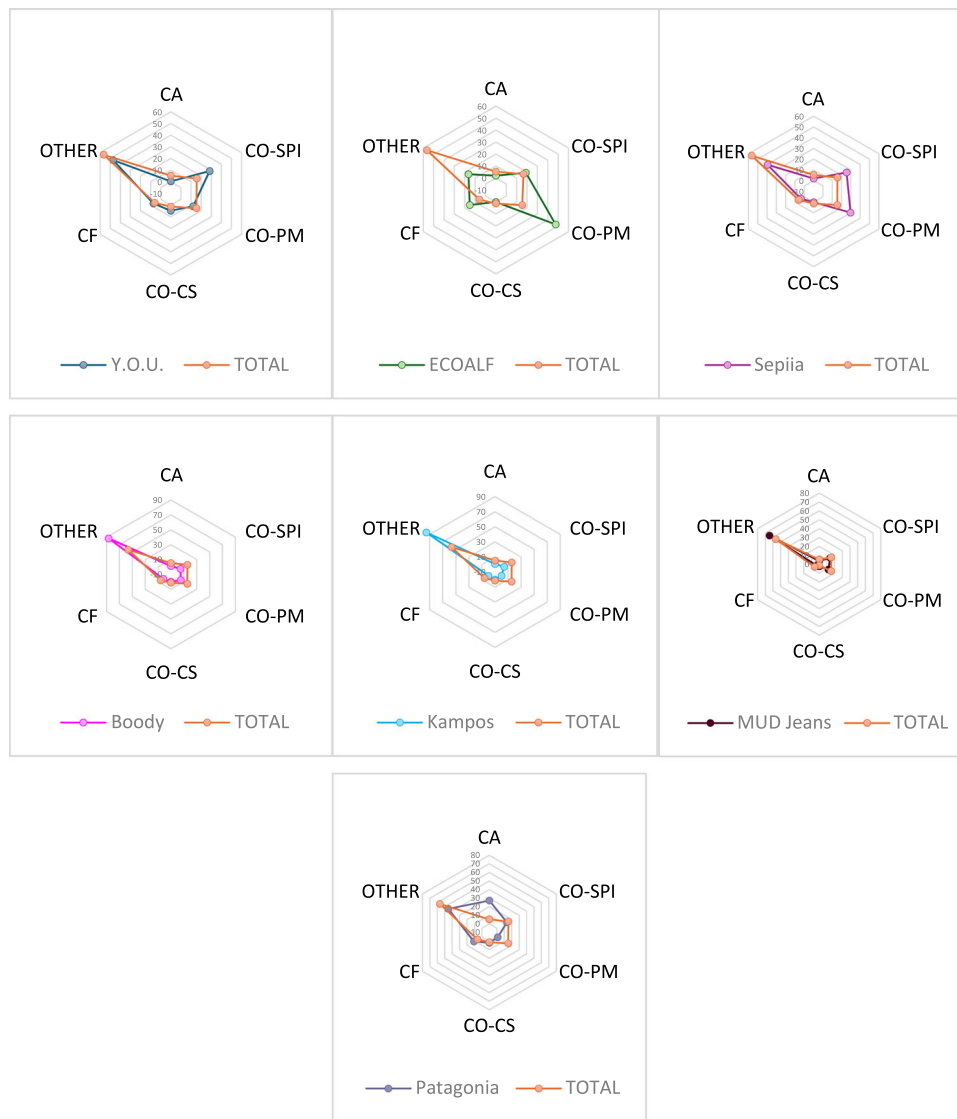


Fig. 2 Brands' performance across six content categories.

strong dominance of traditional fashion marketing visuals, particularly persuasive fashion shoots; (b) a significant presence of engaging corporate narratives that emphasize each brand's sustainability commitments and milestones in circular product and service innovation; (c) the emergence of informative content aimed at raising awareness about climate change impacts, sustainability data, and standards; and (d) the increasing presence of motivational content that encourages audience engagement through calls to join environmental action and to adopt more sustainable behaviors.

A more traditional fashion marketing approach is particularly prominent in the visual posts of Y.O.U., ECOALF, Sepiia, Kampos, and MUD Jeans, with over 60% of their visual content dedicated to showcasing the latest product designs and visually appealing fashion imagery. At the same time, all brands include inspiring corporate narratives about their sustainability and circular innovation efforts, with more than 45% of post captions from Y.O.U., ECOALF, and Sepiia exclusively focused on these topics. In contrast, Patagonia distinguishes itself by consistently sharing engaging visual content and compelling narratives aimed at raising global awareness about the impact of climate change on human wellbeing and natural ecosystems. The brand also highlights the work of environmental activists and their projects,

emphasizes the use of recycled and upcycled materials, and promotes product longevity and care. Patagonia's holistic focus on critical environmental issues and its strong narratives around the urgency of collective climate action contribute to the highest levels of digital engagement among the B-Corp fashion brands analyzed.

Furthermore, the analysis of the digital engagement of followers with visual and narrative content reveals the following findings.

The importance of avoiding visual ambiguity and inconsistency in sustainable communication. Traditional visual communication categories in the fashion industry, primarily focused on showcasing product style, design, and promotional triggers (e.g., seasonal sales) (Yoo, 2023), account for nearly 50% of all visual posts by innovative B-Corp fashion brands. This is particularly evident in the Fashion Shoot (FS) and Fashion Item (FI) categories, with the notable exception of Patagonia, which features a significantly lower number of conventional fashion images. The prevalence of traditional fashion marketing content aligns with existing scholarship emphasizing Instagram's role as a main marketing and advertising platform for sustainable fashion

Table 6 Sustainability narratives used by B-Corp brands on Instagram.

Content category	Narratives	Examples
Communication about sustainability—CA	Raising awareness about the impact of climate change on human wellbeing; dissemination of sustainability-related data; promotion of community-based sustainable and circular projects; highlights of current sustainability standards and regulations in the fashion industry	Patagonia promotes <i>Home, Grown, Madre Mar, For the Love of the Sea, Jalpi, Hot Pink Dolphins</i> , and <i>The Custodians</i> documentaries, highlighting critical environmental issues and grassroots activism. Boody runs educational campaigns #DidYouKnow, #EcoTips, and #ReduceReuseRecycle. ECOALF shares infographics breaking down CO ₂ emissions from everyday life. Content about the impact of the B-Corp movement is promoted by ECOALF, Y.O.U, and Boody
Communication of sustainability: Sustainable performance, values and indicators—CO-SPI	Inspiring narratives showcasing brands' sustainability commitments featuring founders, employees, customers, and climate ambassadors; highlights of collaborative projects with local communities; communication of brand vision and values, periodic reporting of key sustainability milestones and impacts	Patagonia marks the 10th anniversary of its documentary <i>The Stories We Wear</i> and commemorates 50 years of brand activism, reflecting on milestones and future sustainability goals. MUD Jeans highlights #WeGoBeyond campaign, outlining commitments to circularity and sustainability. Both MUD Jeans and ECOALF share anti-consumerist messages during Black Friday. ECOALF reinforces its climate-focused goals through #NetZero2030 and #BecauseThereIsNoPlanetB narratives. Sustainability and Impact Reports are publicly shared by MUD Jeans and Y.O.U. KAMPOS features content related to the conservation and restoration of coral reefs
Communication of sustainability: New product and materials development, upcycling, recycling—CO-PM	Facts on the environmental impact of recycled materials; highlights of innovative fabrics with sustainable properties and innovative materials	ECOALF features innovative materials such as Piñatex® (from pineapple leaves), Yulex® (natural rubber), and 100% recycled cotton. Both ECOALF and Patagonia share the use of recycled polyester yarn from plastic waste. Sepiia promotes anti-wrinkle and anti-stain fabrics. Boody focuses on bamboo fibers for their low environmental impact. MUD Jeans emphasizes recycled denim
Communication of sustainability: New circular services of resale, repair, rental—CO-CS	Promotion of new circular services instead of garment disposal; presentation of circular and recycling standards and innovative initiatives to extend garment use	Patagonia showcases its repair kits and documents a 4,248-mile repair voyage. MUD Jeans runs campaigns <i>Why Do We Want Your Waste</i> , #Recycle and #CircularEconomy. Y.O.U calls to #RecycleWithUs and #RecycleUnderwear, in addition to hosting mending workshops at their stores
Communication for sustainability—CF	Calls to join rallies and sign petitions to protect endangered species, natural habitats and indigenous communities, dissemination of community challenges to encourage more sustainable daily behaviors	Y.O.U and Boody promote #PlasticFreeJuly. ECOALF encourages ocean waste collection through #TheEmergenSea, and #Plasticosis., Y.O.U organizes underwear donations for the <i>Smalls for All</i> charity. BOODY and MUD Jeans promote #EarthDay challenges. Patagonia calls to support #RallyForNativeForests, #YouthSalmonProtectors, and protection of remote Pacific Islands

Table 7 Presence of sustainability content in each visual category (%).

Visual category	Content category						Total
	CA	CO-SPI	CO-PM	CO-CS	CF	OTHER	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
FI	0.5	6.0	36.7	1.0	3.5	52.3	100
FS	0.6	6.1	18.6	0.3	1.9	72.5	100
BS	0	41.5	3.8	7.5	3.8	43.4	100
NL	19.0	27.8	3.8	0	16.5	32.9	100
ALS	4.7	8.5	13.2	0	4.7	69.0	100
BA	7.3	13.8	9.3	1.2	5.7	62.6	100
MM	4.2	50.0	37.5	0	0	8.3	100
ESC	29.9	41.1	0	0.9	27.1	0.9	100
SF	0	92.3	0	0	0	7.7	100
SCI	15.6	52.2	7.8	10.0	14.4	0	100
OV	2.2	15.1	2.2	2.2	7.5	71.0	100
Total	5.3	15.6	15.4	1.3	6.0	56.4	100

brands (Bulmer et al., 2024; Milanesi et al., 2022; Shrivastava et al., 2020; Yoo, 2023). However, it is noteworthy that while these visual commercial images dominate, the accompanying captions frequently address sustainability topics and highlight important environmental challenges. For instance, content focusing on

organic materials or innovative yarn derived from recycled plastics, fishing nets, or tires is prominently featured within these categories. Despite this integration of traditional fashion marketing visuals with sustainability narratives, the approach does not appear to be particularly effective in driving consumer digital engagement. Both FI and FS categories exhibit lower-than-average numbers of likes, suggesting that this mixed messaging strategy may not resonate strongly with followers. These findings align with existing research indicating that ambiguity and inconsistency in sustainability communication, alongside a lack of clear, verifiable evidence of real sustainability practices, can lead to consumer confusion, skepticism, and even perceptions of greenwashing (Díaz-Bustamante-Ventisca et al., 2024; Kaner and Baruh, 2022; Reilly and Hynan, 2014; Szabo and Webster, 2021).

High digital engagement of visual and content narratives addressing critical environmental and social challenges. Highlighting critical environmental and social challenges is a consistent approach among B-Corp fashion brands on Instagram. These brands actively engage in both visual and textual narratives to raise awareness of environmental damage caused by irresponsible human activity, emphasize the importance of waste recycling and seabed protection, foster support for Earth Day celebrations, and critically reflect on Black Friday's environmental impact. Additionally, they showcase brands' collaborative projects

Table 8 Digital engagement of visual posts (average likes).

	Y.O.U	ECOALF	Sepiia	Boody	Kampos	MUD Jeans	Patagonia	Total
FI	17	372	448	140	40	76		253
FS	30	337	684	164	52	72		169
BS	32	652	1997				3827	673
NL		324	130	197	31	68	14,427	5647
ALS		287	181		39	69	13,669	8785
BA	53	3414	4067	144		263	11,250	3723
MM		286	263		37	222	18,338	4415
ESC	12	567	635	263	37	80	11,039	5855
SF	22		172			226		106
SCI	20	576	277	127		156	6803	2237
OV	21	394	504	228		75	5919	285
Total	28	653	914	169	50	122	11,991	2312

Table 9 Digital engagement of captions (average likes).

	Y.O.U	ECOALF	Sepiia	Boody	Kampos	MUD Jeans	Patagonia	Total
CA		250	4423	144	27	86	10,333	7991
CO SPI	37	441	709	112	37	229	10,597	2100
CO PM	24	900	410	103		152	8729	724
CO CS	21					475	14,645	4013
CF	22	564	4472	191		112	10,831	3733
Other	25	305	320	176	50	82	13,655	1949
Total	28	653	914	169	50	122	11,991	2312

with local communities and environmental activist to protect unique ecosystems and their indigenous communities. Beyond raising sustainability awareness, brands also use Instagram to promote their innovative circular services, such as garment collection for recycling or donation, repair workshops, rental programs, and clothing swaps. This emphasis on sustainability and circularity in visual content is further reinforced through detailed captions, amplifying the impact of brand messaging and encouraging active consumer engagement in sustainable initiatives. Furthermore, B-Corp brands combine the dissemination of scientific research and sustainability reports with updates on their own sustainable projects, strengthening credibility and transparency. Notably, our analysis reveals high digital engagement with posts in the Environmental and Social Challenges (ESC) and Sustainable and Circular Initiatives (SCI) categories, demonstrating their effectiveness in capturing followers’ interest and fostering support for sustainability-driven innovations. These findings underscore the importance of using scientific evidence and factual data to build trust in sustainable and circular initiatives among brand followers and consumers, as was also highlighted in the research of Han et al. (2017) and Vehmas et al. (2018).

High digital engagement potential of niche sustainability and circularity visual categories. While sustainability communication and environmental activism vary significantly among B-Corp brands, the analysis of the Nature and Landscape (NL) and Materials and Manufacturing (MM) categories has provided valuable insights. Despite its yet limited presence on Instagram ($n = 79$ posts) compared to other categories, the Nature and Landscapes (NL) category, which features inspiring images of forests, mountains, and seascapes, generated substantial digital engagement. This effect was further amplified by impactful sustainability-focused captions accompanying the posts. Similarly, while the Materials and Manufacturing Process (MM) category visuals, which depict innovative organic and recycled

materials from plastic and ocean waste used in fashion manufacturing, were found to be a niche presence on Instagram (only 24 posts out of 1754 analyzed), they played a significant role in driving digital engagement of followers. These posts combined compelling textual content on circularity principles, recycling, upcycling, and product innovation with strong visual storytelling, leading to significant digital engagement, comparable to more frequently used visual categories.

These findings highlight the high strategic potential of niche sustainability content in digital brand communication. Findings of Milanesi et al. (2022) also emphasized the relevance of featuring production process, materials, and supply chain imagery on Instagram to enhance corporate transparency and mitigate perceptions of greenwashing.

The importance of a people-centered approach in sustainability communication and environmental activism. The role of Brand Ambassadors (BA) in B-Corp fashion brands’ sustainability communication was also found to be noteworthy. As the third most prominent visual category generating high digital engagement, this category highlights the significance of testimonials, personal experiences, and calls to action from brand owners, employees, clients, and associates. While traditional fashion brands primarily leverage celebrities and influencers for marketing purposes, promoting the latest styles to drive sales, our findings reveal that B-Corp brands take a different approach. Rather than relying on external influencers, they position brand founders, employees, and customers as key brand spokespersons for their commitment to sustainability and circularity. Notable examples include Sara Jordan, founder of Y.O.U; Carol Blázquez, Head of Innovation and Sustainability at ECOALF; and Yvon Chouinard, founder of Patagonia. Current research increasingly underscores the importance of internal stakeholders in crafting effective and engaging sustainability narratives (Dessart and Standaert, 2023; Moorhouse and Moorhouse, 2017). In particular, the role of CEOs as the most influential brand ambassadors for

environmental activism has gained significant attention (Abebe et al., 2020; Podnar and Golob, 2024; Rumstadt and Kanbach, 2022).

For this study, the analysis prioritized the top-down approach aimed at reviewing sustainable communication and environmental activism on Instagram by leading B-Corp brands within the fashion industry. We specifically focused on the communication intentionally developed by B-Corp fashion brands to explore how these innovative and purpose-driven brands feature their environmental commitment and brand activism on Instagram. While our approach provides a comprehensive (albeit not exhaustive) review of the best practices and emerging opportunities for sustainable communication and environmental activism in the fashion industry, we welcome further empirical and conceptual studies to reflect and to further develop the understanding of the key pillars of sustainability and circularity narratives on social media as well as their impact on the digital engagement and on the brands' corporate reputation and sustainability leadership.

Data availability

The datasets used and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Author contributions

OK and SC-G wrote the main manuscript text; OK, SC-G, and MD-BV carried out the basic research, and data analyses; OK and PD-S provided guidance for the overall conception of the project and the research design of the manuscript; and SC-G prepared the figures. All the authors reviewed the manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was not required as the study did not involve human participants.

Informed consent

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Additional information

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