
Communicating Sustainability Information in the Fashion Industry

Submitted 08/09/24, 1st revision 20/10/24, 2nd revision 06/11/24, accepted 30/11/24

Anna Terer¹, Maciej Turała²

Abstract:

Purpose: The purpose of the article is to assess how fashion retail brands communicate their sustainable practices to customers.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The research is carried out through an analysis of websites belonging to 77 fashion brands owned by 50 companies randomly chosen from amongst 200 most profitable fashion companies. The research focused on the quality of sustainability information on the brands' main pages, sub-pages, and exemplary baskets of goods presented in the stores. Placement and measurability of information were taken into consideration.

Findings: The findings indicate that the majority of general information is accurate (measurable), although there are also areas where non-measurable information predominates, most notably on main pages of brands. All of the analysed brands have at least one mention of sustainable topics on their websites, although some of them communicate information in solely unmeasurable manner.

Practical implications: The results show that brands are generally able to inform consumers about their practices in a measurable way, but there are still gaps in the information flow.

Originality value: Future research could concentrate on determining whether there exists a causal dependence between the measurability of information and the consumers' decision-making process and purchase decisions.

Keywords: Corporate social responsibility, online retailing, transparency.

JEL codes: D22, L67, M14.

Paper type: Research article.

¹BA in Business Management, University of Lodz, Poland,
e-mail: anna.terer@outlook.com;

²Associate Professor, Department of City and Regional Management, Faculty of Management, University of Lodz, Poland, e-mail: maciej.turala@uni.lodz.pl;

1. Introduction

Since the Brundtland Report, global efforts have sought to reduce the environmental impacts of human activity (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987; United Nations, 2015). The fashion industry ranks among the top three global polluters (Rudnicka and Koszewska, 2020), contributing to carbon emissions, water pollution, waste, and poor labour conditions in low-cost production countries (Fashion Revolution, 2021; Fashion Revolution, 2018; Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017; Kant, 2012).

Historically, the fashion industry has undergone significant innovation (Lewis, 2001), with recent efforts focusing on reducing its environmental impact (Roshitsh, 2020). Increasingly, consumers demand sustainable, transparent fashion choices, positioning transparency as a key innovation within the sector (Rauturier, 2021).

While studies examine the sustainability information shared by brands, they often lack comprehensive measurability (Fashion Revolution, 2021). Research on the quality of this information remains limited. This article seeks to evaluate the accessibility and quality of sustainability-related information provided to consumers through fashion retail brands' online stores. The article thus approaches one research question and two hypotheses.

Q: How do fashion retail brands inform consumers about sustainable practices?

H1: Most topics connected with sustainability in online stores of retail fashion brands are not measurable.

H2: Retail fashion brands do not inform consumers about their sustainable practices through online stores.

The research is based on an analysis of websites belonging to 77 fashion brands owned by 50 companies randomly chosen from amongst 200 most profitable fashion companies. It evaluates the quality, placement, and measurability of sustainability information across main pages, sub-pages, and product baskets.

2. Literature Review

Sustainability lacks a single, universally accepted definition. Existing definitions often prioritise conflicting objectives, aligning them with specific stakeholder interests. Efforts to create broadly acceptable goals tend to remain implicit, given the diverse range of stakeholders, including governments, corporations, communities, and regulators (Parris and Kates, 2003).

Three core sustainability components may be identified: resource depletion, environmental and ecological health, and quality of life (van de Kerk and Manuel, 2008). These translate into preserving resources for future generations, maintaining a

clean environment, and supporting human wellbeing. Although no definitive objectives or measurement systems exist, interest in corporate sustainability performance has grown (Searcy, 2012). Governments typically include social, environmental, and financial dimensions in their sustainability agendas, spurring measurement efforts in these areas (Böhringer and Jochem, 2007).

Since the 1990s, over 500 indicators have been developed to measure sustainability, ranging from single metrics (e.g., CO₂ emissions) to composite indices combining multiple dimensions (e.g., Environmental Sustainability Index) (Babcicky, 2013; Parris and Kates, 2003). However, existing tools often fail to provide a comprehensive view, are inaccessible to the average person, and leave gaps, particularly in measuring the social aspects (van de Kerk and Manuel, 2008; Corona *et al.*, 2017).

Moreover, sustainability metrics often focus on reducing harm (i.e., how to make products and services less unsustainable) rather than enhancing benefits (i.e., how to make them more sustainable) (Schaubroeck and Rugani, 2017).

The fashion industry ranks as the third-largest manufacturing sector globally, after automotive and electronics. In Europe alone, the industry's turnover grew by 3.3% from 2016 to 2017, reaching a value of €181 billion, with investments worth €4.9 billion (Rudnicka and Koszewska, 2020). Between 2000 and 2015, clothing production doubled, driven largely by the rise of fast fashion (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017).

While the fashion industry ranks as the third-largest manufacturing sector, it is the second-largest polluter due to the rise of fast fashion (Rudnicka and Koszewska, 2020). The sector contributes 10% of global carbon emissions and 20% of wastewater, amongst other through dyeing processes, using over 8,000 chemicals, many of which are toxic (Kant, 2012). Only 0.1% of fashion industry waste is recycled into new textiles, and vast amounts are discarded or incinerated every second (Wicker, 2016; UNEP, 2021).

Globalisation has driven companies to move production to countries with lower labour costs, outsourcing to cheaper suppliers. This has raised concerns over fast fashion's social impact, including poor working conditions and safety risks, as seen in the 2013 Rana Plaza collapse in Bangladesh. While new safety regulations followed (Butler, 2013), poor conditions persist.

Fast fashion has made clothing cheap and disposable, encouraging frequent purchases without considering their impact. The core issue with this model is that brands rely on constant sales, pushing out new collections to generate profit (UNEP, 2021). The goal is not speed but greed – selling more products while exploiting natural resources and labour (Fletcher, 2007).

Globally, customers discard 460 billion USD worth of wearable clothes each year. The term "throwaway fashion" largely excludes the luxury sector, where high prices prevent impulse buying (Okonkwo, 2007). Consumers are often confused about the link between sustainability and fashion, opting for sustainable food but not extending this to clothing (Ritch, 2015). This behaviour is partly due to a lack of guidance from retail fashion stores on sustainability, leading to overconsumption and the purchase of clothes that are rarely used.

Despite rising demand for clothing, there is greater expectation for producers to adopt sustainability rather than rely on consumers to buy less, especially when they are incentivised to buy more (UNEP, 2021). Fibre, textile, and fashion industries have seen the most revolutionary changes and innovations since the 1950s (Lewis, 2001). Success in the fashion industry demands high creativity and innovation (Okonkwo, 2007).

Given the fashion industry's environmental impact, sustainability innovations are emerging rapidly. Industry members are increasingly collaborating, adopting standards, and joining sustainability initiatives. The sector is also developing more sustainable textiles, such as bio-based and recycled materials, and less toxic chemicals like bio-nylon. Sustainability is becoming a fashion trend (Schaer, 2020).

Innovation in the fashion industry extends beyond new products and technologies. Consumers are increasingly concerned about the environmental impact of their purchases and are demanding more sustainable production methods. Cost transparency has become a tool for business model innovation, with companies disclosing their environmental impact and sustainability (Singh, 2015). Brands are adopting transparency measures to promote ethical production (Kozłowski *et al.*, 2012).

As access to information increases, consumers are seeking to make more sustainable fashion choices. However, for this to happen, brands must share information about the sustainability of their products. Transparency in fashion involves openly sharing details about how, where, and by whom a product was made, from start to finish, allowing consumers to know exactly what they are buying (Rauturier, 2021).

3. Methodology

Due to the pandemic, there was a notable increase in online purchases, and therefore an analysis of the websites, precisely – online stores of the chosen brands, was conducted. The research focused on the quality of sustainability information on the brands' main pages, sub-pages, and exemplary baskets of goods presented in the stores. Placement and measurability of information were taken into consideration. Additionally, any other actions taken by the brands were also listed, but their quality was not evaluated. The websites were analysed between March and May 2022.

Websites of brands were analysed only if the website had the functionality of an online store, which allowed for the purchase of items or at least provided a preview of the items available in physical stores. Moreover, only websites accessible in English were taken into consideration.

For each brand, a basket consisting of one item from each category – top coverage, bottom coverage, shoes, and accessory – was analysed. These items were selected for their common availability across stores. Only one item of each type was chosen, assuming uniform descriptions by brands. Some brands differentiated certain products as more sustainable, either through wording or symbols. If such differentiation was present, two baskets were analysed: one with regular items and another with more sustainable versions. Sustainable items were identified either by:

- wording associated with sustainability, such as sustainable, green, ecological, vegan, recycling, responsibility;
- graphical symbols of sustainability, such as leaves, plants, water or animals.

When analysing items, the first product on the top left of each category was considered if it lacked sustainability indicators (wording or symbols). For more sustainable versions, items were first filtered for sustainability indicators (if such an option was available), and the first item from the top left was analysed.

If no filter was visible, the first item with any sustainability indication was selected. A limit was set to ensure a sustainability indicator was found – if none appeared within the first five pages or 50 items, it was assumed no such indicator existed. This method assumed these items were those brands intended consumers to notice first.

In addition to analysing the baskets of goods, the main page of each brand and any sub-pages with potential sustainability information were examined. This included indicators associated with the baskets, as well as pages detailing the brand, its purpose, sustainable practices, and corporate policies. To ensure the analysis reflected a sustainability-oriented consumer's perspective, information from sites requiring redirection to a different domain or the downloading of materials was excluded.

To avoid repetition, a limitation was set on the number of entries for each topic. Each sustainability-related topic was reported once, categorised by its manner (measurable/non-measurable; plans/actions) and area. Each brand's topics were classified into three areas, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. *Categories for the information gathering*

Area no. 1: Measurability	Measurable
	Non-measurable
Area no. 2: Timeliness	Future Plans (in short: Plans)
	Completed Actions (in short: Actions)

Area no. 3: Placement	Top coverage with / without a sustainable indicator
	Bottom coverage with / without a sustainable indicator
	Shoes with / without a sustainable indicator
	Accessory with / without a sustainable indicator
	Main page
	Sub-page

Source: Prepared by the authors.

The same topic was counted multiple times, provided that it appeared in a variety of areas. For example, a topic of diversity could be mentioned in several categories, and each one would be counted in the analysis, therefore resulting in three counts: (1) as a plan, on main page, (2) as a plan, on sub-page, (3) as an action, on main page.

However, if a topic of diversity was mentioned twice on main page (i.e. as an action), it was counted once for the purpose of this paper. All the rules mentioned above allowed for consistency of information noted about each brand.

When it comes to the measurability or specificity of information found – if the topic was mentioned with regard to a plan, three parts had to be provided to consider it measurable:

- end date to achieve the plan (year),
- an explained action to be made,
- the extent to which the action was supposed to be fulfilled (a number/percentage provided).

The action should be as specific as possible – “being more sustainable” would not be considered measurable, but “decreasing the amount of water used by 5% compared to last year” would be. When there was no specific number or percentage provided, but a synonym of 100% was provided, the plan was considered measurable, e.g., “fully”, “all”. If a company claimed that a particular item reduced or would reduce impact by a certain percentage but did not specify what that was compared to, it was also considered non-measurable.

The measurability of actions followed the same rules but omitted the date. When it came to the topic “origin of materials”, the brand had to provide at least the country of origin to be considered measurable. Continents were not considered measurable, nor stating that the item was “imported” but did not specify the country. Any topics mentioned in the research either measurably or non-measurably followed the analogy of the above rules.

The assumption was that the topics communicated by brands had to be comprehensive to an average consumer without doing any additional research on external pages.

Examples of measurable and non-measurable actions and plans taken from the analysed websites:

- Non-measurable – “100% of workers will have access to channels to raise concerns and ideas by 2025” – does not explain which ideas, concerns, or channels would be considered
- Measurable – “40% reduction of our own water consumption proportionate to our turnover by 2025 (in comparison to 2016)”
- Measurable – “We will remove all single-use plastic packaging by 2025.”
- Non-measurable – “Over the years, our efforts have included engineering our cutting process to minimise waste, overhauling lighting systems to conserve electricity, and purchasing green cleaning products” – no mention of the extent to which the waste was minimised and what “green” means

Apart from assessing the quality of information, the websites were also searched for any other indications of sustainability, such as: having filters enabling searching for more sustainable options, providing tips on how to live a more sustainable life, providing events promoting sustainability, offering repair services, etc.

The research focused on brands owned by companies from the top 200 most profitable fashion companies in The FashionUnited Combined Top 200 Index (Fashion United, 2022). Twenty-three companies were excluded for reasons such as lack of an online store, no English website, unclear official websites, website dysfunctionality, or company closure. From the remaining 177 companies, 50 were randomly selected for analysis, representing 77 brands. A list of all analysed brands is shown in Figure 2.

4. Research Results and Discussion

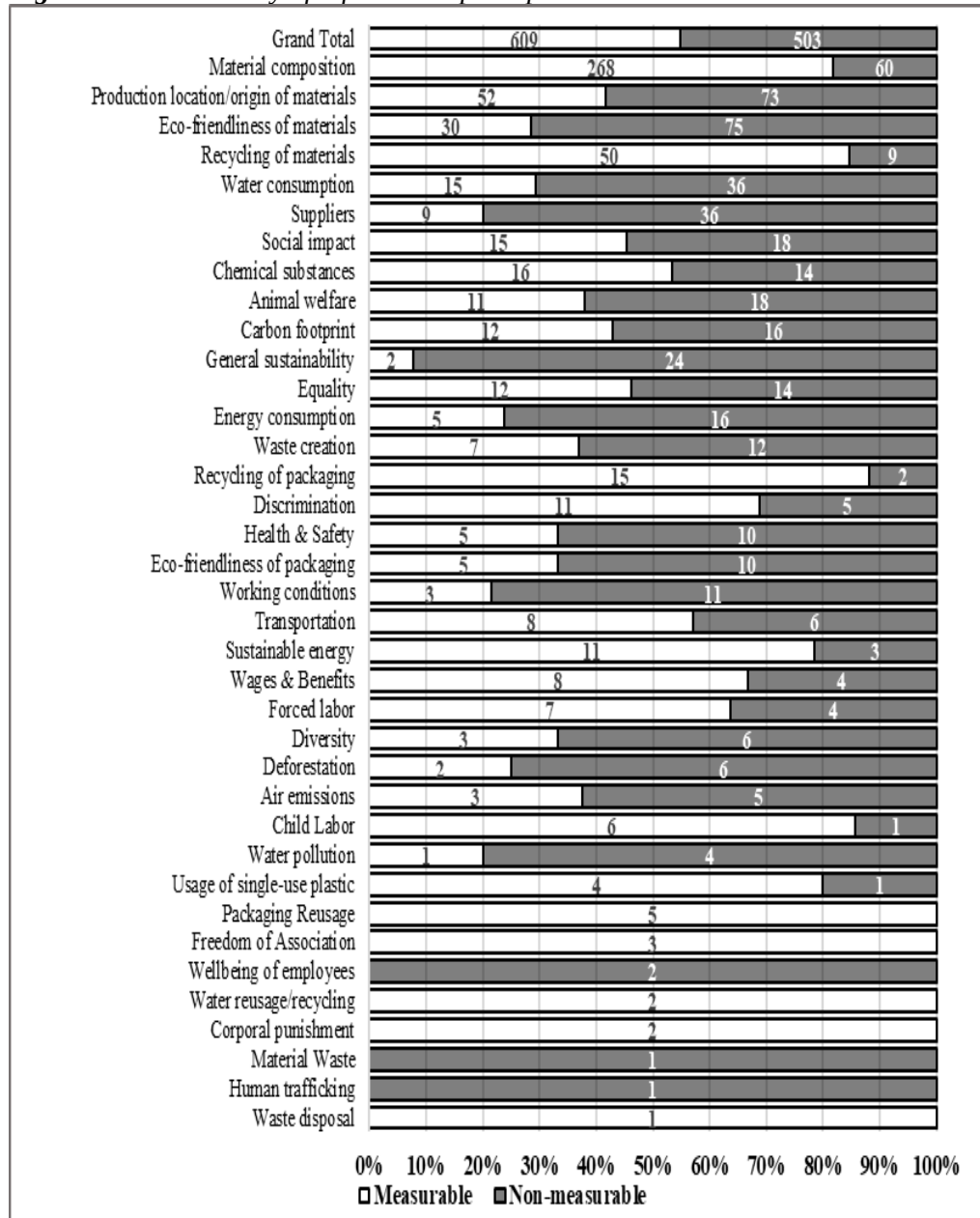
A total of 37 topics were communicated 1,112 times by all analysed brands (see Figure 1). 55% of all instances of communication were considered measurable. Topics that were mentioned the most frequently were: material composition of pieces of clothing, production location/origin of materials, and general eco-friendliness of materials.

Topics communicated only in measurable ways included: packaging re-usage, freedom of association, water re-usage/recycling, corporal punishment, and waste disposal. Topics communicated only in non-measurable ways included: wellbeing of employees, material waste, and human trafficking.

Topics communicated by brands were further divided into those presented as actions or goals. 85% of information was categorised as goals and 15% as actions. A total of 37 topics mentioned as actions were communicated by all brands 950 times with 57% of observations indicating measurable communication. As far as plans are

concerned, there were 2 topics mentioned in 162 instances of communication. In this case only 43% of observations was considered measurable. This suggests that brands communicate, on average, more actions than plans. Plans are also more likely to be communicated in a non-measurable way.

Figure 1. *Measurability of information per topic*



Source: Prepared by the authors.

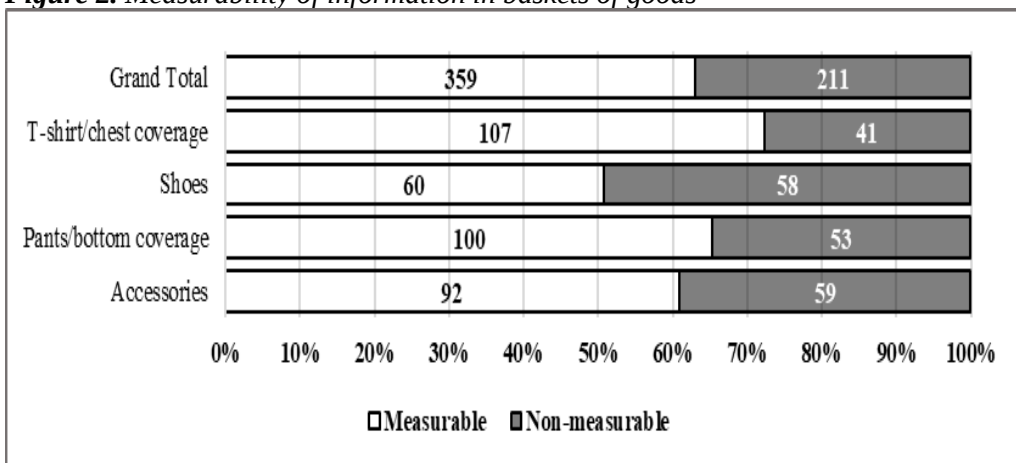
Looking at the results through the lens of goods' baskets – 63% of instances when baskets of goods were communicated were measurable, and all goods are presented in a primarily measurable way, with top coverages having the highest rate of 72% of measurable information and shoes the lowest – 51% (see Figure 2).

Finally, approaching the result from the perspective of brands, it transpires that 58% of brands have more measurable than non-measurable instances of communication of topics on their websites, while 38% provide more non-measurable information (see Figure 3). In case of two brands (4%) there is an equal number of measurable and non-measurable instances of communication. Seven brands provided only non-measurable information related to sustainability and five provided only measurable ones.

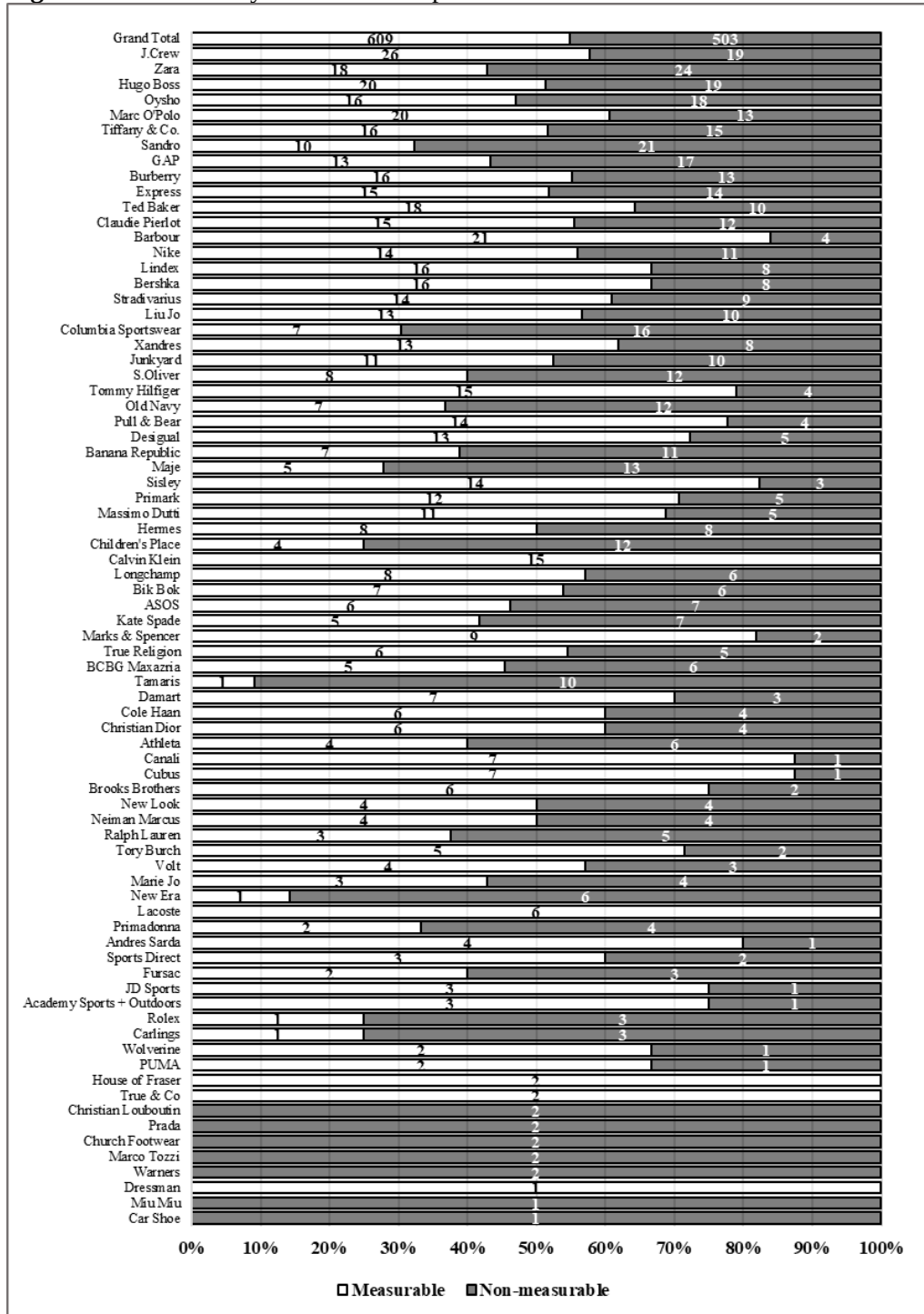
Other notable findings include:

- 27 brands had a sustainable tag next to clothing or a sustainable collection;
- 16 brands provided a filter that enabled searching for more sustainable alternatives of items;
- 14 brands had articles or pieces of text informing consumers on what they can do fashion-wise to increase sustainability;
- 4 brands had articles or pieces of text informing consumers on what they can do non-fashion-wise to increase sustainability;
- 6 brands provided repair services;
- 5 brands had benefits for consumers who chose to shop in a more sustainable manner;
- 3 brands included information about the impact of fast fashion on the planet;
- 2 brands planned events for consumers on the topic of sustainability.

Figure 2. *Measurability of information in baskets of goods*



Source: Prepared by the authors.

Figure 3. Measurability of information per brand

Source: Prepared by the authors.

5. Conclusions

H1: *Most topics connected with sustainability in online stores of retail fashion brands are not measurable.*

45% of all information provided on websites is non-measurable, and 38% of brands present more topics in a non-measurable way, with 4% having an equal distribution of measurable and non-measurable information on their websites. Although the majority of general information seems to be measurable, there are areas where non-measurable information is the majority:

- 75% of information on the main pages;
- 53% of information on sub-pages (not adding item sub-pages);
- 51% of information applicable to shoes on item sub-pages without a sustainable indicator;

While the hypothesis is false when looking at the grand picture, there are areas in which the majority of information found is not measurable, with the most under-measured being the main pages of websites.

H2: *Retail fashion brands do not inform consumers about their sustainable practices through online stores.*

All brands have at least one mention of sustainable topics on their website. However, seven brands presented information only in a non-measurable way, which leads to questioning the validity of shared information.

The results show that brands are generally able to inform consumers about their practices in a measurable way, but there are still gaps in the information flow. One of the inconsistencies was that information present on the item sub-pages without the sustainability indicator had a higher ratio of measurable and non-measurable information (65%) than the area with the sustainable indicator (60%).

Future research could compare the measurability of information with what the consumers pay attention to while shopping and see how much of an impact the quality of information has on the consumers' decision-making process in each brand.

References:

- Babcicky, P. 2013. Rethinking the Foundations of Sustainability Measurement: The Limitations of the Environmental Sustainability Index (ESI). *Social Indicators Research*, 113(1), pp. 133-157.
- Böhringer, C., Jochem, P.E. 2007. Measuring the immeasurable - a survey of sustainability indices. *Ecological Economics*, 63(1), pp. 1-8.

- Butler, S. 2013. The Guardian: Bangladeshi factory deaths spark action among high-street clothing chains. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/23/rana-plaza-factory-disaster-bangladesh-primark>.
- Corona, B., Bozhilova-Kisheva, K.P., Olsen, S.I., San Miguel, G. 2017. Social Life Cycle Assessment of a Concentrated Solar Power Plant in Spain: A Methodological Proposal. *Journal of Industrial Ecology*, 21(6), pp. 1566-1577.
- Ellen MacArthur Foundation. 2017. A new textiles economy: Redesigning fashion's future. Available at: <https://ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/publications>.
- Fashion Revolution. 2018. Written evidence submitted by Fashion Revolution. London: UK Parliament, SFI0056.
- Fashion Revolution. 2021. Fashion Transparency Index 2021. Available at: https://issuu.com/fashionrevolution/docs/fashiontransparencyindex_2021.
- Fletcher, K. 2007. The Ecologist: Slow fashion. Available at: <https://theecologist.org/2007/jun/01/slow-fashion>.
- Kant, R. 2012. Textile dyeing industry: An environmental hazard. *Natural Science*, 4(1), pp. 22-26.
- Kozlowski, A., Bardecki, M., Searcy, C. 2012. Environmental Impacts in the Fashion Industry: a Life-cycle and Stakeholder Framework. *Journal of Corporate Citizenship*, Volume 45, 17-36.
- Lewis, R. 2001. Smart fibres, fabrics and clothing. Sawston, Cambridge: Woodhead Publishing Ltd.
- Okonkwo, U. 2007. *Luxury Fashion Branding: Trends, Tactics, Techniques*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Parris, T.M., Kates, R.W. 2003. Characterizing and Measuring Sustainable Development. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 28(1), pp. 559-586.
- Rauturier, S. 2021. Good On You: The Importance of Transparency in the Fashion Industry. Available at: <https://goodonyou.eco/transparency-fashion-industry>.
- Ritch, E.L. 2015. Consumers interpreting sustainability: moving beyond food to fashion. *International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management*, 43(12), 1162-1181.
- Roshitsh, K. 2020. 10 Fashion Sustainability Initiatives to Know. *Women's Wear Daily*, 15 9, 44.
- Rudnicka, A., Koszewska, M. 2020. *Uszyte z klasą*. Lodz: University of Lodz Press.
- Schaer, C. 2020. Where Streetwear Meets Sustainability - and Survives. *Women's Wear Daily*, 9(1), p. 38.
- Schaubroeck, T., Rugani, B. 2017. A Revision of What Life Cycle Sustainability Assessment Should Entail: Towards Modeling the Net Impact on Human Well-Being. *Journal of Industrial Ecology*, 21(6), pp. 1464-1477.
- Searcy, C. 2012. Corporate Sustainability Performance Measurement Systems: A Review and Research Agenda. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 107(3), pp. 239-253.
- Singh, N. 2015. Commentary: what's behind the price tag: understanding cost transparency? *European Journal of Marketing*, 49(11/12), 1987-1991.
- UNEP. 2021. Putting the brakes on fast fashion. Available at: <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/putting-brakes-fast-fashion>.
- United Nations. 2015. *The Millennium Development Goals Report*, New York: United Nations.
- van de Kerk, G., Manuel, A.R. 2008. A comprehensive index for a sustainable society: The SSI — the Sustainable Society Index. *Ecological Economics*, 66(2/3), pp. 228-242.

- Wicker, A. 2016. Newsweek: Fast Fashion Is Creating an Environmental Crisis.
Available at: <https://www.newsweek.com/2016/09/09/old-clothes-fashion-waste-crisis-494824.html>.
- World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987. Our Common Future, New York: United Nations, A/42/427.