ONE SIZE DOES NOT FITS ALL: A TYPOLOGY OF SUSTAINABLE LUXURY BRAND COMMUNICATIONS AND SUSTAINABILITY PRACTICES

Background & Purpose: The spotlight of sustainability debate has primarily been focused on consumers in commoditised, lower-value products (Davies et al., 2012; McDonagh & Prothero, 2014); and less from an organisational perspective. In the luxury context, the link between luxury and social/environmental sustainability is contentious. Moore (2011) and Carrigan and Moraes (2016) warned that many luxury brands have similar (if not worse) sustainability and ethical standards as compared to high street fast fashions. Yet, comparatively little, however, is known about how sustainable luxury fashion brands communicate its sustainable authentic luxury propositions to signal their brand purpose (Schaeffer, 2019). Past studies show large luxury brands are more advanced at implementing sustainability practices as well as more explicit in communicating their social purposes to appear authentic and avoid woke washing (Beverland, 2005; Athwal et al., 2019; Amatulli et al., 2017). However, other studies show that it is over-communicating its sustainability can devalue the prestige of these luxury brands (Janssen et al., 2017). Given this inconsistency, in this paper, we explore the relationships between sustainability practices in luxury fashion firms and their brand communications that seek to explain their authenticity.

Methodology: We used interpretive and case study approaches. We carried out semi-structured interviews with 10 luxury/premium fashion brands' founders, Directors of sustainability and senior managers. Informants were asked about the difficulty in communications and to describe 'to what extent these messages are authentic'. The interviews ranged from 60-90 minutes and were taped and transcribed. A typical grounded analysis was undertaken which involved open and axial coding procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Cross-case analysis looked for both commonalities and differences between the case examples.

Findings & Discussion: Across ten sustainable luxury fashion brands, dimensions of sustainability efforts and communications strategies varied considerably. We identified four main strategies Elite Activist, Capitalist Strategy, Re-orientation Strategy and Silent Activist. See Figure 1.

The study shows evidence of extreme ways these luxury brands communicate their sustainability efforts. Elite Activist strategy reflects the large fashion houses that have resources in innovating their supply chain and explicit in their brand messaging around sustainability to avoid woke washing. Yet, on another extreme, we found other luxury firms with high sustainability practices and deliberate to avoid sustainability brand communications. Our research shows that the latter mirrors the 'aura of authenticity' (Grayson &Martinec, 2004). As authenticity cannot be claimed, luxury sustainable brands use other forms through which authenticity can be infused. Hartmann and Ostberg (2013) argue that marketers construct authenticity through enchantment or moments of magic and myth. Here, the 'unspoken product quality or sustainability' play an instrumental role

in conveying authenticity; since it is an element which doesn't need to be communicated or emphasized, but instead experienced by the consumer. It will be interesting for future research to explore and examine the differential effect of these two communication strategies and their impact on various stakeholders. For example, under what circumstances is the 'aura of authenticity' more prevailing compared to 'objective authenticity' in communicating sustainable messages?

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Figure 1: Typology of managing sustainable practices and brand communications for sustainable luxury firms