

Finding Sustainable Strategies for Fashion Communication: Lessons from #harrystylescardigan

Rachel Matthews

Australian College of the Arts, Melbourne Australia

Marketing and communications are failing to support a green transition in fashion. Consumers, who are seeking information on sustainable fashion are confused and mistrustful of competing messages and content. Despite the abundance of digital communication channels in the twenty-first, predominant discourses around garments and their sustainable credentials remain vague and unverifiable or overly technical. Further, these notions of sustainability often sit disconcertingly alongside content promoting the over-consumption of new products.

This research explores ways we can rethink how a fashion product is communicated in order to support understanding and behaviour change. It adopts a socio-material perspective, to examine the social media phenomenon of #harrystylescardigan (based on a cardigan designed by JW Anderson) as a case study. The theoretical framing recognises fashion as an ‘entanglement of materiality, meaning and social practices’ (Story 2015) and further interwoven with technology. Digital content generated under this hashtag was not designed to promote sustainable fashion; however, data analysis revealed genuine knowledge exchange, consumer empowerment and new levels of cooperation in fashion centred around the patchwork cardigan worn by Harry Styles. These findings provide starting points for a discussion of ways to develop more credible and transparent communication strategies for sustainable fashion and proposes three possible approaches that support creators and consumers of fashion to work more closely together while finding ways to do more with less garments.

Keywords: fashion communication, sustainable fashion, trust, consumer behaviour, #harrystylescardigan