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# COMMUNICATION IN SUSTAINABLE LUXURY

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# Introduction

We are living in a context in which environmental degradation is increasingly affecting people's lives, so that it does not only concern governments but everyone in the society. Under this scenario, businesses are more willing to promote sustainable principles to customers in view of the fact that they are seeking and choosing healthier, greener and more socially responsible options. Businesses and investors, in fact, are realizing how much potential profitability and value are on offer.

Communication is on the core of any sustainable plan or strategy, for this reason we will analyze how companies in the luxury market communicate, since they easily become a focus of attention through multiple articles in the press and have a large influence among people.

To achieve this objective, therefore, the work is organized in the following way. The first chapter focuses on the theoretical framework with a delineation on sustainability and its role in marketing, explaining the reason why companies should implement CSR actions and the difference with "business as usual" marketing model. Next, there will be described some of different channels through which it is possible to spread information, as the impact may be different. At the same level of importance there are the typologies of communication with a further distinction of concrete versus abstract. Finally, there will be a discussion on circular economy and its processes, as it is fundamental in acting sustainable.

Along the second chapter instead, there will be described the procedures, participants and relevant discoveries on the empirical case studies.

# Chapter 1. Theoretical framework

*Along this chapter we will have a general view on the definition of sustainability. Then going in depth, we will discuss on sustainability marketing, the methodology of how to communicate it and through which channels it is possible to do it. Finally, there is a description of circular economy and its processes.*

## 1.1. Sustainability

There have been different definitions on the meaning of sustainability, that are often predictions of actions taken today that one hopes will lead to sustainability [1], and to a better world for future generations. According to *Cambridge University Dictionary*, sustainability is “the quality of being able to continue over a period of time” or “the quality of causing little or no damage to the environment and therefore able to continue for a long time” [2]. Whereas, the ecological definition of sustainability originated with the Brundtland Report in 1987 frames sustainable development as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs [7]. The report underlines the fact that in order to have sustainable development then economic, social and ecological processes should be interconnected.

The concept of sustainability has been introduced by the World Council of Churches in 1974. It was proposed by Western environmentalists in response to developing world objections to worrying about the environment when human beings in many parts of the world suffer from poverty and deprivation [1]. But were known and popular only by a small group of environmentalists and environmental economist [4]. Common people didn't really have the idea of what is being environmentally sustainable, lack of information disclosure was one of the reasons.

It is argued that we are presently depleting the ‘natural capital’ of the Earth and, as the green economist Herman Daly put it, treating the world as if it were a business in liquidation [2]. Air, food, water, soils and mineral, are natural resources that one day will have an end if we consume them at a rate that is higher than the capacity to restore itself, therefore, businesses' main objective in being sustainable is to incorporate natural capital in their decision-making. However, nothing lasts forever, being sustainable would also mean a life span that is consistent with the system's time and space scale [1].

Pollution happens in lots of different ways and can be categorized depending on the nature of the pollutant or the fraction of the environment concerned. It is viewed from different angles by different people but is commonly agreed to be the outcome of urban-industrial and technological revolution, rapacious and speedy exploitation of natural resources, increased rate of exchange of matter and energy, ever-increasing industrial wastes, urban effluents, and consumer goods [5]. Rapid industrialization, modernization and urban growth led to significant challenges that the world as a whole is facing every day.

Shutdown of cities with lower rate of outdoor activities, due to the pandemic situation we are currently living, resulted as lower human pressure on natural ecosystem. The virus has impacted not only on a healthiness point of view, but it also has impacts on biodiversity and sustainability. Satellite images of China, in fact, show improvements in air quality during the quarantine.

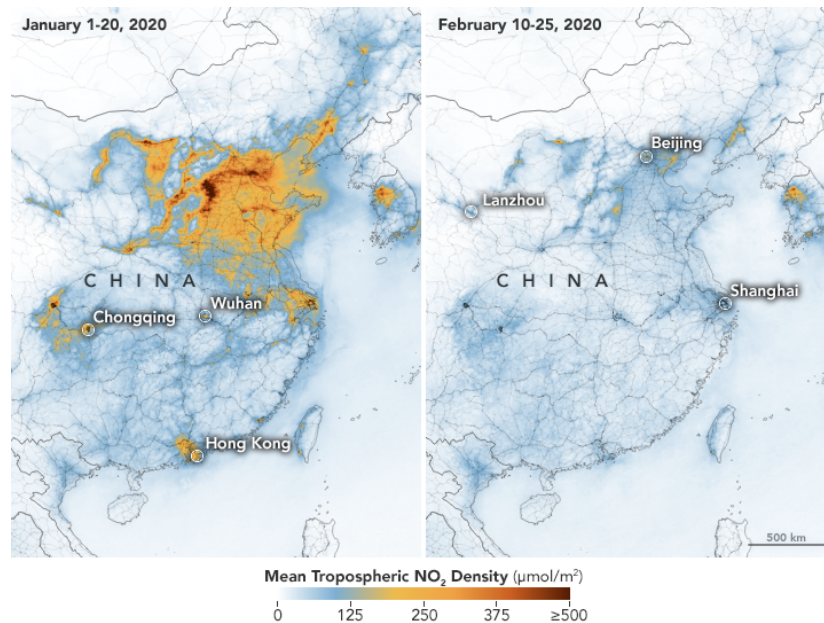


Figure 1: Concentrations of nitrogen dioxide across eastern China from January 1–20, 2020 (before the COVID-19 quarantine) and February 10–25 (during the quarantine).

These may be short-term improvements, because emissions will most likely rise to previous levels when economic activities recover, but they dramatically underline the pervasiveness and severity of anthropogenic impacts worldwide [6].

Nowadays, the term of sustainability is commonly used in different sectors and measured in several quantitative ways. We will discuss in fact on sustainable marketing in the next passage.

## 1.2. Sustainable Marketing

One of the sectors in which sustainability is operated, is marketing. Ethics here play a huge role; companies adopt sustainable marketing as a strategy to attract more customers offering an ethically better choice. The true socio-ecological product is one that becomes a consumer's first choice, since it meets consumption needs along with their need for healthy, sustainable physical environment. It is important to understand that customer's needs are not, nor should they be, in conflict with the environmental needs. In fact, people need and want to coexist with nature [8].

Marketing has evolved from a production concept, meaning that consumers will favour products that are available or highly affordable, to a sustainable marketing concept which is based on the idea that marketing should deliver value to customers in a way that maintains or improves the customer's and the society's well-being [13]. As of now, there are increasing numbers of companies that express their attention toward the ecological environment, including luxury brands, which have adapted their strategies concerning it.

Luxury companies, therefore, cannot avoid performing Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) actions. Yet, most of the majority of brands have created dedicated webpages to sustainability (as we will see further through chapter 2).

Researches has traditionally suggested that CSR is not a prominent factor in luxury consumer's decision-making. There could be conflicts on the meaning of luxury and CSR, thus, reducing consumers' perceived value of the product. This because luxury generally evokes hedonism, excess,

and ostentation, while CSR evokes, on the contrary, sobriety, moderation and ethics [14]. Nevertheless, a deeper analysis reveals that luxury and sustainable development converge, both focus on rarity and beauty. Beyond the brand exclusive image, luxury value is based on its objective rarity and high prices, which limits the demand and therefore, protects the future of resources. Another characteristic they have in common is durability. Luxury is managed with a “long term” perspective. Louis Vuitton provides after sales services to any genuine Louis Vuitton product, whenever it was bought, the same holds for Ferrari and other luxury brands [15]. Compared to fast fashion brands as H&M or Zara, this will indeed reduce waste of materials and provide lasting products. Accordingly, since luxury and CSR do not conflict with each other, and given luxury customers’ interest toward environmental impact, it is important that brands implement CSR’s strategy to strengthen marketing communication and increase competitiveness.

Millennials and Generation Z constitute the vast majority of driving factors in the luxury industry. In 2015, Nielsen’s global online study found that Millennials (defined as those born from 1977 to 1995) continue to be most willing to pay extra for sustainable offerings. The rise in the percentage of respondents aged 15 – 20, also known as Generation Z, who are willing to pay more for products and services that come from companies who are committed to positive social and environmental impact was also strong [11]. Younger generations nowadays have a new perspective for goods and brands, they prefer to spend more on products that are good for the environment and are more willing to establish a relationship with companies that use a claim plus a marketing sustainability approach. As luxury is a very visible sector with high public attraction, brands repositioned themselves, and followed the trend toward ethical and sustainable luxury.

Marketing strategies are usually regarding firms that gain profit while satisfying customer’s needs, a result known as the “win-win” outcome. The process concerns decisions about what products to make and how to offer them to customers. But determining the attributes of products, and the specific system through which they are made available to markets, also determines resources/energy use and waste generation patterns, the antecedents of pollution and ecosystem degradation [9]. Sustainable marketing, is therefore, an essential part of businesses’ strategy as it merges a company’s economic success with the environmental protection.

The “business as usual” model of marketing management, consists of target market, marketing mix, company resources and objectives, and external factors. Within this setting, managers make decisions that involve planning, implementing and controlling. The difference with the sustainable marketing management model is that it has “the natural or physical environment” as one of the external factors to delineate its influence on decisions and the need for marketing strategy to be compatible with ecosystem.

Additionally, in the business as usual, marketing management process decisions are focused on the immediate channel network; sustainable marketing instead extends decision boundaries to include the total set of organizations, functions, and activities that make up the product system cycle [12]. According to Gordon, Carrigan and Hastings, there are three ways in which sustainable marketing can be achieved:

- Green Marketing – Developing and marketing more sustainable products and services while introducing sustainability efforts at the core of the marketing and business process.
- Social Marketing – Using the power of upstream and downstream marketing interventions to encourage sustainable behaviour.

- Critical Marketing – Analyzing marketing using a critical theory-based approach to guide regulation and control and stimulate innovation in markets with a focus on sustainability, but moreover challenging some of the dominant institutions of the capitalist and marketing systems, to construct a more sustainable marketing discipline [10].

These three concepts are interdependent, they need to be pursued complementarily so that sustainable marketing becomes reality. Though these strategies the company differentiates itself against competitors and creates a more solid relationship with customers.

However, there is still lack of awareness, trust and understanding about sustainability among customers, for this reason it is important that companies may analyse deeply sustainability communication.

### 1.3. Sustainability communication

Communication is among the main activities of marketing; it has a key part in implementing the marketing mix as it consists in creating awareness and delivering, either directly or indirectly, the value proposition to the targeted consumers. Instead of traditional marketing communication concept, where there was an active sender and a passive receiver, marketing communication should focus more on the receivers and the meaning created by them in the communication process [16]. Due to the increasing media fragmentation and segmentation of consumer tastes and preferences, easier access to consumer databases and computational resources, the importance of reinforcing consumer loyalty via relationship marketing, and the importance of building and increasing a brand's image-based equity led to Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) [17], which is a more consumer-based communication tool.

IMC is founded on the idea of incorporating different communication disciplines into one marketing communication campaign with the aim of achieving outcomes desirable to the company, for example, persuading customers to buy [18]. It is done by using several innovative ways to deliver the message in the right way to the client. Buyers and sellers need to communicate simultaneously, letting consumers have a more active role in the process.

Since sustainability has emerged as an influential corporate strategy, communication here plays a crucial role. Environmental issues are typically characterized by high levels of *complexity* and *uncertainty*, if there is a lack of internal communication within an organization, it would be hard to implement the changes with respect to making the organization more sustainable. Increased communication and dialogue will enhance involvement of stakeholders to broaden the information basis. Whilst, lack of external communication with the customers can result in loss of sales [19]. Thus, transmission of information is important not only for delivering the right message to consumers but also for the organization itself.

Furthermore, communication is essential in order to reach a common understanding about societal values on sustainability and concrete goals that need to be pursued. Network-like forms of coordination that enable effective arguing, bargaining, and social learning are regarded as conducive to governing sustainable development [20].

Sustainability communication is a process of mutual understanding dealing with the future development of society at the core of which is a vision of sustainability and acts as an intermediate between human behaviour and environment. Theories that sustainability communication makes use of include psychology, sociology and systems theory [21]. It is a more transparent and honest way



to communicate, companies show that they are contributing in the creation of sustainable development.

Within this field of activity, there can be distinguished different perspectives: Communication about Sustainability (CaS), Communication of Sustainability (CoS) and Communication for Sustainability (CfS).

CaS involves the process in which information, interpretations, and opinions regarding sustainability issues are exchanged and debated in a horizontal way, that is, among many people of the same hierarchical level. CoS, on the contrary is an intentional transmission of information toward an objective and it is focused on a mono-directional, sender-receiver flow of communication. Scientists, NGOs, educators, companies, and journalists seek to gain the attention of decision makers or the wider public in order to provide information about sustainability-related phenomena. While CaS and CoS are more about the direction and the initiators of information flows, the main objective of CfS is to facilitate societal transformation towards the normative goals of sustainable development [19].

As a result, companies are now integrating sustainability communication in their strategies. It is a challenge especially to luxury brands since they tend to communicate little. Christine Borgoltz, corporate communications director of Cartier International, for instance, says: “In one way or another way, all luxury brands are giving to charities, but we don’t like to talk about it because we feel it is normal”. Cartier boutiques, headquarters and manufacturing locations in fact go through a continuous optimization process to reduce environmental footprint, but we do not see Cartier as a sustainable brand because consumer marketing makes little mention of that [24].

Luxury companies interested in fully embracing sustainability, should be able to clearly analyse and understand customer motivations then segment the market on the basis of the internalized versus externalized customers and then develop communication strategies. Once internalized consumers start appreciating sustainable luxury initiative, it is likely that also externalized consumers would do the same because the former ones are more mature in terms of their general approach to consumption. Nonetheless, the vast expansion of cultural outlets and media tools has given luxury companies more ways to connect with and attempt to influence the customer’s thoughts, perceptions, and aspirational desires [23]. Since customers may react in different ways, companies can choose to frame sustainability messages through various typologies of channel. It is important then, to choose the right method of communication to gain positive attitudes from the clients toward the brand.

### **1.3.1. Communication channels**

Both communication channels and tools play a critical role for businesses’ sustainability strategies. Channels refer to the methods through which the information is communicated to someone [26] or the means by which promotional communications are disseminated to the target market [27]. Managers face a wide range of communication channels through which to send their message, and customers’ preferences for them change over time as new means of communication are developed and become mainstream [25]. However, we can distinguish between personal communication and non-personal communication channels [34].

Personal communication channels are those in which two or more people communicate directly with one another [28], in fact people might communicate face to face (or person to audience), on the phone, through mail (or e-mail), or through an online “chat”. The receiver of marketing

communication may be more or less interested in sales offers depending on the volume of messages already received through each of the media channels. For example, a person who receives 100 e-mails of which mostly are sales offers, is less inclined to pay attention compared to another person who receives only few of them. The same holds for the other channels [29]. A further distinction can be drawn among: [30]

- Advocate channels, which consists of company hired salespeople. Personal selling indeed is included in this section. All industrial products, direct marketers, consumer goods and services use this channel to counter competition and sell their products;
- Expert channel, that refers of acknowledged individual promoting company's products. For instance, a firm manufacturing sustainability control equipment may get a leading expert on environment to speak to decision makers on the interested area and how the company is helping in sustainability;
- Social channel, that might be composed of friends, family members, neighbors or colleagues.

In the latter one, word of mouth (WOM) plays considerable effects. WOM refers to informal communications between private parties concerning evaluations of goods and services. Ernest Dichter's research from the mid-1960s revealed that consumers reject advertising messages because they feel threatened by the "cold commercialism" of the messages, but when they feel that the advertiser speaks as a friend, then it would be more acceptable as a recommendation [31, 32].

Non-personal communication channels are of the category of mass communication, messages are carried without a personal interaction with the target customer group. They include:

- Major media, that is distinguished furthermore in print media (newspapers, magazines, direct mail), broadcast media (radio, television), display media (billboards, signs, posters) and, online and electronic media via Internet (e-mail, companies' websites, online social and sharing networks).
- Atmospheres, that are intended as the conscious designing of space to create certain emotional effects in the buyer that enhance his purchase probability [33].
- Events, which are activities less formal aimed to create attention and interact with consumers. For example, public relations departments that arrange press conferences, public tours, shows and exhibits to communicate with specific audiences.

Although personal communication is often more effective than mass communication, mass media might be the major means of stimulating personal communication [34].

As sustainable actions guarantee luxury companies more visibility and better brand images, the choice of media used to promote products is crucial likewise in this market. Several luxury retailers use atmospheres method as communication channel, Faultrier (de) and Towers for this matter conceptualized the fashion store as the way in which the customer can experience brand identity based on specific materials, lighting and fittings designed for the brand and the products it offers [36]. Specifically, flagship stores fit to this aim. Despite of adding value through in-store services and entertainment activities, flagship store can be managed to act as communication channel about brand's commitment towards sustainability, that can be done for instance, with concrete green practices covering the management of energy, water and waste in the flagship store locations' operations [37].

In connection with nature-related messages, a research demonstrates that the strongest preference for receiving information is through personal experience, followed closely by watching

visual media through cable/satellite/network, and watching visual media online. The least preferred instead are recorded or live audio media and attending educational opportunities [25]. It is proven again that WOM is the most efficient way to spread information.

Moreover, costumers' preferences about channels may depend on many factors, such as demographics. Older people may in fact prefer to obtain their news from print newspaper and TV, while younger people are more likely to receive news using online channels [35]. In addition, Brunello Cuccinelli highlights the importance of online channels when stating that "before purchasing an 'expensive' item, the end customer gathers information online and in the press. Through the Internet everyone can see how we live and work, whether our business activities are causing harm to humanity" [23].

Although there are some communication channels that are not liked by the overall consumers, they may also be important for certain demographic audience as niche target customers.

### **1.3.2. Types of communication**

As we saw previously, communication skills are vital in building relationships and lead to an efficient workplace. On the basis of the channel chosen there are four main categories of communication typology: verbal, nonverbal, written and visual.

During the verbal or spoken communication a sender communicates its feelings, thoughts or opinions through speeches, dialogues or presentations, to a receiver. It is the most obvious and understandable among the categorization, as it is possible to adjust the message when communicating it depending on the audience's feedback. In a world where we do most is talking by email and text messages, spoken communication is a breath of fresh air [38]. Through verbal communication it is possible to interact directly with costumers, for this reason verbal skills are able to the most valuable and successful. Yet, combined with nonverbal communication it would be even more powerful.

Whereas verbal cues are definable by an explicit dictionary and by rules of syntax, there are not explicit rules for encoding or decoding nonverbal behaviours [39]. We are continuously communicating with our body language, whether we are aware or not, in fact during face to face interactions, all the nonverbal channels come to play. Body, face, voice, appearance, touch, distancing, timing, and physical surroundings all play a part in creating the total communication. These elements together give perception to the communicator or receiver on whether they are interest or not on the argument discussed. Even when there are not verbal exchanges, every encounter between two or more people is a potential nonverbal exchange. Nonverbal communication can help giving a better impression, they allow people to communicate with one another at them most basic level regardless cultural difference, forming a kind of universal language.

Consistently, written communication can have nonverbal feature because choosing not to interact in person with someone carries a message in itself [39]. The ever-increasing use of technological devices to communicate information means that the need for competent writing skills are rising as well. This is highlighted by the fact that lots of businesses establish and maintain relationships with customers and suppliers exclusively through the use of written communications. Advantages in using written forms of communication are that they can be edited and revised several times before they are sent so that the content can be shaped to maximum effect, similarly, recipients can take more time in reviewing the message and providing appropriate feedbacks [41].

According to Herta A. Murphy and Herbert W. Hildebrandt observed in *Effective Business Communications*, good communication should be complete, concise, clear, concrete, correct, considerate, and courteous [42], so that companies can reach the attention of audiences through story lines or case studies.

Visual communication graphically represents information to efficiently and effectively create meaning [44]. Graphs and charts usually reinforce written communication and can in many cases replace it altogether [43]. Along this typology of communication variety of visual elements and formats are used to develop a narrative to communicate more clearly with an audience, since people are hard-wired to process visual information both accurately and quickly [44]. This may be the reason why marketers claim that there was a 10.8% increase in visual content use from 2018 to 2019, and there will be more as 25% of marketers expect to spend between 10 and 20% of their budget in visual communication [45].

As long as marketing advisement are distributed mainly on Internet along with the fact that messages are primarily of visual components, learning and developing good communication skills on this field is on the basis of successful marketing strategies.

### **1.3.3. Abstract versus concrete**

Regardless on the type of communication, there can be identified different kinds of phraseology used during communication, namely abstract and concrete languages. Linguistic Category Model helps to better classify the proprieties of them. LMC identifies four different linguistic devices or categories that may be used to describe an event. The first category contains the descriptive action verbs (DAV), which give a non-interpretive concrete description of observable events with a clear beginning and end that involve mouth, foot, and hand (e.g. to hug). Second, interpretive action verbs (IAV) which provide a description and interpretation of the behavior (e.g., to help). The third category contains state verbs (SV) that refer to invisible states, such as respect, hate and love. The final category, the most abstract one, includes adjectives which describe qualifiers of people such as friendly and helpful [46, 47, 48].

Marketers use both abstract and concrete messages, however, when consumers are exposed to marketing messages, the impact of the message on the customers' behaviour can differ depending on whether an abstract versus a concrete product's message is processed differently in the consumer's mindset during the decision-making process.

In the context of language abstractness in WOM, studies of Schellekens et al. [49] demonstrate that consumers tend to be more willing to describe a purchased object using more abstract language if such experiences are congruent with their expectations, as well as that individuals with a persuasion goal (i.e., the goal to convince recipients about the quality of a product) describe their positive product experiences more abstractly than individuals without such a goal. On the other hand, concrete language is used more when expectations are incongruent with their purchases [48]. Moreover, a research explains that that consumers can render their recommendations more effective by adopting abstract or a concrete language depending on recipients' prior knowledge, presumably in both offline (e.g., face-to-face conversations) and online settings (e.g., service- focused forums or blogs vs. general review websites) [48]. Another research towards luxury brands suggest abstract language is more effective at increasing consumer's attitudes and willingness to buy when luxury products are characterized by lower brand prominence following by a more luxurious perception of those products [50].

In order to enhance effectiveness of marketing messages, companies should design the language used in communication on the basis of clear vision of targeted customers.

## 1.4 Circular economy

Circular economy (CE) concept is widely discussed among scholars and practitioners because it is viewed as an operation that helps businesses to achieve sustainable development [52]. According to the definition by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation [53], CE represents an industrial economy that is restorative or regenerative by intention and design. It can be described as a cycle in which companies, after having harvested resources from the environment and transformed them into products and services, recover them after the consumption [52], applying strategies of recycle or reuse. In addition to that, there are four principles on which circular economy is based: preservation of natural capital, optimization of the available resources, risk reduction and renewable flow of resources and products [54, 55]. Once the mentioned operations are accomplished, businesses can benefit economic advantages as material cost savings, reduced price volatility, improved security of supply and, most importantly there can be reduced environmental pressures and impacts [56].

Implementing circular economy, which consists in changing production and consumption models, would have impacts on environmental, social and economic aspects. This concept is illustrated more in detail by the Venn diagram shown below.

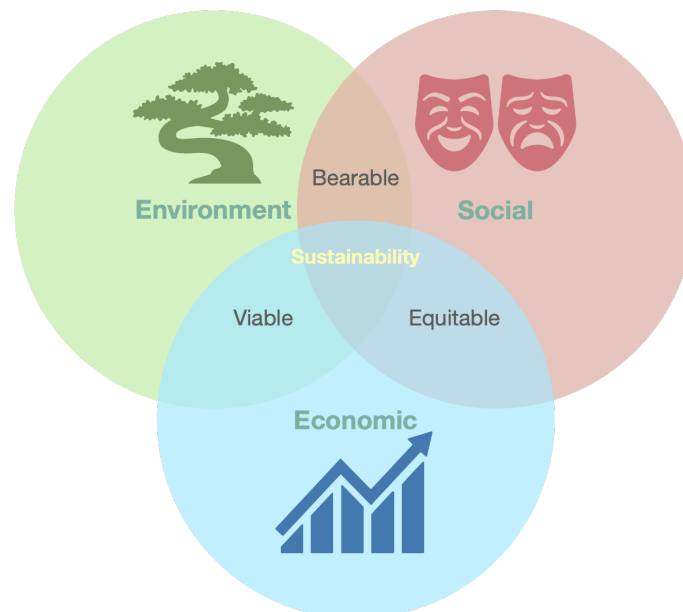


Figure 2: Sustainability's three pillar Venn diagram. Source: Author's own work.

In the view of Porter and van der Linde, this implies that the best choices are likely to remain those that meet the needs of society and are environmentally and economically viable, economically and socially equitable as well as socially and environmentally bearable [51]. Only through balancing these three elements we are able to achieve true sustainability and a truly circular economy.

There can be identified eight processes or models that go under the umbrella of circular economy, they can be classified furthermore into three main categories, namely, (i) using less primary resources, (ii) maintaining the highest value of materials and products, and (iii) changing utilization patterns [57]. The first category's main elements are:

- Recycling, which is the recovery and reprocessing of waste materials for use in new products. The basic phases in recycling are the collection of waste materials, their processing or manufacture into new products, and the purchase of those products, which may then themselves be recycled [58];
- Efficient use of resources, that means to use the Earth's limited resources in a sustainable manner while minimizing impacts on the environment. It allows us to create more with less and to deliver greater value with less input [59];
- Utilization of renewable energy sources, including solar, geothermal, hydro, wind, and biomass, that are intended to substitute fossil fuels [60].

Moreover, components of “maintaining the highest value of materials and products” are remanufacturing, refurbishment and re-use of products and components (in which used products are recovered after their use and are given a ‘next life’) together with product life extension. The two elements are interlinked with each other.

Finally, to change utilization patterns we need to have the concept of product as a service, sharing model and shifting in consumption patterns. Product as a service is a way in which companies maintain the ownership of the product in question and offers the customer access to the product [57], customers use products through a lease or pay-for-use arrangement versus the conventional buy-to-own approach. The sharing model is centered on the sharing of products and assets that have a low ownership or use rate. Companies that leverage this model can maximize the use of the products they sell, enhance productivity and value creation [61], an example of this model is car-sharing. Instead, changes in consumption patterns may be for instance to provide virtual versions of books in order to reduce paper consumptions.

The recycling process is not the same in every circumstance, in fact we can distinguish furthermore upcycling and downcycling processes depending on the effectiveness at renewing value and quality of the material in question [62].



*Figure 3: Three types of renewing value and quality of the material in question.*

The upcycling operation relates to the practice of taking something that is disposable and transforming it into something of greater use and value [63]. To achieve this concept, industries need to avoid the use of hazardous materials, recycle and up-cycle for continuous product life, decrease the use of energy and water, and pay fair wages to employees [64]. An example, in the textile industry, would be that of using scraps of clothes to create authentic goods that are valuable

for their design. The difference here with recycling is that, the latter one occurs when the waste materials are recycled again into the initial products, for this reason it is a closed-loop recycling [65]. Consequently, downcycling process is an open-loop recycling, where the recycled material is of lower quality and functionality than the original material, in fact it is considered a less desirable form of recycling [66]. The result of downcycling is, for example, the creation of cleaning rags out of clothing, or newspaper out of writing paper [62]. The only way to move from downcycling to recycling is to improve the quality of recycled aggregates by removing the impurities [65].

## Chapter 2. Empirical findings

*This chapter presents some study regarding brands' website pages that concentrate in the communication of sustainability. This will help us not only to understand how communication is done in reality but also how to improve it in order to influence more people to be sustainable.*

*Luxury brands have a great potential to play a fundamental role in spreading the cultivation of ecofriendly activities. The purpose of this chapter is, therefore, to examine which sustainable practices are luxury companies applying, the language used, whether it is abstract or concrete, and which one is the most used.*

### 2.1. Methodology

Fashion industry is the most polluting one after oil, however, luxury has the advantage of being purchased for longevity, rather than being temporary and disposable like their inexpensive counterparts [67].

The fact of communicating sustainability by luxury brands is not well explored, thus implies that a research is needed to fill this gap.

This study performs websites analysis to gather information about sustainability communication initiatives and it is organized in two phases. In the first phase there are selected 15 top-ranked brands, and corresponding 60 website pages, that comprehend both prestigious luxury companies, and other fashion companies, as well as e-retailer. Information are collected in an Excel file, where brands' sustainability related post category is considered, respectively coded as follows: (1) new sustainable product/fashion line; (2) company related sustainability action, such as water saving, ethical payment, ethical supply chain; (3) general message about sustainability for the stakeholders; (4) cause related marketing, such as buy one, donate money to plant a tree; (5) company sponsored event. If (1) is selected, each category then is classified based on the type of change adopted: (1) organic/biologic cotton/silk; (2) biologic leather/leather alternative material/fur-free; (3) recycled product; (4) upcycled product; (5) lyocell fibers; (6) re-nylon or recycled nylon; (7) biologic nylon; (8) solution applied to packaging; (9) water saving.

The second phase follows with a more detailed analysis of the messages displayed on the website in question, clearly indicating the items included (1=photo, 2=video, 3=statistical numbers, 4=text or 5=all of the above), if there are elements of nature or green in the post (1=yes, 0=no), number of words in the message, type of communication (1=verbal, 2=nonverbal, 3=written, 4=visual) and whether it is abstract (=1) or concrete (=2) language. Depending on the above results, the followings are calculated: average of how many messages related to general information about

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<sup>1</sup> See full Excel file at: [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1\\_EJc\\_3q3P3TkKFSIkMSztX2iMXYG\\_djF/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1_EJc_3q3P3TkKFSIkMSztX2iMXYG_djF/view?usp=sharing)

sustainability; average of words number in each message along total messages; percentage of written message.

Brand Name	Index: brand post	Brand post type	Type of new sustainable product (if 1 is chosen in brand post type)	Website	Language
		1=new sustainable product/fashion line	1= organic/biologic cotton/silk		1=English
		2= company related sustainability action (such as water saving, ethical payment, ethical supply chain....)	2= biologic leather/leather alternative material/ fur		2=Chinese
		3= general message about sustainability (protect the environment...)	3=recycled product		3=Italian
		4=cause related marketing (such as buy one, donate n	4=upcycled product		
		5=company sponsored event	5=Lyocell fibers		
			6=re-nylon or recycled nylon		
			7= biologic nylon		
			8=solutions applied on packaging		
			9=water saving		
Alibaba	1	1,2	3,8	<a href="https://esg.alibaba.com/group/environment.html">https://esg.alibaba.com/group/environment.html</a>	1
	2	2		<a href="https://www.alizila.com/ant-financial/">https://www.alizila.com/ant-financial/</a>	1,2
	3	1,5	3,8	<a href="https://www.alizila.com/alibaba-un-team-up-for-world-e">https://www.alizila.com/alibaba-un-team-up-for-world-e</a>	1
	4	2,5		<a href="https://www.alizila.com/video/communities-clean-and-g">https://www.alizila.com/video/communities-clean-and-g</a>	1
Stella McCartney	1	1	1,2,6	<a href="https://www.stellamccartney.com/experience/us/sustain">https://www.stellamccartney.com/experience/us/sustain</a>	1
	2	2		<a href="https://www.stellamccartney.com/experience/us/sustain">https://www.stellamccartney.com/experience/us/sustain</a>	1
	3	3		<a href="https://www.stellamccartney.com/experience/us/sustain">https://www.stellamccartney.com/experience/us/sustain</a>	1
	4	3		<a href="https://www.stellamccartney.com/experience/us/sustain">https://www.stellamccartney.com/experience/us/sustain</a>	1
Gucci	1	2		<a href="https://www.gucci.com/us/en/stories/gucci-equilibriu">https://www.gucci.com/us/en/stories/gucci-equilibriu</a>	1
	2	2		<a href="https://equilibrium.gucci.com/?utm_medium=gucci.com">https://equilibrium.gucci.com/?utm_medium=gucci.com</a>	1
	3	1	8	<a href="https://equilibrium.gucci.com/sustainable-packaging/?u">https://equilibrium.gucci.com/sustainable-packaging/?u</a>	1
Versace	1	2,3		<a href="https://www.versace.com/international/en/world-of-ver">https://www.versace.com/international/en/world-of-ver</a>	1
	2	2		<a href="https://www.versace.com/international/en/world-of-ver">https://www.versace.com/international/en/world-of-ver</a>	1
	3	2		<a href="https://www.versace.com/international/en/world-of-ver">https://www.versace.com/international/en/world-of-ver</a>	1
	4	2		<a href="https://www.versace.com/international/en/world-of-ver">https://www.versace.com/international/en/world-of-ver</a>	1
	5	3		<a href="https://www.versace.com/international/en/world-of-ver">https://www.versace.com/international/en/world-of-ver</a>	1
	6	2		<a href="https://www.versace.com/international/en/world-of-ver">https://www.versace.com/international/en/world-of-ver</a>	1
	7	2		<a href="https://www.versace.com/international/en/world-of-ver">https://www.versace.com/international/en/world-of-ver</a>	1
Giorgio Armani	1	3		<a href="https://www.armani.com/experience/en/corporate/soci">https://www.armani.com/experience/en/corporate/soci</a>	1
	2	2		<a href="https://www.armani.com/experience/en/corporate/soci">https://www.armani.com/experience/en/corporate/soci</a>	1
	3	2		<a href="https://www.armani.com/experience/en/corporate/soci">https://www.armani.com/experience/en/corporate/soci</a>	1
	4	2		<a href="https://www.armani.com/experience/en/corporate/soci">https://www.armani.com/experience/en/corporate/soci</a>	1
	5	2		<a href="https://www.armani.com/experience/en/corporate/soci">https://www.armani.com/experience/en/corporate/soci</a>	1
	6	1	2,3	<a href="https://www.armani.com/experience/en/corporate/soci">https://www.armani.com/experience/en/corporate/soci</a>	1
PRADA Group	1	3		<a href="https://www.pradagroup.com/en/sustainability/prada-in">https://www.pradagroup.com/en/sustainability/prada-in</a>	1
	2	3		<a href="https://www.pradagroup.com/en/sustainability/prada-in">https://www.pradagroup.com/en/sustainability/prada-in</a>	1
	3	3		<a href="https://www.pradagroup.com/en/sustainability/prada-in">https://www.pradagroup.com/en/sustainability/prada-in</a>	1
	4	2		<a href="https://www.pradagroup.com/en/sustainability/prada-in">https://www.pradagroup.com/en/sustainability/prada-in</a>	1
	5	2		<a href="https://www.pradagroup.com/en/sustainability/prada-in">https://www.pradagroup.com/en/sustainability/prada-in</a>	1
	6	2		<a href="https://www.pradagroup.com/en/sustainability/environi">https://www.pradagroup.com/en/sustainability/environi</a>	1
	7	2		<a href="https://www.pradagroup.com/en/sustainability/environi">https://www.pradagroup.com/en/sustainability/environi</a>	1
	8	1	2	<a href="https://www.pradagroup.com/en/sustainability/environi">https://www.pradagroup.com/en/sustainability/environi</a>	1
	9	1	6	<a href="https://www.pradagroup.com/en/sustainability/environi">https://www.pradagroup.com/en/sustainability/environi</a>	1
	10	2		<a href="https://www.pradagroup.com/en/sustainability/environi">https://www.pradagroup.com/en/sustainability/environi</a>	1
Burberry	1	1,3,5	1,2,3,6,8	<a href="https://it.burberry.com/scopri-reburberry/">https://it.burberry.com/scopri-reburberry/</a>	3
Lush	1			<a href="https://www.lushusa.com/stories/article_our-values-nak">https://www.lushusa.com/stories/article_our-values-nak</a>	1
	2	2,4		<a href="https://it.lush.com/article/riciclando-ciclo-continuo">https://it.lush.com/article/riciclando-ciclo-continuo</a>	3
	3	1	2	<a href="https://uk.lush.com/plastic-free">https://uk.lush.com/plastic-free</a>	1
	4	1,3	3	<a href="https://uk.lush.com/plastic-free/all-products">https://uk.lush.com/plastic-free/all-products</a>	1
Toms	1			<a href="https://www.toms.com/environment">https://www.toms.com/environment</a>	1
	2	1,2,3	1,2,3,5,6	<a href="https://www.toms.com/impact">https://www.toms.com/impact</a>	1
Adidas	1			<a href="https://www.adidas.com/us/sustainability">https://www.adidas.com/us/sustainability</a>	1
	2	1,3	3	<a href="https://www.adidas.com/us/sustainability-recycled-poly">https://www.adidas.com/us/sustainability-recycled-poly</a>	1
	3	1	3	<a href="https://www.adidas.com/us/futurecraft">https://www.adidas.com/us/futurecraft</a>	1
	4	1,5	3	<a href="https://www.adidas.com/us/sustainability-parley-ocean-w">https://www.adidas.com/us/sustainability-parley-ocean-w</a>	1
	5	1,2,3	3	<a href="https://www.adidas.com/us/blog/455918.adidas-x-parle">https://www.adidas.com/us/blog/455918.adidas-x-parle</a>	1
	6	2,5		<a href="https://www.adidas.com/us/runfortheoceans">https://www.adidas.com/us/runfortheoceans</a>	1
		2,5			1
Kiehl's	1			<a href="https://www.kiehls.com/made-better">https://www.kiehls.com/made-better</a>	1
	2	1,2	3,8	<a href="https://www.kiehls.com/recycle-and-be-rewarded">https://www.kiehls.com/recycle-and-be-rewarded</a>	1
	3	4		<a href="https://www.kiehls.com/environmental-consciousness-a">https://www.kiehls.com/environmental-consciousness-a</a>	1
Maggie Marilyn	1			<a href="https://www.kiehls.com/environmental-consciousness-a">https://www.kiehls.com/environmental-consciousness-a</a>	1
	2	1,3	3	<a href="https://maggiemarilyn.com/pages/somewhere">https://maggiemarilyn.com/pages/somewhere</a>	1
	3	1,2	3,8	<a href="https://maggiemarilyn.com/pages/planet">https://maggiemarilyn.com/pages/planet</a>	1
		3		<a href="https://maggiemarilyn.com/pages/language">https://maggiemarilyn.com/pages/language</a>	1
Levi's	1			<a href="https://www.levi.com/IT/en/features/waterless?ab=nav_f">https://www.levi.com/IT/en/features/waterless?ab=nav_f</a>	1
	2	1,2,3	9	<a href="https://www.levi.com/IT/en/features/wellthread?ab=nav">https://www.levi.com/IT/en/features/wellthread?ab=nav</a>	1
Estée Lauder Companie	1		3	<a href="https://www.levi.com/IT/en/features/wellthread?ab=nav">https://www.levi.com/IT/en/features/wellthread?ab=nav</a>	1
	2	2		<a href="https://www.elcompanies.com/en/our-commitments/su">https://www.elcompanies.com/en/our-commitments/su</a>	1
	3	2		<a href="https://www.elcompanies.com/en/our-commitments/su">https://www.elcompanies.com/en/our-commitments/su</a>	1
	4	2		<a href="https://www.elcompanies.com/en/our-commitments/su">https://www.elcompanies.com/en/our-commitments/su</a>	1
		2		<a href="https://www.elcompanies.com/en/our-commitments/su">https://www.elcompanies.com/en/our-commitments/su</a>	1
Apple	1			<a href="https://www.apple.com/environment/">https://www.apple.com/environment/</a>	1
	2	1	3		1
Average message dedic	4,066666667				
Average words number	233,6191115				
%written message	80%				

Figure 4: Summary table. Source: Author's own elaboration.



In the next paragraph we will see which brands are analyzed and select a sample of the most relevant ones to discuss on, to a better understanding of how companies are acting.

### **2.1.1. Brand analyzed**

The selection of brands is based on different criteria, in fact most of the companies chosen are: (i) prestigious luxury brands; (ii) medium and large sized; (iii) well known for their sustainability actions; (iv) fashion brands; (v) have environmental and social regulations. Correspondingly, they are Alibaba, Stella McCartney, Gucci, Versace, Giorgio Armani, Prada Group, Burberry, Lush, Toms, Adidas, Kiehl's, Maggie Marilyn, Levi's, Estée Lauder and Apple. Some of them are reviewed below to gain insights on how companies are now operating towards sustainability.

#### **Stella McCartney**

Stella McCartney was born and raised in London and the English countryside, then graduated from Central St. Martins in 1995 and launched her own fashion house under her name in a partnership with Kering, a global Luxury Group. The first collection was shown in Paris in October 2001, now Stella McCartney operates 51 freestanding stores and her collections are distributed in 77 countries through 863 doors including specialty shops, and department stores, as well as shipping to 100 countries online [69].

As said on the brand's Sustainability Mission Statement, the company is committed to be modern and responsible for the resources it uses as they have impacts on the environment. "We challenge and push boundaries to make luxurious products in a way that is fit for the world we live in today and the future: beautiful and sustainable"[70]. As a matter of facts, the company never uses leather or fur, selects new alternative materials, utilizes cutting edge technologies, pushes towards circularity, protects ancient and endangered forests and measures their impact with innovative tools such as the Environmental Profit and Loss (EP&L). The EP&L measures the environmental impacts from the greenhouse, such as gas emissions, water use, water pollution, land use, air pollution and waste across the entire global supply chain and converts the impacts into monetary value to better understand the hidden benefits and costs. This allowed the company to make important decisions related to, for instance, the selection of raw materials. The EP&L in 2014 in fact revealed that although cashmere represented only 0.1% of the materials used in the collections, it accounted for 42% of the total environmental impact at the raw material stage. This insight led to the end of virgin cashmere utilization and change to reengineered cashmere yarn [71].

The main sustainable action the company relies on is circularity, which is based on renewable materials that are furthermore classified into technical and biological materials. Technical materials are inorganic or synthetic materials manufactured by humans – such as nylon, polyester, plastics and metals – when optimally recycled they can be used many times over without any loss in quality. Biological materials instead, refer to natural ones that when manufactured for the circular economy can safely decompose into the natural environment (soil, water, etc.) without affecting it in a negative way [72].

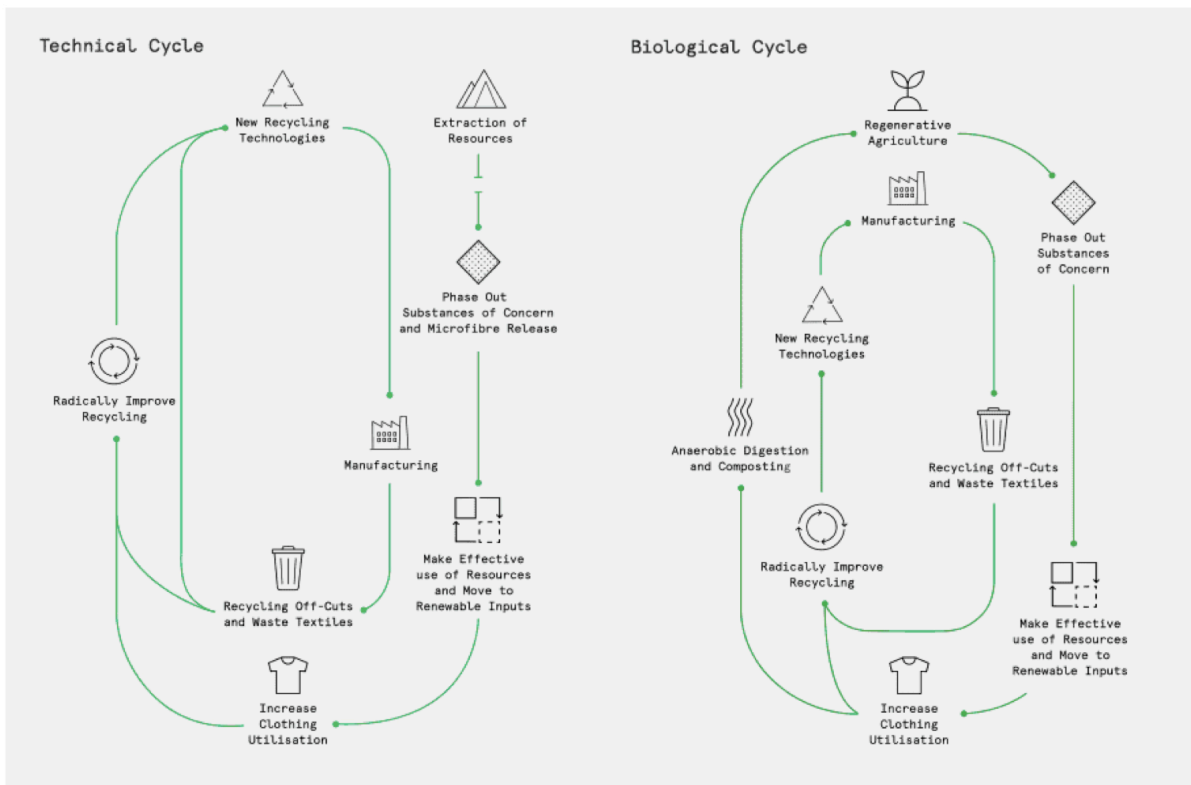


Figure 5: Technical cycle and Biological cycle. Source: StellaMcCartney.com

## Gucci

Another Kering brand, Gucci, is also leading in sustainability. Gucci was founded in 1921 and for the last century it has been the symbol of elegance, creativity, craftsmanship, and Made in Italy [23].

Operating sustainability means to Gucci generating positive change for people and our planet, for this reason in 2018 Gucci Equilibrium has been launched. The website has the objective of connecting people, planet and purpose. It is part of the company’s 10-year “Culture of Purpose” sustainability strategy which started in 2015 and include [73]:

- Promoting diversity and gender parity;
- Supporting the continuation of craftsmanship traditions;
- Offering a sustainable and caring working environment;
- Contributing to positive social impacts and supporting transformation across the entire supply chain;
- Reducing company’s total environmental footprint;
- Decreasing greenhouse gas emissions as well as transportation and distribution, business flights, fuel and energy related emissions. Further, reducing additional emissions from purchased goods and services;
- Attaining 100% traceability for our raw materials and 100% alignment with parent company Kering;
- Using 100% renewable energy;
- Developing new eco-friendly sourcing solutions, raw materials and processes by applying disruptive innovation.

Gucci was one of the first brands to use EP&L accounting and started to publish its annual results externally as part of the Kering Group in 2015 to provide even more transparency. 2019 EP&L results revealed that emissions decreased by 18% compared to 2018 and total impacts decreased likewise by 21%, relative to growth. The resulting outcomes are directly linked to sustainable improvements such as the increased use of recycled raw materials and organic fibers in the collections and incorporating responsibly sourced precious metals, like 100% ethical gold for jewelry; extent of sustainable processes and manufacturing efficiencies, like Gucci Scrap-less program for leather and Gucci-up program for circulatory (where leather and textile offcuts are upcycled); and switch to green energy.

### **Giorgio Armani**

Giorgio Armani company was founded in 1975 and embodies itself as an icon of elegance, practicality and modernity, but also the essence of “Made in Italy”, capable of combining timeless style with a farsighted vision trained on the future. Today, the company has several brands with a view to better responding to the wants and needs of the various target customer segments. Namely, Giorgio Armani Privé, Armani Casa, Emporio Armani, EA7, AX, Armani Fiori, Armani Hotels & Resorts, Giorgio Armani beauty and Armani Dolci.

As the attention to environmental and social sustainability-related themes is increasing in every sector, the Armani Group's response to these influencing factors is to integrate sustainability criteria into the company's strategic decisions and choices, while expanding or enhancing its product offerings with innovative products yet without compromising the creative process undergirding their production. In order to do that the company relies on the CSR and since 2016 the group has abandoned the use of animal fur in its collections. Selection of raw materials is in fact important to the company, in 2018 the Group's collections introduced a variety of products that use innovative materials, such as cotton from Africa with the goal of improve the lives and living conditions of cotton farmers in sub-Saharan Africa, here, cultivation ensures the maintenance of soil fertility and protection of water courses, through responsible pesticide and fertilizer use; denim made with chitosan, a natural non-toxic and biodegradable polysaccharide; cashmere flakes, special because of exclusive filling of cashmere material which constitutes a valid alternative to goose down [75].

## **2.2. Results**

Among the 60 website pages considered, some of them are adopting the best sustainable practices but are not communicating much, and some others are over-communicating but haven't adopted much ecofriendly activities or are considered not good enough

There can be observed that most of the companies have sustainability landing pages on the main website itself, instead, a minority conduct the reader to another page. For instance, there is little about sustainability on the webpage of Gucci, to understand more about their ecofriendly activities we should then visit a dedicated webpage, namely <http://equilibrium.gucci.com>. There are differences also on where companies choose to place the link destined to sustainability. The most popular destination is on bottom of the page or under the World of “brand name” and Stories section, only a few have a section dedicated on top of the website or in the scrollable menu, and the ones who have direct messages about green on the frontpage is even of smaller minority. For

customers who are not interested in understanding actions of companies, placing sustainability related contents on bottom of the webpage won't be efficient in terms of attracting people and raise awareness on the topic. Therefore, it would be more relevant in the way as Maggie Marilyn is doing, launching messages directly on the frontpage but having dedicated pages as well.

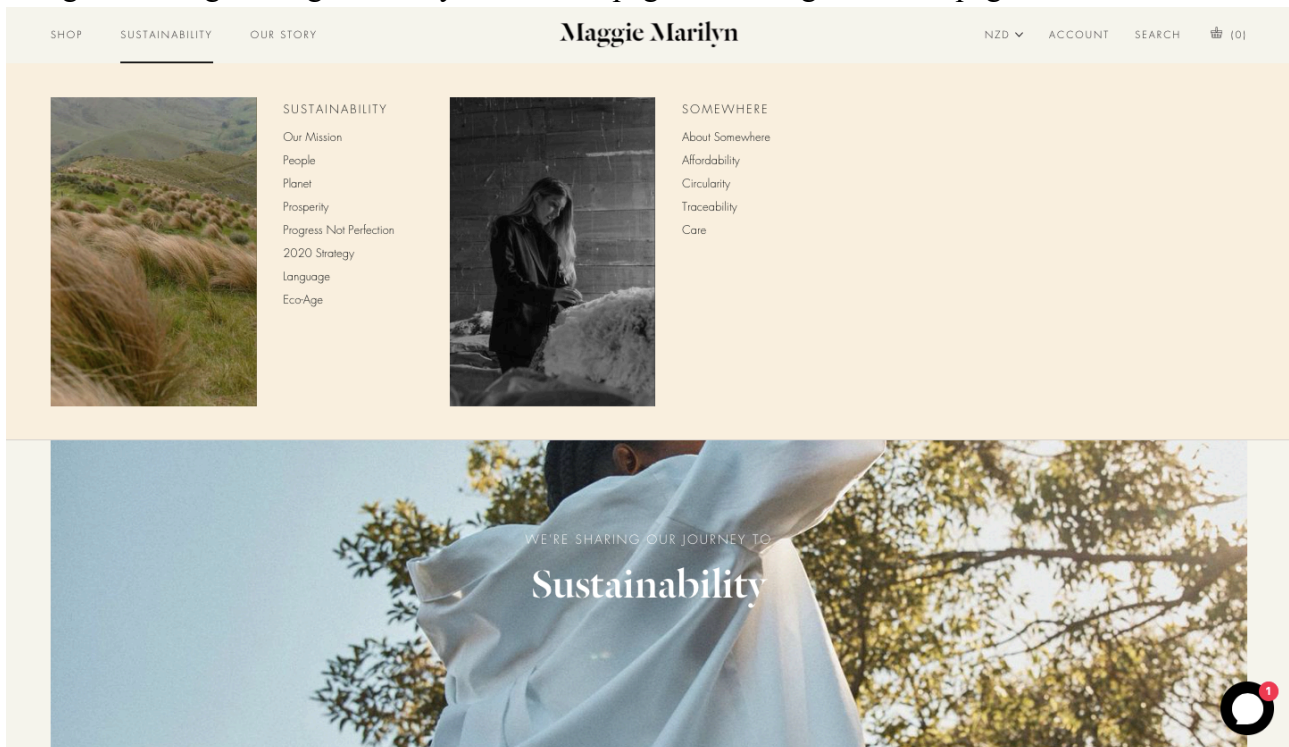


Figure 6: Maggie Marilyn website homepage

Most of the environmental arguments treated among the brand sample consist in communicating transparently the sustainable practices, this goes under the category of (2) company related sustainability action, such as water saving, ethical payment, ethical supply chain, which is present in 58% of the website pages taken in consideration. Specifically, the topics regard mostly reducing footprint, so, developing energy-savings solutions within the warehouses, offices, store and internal manufacturing, the selection of renewable/recycled raw materials and responsible packaging. Whilst, a lower percentage of 25% give definitions about sustainability in a manner that includes company's perspective towards it, this goes under the category of (3) general message about sustainability for the stakeholders.

Regarding the language used to communicate – whether it is concrete or abstract – the analysis on the single messages show that concrete language is the predominant one, it is used in communicating the actual operations on sustainability and description of products, whereas, abstract language is more used to express brand's concept and values, such as “Being a luxury brand, Prada believes a lot in culture, which is the only way to letting people understand deeply sustainability” . Since sustainability is usually in a context of uncertainty, it has already a lot of abstract attributes in itself, from a managerial point of view it would be more relevant for the consumer if concrete attributes of actions are associated in the message.

The number of words contained in the message would help to understand if the brand is conducting an effective communication. If the text is too long most people won't be willing to read it, a reader wants to be informed, not feel like the writing is rambling to the point [68]. Considering that the average of words number does not exceed 234 words per message, the above statement is

coherent to the research, companies, thus, are trying to deliver the message as efficiently as they can, reducing number of words and delineating the key concepts.

According to the analysis, 80% of messages among those taken in consideration are broadcasted using texts, in most of the cases accompanied with photos, while videos and statistical numbers occupy the minority. Therefore, the principal typology of communication (1.3.2. Types of communication) used from businesses to communicate sustainability related information is written together with visual.

By studying the meaningful attention towards sustainability and changes applied in the luxury industry, it is perceived that more can be done in communication strategies. As we saw in the first chapter, it is important that companies communicate both internally and externally, in this case, there are some gaps in external communication. Despite of improving web-based communication, a great effort can be made also in other aspects of nonpersonal communication, specifically, organizing events and investing more in atmosphere, such that brands beyond promoting sustainability, can also become closer to customers.

Overall, a positive side benefit of corporate sustainability communications in the context of luxury is that a large number of consumers are cultivating awareness towards a more sustainable consumption, which is benevolent to the world as a whole.

## Conclusion

Thought this work it was possible to understand what sustainability is in general, and that it can influence different areas such as marketing. In this context we saw how it evolved from a production concept marketing to a sustainable and consumer based one. Then, we comprehended that communication can be seen in different perspectives, namely, CaS, CoS and CfS.

One of the main important aspects we saw among the different communication channels described, is that WOM has great capacity of influence among customers. However, as long as marketing advertisement are spread on the Net, it is fundamental to improve skills in this mass communication as well.

We deepened our insight about abstract and concrete language though an empirical research, which results demonstrate that concrete language is the mostly used among the messages taken into consideration. According to economics of information theory, consumers tend to be more skeptical of subjective (e.g. eco-friendly) claims than of objective (e.g. no plastic) claims [76].

It is difficult to understand whether sustainable actions practiced are the best, a system can only be known to be sustainable after there has been time to observe if the prediction holds true because usually there is so much uncertainty in estimating natural rates of renewal [1]. Nevertheless, this work hopes to be helpful in allowing companies maximize both their sustainability and strategic business goals efficiently, through which it is possible to stimulate sustainable consumer behavior change.

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