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Green marketing: an analysis of sustainable criteria in fashion brands

Marketing verde: análise de critérios sustentáveis em marcas de moda

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Abstract

The search for sustainable products emerged after consumers' interest in this type of product. Thus, these individuals have sought to know what fashion brands have been causing in the social, economic, and ecological spheres. Through this action, companies have begun something called green marketing, which aims to disclose the contributions companies choose to reduce these impacts. This article focuses on analyzing the criteria that point out and evaluate which brands have marketing that does not match their reality. The objectives were to research concepts of green marketing, sustainable fashion, and criteria for defining sustainable brands by analyzing their communication forms and seeking broad information through exploratory, descriptive, and bibliographic research and a case study. We observed that some brands have the best grades in this regard due to their interest and care for sustainable issues. Our findings also showed that sustainable criteria are indicators that help consumers find brands that have honest green marketing, regardless of the market they are in.

Keywords: fashion; sustainability; green marketing; sustainable fashion.

Resumo

A busca por produtos sustentáveis surgiu após o interesse dos consumidores por esse tipo de produto. Assim, procuraram saber o que as marcas de moda estavam causando no meio social, econômico e ecológico. Através dessa ação surgiu o marketing verde, que possui a função de divulgar as contribuições que as empresas estão escolhendo para diminuir esses impactos. Assim, o presente artigo concentra- se em analisar os critérios que apontem e avaliem quais marcas possuem um marketing que não condiz com a realidade. Os objetivos foram pesquisar conceitos de marketing verde, moda sustentável e critérios para definição de marcas sustentáveis, analisando as formas de comunicação delas, buscando as informações de uma forma ampla através de pesquisas exploratórias, descritivas, bibliográficas e com estudo de caso. Observou-se que algumas marcas possuem as melhores notas nesse quesito, devido ao interesse e cuidado com questões sustentáveis. Conclui-se também que os critérios sustentáveis são indicadores que auxiliam os consumidores a encontrarem marcas que possuem marketing verde honesto, independente do mercado em que se apresentam.

Palavras-chave: moda; sustentabilidade; marketing verde; moda sustentável.

1. INTRODUCTION

Due to globalization, an increase in consumerism originated, consequently generating a greater waste of natural resources. As a result, brands realized that the search for a more conscious fashion had gained space in the market and, thus, in order not to have disadvantages in relation to their competitors, they decided to propagate green marketing, showing the acceptance of a clean production (SALVI; SCHULTE, 2014).

Guimarães, Viana, and Costa (2015) reported that green marketing has great value as it promotes healthy competition among companies, extends resources for the long term, and helps society with cultural and educational issues. Hence, fashion has been using green marketing to promote its products; however, as a result, it can implant an image disconnected from the concept of sustainability. Thus, the question sought to be answered was: "How do fashion brands that use green marketing meet the sustainability criteria?"

Some brands, such as Nike, Levi's, Adidas, Gap, and Zara, have been accused of having suppliers in China illegally discarding polluted water (PORTUGAL TÊXTIL, 2017). The portal also reports that after washing clothes with polyester in China, 15–31% of the 9.5 million tons of plastic microparticles discarded into the oceans come from the textile and automotive industries (PORTUGAL TÊXTIL, 2017).

Therefore, this study aimed to verify if the fashion brands that promote green marketing are truly concerned with the environmental and social impact of their productions, describing their framework or not in the concept of sustainable fashion. With that, the specific objectives of the article were to: research the concept of green marketing and sustainable fashion, research the criteria defined for a brand to be considered sustainable, select fashion brands that disclose green marketing, and analyze the communication and information disclosed by the brand to verify if they meet the studied sustainability criteria.

Through these specific objectives, it was possible to conclude which brands have clean production and fully understand the concepts of sustainable fashion and green marketing used so that they can serve as consumer criteria in the future.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

To present a greater foundation, it was necessary to shed more light on the vision of several authors about the meaning of sustainable fashion and green marketing and which criteria are used to determine whether the brands have a clean and sustainable production.

2.1 Green marketing

Green marketing is directly linked to clean measures (i.e., sustainable measures), and this type of marketing is used by companies that publicize the sustainable movements they apply in their production, packaging, or sales. Souza and Benevides (2005) reported that green marketing arose to disseminate products or services that contribute to a pollution-free environment. Through this type of advertising, the objective is to value, explain, and communicate, to their consumers, the efforts of these companies to preserve nature.

According to the same authors, ecological marketing must seek the understanding of environmental demands responsibly and sustainably (SOUZA, BENEVIDES, 2005). For Gonzaga (2005, p. 365–366), it is possible to

constitute production that reduces pollution in the world through green marketing and present advertisements with social changes that affect consumption practices. Kotler and Armstrong (1998, p. 481) stated that green marketing is "[...] the development of ecologically safer products, recyclable and biodegradable packaging, greater pollution control, and more energetic and efficient operations."

The same authors also believed that the companies that employ this type of marketing must include the "[...] management of the three Rs in terms of waste: reduce, reuse, and recycle" in their production processes (KOT-LER; ARMSTRONG, 1998, p.480). Hence, it is more than producing products with sustainable processes; the goal is, through green marketing, for companies to take clean attitudes in internal processes, that is, to manage an education about sustainability to employees, find ways to reduce the disposal of waste, and products, among other aspects.

2.2 Sustainable fashion

Historically, production in large quantities has always relied on abundant raw materials and energy; this is still present today, showing that consumption patterns are one of the factors responsible for the environmental crisis (PORTILHO, 2005). Given this dilemma, a manifesto in search of sustainability emerged.

Today, sustainable fashion must consider three relevant areas: society (which must focus on social property rights), the environment (which, in turn, must focus on ecological stability), and the economy (whose focus must be centered on economic stability). Designers encounter challenges in differentiating these three aspects responsibly and taking a holistic approach to sustainability. (GWILT, 2014, p.22)

According to Zanirato (2013), a way to produce sustainable fashion is by eliminating chemicals and fertilizers in fabric production, reusing and saving water, and advising against using chemicals poured into the soil, water, and air. Araújo (2014) agreed that sustainable fashion is indispensable because the fashion industry is one of the most responsible perpetrators of environmental damage.

With this, sustainable fashion assists sustainability, which continues to be sought after as a quality of life, including living in a healthier environment with personal community values that prioritize natural resources (BERLIM, 2012).

2.3 Sustainable criteria

The goal of some companies is to develop green production. According to Gwilt (2014), the fashion industry must follow some sustainable strategies, such as minimizing and using resources with a low environmental impact, reducing the consequences caused during use, and increasing product life. For Salvi and Schulte (2014), one criterion considered sustainable that a company must obtain is the decision to acquire green seals. These seals aim to identify to the consumer that such a product presents sustainable processes based on the defense of the three Ps: people, profit, and planet.

Products with slow fashion initiative and superior quality enter as sustainable criteria addressed by Araújo (2014), who emphasized the importance of products that present aspects of tailoring, aiming at the craftsmanship. Another point is the valorization of upcycling, which aims to transform products or materials in disuse into new products (i.e., this action encourages a new destination for that product that would be discarded).

The same author cites handmade products as a sustainability criterion and highlights using recycled materials in manufacturing products (ARAÚJO, 2014). It is noticeable that the author praises small businesses and local manufacturing in each region. For larger companies, the use of green seals stands out, in which each company has the option of choosing which requirements companies wish to meet to obtain the seal.

Thus, through the authors' analyses, the sustainability criteria for fashion brands included: decreasing the use of resources that generate environmental impact, acquiring green stamps, encouraging slow fashion products with superior quality, valuing upcycling, using recycled materials in product manufacturing, praising local manufacturing, seeking products with aspects of tailoring or aimed at craftsmanship, and valuing sustainability by emphasizing social, environmental, and economic aspects.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to analyze the green marketing of fashion brands; therefore, exploratory and descriptive research was necessary. According to Gil (2008), exploratory research aims to clarify concepts and ideas, providing a complete view and emphasizing a certain fact; descriptive research aims to study the characteristics of a certain group.

Throughout the process, information was needed that came from employing bibliographic research (i.e., extracted from books and scientific articles). Gil (2008) stated the advantage of this type of research lies in the fact that a broader range of phenomena can be found compared to a survey done directly.

Documental research was also carried out, dealing with official documents, newspa-

per reports, films, and others. According to Gil (2008), this type of study did not receive any detailed treatment, as cited above, or received some previous treatment (e.g., research reports and statistical tables).

We also applied the case study, which according to Gil (2008), is a method of obtaining detailed and comprehensive knowledge to describe situations in the context where a certain investigation will be carried out, explaining the causal variables of a certain phenomenon in very complex situations that do not allow one to use surveys and experiments.

With the data obtained, an analysis of the brand's communication and information was carried out, which enabled us to verify whether they meet the sustainability criteria researched and studied.

4. RESULTS

Based on the concepts studied about green marketing, fashion, and sustainable criteria, some brands were selected to be analyzed, checking if they had any unsustainability in their communication and/or production. Five brands were chosen: Zara and H&M, which are among the fast fashions with greater international recognition; Adidas, famous for its sports line, has been casually gaining more and more space; G-Star Raw, a brand specialized in the jeans business; and lastly, Gucci, which is among the world's leading fashion brands. The choice for a diversified sample aimed to exemplify the various sectors existing in the textile industry. With this, it was possible to collect data for the aforementioned analysis through research into the sustainable history of the selected companies.

4.1 Zara

Zara has been in the market for 45 years. It is part of the Inditex group, which contains eight other brands: Pull & Bear, Massimo Dutti, Bershka, Stradivarius, Oysho, Zara Home and Uterqüe. Zara currently works with collections for women, men, and children, and as a way of advertising, it discloses the keywords beauty, clarity, functionality, and sustainability as its values (INDITEX, 2020).

Regarding the term sustainability, the Inditex group has invested in eco-stores and a cycle that involves the collection of used clothes, providing a longer useful life for the garments. In this way, the brand has also implemented a system that allows controlling the lights and air conditioning of the stores as needed, reducing CO₂ emissions. The group's website indicates that the company is exemplary in production, not discarding any type of chemical harmful to the environment (IN-DITEX, 2020).

In addition, Inditex's website highlights, in a separate tab, "Our Commitment to the Environment," where it addresses the issue of sustainability in the following areas: water, climate change, energy, biodiversity, and closing the loop (INDITEX, 2020). Long into 2023, Zara seeks to work with fibers that follow the required environmental standards and develop more sustainable packaging so that the brand can eliminate plastic use in this process (ZARA, 2020). Another measure to be implemented is using reused or recycled materials in all departments, reducing waste (ÉPOCA NEGÓCIOS, 2019). By 2025, the goal is for all cotton and linen to be sustainable and for polyester to be recyclable; 80% of energy will come from renewable sources, and all plastic will be reused for other functions (ZARA, 2020).

In addition to environmental measures, Zara supports organizations that help communities with projects focused on social welfare, education, and humanitarian aid. Regarding the production part, Zara guarantees that all Join Life products can be traced, informing where and who produced them (ZARA, 2020). Despite having an impeccable list of sustainable measures, Zara has made negative headlines for several years. One situation occurred in 2011 when the brand was accused of having irregular labor in one of its factories in São Paulo State. The Regional Superintendence of Labor and Employment of São Paulo (SRTE/SP) investigated the case, which found workers working over 16 hours a day and being forbidden from leaving the premises without their superiors' authorization (IDEC, 2011).

Another problem Zara encountered was a manifesto by Greenpeace in front of stores in France, Germany, Spain, Mexico, and Sweden, accusing the company of using harmful substances in its garments. The negative campaign came after a publication made by Greenpeace's report, "The toxic fashion of fashion," showing that some products of the world's most famous brands could cause some kind of cancer or affect human reproduction (EXAME, 2012).

4.2 H&M

H&M began its history as Hennes, a name that means "theirs" in Swedish, to present a frequently updated fashion at an affordable price. Soon after becoming successful among women, the M was added to the brand to represent the line of men, babies, children, and young people, thus emerging the well-known H&M (H&M GROUP, 2020).

In summary, the group's values include collectivism, diversity, trust, entrepreneurship, cost-consciousness, constant improvement, open-mindedness, honesty, and simplicity (H&M GROUP, 2020). In terms of sustainability, the organization published its Transparency Index in the week of Fashion Revolution (2020). The assessment was based on shares about sourcing, environmental practices, and social commitments. Among 250 brands and retailers, the H&M group ranked first in transparency, achieving a 73% out of 100% (FFW, 2020).

A company that has a score equal to or higher than H&M:

It discloses most of its human rights policies, procedures, goals, and social and environmental information about its governance processes, as well as makes public detailed supplier lists for manufacturers and raw material suppliers. (FFW, 2020).

The brand's website highlights sustainability, including the transparency cited in the Fashion Revolution survey. For example, H&M created the Conscious collection in 2019, presenting the sale of pieces with organic, recycled, and sustainable materials with meaning, thinking about tomorrow (H&M, 2020).

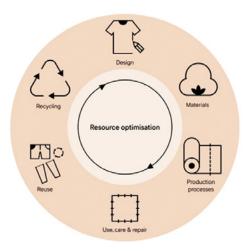
Since 2018, the group has been exhibiting sustainability reports, addressing issues such as recycling, climate, and processes to keep a company green without impacting the environment and water and with less harmful packaging (H&M GROUP, 2020).

Regarding recycling, the group states that it aims to obtain 100% sustainable sources and materials by 2030. In pursuit of this result, in 2019, 29,005 tons of textiles were collected for the following paths: reuse (using the product again, i.e., second quality), recycling (transforming the disposal into new products), and

upcycling (altering a product and transforming into a new trend) (H&M, 2020).

In all productive areas, the company seeks circularity. With this, a linear business model was employed, which consists of increasing resources and scarcity of waste. Any product remains in use as long as possible before transforming into a new product (H&M GROUP, 2020).

Figure 1 - Circularity in the value chain



Source: H&M Group (2020)

Figure 1 shows how the company has found a cycle where the product does not end, so with the right materials and means of production, the designer can create a product that can be used, repaired, and reused (H&M GROUP, 2020).

Although it meets all ecological requirements, H&M has recently questioned how the Conscious¹ collection is more sustainable than its other products. According to the Norwegian government body, The Marketing Control Act, some brands, such as H&M, may have "practices that are off limits in the field of advertising and marketing, including making statements that mislead consumers" (PORTUGAL TÊXTIL, 2019).

¹ According to the brand's website, items in the Conscious Choice line contain at least 50% more sustainable materials, such as organic and/or recycled cotton, or recycled polyester (H&M, 2020).

Along the same lines, in 2012, a group of labor rights advocates from Berlin held a protest in front of one of H&M's stores. According to the protesters, the company did not take measures to prevent risky workplace situations. An example of this was the fire in Bangladesh's factories in 2010 (EXAME, 2012).

4.3 Adidas

With a passion for sports, cutting-edge technology, and quality standards as its main values, Adidas is one of the best-known brands in sports fashion. Currently, its lines serve men, women, and children, with specific pieces and footwear for most sports (ADIDAS, 2020).

For Adidas, a green product must be developed from the following steps: understanding the life cycle concept at the beginning of the process to reduce environmental impacts and following the environment as an additional requirement for the design. For this, the brand has used green materials since 2007, such as polyester and recycled rubber, organic cotton, BCI cotton, Tencel (material extracted and composed of wood pulp), and wool obtained without harming animals. Regarding suppliers, the brand ensures that 99% of the waste manufactured by them is recycled directly into their production (ADIDAS, 2020).

Moreover, the brand was at the top of the Fashion Transparency Index ranking in 2018, released at Fashion Revolution Week. Adidas achieved 58%, staying ahead of brands such as H&M, Puma, and Gap (PORTUGAL TEXTILE, 2018). Another form of taking care of the environment, according to Adidas, is by preventing the oceans. Thus, the brand supports the Ocean Uprise movement² and encourages the Run for the Oceans event, a race to fight against plastic found in the oceans (ADIDAS, 2020).

In 2021, the brand launched the Futurecraft Loop, a 100% recycled shoe produced only with thermoplastic polyurethane. After its lifetime, it can be returned to Adidas, where it will be transformed into a new model without any disposal (EXAME, 2019).

Despite all this, Adidas was the protagonist of scandals involving slave labor in 2015, including the death of 1200 workers due to terrible conditions. To protest, designers rebuilt its logo (Figure 2) (EXAME, 2015).

Figure 2 - Adidas Logo Reconstruction



Source: Exame (2015)

The image above shows Adidas' stripes in the shape of weights being carried by slaves, complementing the slogan "Nothing is impossible" with the phrase "with slave labor" (EXAME, 2015).

4.4 G-Star Raw

With an emphasis on jeans for men, women, and children, G-Star Raw seeks sophistication and diversity in its collections (G-STAR, 2020). In addition, it guarantees to be a brand concerned with sustainability: on its official website, there is a field just for this subject.

² The Ocean Uprise movement is an activist community where young leaders from around the world come together to learn, connect, and take action to protect the oceans (OCEAN UPRISE, 2022).

Since the brand does not have its own factory operations, a Code of Conduct was developed for its 27 suppliers to ensure that products are made fairly and safely, following environmental and health standards (G-STAR, 2020). Over the past few years, the brand has also published MODE Tracker process reports showing its results with sustainable measures and supported projects related to education and entrepreneurship (PORTUGAL TÊXTIL, 2018), supporting communities in China, India, Vietnam, and Bangladesh through a non-profit foundation (namely GSRD).

In 2014, G-Star Raw created a project worthy of the international advertising award: the Cannes Lions festival. The project had the objective of collecting the garbage present in the oceans and, from this, making jeans. The process for manufacturing the piece is summarized as collecting bottles, grinding them, and transforming them into fibers braided with polyester, forming the fabric threads (EXAME, 2014).

Two of the most unsustainable processes in jeans are washing and finishing, so together with their suppliers, the brand seeks greener measures such as the use of Earthcolors, a ban on sandblasting, the availability of a dyeing and finishing process that can reduce water, energy, and chemicals up to 95%, and the use of a rotary dry air system that can dry 40,000 jeans in a few minutes instead of using conventional dryers (G- STAR, 2020). Despite all its initiatives regarding sustainability, G-Star was investigated by the University of Sheffield for continuing to pay low wages to its workers (PORTUGAL TÊXTIL, 2019).

4.5 Gucci

Gucci is one of the best-known luxury brands worldwide. Currently, the brand works with several lines for women, men, and children, producing clothing, footwear, accessories, handbags, jewelry, fragrances, and home fashion (GUCCI, 2020). Despite presenting selected products, Gucci has been acquiring an interest in sustainability awareness. With this, on its website, the brand presents Gucci Equilibrium, a platform that displays news and measures that the company has been pursuing to improve the planet. On the platform, the brand discloses a more sustainable business plan that began in 2015 and should end in 2025, taking the name "The Culture of Purpose." The goals that Gucci aims to achieve are divided into two areas: people and planet (GUCCI EQUILIBRIUM, 2020).

In the first area, the brand encourages measures such as "promoting diversity and gender parity, [...] continuing craft traditions, [...] sustainable and supportive work environment, [...] positive social impacts, and [...] transformation throughout the supply chain" (GUCCI EQUILIBRIUM, 2020).

Initiatives related to the planet include reducing gas emissions by up to 50%, using 100% traceable raw materials and renewable energy, and developing new raw materials and sustainable processes (GUCCI EQUI-LIBRIUM, 2020). According to Vogue (2019), Gucci is becoming Carbon Neutral (i.e., decreasing greenhouse gas emissions). This measure has been happening because of REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation), which was created by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. With this, the brand seeks an increase in the use of "alternative and sustainable low-impact materials" in its collections (GUCCI EQUI-LIBRIUM, 2020), developing renewable energy sources, and applying methods of saving these energies, reducing waste by circular measures and, finally, supporting needy communities through projects (GUC-CI EQUILIBRIUM, 2020).

Despite all these efforts, according to Exame (2019), the brand was accused of racism due to the circulation of a black sweater with a turtleneck and red edges. The accusation was made for having a connection with "blackface," a racist representation of black people.

4.6 Analysis of the results

With the analyses of each brand, an explanatory table was built, separating them into three categories: totally, partially, and does not meet the requirement. These categories

ries present a score to specify the sustainability criteria, meaning the brands that totally meet a requirement will receive a score of 1, those that partially meet it will have 0.5, and those that do not meet this requirement will receive a score of 0.

We observed that the brands with the lowest scores were Gucci and Zara; the brands with the best sustainable performance were Adidas and H&M (Figure 3). These brands have already ranked first in the Transparency Index in recent years.

Figure 3 - Sustainability criteria table

| SUSTAINABILITY CRITERIA | BRANDS | | | | |
|---|--------|-----|--------|------------|-------|
| | ZARA | н&м | ADIDAS | G-STAR RAW | GUCCI |
| Reduced use of environmental impacts | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Possesses sustainable seals | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Incentivizes the use of slow fashion | 0.5 | 0.5 | 0.5 | 0.5 | 0.5 |
| Use of upcycling | 0.5 | 0.5 | 0.5 | 0.5 | 0 |
| Use of recyclable and sustainable material; | 0.5 | 1 | 1 | 0.5 | 0.5 |
| Presents tailored aspects | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Concerned with social, environmental, and economic aspects; | 0 | 0.5 | 0.5 | 0.5 | 0.5 |
| TOTAL | 3.5 | 4.5 | 4.5 | 4 | 3.5 |

Source: The authors (2020)

Gucci did not score on the requirement of sustainable seals and the use of upcycling because there is no disclosure about any green production seal on its website. Zara scored lower for not presenting products with tailored looks or handicrafts. Along with this, it was accused of slave labor and experienced protests for using materials harmful to human health.

On a positive note, H&M presented a cycle system in all its products, avoiding waste.

Adidas showed itself to be more creative and innovative in using recyclable materials, as in constructing a sneaker using only one type of recycled material. Thus, we can see that the sports brand obtained the highest score among all the other brands. Regardless of the score, the brands seek to maintain themselves in the sustainable market, improving in producing less impact, according to the grades given.

³ Blackface was a practice with racist origins, in which black people were ridiculed for the entertainment of White people through face painting and jokes with negative stereotypes (BBC, 2019).

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

With the concepts studied and sustainable criteria determined, brands in different markets were analyzed. The results showed that H&M and Adidas generated the highest scores, while Zara and Gucci had lower scores. The sustainability criteria for analyzing the brands were defined according to bibliographic research. The brands were evaluated according to the use of resources that generate less environmental impact, their green seals, the incentive to produce and consume quality slow fashion products, the valorization of upcycling, the use of recycled or sustainable materials, the use of local labor to develop products, and social, environmental, and economic concern of the place where the brand is located.

None of the brands analyzed obtained an effectively high score because they do not meet or only partially meet the criteria analyzed in this article. This way, one can see how much sustainability still needs to be truly worked on by the brands to have better awareness in the development and manufacturing of fashion products, both by the brands and those who consume them.

Given the above, the selected brands seek to present their green marketing by developing capsule collections, addressing ecological materials and concepts, or through sustainable measures that the companies already carry out and/or intend to carry out.

From the criteria studied, it was possible to analyze and define if the brands present green marketing and/or sustainable production, helping the consumer in the purchase and verifying if their ecological interests are aligned with the brands they intend to consume. Therefore, future studies may address more brands that behave this way and add more criteria in the analysis from the consumer's point of view.

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