

Rupal Teotia (MCS) Faculty of Design & Creative Technologies

This presentation examines how sustainability communication on Instagram can operate as an ideological performance, using ethical branding to obscure the material realities of production. Existing scholarship on brand sustainability narratives remains largely anchored in Global North and Eurocentric frameworks (Patara & Nayak, 2025), a bias this study addresses by comparing Instagram content from Stella McCartney, a British luxury brand regarded as a Global North benchmark for ethical fashion, and FabIndia, a heritage Indian textile label, across a dataset of 72 posts.

Applying reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) and framing theory (Entman, 1993), this study argues that Stella McCartney's sustainability communication relies on performed sustainability, explicit, quantifiable claims, such as named certifications, statistics, and material breakdowns, that manufacture ethical credibility through visibility, while leaving the material conditions of production, labour, sourcing, and environmental cost, largely unaddressed. This selective curation is ideologically produced, positioning Instagram as a tool for performing ethics rather than disclosing practice.

FabIndia offers a contrasting register, communicating sustainability through ambient, culturally embedded aesthetic and affective cues, artisan imagery, heritage motifs, and mood, rather than explicit claims. Where performed sustainability asserts ethics through declaration, ambient sustainability lets ethics emerge implicitly, without ever stating a claim outright. Yet FabIndia's own production practices, including artisan labour conditions and organic fabric processing, remain similarly unverified. This suggests that obscuring material realities is not unique to Global North branding, but a broader feature of how ethical fashion communicates on social media.

By centring this critique on Stella McCartney while using FabIndia as a comparative lens, this study argues that visibility, not accountability, has become the currency of ethical fashion branding, regardless of cultural register. What gets seen, and celebrated, as sustainable is not necessarily what is sustained, raising urgent questions about whose ethics social media is actually built to reward.

Keywords

sustainable fashion, Instagram narratives, cross-cultural communication, framing theory, postcolonial media studies, brand ethics

References

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