

Article

“We Like That It Matters!”: Towards a Socially Sustainable Retail Store Brand Experience

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Abstract: Social sustainability is a topic that is gaining increased attention and yet has not been overly discussed, in particular with reference to the fashion industry. There is a shift in consumer demands, where brands are urged to stand for values, affect change in the industry, and have a clear purpose and positive impact over society. At the same time, brands are struggling to provide offers beyond products, or product-related experiences, at the risk of dissatisfying consumers expectations. Part of such dissatisfaction is clearly represented by the lack of footfall in retail stores and the fast-pace abandonment of the high-street by brands that cannot afford empty stores. This paper suggests an opportunity to rethink the retail store functionality as a space for brands to provide consumers with educational initiatives related to important societal issues, hence build their socially responsible profile. A netnographic exploratory analysis of Patagonia platforms was conducted in order to pinpoint potential positive reaction to a purpose-driven brand and its educational initiatives. The brand was chosen due to its value-committed strategy and constant educational effort towards consumers, both offline (product-related) and online (societal-related). This paper suggests that brands such as Patagonia, purpose and value driven in positively impacting society, should bring their activism and educational efforts on the high-street and in the retail spaces. By doing so, brands would concurrently provide consumers with experiences beyond product consumption, could revitalise our high-street, and could reinstate a sense of community belonging while raise their socially sustainable profile. This paper contributes to the existing literature of consumer education in retailing by expanding into the specific domain of fashion, a domain in which many social issues could be successfully addressed through a socially-driven consumer education at the moment still overlooked by researchers and brands.

Keywords: social sustainability; consumer education; brand purpose; cognitive engagement; fashion retailing; fashion branding



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1. Introduction

Many innovations in human history have emerged from deep disruptions in everyday life, due to technological advancements, war, and pandemics. The COVID-19 pandemic has created a disruption on the market and in people consumption habits, something that should be exploited by brands to innovate the retail store experience after years of stagnation and haemorrhaging footfall. Unavoidable shifts in consumption habits have been accelerated by the pandemic, and the retail store that was already struggling before this global event, is now in a position to have to reinvent itself and find new ways to attract consumers. Moreover, brands need to reconnect with their customers and strengthen those relationships that have suffered from the forced distance. In particular, those brands that were not well equipped to offer an online alternative to their customers, now need to rebuild trust and engagement.

Even brands able to offer an online experience to their customers, should seize the moment to rethink the retail function. Trends show that consumers are now looking for returning to physical spaces [1], for micro and local alternatives to the previously most

common big chain [2], with a tendency to appreciate more a curatorial visual merchandising [3], experiences beyond product [4], a retail experience moving towards a sense of community destination space [5]. The desire for the local curated environment combined with the search for new forms of learning and immersive entertainment represent an ideal opportunity to rethink the store function and establish a new way to use the physical space. Despite the flourishing of online offers, the physical store is still to be considered a centrepiece of the relationship between brand and consumers [6]. Yet, because people have now increased the desire for and improved their way around online shopping, to maintain the retail store as the key point of reference for consumers' relationship with the brand, retailers need to find a new reason for it to exist.

A number of studies dedicated to consumer education show that activities oriented towards explaining to the consumers why specific behaviours are important, bring consumers to act as explained and feel empowered [7–12]; the most prominent of such examples regard the area of sustainable behaviours related to fashion consumption or healthy lifestyle in relation to grocery shopping [13–15]. Previous work has been limited to understanding the effect on the consumer of that education that is strictly related to the use of the product. While it has not yet been established whether education regarding broader social sustainability could have important effects on the consumer and how such education should be implemented in brands' strategies.

Most recent trends see consumers interested in brands' activism and opportunities to learn [16,17]. Consumers are looking for new communities and a new sense of collectivism [2,18,19] together with retail experiences being physical, sensorial, and memorable [20,21]. Such trends, if followed, could be an opportunity for brands to increase their social sustainability while reshaping the retail landscape. This paper aims to analyse elements of such opportunities when already existing, and suggest potential venues to further implement these opportunities in brands' strategies. In particular, this paper focuses on Patagonia as a case, and argues that what Patagonia has done with its product-focused educational activities (from in-store presence, to online presence) could be done reversely by the brand for its social-focused educational activities (from online to in-store) aiming to rethink the functionality of the retail store as a space to foster conversations and improve awareness around societal issues. Hence, satisfying those consumer needs that appear to be key trends [16,18]. Patagonia was chosen as a case because of its renowned activism and active and highly-responsive community, making the brand the perfect case to analyse, and equally the biggest limitation of this study. Indeed, these kinds of initiatives could be replicated by other brands, but only in the measure of these activities being aligned with the brand's core values and general behaviour in the industry. Otherwise, the risk of alienating consumers is high and loss of credibility very plausible.

The following sections analyse the importance for brands of consumer education and cognitive engagement as tools to foster loyalty and strengthen the relationship with consumers, with a final part of the literature focusing on the importance of communities to help brands create knowledge and further educate consumers and wider opportunities to do so in the "safety" of the retail space. The main question this paper is aiming to answer is "Could consumer education about complex societal issues revive the retail store?". Sub-questions emerging from the analysis of the literature are then answered through a netnography journey of Patagonia's online presence and lead the authors to answer the main question by providing suggestions on how consumer education could be used to help brands rethink and redesign the functionality of the retail store.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Consumer Education and Social Sustainability

According to Rajagopal [7], consumer education is a driver of purchase intention where brand literacy is identified as a positive influencer of the consumers decision-making process. The author claims that consumer literacy helps consumers assess brand values

and brand coherence. Thanks to consumer education there is an increased level of expertise and brands find themselves in a relationship with a more attentive and savvy consumer.

Consumer education is a topic that has been discussed for a long time. Back in 1977, Longrehr and Mason [22] reported that consumer education was a national matter in the US. Presidents like Kennedy, Ford, and Nixon were discussing the importance of educating consumers. At that time, the focus of the conversation was the youth and their ability to use money and education on how to spend. According to McGregor [9], governments have continued conversations concerning the importance of consumer education over the years. The author reports that Canada, UK, and the US, among others, considered consumer education fundamental for consumer empowerment. They considered consumer empowerment as a force to derive healthier markets, more competition, and stronger innovation. Yet, from a business perspective there are companies considering consumer empowerment more as a threat than a force for improvement. At the time, McGregor [9] reported that businesses think that having an empowered consumer means having to change marketing practices from pitching to engaging. Nowadays, some companies are still afraid of consumer empowerment while there are virtuous brands that have made of consumer education one of their points of differentiation and competitive advantage [10].

Although spending money wisely is still pivotal in today society, this should not be of primal concern for governments. Priority should be given to consumption attitudes and companies' behaviours towards society. From a business perspective, considering the communicative power most brands have today, they should use this power to influence the conversation towards an education of the consumer that is shifting beyond the product. Needless to say, this kind of communication would be effective only if brands and companies are virtuous and words and actions coincide.

As McGregor [9] claimed in their work, the way consumer education has been considered for decades in relation to product and consumption has to change. The number of brands embracing this approach is still today very low, and governments appear to have no interest in nurturing that kind of consumer empowerment and education. Yet, thanks to technology and easy access to information, it appears that now consumers are educating themselves and as a bottom-up force some of them are strongly demanding governments and brands to act. Citizens have started to be "critical of their role as in a consumers society" [9] (p. 446) and are calling for brands to do the same.

Arguably, not all consumers are interested in brand accountability and social sustainability. On the contrary, it can be said that with today's technology and influx of information not always transparent, the gap between literate and illiterate consumers is quickly widening. Brands that have started the process of being critical as an institution in an overconsuming society should use their influence and power to educate those consumers that are in need of empowerment beyond their purchasing rights. These brands could be an inspiration to implement a different business model based on transparency, collaboration, and open conversation with consumers towards a better society.

Some notorious brands have already started this conversation, when attached to the product there is a wider conversation regarding human rights, climate change, racism, etc. Occasionally, these conversations are seen as mere publicity stunts. This happens particularly when brands' actions are not in line with their purpose and communications effort [23]. Brand coherence is pivotal to ensure consumer education beyond the product is credible and could have some impact. Moreover, if a brand is the first in showing a focus shift from product to society and uses its consumption cathedral (the retail store) to do so, this could strongly influence consumers who might be hesitant in deciding to follow its lead.

The retail store is still to be considered a key point of reference for the brand to connect, engage, and strengthen the relationship with the consumer. The retail store as a communication tool allows brands to create awareness and attract a new and wider audience. For this reason, the store should be re-considered in its function as the place to convey empowerment and reinforce consumer education beyond the mere product.

Finally, consumer education beyond product knowledge and use could provide consumers with experiences that are imbued with cognitive engagement, a powerful tool for brands to strengthen relationships with consumers and foster their loyalty. Thus, the following question:

Q1_Do consumers display interest towards brands' educational activities regarding societal issues?

2.2. Cognitive Engagement

Cognitive engagement is one of three key dimensions in consumer brand engagement [24,25]; meaning the consumer has a specific level of concentration towards the brand. Consumers when engaging with specific brands are investing time and emotions, they are immersed in the brand. Hollebeek [24] sees consumer brand engagement as the mix of emotional behavioural and cognitive engagement. Cognitive investment generally refers to actively interacting with the brand.

It is generally accepted that engagement facilitates loyalty in the consumer/brand relationship. Keller's [26] seminal work defines engagement as one of the elements allowing brands to reach a state of resonance that in his consumer-based brand equity model is the best situation in which a brand wants to find itself in the relationship with the consumer. Thus, considering the consumer education context, being able to cognitively engage with the consumers would help the brand strengthening its relationship and enhance loyalty [24]. Moreover, a growing body of literature recognises in the acquisition of new knowledge as an important step for consumers to live a transformative experience (experience that facilitates self-transformation) [27,28]. These kinds of experiences have a long-lasting effect on consumers' minds and, if offered by brands, they can strongly influence and strengthen the consumer/brand relationship [25].

When providing consumers with knowledge, brands are offering them to reconsider themselves against such knowledge. Consumers can look into their beliefs and weigh their new acquired knowledge, and potentially feel renewed self-awareness or a sense of self-discovery. Such experiences, with such a strong imprint on consumers' minds, would bring consumers closer to the brand and looking for experiencing more. Moreover, if knowledge is provided around important societal issues, the impact that these could have on consumers could shift their beliefs and attitudes towards such issues and potentially change their behaviour in society. Hence, educational activities, bringing such knowledge to consumers, are a powerful tool in brands' hands and it is pivotal to further understand what drives consumers to look for such brand offerings. Thus, the following question:

Q2_What kind of interest do consumers display regarding brands' educational activities?

2.3. Bringing Online Communities to the Physical Space

There is evidence of the effects that educational experiences have on consumers, particularly in online (sometimes fan-based) communities, where consumers gather around a brand and absorb knowledge/create knowledge with the brand in the attempt to improve society and consumption [7,29,30]. Online brand communities are a clear example of the transformative effect that cognitive engagement can have on consumers/brands/attitudes/behaviours. In recent years, there is an increasing trend of creating online communities around sharing tips on how to use a product, how to recycle or upcycle it, or sometimes just how to fix it. These communities are sometimes independent and created by consumers, while most of them are institutionalised by brands—meaning the brand is aware of the existence of the community, and sometimes foster the rise of such community while incorporating it and its created content into the brand space. For the purpose of this study, only institutionalised brand communities are considered, and in particular two main types of online brand communities, one is brand-led or business-to-consumer support community—the brand creates content online (mostly blogs) and consumers create a community around it following the brand content and engaging with it; the second is consumer-led or user-

generated community—consumers create content on a brand approved/created platform and other consumers engage with the content [31].

Examples of business-led communities are the Gymshark Central community and the Glow Recipe community. Brands create content relevant for their consumers and involve information about the product together with tips on how to better use it or other relevant information. Gymshark proposes diets and exercise tips, while Glow Recipe provides information about ingredients, and how to use them, and started creating content around empowering women entrepreneurs. On the other end, examples of user-generated communities are the Sephora community called Beauty Insider Community, and the Patagonia Worn Wear community.

A growing body of literature has studied online brand communities and has identified some key motivational factors that might explain the reason for people to engage with such communities in sharing their knowledge [32]. Arguably, intrinsic motivations stemmed from the study are enjoyment to help others and knowledge self-efficacy. However, as the authors reported, a person that has never engaged with a community by sharing content/knowledge before could find it difficult and might be prevented from doing it. Yet, in this case, intra-community factors are playing an important role. Particularly, the presence of a moderator and offline activities can help, and influence knowledge sharing also for those people who have never done it before [32].

When thinking of fashion brands, the first “brand’s place” considered is usually the retail store. It helps the brand create awareness of products and services, it triggers desire and interest for the brand and, most importantly, it can lead consumers to action—generally associated with buying products. Studies show that the retail store is still one of the best places for brands to influence consumer actions, also in terms of consumption behaviours—not only for purchase. Lehner [13] discusses how interaction in the store with retailers is sometimes underestimated as an influencer of consumer behaviour. We also know that in-store information and education may influence consumption behaviours [14,15], and that consumer education can be a competitive advantage [10]. As a competitive advantage, this paper argues that the powerful effect that brand education can create among members of the brand community shouldn’t be kept behind the “internet” walls. As said, cognitive engagement affects consumers, and brand retail stores might benefit from such effect. Moreover, as implementing the information in store change consumers’ consumption behaviour, this kind of information could also influence consumer societal attitude and reach a wider audience. This paper suggests that, if there are signs of educational activities triggering acquisition/creation of knowledge online, then brands should consider bringing their societal education activities in-store and together with their communities, attempt to improve society and consumption understanding through conversations and knowledge acquisition. Hence, the following question.

Q3_Do brand educational activities facilitate knowledge creation/acquisition?

3. Methodology

This paper is an exploratory study regarding the potential benefits educational activities could bring to rethink the functionality of the retail store. As a first step of a bigger project, this initial phase aim to explore how and if educational activities regarding societal issues are influencing people perceptions of brands. Hence, netnography was considered the best approach for this initial stage of enquiry allowing the authors to gain a holistic understanding of a selected brand and its activities. Limitations apply to such approach, and in particular considerations that access to and behaviours on social media are not equal in different context and cultures.

A netnography approach of online platforms was used to answer the three questions that emerged from the analysis of the literature discussed in previous sections. The brand Patagonia was used as a case. Patagonia is a brand known for its commitment towards the environment. It is also known for its strong commitment to educating its consumers, starting by educating them in stores about repairing products or recycling them. They also

created second-hand stores to encourage consumers towards a more conscious consumption. The main reason to choose Patagonia lies in the brand shift towards an education that is focusing on wider social issues and not only focusing on products. The brand launched a new activist website where athletes, artists, activists, and journalists are prompted to share stories related to issues such as racism, human rights violations, environmental initiatives, and more in general climate change issues. Choosing this brand allowed a cross-analysis of Instagram posts, blog posts, and brand websites. Instagram posts were considered because this new website is not open to comments but most of the stories published on the website are also shared on the social media allowing an analysis of comments and interactions.

Netnographic studies generally focus on one or more appropriate online domains to collect data and then observation allows to follow interactions on such domains [33]. Except for a few cases [34,35], netnographic studies focus on a short period of time (e.g., weeks) analysing a stream of messages, postings, reviews and other content.

Instagram posts, comments, and interactions were observed and analysed without direct interaction for four months (from May 2021 until September 2021). The characteristic of the platform allowed analysing past posts as well as present posts. Screenshots of relevant posts were saved and analysed. Notes on reflections were taken while analysing the brand's websites and were coded, together with comments collected.

An interpretative process was used to analyse data with themes emerging from the data collection and related back to the reviewed literature. Qualitative analysis of the data loosely used Corley and Gioia's [36] framework. Data was collated into emergent first-order concepts by repeatedly linking the contents of these and themes within the literature. First-order concepts emerged from an inductive approach to collected data and reflections on such concepts. Then, an abductive analysis of second-order themes allowed to explore the relationships between these categories, and form broader groups. A final cycle between overarching themes and the relevant literature allowed to determine findings. The first overarching theme related to consumer education on social issues stemmed from the brand. Second, grouped together were comments relating to establishing cognitive engagement of users. Finally, elements of online communities' knowledge sharing were identified. These themes are presented in the following in the form of answers to the three questions that emerged from the literature.

4. Findings

4.1. Do Consumers Display Interest towards Brands' Educational Activities Regarding Societal Issues?

To answer question one, an observation exercise was conducted on Patagonia's media. Focus was then given to Instagram posts and people engagement with them, in particular, Table 1 at the end of the sections provides an idea of the number of comments and likes on a few posts reported here for example.

Table 1. This table shows a summary of the characteristics of some key analysed posts. All caption retrieved from Patagonia Instagram account (<https://www.instagram.com/patagonia/?hl=en> (accessed date 12 August 2022)).

Post Date	Topic	Caption	Likes and Comments
14 May 2021	Coal mining	The people of Elkford, British Columbia, face the questions we all must, but in somewhat more stark terms. If we have to clean up the economy to have much of a future on this planet, how do you do that when a carbon-heavy coal business employs your whole town? How do you kick the coal habit when it's your economic lifeblood?	8741 likes 89 comments

Table 1. Cont.

Post Date	Topic	Caption	Likes and Comments
1-4 21 May 2021	Immigrant workers in US	J. immigrated to the US from Mexico when he was a young man, worked in restaurants and bought a house for his family. When he lost the house and his job during the housing crisis, he decided to complete his high school education and go back to his farming roots. But at 43 years old, the prospect of owning his own farm seemed out of reach. With the support of his family, community and a farmer advocacy organization called ALBA, J. set out to defy the odds.	11,900 like 253 comments
23 May 2021	George Floyd	No caption	27,300 likes Comments were blocked by the company. Many comments regarding this post were found underneath another post published a few days before. People mostly negatively commenting the decision to block comments and the decision to celebrate George Floyd life.
9 June 2021	Pride	Through activism, allyship and love, Patagonia proudly commemorates Pride. With humility and in recognition of our shortcomings, we celebrate Pride and the right for each of us, including members of the LGBTQ+ community, to live a life of dignity and authenticity. We will raise our voice as advocates and will protest laws that discriminate against LGBTQ+ individuals and sow hate and division within society. We will work toward equality in our company and the places and communities where we work, so that we can all live proudly and openly as we are. We're in business to save our home planet—and to succeed means creating a future that is fair, just, equitable and inclusive for all.	55,000 likes 892 comments
8 July 2021	Organic Cotton/regenerative agriculture	Organic cotton farming accounts for less than 1 percent of US cotton production. For this family, that's why it's a calling. "A. didn't want to be a farmer. 'Compared to other kids' summer jobs, it was hard work being in the fields,' the reserved 34-year-old says. 'But I guess it was good to be out there with my parents and my sister. We were miserable together.' In 2000, he left his family's third-generation farm for college, intending to get into banking. To his surprise, though, he returned in 2004 and never left. 'I could quit later, I figured, but I never did,' he shrugs. 'At some point, it didn't seem as bad as I remembered it.'"	13,000 likes 103 comments A post on a same topic in May gained 22,400 likes 132 comments A video published a few weeks after on regenerative agriculture had 238,000 views 129 comments

Table 1. Cont.

Post Date	Topic	Caption	Likes and Comments
13 July 2021	Surfing and Racism	On a winter morning in Manhattan Beach, Los Angeles County, B. and G. paddled out for a surf, where they were greeted by a bigot in the water. "There were 10 or 15 people there. They watched this man call me the N-word over and over, and nobody said a word," says B. Following the incident, B., G., and their surf-and-arts collective hosted a Peace Paddle to rise above the racial injustice, reset the tone and show the surfing community that peace and inclusivity are the best way to combat hate.	24,200 likes 257 comments

There is a recent initiative that Patagonia has launched on its institutional website that is part of a new brand strategy. Moving from focusing exclusively on educating consumers about their products and how to be environmentally conscious by avoiding waste and repairing products, Patagonia seems more centred on brand values. WornWear, the brand experience related to product education that started from the physical store and moved online is still active both online and offline. The new initiative that is mainly focusing on the brand's social sustainability (and brand values), at the moment, is happening exclusively online. The brand's institutional website (Patagonia.com (accessed date 14 July 2021)) has two dedicated sections, activism and stories where consumers are called to action and to volunteer for some good causes, on the first page, and stories related to different topics are shared on the second page. The stories shared on this second page are arranged into topics, and appear to be written by professional bloggers, writers, and athletes, invited by the brand to share their experiences. This is the main difference between this new educational activity compared to the WornWear page, where consumers are invited to share their own stories related to the use of the product and their way to fix or recycle the product.

The main topics on the "Stories" page are arranged around specific activities like trail running, surfing, climbing, mountain biking, and fly fishing, or around broader topics like design stories, culture stories, food stories, and climate change stories. Finally, there is one block of stories dedicated to activism, something that the brand has started to push quite vigorously through the first page mentioned on the website. As said, on this "Activism" page the brand is publishing political statements and asking people to volunteer and take actions to "save our home planet". This shift of focus from garments to society is happening on the brand's website and shared on social media. Particularly on the Patagonia page on Instagram, there are many posts published by the brands where the content recalls the stories shared on the website and prompts followers to click the link on their Instagram bio page to land on the institutional website on the "Stories" page. The images used in these Instagram posts are the same used on the main website, this facilitates users' navigation to find the stories they are interested in, particularly if they land from the brand's Instagram account.

When opening Patagonia's Instagram account which counts 5.1 million followers, it is immediately clear that the focus of the brand is shifting, and products are barely represented on the page. When the product is part of the content, particularly the visual element of it, it is mostly accompanied by a text focusing on a story that is not always recalling the product or clearly refer to it. References to buy less and to the WornWear educational activity are still present on the Instagram page until February 2021. From that moment, posts related to societal issues that were already present on the page, start to be the most common.

The type of content shared on Instagram starting from February 2021 can be divided into a few main categories: environmental issues (protecting environment and wildlife, regenerative organic agriculture, fossil fuel fight, citizen-led renewable energy, etc.) equality

and inclusivity issues (women rights, gay pride, immigrants' rights, community surviving, etc.); racism (Black lives matter and George Floyd, anti-Asian violence, exposé on racial abuses and racist episodes, etc.). A few posts per each type of topic are here reported as part of the analysis conducted to find answers to this paper's research questions. Table 1 shows the number of likes and comments for each post, date of publication and caption accompanying the posts.

Notably reactions to these posts are different. When the post is focusing on inclusivity matters or racial issues, there is an increase in likes and comments, while posts on environmental issues and climate crisis fights still gain a good number of likes but a lower number of comments. There is an apparent higher engagement with posts touching more controversial/strongly political topics.

Hence, to answer Q1 "Do consumers display interest towards brands' educational activities regarding societal issues?" Number of posts and likes for most of the posts analysed appear to show that there is a good level of engagement with Patagonia's posts that are not product related.

4.2. What Kind of Interest Do Consumers Display Regarding Brands' Educational Activities?

To answer Q2, comments to most of Patagonia's posts between May and September 2021 were analysed with the aim to identify a sentiment linked to posts. The analysis considered comments words and emoticons to evaluate if most posts were welcomed negatively or positively. Types of comments tend to be mostly positive for the environmental posts and on two extremes of the spectrum, very positive or very negative, when strongly political (e.g., against racism, pro human rights). Various emoticons such as hearts, fires, and the 100 symbol were considered as associated with positive reactions.

The following section provides excerpts of comments on the same posts presented in Table 1 to give an idea of the kinds of comments analysed.

4.2.1. 14 May 2021—Coal Mining

Post:

"The people of Elkford, British Columbia, face the questions we all must, but in somewhat more stark terms. If we have to clean up the economy to have much of a future on this planet, how do you do that when a carbon-heavy coal business employs your whole town? How do you kick the coal habit when it's your economic lifeblood?"

Excerpt of Positive Comments

"Yeah, very tough. Solutions are not easy and emotions run high. This does not need be a "zero sum" game. Solutions are there that do not require winners and losers."

"Starting important conversations! We can't change the past, but we can change the future! Read "Overburden" through the link in bio."

"Such an unfortunate situation . . . but a familiar story when it comes to the environment. The logistics of cleaning up the planet are so complex, but I think it will require huge lifestyle changes for all of us, especially in western culture."

"I wonder if any of these anti-Patagonia commenters actually took the time to read "Overburden" before becoming emotionally hysterical 😏."

Excerpt of Negative Comments

"Very interesting piece. How about an article on how energy efficient your partner factories in China are ???"

"Elkford population & Patagonia's direct employees are identical at 2500 plus another 3500 indirect worldwide. Patagonia's C-footprint per person is the larger than Elkford. Elkford coal is processed into steel making grade coal which is exported to China for building ships & containers that in turn export Patagonia clothing made in China (that imprisons minorities) to all parts of the world. Brilliant!"

“Stick to making cloths”

“More false information promoted by Patagonia . . . Disappointing but not surprising!”

4.2.2. 21 May 2021—Immigrant Work in US

This post follows a Film the brand published on the institutional website about Hispanic farmworkers and their chances to become farms owners.

Post:

“J. immigrated to the US from Mexico when he was a young man, worked in restaurants and bought a house for his family. When he lost the house and his job during the housing crisis, he decided to complete his high school education and go back to his farming roots. But at 43 years old, the prospect of owning his own farm seemed out of reach. With the support of his family, community and a farmer advocacy organization called ALBA, J. set out to defy the odds.”

Excerpt of Positive Comments

“J. He spoke for Bay Area Green Tours Solutionaries Speak on May 13! He is doing wonderful things in his community. And he chooses healthy packaging just because it’s the right thing to do!”

“Loved this story so much 🐦🐦”

“We want more of these posts @patagonia!!!!!!”

“Legendary”

Excerpt of Negative Comments

“Hey @patagonia if you really want to support black and Mexican communities, maybe you should lower your prices for us”

4.2.3. 23 May 2021—George Floyd

Post:

“We honour the life of George Floyd.”

After publishing this post, Patagonia blocked the opportunity for people to comment on the post. Browsing the post that was published a few days before unrelated to George Floyd, most of the comments were actually referring to this post. Because comments are located underneath another post, when containing only emoticons, it wasn’t possible to determine what they actually referred to. Particularly intense were the negative comments here reported to show the difference in language used when political topics such as racism are touched.

Excerpt of Negative Comments

“What’s up with the current post. About remembering George Floyd? The dude was a criminal as well. Have you guys ever looked at his criminal rap sheet? Holding a gun to a pregnant woman’s stomach, while his boys robbed the place.”

“I have always loved your brand but you have lost my support after your last post. Not because I don’t think that a company has the right to respect and honor a life lost. It is because I believe this is pandering. I have scrolled through your instagram and I did not see a single post about a fallen veteran or officer killed in the line of duty. This post seems to follow a disturbing trend that glorifies recent news trends and I simply cannot support a brand that disregards the work of our veterans and law enforcement.”

“Amidst backlash, Patagonia has considered removing their post about honoring the criminal life of George Floyd. I guess someone has some sense or understands political puppetry.”

“I hope you do more to honor Mr. Floyd than making a practically blank post. You guys better donate.”

"I wonder why a page with 4.6 million followers only gets 5–15 k likes a post. You should probably stick to doing what's right rather than becoming a propaganda page"

"Love how you COWARDS don't allow posting on your idiotic post about George Floyd. Way to "honor" a crack addict who held a pregnant woman at knifepoint whilst robbing her."

"Yea . . . that George Floyd cxxx wasn't your lane. I definitely don't honor him nor want to shop for your product anymore."

"Have a backbone. If you are going to post garbage at least have the courage to leave the comments on and defend yourself. What a garbage post. What happened to him was wrong and justice is being served. He was a career criminal. Where is your support of the victims he hurt? That post is garbage and you are clowns."

"Condemning his death is one thing, honoring his life is something else. I disagree with your recent post."

4.2.4. 9 June 2021—Pride

Post:

"Through activism, allyship and love, Patagonia proudly commemorates Pride. With humility and in recognition of our shortcomings, we celebrate Pride and the right for each of us, including members of the LGBTQ+ community, to live a life of dignity and authenticity. We will raise our voice as advocates and will protest laws that discriminate against LGBTQ+ individuals and sow hate and division within society. We will work toward equality in our company and the places and communities where we work, so that we can all live proudly and openly as we are. We're in business to save our home planet—and to succeed means creating a future that is fair, just, equitable and inclusive for all."

Underneath the post, in the comment section, the brand continues:

"Global Community Guideline: Our Pride statement was written by and in support of Patagonia's LGBTQ+ community. We welcome positive and constructive discussion. Hate speech, bullying or other behaviors that are not in the spirit of diverse and inclusive community WILL be deleted."

Many comments appeared to be a reply to some negative posts that the brand considered part of hate speech and cancelled. Hence, at times it is hard to contextualised comments do to a missing starting source.

Excerpt of Positive Comments

"This comment section is a good reminder of how far we have come and how far we have to go in accepting people for who they are"

"♥ thank you. As a climber and a photographer who happens to be lesbian, it gives me hope to businesses standing up for the community. ♥♥♥♥"

"One of the few companies that practice what y'all preach 🙌"

"Beautiful statement! Just another reason we love your company!"

♥♥♥♥♥♥♥♥

Excerpt of Negative Comments

"@patagonia y'all deleted my comment regarding you being able to support and post about Pride but not about Memorial Day. What guidelines did I violate to deserve that comment being deleted?" In reply to this another user "lol it doesn't profit them."

"ahhhh limit freedom of speech and you can interpet opinions that diifer from your agenda as "hate" so you want so can delete them. ☹️ how very patagonia of you! Is that how you guys run your sweat shops too?! ☹️"

4.2.5. 8 July 2021—Organic Cotton

Post:

“Organic cotton farming accounts for less than 1 percent of US cotton production. For this family, that’s why it’s a calling. “A. didn’t want to be a farmer. ‘Compared to other kids’ summer jobs, it was hard work being in the fields,’ the reserved 34-year-old says. ‘But I guess it was good to be out there with my parents and my sister. We were miserable together.’ In 2000, he left his family’s third-generation farm for college, intending to get into banking. To his surprise, though, he returned in 2004 and never left. ‘I could quit later, I figured, but I never did,’ he shrugs. ‘At some point, it didn’t seem as bad as I remembered it.’”

Excerpt of Positive Comments

“Can’t wait to read this story!”

“Stunning photo. Look at those generations!”

“Small is essential.”

“Great story.”

“Yes!! Support small & beautiful businesses.”

Excerpt of Negative Comments

“Why does it matter if cotton is organic? I can understand the reasons for eating organic produce but organic cotton seems pointless LOL.”

“Patagonia—a multi on billion \$ company yet a basic tshirt still costs \$50 . . . what’s your deal yo.”

“How much US produced cotton actually goes into Patagonia products? Whenever I’ve picked up a garment and checked the tag, it was made overseas, likely by slave labor.”

4.2.6. 13 July 2021—Surfing and Racism

Post:

“On a winter morning in Manhattan Beach, Los Angeles County, B. and G. paddled out for a surf, where they were greeted by a bigot in the water. “There were 10 or 15 people there. They watched this man call me the N-word over and over, and nobody said a word,” says B. Following the incident, B., G., and their surf-and-arts collective hosted a Peace Paddle to rise above the racial injustice, reset the tone and show the surfing community that peace and inclusivity are the best way to combat hate. ”

Excerpt of Negative Comments

“@patagonia just sell your clothing and gear and stay out of politics # all lives matter.”

“I want everyone, EVERYONE, to have access to the outdoors and to the waves, but this is wrong-headed messaging. It shouldn’t be about having space for Black people, or white people, or Asian people, or Native people or any kind of people. It should be about all people having that access. Singling out specific groups is inherently racist and does as much harm as good. This is pandering.”

Excerpt of Positive Comments

“[Patagonia] has been a socially responsible company from the inception from conservation to sustainability to social injustice. They have NEVER “just made clothes” and it’s one of the things I love about them. It speaks volumes of the state of our country to say this is political. Time to move past that catch phrase and just simply do better.”

“This is about uplifting groups that are victims of racism in the water! since white people of Manhattan beach aren’t victims of racism and exclusion due to the color of their skin,

they don't need uplifting! Supporting groups through outreach and community building is not racist :-)"

"After what happened to the England players, us white folk need some soul searching."

"I was really disappointed to hear their story about Manhattan Beach—spent the past three years in Hermosa. MB has been working on things and they're giving back Bruce's Beach . . . a bit of progress, bit by bit, amongst the daily stories in this country that are appalling, illegal and inhumane."

"Sorry this happened to you, my fellow surfers. This is everybody's break, so don't stop showing up!! And one sour blueberry means the next one will taste even better."

To answer Q2 "What kind of interest do consumers display regarding brands' educational activities?" there is a clear engagement with any Patagonia posts that is not product related. There is a stronger engagement when posts are openly political (e.g., against racism). Particularly, the negative comments in these posts use stronger and more insulting language than in other comments. Promises to unfollow and boycott the brand are very common underneath such comments. It could be argued that facilitating conversation and education regarding such topics online is harder because of such strong reactions. Yet, a more enclosed environment where screens and keyboards are not helping anonymisation could help continue Patagonia's effort.

4.3. Do Brand Educational Activities Facilitate Knowledge Creation/Acquisition?

Finally, to answer the last research questions, comments were analysed looking for any kind of interactions that were not simple reactions to the post (e.g., emoticons, insults). In particular, for a few of the posts reported here, there were users posing questions with regard to the topic discussed in the post. Interestingly, when such questions were posed, answers were provided by other users signalling the willingness to share experience and knowledge.

4.3.1. 9 June 2021—Pride

"@patagonia what does the + stand for? I'm so confused."

A user replied to this:

"The 'plus' is used to include all of the gender identities and sexual orientations that are not specifically covered by the other five initials."

The same user who asked the first question then replied:

"what are the other 5, I genuinely don't know? Thanks."

Another user reply to the question:

"L-lesbian G-gay B-bi T-trans Q-queer."

Finally, a user commented:

"Nice. It's always feels good to connect with someone and conversate with like minded people."

4.3.2. 8 July 2021—Organic Cotton

"A lot of misinformed folks in the comments 🤔"

"What is organic cotton farming and how does it compare to regular cotton farming? thanks."

In reply to this comment another user

"Also not an expert but you can read more about the cause of "soil degradation" for reasons why organic farming is important. Large scale, non-organic farming makes the soil unusable over time hence requiring the huge amount of fertilizers and chemicals to

keep crops turning out. It's very far from pointless and it's disappointing how few people think about these environmental changes we cause."

As a reply to this post, a user explains this is correct and adds:

"Exactly this really. Even if it's not beneficial to us immediately in terms of the product itself, it's about the artificial inputs (fertilizer, pesticides) that have impacts on human and environmental health. And of course that need to be manufactured, which has a footprint of its own. When I buy organic veg, I'm not bothered about the health impacts to me but more the overall ecological impacts of its production." And again, another user "health of the soil, ecosystem, carbon sequestration, less resources, etc." and again "If you actually care, check out Let My People Go Surfing. If you will read it . . . I'll send you a copy 🙌❤️"

"Next step, biodynamic cotton. Help improve the soil."

Another post addressing the brand:

"Heyo! I am working on a project to align sustainable agriculture with modern food diets. I look for collaborations and you guys could help to bring this project to a next level as i believe we share this responsibility with everyone on this crazy planet. Please contact me 🌱👉"

The brand replied as follows:

"Hi there, we encourage you to read through our Environmental Grants page as your work may meet our requirements for a grant. We have a variety of different grants and that page will walk you through the application process and point you towards the type of grant that fits best. Go ahead and visit Patagonia.com and type "Grant Guidelines." into the search bar."

4.3.3. 13 July 2021—Surfing and Racism

"How common is racism amongst the surfing community?"

Unfortunately, no answer was given to such comment, however, this might signal an interest in knowing more about the topic.

To answer Q3 "Do brand educational activities facilitate knowledge creation/acquisition?" These short excerpts show that there is room for a conversation around difficult societal issues and there are people open to help in developing a further understanding when there is genuine curiosity to learn. When people are asking questions regarding organic cotton cultivations, for example, it is clear that there is a genuine curiosity to know more and that other users, potentially brand followers, are happy to share their knowledge with others. Hence, it could be said that there is an indication that such brand educational activities could facilitate the acquisition and creation of new knowledge.

5. Discussion

Learning about the environment and the importance to keep garments longer is apparently influencing Patagonia's customers to repair their products. This very positive change of behaviour is sometimes triggered by reading online about other customers' shared stories.

There is a clear request by many Instagram followers for the pop-up store of Worn-Wear to be in their hometown. They are carving a physical presence no matter the free online service.

There is still no asking for physical in-store activities regarding social sustainability, arguably because this is not present offline yet, and consumers do not know this could happen. However, according to Lai and Chen [32], offline activities facilitate knowledge sharing also for those members of the community not used to sharing their opinions. The brand's success offline for product education should be of inspiration for the offline education of values and side activities. Moreover, the physical experience could facilitate

the mitigation of extreme behaviour that happen easily online when people can hide their identity behind a screen. There is some clear interest in further understanding specific issues, and the very limited number of comments online might be a further indication that people do not feel comfortable having such conversations online, maybe fearing strong reactions from other users.

It is possible to notice an important difference in the comments when posts are referring to climate and environment, and when instead are referring to other societal topics like the George Floyd death (and the Black Lives Matter movement) or the Pride movement, and that is the radical reaction to the second compared to the first. In most of the environmental based posts, even when comments are negative tend to elaborate an opinion and create debate. When posts are focusing on problems related to exclusion and inequality, comments are very negative and nasty, and more are insults than conversations. The pride post guidelines regarding hate speech that will be deleted clearly show the brand is aware that touching specific topics brings trolls and haters to comment on content. This could be tackled in a physical space where conversations are not wide open to the internet world. According to Simmons [37], it is this kind of attitude towards difficult conversations that could be changed in the safety of a physical brand space.

The physical store could help mitigate the hate comments and negative comments and facilitate a softer approach to educating consumers regarding important social issues without risking nasty comments and hate speech. Scholars have widely investigated the use of social media as an easier tool to spread hate, racism, false news regarding climate change, etc. In this environment, a brand attempting to start a conversation around these topics will always encounter hate and negativity. A physical store will instead provide a safer place to engage in such conversations, particularly with people that might be interested in learning more about topics, but fear the online space to ask for information. Same applies to those customers who might be interested in helping the brand educate other consumers but, as reported by Lai and Chen [32] might fear sharing their knowledge online because never been done before or not confident enough to share and fearing judgment.

Brands such as Patagonia, with committed and loyal communities supporting their strategic choice to face such conversations, should consider bringing this online call to arms and activism in-store and on the high street. The physical store allows for generating awareness and reaching a wider audience while online communities work well mostly for loyal customers. Make the store a safe place to share stories and allow the community to grow and help the brand consolidate values and educate about various societal issues like racism, inequality, and climate change.

There are plenty of businesses educating consumers on fashion waste and sustainability posing most of the “pressure” on the consumer. Arguably, most of the industry’s problems derive from business models obsolete and that are ignoring the most basic human rights and climate issues, problems that can’t be fixed by the consumer. Hence, back to McGregor [9] that was asking to educate the consumer to society, what consumers can do is to understand these issues and their consequences and start demanding brands to change. Virtuous brands like Patagonia that have made of their commitment to society and the environment the core of their existence are the brands that should continue and increase their endeavour to educate consumers and push the industry to change.

Environment, communities, social justice, and race are all areas encompassing deep-rooted issues that the fashion industry is contributing not to solve. There are a few exceptions and calls to activism are a positive starting point, but they are not sufficient if not accompanied by an explanation of the issue first. Online communities are a closed circle and although very good for the brand in terms of strengthening loyalty, they might not be the best solution for this kind of “service” that the brand appears to want to provide. There is a need to reach a wider audience and create simple and cognitive engaging activities to involve more people and create a positive attitude towards activist brands, and hopefully a better society.

6. Conclusions

By analysing Patagonia's online presence and educational activities, it is clear that there is interest in such activities. Interest that is a mix of positive and negative attitudes, and at times leans more towards the negative side facilitated by the anonymity that the internet gives. Another reason behind strong negative reactions to specific comments could also be due to reactions being linked to a specific and momentary episode that generates gut reactions, more than a clear address to the root of the societal issue. One of the most interesting findings of this study was that when conversations circle around important issues that are not openly politic and less likely to trigger gut reactions, there is a clear willingness from users to share knowledge and to help others to know and understand more. Such a reaction is the one that should also be fostered and searched in relation to those more controversial issues. According to Greijdanus et al. [38], there is evidence that online and offline activism are intertwined, hence the suggestion that a softer approach to important societal issues in a more enclosed and safer environment might help such conversations, foster a positive and inclusive future, and create an even stronger community around the brand.

7. Limitations and Future Research

This paper has limitations in the methodology selected. Analysis of Instagram posts create natural boundaries to the study when such social media is not always possible to be accessed globally in equal manner. Hence, elements of the analysis are not considering how Patagonia initiatives could influence such countries in which this social media is not easily accessed. Further enquires through different methodologies (qualitative and quantitative) would help to better understand the impact that Patagonia's activities are having on its consumers. Authors are aiming to further develop this research by conducting experiments of communicating societal issues via virtuous brand retail stores (global or local) aiming to further understand if such approach could help restore the retail landscape and help brands strengthening consumer relationships.

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