

Social Cohesion and Development

Vol 20, No 1 (2025)

No 39, SPECIAL ISSUE: Media, Culture and Social Change

Κοινωνική Συνοχή και Ανάπτυξη
Εξαμηνιαία Επιστημονική Επιθεώρηση, Άνοιξη 2025, τόμος 20ός, τεύχος 1

39 Biannual Scientific Review, Spring 2025, volume 20, issue 1

SPECIAL ISSUE *Media, Culture and Social Change*
ΕΙΔΙΚΟ ΤΕΥΧΟΣ *Μέσα, Πολιτισμός και Κοινωνική Αλλαγή*

ΤΗΣ ΣΥΝΤΑΞΗΣ
Editorial

ΑΡΘΡΑ
Articles

Ioanna Vovou, Media, Culture and Social Change. Between cohesion and collision. An introduction

Ifigenia Tepetidi, Aggeliki Gazi, Zenonas Theodosiou, Social media and otherness: The case study of the beauty community 'Live Tinted'

Matina Peppas, Digital narratives of the Greek 'Manosphere'

Panayis Panagiotopoulos, Stavros Kostas, Food authenticity and national identity. Consumption patterns in the commercial micro-scale of the late Metapolitefsi period

Konstantinos Theodoridis, Social media, consumer culture and sustainable lifestyles: Some evidence from a youth civil society group

Cryssanthi Tsalafouta, Artists or influencers? The influence of Social Media on the creativity of artists

Achilleas Karadimitriou, Constructive journalism, networked journalism and AI-based journalism: A critical approach to reform trends in the news media field

Stefanos Pnevmatikos, Representations of social outrage movements in Greek print media narratives: The 'Indignants' and the 'Tempi movement'

ΕΚΔΟΣΕΙΣ ΔΙΟΝΙΚΟΣ

Social media, consumer culture and sustainable lifestyles: Some evidence from a youth civil society group

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doi: [10.12681/scad.44788](https://doi.org/10.12681/scad.44788)

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To cite this article:

Theodoridis K. (2026). Social media, consumer culture and sustainable lifestyles: Some evidence from a youth civil society group. *Social Cohesion and Development*, 20(1), 59–75. <https://doi.org/10.12681/scad.44788>

Social media, consumer culture and sustainable lifestyles: Some evidence from a youth civil society group

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Μέσα κοινωνικής δικτύωσης, καταναλωτική κουλτούρα και βιώσιμα λαϊφστάιλ: Ορισμένα ευρήματα από μια ομάδα νέων της κοινωνίας των πολιτών

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ABSTRACT

Sustainability issues and sustainable lifestyles have been a crucial subject in the public sphere. There is a need to understand the ways social media narratives might affect consumer culture and behaviour in relation to sustainable consumption practices and fashion. By focusing on a civil society group of young people on Instagram, this paper seeks to understand how young volunteers communicate to their audience about consumerism, unsustainable lifestyles and the need to reconsider everyday consumption practices. In particular, it explores the role of social media in the ways young people support and advocate for a socio-environmental change. Through a literature review and a thematic analysis of the posts, it is demonstrated how social media can be used by youth groups in order to challenge unsustainable practices, educate consumers and promote alternative consumer lifestyles.

KEY WORDS: Consumer culture, consumer behaviour, sustainable lifestyles, youth, fast fashion

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Η βιωσιμότητα και ο βιώσιμος τρόπος ζωής έχουν αποτελέσει κρίσιμο θέμα στη δημόσια σφαίρα. Υπάρχει η ανάγκη να κατανοήσουμε τους τρόπους με τους οποίους οι αφηγήσεις στα μέσα κοινωνικής δικτύωσης ενδέχεται να επηρεάσουν την καταναλωτική κουλτούρα και συμπεριφορά σε σχέση με τις πρακτικές βιώσιμης κατανάλωσης και τη μόδα. Μέσω της εστίασης σε μια ομάδα νέων της κοινωνίας των πολιτών στο Instagram, το παρόν άρθρο επιδιώκει να κατανοήσει πώς οι νέοι/ες εθελοντές/τριες επικοινωνούν με το κοινό τους σχετικά με τον καταναλωτισμό, τα μη βιώσιμα λαϊφστάιλ και την ανάγκη επαναπροσδιορισμού των καθημερινών καταναλωτικών πρακτικών. Συγκεκριμένα, διερευνά τον ρόλο των μέσων κοινωνικής δικτύωσης στους τρόπους με τους οποίους οι νέοι και οι νέες ενισχύουν και υποστηρίζουν μια κοινωνική και περιβαλλοντική αλλαγή. Μέσω της βιβλιογραφικής επισκόπησης και της θεματικής ανάλυσης των αναρτήσεων, καταδεικνύεται πως τα μέσα κοινωνικής δικτύωσης μπορούν να χρησιμοποιηθούν από ομάδες νέων για να αμφισβητήσουν τις μη βιώσιμες πρακτικές, να εκπαιδεύσουν τους καταναλωτές και να προωθήσουν εναλλακτικά καταναλωτικά λαϊφστάιλ.

ΛΕΞΕΙΣ-ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ: Καταναλωτική κουλτούρα, καταναλωτική συμπεριφορά, βιώσιμα λαϊφστάιλ, νεολαία, γρήγορη μόδα

1. Introduction

There is an ongoing discussion about the environmental problems and the climate crisis in the public sphere. Sustainability issues and sustainable lifestyles have been a crucial subject for mainstream media and social networking sites. The necessity for change of individuals' everyday lifestyles has been at the centre of such debates. Unsustainable lifestyles' effects that deteriorate the socio-environmental situation have been at the core of academic research (Jackson, 2005). In this context, there is a need to understand the ways social media narratives might affect consumer culture and behaviour in relation to sustainable production and consumption practices. This study seeks to explore in what ways consumers and civil society groups try to inform the audience about sustainable lifestyles and how social media can be used for socio-environmental change. In this paper, the main aim is to focus on the role of social media narratives around responsible production, consumption and sustainable fashion and how such themes are addressed by a civil society group of young people on Instagram, namely Solidarity for Fashion.

Solidarity for Fashion is a volunteer group in Greece organised by young people in their attempt to sensitise youth and the wider audiences in relation to fast fashion and its impact on climate change and sustainability. It is an initiative comprised of young volunteers who try to raise awareness about the socio-environmental consequences of the fashion industry and promote sustainable and zero-waste lifestyles. It began its operation in September 2020 in the context of the European Solidarity Corps and more specifically in collaboration with the Hellenic Youth Participation. It is crucial to acknowledge the role of a voluntary youth group in advocating for the interests of local communities and consumers. In this way, we can better understand about the role of civil society organisations and the key messages in their attempt to influence both household and individual practices around sustainable fashion. One of main goals here is to understand how local community groups might use social media platforms in order to communicate their message to the broader audience and in what ways actors advocate for social transformation about responsible consumption and fashion contribute to the wider debates.

During the last decades, social media have affected the arena of consumer culture playing a great role in the construction of spaces where individuals, brands, influencers, governmental and non-governmental organisations might engage with elements of consumerism (Dessart, Veloutsou, & Morgan-Thomas, 2015; Scholz, 2021). In this way, it is important to explore the ways the digitally mediated communication of local and global community groups could influence the discussion about responsible consumption and production in our contemporary societies. It could be argued that an analysis of the generated Instagram posts of a civil society group of young people can provide us with useful and meaningful data in relation to the bottom-up initiatives that challenge hyper-consumption practices and mainstream norms about the fashion industry. By giving emphasis and analysing the Solidarity for Fashion youth group can provide us with an in-depth understanding about the ways sustainable lifestyles might be shaped by a particular (local) digital community. In this way, we can understand which are the main arguments, the sustainable consumption patterns, the values and the meanings that a group of young people, who care about responsible consumption, communicate in the digital public sphere.

2. Literature review

2.1 *Consumer culture, sustainable lifestyles and fast fashion*

Unsustainable lifestyles and the wider implications for the environment have been at the centre of academic debates. According to United Nations Environment Programme (n.d.), “sustainable lifestyles are considered as ways of living, social behaviors and choices, that minimize environmental degradation (use of natural resources, CO₂ emissions, waste and pollution) while supporting equitable socio-economic development and better quality of life for all”. More specifically, one UN’s Sustainable Development Goals is to “ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns” (United Nations, n.d.). In addition, the climate crisis and the deterioration of environmental conditions have been linked with the consumerist world. For Brown and Vergragt (2016), any improvement in relation to the ecological crisis cannot take place without challenging consumerism as one of the fundamental pillars of the socio-economic system. The authors suggest that a radical transformation in relation to consumerist ethos necessitates a wider change both of the system, as well as of individuals’ daily practices. It could be argued that although there is a relative economic prosperity for middle classes in some developing countries and continuous advertising for buying consumer products, these factors are somehow ignored as possible reasons for unsustainable lifestyles (Ahlström, Gärling, & Th gersen, 2020).

According to Tim Jackson (2005), there is a need to turn our attention to the sustainability of consumption patterns in order to decrease the negative effects of our socio-economic and cultural activities in the environment. Speck and Hasselkuss (2015) argue that we have to focus on sufficiency and change significantly our lifestyle routines. In their attempt to shed light on the reasons behind individuals’ adoption of sustainable lifestyles, the authors argue that it is important to focus on people’s alterations around their mobility, housing, nutrition and leisure. In this context, it could be argued that it is fundamental to explore social actors’ calls for changing individual behaviour and practices. Katz-Gerro, Cveti anin and Leguina (2017) during their research about the impact of recession in consumers’ everyday choices and social practices in countries of Southeastern Europe highlighted the effects of such socio-cultural changes in relation to environmental sustainability. In particular, they found that socio-cultural transformations due to the crisis can lead to the changing habits related with buying material goods. Therefore, such changes are linked to the revision of consumer needs, to different distribution of resources, as well as wider transition from consumption to (self)production mindset.

Moreover, Welch (2020) focuses on the promotional sustainable consumption as a contemporary way to understand consumer culture. More specifically, Welch (2020: 70) argues that “it is institutionalised in business functions, markets and civil society organisations, and its powerful advocates champion it as a model for a new, sustainable, consumer culture and as a legitimation for consumer capitalism”. In this way, he suggests that commercial and communication experts disseminate sustainable consumption patterns to the public sphere in an attempt to influence consumption norms and everyday practices. As a result, it is crucial to investigate the connection between forms of communication strategies that try to inform the public about sustainability, as well as influence daily changes in consumers’ lives.

Debates in the public sphere around sustainability and responsible consumption are linked to the fashion industry and criticism about fast fashion practices. Aakko and Koskennurmi-Sivonen (2013) suggest that “ironically, fashion, which is commonly considered innovative, is desperately

behind in sustainability” (p. 13). Business models in the fast fashion industry require immediate response to the consumer demand, effective production, as well as an efficient supply chain (Cachon & Swinney, 2011). From a critical point of view, Monçores and Maciel (2023) argue that it is the globalisation effects on production and consumption practices that promoted the logic of fast fashion, “where an entire production chain, especially textile and clothing, revolves around logistics demands imposed by speedy consumption, or fast” (emphasis on the original) (p. 152). According to Buzzo and Abreu (2019), fast fashion brands and retailers have a significant impact on contemporary consumption practices around clothing and garments. In this way, the fast fashion industry and the related unsustainable lifestyles have negative effects on natural resources (Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2006). For instance, the garments and the materials used by the fast fashion industry go to sites for burying waste, even if some of the them could be re-used (Pereira & Broega, 2023). In addition, it is argued that “wardrobes were overflowing and fresh new garments, not even worn once, may land up in waste bins as it was not in vogue” (Radhakrishnan, 2020, p. 60). Degli Esposti, Mortara and Roberti (2024) in their qualitative research about young female consumers and their motivations and attitudes around sustainability, they found that while young consumers perceive sustainability as significant, this is not directly linked to responsible consumption behaviour. They highlighted that there is a paradox here, their young participants are critical about fashion industry’s unsustainable practices but at the same time, they are influenced by fashionable brands, low prices, latest trends and social media influencers. In order to be able to understand the wider critique towards the fashion industry, we need also to acknowledge that fashion-related sustainability issues are linked to the materials used in production, the life cycle of the products, working conditions, fair wages and workers’ safety.

It is argued that consumerism and consumer capitalism have played a fundamental role in the unsustainable levels of apparel consumption (Schor, 2005). Connolly and Prothero (2008) argue that “the contemporary understanding of green consumption has become tied to the discourse of sustainability, that is, the concepts of sustainable consumption and sustainable development” (p. 119). In this context, the growing criticism in the fashion industry due to its adverse environmental consequences, has played a crucial role in the calls for adopting sustainable fashion practices. Some of the sustainable development issues that need to be improved are directly related with the socio-economic and environmental dimensions of the fashion supply chain. However, apart from the production side and supply chain’s operations, there is an emerging discourse around sustainable fashion from the consumer side. One of the most prominent responses to the fast fashion industry relates to sustainable consumption. For Matharu, Jain and Kamboj (2021), “understanding the impact of factors influencing environment friendly lifestyle and its impact on consumer decision-making becomes imperative” (p. 33). The main point here is that sustainable consumption might provide people the ability to continue to live better, even if they reduce to some extent their levels of consumption.

There is an attempt to focus on ethical production and consumption practices as a response to the increased socio-environmental challenges. Researchers have turned their attention to slow fashion practices as a way to promote sustainable fashion industry through radical transformation both in production and consumption procedures (Ozdamar Ertekin & Atik, 2015). The concept of “slow fashion” is inspired by the slow food movement and constitutes an alternative to fast fashion (Aakko & Koskennurmi-Sivonen, 2013). The foundations of the notion of slow fashion are based on values which are linked to decent working conditions and minimising environmental catastrophe (Gurova, 2024). Some of the practices related with slow fashion include longer life

cycle of clothing, local source of materials and the creation of local production units. Apart from the production side of view in relation to slow fashion, we need to focus on the consumers' role regarding their choices, use, appropriation, repair and disposal of clothing as equally crucial (Gwilt & Rissanen, 2011). In addition, it is argued that putting more emphasis on personal style and meanings instead of continuous trends, it might be an effective way to reinforce attitudes towards slow fashion consumption patterns (Gupta, Gwozdz, & Gentry, 2019). Furthermore, alternative consumption models through individualised "minimalist lifestyles" are presented as a possible response to the mainstream consumerist ethos (Meissner, 2019). However, it is suggested that individualised alternative lifestyles avoid questioning the current economic system, the unsustainability of consumer capitalism and its "loyalty" to growth (Meissner, 2019). Therefore, it could be argued that the research around sustainable lifestyles is significant in the context of the contemporary consumer culture. Before moving on to providing some information about the methodological part of this study, it is crucial to consider the role of media, and in particular social media, in relation to the debates around sustainable lifestyles in the public sphere.

2.2 Media, digitalisation and sustainable lifestyles

The ways that the notions of sustainability and sustainable lifestyle are framed in the public sphere are characterised by increasing complexity. In particular, media and news representations of sustainability have been examined from different perspectives, focusing on businesses, human creativity, governments and the potential solutions to environmental problems. In relation to traditional media, sustainability and socio-environmental issues might be approached either as an opportunity for firms and consumers or as a wider goal which can be achieved via new technologies (Yacoumis, 2018). Additionally, it is argued that promotional intermediaries, that is cultural intermediaries with commercial activity (Davis, 2013), might engage in contradicting actions such as addressing environmental problems, while, at the same time, they promote consumer behaviour which is against long-term solutions to sustainable lifestyles.

Communication experts, marketing specialists and researchers have to focus on reinforcing the adoption of sustainable consumption practices in people's everyday lives in order to transform behaviour, instead of providing only a general understanding about sustainability issues (Guillen Mandujano, Vergragt, & Fischer, 2021). Furthermore, it could be argued that the discussion about the relationship between digitalisation and sustainability might focus on just one aspect of digital life or one sustainability-related issue. As a result, it can lead very often to a partial understanding of the phenomenon (Brenner & Hartl, 2021). In addition, it is argued that communication experts as well as marketers and fashion businesses have adapted their campaigns in order to reflect consumers' positive attitudes towards a green transition (Kong, Witmaier, & Ko, 2021). Another way that might influence consumers' perceptions and choices around sustainability is the ecosystem of the environmental lifestyle media. By this term, we mean "those media texts that have the environment as a primary theme or subject" (Craig, 2019, p. 37). In this context, it is suggested that lifestyle media linked to sustainability issues provide valuable information to consumers but, at the same time, they have been criticised for blurring the boundaries with other entertainment-oriented media (Craig, 2019).

Social media platforms can provide valuable information about new fashion trends, brands and their prices. In particular, social media platforms and narratives in the digital sphere can be used as mechanisms for consumers in order to be informed about sustainability and sustainable

lifestyles. It is argued that online blogs could affect climate change debates by cultivating scepticism among people (Sharman, 2014). Social networking sites have been used extensively by young people during school strikes and protests criticising the inactions of governments and world leaders (Han & Ahn, 2020). In this sense, influencers on Instagram might have a significance effect both on audiences' attitudes and fashion industry's trends. The digital media ecosystem, characterised by the non-boundary of temporal and geographic spaces, can provide different cross-cultural fashion images and trends adapted to the wider socio-cultural consumer needs and attitudes (Suh, 2020).

More specifically, Instagram could be used for the promotion of sustainable practices, such as exchanging clothes between consumers or re-selling second-hand apparel (Williams & Hodges, 2022). Furthermore, there are online thrift stores on Instagram which function as a point of connection between sellers and consumers, reinforcing digitally mediated sustainable fashion practices. In addition, influencers' online narratives could play a crucial role in the dissemination of sustainable consumption patterns related to fashion. Thus, it could be argued that the digital sphere and the online platforms might function as an alternative for consumers in order to buy second-hand products, something which might be linked either to their attempt to find more cost-effective options or due to their pro-environmental attitudes (Martin-Woodhead, 2022). However, there is a need to acknowledge that online conversations about the climate crisis could take place in online "filter bubbles" increasing polarisation, while in some cases might contribute to climate catastrophe denial (Murdock & Brevini, 2019).

During the last decade, young people have been engaged in the organisation of global socio-environmental movements such as the "Fridays For Future". It is argued that youth activism in relation to the environmental catastrophe is a complicated phenomenon to analyse (O'Brien, Selboe, & Hayward, 2018). Bowman (2019) argues that there is a need for a participatory approach in order to investigate youth climate-related activism that challenges previous top-down approaches towards environmental issues. Young people are interested in sustainability and they might engage in actions such as campaigns and boycotts in order to challenge environmentally disastrous economic policies and business practices which are against socio-environmental progress (Fisher, 2016). In this way, social media platforms can play a significant role in creating new forms of digital activism for a pro-environmental agenda, apart from just providing information to audiences (Cox & Pezzullo, 2016).

Digital media affect significantly climate organisations and movements by reinforcing the approach of "connective action", that is connecting individuals who are part of the movement (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Through the analysis of social media usage in relation to the People's Climate March, it was evident that organisers and participants have managed to produce a space of common visibility in the digital sphere that covers a range of environmental issues (Thorson, Edgerly, Kligler-Vilenchik, Xu, & Wang, 2016). In this case study through a multimethod analysis of the Twitter discussions, it is argued that social media might provide a more flexible way to create connections between activists, as well as a platform for transforming organisational communication strategies. In this sense, by promoting one particular hashtag, the organisers of this movement have attracted the attention of other activists, members and broader audiences creating a specific digital space both for mobilising the public in their cause and expressing their personal feelings about environmental issues (Thorson et al., 2016). Therefore, it is important to try to understand the role of the online environment and social media in the relationship between activists, advocacy groups and actions to promote sustainable consumption practices.

3. Methodology

After discussing the theoretical background, we need to outline the methodological considerations of this research. The purpose of this study was to provide an in-depth understanding of how the notions of sustainable consumption and sustainable fashion are produced and consumed in the digital sphere and the implications for a wider social change. In general, the research was designed to shed light on the relationship between sustainability issues and consumer culture through an analysis of social media posts on Instagram and the engagement of a specific voluntary group of young people who advocate for sustainable fashion practices. More specifically, in order to understand the impact of sustainability narratives on consumer culture, it is important to focus on the ways social media might be able to influence this discussion. The main rationale of this study was about the role of social media platforms in forming, promoting as well as challenging forms of consumer lifestyles. In particular, this research investigated questions such as: How youth voluntary groups can influence the discussion about sustainable consumption through social media platforms? How Instagram can be used by a civil society group in order to challenge unsustainable fashion practices?

In order to provide an answer to the aims of this study and the research questions, a qualitative approach was employed for gaining and understanding social media data. As Caliendo argues (2014), “the most appropriate method to understand the culture that consumers produce within their daily life practices on social media is undoubtedly web-based ethnography” (p. 658). In an attempt to understand the generation of meaning in this research, we employed a netnographic approach that gives the opportunity to the researcher to immerse in discussions in the online environment between consumers (Kozinets, 2002). Definitions and conceptualisations around the ways netnography might take place have changed over time (Kozinets, 2015). In this study, we were interested in a specific online community of young people who advocate for sustainable consumption and fashion. More specifically, the selected online group on Instagram has a preference for specific sustainable consumption (and production) practices. A virtual non-intrusive observation of an online community can provide meaningful data about the members of the community, their culture and practices (Bruckman, 2006). In order to analyse the potential influence of Instagram on sustainable consumption and fashion, we have selected to focus on the “Solidarity for Fashion” youth group. We have selected one particular case study of young people who are active on Instagram in relation to sustainability issues. First, we have searched Instagram posts related to such issues through hashtags and then we identified the specific group for analysis. By observing, analysing and interpreting the online characteristics and the natural engagement of this community, it can provide us with meaningful insights about the dynamic digital arena in relation to sustainable consumption.

As it was mentioned in the introduction, the Solidarity for Fashion group is a youth civil society initiative supported by the Hellenic Youth Participation (HYP) in the context of European Solidarity Corps. This is an EU initiative for youth and organisations that provides funding and help for young people in order to “take part in projects either abroad or in their country”. As it is mentioned in the HYP’s website (n.d.), the Solidarity for Fashion “creates collaborations with local companies to raise public awareness on issues related to fast fashion and the environment”. The group has 219 posts on Instagram, 1894 followers and follows 719 users. The first post was shared on 13, December 2020 and the last one on 14, June

2025. We chose Instagram as a rich source of visual and textual data. Instagram, a visual-based social media platform, has a user base around 1.7 billion users. In Greece, 27% of the users were young people between the age of 25-34 years old and young people between 18 and 24 years old were the second group reaching around 20% of the total users (Statista Research Department, 2025). The collection, analysis and interpretation of the data lasted for two months between mid-March and mid-May 2025.

Our focus is on how youth volunteer groups use social media and in particular a visual platform such as Instagram, in order to communicate their thoughts about circular and sustainable fashion. For the analysis, we used an inductive approach examining visual and textual data and the engagement material in the profile. Over a two-month period, all the 289 posts of the public profile (up 15th of May) were examined. We conducted a qualitative thematic analysis of the posts identifying codes and the recurring themes related to the research project. Through continuous analysis, revision and merging we generated wider themes (Creswell, 2013). Of course, data coming from one group cannot produce results that can be generalised across all sustainability-related civil society groups on Instagram. However, it can provide useful insights and provide a foundation for other studies around such issues. In relation to ethical considerations, publicly available posts and data were selected and used for the analysis, while specific member/profile names and individual data are not provided in order to secure privacy of the member of the community.

4. Findings

4.1 Challenging fast-fashion and unsustainable consumption practices

This study investigated and analysed the public posts of a civil society youth group on Instagram. This part presents the category coming from the data analysis in relation to consumption practices, as well as fashion industry practices which are considered unsustainable. The analysis of the content on Instagram demonstrates that the young volunteers challenge continuously unsustainable fashion practices. In other research, it has been examined how young people who belong in the Gen Z make their consumption decisions their sustainable and responsible fashion consumption habits (Williams & Hodges, 2022). Here, our attempt is to focus on the digitally mediated narratives of a youth civil society group. Various posts published in their social media profile put emphasis on climate change and environmental issues. More specifically, in many cases the posts target consumerism and traditional fashion business models. In this way, previously accepted consumer lifestyles and business practices are challenged. The Instagram posts of the volunteer group are characterised by a careful selection of photos and curated text in order to be attractive to their viewers-readers. The posts are not very long and they incorporate also emojis making the text more vivid and attracting audience's attention. In most of the cases, the posts are accompanied with hashtags after the main text. The connection between hashtags related with sustainability, environmental issues and sustainable fashion can help other Instagram consumers to identify the civil society group and their content. In this way, it could be argued also that this group of volunteers participate in the wider debates in the digital world via the usage of hashtags.

One of the key findings of the thematic analysis was that the group advocates for a need to reconsider consumerism and the wider shopping style. For example, posts published on specific dates, such as on Valentine's Day, describe explicitly the way this group challenges mainstream and widespread understandings of contemporary consumer culture. For instance, it is mentioned:

"Every year on a day like this, in the name of love, people pour into the streets to buy every possible item to show their affection to their partner. Teddy bears, flowers wrapped in plastic, chocolates in plastic packaging, fast-fashion clothing, balloons. In our attempt to demonstrate love, we end up harming the environment".

This is one of the most well-known days which has a symbolic power linked with individuals' emotions and the triumph of consumerism (Schmidt, 1995). In this way, the group helps their audience to realise the implications of similar consumption practices. Another example is linked to a post about Black Friday while the group invites their audience to think carefully the shops from which they select to buy their clothes. More specifically:

"  This year, on Black Friday, let's rethink how and where we buy our clothes.  Small local businesses are suffering financially because they are unable to offer comparable discounts with large companies and do not attract the consumers they need.  Before we buy something brand new, it's good to remember that the clothes we already have can be repaired & repurposed. Could we find what we have in mind at a thrift store? Could we borrow it from someone we know? Do we really need it?"

In this context, young volunteers are concerned about the financial sustainability of small-scale local businesses during the Black Friday period because of the difficulty which they face to compete with global brands and firms. Through their posts, they try to make consumers to question their own consumer behaviour and as they state, " let us not be easily carried away this year by the tempting «opportunities» that are already coming our way".

Some of the posts also try to highlight the impact of hyper-consumption in people's lives focusing on the Christmas shopping spree. It is suggested that advertisements and promotions during this period of the year present moments of consumption as the primary way to demonstrate individuals' feelings and love for family and friends. The "Solidary for Fashion" youth group through a specific post presents how "movies, songs, books, articles are full of MUST-have behaviours and products for the IDEAL Christmas". One of the main arguments is about the multiple ways in which advertising messages, special offers, trends as well as shops' decoration during this period can attract consumers' attention. It is argued that "bombardment of advertisements... create fictitious needs and so what now seems ideal is material bliss". In this context, it is also important to consider the ways the "Solidary for Fashion" volunteers address the audience as consumers. Moreover, through a close examination of the posts, it is shown how this civil society group informs the public about the ways people can become hyper-consumers during Christmas holidays increasing that way their environmental footprint for unnecessary material products.

Finally, the critique towards fast-fashion and unsustainable practices is not only linked to environmental issues but it also highlights the extremely poor working conditions under which clothes are being produced. The Instagram posts explain the inhuman conditions for workers in fast-fashion production sites, as well as the multiple ways they are exploited, such as excessive workload and unsafe environments. As it is mentioned in one of the posts, "mass production of clothing imposes practices that cause not only environmentally unfriendly effects, but often impose inhuman conditions for workers in this sector". In this context, it could be argued that the posts offer a critical approach to social and environmental effects of the fashion industry. It

has been analysed elsewhere that some of the major problems around ethical and responsible actions in the specific industry are low wages, overtime, discrimination, health safety issues and abuse (Aakko & Koskennurmi-Sivonen, 2013), and these are some of the issues that this youth group tries to challenge systematically through their communication campaign on Instagram.

4.2 Educating consumers and raising awareness about sustainable consumption practices

Many of the posts of the civil society group on Instagram try to educate their followers around the notions of sustainability and sustainable practices. More specifically, the posts provide information and resources to consumers in order to be able to understand the complexity of environmental and ethical consumption issues in a better way. For instance, the young volunteers created a “dictionary of ethical fashion” in order to explain some of the concepts discussed widely in the public sphere. In addition, the youth group promotes useful material to their audiences, such as a list of “eye-opening movies on fast-fashion” with their main goal to educate consumers, influence their actions and consumer behaviour. In one of their posts, they ask their audience “did you know that there are sensational documentaries and videos about fast fashion released on YouTube, Netflix and Vimeo? You will find some of them in this post! Watch them and you will change your mind about your consumer habits”. For the Solidarity for Fashion group, it is important to educate consumers about fast fashion practices because it clarifies the ways fashion businesses might focus on consumers’ hedonistic pleasures and their desire for new material acquisitions, as well as their operational nature oriented towards efficiency and low-cost production (Buzzo & Abreu, 2019). In comparison with the posts in the previous category that criticise production and consumption patterns, as well as challenge unsustainable practices, the posts in this case include more information about the fast-fashion industry and its wider impact in an attempt to reshape consumption as a possible way through the global (and local) socio-environmental sustainability challenges (Katz-Gerro et al., 2017).

Instagram posts provide information about the effects of the industry practices referring to specific numbers and statistics. Moreover, in order to present their arguments and gain credibility towards their audiences, the young volunteers mention their sources below their posts. For example, in one of their posts, they focus on issues of water overconsumption and how this might lead to water scarcity due to the fast-fashion industry unsustainable practices:

“How much water is needed to make the clothes we wear?”

A pair of jeans  requires 10,000L of water from cotton production to the time the product reaches the store.

To create a t-shirt  2,700 of water are consumed.

To make a pair of shoes, 8,540L of water are needed. More specifically, to make 0.45g of rubber (the material that the sole of the shoes is made of) it takes 208L of water.

In a study conducted in 2017, it was revealed that in 2015 the fashion industry used water that could fill 32 million Olympic-sized swimming pools(!). Forecasts say that by 2030 this number will increase by 50%.”

In this way, social media Instagram profiles might be used in order to shape audiences’ perceptions about the socio-environmental issues. In any case, we need to highlight that posts sometimes can have two different purposes trying to achieve different goals at the same time. That is, the first part of the post might try to inform consumers, while the second to provide different options to consumers in order to adopt more sustainable practices:

One thing we all do when buying clothes is to look at our size. 💡 However, it is equally important to look at the way we take care of this garment. How will this help us?

▶▶ By looking at the clothing labels for the washing-ironing method and the materials from which they are made, we can take better care of the garment extending its lifespan in this way and keeping it like new.

🔧💡 This way we will not iron clothes that cannot withstand the temperature of the iron again and thus we will not have to throw them away by buying new ones.

Many “Solidary for Fashion” posts explain different concepts, which are essential to the public dialogue in order to make the broader audience aware of key terms in relation to sustainability and fast-fashion industry. These examples are characterised by a general description in the main part of the post, as well as some photos that incorporate text with information and definitions. This process reveals how the civil society youth group tries to clarify basic ideas. In particular, notions like minimalism and sustainability as well as their differences are explained:

“Minimalism vs Sustainability, two concepts that we often confuse in our minds.

😊 But what exactly does each concept mean?

👤 What are their different types?

🗑️ Did you know their definitions?»

Explaining key terminology, such as minimalism, emphasise people’s essential needs and the significance of having less material objects and clothing, with messages like “having in our closet only the clothes we really need and use every day, which give us some kind of joy. It is based on having arithmetically few clothes. Indirectly, it aims at living without stress”. In this way, the post offers a definition of minimalism, as well as it presents its benefits in relation to the importance of making a distinction between needs and desires, reducing anxiety and the actual source of happiness. The focus of the group on educating consumer about minimalism, signifies the importance of this global popular lifestyle movement which is based on the reduction of material consumption and possessions, leading to immaterial everyday consumption practices (Martin-Woodhead, 2022).

4.3 Promoting alternative consumer lifestyles

Many of the posts that are related to sustainable consumption and fast-fashion practices in the “Solidarity for Fashion” profile try to influence the viewers-readers in order to reconsider holistically their lifestyles and change their consumer behaviour. In this context, the youth group calls their audience through their Instagram profile to rethink about consumer cultures and avoid adopting traditional lifestyles. More specifically, the young volunteers promote different ways of consumption practices and reveal the potentiality of social media as a means to challenge unsustainable consumer lifestyles. The posts in this category are more critical towards the implications of consumerism. Through two different posts, the group promotes consumer behaviour shifts and a new way of thinking via the usage of the 6 Rs: Refuse, reduce, rethink, reuse, repair and recycle. In this way, they criticise those consumption practices which are linked to impulse buying and they put emphasis on conscious consumption. In addition, they call for a reduction in consumerist attitudes which intensify the usage of fossil fuels for production as well as create excessive waste. As it is mentioned in the first part of such posts which describes

the 3 Rs, “rethinking comes to fit in with all your small and big steps regarding your consumer behaviour”. Moreover, a second post (part 2) with an analytical explanation of the other 3 Rs was posted almost after two weeks. The posts in this thematic category direct the audience’s attention to think again about their consumption practices and search for new alternatives. Such consumption practices are presented through the adoption of a zero-waste lifestyle:

“On the occasion of the European Week for Waste Reduction, our team invites you to a 5-day zero waste challenge where everyone will try to monitor and reduce their waste. The zero-waste movement revolves around the principles of the three Rs: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle. So, keeping the three Rs in mind during the challenge, we try to reduce our daily waste and think about or look for zero waste alternatives”.

The proposed ideas work as a way to change gradually the current approach to consumerism, leading to a zero-waste everyday life. This is a good example of the ways ethical and sustainable practices are promoted (Martin-Woodhead, 2022). In this sense, the youth group’s social media profile becomes a channel for cultural and social transformation. Here, what is important is the meanings embedded in the posts and their role in shaping audiences’ consumer behaviour. Another post which highlights the need for a transition to more sustainable consumption practices, states that “one of the most financially feasible alternatives when it comes to ethical fashion is to buy from a second-hand clothing store”. In this way, it promotes purchases of clothing from thrift shops. However, it is significant to mention that through their post, the young volunteers realise that even consumption via thrift shops might lead to the hyper-consumption of relatively cheap but unnecessary purchases. In particular, it is mentioned that “as important as it is to limit our purchases from fast fashion companies by supporting second-hand clothing, it is also important to make these purchases consciously”. Therefore, it is clear that there is reconsideration of even alternative consumption practices as they might intensify the consumerist mentality rather than reduce consumption of material objects and waste. Although critiques of consumerist ethos and firms’ marketing practices, such as greenwashing and femwashing, are frequently mentioned in the posts, wider ideologically linked criticism of late capitalism remains evasive. Many of the posts present different consumer lifestyles that defy mainstream consumer culture attitudes. This reveals how the specific civil society youth group supports actively a more environmentally friendly way of life:

“A more minimalist, meaningful and ecological life can start with a shift in our mindset regarding how much and what we consume. It is important not to push ourselves in absolute terms but to focus on how we will want less, reducing but not suppressing our needs. How can this be done?”

It is important to mention here that there is a paradox discussing about a radical transformation of lifestyles, while at the same time, the economic system is not questioned at its core (Meissner, 2019). Through the analysis, it is evident that for the solidarity group, individuals have a crucial role to play in the transition to more sustainable and ethical lifestyles. In addition, it is important to mention that the analysis did not provide any specific findings explicitly suggesting a connection to particular political parties and/or political ideologies. Thus, changes in relation to consumer behaviour are considered necessary steps at a personal level in order to have a positive result about the future of the environment. It is significant to note that young volunteers try to promote alternative consumer lifestyles in order to protect the environment and increase individuals’ satisfaction through consuming less in a more sustainable way.

5. Conclusion

Previous research has analysed issues related with unsustainable consumption levels (Ahlström et al., 2020), the significance of sustainable consumption practices (Gurova, 2024) as well as young people's relationship with environmental activism and the climate crisis (Bowman, 2019; Fisher, 2016). This paper has focused on understanding the digitally mediated narratives of sustainable consumer lifestyles. More specifically, this article has investigated through a literature review issues related to consumer culture, digitalisation, sustainable consumption and fast fashion. Furthermore, this work draws on material collected via the Solidarity for Fashion civil society group on Instagram. The rationale behind this selection was to explore young volunteers' communication strategy for a socio-environmental transformation. The theoretical review and the thematic analysis conducted here try to address the questions about the ways youth voluntary groups can influence the discussion about sustainable consumption on social networking sites, as well as the ways unsustainable fashion practices could be challenged on Instagram. The main intention was to demonstrate the most important issues related to consumer culture and sustainable lifestyles in the digital arena.

The climate crisis and the broader implications of an unsustainable way of life constitute challenges that affect both global and local communities. Individuals' consumption practices and daily routines can be argued to play a crucial role in the research approach to investigate sustainability and consumer culture (Buzzo & Abreu, 2019; Meissner, 2019). Young people appear to be at the cutting edge of socio-environmental changes. In this way, it is imperative to understand the sustainable consumption narratives of youth. For this reason, it is significant to research thoroughly the ways young advocates of sustainable consumption and fashion present their narratives on Instagram. Young volunteers try to challenge mainstream unsustainable consumption, make consumers aware of the effects of their consumer behaviour, as well as promote alternative sustainable lifestyles.

The findings have shown that this civil society group use the affordances of Instagram in order to make their content attractive and communicate effectively their messages to the audience by using hashtags and emojis in their posts. In this way, young volunteers can be considered social actors who actively engage in the digital sphere challenging traditional business models and hyper-consumption. The analysis of the posts reveals that apart from the environmental impact, the young volunteers are interested in highlighting poor working conditions and workers' exploitation. In addition, there was also a category of posts which were primarily intended to educate consumers and provide information, facts and details about sustainability issues. The content of the posts was linked to the fast fashion industry and there was an attempt to influence directly consumers' actions. Finally, the themes discussed in the analysis show that posts' descriptions promote alternative consumer lifestyles by giving emphasis on thriftiness, zero-waste lifestyles and second-hand shops for clothing. Focusing on the digitally mediated narratives about sustainable consumption suggests that social media platforms, in particular Instagram, are crucial for young volunteers as a means to challenge unsustainable consumer lifestyles. Social media posts can be approached as a useful arena for understanding the sustainable consumption issues, as well as the wider socio-environmental transformation.

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