

## **Taking sustainable fashion mainstream: social media and the institutional celebrity entrepreneur**

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Title: Taking Ethical Fashion Mainstream: social media and the institutional celebrity entrepreneur

Short Title: Taking Ethical Fashion Mainstream

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## ABSTRACT

There is a growing imperative to address the negative environmental impact of fashion and an increased awareness of sustainability issues; the Sustainable Fashion Concept (SFC). However, although consumers are becoming more aware and concerned about sustainability, this is not resulting in the purchase of sustainable fashion products in preference to 'mainstream' goods. This so-called attitude-behaviour gap is well documented in academic literature and yet there is a lack of research into potential methods of disrupting this phenomenon. This study seeks to redress this by examining the potential influence of celebrity institutional entrepreneurs (CIEs) to raise awareness of the SFC and to therefore guide and change consumer behaviour towards more sustainable practice. CIEs are celebrities who use their social position to espouse their values with the intention of influencing institutional habits and behaviours. In this case, Emma Watson is identified as an appropriate and credible proponent and her @the\_press\_tour Instagram account used to examine her influence. A netnographic investigation of this account was conducted in combination with eight in-depth interviews with account followers to examine attitudes and actions towards sustainable fashion. Findings showed that the account had partial impact on consumer engagement with the SFC in that it led to the participants being more likely to discuss and consider the issues around sustainable fashion, however, it had no significant impact on purchases of sustainable fashion. The study concludes that CIEs can impact the attitudes of mainstream consumers towards sustainable fashion, however, further research is required to determine any long-term influence.

Keywords: sustainable fashion; celebrity institutional entrepreneur; social media; attitude behaviour gap; consumer engagement

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The sustainable fashion concept (SFC) is associated with fair working conditions, a sustainable business model, organic and environmentally friendly materials, certifications and traceability and has emerged in response to growing awareness and concern about the negative, environmental and human impact of the global fashion industry (Henninger et al., 2016). Consumers can play a significant role in altering industry standards and by engaging with the SFC, could foster industry change (Hopkinson and Cronin, 2015). However, while consumer awareness and concern about the SFC is growing, this does not correlate to sustainable behaviours in consumption (Kong et al., 2016). This disparity, known as the 'attitude-behaviour' gap, has received much research attention as it is recognised that sustainable practices need to become mainstream and to be adopted industry-wide (McNeil and Moore, 2015). Despite this imperative, there is limited extant research that focuses on interventions that may encourage consumers to choose sustainable fashion (SF) in preference to other options.

Social media (SM) is a key means of raising awareness of global issues (Strähle and Gräff, 2016) and a way through which consumers can affect industry norms (Hopkinson and Cronin, 2015) however, a review of social media research by Kapoor et al. (2018) did not identify any studies of consumer behaviour that considered the use of social media to impact broader institutional awareness and behaviours related to the SFC. This study therefore, considers the potential of social media as a conduit through which to impact institutional change, leading to increased SF behaviours. In particular, it aimed to explore the ability of social media influencers, in this case UN Goodwill Ambassador Emma Watson, to effect a 'societal change' in relation to awareness of the SFC and, in so doing, to encourage mainstream, sustainable consumption practices. In this context, the mainstream consumer is a person whose fashion purchases and interests are commonly accepted and to whom concerns about sustainability in fashion may be more "fleeting and less central" than those for whom it is an "enduring aspect of their identity" (Hopkinson and Cronin, 2015, p.31).

Watson is a vocal proponent of SF, has significant global reach and is committed to wearing only ethical fashion at public events with the aim of spreading awareness and changing perceptions of the SFC amongst her social media followers. Her credibility is further ensured by refusal to take payment for endorsing any of the brands or products she features and this expression of integrity identifies her as an authentic and honest source of influence (Audrezet, et al., 2018). As such, Watson may be defined as a celebrity institutional entrepreneur (CIE); “an actor who attempts to act on their dissatisfaction with some aspects of the status quo and use their resources, expertise, and social position to lead change” (Hopkinson and Cronin, 2015, p.1385). Watson’s @the\_press\_tour Instagram account was therefore adopted in this research as a case study through which to examine the following assumptions: firstly, that CIEs could positively impact the SFC by raising awareness of issues; secondly, that an increased awareness would be likely to result in a greater level of consumer engagement in relation to the SFC; and thirdly, that this awareness and engagement would, in turn, result in a shift of purchasing behaviours towards choosing SF goods in preference to non-sustainable options.

## **2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **2.1 Institutional Entrepreneurship**

As the aim of this study was to explore mainstream ‘institutional’ behaviours rather than focus on specific brands or consumer segments, it was considered appropriate to adopt the concept of the ‘Celebrity Institutional Entrepreneur’ (CIE) and to position the research within ‘Institutional Theory’ (IT). IT considers the processes by which structures, including schemes, rules, norms, and routines, become established as authoritative guidelines for social behaviour (Wahid and Sein, 2013; Hopkinson and Cronin, 2015) and posits that long term change occurs through the linked actions of organisations and consumers, with CIEs having the ability to rally and inspire the mainstream consumer and contribute to institutional change (Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013; Wahid and Sein, 2013).

Successful celebrity endorsement of traditional products requires a close match between celebrity and brand, with the aim of encouraging purchase (Poghosyan, 2015) and the source attractiveness (SA) model has played a prominent role in ‘match-up theory’ which identifies the attractiveness of the celebrity as being the most important attribute for successful endorsement (Carroll, 2008). However, while this may play a role in gaining initial consumer attention (Poghosyan, 2015) endorsement effectiveness is dependent upon the perceived expertise and trustworthiness of the celebrity (Carroll, 2008; Byrne et al., 2003) with the most successful campaigns resulting from high credibility owing to close endorser-brand congruity (Kang and Choi, 2016; Poghosyan, 2015; Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). Thus, celebrity endorsement of sustainable products is likely to be effective when the endorser is considered to be trustworthy, genuinely ethical and a close match to the sustainable brand (Kang and Choi (2016) such is the case with Watson’s credibility. Further, non-commercialised motivations are more likely to result in positive perceptions and favourable attitudes within SM communities through sharing and engagement of the cognitive, affective and behavioral (or conative) elements that shape subjective norms (Shareef et al., 2018). Therefore, as the focus of Watson’s social media message is on context (sustainability), rather than content (brand or product) this should positively impact attitudes towards SF. However, the theory of reasoned action (TRA) (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980) identifies that favourable attitudes and intentions do not necessarily convert to positive behaviours and this can be evidenced in the apparent discrepancy between consumer attitudes and sustainable consumption behaviours; the ‘attitude-behaviour’ gap (Kong et al., 2016).

### **2.2 The Attitude Behaviour Gap**

The ‘attitude-behaviour’ gap in SF refers to a phenomenon whereby consumers who profess to have strong environmental or ethical values do not translate these into purchases of SF products (Perry and Chung, 2016; McNeil and Moore, 2015). While this gap exists for ethical products

generally, it is more pronounced in the uptake of sustainable clothing (Gam, 2011): consumers perceive SF to lack the standards of 'mainstream' alternatives in relation to price, design, fit and ease of purchase (Carrigan and Attala, 2001; Solomon and Rabolt, 2008) and will not buy solely on ethical credentials (Perry and Chung, 2016; McNeill and Moore, 2015). As the tangible aspects alone of SF goods are not sufficient to compete with 'mainstream' apparel, the decision-making process requires additional elements to influence and shape subjective norms and potentially impact behaviours.

The 'Theory of Planned Behaviour' (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) can be applied to examine the social influence affecting these other elements that comprise attitudes, values, emotions and concern for the perceived judgement of others. Those who are positively predisposed towards ethical purchase behaviour, will have correspondingly positive values, emotions, intentions and knowledge of sustainability issues and will therefore be more likely to engage in sustainable practice (Cowan and Kinley, 2014). Further, social and environmental concerns may be intrinsic to the individual's self-concept and also relate directly to sustainable purchase decision making and behaviours (Cowan and Kinley, 2014). Correspondingly, a lack of knowledge of the SFC and eco-fashion products will result in non-purchasing behaviour; in other words, a gap in knowledge of sustainability will result in a lack of purchase of sustainable goods (McNeill and Moore, 2015; Kong et al., 2016; Gam 2011; Birtwistle and Moore, 2007; Song and Ko, 2014). However, where the social norm is towards sustainable concerns and ethical practice, the TPB can be applied to suggest that the impact of social interaction will result in increased social pressure towards sustainable consumption. Therefore, the impact of the CIE in changing social perception, will potentially result in greater awareness of the SFC and an increase in sustainable purchase behaviours as a result of consumer engagement in social media communities (in this case Watson's Instagram account).

## **2.3 Consumer Engagement**

Consumer engagement indicates a state of connectedness between consumer and brand (Calder and Malthouse, 2008) and "reflects a motivational state" (Hollebeek et al., 2014, p. 150). Customer co-creation, including participating in electronic-word-of-mouth (eWOM), recommendations and referrals, asking questions and giving responses on online community forums, could be taken as measures of deeper consumer engagement (van Doorn et al., 2010) and are 'measurable' via the number of 'likes' and 'comments' on Instagram posts (de Vries et al., 2012). Consumer engagement studies are typically brand focused (Hollebeek et al., 2014) and have identified that engagement adds brand value, loyalty and trust among members of the community (Kamboj et al., 2017; Connell et al., 2019). By extending this premise to wider institutional concerns, SM platforms have the potential to facilitate consumer engagement with CIEs who can galvanise and inspire the mainstream consumer towards more sustainable behaviours. Therefore, an initial measure of the success or failure of CIEs to stimulate consumer demand for institutional change, is an increase in consumer engagement with the SFC.

# **3 RESEARCH APPROACH**

## **3.1 Research Gap and Implications**

The general consensus of extant literature is that a lack of knowledge about sustainable fashion brands and products is among the most significant barrier to overcoming the attitude-behaviour gap. Celebrity endorsement is a popular communication tool used by companies to increase consumer knowledge about, and interest in, their brand and products, and has been suggested as a way to overcome the attitude-behaviour gap and increase purchase of SF (Hollebeek et al., 2014; de Vries et al., 2012). However, endorsement campaigns are brand specific, and therefore unlikely to have a widespread impact on the uptake of sustainability in the fashion industry. The present study therefore extends this context by applying Institutional Theory to consider the potential for CIEs to effect institutional change in regards to SFC, thus contributing new insight relevant to

sustainable fashion consumption behaviours. Institutional Theory has rarely been applied to the fashion industry and has not, to our knowledge, been considered in the context of mainstream adoption of SF practice amongst consumers and the industry. Additionally, a novel, qualitative approach is adopted to examine online Instagram engagement resulting in recommendations to address ongoing barriers to SF behaviours.

### **3.2 Methodology**

As no previous research had been carried out on the impact of CIEs in regard to the SFC, this study was exploratory in nature. Focussing on Watson's @the\_press\_tour Instagram account, a netnographic methodology was adopted, defined by Kozinets (2012, P.62), as a "qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to the study of cultures and communities emerging through electronic networks". This included the collection of archival data from @the\_press\_tour and from qualitative interviews with self-identified 'mainstream followers'. Netnography is a flexible qualitative method that offers marketers an insight into consumer behaviour and can be enhanced by taking an active participatory approach (Costello et al., 2017; Heinonen and Medberg, 2018). This single case study, involving both passive and active netnographic approaches, is in keeping with previous netnographic research on other topics (Ewing et al., 2013; Gurrieri and Cherrier, 2013; Wilkinson and Patterson, 2010). This mixed methodology facilitated an in-depth understanding not only of online engagement but also of the offline impact of CIEs on mainstream consumers' attitudes towards SF, and is in accordance with the quality criteria for netnographic research established by Kozinets (2015).

### **3.3 Data Collection**

A four-step mixed approach was adopted for data collection beginning with a passive, observational phase then moving to an active, direct interaction with the online community. Step 1: prior to contacting potential interview participants, two weeks were spent casually observing the account, the content of posts and interaction of followers. This process of acculturation allowed for familiarisation with the terminology, languages and 'netiquette' used within the account and to form initial impressions on how best to approach participants and conduct the study (Langer and Beckman, 2005). Step 2: adhering to practices laid out by Wilkinson and Patterson (2010), and to embed the researcher within the community, disclosure of the study and limited details of researcher identity, academic affiliation and the nature of the research project were revealed on the personal Instagram profile so as not to deceive community members. Step 3: archival data were collected from the comments section of 31 posts on the account during a four-month period and analysed to monitor engagement with the SFC over this period. Comments and 'emojis' were captured exactly as they appeared in order to provide further insight into attitudes of commentators (Wilkinson and Patterson, 2010; Markham, 2004). Step 4: contact was made with followers of the account who were initially provided with information about the study and asked a series of eligibility questions that determined if they were a mainstream consumer of fashion for whom sustainability was not a key component of their identity. From this a purposive sample of eight was identified for interview. Purposive sampling is acknowledged as suitable for netnographic studies, allowing the inclusion of otherwise hard-to-reach groups (Costello et al., 2017). Each interview lasted between 45-60 minutes and was conducted through computer-assisted viewing to simulate face-to-face interviewing (Kozinets, 2012). The audio of each interview was recorded and subsequently transcribed. In accordance with Kozinets's (2012) guide to ethical netnography, the identity of participants remained anonymous and informed consent was obtained from all interviewees prior to interview.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

A three-step approach was applied for the analysis. Firstly, data collected from the 31 archival posts were analysed for content (number of views, likes, comments, and post context) to provide an overview of the account and the activity relating to it. Secondly, a thematic analysis of comments from three selected posts (from the beginning, mid-point and most recent points of the campaign)

was conducted, resulting in the identification of two overarching themes: (i) engaging with sustainability, and (ii) engaging with Watson as an individual. Thirdly, inductive and deductive approaches to thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2017), which combined insights from the literature with themes emerging from participants' own narratives, were used to analyse the interview data. The findings presented below reflect the main themes identified across both archival and interview data analysis relating to (i) awareness of SFC; (ii) knowledge about SF options; (iii) engagement with SFC; (iv) consumption practices; and (v) endorser-brand congruity.

## **4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **4.1 Awareness of the SFC**

The ability of the @the\_press\_tour account to increase awareness of the SFC was a crucial measurement of Watson's success as a CIE. Participant prior awareness of the SFC was mixed. Those with the highest prior awareness of environmental and social impacts of fashion had either professional experience in the fashion or makeup industries (P1, 3 & 4) or who practised veganism (P2). P5 & 6 had low level awareness that SF products existed, while P7 & 8 had none; "I didn't realise it was a thing" (P7). All participants reported an increased awareness while following the account but relative to their initial level, this appears to have been most significant for P7 & 8, who had no prior awareness: "I didn't even know what it was until she [...] started posting about it" (P7); "people like me wouldn't have thought about sustainable fashion [...] without her advertising it" (P8). Participants with higher prior awareness reported an increase in their awareness due to following the account ("It was only through this account that I even realised that more people were doing it" – P1), therefore it had a positive effect on awareness of the SFC concept regardless of their prior level of awareness.

### **4.2 Knowledge about Sustainable Fashion Options**

Prior to following @the\_press\_tour, P4-8 perceived SF to be unattractive; "bland [...] isn't attractive (P8), whereas those with the highest initial interest in SF (P1-3) lacked these preconceptions, instead relating their prior knowledge of SF to high-end designers "Stella McCartney" (P1+3) and popular high street collections ("I liked it when Topshop did their Made in England collections" – P2) confirming that they were already aware that SF could be attractive prior to following the account.

In following the account, P4, 6-8 stated that it had changed their previous perceptions of SF being unattractive; "I've realized how pretty sustainable fashion can be and it's gotten out of my head this idea of sustainable fashion being unattractive" (P8). This supports McNeil and Moore (2015) and Perry and Chung (2016) that a lack of knowledge about SF creates a perception that it is unattractive; participants with the highest prior knowledge did not hold this view, while those who were less informed, did. Consumer perception of SF as unattractive is a major barrier to purchase (Meyer, 2001; McNeil and Moore, 2015; Perry and Chung, 2016) and for the participants who held this perception, exposure to Watson's account increased their knowledge and changed this perception, thus removing this particular barrier to SF purchase.

Prior to following the account P1-4 knew of at least one SF brand and a small number of 'eco' collections from mainstream brands. The same five brands were mentioned by all of these participants, indicating a limited knowledge of other such available brands. However, breadth of brand awareness did increase while following @the\_press\_tour, which participants attribute directly to the account: "It's brought me to brands I never would have went to" (P1). P1-3 reported that they enjoyed and usually read the full information caption on the posts, whereas P4 read only the section of the caption relating to her favourite product; this reduced reading does not appear to have had an impact on increased knowledge.

P5-8, who had low or no prior awareness of SF, knew of no SF brands prior to following the account and its impact on their knowledge of sustainable brands was mixed. P5's knowledge increased to

the extent that she could discuss several brands; “it’s a space that I can discuss when previously I probably wouldn’t have been able to”, and P8 felt similarly. Both read at least a part of the text caption on posts detailing the sustainable information about the products but P5 was unlikely to read any caption “longer than the length of my screen” and P8 read the section relating to whichever aspect of the outfit she liked best. Both enjoyed the information and felt it was important to their engagement with the account.

In contrast, P7 usually read the caption, however twice stated that the information “may not sink in”, and P6 did not generally read the captions at all. Both felt that the information was not important to their enjoyment of the account and neither reported an increased knowledge of sustainable brands; “not that I can recall no” (P6). It is possible to infer that participants who actively enjoyed reading all or part of the caption information gained substantially more knowledge about sustainable brands than those who did not.

It is interesting to note that P8, who, like P6 & 7 had no prior awareness of the SFC or SF brands, gained increased knowledge about brands while the other two did not. In addition to reading and enjoying the captions, P8 also used Instagram as a tool for fashion inspiration and shopping “it’s a good source of inspiration”, whereas P6 & 7 did not; “instagram for me is not set up as very accessible for purchasing” (P6). It can be inferred that the purpose for which followers use the Instagram app could also influence how much information about brands they absorb from posts, however, further study is required to examine this. Overall, the @the\_press\_tour account increased knowledge about sustainable brands and products for participants with prior awareness of the SFC and for those who read and enjoyed the text accompanying the visual posts. However, it had no impact on those who did not read and enjoy the posts and had no prior SF awareness.

### 4.3 Engagement with the SFC

Consumer engagement is thought to heighten consumer brand loyalty, leading to brand referrals to other potential consumers and eventually sales growth (Hollebeek et al., 2014). In parallel, this study sought to evaluate the impact of the account on engagement with the SFC amongst mainstream followers to examine whether or not an increase in engagement has the potential to encourage more sustainable consumption and, in turn, influence others to do so, thus taking steps towards making SF practice more mainstream. In line with de Vries et al., (2012) that the number of ‘likes’ and comments on Instagram posts are indicators of engagement, participants were questioned on their ‘liking’ and commenting habits. Archival data on the number of likes and comments per post and in-depth analysis of the 1<sup>st</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> post comments were also gathered. Other than P7, all interviewees used the ‘like’ feature on Instagram to engage with the @the\_press\_tour account, but only half of them used it as a tool to engage with the SFC. P7 did not ‘like’ any post, however, this was due to how she used the Instagram app and is not necessarily a reflection of her enjoyment of the posts “I use my likes sparingly...to my friends”. The visual appeal of the post was the most important consideration for all other participants when deciding to ‘like’ (“how the clothing looked and how attractive it was” – P8). P2, 3 & 5 were the only participants for whom the caption content was also a factor in ‘liking’ the post; “it’s a combination of the clothes and the message behind it” (P2). For P1, the caption was not a determining factor for ‘liking’ the posts; instead, she ‘liked’ posts to “use it as a marker” to return to later and look up more information on the featured sustainable brands.

No participant reported having commented on any post and rarely commented on any Instagram post, particularly those from celebrities; “never [...] I would never say [...] ‘I love your dress’ or anything like that. I just wouldn’t do that [on a celebrity post]” (P3). Contrary to the findings of de Vries et al. (2012), comments on Instagram posts may not be valuable indicators of engagement. No participant used this function in regards to the account, and rarely in any context; this being reserved for “people who are just crazy when it comes to following celebrities, liking all their posts, commenting constantly on their posts” (P7). This somewhat reflects the archival data, as the percentage of comments expressing ‘love’ for Watson was significantly higher than the proportion referring to sustainability. Though this proportion increased over time, the actual number fell



dramatically, from 317 in post 1 commenting about 'love' for Watson, to only 65 in post 31; 40 of which were posted by the same person. Therefore, those who comment are perhaps in the minority of overall users and may represent a 'loud' yet small proportion of all account followers.

For some, engaging with the celebrity may be more important than engaging with the concept that the CIE is advocating (Hopkinson and Cronin, 2015; Lim and Moufahim, 2015). This was particularly true for P6, who did not generally read the post captions but did check to see Watson's location; "the only piece that impacts my enjoyment is I usually check to see where she is". Strong follower interest in Watson's location was also apparent in the general archival data collected. The three posts with the highest number of 'likes' and comments all mentioned the city that Watson was in and did not mention sustainability until later in the caption. Conversely, the four posts with the lowest number of 'likes' and comments referred only to the SFC. This indicates that the account followers may engage more with Watson than with the SFC. However, in every post, the number of comments is significantly less than the number of 'likes'. In line with assertions that they rarely, if ever, comment on celebrity posts yet do 'like' them, there may be support for P7's belief that those who comment on the posts do not accurately reflect the ordinary follower's engagement.

WOM referrals are often influential in consumer decision making due to the trust consumers place on the opinion of their peers, and the discussion of a brand is considered to be an act of engagement (Sen and Lerman, 2007). While following @the\_press\_tour, all but one of the participants engaged in WOM about the account with co-workers, family or friends; "I discussed [the brands] with my sister" (P8). Half engaged in WOM specifically about the SFC; "talk mostly about the fabric and what makes it sustainable, instead of the actual fashion itself" (P1).

Engagement differed depending on how much effort was required for each type of engagement and the participants' previous level of interest in the concept. Participants were asked if they had followed a sustainable fashion brand on Instagram or visited its website after seeing it featured on @the\_press\_tour. The additional effort on the part of the participant to perform these actions was taken as a sign of engagement with the SFC (Erkan, 2015) and potentially having a long-term impact. P1, 3-5 & 8 followed at least one SF brand after finding out about them but only P1, 3 & 8 visited the brands' websites; "I went onto that EDUN [website], to try to look for trousers, they're really nice ones [...] I've done it with 3 or 4 things actually" (P1). The three participants who were not inspired by the account to follow any sustainable brands, reported that they follow few, if any, fashion brands on Instagram. Therefore, this may not be a sign of lower engagement, rather a reflection of how they use the app. As P1 & 3 had higher prior awareness of SF, as well as professional experience in the fashion and makeup industries, it was not unexpected that their engagement would extend to visiting a brand website for more product information. It was surprising that P8 took this step, due to her lack of prior awareness, however, this may be explained by her use of the Instagram app as a shopping and fashion inspiration tool, perhaps making her more likely to visit brand websites in general.

#### **4.4 Consumption Practices**

Encouraging consumers to purchase SF is critical as it supports a growing niche industry and sends a message to mainstream retailers that SF is important to consumers, potentially leading to industry change (Hopkinson and Cronin, 2015). Prior to following the account, P1-5 had purchased SF before ("I got stuff from People Tree" P2) and had some prior awareness of the SFC, suggesting that awareness of the need for SF is linked to its purchase.

This is supported by P6-8 who had no prior awareness and had never purchased SF ("I don't think so no" P7). However, none of the participants regularly purchased SF and did not do so while following the account. As well as a lack of visibility and advertising, a barrier to purchase was the perceived high cost of SF with all participants reporting that these products were not accessible to them; "they come across as inaccessible to people, their price point being quite removed from the average clothing shopper" (P2). Every participant stated that style, fit and price were the primary

concerns when purchasing, with sustainability an added bonus for which they might be willing to pay slightly, but not significantly, more; “does it fit, how much is it, [...] does it look good on me [...] it’s a bonus if it’s made in Britain or it was recycled or something like that but if it doesn’t fit then I wouldn’t buy it so that has to be the main consideration” (P3); “it’s a selling point but it’s not a big selling point, like I wouldn’t get it if it was missing a lot of the other things” (P1). The universality of this in each interview lends support to generally accepted theory that consumers will only purchase SF products if they are similar to mainstream products in terms of style, fit, price and ease of purchase (Perry and Chung, 2016; McNeill and Moore, 2015; Carrigan and Attala, 2001).

The @the\_press\_tour account, however, did somewhat impact the actions of P1-3. For example, P3 credits the account with encouraging her to “buy maybe pricier pieces but that will last longer” and P1 halted an impulse purchase at Zara “I just thought that’s not going to be recyclable [...] that’s a lot of fabric to waste, I’m not going to purchase it”. These three participants had the highest prior awareness of SF, which subsequently increased; previously knew of at least one SF brand, and subsequently became aware of more; participated in engagement with the SFC either through visiting brand pages and websites or discussing it with friends; and had previously purchased SF. These results provide some support for McNeill and Moore’s (2015) argument that increasing knowledge and awareness of the SFC can lead to greater SF purchasing, but only for people with high initial concern for social and environmental well-being.

#### **4.5 Endorser-Brand Congruity**

It became clear that Watson herself was the crucial component of the @the\_press\_tour account, without whom it would have been unable to impact followers’ awareness, knowledge, engagement, and perhaps purchases; “if it was someone else you wouldn’t connect with it so much” (P1). P2 & 3 both used reality TV star Kim Kardashian as a comparison: “Someone like Kim Kardashian [...] no one would care [...] but because it was a credible person it became a bigger deal” (P7). Supporting the source credibility model (Kang and Choi, 2016), this indicates that the account would be less impactful if it was associated with a celebrity less congruent with the SFC than Watson. However, while all participants perceived Watson to be a trustworthy and credible endorser of SF, only three (P4, 6 & 8) considered her to be an expert. Contrary to existing research, which presents the perception of the ‘expert’ celebrity as a key factor in endorser effectiveness (Carroll, 2008; Byrne et al., 2003), this did not hamper the perception of her as being appropriate for SF, as she was perceived to have a “higher level of knowledge than the average person” (P7).

### **5 DISCUSSION**

#### **5.1 General Discussion**

The aim of this study was to investigate whether CIE’s can impact the attitudes and actions of mainstream consumers towards SF. In conclusion, the @the\_press\_tour account had a positive effect on awareness of the SFC, which is the first step in closing the attitude-behaviour gap (Kong et al., 2016). As cognitive values were positively affected by the account it can be posited that repeated and increased exposure to sustainable concepts within social media communities will lead to a prevailing norm that predisposes sustainable practice. Additionally, the socially descriptive values of Watson’s posts are reinforced and promulgated by consumer engagement with the account (indicated by the use of likes/loves/comments - the symbolic indicators of the social injunctive), and therefore further reinforce attitudes and behaviours towards the sustainable imperative. Additionally, the account was successful in reversing negative perceptions of SF, particularly among those with limited prior knowledge of the SFC, which is significant in breaking down barriers to SF consumption. However, although participant knowledge about specific SF brands did increase, this was primarily for those with higher prior awareness of the SFC and/or those who read and enjoyed the information provided in the text captions of posts. It had no impact on those who did not read the captions. With reference to the TPB it may be argued that prior knowledge of SF positively affected attitudes, perceptions and perhaps intentions but socially

normative values might not have been sufficiently established in this case to impact the shift towards sustainable behaviours. Therefore, the attitude-behaviour gap was not resolved by CIE intervention. However consumer engagement in social media around SF issues does positively affect cognitive values which in turn will positively impact behaviours as the prevailing norm becomes predisposed towards sustainable consumption. This is evidenced in the findings where all participants had a positive shift in awareness and inclination towards more sustainable practice.

Evaluating the impact of the account on engagement with the SFC was crucial, as an increase in engagement has the potential to encourage more sustainable shopping and, in turn, influence others to do so, thus taking steps towards making SF more mainstream. In this regard, the account had a partial impact. The effect of the account was largely positive, with impact dependent on the degree of effort involved in each type of engagement and the participant's previous level of interest; half of the mainstream consumers interviewed actively engaged with the SFC through the account. Additionally, archival data analysis revealed that the account's least popular posts in relation to 'likes' were those which focused primarily on SF without reference to Watson's location or current film project, indicating that many followers may not be engaging with the SFC through the account, but with Watson herself. This lends support to the primary critique of Institutional Theory that followers may engage more with the CIE than the institutional concept they are advocating (Hopkinson and Cronin, 2015). However, the use of Instagram as a platform for CIEs may reduce the impact of this; by 'liking' the account posts, even if the intent was to engage with Watson rather than the SFC, the post becomes visible to the followers of the person who 'liked' the post through the app's 'following' tab. This increases the reach of Watson's account beyond its followers, potentially raising awareness amongst other demographics and consumers and therefore influencing the prevailing norm. However comments on Instagram posts were not indicative of engagement, which is contrary to social media research by de Vries al. (2012) and Hoffman and Fodor (2010).

It can be concluded that overall, despite increased awareness, knowledge and (to an extent) engagement, the @the\_press\_tour account had little to no impact on participants' consumption practices. This finding was contrary to the literature that if consumers have more knowledge and are more engaged with the SFC, they will be more likely to purchase SF products (Song and Ko, 2014). Interview analysis also supports the general consensus that accessibility, visibility and price are significant barriers to purchasing SF and therefore the product must match mainstream versions in all other areas with sustainability being a 'bonus' feature (Perry and Chung, 2016; McNeill and Moore, 2015; Carrigan and Attala, 2001). As behaviour is determined by the individual's intentions, and these intentions are influenced by motivations, it is the motivations that need reframed to bring about a shift in mainstream behaviours, as might be the case with a shift in subjective norms towards SF consumption. It is not conclusive in this case that CIE intervention was significant enough to shape the prevailing social norms, even within this community of account followers, however it did appear to raise awareness as a first step towards institutional change.

This research therefore established that CIEs can change attitudes towards SF but less definitive results were found as to their potential to impact action. While it indicates that CIE's may have a role to play in inspiring mainstream consumers to engage and increase sustainable practice generally, due to the limited time span of this study, further research is required to determine whether the generally more positive attitude of mainstream consumers towards the SF will eventually manifest itself in SF purchases.

## **5.1 Limitations and recommendations**

This study has indicated a need for SFC interventions to take a multi-dimensional approach that aligns SF/SFC awareness, perception of desirability of product, and the development of social norms that motivate SF behaviours. As the @the\_press\_tour account was at an incipient stage at the time of the research, an extended period of data collection might have provided a stronger indicator of behavioural change, and offers potential for a longitudinal study. Additionally, this study is exploratory with a small sample size, therefore, the finding is indicative rather than representative

of the wider population. The research does however provide an initial insight into the impact that CIEs may have in relation to SF and offers the basis for further research.

Emerging from the study is the reiteration that consumers perceive SF to be more expensive than 'mainstream' offerings. The account may have been more impactful upon SF purchasing decisions if Watson showcased more affordable, 'every-day' outfits in addition the designer brands she features. A recommendation is therefore to examine the impact of including more accessible and affordable SF items in similar social media accounts. Additionally, the study indicates that consumers are more likely to engage with SF if they encounter it more frequently and therefore it is recommended that sustainable fashion products are given increased visibility via more prominent in-store and social media marketing in order to enhance the likelihood of sustainable purchasing behaviours.

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