



Eco-activism, Human-Computer Interaction and Fast Fashion

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Abstract. The aim of this paper is to understand the role of social media in organizing environmental protests against the fast fashion industry. The way eco-activist groups talk internally, highlight events, organize protests as well as their networks and platforms is through online communication and, in particular, through social media such as Instagram or Facebook. Using qualitative methodological approaches such as focus groups and qualitative interviews, this paper examines what kind of social platforms activists use in 2021, both for direct communication with fellow activists and in broadcasting their message. How do activists engage with social media and why do they prefer certain platforms to others? What factors play a role in choosing the platforms when analyzing them from a human-computer interaction point-of-view?

The main argument of this paper is that the key social media decisions within climate change groups, what platforms to use, how, when and why, are often determined by a wider peer group pressure rather than according to any strategic plan or design. This allows activists to convey their messages in two ways: to inform and educate publics focusing on debunking fake news or when talking about fashion and greenwashing, etc.

Keywords: Fast fashion · Climate change · Activism · Social Media

1 Introduction

In recent years, the subject of environmentalism has seen a rise in media coverage and public attention, especially from younger generations. Companies and organisations have also implemented more sustainable business models while making sure that their sustainable commitments receive public attention through advertising campaigns, PR and CSR work. Among those businesses making these changes is the fashion world, which is widely recognized, including from those working in the industry, as an extremely wasteful one causing major damage to the world's eco system and contributing to climate change. Among those groups most critical of the fashion industry is the environmental activist lobby, which has stepped up its protests in recent years. The main communication channel for activists is to communicate messages through social media. The aim of this paper is to understand the role of social media in organizing environmental protests against the fashion industry, with particular attention to fast fashion. The way eco-activist

groups talk internally, highlight events, organize protests as well as their networks and platforms is through online communication and, in particular, through social media such as Instagram or Facebook. What kind of social platforms do they use in 2021, both for direct communication with fellow activists and in broadcasting their message? How do activists engage with social media and why do they prefer certain platforms to others? Finally, we will examine key usability factors that determine choice of platform by activists, highlighting the key issues of human-computer interaction in the important area of fashion activism.

The main argument of this paper is that the key social media decisions within climate change groups, what platforms to use, how, when and why, are often determined by peer group pressure rather than according to any strategic plan or design. Group members considered to hold areas of ‘expertise’ in areas related to social media will often define which social media platforms to use even when, as demonstrated in this article, this expertise extends no further than holding a Twitter or Instagram account. While awareness might exist about targeting certain groups on particular social media and the perceived functionality of some platforms over others, the organisation of social media appears to owe less to technology and rather more to opinion leaders within groups. The reasons why social media are used is to target younger audiences with information and generate debates about fake or misleading information about climate change, so called greenwashing. Activists consider social media as idea platforms for discussing climate change issues and for raising ideological issues related to climate change such as social justice. Our results highlights potential for social media to engage the fashion industry in meaningful dialogue about change and development. This paper will use qualitative methodological approaches through focus group and interviews with activists.

2 Climate Change Activism in Switzerland

This article examines two climate change groups, both based in the Italian speaking part of Switzerland. *Sciopero per il Clima* (translated here as Climate Strike [CS]), based in the Canton of Ticino, Switzerland, was inspired by another Swiss climate change group, *Klimastreik Schweiz*. The latter group defines itself as “a political ecological movement fighting for the preservation of biodiversity, nature and against climate change” (*Klimastreik Schweiz* 2021). Climate Strike is run on a voluntary basis and is decentralized. Affiliated with the Fridays For Future movement led by the prominent activist, Greta Thunberg, it operates on a local, national and international scale. *Extinction Rebellion Ticino* (XR) is an independently-run offshoot of the British non-violent civil disobedience group *Extinction Rebellion*. The latter was founded by Roger Hallam and Gail Bradbrook in 2018 as an environmental movement and aims to have national governments across the world declare a climate emergency, reduce greenhouse gas emissions to zero by 2025 and maximize direct participation in democracy in order to prioritize problems caused by the climate crisis. Collaboration exists between the two groups in Ticino not only through joint campaigning, but also at the membership level. One of our focus group participants was a member of both CS and XR.

3 Fast Fashion

The global rise in the earth's surface temperature in coming decades will bring with it increased instances of flooding, drought and volatile weather patterns. One of the main industries causing climate change is fashion, which is responsible for some 5%–10% of current global carbon emissions (Bauck 2017). There is common acknowledgement that every stage in the production and consumption of garments creates increasing pollution and emission problems for the fashion world. From sourcing and use of scarce water resources in the production of cotton to farming processes in the production of leather. From the use of industrial dyes and synthetic textile fibres to the need for ships, planes and lorries to transport the final product globally (Hibberd 2019). These processes have created highly complex supply-chain issues creating contractors and sub-contractors in delivering fashion garments often across continents (Hibberd and Habib 2021). The fashion industry can be defined as the design, manufacturing, distribution, marketing, retailing, advertising, and promotion of all types of apparel from the most expensive *haute couture* and designer fashions to ordinary everyday clothing. Fast fashion is a 'term used to describe clothing designs that move quickly from the catwalk to stores to meet new trends. The collections are often based on designs presented at Fashion Week events. Fast fashion allows mainstream consumers to purchase trendy clothing at an affordable price' (Kenton 2020).

Central to these issues is the role of fast fashion, its importance to modern industry and the waste involved in bringing latest trends to consumers. We asked activists in focus group and interviews about their understanding of fast fashion. The opinion among all participants was one of hostility to various elements of fast fashion and the emphasis on seeking alternative production and consumption patterns:

"Fast fashion brands are cheap to produce, are super polluting, do not respect human rights in the workplace and there is so much which is bad".

Alternatively, participants sought to draw comparison with 'slow fashion' defined as:

"an answer to fast fashion, and therefore to the question 'can you buy a sustainable product?'. Slow fashion is recognized as opposite to fast fashion, second hand purchases... repairing older items."

"For one year I decided to stop buying clothes. Maybe I went to extremes from this point of view, but I reduced all types of consumption".

"I spend in order not to spend".

Some weight was also given to the concept that smaller is better in the fashion world where big global brands attract much attention. Another key point made by focus group participants was the emphasis they placed on smaller fashion companies being more environmentally aware:

"Those companies are a little smaller, more eco-sustainable and also more attentive to human rights, to working conditions".

Participants were also keen to stress the difference between slow and the more expensive high or haute couture fashion:

“High fashion is not considered slow fashion due to ‘unjustified prices’ and ‘unsustainable working conditions’, while quality local production emerges as a possible solution to the problem of the climate crisis.”

4 Human-Computer Interaction or Peer Group Pressures?

According to the Encyclopedia of Database Systems (2009) the broad definition of human-computer interactions is:

‘the study of the way in which computer technology influences human work and activities. The term “computer technology” now-a-days includes most technology from obvious computers with screens and keyboards to mobile phones, household appliances, in-car navigation systems and even embedded sensors and actuators such as automatic lighting. HCI has an associated design discipline, sometimes called Interaction Design or User-Centered Design, focused on how to design computer technology so that it is as easy and pleasant to use as possible. A key aspect of the design discipline is the notion of “usability,” which is often defined in terms of efficiency, effectiveness and satisfaction.’ (Ling and Tamer 2009).

What became very clear in all our discussions with activists was the importance of technology, especially mobile, in developing their communications strategies. The use of smart phones was universal among participants. Most of our participants could be defined as ‘millennials’, born between 1995 and 2005, and therefore the first generation to be defined as digital natives. Participants understood the issues of human-computer interaction within parameters of defining what the best social media platforms were for the different tasks in hand. So different social media were utilized in different contexts. This was clearly linked too to the usability of different platforms and the efficiency of putting content online quickly. Likewise, there was little explicit awareness of social media as part of the global capitalist infrastructure, perhaps strange for groups that often stress their anti-capitalist credentials. The idea of the social media as part of the platform society, with the commodification of every interaction as a transaction, with the collection of big data, often resold for marketing purposes, and with social media being widely blamed internationally for promoting fake news discourses, was rather an anathema (van Dijck et al. 2018).

So participants related to the issue of human-computer interaction in very practical terms and based choices on effectiveness of each platform. Firstly, the two groups under study operate on the same social media platforms to disseminate messages both internally, to fellow group members, and externally to stakeholders. What set the two groups apart was the range of activities each group promoted and the technical requirements needed to fulfil those activities. As regards Extinction Rebellion, for example, the choice of internal communication took place on two levels:

“As long as these messages are only to start a discussion as an exchange of knowledge Whatsapp, Signal, Telegram are the ones chosen. In general we use Telegram, as a base forum and in particular for those who want to know more.”

“When it comes to organizing actions, we use Signal with partner groups. This means that these are only people we trust”.

This last quote is instructive because security was a key point, especially for Extinction Rebellion, which has used non-violence civil disobedience tactics in many countries. Preventing messages from interception, i.e. through encryption, might be useful in retaining secrecy in planning demonstrations, but once those initiatives started, the biggest social media organisations were used to maximize publicity. As an activist argued:

“We (XR) did several actions at H&M where several people had their naked torsos painted red. In that case we use Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and invited journalists. Journalists were invited to all actions and were then given a press release”.

Climate Strike seeks to use these social channels but did not have a Twitter account in Italian at the time of writing this article (February 2021). The main idea of using social media was to get the message to as many people as possible.

“The idea is to be as accessible as possible and then use those platforms that our audience uses them. We are a more ‘youthful’ group than XR so we often use more youthful social networks so maybe more Instagram than Facebook and we also have a Tic Tok account which, however, has never been used, but which will be used regularly at national level soon”.

The age of activists and their target publics was also a factor in choosing which social media to use. On this last point, however, XR activists stressed that it is a wrong to think that XR is “for adults” only, indicating that they, too, among their ranks, include young activists. From an individual point of view, one activist said that he does everything possible to be accessible:

“I always try to be as accessible as possible, as central as possible in the discussion on the climate crisis, also because I have faith in my social methods of persuasion and I have also had training, with Climate Strike, on methods to use when talking to people about the climate crisis”.

In this case, the activist becomes an access point for publics not only at the level of information, but as an agent of persuasion. It was evident in many discussions we had that activists not only seek to represent themselves and their peers on social media, but also use those platforms as sites of mobilization, very much in line with the model developed by McNair et al. (2003) (see also Hibberd and Nguyen 2013a, b).

Likewise, Climate Strike based their campaigning and social media decisions to align with the fact that their activists were committed to strict adherence to the law rather than committing acts of civil disobedience like XR. As one activist stated:

“Everything we do is legal, so there is no danger of prosecution. This makes us easily reachable on Whatsapp groups. In addition to this we often use Discord which is practical from an organizational point of view”.

The use of Discord's was justified in terms of its user-friendly interface that enjoyed significant advantages over other social media sites:

"It is very practical for organizational reasons to divide work and know what messages are written for each recipient. Everything is structured so that others can see. It is transparent. On Whatsapp this would not be possible. If I wanted to know what others in Climate Strike are doing, I can see on Discord".

As important as human-computer considerations might have been to activists from a practical point of view, human-to-human interaction was more important, especially with peer pressure to recognise perceived 'technical' skills among some activists:

"In Switzerland we use Instagram and Facebook equally. But XR Ticino uses more Instagram because we have a person who is very good and who posts there more often than Facebook".

"In addition to wanting to reach audiences on Instagram, we know how to use Instagram better. Many things are not due to rational choices, but to how things are. We stayed on Instagram because we found our audience there. We are not on Twitter because none of us know how to use it".

These quotes found common agreement highlighting the role of social interaction and peer choice, rather than particular forms of human-computer interaction, in making key social media-related decisions among climate change activists. The importance of key players here draws our attention to the work of the Bureau of Applied Research in the USA in the 1940s led by Paul Lazarsfeld. In their analysis of voters in the 1940 and 1944 Presidential elections (published in 1948 as the *People's Choice*), researchers discovered a small and distinct group referred to opinion leaders. These individuals were distinct from other voters in that they were heavily exposed to media coverage and were seen by other people as having authoritative opinions on politics. Activists in our focus groups identified a small group of their peers as possessing higher levels of expertise in operating social media. This small and select group, so-called opinion leaders, could influence heavily the decision making processes relating to the precise social media platforms used and communication strategies adopted by the group as a whole (Lazarsfeld et al. 1948).

The importance of verifiability in the search for information was also a topic of primary importance for activists. What emerges is that fora and social media are starting points from which to exchange information and ideas or what our participants called 'food for thought'. However, activists emphasized the importance of quality journalism as the most effective and reliable way to retrieve and disseminate information.

"There are newspapers that have a reputation that must be maintained and therefore cannot publish unverifiable news, even if sometimes that happens. If I look at the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* or *USA Today* sources are cited in their articles, so I look at what the sources are and then from there I judge the reliability of the article. If it's a known source or a scientific article, I'm not going to check it a second time".

"The *Guardian* can also be a starting point from which to start the search".

“If I have to see the data on companies, I often go to the *Guardian* website, which is the favorite source of every activist, because they focus precisely on pollution, exploitation, etc. ...”.

In this last quote, the *Guardian*'s model of journalism is defined by activists as a classic watchdog one, critically analyzing the activity of fashion companies. This investigative form of journalism can highlight both positive and negative roles played by companies in climate change issues as well as highlighting other socio-economic issues related to climate justice. Another point that emerges from the search for information and fact-checking is the large presence of foreign newspapers. Relying on American or British newspapers, according to interviewees, may indicate both a lack of attention to the issues of the climate crisis by local Swiss journalism or might merely emphasize the importance of climate change from an international media point-of-view. This does create a problem for those who have language barriers and therefore cannot access English-language publications.

Climate change groups also use social media posts to republish official government documents as well as research from other activist groups.

“As a source there are government sites: federal, cantonal and European. Other very interesting source is studies of other movements, for example WWF or Greenpeace which in recent years have collected a lot of data”.

Another participant highlighted the importance of dialogue or mutual support facilitated by social media, affirming the importance of having reference figures to rely on in case of doubt. Once again, we see key roles for senior group members and/or our opinion leaders. This continuous exchange of opinions, although conducted on social media and available publicly, formed part of internal communications and often was seen as sources of good advice.

“I have people in the movement that I consider references. When it comes to making a choice, I ask them, for example, when I had to decide whether or not to get a license (because it involved many hours driving) I asked”.

“Once at a sushi restaurant and I am vegetarian, some of my friends had left over some food and I called some friends to ask if I should eat it. In the end I called four people to ask for advice and it was also fun to show that there are alternatives”.

5 Greenwashing

One area of clear importance to activists when stressing the key uses of social media related to greenwashing. The emergence of so-called ‘green advertising’ in recent decades responding to consumer trends has led to the rise in the number of spurious claims accompanying such adverts – so called greenwash. There is nothing new about instances of greenwash, which is defined here by the Oxford English Dictionary as:

Disinformation disseminated by an organisation, etc., so as to present an environmentally responsible public image; a public image of environmental responsibility promulgated by or for an organisation, etc., but perceived as being unfounded or intentionally misleading (Quoted in Futerra 2008: 3).

In part these complaints come from commercial competitors or the green lobby and groups like Friends of the Earth. But there is increasing evidence of public members intervening to complain about adverts. Given this context it is unsurprising that regulatory authorities around the world have tightened up codes of conduct relating to environmental claims. Complaints relating to greenwash have continued to rise in many countries, including for fashion-linked advertising. We asked activists to describe so-called fashion greenwashing in one or more words. The responses were blunt.

“Masking, lying, dirty, crap, scam”.

“Pretending to be ecological despite the fact that the reality is exactly the opposite.”

Addressing the issue of greenwashing, the interview shows a sense of distrust and skepticism towards the corporate messages related to sustainability. This mistrust leads all interviewees to check, through the aforementioned sources, the actual truthfulness of the corporate message.

“When I see corporate messages linked to sustainability, I’m reluctant to buy because it tastes like advertising... these messages are also pushed by some online sites. But I can recognise the difference in buying a suit that respects worker rights and one produced under normal conditions”.

Once verified and ascertained as greenwashing, some of the interviewees talked about it with people close to them or publish stories on Instagram about the subject.

6 Dialogue with Other Activists and Wider Publics

The topic of fashion is an important one which is discussed within activist groups, although the extent of this discussion depended a lot on the individual activist and their particular interests. Some activists gave the issue a high level of importance saying:

“It is a very heartfelt argument, just look at how certain statistics, certain data, say that pollution from fast fashion or the fashion industry is among the highest”.

On the one hand, some activists saw fashion as an important issue which was “under-reported or misunderstood” by general audiences.

“Contrary to that of transport or that of meat, fashion is less exposed, more hidden and not spoken of at the same level. As an activist it is important that this is no longer the case because fashion is often one of the industries that uses greenwashing the most”.

Within the activist groups, on the other hand, fashion debates are often not always prioritized as much since it is taken for granted that the topic and key issues are understood in activist circles, although this also depends from case to case:

“It’s something we don’t talk about that often, or at least I don’t talk about it often, because in the environmental movement it’s almost a given that we don’t buy clothes because everyone is a very sensitive to issues relating to fashion.”

During our focus group and interview discussions, two types of conversations emerged between activists and external audiences. One type of debate was with friends and family unconnected to the environmental movement and the second was with general audiences.

“It happened that a friend of mine sent me a picture of a skirt saying” ‘look, I bought an environmentally-friendly skirt’ because there was no plastic in it, but I had to explain to her that that wasn’t the only problem with fashion (plastic), far from it”.

From this last quote we can see that fashion-related issues can be general sources of debate between activists and non-activists, with activists operating as gatekeepers or “fact-checkers against greenwashing” even with family and friends.

“On social networks it is a theme that we try to bring with a sort of regularity, even if there are many other themes for debates and therefore it is not always possible to talk only about that”.

The dissemination of information and discussion with followers takes place on social media, even if it was emphasized that this is only part of the information campaign that is being carried out. One of our groups under study, Climate Strike, has not yet organized campaigns or events related to fast fashion.

7 Fashion and Social Justice

There was little doubt that many of our activists link their participation in climate change issues to a broader world view that seeks to stress values and principles such as human rights and social justice.

“There can be no climate justice without social justice”.

“On a global level, we cannot talk about climate justice without talking about social justice. The exploitation of the most vulnerable countries can also be seen in the context of fashion”.

“If the climate crisis is not fought, social justice is unimaginable”.

The fashion industry is indeed linked to the various tendencies of global capitalism. According to different political standpoints, fashion can either be seen – positively - as promoting new forms of liberal individual or collective power in contemporary societies or – as we see above - as instrumental in reinforcing economic and social disparities such as poverty and human rights violations in the developing world. While the Bick, Halsey and Ekenge point to environmental engagement by various stakeholders, they conclude by arguing that

Ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns, seeks to redress the injustices caused by unfettered materialism. Consumers in high income countries can do their part to promote global environmental justice by buying high-quality

clothing that lasts longer, shopping at second-hand stores, repairing clothing they already own, and purchasing from retailers with transparent supply chains (Bick et al. 2018: 92).

They also add that:

While fast fashion offers consumers an opportunity to buy more clothes for less, those who work in or live near textile manufacturing facilities bear a disproportionate burden of environmental health hazards. Furthermore, increased consumption patterns have also created millions of tons of textile waste in landfills and unregulated settings. This is particularly applicable to low and middle-income countries (LMICs) as much of this waste ends up in second-hand clothing markets. These LMICs often lack the supports and resources necessary to develop and enforce environmental and occupational safeguards to protect human health (Bick et al. 2018: 92).

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, our activists were skeptical when asked about talking to the fashion industry and the role of social media in that discussion. There was some difficulty in seeing beyond the damage caused to the biosphere and climate change:

“When it comes to fast fashion, they can say what they want, but they don’t convince me anyway. Because in principle, what is based on enormous low-cost production is ethically and logically impossible”.

“I feel betrayed by these companies. I feel bad when I see this data and I don’t want my money to go to them, even if they manage to do everything correctly, I’m not interested in giving these companies a second chance”.

“From the moment a company grows in size... there is mistrust. Any brand, if it is large, I do not trust”.

On a more positive note, climate activists did see the potential in promoting forms of fashion that spring from local activity:

“I prefer to support someone local, who maybe I know and who I know supports the place where they are”.

“When you go to the website of small sustainable shops, they often write their philosophy. You see transparency, where what comes from and where I trust”.

And, likewise, there was evidence that should the fashion themselves engage more with climate activists, including through social media, that dialogue could bring rewards in developing understanding between and industry deeply rooted in global capitalism, big brands and fast fashion, and climate change movements that stress their anti-capitalist credentials, localism and the abolition of fast fashion.

“If there was a real intention on their part to establish a dialogue, I would certainly listen to them”:

8 Conclusion

This article has examined the role of social media in climate change activism and the fashion industry. Our focus group and interview-based research concluded that human-computer interaction was important to social media choices based on key needs of activists such as efficient, effective, secure and popular platforms. The usability of individual social media was also a key consideration among activists. But in addition to importance of human-computer interaction through selection of social media as opposed to internet blogs, etc., the main finding that struck us was the rather haphazard choice of platforms, at times, dependent on peer selection by perceived social media ‘experts’. We found that activists often deferred decisions to opinion leaders within their groups rather than through systematic research or thorough understanding of these platforms. We found that activists chose social media to produce content that best represented their ideas and provided the best chance of mobilizing new participants and activists to the climate change agenda. In that sense, social media provides a vital role in disseminating information vital to discussion in many countries. Climate change activists were more critical about the perceived failure of the fashion industry to stop the dissemination of fake or misleading news, specifically greenwashing, on social media. The article concluded that social media might provide useful spaces for the activists to have dialogue about climate change and biodiversity issues. We recommend further research to look at any such dialogue and understand industry perspectives better.

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