

# Digital Brand Storytelling, an Emerging Catalyst to Consumer Engagement: A Netnography Analysis of Sustainable Fashion in Malaysia

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## Abstract

This study analyses the effectiveness of Malaysian sustainable fashion brands telling their brand story to enhance consumer online engagement. This study uses a netnography approach to analyse the brand Instagram activities. Sustainable fashion brand in Malaysia uses a similar strategy in communicating with the consumers on Instagram. However, a brand that can emotionally connect with the consumers through its brand storytelling is more successful in engaging with the consumers. The result of this study shows that the most successful sustainable brands consistently update photos and videos, talks to the consumers, and continuously make the consumer central to their brand story by using mobilising the consumers through social media content.

**Keywords:** Digital brand story, branding, sustainability, social media marketing, netnography analysis

## Introduction

Fashion is the contemporary style of clothing and accessories worn by a group of people [Major, *et al.*, 2020]. The fashion industry encapsulates industries such as textiles, designers, manufacturing, distribution, marketing, retailing, advertising, and promotion of all types of clothing [Terrel, E., 2019]. In 2021, the global market is USD1.5 trillion and is expected to grow to USD2 trillion by 2026 [Statista, 2022, March 2]. During the covid-19 pandemic, it was estimated that the textile and apparel industry in Malaysia suffered an RM163 million loss a day [Mung, T.S., 2021, July 16]. However, as the country is going into the endemics phase, the Malaysian economic will receive its booster shot and the revenue in the Malaysian fashion industry is expected to reach USD5.2 million in 2022 and will hit USD3.8 million by 2025 [Statista, 2021, July 5].

Despite its economic benefits, the fashion industry had caused irreparable damage to the environment. Fashion production contributes to 10 percent of the world's carbon emissions second only to the fossil fuel industry [UN Environment Programme, 2021, June 28]. The fashion industry uses 93 billion cubic meters of water annually which can meet the need of five million people a year causing water scarcity in places such as sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia [United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2020, September 24]. To put the water consumption in the fashion industry into perspective, it takes 2,700w liters of water to make one cotton shirt which is equivalent to a single person's water consumption for two and a half year [Reichart, E. & Drew, D., 2019, January 10]. Levi Straus, a jeans manufacturer estimates that a pair of 501 jeans will generate 33.4kg of carbon dioxide in its entire lifespan; one-third of the carbon dioxide emission generated from the production of the jeans' fiber and fabric, 8% from cutting, sewing, finishing the jeans, 16% from packaging,

transport, and retail, and the balance 40% of the carbon dioxide emission generated by the consumers in washing and disposal of the jeans in landfill [Ro, C., 2020, March 11].

Clothes made from artificial fibers such as plastics will release 6 million microfibres every time we wash the clothing which find their way to the rivers and other freshwater resources and the sea as their destination [Grid-Arendal, 2021, March 4]. At the same time, 85 percent of textiles go to the garbage landfills, enough to fill the 1.5 Empire State Building every day [Davis, N., 2020, April 7]. Fast fashion makes clothes more affordable, but at the same time contributed to 10% of all the world's population's carbon emissions, causing a grievous impact on the environment [McFall-Johnsen, M., 2020, January 31]. Cheap clothes bought and discarded due to changes in trends in quick turnaround aggravate the fast fashion problem [McKinsey & Company, 2021, December 1].

Malaysian consumers especially young shoppers are stylish shoppers with a high propensity to follow the latest trend in fashion which caused overconsumption of apparel [Yee, *et al.*, 2016]. In 2020, the Malaysian fashion industry generated 2 million kilograms of textile waste every day [Ali, *et al.*, 2020]. This trend will continue as it was projected that the Malaysian fashion industry will grow 7.21% annually from 2022 to 2026 [Statista, 2022]. Malaysian consumers in general are aware of the impact of their conduct on the environment but failed to translate that awareness into constructive action [Shafie, S., & Kamis, A., 2019]. There is hope however as previous research shows that advertising plays a significant role in influencing young Malaysian consumers to environmentally friendly products [Tan, *et al.*, 2019].

After two years of the covid-19 pandemic disruptions, Malaysian fashion industries in 2022 will be back in trend but with brands intensified on greener materials and more sustainable technologies [Rogers, K., 2021, June 24]. The Malaysian Ministry of International Trade and Industry recognises the adoption of sustainability contributes to the country's economy in post-pandemic [The Sun Daily, 2021, December 3]. Young Malaysian consumers are more receptive to green advertising and have positive perceptions of green products [Yahya *et al.*, 2021]. Anticipating demands for sustainable fashion, many Malaysian local brands such as The Selina in collaboration with Malaysian Airlines, produce sustainable handbags by repurposed aircraft materials such as leather seats, belts, buckles, tablecloths, and cabin crew uniforms [Cheong, B., 2022, February 19].

Consumers are vital to the success of sustainable fashion. Consumers not only look at the environment and ethical factors in a brand but also at how the brand adds value to the consumers' life [Fashion Sustainability Report 2021]. Post covid-19 pandemic created the dire need for more sustainable fashion businesses to be creative in engaging the consumers [Silva, E.S., & Bonetti, F., 2021]. Consumers are unfamiliar with the relevance of sustainable issues on specific brands but are attracted to interesting and aesthetically pleasing social media posts [Testa, *et al.*, 2020]. The issue of sustainability in fashion is not 'on-trend' enough to attract mainstream consumers [Portway, S., 2019]. Brands promoting sustainable fashion were struggling in framing an effective message to their target market [Guedes, *et al.*, 2020]. In addition, sustainable fashion brands lack in communicating their brand story to build brand awareness [Kusa, A., & Urminova, M., 2020].

Brand storytelling provides the emotional link between the brand and the consumer, streamlining the sustainable fashion brand with social and environmental issues [Moorhouse, D., & Moorhouse, D., 2018]. Brand storytelling forms a new meaning of sustainable fashion to the consumers [Timofeeva, M., & Churakov, S., 2021] to differentiate sustainable fashion from the fast fashion industry [Lee, *et al.*, 2018]. A sustainable fashion brand needs to create an emotional link between the brand's identity and the consumers [Roggeveen *et al.*, 2021]. The emotional link created by storytelling reinforces sustainable fashion value to the consumers [Matheny, R., & Hernandez, A., 2017] which increases the consumer purchase

intention [Suhud, *et al.*, 2020].

This study aims to analyse and compare how sustainable brands in Malaysia engage their consumers on Instagram using brand storytelling. Four local sustainable fashion brands (Fondest, Hanya, Nelisaa Hilman, and Maryambayam) are chosen for this study because of the products of these brands adopts processes, activities, policies in achieving carbon-neutral fashion. The usage of Instagram is due these brands social media activities are in Instagram.

This study uses netnography concept and method to collect and analyse data from the sustainable fashion brands' social media [Augustine, *et al.*, 2021] for six months [Loureiro, *et al.*, 2019]. Netnography has great potential as a sustainable fashion marketing research tool as it is cost-effective, time-efficient, and has a better understanding of consumer perceptions [Xharavina, *et al.*, 2020]. Collecting data from fashion brands' social media is a novelty in research to understand consumer engagement with fashion brands' social media [Bilro, *et al.*, 2021]. There is a modicum netnography analysis on sustainable fashion digital brand storytelling to create engagement in Malaysia. Hence, this study will analyse *how successful Malaysian sustainable fashion brands in implementing digital brand storytelling to create brand engagement?*

## **2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **2.1 Social media engagement**

There is a lack of research on reasons for consumer engagement or lack of it with a brand's social media [Cao, *et al.*, 202]. Previous research identified that social media content may have an impact on social media engagement [Dolan, *et al.*, 2016]. Brands that effectively tell their story can generate social media engagement [Wang, *et al.*, 2017]. Previous studies show that narratives on social movements can change the public attitude and increase social media engagement [Maurao, R.R., & Kilgo, D.K., 2021]. Online engagement increases offline engagement in social causes [Piatak, J., & Mikkelsen, I., 2021]. Moreover, a brand can leverage the global crisis to drive social media engagement [Azer, *et al.*, 2021].

Social media engagement such as *Like*, *Comment*, and *Share* are the indicators of consumer engagement in social media [Swami, K., & Labrecque, L.I., 2020]. Previous studies had used text analysis to measure the effect of topics on social media engagement [Chun, *et al.*, 2021]. Past studies also analysed social media content and its influence on user engagement [Lee, *et al.*, 2018]. Consumer engagement on social media creates purchase intention [Cousaris, *et al.*, 2016], brand loyalty [Afifah, *et al.*, 2020] and customer satisfaction [Phuong, T.T.K., & Vinh, T.T. 2020]. Engagement on social media also increases the brand advertisement rank and the effectiveness of the brand's search engine optimisation strategy [Yang, *et al.*, 2016].

### **2.2 Fashion and the social media**

The Internet started to enable consumers to search the information of the fashion brand before making a purchase decision [Nurfadila, S., 2020]. Social media enhance the capability of fashion brands to create brand awareness [Hsiao, *et al.*, 2020]. Even when using social media, past research shows that Instagram has more influence on consumer engagement rate compared to other social media platforms [Romao, *et al.*, 2019]. Fashion reflects how consumers want to express themselves and Instagram provides the platform for fashion brands to showcase their creativity [Suh, H., 2020]. Instagram being a visual and text-based social media platform allows fashion brand to communicate their brand story to their audience [Choi, A., 2016; and Cukul, D., 2015].

Social media has become a prominent platform for sharing information and knowledge on fashion [Poorthuis, *et al.*, 2020]. Fashion consumers especially millennials are using Instagram to search for information and visual inspiration [Jones, A., & Kang, J., 2020]. Instagram also played a significant role in promoting sustainable and innovative practices in

the fashion industry [Lee, E., & Weder, F., 2021]. Instagram visual effects increase the consumer perception of the fashion brand and increase the intention to purchase and intention to share the Instagram image [Lee, *et al.*, 2018]. Instagram is the most influential source for fashion insight [Chu, S.C., & Seock, Y.K., 2020, May 3]. The current trend is sustainable fashion using influencer marketing to convey its brand story [Jacobson, J., & Harrison, B., 2022]. Social media influencers have the power to increase the consumers' positive perception of sustainable fashion brands [Jansom, A., & Pongsakornrunsilp, S., 2021]. In positioning sustainable fashion in the consumer's mind, fashion brand needs to concentrate on (i) authenticity of the product and business process, (ii) local and traditional aspects, and (iii) appealing backstory relevant to the consumers [Bandyopadhyay, C., & ray, S., 2020].

### **3. TYPOLOGY OF SUSTAINABLE FASHION**

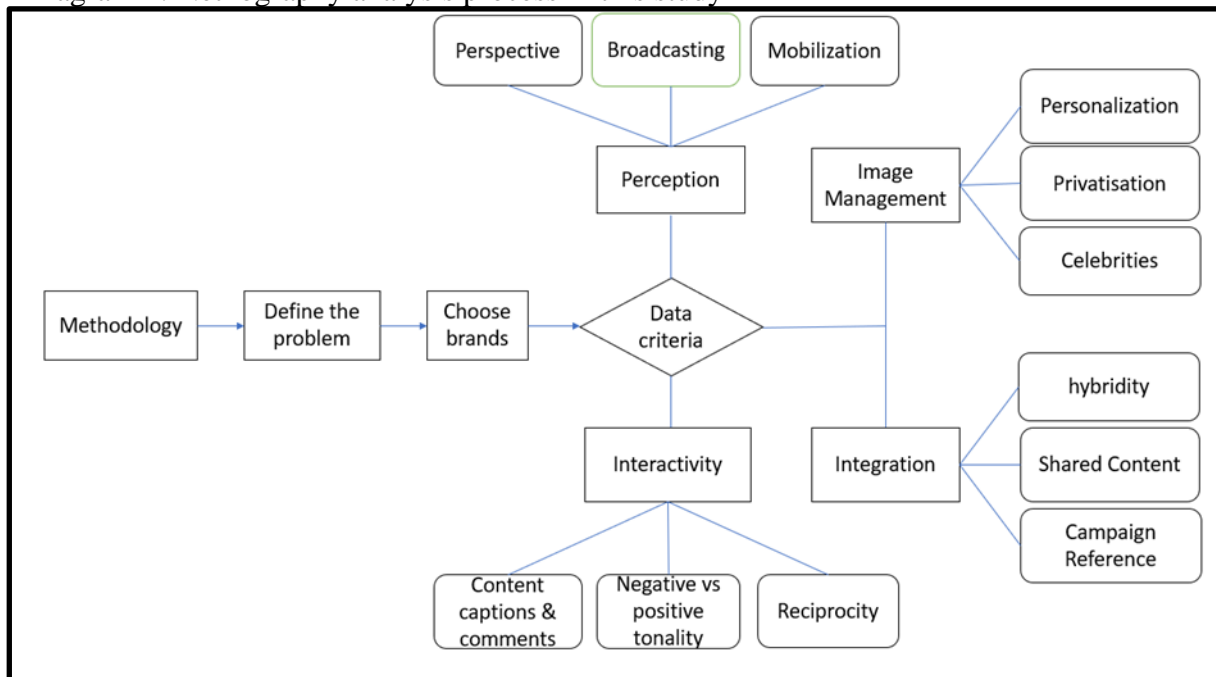
The perception of what is sustainable fashion depends on individual consumers' interpretation [Henninger, *et al.*, 2016]. Numerous studies suggested that sustainable fashion encapsulates the whole process of eco-friendly production, consumption, and the well-being of the various stakeholders such as the workers, the community, and the environment [Cavender, R., & Lee, M.Y., 2018]. In contrast, fast fashion is the anthesis of sustainable fashion whereby the former satisfies consumers' demand for low prices, the latest trend, and frequent merchandise turnover [Kim, Y., & Oh, K.W., 2020]. Sustainable fashion is a niche market, a fraction, and an alternative to the fast fashion industry [Woodside, A.G., & Fine, M.B., 2019].

Fairtrade and recycling are the main attributes of sustainable fashion [Davidaviciene, *et al.*, 2019]. Sustainable fashions also include payment of fair wages and good working conditions to the laborers [Kumar, *et al.*, 2016] which encapsulate the ethical fashion movement in 1990 [Henninger, *et al.*, 2016]. Recently, upcycling, trashion, and zero waste are some of the concepts associated with sustainable fashion [Gurova, O., & Morozova, D., 2018]. Sustainable fashion production is not fully understood which led to consumers' skepticism of high product prices and greenwashing [Ritch, E.L., 2021]. Consumers do not understand the concept and the impact of fast fashion causing problems for marketers of sustainable fashion to explain the adverse impact of fast fashion and why consumers should change to sustainable fashion [Palomo-Lovinski, N., & Hahn, K., 2020]. What consumers are looking for sustainably is the composition of the product, the percentage of recyclable materials used, and the origin of the product [Gheorghe, C.A., & Matefi, R., 2021]. Instagram is an effective platform to sell sustainable fashion as previous research shows consumers who frequently buy online are more receptive to paying a higher price for sustainable fashion [Sanchez-Vazquez, *et al.*, 2020].

### **4. METHODOLOGY**

Data collection for this study was done between January and March 2022 using a netnography approach. The advent of social media gives rise to netnography research which allows researchers to understand and combine knowledge available in social media for practical insights [Kaur, *et al.*, 2021]. Consumers search for information, giving their opinions and sharing their experiences through social media giving marketers invaluable information about online consumer behaviour [Heinonen, K., & Medberg, G., 2018, November 5]. Netnography gives marketers the ability to identify the advertisement efficiency by listening to the online chatter, especially in the fashion industry where fashion-related online-community actively congregate [Xharavina, *et al.*, 2020]. Based on the data derived from social media, marketers can understand the consumers' brand perception and eventually reposition the brand [Morais, *et al.*, 2020]. This study is adopting four steps of netnography analysis [Loureiro, *et al.*, 2019]. The analysis in this study can be summarised in diagram 1.

Diagram 1: Netnography analysis process in this study



#### 4.1 Instagram

The first step is to define the research problem and the online platform used in this study. The imagery, caption, audiovisual content, and the discussion on Instagram is a good source to examine brand stories [Nazariol, *et al.*, 2021]. Image and brand personality on Instagram attracts consumers’ attention [McFarlane, A., & Samsioe, E., 2020]. Fashion consumers are turning to Instagram for information because it is more interesting, easier user interface, and is more current [Lathifah, *et al.*, 2021]. Instagram posting about a brand significantly influences consumers' purchase intention and positive opinion toward a brand. Based on the numerous past research on the potential of Instagram in netnography research, this study is using Instagram as the online platform to study sustainable fashion digital brand storytelling.

#### 4.2 Choice of brands

For the second step, this study chooses four local sustainable fashion brands *Fondest*, *Hanya*, *Nelissaa Hilman*, and *Maryambayam*. These brands are chosen for their active presence on Instagram. All brands selling up-to-date fashion for women with favourable reviews in local fashion blogs. The highest number of followers is *Hanya* with 78.3 thousand followers. Table 1 shows the brands, their Instagram account, and the number of their Instagram followers.

Table 1: sustainable fashion brands in this study

No.	Brands	Instagram Account	Number of Followers (‘000)
1.	Hanya	Shophanya	78.3
2.	Nelissa Hilman	Nelissahilman	74
3.	Fondest	Shopfondest	28.7
4.	Maryambayam	Maryambayam	10.4

#### 4.3 Collecting data

In the third step, this study uses four clusters of information on perception [Loureiro, *et al.*, 2019], image management [Lubinga. E., & Baloyi, M., 2019], integration, and interactivity to be analysed in this study [Evelina, *et al.*, 2021]. The first cluster is the perception which

consists of perspective, broadcasting, and mobilisation. The Instagram postings will provide the data for this study. Data coding is the process of clustering and labeling the data in describing the broad themes of sustainable fashion on Instagram postings.

#### 4.3.1 Perception

##### (a) Perspective

Photo used in social media reflects how the brand behaviour online [Eglen, E., & Ferreira Da Silva, M., 2020]. Photo can tell a story to the audience through the power of visual narrative [Minthorn, R.S., & Marsh, T.E., 2016]. In this study, the photo will be coded as perspective in the analysis if it is an official photo or snapshot/selfie of the organisation. The photo can be posted instantly from any device such as a smartphone or tablet.

##### (b) Broadcasting

Broadcasting in social media had evolved into a new form of marketing as it can reach a wider audience [Chen, *et al.*, 2015]. Broadcasting code in this study is given to postings dedicated to the dissemination of emotions, information [Stieglitz, S., & Dan-Xuan, L., 2013], opinions [Borowski, *et al.*, 2020], ideas [Brady, *et al.*, 2017], and comments by the Instagram followers which reflects the consumers' evaluation of the brand [Pantano, E., 2021]. These number of views, comments and shares is an indicator of how wide the Instagram postings reach the consumers [Liang, Y. & Kee, K.F., 2018].

##### (c) Mobilisation

Mobilisation is a call for action for the consumers to buy the products, attend an event, or share the content on social media [Ohme, J., 2019]. To increase consumer engagement with the brand, sustainable fashion brands' social media posts need to stay relevant to the consumer's current interest [Sutton, *et al.*, 2018]. To influence the consumer call for action, the sustainable fashion brand should feature influencers, experts, and campaign references in their social media content [Zubanova, *et al.*, 2021]. This study will code content as mobilising if the content has more than 50% elements that mobilise the consumers [Loureiro, *et al.*, 2019].

#### 4.3.2 Image management

##### (a) Personalisation

This study is looking at the personality used by the sustainable fashion brand in their Instagram posting. The content of the Instagram posting will be coded as Personalised if the postings are carried out by a single person [Loureiro, *et al.*, 2019]. Previous research shows that personalisation strategies of a single individual in private, non-business settings, showing facial expressions and emotions increase social media followers' engagement [Peng, Y., 2021].

##### (b) Privatisation

The code for this study is given to Instagram content with professional or personal context [Loureiro, *et al.*, 2019]. Exposure to privatisation of Instagram content influence the feel-good factor of a brand's social media [Jebril, *et al.*, 2013].

#### 4.3.3 Integration

##### (a) Hybridity

The purpose of hybridity analysis is to look at whether the content explicitly shows offline media references in the visual, captions, or hashtags. The coding of hybridity is for content that makes references to any sustainable fashion brand's offline media [Loureiro, *et al.*,

2019].

(b) Shared content

For shared content, the coding is for any content from other organisations or individuals' social media. The coding also applied to sustainable fashion brand Instagram content taken from its other social media platform [Loureiro, *et al.*, 2019].

(c) Campaign references

Campaign references are important in mobilising the consumers [Zubanova, *et al.*, 2021]. Sustainable fashion brands are synonymous with specific campaigns especially in creating consumer awareness of sustainability. Contents that contain campaign references such as hashtags will be coded as campaign references [Loureiro, *et al.*, 2019].

#### 4.3.4 Interactivity

(a) Content captions and comments

Contents captions and comments are looking at the emoticons, comments with intrinsic value and without intrinsic value [Loureiro, *et al.*, 2019]. The usage of emoticons in social media improves the consumer's positive perception of the brand [Mjdawi, A.M.A, & Jabi, S.I., 2020]. Code for comments with intrinsic value is given to comments that contain relevant and substantive information such as opinions or comments on the current event [Loureiro, *et al.*, 2019].

(b) Negative and positive tonality

Consumers' comments that criticise the brand, are scandalous and show pessimistic words were coded as negative. Comments that contain smiley emoticons, constructive comments, and a show of approval were coded positive.

(c) Reciprocity

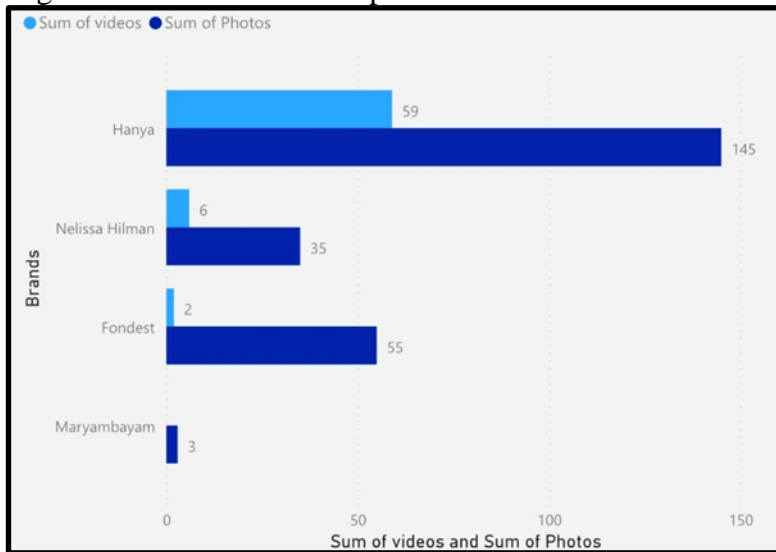
This analysis is looking at the interaction between the brand and the consumer, as well as between consumers and other consumers. These interactions display the level of engagement between the brand and the consumers and between the brand community. The code will be labeled as related to the comment [Loureiro, *et al.*, 2019].

The fourth and the last step in this study is to analyse the brand from the following perspective: (1) number of followers, number of followings, number of photos and videos posted by the brand, and (3) number of celebrities featured in the posting, brand's interaction with the followers in the comment section [Loureiro, *et al.*, 2019].

## 5. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Figure 1 shows that *Hanya* posted the most photos and videos from January to March 2022. The difference is significantly high as *Hanya* posted 145 photos. *Fondest*, at second, posted 55 photos within the same time. *Hanya* also heavily relies on video as they posted 59 videos within three months compared to other brands.

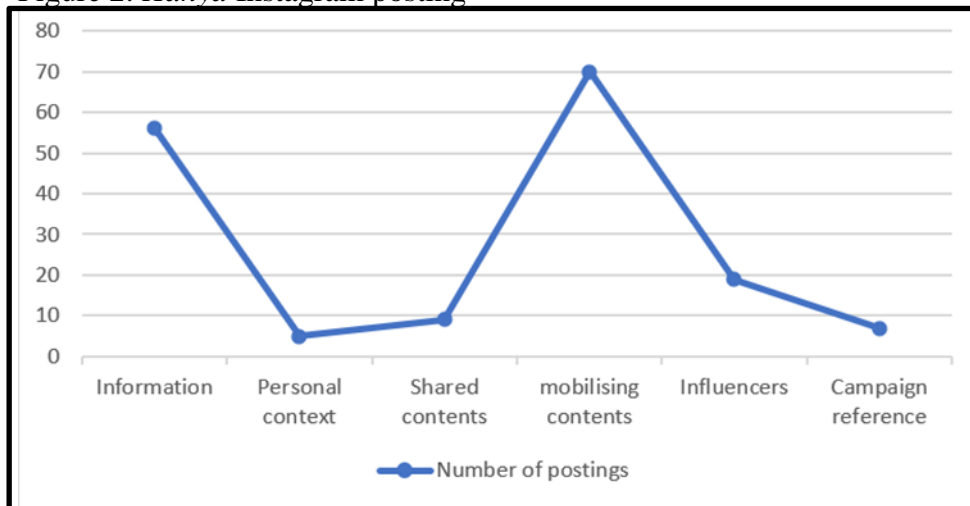
Figure 1: Sum of video and photo



*Hanya*

*Hanya* brand successfully tells its brand story to engage with the audience. Figure 2 shows the elements used in the brand's Instagram postings. The brand spent 70 postings in mobilising the audience to engage with the brands through simple questions, competitions, attending an event, and staying relevant to current events. The caption for these postings is using text and the message is further fortified with the usage of emoticons.

Figure 2: *Hanya* Instagram posting



The brand posted 56 postings that diffuse information about their products. The postings can garner a response from the audience in a form of *Likes* and *Comments*. The study noted that the interaction involves not only between the brand and the audience but also involves interaction between the audience. The brand illicit engagement by asking the audience to tag their friends. These postings had elicited numerous engagements from the audience in terms of comments, Likes and shares. The audience is very engaging with the brand and all comments show positive tonality.

The usage of influencers is very minimal. From January until March, the brand only features influencers 19 times. This study noted from the Instagram postings that there is an authentic partnership between the brand and the influencers. The influencers used in this brand's

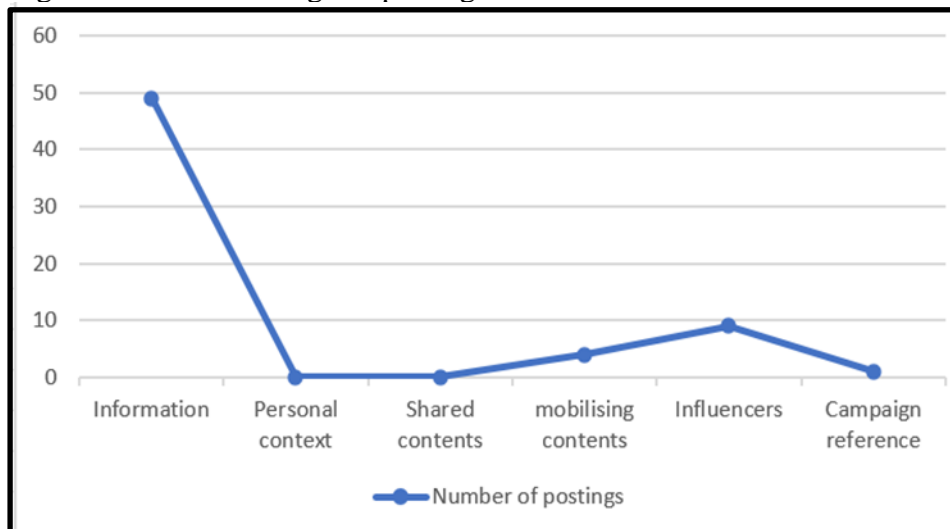


Instagram postings are relevant to the fashion industry and fit the characteristics of their target market profile. The influencers chosen by the brand are well known within in local fashion community.

*Fondest*

*Fondest* relies heavily on photos combined with a call-to-action message to attract its audience. The captions use text and emoticons. However, Figure 3 shows that the brand is using more information postings in their Instagram strategy. The Instagram account looks like a digital brochure.

Figure 3: *Fondest* Instagram postings

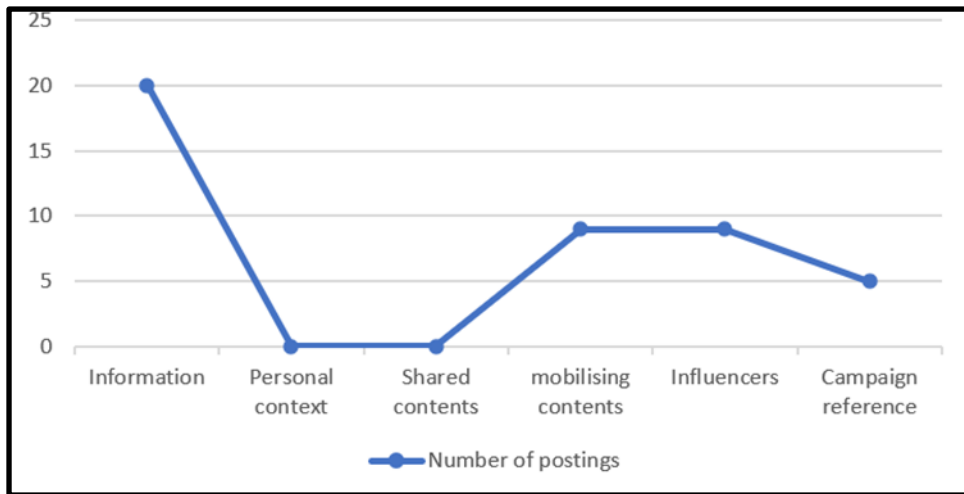


There is no posting that talks about the personal side of the brand. There are only four postings that tried to mobilise the audience to act such as tagging the brand in the audience's timeline. The brand actively used various influencers, but the captions were still in an informative form which did fail to garner comments from the audience. The caption is more focused on telling the audience about the product feature. The audience shows minimum engagement with the brand in terms of comments, Likes, and content sharing. There are positive tonal comments from the audience but there is a lack of conversation between the brand and the audience and among the audience.

*Nelissa Hilman*

The brand uses the same Instagram strategy as *Fondest*. Most of the Instagram postings are information forms. The caption is a combination of text and emoticons. Figure 4 shows the items used in the brand's Instagram postings.

Figure 4: *Nelissa Hilman* Instagram postings



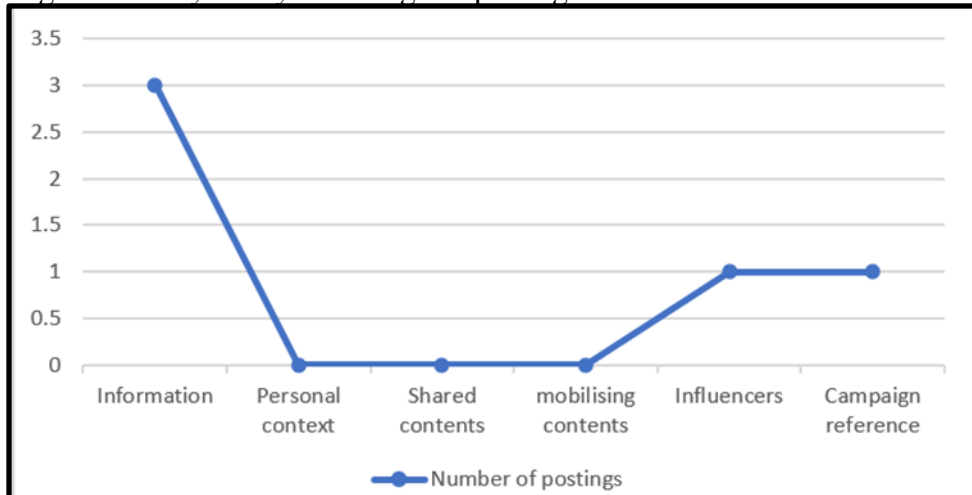
However, the brand had used not only influencers but also nano influencers to promote its brand. The influencers are Instagram celebrities. The brand had featured its customers in their Instagram postings and these customers play the role of nano influencers for the brand. The posting talks about the work, experience, and struggle of the nano influencers but there is no follow-up content on the same nano influencers. The audience shows little engagement with the brand’s Instagram postings. The absence of a follow-up story makes the contents look superficial and fail to emotionally connect with the audience.

Unlike the other brands in this study that sells women's clothing, *Nelissa Hilman* main product is women’s shoes. The brand had to improvise its Instagram postings strategy by collaborating with other local fashion brands such as *Hanya* which complement each other. This collaboration enables the brand to tap into *Hanya*’s audience who might be looking for shoes that look nice on *Hanya*’s clothing line.

*Maryambayam*

*Maryambayam* is a local sustainable fashion brand that uses batik as its core design. The brand promotes batik from Terengganu, and this is evident from most hashtags such as #batikganu and #betterinbatik. However, the brand is unable to fully utilise Instagram to talk about its brand story as shown in figure 5 below.

Figure 5: *Maryambayam* Instagram postings



The brand is not active in telling its brand story via Instagram. Most of the content are concentrating on the product's features. From January to March 2022, the brand used one nano influencer in the Instagram postings. The brand also uses only one posting that refers to the origin of the batik design used in their product. The failure to talk about Terengganu batik uniqueness is a missed opportunity for the brand to connect its audience with the local culture. Terengganu batik is a massive brand storytelling advantage for the brand. The brand failed to create significant engagement with the audience in terms of comments, Likes, and content sharing.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study analyses the digital brand storytelling of Malaysian sustainable fashion brands on Instagram. Based on the netnography analysis, this study found that a combination of consistent volumes of information and mobilising content increase the engagement with the consumers. *Hanya* is more successful in communicating its brand story to the consumers and creating engagement with its audiences. *Maryambayam* ranked the lowest with a low number of contents which translated into low engagement rate with its audiences.

Apart from *Hanya*, the other three brands are relying on informative content, concentrating on product features. Relying mostly on product features disconnects the brands with the consumers, resulting in lower engagement. Information on the product feature is good in telling the consumers about the product but is not very effective in emotionally connecting with the consumers. Brand storytelling is about emotionally connecting with the consumers. Posting which mobilise the consumers and contains personal elements able to appeal to the consumer emotions. To translate the finding of this study into the managerial context, brands should increase mobilising and personal elements in their Instagram postings. The brands should also champion more social issues that are relevant to the consumers.

Amid the rigorous steps in netnography analysis, one of the limitations of this study is the limited period in collecting data. Future studies may be conducted for one year to see the Instagram activities for the whole year. The expansion of time enables future studies to assess the progress of sustainable fashion brands in social media.

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