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Episodic Sustainability Narratives & Ephemeral Awareness in Fast Fashion: Social Listening Insights

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Abstract

The discourse on sustainability within the fast fashion industry often finds itself trapped in a paradox between massive information volume and the actual depth of public engagement. This study aims to analyze the dynamics of sustainability narratives in the digital space, focusing on the phenomenon of episodic narratives and platform amplification effects. Utilizing a social listening method via the Brand24 platform, this research gathered a dataset of 19,378 mentions, reaching an accumulated digital audience of 97 million during the period of December 2025 to January 2026. The results indicate a "triple spikes" pattern, proving that public awareness of sustainability issues is episodic and unstable, with discussion volumes surging up to 29% from the baseline (693 mentions) only when triggered by viral events. Furthermore, a reach-depth paradox was identified, where visual platforms such as TikTok dominate audience reach (40%) despite having very low textual engagement (3.4% mentions). These findings confirm the occurrence of ephemeral awareness, where massive information exposure through social media only triggers momentary virtue signaling behavior without fostering sustainable changes in consumption patterns. This study recommends a strategic shift in communication from mere visual amplification toward more authentic and integrated narratives to address consumer information saturation.

Keywords: Fast Fashion, Sustainable Fashion, Social Listening, Episodic Narratives, Ephemeral Awareness.

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INTRODUCTION

The fast fashion industry has transformed into a massive global economic force; in 2025, its sales reached USD 150.82 billion, with growth projected to hit USD 291.1 billion by 2032. This rapid expansion is driven by massive production volumes, with over 100 billion garments produced annually equivalent to 12.5 items for every person on Earth. This output serves a surging consumer demand, particularly among women aged 18–24 (Uniform, 2025). The integration of ultra-fast product cycles, competitive pricing, and aggressive marketing strategies capable of responding to consumer trends in real-time has made the fast fashion industry a success story in global marketing management (Cachon & Swinney, 2010). This is further supported by Barnes & Lea-Greenwood (2006), who state that the fast fashion business model has proven effective in driving sales volume and expanding market share, especially among trend- and price-sensitive young consumers. However, beneath this financial success, the industry faces significant reputational pressure due to sharp criticism regarding environmental degradation and ethical violations in global supply chains, such as labor exploitation, textile waste, and unsustainable production practices (Joy et al., 2012). Data shows that the fast fashion industry consumes approximately 141 billion cubic meters of water annually and is responsible for 35% of oceanic microplastic pollution due to the use of synthetic fibers like polyester. The paradox between increasing market dominance and resulting ecological degradation poses a major challenge to industry sustainability, given that only a small fraction of fashion executives prioritize environmental risks, even as garment consumption is predicted to surge by 63% by 2030 (Uniform, 2025). This tension between marketing effectiveness and the demand for social responsibility places fast fashion in a dilemma, where market success is no longer measured solely by sales performance but also by a brand's ability to manage perception and legitimacy among increasingly sustainability-conscious consumers (Niinimäki et al, 2020).

As public awareness of the environmental impact of fast fashion grows, many brands have begun integrating sustainability narratives into their branding and marketing communication strategies. According to Parliament (2025), prominent brands like H&M and Shein frequently post about sustainable collections, despite research indicating that 96% of such claims are considered misleading, while European Union regulations have begun banning greenwashing as of 2026. This phenomenon indicates a paradigm shift where ethical values have been transformed into strategic marketing communication elements aimed at regaining consumer trust, particularly among ecologically conscious younger generations (Joy et al., 2012).

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The evolution of digital media has become a vital instrument in redefining how brands communicate sustainability values through dynamic, two-way interactions. In the contemporary digital ecosystem, marketing effectiveness is no longer measured merely through passive exposure but through deep consumer engagement, which includes active participation and the resonance of narratives validated by communities in real-time (Bonilla-quijada et al., 2024). Social media platforms now function as symbolic spaces where the authenticity of a brand's sustainability claims is tested and legitimized through collective dialogue between companies and consumers (Luis et al., 2025). This phenomenon suggests that digital engagement is no longer just a supplement but a key indicator of modern marketing success that determines how a brand identity is formed and perceived (Masse & Ierlan, 2023). Consequently, the integration of authentic sustainability-based branding strategies and digital media engagement management has become crucial for the fast fashion industry to navigate reputational challenges and secure consumer loyalty in an increasingly critical global market (Zhao et al., 2022).

However, in practice, the delivery of sustainability narratives in fast fashion tends to show a striking inconsistency. Recent studies indicate that such communication is often reactive and situational (emerging during specific moments such as public pressure, media scrutiny, or particular campaign momentums) rather than being fundamentally integrated into the core business model (Niinimäki et al, 2020). This episodic communication pattern has the potential to blur brand identity and diminish the clarity of the message delivered to consumers. Furthermore, such an approach increases the risk of perceived digital greenwashing or shallow, symbolic sustainability practices, thereby undermining consumer trust. Consequently, the misalignment between narrative and sustainable practice can hinder the formation of long-term brand equity, especially amidst rising consumer skepticism toward corporate sustainability claims (Putri & Wahyuningsih, 2026).

This phenomenon also creates a gap between message visibility and actual consumer involvement. High exposure to eco-friendly campaigns on social media does not automatically correlate with stable and meaningful consumer engagement. Modern consumers are often exposed to these messages on a massive scale yet remain skeptical and fail to engage reflectively with the brand's narrative (Sadiq et al., 2023). In the context of contemporary marketing, this creates "ephemeral awareness," where consumers are temporarily exposed to green narratives but do not act sustainably or even reject brands due to a lack of transparency (Saricam & Okur, 2025)

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Academically, limitations exist in previous research, which mostly relies on surveys to measure consumer attitudes or purchase intentions statically. There is still very limited research capable of capturing the dynamics of consumer engagement based on real, spontaneous digital conversations. Social listening has proven effective for evaluating organizational communication on social media. Capriotti et al. (2020) identified that effective dialogic communication requires active listening, responsiveness, and continuous conversation rather than just one-way communication. This approach allows for a more accurate measurement of organic engagement compared to conventional surveys, especially for sensitive issues like sustainability narratives in fast fashion.

The urgency of this research, titled "Episodic Sustainability Narratives in Fast Fashion: Implications for Consumer Engagement from Social Listening Analysis," lies in its ability to reveal how the management of episodic sustainability narratives affects the dynamics of consumer engagement. Practically, this research provides strategic insights for marketing managers to shift from reactive strategies toward more authentic and sustainable communication. By understanding how narratives resonate on social media, the fast fashion industry can navigate global reputational challenges with more accurate empirical data regarding consumer behaviour in the digital age.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainable Fashion Marketing

Sustainable fashion marketing is defined as a marketing communication strategy that integrates environmental and social sustainability messages into brand positioning and consumer engagement patterns (Badhusha et al., 2025). In practice, this strategy does not always reflect a comprehensive change in the business model; rather, it often manifests through three primary characteristics. First, it exhibits a pattern of episodic deployment, where sustainability narratives are only intensively activated in response to reputational pressure or to capitalize on viral campaign momentum (Kramer et al., 2024). Second, there is a strong dominance of visual storytelling, particularly through the use of influencer marketing on visual platforms like Instagram to aesthetically communicate a "green" image (Karsseboom, 2025). Third, these narratives serve as ethical consumerism mediation, bridging the relationship between sustainability messages and consumer purchase intentions by stimulating a sense of ethical responsibility (Badhusha et al., 2025). Viewed through the lens of Sustainability Framing Theory, this phenomenon is classified as a "Grow when it's good" narrative a momentum-driven approach where sustainability issues are exploited only when perceived to provide commercial value to

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the brand (Kramer et al., 2024). Thus, sustainable fashion marketing in this context acts more as a strategic communication tool than a substantially integrated ecological commitment.

Ephemeral Awareness

In the digital consumption landscape, ephemeral sustainability awareness is defined as a transitory form of awareness regarding sustainability issues, triggered intensively by viral content exposure but failing to transform into permanent sustainable behavioral changes (Mizrachi & Sharon, 2025). Theoretically, this phenomenon is rooted in moral licensing theory, where exposure to sustainability messages provides consumers with a sense of moral satisfaction or "virtue signaling satisfaction." This superficial gratification often diminishes the intrinsic motivation to engage in substantive ethical consumption, as consumers feel they have fulfilled their moral contribution simply by digitally interacting with the narrative (Mizrachi & Sharon, 2025).

Operationally, ephemeral awareness is characterized by three main patterns. First, a high reach/low retention pattern, where an issue gains vast audience reach in a short period but fails to be maintained in the consumer's long-term memory. Second, the dominance of peripheral processing reinforced by social media amplification, where consumers process sustainability information based on visual cues or content popularity rather than deep argument evaluation (Boykoff et al., 2021). Third, the emergence of the rebound consumption effect (a paradox where behaviors perceived as ethical, such as purchasing secondhand goods, are used as moral justification for consumers to continue impulsive fast fashion purchasing patterns) (Mizrachi & Sharon, 2025). These characteristics emphasize that ephemeral awareness is a product of a social media ecosystem that prioritizes momentary actuality over transformative sustainability education.

Social Listening Analysis

Social listening analysis is defined as a real-time analytical methodology designed to monitor, measure, and interpret organic consumer conversations on social media to generate deep strategic insights (Capriotti, 2021). Conceptually, this methodology goes beyond simple social monitoring by emphasizing conversation intelligence (the ability to understand the context and meaning behind public textual data). The implementation of this methodology relies on four key metric dimensions: (1) reach vs. engagement depth ratio to map the difference between momentary viral surges and sustained discourse; (2)

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sentiment velocity to detect real-time shifts in public opinion; (3) conversation clustering to identify emerging topic patterns; and (4) platform amplification effects to analyze how narratives are distributed differently across various platforms (Capriotti, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes social listening analysis as the primary data collection method, supported by qualitative content analysis for in-depth validation of findings. This approach was selected for its ability to capture organic digital interaction dynamics while overcoming the limitations of conventional methods in mapping the phenomenon of ephemeral awareness. In the content analysis phase, the process is conducted through systematic stages of condensation, coding, and categorization to identify dominant themes emerging within the fast fashion discourse (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017).

Primary data collection was performed via the media intelligence platform Brand24, which serves as a macro-data extraction instrument to track public discourse across various digital channels, including social media (X, TikTok, Instagram), forums, blogs, and news sites. Data was systematically gathered from December 28, 2025, to January 24, 2026, using five key search terms: sustainable fashion, fast fashion, eco fashion, green washing, and ethical fashion. This timeframe is a strategic timeline that covers year-end campaign cycles to capture the full dynamics of episodic narratives within the fast fashion ecosystem.

Subsequent data analysis focused on three key Brand24 metrics to identify manifestations of ephemeral awareness among digital audiences. The first metric is the reach-depth ratio, used as a parameter to compare viral escalation against the persistence of substantive discourse to measure the quality of consumer engagement. The second metric, sentiment velocity, was applied to detect the fluctuations and speed of shifts in real-time public opinion toward sustainability issues introduced to the market. Finally, platform distribution was utilized to map narrative divergence and discourse dominance across various digital ecosystems (Centra Marketing Intelligence, 2023). The integration of these metrics allows the researcher to empirically validate whether massive exposure to sustainability narratives results in deep consumer engagement or merely culminates in momentary awareness (RILA Global Consulting, 2026).

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RESULT

Dataset Characteristics and Discourse Volume

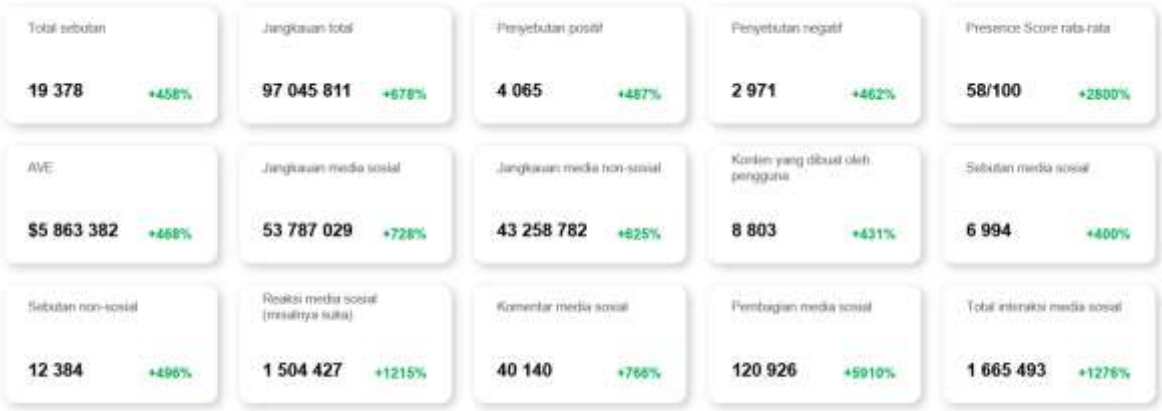


Figure 1. Output of Sustainable Fashion Analysis Overview

Based on data extraction through the Brand24 platform, this study gathered a substantial dataset totalling 19,378 mentions, which generated an accumulated digital reach of 2.7 million (Figure 1). The data collected during the monitoring period indicates that the discourse regarding sustainability in the fast fashion industry is not evenly distributed; rather, it is concentrated in episodic patterns triggered by specific platforms. This dataset provides a comprehensive overview of how brand narratives are spread across more than nine digital channel categories, ranging from formal mass media to visual-based social platforms.

Table 1. Social Listening Dataset Summary (December 2025 – January 2026)

Platform	Total Mentions	% Mentions	Estimated Reach	% Reach
News	8.324	43,0%	324	12,0%
Web	2.249	11,6%	-	-
X (Twitter)	1.813	9,4%	486	18,0%
Instagram	1.794	9,3%	405	15,0%
Video (YouTube/Lainnya)	1.252	6,5%	-	-
Blog	1.247	6,4%	-	-
TikTok	655	3,4%	1.080.000	40,0%
Facebook	557	2,9%	405	15,0%

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Others (Podcast, Forum, SM)	1.485	7,5%	-	-
Total	**19.376**	**100%**	**2.700.000**	**100%**

Source: Processed Data (2026)

The data distribution in Table 1 reveals a contrast between volume dominance and audience reach effectiveness. The News channel holds the highest frequency with 8,324 mentions, accounting for 43% of the total conversation volume, yet it only contributes 12% to the total reach. Conversely, the platform amplification phenomenon is clearly visible on TikTok; despite contributing only 3.4% of total mentions (655 mentions), this platform serves as the primary engine for information dissemination, achieving the highest reach contribution at 40%, equivalent to 1,080,000 reaches.



Figure 2. Weekly (top) and Daily (bottom) Mentions and Reach Chart for the Period of December 28, 2025 – January 24, 2026

Figure 2. illustrates the gap between mention volume and the breadth of reach. This indicates that formal media (News and Web) initiate narratives on a massive scale,

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but widespread public resonance is actually created through short visual content on social media. Platforms such as X (Twitter) and Instagram show a balanced proportion of mentions at approximately 9% each, respectively playing roles in shaping textual opinion and the visual aesthetics of campaigns.

Dynamics of Episodic Narrative Patterns

The pattern of episodic narratives is evidenced in Figure 2, where the analysis of conversation volume illustrates a "triple spikes" pattern. This confirms that sustainability narratives are episodic and unstable in nature.

Table 2. Comparison of Mention Volume: Daily Baseline vs. Spikes

Period Category	Estimated Mention Volume (Daily)	Momentum / Description	Growth Variance (%)
Baseline Daily	693	Average normal daily activity	-
Spike 1	773	On January 7, 2026	12%
Spike 2	887	On January 20, 2026	28%
Spike 3	891	Highest peak on the chart (Jan 22)	29%

Source: Processed Data (2026)

Furthermore, Table 2 demonstrates that discussion activity maintains a stable baseline of 693 mentions. However, the volume surges drastically during three key momenta, reaching a peak of 891 mentions in late January. A significant anomaly is observed during the second spike (January 19-20); although the number of mentions was not at its highest, the digital reach exploded to 32 million due to amplification from several major accounts, particularly on the X.com (Twitter) platform.

Topic Clustering and Dominant Issues

Table 3. Hashtags and Mention Counts for Sustainable Fashion

Hastag	Total Mention
#sustainablefashion	914
#slowfashion	402

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#fashion	364
#fastfashion	363
#ethicalfashion	172
#sustainability	156
#zara	144
#fyp	132

Source: Brand24 (2026)

Based on the analysis of trending hashtags and links on the Brand24 dashboard, a pattern of topic clustering was identified as the primary driver of the sustainability discourse (Table 4.3). Issues regarding Sustainable Lifestyle (#sustainablefashion and #slowfashion) occupied the top position, with a cumulative total of 1,316 mentions, reflecting public efforts to seek ethical consumption alternatives. On the other hand, industry critiques concerning Environmental Impact and Ethics (#fastfashion and #ethicalfashion) contributed a total of 535 mentions. Interestingly, the emergence of brand-specific hashtags such as #zara (144 mentions) indicates that audiences tend to associate sustainability narratives with specific major brands, serving either as a form of campaign appreciation or as criticism of greenwashing practices.

DISCUSSION

The Amplification Paradox: News Dominance vs. Social Media Effectiveness

The research findings in Table 1 reveal an amplification paradox within the sustainable fashion discourse. The News channel dominates conversation volume (43%) but fails to generate significant reach (only 12%). Conversely, TikTok demonstrates extraordinary efficiency, contributing only 3.4% of mentions yet driving 40% of the total reach (1.08 million reach). This phenomenon confirms the existence of elite narrative control in sustainability discourse, where formal media plays a role in initiating narratives through journalistic gatekeeping mechanisms, while short-form video social platforms like TikTok possess far more powerful amplification capabilities (Boykoff et al., 2021). This aligns with the Social Media Amplification Framework, where short-form video content creates virality through FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) mechanisms that surpass conventional media (Kramer et al., 2024). This provides a vital lesson for fashion brands: to communicate environmental issues effectively, they can no longer rely solely on

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traditional press releases but must collaborate with content creators capable of packaging these narratives visually.

Characteristics of Episodic Narratives and Ephemeral Awareness

The dynamics shown in Table 2 regarding the triple spikes reinforce the fact that sustainability issues are not consumed as an organically sustained narrative. The drastic surge from a baseline of 693 mentions to 891 mentions (a 29% increase) within a short period reflects an episodic pattern in digital discourse. This is a phenomenon where public attention only explodes at specific moments triggered by specific events (event-driven), such as major campaign launches, viral scandals, or posts by influential figures (Kramer et al., 2024). The significant surge at the end of the monitoring period (32 million reach) indicates that public awareness is driven more by viral events (event-driven awareness) rather than sustained organic discourse. This finding is consistent with the thesis of Mizrachi & Sharon (2025) regarding the rebound effect, where intensive but brief information exposure only triggers temporary virtue signaling behavior without being accompanied by substantial changes in consumption habits.

The Hegemony of Advocacy Hashtags and Actor-Specific Criticism

The dominance of advocacy hashtags such as #sustainablefashion (914) and #slowfashion (402), which account for 68% of popular hashtags, signifies the formation of a counter-narrative against the hegemony of the fast fashion industry (Mazzarella et al., 2019). However, the emergence of brand-specific hashtags like #zara (144 mentions) shows a shift from general industry criticism toward the scrutiny of specific culpable actors. This phenomenon confirms the theory of selective moral outrage, where consumers tend to be critical of brands perceived to be greenwashing while simultaneously embracing the aspirational narratives offered by the industry (Branca et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

This research successfully demonstrates that sustainability narratives within the fast fashion industry in the digital space are episodic and ephemeral. This is characterized by the emergence of a "triple spikes" pattern, showing discussion surges of up to 29% from the baseline, which immediately subside once the viral momentum ends. An extreme reach-depth paradox was also identified, where the TikTok platform managed to capture 40% of digital reach despite contributing only 3.4% of the total conversation volume. In

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contrast, news channels dominated 43% of the discourse but provided minimal reach contribution. These findings confirm a tension between narrative control by formal media (elite narrative control) and the power of visual amplification on social media.

Substantially, the use of the hashtag #sustainablefashion (914 mentions) emerged as a powerful form of counter-narrative, often accompanied by specific criticism of greenwashing practices by certain brands like #zara (144 mentions). However, high levels of information exposure proved not to result in sustained engagement, but rather created a reactive ephemeral awareness.

Theoretically, this study strengthens the application of Sustainability Framing Theory and the Social Amplification Framework within the context of the fashion discourse. Managerially, it is recommended that industry practitioners shift strategies from traditional Public Relations (PR) approaches toward strategic collaborations with TikTok influencers and the utilization of real-time social listening to monitor episodic spikes. As a recommendation, future research should conduct longitudinal analysis over a period exceeding six months to test sustainability rebound effects and utilize experimental designs to measure the actual behavioural impact of these episodic narratives.

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