



The Digital Brand Identity of Fast-Fashion Brand Zara. A Case Study

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Abstract. The research presented in this paper examined the structure and consistency of the digital brand identity of the fast-fashion brand Zara. The research was based on the content analysis of Zara's brand page, the website of Zara's owner Inditex, and Zara's Instagram page. The analysis of Zara's digital brand identity was divided into two parts: on the one hand, the communicative aspects of the brand site and the Instagram page were examined to verify the conditions of the digital brand experience, and, on the other hand, the structure and consistency of the brand identity on all three digital platforms were considered. Among the brand identity elements, mission, values, personality, and offers were present on all three digital platforms, while the competence element was mostly absent. This gap calls into question the credibility of the brand identity, which in turn makes it difficult for Zara to become a strong brand. Zara's digital brand identity has proven to be consistent towards customers but incomplete towards employees and other stakeholders.

Keywords: Zara, fast fashion, brand identity, corporate website, brand page, Instagram page

Introduction

Globalization and digital transformation are also affecting the fashion industry, and fashion retailers are adopting specific coping strategies. One of these strategies is the fast-fashion approach, whereby companies adapt both their manufacturing and sales processes to best meet consumer demands (Barnes–Lea–Greenwood 2006, Barnes 2013). An important part of the fast-fashion strategy is the creation and communication of a strong brand in order to meet the increased expectations of a fast-paced and experience-driven consumer (Helal–Ozuem–Lancaster 2018, Mihm 2010).

Zara is a leading fast-fashion brand with a large follower and customer base, especially among young people. A strong brand stands out from its competitors

with its attractive personality and unique features. A brand's credibility is ensured by the consistency between the brand promise and the brand's actions, as well as the consistency of the brand's communication mix. The revolutionary role of the Zara fast-fashion brand in the fashion industry has been the subject of numerous articles (Cortez et al. 2014, Nebahat 2008, Crofton–Dopico 2007), but there is a lack of studies that trace the construction of the Zara brand identity to highlight the values and emotional appeal that enable Zara to stand out in the crowd and attract young fast-fashion consumers.

The aim of this study is to analyse the brand identity characteristics of Zara, based on the content published on the official brand page (www.zara.com), the corporate website of the brand's owner Inditex Group (www.inditex.com), and Zara's Instagram page. The Zara brand identity's analysis sheds light on how Zara wants to be perceived by its stakeholders. Examining Zara's brand identity is challenging for a fast-fashion brand that ranks 45th out of the top 100 brands in the world with the highest brand equity (InterBrand 2022). At the same time, Zara's brand identity communication is considered by many experts and analysts to be unreliable, especially in terms of delivering on its brand promise of sustainability, despite scoring 75th out of 100 on the Dow Jones Sustainability Index¹ in 2021 (Allam et al. 2020, Sajn 2019, Brewer 2019, McNeil–Moore 2015).

The website of the brand owner company (Inditex Group) and the Zara brand page are the official static communication channels of Zara, where the brand owner presents the self-image of the brand from its own point of view (Wheeler 2018, Keller 2013). To analyse the relational aspects of Zara's brand identity towards its consumers, the content of 51 posts published on its Instagram page was considered. Currently, one of the most commonly used social media channels for fashion brand communication is Instagram, which focuses on visual communication and is one of the most popular media platforms for young and digitally savvy consumers of fast-fashion brands (Popović–Šević et al. 2021, Helal et al. 2018, Krepapa et al. 2016, McNeil–Moore 2015, Gamboa–Martins Gonçalves 2014).

The research topics discussed in the study are:

- 1) the communicative aspects of Zara's brand page and Instagram page;
- 2) the brand identity elements of Zara displayed on the brand page, Instagram page, and the brand owner's website;
- 3) the consistency of Zara's digital brand identity, taking into account the brand identities presented through these three digital channels.

1 The Dow Jones Sustainability World Index includes global sustainability leaders identified by Standard and Poor (S&P) Global (a respected company that compiles financial market indices) through the Corporate Sustainability Assessment (CSA). The index represents the top 10% of the 2,500 largest companies in the S&P Global Broad Market Index based on long-term economic, environmental, and social criteria.

In the first part of this article, we discuss the characteristics of fast fashion and the digital brand management and communication processes specific to fast fashion. Here, we also present the role of brand identity in brand management. In the second part of the article, we summarize the characteristics of Zara's digital brand identity based on the content published on the brand's website, the brand owner's website, and the brand's Instagram page, comparing the construction of brand identities displayed on each digital platform. The paper concludes with a summary of the results.

Theoretical Background

The Development of Fast Fashion

Fashion denotes popularity, be it in products, services, lifestyles, or business sectors. Any fashion, regardless of the length of its survival, will at some point lose popularity, only to be replaced by a new fashion, and then the cycle restarts (Loureiro et al. 2019, Barnes 2013). Traditional fashion brands were created by established fashion leaders, followed by the spread of particular fashion styles and then their disappearance. Over time, it has been a longer process in which fashion retailers have sought to produce products in anticipation of consumer demand and evolving fashion trends. In general, the fashion industry was based on a two-season approach, which resulted in two major collections per year, namely autumn/winter and spring/summer collections (Barnes 2013). As competition in the clothing industry became increasingly fierce, from the 1980s onwards, fashion retailers paid less and less attention to the present needs of their customers and based their business strategies more on future fashion trends (Gupta–Gentry 2018, Bhardwaj–Fairhurst 2010). Fashion retailers shifted from product-driven to customer-driven distribution strategies and placed greater emphasis on brand management. The essence of the customer-driven strategy is to focus on customers' expectations of fashion, with less and less attention paid to the functional utility of apparel products (Gupta–Gentry 2018, Helal et al. 2018). By the turn of the millennium, the overall pace of life had accelerated, and consumers were demanding constant change and increased rhythm in their fashion following (Gupta–Gentry 2018). Fast fashion responded to this consumer expectation (Sajn 2019, Loureiro et al. 2019).

Fast fashion is a business strategy that reduces the lead time of the buying cycle processes and the time it takes to get new fashion products into stores, with the idea of satisfying consumer demand at peak times (Loureiro et al. 2019, Park–Kim 2016, Barnes 2013, McNeil–Moore 2015, Barnes–Lea–Greenwood 2006). Fast fashion imitates the designs of big fashion brands, and then introduces clothing

styles that keep pace with the trend and are quickly updated and sells them to consumers at lower prices (Nurnafia et al. 2021, Chunling 2020, Sajn 2019). In order to meet consumers' demand for novelty, the number of planned seasons and collections increases significantly, resulting in up to 24 collections per year, as in the case of Zara (Sajn 2019). Constantly renewing collections keep consumers' and the public's attention on fast-fashion brands, but this requires continuous brand communication (Rosenblum 2015, Barnes 2013, Christopher et al. 2004). Fast-fashion brands thus combine three elements: rapid response, frequent changes, and fashionable designs at affordable prices (Loureiro et al. 2019).

An unresolved issue with fast fashion is sustainability, which runs counter to the operational logic of fast fashion (Brewer 2019, Csanák 2018). As fashion cycles become faster, some sectors of the fashion industry are adopting increasingly unsustainable production techniques to keep up with demand and increase profit margins (Brewer 2019, McNeil–Moore 2015, Entwistle 2014). If fashion consumption continues to grow, the impacts on the social and ecological environment will also threaten the quality of life of future generations (Gupta–Gentry 2018). Some researchers refer to this phenomenon as the fashion paradox, whereby global economic importance shields the fashion industry from the criticism of its inherent wastefulness, while slowing down the industry-wide movement towards ethical practice and legitimizing the role of unethical fast fashion in the marketplace (Brewer 2019, McNeil–Moore 2015).

Many manufacturers in the fashion industry are trying to change their unsustainable nature, but this can only be achieved in the long term if consumers support sustainable fashion through their purchases (McNeil–Moore 2015). Research has identified a discrepancy between consumers' perceptions of fast-fashion brands' sustainability and their behaviour towards these brands (Harris–Roby–Dibb 2016, Park–Kim 2016, McNeil–Moore 2015, Niinimäki 2010). The steps taken by fast-fashion brands towards sustainability are not always appreciated. As the fast-fashion strategy is at odds with sustainability, the sustainability efforts of these brands are viewed critically by the professional community and the wider public. Fast-fashion brands are often accused of greenwashing or dishonesty, precisely because of the contradiction between the nature of fast fashion and sustainability (Alexa et al. 2021, Allam et al. 2020, Blazquez et al. 2019).

A Review of the Fast-Fashion Brand Zara

Zara is a leading global fast-fashion brand (Popović–Šević et al. 2021, Mihm 2010). The brand is owned by the Spanish-originated Inditex Group, one of the largest fashion retail groups in the world. In addition to Zara, Inditex also distributes the brands Massimo Dutti, Pull&Bear, Bershka, Stradivarius, Oysho, and Zara Home (Inditex brands). Zara successfully replicates the latest global

trends in luxury brands. Zara's designers draw inspiration from major fashion shows, celebrity wear, and street fashion and combine this with the costs that consumers are willing to pay (Chunling 2020). In this way, Zara allows customers to wear fashion clothes that are constantly renewed worldwide, and at a much lower price (Popović-Šević et al. 2021, Gamboa–Martins Gonçalves 2014). Zara has three clothing product lines, namely: women's, men's, and children's. Zara also has a fourth product line, beauty accessories.

Zara's main target customers are young consumers with an interest in fashion but limited purchasing power, whose income is not sufficient to afford luxury brands. They are willing to pay for fashion but are relatively price sensitive. Zara's product strategy is to create a sense of scarcity with a small number of items, thereby satisfying consumers' personalized needs for varied and unique clothing (Chunling 2020).

During the COVID-19 crisis, Zara has strengthened its digital presence (Popović-Šević et al. 2021). Currently, Zara offers online ordering, in-store pick-up, stock pick-up and exchange, and other after-sales services (Chunling 2020). On digital platforms, Zara emphasizes its commitment to sustainability, which was formulated in the 2000s but since then has been involved in a number of scandals in this area related to poor working conditions and human rights violations affecting its employees (Allam et al. 2020).

Digital Brand Management and Communication of Fast-Fashion Brands

As a result of the digital transformation, which has been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the world moving into the digital space has also transformed the way fast-fashion brands communicate (Popović-Šević et al. 2021, Loureiro et al. 2019, Helal et al. 2018). Fast-fashion brands are also taking advantage of new info-communication technology and in many cases are conquering high-potential markets by deploying webshops. Today, the use of digital technology plays an important role in all processes of fast fashion (Gupta–Gentry 2018).

Competitiveness requires the development of strong fashion brands (Loureiro et al. 2019), as branded fashion products are more valuable. Brand management has become a business priority in the fashion industry because strong fashion brands set higher prices and attract consumers (Urošević–Završnik 2014). Consumers' perception, feeling, and experience of a brand become brand equity, which influences consumer behaviour. Consumers' brand loyalty creates a business advantage for the owners of fast-fashion brands. In many cases, consumers shop for pleasure because they want to have fun, spend their time pleasantly, relax, or relieve their mood (Loureiro et al. 2019). Fashion brands achieve a stronger impact in influencing consumer behaviour not by presenting the functional benefits of their products but by the sense of living and lifestyle they offer (Gupta–Gentry

2018, Keller 2013). This is especially true for fast-fashion brands, as most of the products are designed to be worn on ten occasions (Allam et al. 2020). Fashion brands are cultural products, and therefore the emotional and symbolic elements of the brand identity are of paramount importance (Helal et al. 2018). Followers of fast-fashion brands draw inspiration from the brands' stories and values to shape their personal and social identities. Brand experiences that stimulate emotions and self-expression trigger consumer satisfaction and loyalty (Helal et al. 2018).

For young generations, fast fashion and experimentation with in-between identities have become a lifestyle (Bauman 2005). Fast-fashion products are particularly attractive to consumers who prefer constant change in their fashion consumption behaviour, who embrace a culture of impulse buying, and who care little about the environment and social issues (Brewer 2019, McNeil–Moore 2015). Young consumers are aware of what they are buying and are also informed about the environmental and social impacts of brands. However, conscious consumption behaviour is partly linked to sustainability and ethical values, as consumption is a means of hedonistic experiences (Lendvai et al. 2021, Harris et al. 2016).

Digital brand management is an important prerequisite for the success of fast fashion in reaching and connecting with consumers (Barnes 2013). Through digital brand communication, fast-fashion brands are able to strongly communicate their brand equity and keep consumers up-to-date with their rapidly changing offerings. Fast-fashion brands dictate a spectacular pace to consumers, as their offerings are updated several times a week and products are available in limited quantities and for limited periods of time (Gupta–Gentry 2018). In the digital space, the brand experience is what the customer experiences when visiting a brand page or social media site. To create a successful digital brand experience, brand communication needs to be in line with the characteristics of the digital space and the expectations of visitors regarding the digital experience (Edelman 2010). Brand followers will move away from the brand if the digital brand experience falls short of the brand promise (Chernatony 2014). At the same time, creating a strong digital brand will result in high brand awareness and an increase in the number of online visitors.

The success of fast-fashion brands is hampered by doubts about the business model (Alexa et al. 2021, Allam et al. 2020, Blazquez et al. 2019). The negative effects of fast-fashion production and distribution processes and the consumer culture that encourages wastefulness in the environment and society are on the agenda (Sajn 2019, Brewer 2019). Industries that use unethical practices in their business processes try to balance the situation by communicating strongly about corporate responsibility to neutralize their negative public perception (Gao-Zeller et al. 2019). As the enforcement of corporate social responsibility is voluntary, communicating sustainability only increases brand credibility when backed up by action (Ihlen–Roper 2014).

The Communication Role of the Brand Page

The brand page is a key digital touch point between the brand and its audience (Wheeler 2018, Keller 2013), where consumers can navigate the multimodal content offer (text, image, sound, audiovisual) according to their own information needs. The proper management of brand pages, namely the development of aesthetic visual web design and user-friendly content management, the publication of useful and constantly updated content, search engine optimization, etc., is an important task of digital brand management (Ibeh 2005).

A quality brand website assures a positive brand experience and contributes to the development of trusting relationships between the brand and its users. The user's first impression of the brand is determined by the initial experience on the brand page. As a result of the digital transformation, users first navigate through brand websites and only engage with the brand in real life if the digital experience is positive. Research confirms that users perceive quality brand websites as more credible (Ibeh 2005). The aesthetic visual design of websites increases users' interest in the content on the brand website. If the user has a good impression of the visual design of the brand site, he/she will have more trust in the content on the brand site (Cyr et al. 2010). A good brand page is information-rich, i.e. it provides the user with information that is new, detailed, and constantly updated. If the information content is adequate and sustained over time, consumers will trust the brand more and more, i.e. brand loyalty will develop. The clarity of information also plays an important role in shaping the brand experience. The integration of news and professional blogs and the provision of opportunities to interact with customers are a sign of the brand site's professionalism. The seriousness of the brand site is also indicated by the display of the brand owner's company details and information for employees. A good brand site is both customer-generating and sales-driving. The sales interface is the integrated web shop, where detailed product information with accurate pricing is presented in such high quality that the customer no longer needs to physically experience the product.

The Communication Role of Social Media

Another prominent form of digital brand communication is by social media (Loureiro et al. 2019, Bauer–Kolos 2016, Keller 2013). On brand-maintained social media sites, brand followers meet the brand and one another (Helal et al. 2018, Gamboa–Martins Gonçalves 2014) and form a brand community (Vinerean–Opreana 2019). These sites allow brand owners to communicate brand identity, brand news, and new collection launches quickly and globally. Social media platforms are excellent channels for building relationships with consumers,

providing an opportunity to influence purchase intentions (Loureiro et al. 2019, Helal et al. 2018).

Among social media platforms, Instagram is the most popular and widely used in fashion brand communication, as it provides global reach and interactivity (Loureiro et al. 2019, Vinerean–Opreana 2019, Helal et al. 2018, Krepapa et al. 2016). Instagram provides a multimedia environment and allows for the two-way communication of images, videos, texts, and sounds, but the focus is on sharing visual content, i.e. visual storytelling (Russmann–Svensson 2016). Instagram’s user interface is simple, friendly, and lightweight, and the dominance of visual communication makes it explicitly attractive (Krepapa et al. 2016). Instagram’s prestige is high among young and digitally savvy consumers of fast-fashion brands (Krepapa et al. 2016, Nurnafia et al. 2021). Browsing fashion brands’ Instagram pages has taken the place of window shopping, as consumers turn to this social media content primarily during the discovery and evaluation phase of a fashion brand’s products (Vinerean–Opreana 2019). Well-constructed social media sites easily lead the consumer to the brand’s page or online shop, encouraging a closer relationship with the brand and a purchase.

The role of brand communication on social media is to contribute to customer satisfaction through interactive digital experiences. To increase customer satisfaction, it is necessary to maintain two-way communication and use engagement tools such as quizzes, polls, responding to customer reviews, etc. Brands are less likely to exploit the interactive potential of social media, and social media brand communication is still used more to develop brand awareness and less to engage customers (Nurnafia et al. 2021, Helal et al. 2018).

The Role of Brand Identity in Brand Management

The basis for creating a strong brand is to develop a brand identity and define the values that the brand represents. The development of a brand idea does not create a strong brand, as strong brands are based on a quality and value-added product or service that is further shaped by customer perceptions (Aaker 2010).

While several market-oriented definitions of brand identity are known (Aaker 2002, Kapferer 2008, Chernatony 2014), in this paper we use the identity-based approach to brand identity developed by Burmann et al. (2017). The authors consider brand identity as the self-image of a brand, which summarizes the most important brand attributes as selected by brand creators. The characteristics of brand identity are closely related to the external perception of the brand (Burmann et al. 2009). Burmann et al. (2017) distinguished six elements of the brand identity structure, which are presented in *Table 1*. Along these six elements, an authentic brand identity has internal consistency (Balmer 2012).

Table 1. Dimensions of brand identity for identity-based brand management

Dimensions	Description
Origin	The origin of brand identity refers to the circumstances in which the brand was created.
Mission/ Vision	Examining the mission of the brand enables the identification of the brand attributes that differentiate the brand from its competitors.
Values	The core values of brand identity refer to the brand's beliefs, principles, and way of being. Core values are the emotional components of the brand and influence the nature of the relationships with stakeholders.
Personality	Personality traits encompass the personality traits of the brand's creators and the characteristics of the target audiences with whom the brand is most likely to engage. Personality is an emotional component of the brand, which determines the mindset and style of the brand's manifestations.
Competences	Competences maintain the brand's credibility and highlight the brand's excellence, i.e. the areas where the brand performs better than its competitors.
Offer	Brand offer reveals the benefits of using the brand to different target groups (internal and external). Brand benefits can be functional or symbolic (emotional, social, self-expression). The functional benefits of a brand refer to the usefulness of the branded product. A brand has an emotional benefit if any association with the brand evokes positive feelings in the consumer. Self-expression benefits occur when the brand becomes a symbol for consumers, giving them the opportunity to use the brand to express their identity, social affiliation, or prestige.

Source: Burmann et al. (2017)

Methodology

The analysis of Zara's digital brand identity was conducted in two steps: first, the communicative aspects of the brand site and the Instagram page were examined to verify the conditions of the digital brand experience, and, second, the structure and consistency of the brand identity on all three digital platforms were analysed. To investigate the digital brand identity, we looked at Zara's brand page² and Zara's Instagram page,³ as well as the website of the company that created the brand, Inditex Group. Content from the Inditex site,⁴ such as about the company (Group – Our Approach), the Zara brand (Brands – Zara), and the sustainability (Sustainability) menu items, were saved and analysed. The content of the Inditex

2 Zara Official Website: <https://www.zara.com/hu/> (last access: 05.11.2022).

3 Zara Official: <https://www.instagram.com/zara/> (last access: 05.11.2022).

4 Inditex Group Website: <https://www.inditex.com/itxcomweb/en/home> (last access: 05.11.2022).

corporate sustainability documents were reviewed, including *Sustainability Policy* (2020), *Sustainability Commitment and Roadmap* (2020), *Inditex Group Modern Slavery, Human Trafficking and Transparency in Supply Chain Statement for FY 2021*, and the *Annual Report 2021*.⁵ Data from the Zara brand page and the Inditex corporate website were collected between 15 and 24 July 2022.

A difficulty in analysing the content of social media sites is the continuous change and dynamic nature of the content. Users are frequently accessing content, and therefore content can be constantly updated with comments, shares, etc. 51 posts on Zara's official Instagram page were analysed for the period of 15 July–20 August 2022. Data were collected on 24 August 2022. The analysis criteria for Zara's brand identity and the content analysis criteria for the Zara brand page and Instagram posts are presented in the tables below.

Table 2. *Assessment dimensions of brand identity (on the three digital platforms)*

Dimensions of brand identity	Description
Origin	starting, industry specificities, company characteristics
Mission	role to target groups, creating a competitive advantage
Values	values, principles, attitudes
Personality	style, personality traits, personality of the ideal customer
Competences	supporting of brand offers with results
Offers	brand benefits (functional, emotional, and self-expression)

Source: author's compilation based on Burmann et al. (2017)

Table 3. *Content analysis criteria for the brand page*

Criteria	Description
Quality of visual content	nature, quality, and use of product images
Delivery of information	layout of menus and content structure, search facility, use of filters, newsletter, professional blog on the site, company information, distribution network, company policy, careers page, website map
Interaction with the customers	contact details, chat interface, social media links, web shop, help

Source: author's compilation based on Keller (2013) and Ibeh (2005)

⁵ Inditex – Ethical Commitment: <https://tinyurl.com/2p8z59wr> (last access: 05.11.2022).

Table 4. Content analysis criteria for the Instagram page

Criteria	Description
Quality of the visual content of the posts	nature and quality of visual content, the use of colour in visual content, people in the visual content, nature of the environment captured by the visual content
Delivery of information of the posts	caption of posts, hashtags associated with posts
The interactivity generated by the posts	number of likes, number of comments, response to comments

Source: the author's compilation based on Russmann and Svensson (2016)

Findings

Digital Brand Management and Communication of Zara

Zara's Communication on the Brand Page

According to our observation, the visual design of the Zara brand site is engaging, following a minimalist web design. Zara's brand page was based on visuality (Popović-Šević et al. 2021). The opening image for the women's product line was a hero image that took up the entire visible area and depicted a white-skinned female figure; the opening image for the men's product line was a cinemagraph with a black-skinned male figure moving in a repetitive motion; the children's product line used several cartoon animation images. The brand site also included a web shop where products were presented using high-resolution and enlargeable images. Up to seven or eight images per product were available. The garments were worn by models, so the products could be observed in use, giving them a specific sense of life.

Zara's brand website contained up-to-date information and was characterized by a wealth of information. The information was arranged in a two- to three-level hierarchy, which met the requirements of a quality brand website. The main submenu items were grouped by gender and by children's product lines; under the main product lines were the clothing product groups, always starting with the new collection. Special collections (Sustainable, Studio, Workshop), Promotions, and Career Opportunities were also displayed at this hierarchical level. The brand page had a search option and filtering facility. There was a link to Inditex, the company that owns the Zara brand, and a store finder option to help find the nearest store. At the bottom of the brand page, there was a map of the website, which made the entire brand page transparent.

The brand page provided many opportunities to communicate with the consumers. When entering the site, the user's geographical location had to be entered, and then the brand page for the corresponding country was automatically launched. On the home page, there was a Help menu, where information on shopping and returning used clothing could be found. It also provided information on how to make a gift card and request gift wrapping. From the brand page, it was possible to go to Zara's social media platforms, including TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Pinterest. The website also featured a virtual store where products could be viewed in a similar layout to physical stores.

Overall, Zara's brand site provided a positive digital brand experience, as the user found themselves in a modern and slightly disconcerting experience through a visual content ecosystem. Professional images dominated the brand site and created a distinctive atmosphere. The textual information was complementary, but provided the user with all relevant product data. The well-functioning web shop indicated a customer-oriented approach.

Zara's Brand Communication on Instagram

With its 1.28 billion users worldwide (Statista 2022), Instagram is the fourth most popular social networking site in the world after Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp. Zara's official Instagram account has 53 million followers and has published 3,771 posts since its creation. According to our observation, the frequency of publishing posts was every three days, when 3–6 posts were published simultaneously.

The 51 posts published in the 35 days under review represented 1.4 posts per day. The posts were mainly based on professional photos. Of the 51 posts, nine were videos with a visual content of less than half a minute. Both the photos and videos were of professional quality, with no snapshots, selfies, or phone videos found in any of the 51 posts. The posts had captions and all but seven (about male fashion) posts had hashtags. The hashtags highlighted Zara's product lines and sustainability achievements: #zarawoman (18 posts), #zaramen (2 posts), #zarakids (3 posts), #zarababy (3 posts), #zarabeauty (6 posts), #zara (9 posts), #innovation, #joinlife (3-3 posts). The hashtags organized the posts and made the published content easy to follow. The posts communicated relevant visual content with appropriate captions, indicating appropriate communication.

The posts depicted Zara fashion products, mainly aiming to create an emotional impact, but did not contain direct calls for purchase. On Instagram, the familiar photos and videos from the brand's website were reintroduced. In 49 cases, the photos integrated into the posts were of a model wearing Zara products. The models were women (33), men (11), and children (5). Among the individuals, there were both female models with white skin, mostly blond, and models with

black skin. The situation was similar for male models, who included both white-skinned and black-skinned models. There were nine references to celebrities in the postings, six of which featured men's fashion products (Somali Findlay, Geron McGinley, Dylan Saje McKay, Steve McQueen) and three featured beauty accessories (Ajok Madel, Laff Michelle). In the photos and videos integrated into the posts, the models were in abstract or studio environments, which drew even more attention to the Zara product and the wearer. Visual content was characterized by a strong use of colour, with ten cases of black and white visuals. The strong colours created an atmosphere of modernity, while the use of black and white supported a retro feel.

The information was communicated by captioning the posts. The captions communicated the brand's mission and values, while the visual content focused on the brand's personality, style, and brand offer. Within the 51 posts, the following themes could be identified: new clothing collections (women's, men's, and children's), summer beauty collection, new pieces from the Studio and Workshop collections, and sustainability achievements (recycling of old clothes materials through innovative methods and the invention of new materials).

The strengths of Instagram communication consisted in providing visual experience and interactivity. The posts analysed had a minimum of 1,000 and a maximum of 63,000 likes. The posts with the fewest likes were the ones featuring retro pieces, while the posts featuring summer women's linen clothes had the most likes. The number of comments varied between 23 and 480, but in many cases the brand followers used emoticons to communicate with the brand and with each other. The fewest comments were on posts featuring menswear and the most on posts featuring very feminine clothes. In most cases, there was no formal response from Zara representatives to the problems raised by brand followers, unless it was about the launch of new collections or the distribution of different collections to national markets. However, clarity was strengthened by the fact that negative comments remained public, even if they were not answered.

Zara did not use any specific tools to engage customers on Instagram, such as polls, competitions, surveys, etc. No influencers appeared in the 51 posts, but classic celebrities were brought in to promote retro menswear and beauty accessories. There were no posts sharing or promoting the customers' brand experience. Zara's Instagram page was more characterized by sharing representative content than engaging content (Nurnafia et al. 2021). The Instagram page of Zara, although not very interactive, still provided a visually grounded and pleasant brand experience.

Digital Brand Identity of Zara and Its Consistency

The Origin of Zara's Brand Identity

The origin of Zara's brand identity was delivered on the Inditex website. Zara had its origins in the name of Spanish founder Amancio Ortega. The founder of Zara started a clothing company in 1963 and opened his first clothing store, Zara, in 1975. Thanks to his persistence, Zara had grown into a local, national, and then global clothing chain with a presence in 205 markets by 2021 (Inditex – Our Approach). Between 1991 and 1999, new clothing brands were added to the brand portfolio, which the owner consolidated into the Inditex Group. Inditex Group's biggest revenue was generated by the Zara brand (around 80 percent). Zara and its co-brands entered the e-commerce market between 2007 and 2017, where they became a reference. The Zara brand site and online shop operated internationally and in 98 countries. In the fashion industry, Zara is one of the biggest fast-fashion brands, whose business model has completely transformed the clothing industry (Loureiro et al. 2019). According to data on the Inditex website, in 2021, the number of visitors to its brand page in different languages was 6.2 billion (Inditex – Our Approach). Zara's Instagram page had no brand origin information. From the Instagram account, one could click through to the brand page to find details about the brand. On the brand page, there is a link to the brand owner's website, where information on the origin of the brand was available.

The Mission of Zara's Brand Identity

The mission of Zara's brand identity cannot be separated from the mission of Inditex, which was communicated on the corporate website. Inditex's mission is to create boldly innovative fashion based on innovation, creativity, risk-taking, and a commitment to progress. Inditex's mission was to provide customers with access to inspiringly beautiful fashion while taking responsibility for the future of the planet and its people (Inditex – Our Approach). The content of the mission statement refers to customer orientation, as there is no articulated commitment to other stakeholders. For each fashion brand owned by the Inditex Group, the company strived to deliver an outstanding brand experience.

Zara saw itself as a driving force in fashion, achieving its performance through responsibility and ambition. Zara's aim was to provide everyone, wherever they were, with the inspiring, always fashionable, responsibly made fashion they deserved (Inditex – Brands 2022). Zara seems to be fulfilling its mission of fashion through the tasteful and indeed bold fashion pieces presented on its brand website. Zara's Instagram page also fulfils its mission of modern fashion creation with its unique, powerful, and often startling visual content.

A commitment to sustainability was present in both Inditex's and Zara's mission. This commitment to sustainability was also included in the brand values and brand competencies, which will be discussed below. Zara also emphasized its commitment to sustainability on its Instagram page and shared visual content that served to demonstrate Zara's commitment to sustainability.

The Values of Zara's Brand Identity

On Zara's brand page or Instagram page, we do not explicitly see the presentation of values. To find information about the brand values, we should go to the Inditex website, where we can find values related to consumers and employees. The values for consumers were customer orientation, professional quality, and sustainability. Inditex placed its customers at the heart of its business model, and their satisfaction was the ultimate measure of the company's performance. On its brand page, Zara referred to the intimate relationship it had with its customers. They have sought to meet the needs of customers by having Zara designers respond to changing needs, respond to the latest trends and continuous customer feedback to provide customers with new fashion ideas in the right place at the right time.

Inditex also wanted to provide a high-quality digital brand experience by constantly updating its digital platforms (Inditex – Our approach). The comments that appeared next to each post on its Instagram page often asked about the launch of a fashion piece or collection, and official Zara responses to such questions were also available.

Zara also emphasized professionalism. Its integrated value chain, built to ensure customer satisfaction, allowed it to respond quickly and efficiently to real events and new challenges. At every stage of its business model, ensuring quality was a priority, and therefore the investment of resources was not neglected, as they stated (Inditex – Our approach). Zara had also embraced the integration of digital technology. By implementing and developing cutting-edge technologies, quality operations and tracking of the entire production chain were achieved. Zara's innovative fashion ideas have received acclaim from the fashion industry and consumers, but several authors have been critical of the ethics of its production processes (Allem et al. 2020, Sajn 2019).

Criticism of manufacturing processes is also linked to ensuring sustainability. Inditex and Zara have declared sustainability as one of their core brand values (Inditex – Sustainability, Zara – Sustainability). On its website, Inditex has committed to promoting all dimensions of sustainability, namely quality management and fair operating practices, proper management of environmental and social issues, respect for human rights among employees, consumers, and the local community (Inditex – Sustainability). The problem lies in the lack of integrity, as the criticisms that have been made have referred to the use of inhumane

working conditions and child labour in Zara companies or subcontractors, accusations that call into question Zara's overall values and brand credibility (Allem et al. 2020, Sajn 2019).

The list of values for employees was also available on the Inditex website, on the careers page (Inditex – Talent). Three of the Inditex-Zara values were related to personal attributes and three to human behaviour. The values for Zara were curiosity, creativity, and humility. These were the qualities that lead to excellent professional results for employees, which also added value to Zara. At the same time, Zara also emphasized individual value, diversity, collective development, and ethical-sustainable behaviour. These values were a reflection of Zara's people-centeredness.

Zara's Instagram posts communicated its values towards its customers, namely customer orientation, professionalism, and sustainability. This value communication was achieved through professional photos and videos integrated into the posts, as well as captions. Comments on sustainability posts also include negative comments questioning Zara's performance in this area.⁶ Zara has not responded to the negative comments, with sustainability posts receiving between 12 and 24,000 likes. The posts on the social media site did not target employees or any other stakeholders.

The Personality of Zara's Brand Identity

Different aspects of Zara's brand personality were communicated on the Inditex career site, the Zara brand page, and the Zara Instagram page. The Inditex careers page provided a description of the ideal employees the company would like to have on its team – namely, team players who embrace diversity, are creative, innovative, and committed to progress. The brand personality was also reflected in the characteristics of the current workforce. Inditex had more than 165,000 employees from 177 nationalities. 76% of the employees were female, with an average age of 30 years. It is noteworthy, however, that communication with employees was limited to the Zara careers site, with the brand page and Instagram page targeting customers only.

The brand's personality towards customers could be experienced on the Instagram page. The characteristics of the models wearing Zara products were close to those of the ideal customer. Models of men, women, and children, both white and coloured, showed an appreciation for diversity, meaning that Zara was appealing to all those who value innovative and powerful fashion without

6 E.g. "autoimmunfreedom: Hi! I hope you are doing well. Please note that Zara Woman's Senior designer sent racist messages to a model and wasn't fired. Zara are also under investigation for using slave labor. We are boycotting Zara, Massimo Dutti, Bershka, Pull and Bear, Stradivarius, Oysho, Uterque (all owned by Inditex)."

any other distinction. The men's and women's models were youthful, modern, and exclusive. Zara products highlight the uniqueness of the wearer. The strong colours of the visual content also emphasized character, distinction, and modernity. The style of the messages for the two core audience groups reflected Zara's brand personality, which was passionate, curious, demanding, innovative, and proactive.

The Offer of Zara's Brand Identity

Zara communicated the benefits of using its products to its customers through its brand page and online shop. At the same time, through its Instagram page, it generated interest and desire for brand products. The brand's offer was to provide a high-quality fashion experience for all, giving customers the originality and inspiration they craved after. Zara strived to provide customers with a sustainable and ethical way to follow fashion. Alongside its traditional collections, Zara has also created its *Join Life* sustainable collection. Additionally, Zara communicated the idea of sustainable fashion on its Instagram page, showcasing its fashion products and communicating its sustainability efforts.

Offers included consistent brand communication across all brand touch points. This was achieved through aesthetically pleasing and innovative window displays and a unified digital interface design, providing a cohesive brand and seamless shopping experience for customers. The brand offer focused not on the functionality of the products but on their uniqueness and the emotional and self-expression benefits associated with them. Zara expressed the emotional and self-expression benefits through visual communication. Zara's visual communication is consistent across the brand's site, online shop, and Instagram page, which means that the customer was presented with similar photos and videos across these channels.

The Competences of the Zara Brand Identity

Strong brands back up the credibility of their brand promise with data, testimonials, and success stories, highlighting areas where the brand was performing better than its competitors. Zara claimed to excel in three areas: innovative fashion creation, customer orientation, and sustainability (Inditex – Brands).

Zara has backed up its promise of innovative fashion creation with its excellent design team, its extensive retail network, its smart logistics, and, more recently, its technological transformation. In most cases, all these claims were not backed up by concrete results or testimonies from stakeholders. On the Inditex website, in relation to the development of design expertise, some members of the talented creative design team shared their experiences of working

within the company. Apart from the design team, other groups of employees did not speak. Operational excellence was evidenced by the data published in the annual report on the Inditex website, as well as by the publication on the corporate website of the results achieved according to various benchmarks (e.g. Most Innovative Company 2021, ranked 73rd in The Global 100 Most Sustainable Corporations 2021, etc.).

Zara provided evidence of customer orientation through the brand experience created in its stores and on digital platforms. Across the different digital platforms, visual experiences were similar in quality, content, and atmosphere. Beyond the visual content seen on the platforms studied, no factual data on customer satisfaction was found on the brand's or the maintaining company's website. However, without having conducted an analysis, it is worth mentioning that Zara received a poor rating of 81% on the Trustpilot review-sharing site.⁷ On Review.io, 39 percent of customers who posted a review recommended the brand.⁸

In 2021, Inditex published a sustainability report,⁹ including its non-financial data, a report on employee engagement and respect for human rights, and a statement on community investment. The GRI methodology¹⁰ was followed in the preparation of the non-financial report, and a range of data was available in the report. The report on the employee engagement described the role of human resources in the different areas of the company, with less concrete data and more future plans and objectives. The report about the human rights focuses on the principles and strategies, the most important aspects of Inditex's commitment to human rights, which will shape its future operations and business processes. The report on community investment contained plenty of information about the projects supported by the company and its beneficiaries all around the world. These reports do not specify the source of the data presented, nor do they mention third parties to confirm the authenticity of the data.

Sustainability was also argued by the launch of *Join Life*, a sustainable clothing collection, which was based on the use of more environmentally friendly raw materials in the production of products and enabled the life cycle of products to be extended. Also demonstrating Zara's commitment to sustainability was its clothing recycling programme initiative,¹¹ which allowed customers worldwide to return their worn clothes to Zara, thus helping to reduce waste and the consumption of new raw materials. Most recently, Zara has created a platform called the Sustainability Innovation Hub, which "promotes new technologies, materials and processes to reduce the environmental impact of our products,

7 <https://tinyurl.com/y4jh8npb> (last access: 05.11.2022).

8 <https://tinyurl.com/yebdwhc> (last access: 05.11.2022).

9 <https://tinyurl.com/3f2c5ccf> (last access: 05.11.2022).

10 <https://tinyurl.com/5n6b28ww> (last access: 05.11.2022).

11 Clothes Collection Programme: <https://tinyurl.com/bdhe5p8r> (last access: 05.11.2022).

helping to move towards more sustainable solutions and circularity” (Zara – Sustainability – Innovation).

There are a number of concerns about Zara’s sustainability communications. The sustainability reporting of the Inditex Group has been questioned by researchers and is seen as greenwashing or hypocrisy in several respects (Alexa et al. 2021, Allam et al. 2020, Brewer 2019, Saju 2019). The lack of credibility of Zara’s sustainability is often voiced in the press and on professional blogs.¹² The scandals surrounding the company (in 2018, 2013, 2011), which were linked to human rights violations and poor working conditions (Allam et al. 2020), have further damaged the brand’s credibility. Articles on professional blogs also criticize Zara’s polluting behaviour, which is also dangerous for workers. Zara usually produces its products in the Global South, where garment workers are paid low wages and work in dangerous conditions.¹³ Last but not least, Zara is held responsible for producing large quantities of clothing, much of which ends up in landfills.¹⁴ Over the past two years, Zara has adopted a number of firm-level policies (e.g. *Corporate Social Responsibility Policy* and *Environmental Sustainability Policy* 2020), signed agreements, and entered into partnerships with recognized organizations in the field of sustainability (e.g. United Nations Global Compact, International Labour Organization, The Fashion Pact, Ellen MacArthur Foundation, Zero Discharge of Hazardous Chemicals, Sustainable Apparel Coalition, etc.) to strengthen its sustainability, but it has yet to take concrete action and show visible results (*Annual Report* 2021).

Summary

The research presented in this study investigated the characteristics and consistency of the digital brand identity of the fast-fashion brand Zara. The research relied on digital content analysis and document analysis. The content analysed was collected from the Zara brand page, the website of Zara’s owner, Inditex, and Zara’s Instagram page. Of the three digital platforms, Zara’s brand page and Instagram page reflected a strong customer orientation and conveyed visual content that was specifically targeted at consumers and aimed to create an innovative consumer experience. The Instagram page was eye-catching and captured a fascination with fashion products through the sense of living and lifestyle it conveyed, while the online shop, integrated with the brand page,

12 The Truth about Fast Fashion: Can You Tell How Ethical Your Clothing Is by Its Price? <https://tinyurl.com/mwrud2kt> (last access: 05.11.2022); How Ethical Is Zara? <https://tinyurl.com/ms2rz6kk> (last access: 05.11.2022); Changing Market Foundation: Dirty Fashion. <https://tinyurl.com/2xycpfbx> (last access: 05.11.2022).

13 Is Zara Ethical and Sustainable? <https://tinyurl.com/bdf97hj5> (last access: 05.11.2022).

14 Ibid.

convinced the customer with its high-quality and detailed visual product presentation. Zara's brand page and Instagram page showcase four elements of brand identity. The content conveyed on both platforms hinted at Zara's mission to provide shoppers with access to powerful and innovative fashion products. There was an emphasis on sustainable fashion creation with a dedicated sustainability menu on the brand page and posts on the Instagram page. These platforms conveyed the values of customer orientation, professionalism, and sustainability through the content they published. Both on the brand page and the social media page, the brand's personality was asserted as bold, modern, and challenging. The brand's symbolic offer was easy to follow on both the Instagram page and the brand page. On both platforms, the origins and competencies of the brand identity were missing elements.

More details about Zara's brand identity were available on the Inditex website. The corporate site was open to more stakeholders, more specifically customers, workforce, and financiers. The corporate website included a history of Zara's origins and a description of the competences that underpinned the brand promise. Inditex's site has increasingly published documents to demonstrate the sustainability of the whole group and, within it, the Zara brand. The credibility of Zara's brand identity, despite the publication of numerous sustainability documents, is questionable, as the source of data from the reports are not provided. In both academic and professional circles, the Zara brand has been attacked for greenwashing or hypocrisy, as it performs well in terms of reporting and ratings, but several scandals have erupted around the brand that have cast doubt on the data contained in the reports and ratings. Zara's brand identity is flawed by a lack of competence to back up its promises about its workforce, while sustainability scandals also focus on poor working conditions for its workforce and human rights abuses.

Examining Zara's brand page, Instagram page, and Inditex website, the brand identity is seen as consistent towards customers but incomplete towards the workforce and other stakeholders. Credibility of the brand identity was the most problematic, as in addition to well-qualified sustainability reports, stakeholders are also aware of the environmental and social problems caused by the company that maintains the brand. Unfortunately, fast-fashion brands' customers are not sensitive enough to social and environmental problems (Brewer 2019, McNeil–Moore 2015).

A shortcoming of the presented research is the one-sided approach, as the focus is on Zara's brand identity, which reflects the perspective of the brand owner. It would be worthwhile to continue the research by exploring Zara's brand image in order to gain insights into external stakeholders' perceptions of the brand. Here, the content of opinion-sharing platforms about the Zara brand, such as Sitejabber, Trustpilot, Review.io, Good on You, etc., could be investigated. It would be useful

to assess the brand credibility and the reputation of the brand owner company and then monitor the impact of brand credibility and company reputation among brand stakeholders.

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