

Out of the Boardroom and into the Showroom: Shifting the Brand Digital Conversation from Emotional Response to Awareness

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Abstract

In the contemporary digital environment, brands are modelling their communication strategies on values typical of the corporate world and thus creating a widened narrative which transforms emotional storytelling into something more oriented towards authenticity, reputation and ethics. An insight into where your jeans were packaged or the tags on your trainers were made, a glimpse inside the factories where raw materials are transformed into products, a guide to every step of the process by which fishing nets recovered at sea are recycled into items of clothing — these are just a few examples of what today might be termed “project storytelling”: manufacturing information as narrative, sustainability in action to sidestep accusations of greenwashing. Brands are becoming more and more aware of the need to present a transparent creative process in all its phases, as well as to involve the consumer in the dialogue. In this brave new world, there are many admirable examples of brands at which the traditional rhetoric of the fashion narrative (more closely linked to aspirational and purely aesthetic imaginaries) has given way to a total honesty and a commitment to customers and, above all, younger generations, who are ever more concerned with questions of ecology, inclusivity and sustainability.

Keywords: Transparency; Awareness; Brand Activism; Purpose Marketing; Augmented Denotation.

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Introduction

An insight into how raw fabric is transformed into a T-shirt (Pangaia), a glimpse into where your trainers are created (Veja), or a guide to every step of the process by which fishing nets recovered at sea are recycled into items of clothing, making valuable use of waste material (Ecoalf) — these are just a few examples of what might be termed “project storytelling”: manufacturing details as narrative, sustainability in action. Brands narration focuses increasingly on transparency — revealing the process of creation in all its phases — and involving the consumer as a participant. Corporate social responsibility¹ has taken its place at the heart of communications and customer relations. In this brave new world, which had already emerged substantially pre-Covid 19, there are many admirable examples of DTC (direct-to-consumer)² brands at which the typical rhetoric of the fashion story (more closely linked to aspirational and purely aesthetic imaginaries) has given way to a total honesty and a commitment to their customers and to the new generations. It gives prominence to the smallest of suppliers and sheds light on the innermost workings of the production process to ensure that value is spread throughout the supply chain. As they erase the differences between B2B and B2C in a digital narrative that, today more than ever, is H2H (human-to-human),³ not only DTC brands⁴ but also companies are placing new notions of authenticity in the foreground. “Made in” culture has thus become an important part of company websites, official social media, newsletters, and all available channels of communications, as further progress is made towards a new concept of storytelling.

With the aim of tracing the new aesthetic-narrative modalities of transparency, this essay will focus on specific case studies that in recent years have experienced very high growth (both economic and in terms of prominence) and have become key to any discourse on these new forms of corporate authenticity.⁵ The communication of each brands on official websites and social channels was analysed through a narrative and visual approach. Similarly, the analysis of companies such as Reda, Desserto, Piñatex and Rifò focused on their communication practices on official sites and social media, mainly analysing copywriting texts and the aesthetics of the photographs. The analysis was therefore of a narrative, visual type, focusing on the style that the brands seek to create. Working on identities on a visual level, the proposed cases shine a new light on the relationship between the construction of meaning and the crucial question of authenticity, which on several levels shapes both the private and public discourse of individuals on social media; now it also shapes the behaviour of companies and brands. In doing so, the coordinates are set for further interpretations of this new aesthetic, stemming from broader reflection on the theme of authenticity as the heart of contemporary philosophical and political ethics.

The pursuit of transparency

The profound cultural, social, economic, and political changes of our times are generating a significant paradigm shift in the creation and affirmation of new fashion identities. The interdependence of new expressions of project design and creativity and the events of the historical moment in which we find

1. Ryan Honeyman, Tiffany Jana, and Rose Marcario, *The B Corp Handbook: How You Can Use Business As a Force for Good*, 2nd ed. (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Pub., 2018)
2. “The New Four Ps of DTC Marketing,” *The Business of Fashion*, 11 March 2021, <https://www.businessoffashion.com/case-studies/marketing-pr/the-new-four-ps-of-dtc-marketing-download-the-case-study>.
3. Santina Giannone and Marisandra Lizzi, *Comunicare human to human. Dai valore alla tua azienda attraverso purpose marketing e brand journalism* (Flaccovio Dario, 2020); Bryan Kramer, *There is No B2B or B2C. It's Human to Human: #H2H* (Waldorf Pub., 2017)
4. Small and medium-sized independent brands with a truly global reach which have cut out the middleman completely and owe their rise to sales online and through social media. BoF Team, “A New Playbook for DTC Brands,” *The Business of Fashion*, 10 February 2021, sec. Video, <https://www.businessoffashion.com/videos/marketing-pr/a-new-playbook-for-dtc-brands>.
5. “Pangaia Is The Sustainable Fashion Brand Taking Over Instagram” *L'Officiel France*’ <https://www.lofficielsingapore.com/fashion/pangia-life-size-fashion>; Grace Cook, “How Sustainable Sneaker Brand Veja Went Viral,” *Financial Times*, 11 October 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/69b6e762-e8ee-11e9-a240-3bo65ef5fc55>.

ourselves traces a fascinating and unprecedented relation with the context. Without doubt the most important factor in this profound shift in the global social and cultural equilibrium is digitalisation. There are a series of aspects of this complex phenomenon that have changed the world of fashion at every level: lack of job security — the combined effect of globalisation of the supply chain and crisis in the classic model of production —, the advent of the long tail which flanks the mass market model, the emergence of a mass of markets that satisfy niche global consumer demands, and the intense hybridisation of productive and discursive systems traditionally hailing from different cultural industries (communications, art, fashion and design).⁶ Such radical change has profoundly altered the way in which fashion brands have begun to engage with the market, amplifying their identities and industry presence through the web. Not only this, but these changes — added to the equally decisive transition to online user participation — have contributed to the creation of an increasingly switched-on and conscious class of consumers.⁷ Growing pursuit of transparency on the part of the consumer has created strong incentives for companies to change the way they first visualise and then develop their entrepreneurship.

This is not just a question of Generation Z; there exist, in fact, various groups of individuals and consumers for whom not only the quality of a product but also the sustainability and transparency initiatives present throughout the entire supply chain are a key factor, essential to the purchasing process.⁸ It is a sustainability born of an omni-channel distribution in which the story of the brand becomes a civic narrative, presenting itself as an opportunity for innovation even within classic communications processes. Many of these brands have been conscious from the start that customer relations are now conducted in an environment, such as that of social media, less obviously oriented towards sales and more towards the democratisation of trends and the building of communities. That being said, digital-savvy brands are more than aware of the processes of engagement and gamification that underlie contemporary consumption.⁹ In this new landscape and as a consequence of the factors listed above, conversation on the impact of fashion from both an environmental and a social point of view has intensified considerably.¹⁰ However, this dash for green narratives does not always correspond immediately to ecological measures being taken: many articles and studies of the industry complain of regulatory gaps and highlight the grey areas which exist.¹¹ Moreover, lack of data poses a considerable obstacle to fashion cleaning up its act when it comes to climate change and working conditions.

Sustainability is still rife with murky practices and a rather nebulous definition provides the ideal smoke-screen for the many companies that prefer to settle for the convenience of greenwashing rather than make real efforts to improve. In this still little-charted territory, it is a challenge even for brands with the best of intentions to choose the right suppliers, the right producers of raw materials, and set out on the right track.¹² The ever-growing demand for ethical behaviour is also supported by a range of organisations that raise awareness of more sustainable methods of production among both consumers and companies. Many communications campaigns cite the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (Ecoalf focuses its commitment to the safeguarding of the oceans around one of these very goals, as we shall see), as well

6. Vittorio Linfante and Paola Bertola, *A-Z. Il nuovo vocabolario della moda italiana*. Illustrated ed. (Florence: Mandragora, 2015)

7. Consumption at its most switched-on and conscious may arise as a reaction to the overproduction of the fast fashion business model, as a new awareness of an ethical and ecological way of life, or as a means of empowering consumer choice and reestablishing consumption as a sharing of values with a chosen brand. See "Trust Barometer Special Report: Brand Trust in 2020," *Edelman*, accessed 19 March 2021, <https://www.edelman.com/research/brand-trust-2020>.

8. "Deloitte Global Millennial Survey 2020," *Deloitte*, accessed 19 March 2021, <https://www2.deloitte.com/global/en/pages/about-deloitte/articles/millennialsurvey.html>.

9. Corinne Watson, "Direct to Consumer Trends 2021: 3 Brands Winning at DTC," *The BigCommerce Blog*, 11 March 2020, <https://www.bigcommerce.com/blog/dtc-trends/>.

10. Devon Powers, *On Trend: The Business of Forecasting the Future* (Urbana: University of Illinois Pr., 2019)

11. Elena Grinta, "Solo il 12% dei brand fashion a livello internazionale può essere considerato sostenibile | Communication For Good," *Be Intelligent*, accessed 18 March 2021, <https://www.beintelligent.eu/it/solo-il-12-dei-brand-fashion-a-livello-internazionale-puo-essere-considerato-sostenibile/>.

12. Sarah Kent, "Fashion's Greenwashing Problem Begins with Bad Data," *The Business of Fashion*, 16 September 2020, <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/sustainability/fashion-sustainability-data-greenwashing>.

as the organisations and foundations (such as Eco-Age, Fashion Revolution and the McArthur Foundation) whose mission it is to plug the gaps in regulation, to publish reports, articles, and management guides¹³ which reach the whole industry and not only consumers, and to launch communications campaigns that help to shape this new way of thinking (for example, the #whomademyclothes campaign which was such a crucial forerunner of this trend).

Telling fact from fiction

“Reality must take over fiction” (Fig.01): so claims a tagline used by the brand Veja to accompany a photo shot in the Amazon rainforest which speaks volumes, the human figures tiny and dwarfed by their surroundings. In a sort of manifesto of the aesthetics of transparency, Veja states:

When you deconstruct a product, and you have a truly transparent approach, reality becomes more fascinating than any advertising fiction or marketing story. And that’s also what we’re trying to prove with VEJA: describing reality is always more interesting than trying to make up stories about your own product.¹⁴

The urge to describe thus becomes the key to interpreting the new real: refined, essential, augmented but not falsified. As the Business of Fashion (BoF) also states, the imperative of “sorting fact from fiction” is leading to a growing number of companies and initiatives that work to provide full disclosure not only to consumers but also to industry players themselves. And although there is already a lot of talk of blockchains¹⁵ and smart-tagging, here too there is no precise international standard to respect.¹⁶ While blockchain adoption may have some potential benefits — such as improved risk reduction, operational processes, value creation, and retail experience —, use of these technologies is no mean feat for businesses. Since it is only a recent development, its economic, managerial and industrial aspects require study, and this makes companies hesitant to embrace it. Furthermore, discussion of such topics has usually been confined to corporate communications, as a means of safeguarding company assets. In the past, companies — in particular those operating in the fashion and lifestyle sectors — attributed a competitive advantage to supply-chain confidentiality, since guaranteeing the utmost confidentiality both in terms of suppliers and the origin of raw materials ensured the exclusivity and irreplaceability of the product. Today, however, some companies have little idea of how or where the materials used to make their clothes come from. Others collect data from their suppliers, but don’t always disclose it to the public, and when they do, it is rarely standardised so as to allow comparison with competitors. In many cases, exactly what to measure and how remains a point of discussion. Without getting in too deep, what must be underlined here is the extent to which the need for transparency operates on different planes and how this approach is shaping the fashion business at all levels (from infrastructure to

13. 65 NGOs submitted a strategy called Fair & Sustainable Textiles to the European Parliament, which sets out a legal framework to cover all aspects of sustainability in textiles. Cf. WFTO Europe, “Fair & Sustainable Textiles — European Civil Society Strategy,” *WFTO Europe* (blog), 23 April 2020, <https://wfto-europe.org/press-releases/fair-sustainable-textiles-european-civil-society-strategy/>.

14. See <https://project.veja-store.com/en/single/deconstructing>.

15. Born as a means of organising digital information, blockchain technology brings transparency, traceability, adaptability, scalability and flexibility to a system. It not only makes it possible to document each step of the production process, but also to protect the intellectual property of brands/designers. “Tracciabilità 4.0 nel sistema moda fra blockchain ed etichettatura smart,” *Rén collective* (blog), 20 February 2019, <https://recollective.org/blockchain-ed-etichettatura-smart/>; Marco Filocamo, “Blockchain Technology for Fashion: A Future Revolution?” *Fashion Technology Accelerator* (blog), accessed 7 March 2021, <https://www.ftaccelerator.it/blog/blockchain-technology-future-fashion/>.

16. There is a potential application in implementing a blockchain-based traceability system for textile and clothing supply chains. The necessity and concept of a traceability system could also provide some advantages for communications and marketing. See Tarun Kumar Agrawal, Ajay Sharma, and Vijay Kumar, “Blockchain-Based Secured Traceability System for Textile and Clothing Supply Chain,” in *Artificial Intelligence for Fashion Industry in the Big Data Era*, ed. Sébastien Thomassey and Xianyi Zeng, Springer Series in Fashion Business (Singapore: Springer, 2018), 197–208, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-0080-6_10.

communications) to bring it closer and closer to the circular economy.¹⁷ One of the key concerns of DTC brands and companies that are forging their own paths to sustainability is to make transparency the cornerstone of their narratives, edging the conversation away from emotional response and towards awareness. While the majority of high-profile brands (luxury, premium) still cling to a more aspirational means of self-representation tied to the classic aesthetic and communicative canons, the brands examined here, having totally cut out the middleman, have bet on another type of narrative. As they embrace this techno-poetic naturalism,¹⁸ their websites and social media are fit to burst with infographics and videos that list and explain all the latest achievements in the field of textile engineering: from infographics on the new avenues opened up by plant-based down jackets (Pangaia, with their patented FLWRDWN) to videos presenting fabrics with images of the places where the raw materials are grown (Veja, Rifò). This all forms part of a narrative that speaks of quality and of valorisation of resources, of entrepreneurship and rich, interconnected local design and manufacturing, of technology, experimentation, and the flexibility of small supply chains, all radically redefining the way in which a particular section of the fashion industry talks about itself. In expressing this alternative mindset, they push the boundaries of their creativity by combining it with ethical credibility. They have in mind a certain profile of the contemporary consumer, who seeks a product not so much to satisfy a specific need but rather to represent a lifestyle.



Figure 1. Sébastien and Ghislain, Amazon, 2016, © Studio VEJA
<https://project.veja-store.com/en/single/deconstructing>

Brand activism and artisanship: description and deconstruction

Thanks to the digital, we live in an era of access which only serves to radicalise our innate desire to see things from a different perspective.¹⁹ The expanded narrative which transforms emotive communications into something more oriented towards authenticity, reputation and ethics is rendering brand

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17. To understand the system architecture of blockchain-enabled circular supply chain management in the fast fashion industry, cf. Bill Wang et al., "Blockchain-Enabled Circular Supply Chain Management: A System Architecture for Fast Fashion," *Computers in Industry* 123 (1 December 2020): 103324, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compind.2020.103324>.
18. In the world of outdoor technical clothing, Patagonia can be hailed as the founder of this trend. However, we must also bear in mind the unique nature and non-replicability of it as a case study. Patagonia was born of such a special corporate philosophy that its actions, for a long time, attracted no followers. Cf. Yvon Chouinard and Naomi Klein, *Let My People Go Surfing: The Education of a Reluctant Businessman* (New York: Penguin Group USA, 2016)
19. Deconstructionist practice has always formed part of our culture, especially in relation to consumption.

strategy ever more a manifesto of commitment, driven also by the pressure from society to take sides, to embrace sustainability, and, above all, to wear it on your sleeve. The integration and interdependence of these key factors lies at the heart of the rediscovery of the “artisanal” model, regardless of the size of a company.²⁰ In pursuit of this new equilibrium and in complete control of their distribution and communications chains, DTC brands radically rethink their narratives²¹ and the presentation of the product also often features the making of the product itself. Consider, for example, the case of Rifò, the Tuscan brand that takes its name from the local inflection of the verb *rifare* (“remake”) and so nods towards the dialect of the artisans — the so-called *cenciatori* (“ragmen”) — who invented a method of reusing old garments to produce new yarn more than a century ago.

The same goes for companies. Within a digital culture that thrives on propagation, it was only a matter of time before they, too, began to pick up on these new expressive practices. B2B and B2C, which for a long time operated according to very different communications systems, are now often closely aligned. Where previously corporate narratives spoke not to the public but to stakeholders, the H2H philosophy has brought about enormous change. The historic Italian company Reda²² takes us on a guided tour of their ranches around the world, as we learn the names of the farms and their locations. Desserto,²³ a Mexican company that produces vegan leather from cactus plants, explains the transformation process to the tiniest detail, as do Piñatex,²⁴ which creates leather from pineapples, and Orange Fiber,²⁵ which creates a silky fabric from orange peel.

In this way, the concept of artisanship, understood as an approach to work, fuses with the much more recent concept of brand activism²⁶ to enact a transformation that steers us from “made in” culture to “who made and how”. If the former concept is useful for understanding the push towards deconstruction — that is, the production-line narrative in which each part is constructed separately allowing for experimentation, and the fundamental principle of the brand is based on combination —, the latter is based on a system of description in which surplus information is of cognitive benefit to the consumer and directs them towards the “purpose”. Of course, not all brands can afford themselves this internal dilation, this exploratory model in which digression into documentary description reveals new things and conveys knowledge.

Hi-tech naturalism

‘The Truth About Fashion’ is a collaborative and educational project created to help student voices understand fashion and media beyond the most simplified stereotypes. The fashion school’s main goal was to investigate the truth about fashion by delving into how

20. The concepts of artisanal spirit, skill and manner of self-expression should bear no relation to size. In Italy, on the other hand, as Micelli argues (45), supporters of artisans tend to be defenders of small businesses, and this focus on size has caused us to overlook the qualitative aspect of craftsmanship, or rather the way it functions within businesses. Stefano Micelli, *Futuro artigiano: L'innovazione nelle mani degli italiani* (Venice: Marsilio, 2011)

21. The fast fashion business model has had a transversal impact on all other models in the industry. The overproduction of high street brands has undoubtedly weakened the entire system for years, forcing many brands to change their idea of market position completely. “Resistance” to fast fashion and its frenzied and polluting model can be found here. See Dana Thomas, *Fashionopolis: The Price of Fast Fashion and the Future of Clothes* (London: Apollo, 2019); Elizabeth L. Cline, *The Conscious Closet: The Revolutionary Guide to Looking Good While Doing Good* (New York: Plume, 2019); Elizabeth L. Cline, *Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion*, (New York, NY: Portfolio, 2013); Marina Spadafora and Luisa Ciuni, *La rivoluzione comincia dal tu* (Milan: Solferino, 2020); Kate Fletcher, Alessandro Castiglioni, and Gianni Romano, *Moda, design e sostenibilità* (Milan: Postmedia Books, 2018); Kate Fletcher, *Moda, design e sostenibilità* (Postmedia Books, 2020).

22. See <https://www.reda1865.com/it/>.

23. See <https://desserto.com.mx/>.

24. See <https://www.ananas-anam.com/>.

25. See <http://orangefiber.it/>.

26. Philip Kotler, Christian Sarkar, and Paolo Iabichino, *Brand activism. Dal purpose all'azione*, trans. Sabina Addamiano (Milan: Hoepli, 2020)

the younger generation thinks. The study found that a large majority of young people think authenticity is the most important aspect of the fashion industry. It also found that while this audience admires big brands for their values and long-standing heritage, they're beginning to sway towards newer brands that represent sustainability and education.²⁷

One of the brands mentioned in the report is Pangaia, the standard bearer for hi-tech naturalism, ethical and minimalist with a tagline that self-defines as: "A materials science company on a mission to save our environment". Founded by a collective of artists, designers and scientists who research bio-materials and produce athletic-minimalist collections with a very strong ethical, technological and sustainable edge, they aim to "create a global open-source platform for the latest eco-innovations and solutions connecting like-minded individuals and organisations who care about the environment."²⁸ Their bio-materials range from seaweed fibres and eucalyptus pulp²⁹ to a fabric infused with mint oil to allow it to stay fresh longer and save thousands of litres of water over the course of its life cycle (Fig.2). They are also involved in research into recycled and upcycled materials (one of their latest collections makes use of regenerated cashmere). A glance at their website and Instagram page reveals the key principles on which this hi-tech naturalism is based to be in-depth study and information. With communications increasingly intertwined with brand journalism, the mix of digital graphic design, information architecture, photography, infographics, and video lends the company a more knowledge-oriented form of storytelling.³⁰ All this renders Pangaia an "EarthPositive business that gives back more than it takes."³¹ Its motto — "Problem-solving science that you can wear" — could equally apply to the brand Veja, for whom the concept of compensation is a pillar of its communication strategy. We need look no further than the homepage to be greeted by the "Project" section, in which the brand's mission is laid out in full. The vertical-scroll narrative of images and text lends further weight to its motto: "Refusing to choose between design and social responsibility."³² The brandname itself incorporates these aesthetics of the transcendent, the "Transparency" page of their manifesto informing us that:

VEJA is Brazilian for 'look', looking beyond the sneakers, looking at how they're made. How are VEJA's made? How much are labourers paid? How much does an organic cotton producer earn? What are the chemicals used in a pair of VEJA?

A visitor can peruse at leisure their production map, their contracts with cotton producers, their commitment to Fair Trade, their certifications, and their detailing of their B-Corp credentials. Veja and the other DTCs thus become simultaneously "facts of fashion" and "facts of style". In the short mythologies of the eye and the spirit³³ that Jean Marie Floch identified in his analysis of Chanel,³⁴ he defined fashion and the fact of fashion as corresponding to that pole of identity linked to time, to the figurative dimension, to the flow of the trend. The fact of style, on the other hand, corresponds to the pole of

27. "Polimoda Gives a Voice to New Generations and the Future of Fashion," *HYPEBEAST*, 1 July 2020, <https://hypebeast.com/2020/7/polimoda-research-project-truth-about-fashion>.

28. Gabrielle Leung, "PANGAIA's Seaweed T-Shirts Receive Artistic Makeover by Haroshi," *HYPEBEAST*, 15 October 2019, <https://hypebeast.com/2019/10/pangaia-haroshi-capsule-collection-release-info>.

29. Jack Stanley, "PANGAIA Unveils New Sustainable C-FIBER Material," *HYPEBEAST*, 10 February 2021, <https://hypebeast.com/2021/2/pangaia-c-fiber-sweatshirt-dress-longsleeve-sustainable-details>.

30. Consistency is also revealed in their choice of testimonials. For its "Protect the Species" campaign, the brand found suitable voices in eco-activist and UN Environment Goodwill Ambassador Nadya Hutagalung and Canadian artist Raku Inoue. Gabrielle Leung, "PANGAIA Taps Eco-Activist Nadya Hutagalung for 'Protect the Species' Capsule Collection," *HYPEBEAST*, 24 October 2019, <https://hypebeast.com/2019/10/pangaia-nadya-hutagalung-raku-inoue-protect-the-species-collection-info>.

31. Rachel Besser, "New Fashion Items In Style You Can Shop Here," *Vogue*, 30 January 2021, <https://www.vogue.com/slideshow/new-fashion-arrivals-1-30>.

32. Take the section "The Blindness around CO₂ Emission", laid out as journalistic reportage and providing data and the opportunity to navigate between sources.

33. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies: The Complete Edition, in a New Translation*, trans. Richard Howard and Annette Lavers, Reprint (Hill & Wang Pub, 2013)

34. Jean-Marie Floch, *Visual Identities*, trans. Pierre Van Osselaer and Alec McHoul (London ; New York: Continuum Intl Pub Group, 2000)

ethics, to the “life project”. The aesthetics these brands create is based on figurative and plastic principles converted into precise narrative structures that establish a symbolic field based on the concept of life project of which Floch’s ethics speak; it is no coincidence that their style is minimalist, new normal, comfy, hardy, essentially basic, and pragmatic but not cold. There is also a thymic component to the aesthetics of transparency. It becomes a political philosophy that moves to address the great challenges of our times in a planned, project-based way. In a society ripe with information, the human project seeks to act ethically, to combine green policies (green, circular and sharing economies) and blue policies (information technology and digital economies), and to nurture a way of living together centred around the quality of our relations and processes, rather than on consumption and things.³⁵ It is also no coincidence that, by echoing one of Patagonia’s most famous advertising campaigns,³⁶ Veja dared to break one of the taboos of communications, evoking competition and anti-consumption with the claim: “For us, the most sustainable sneakers are the ones you are wearing. Even if they belong to another brand.” Within the refined communications sphere of “accountability”, others choose to focus their attentions on the oceans (Fig.3).³⁷ Take the case of Ecoalf, a brand founded in 2009 by Javier Goyeneche, a leading Spanish entrepreneur in the field of sustainability. To the rallying cry of “There is no Planet B”, the brand was born around the idea of recycling various materials, from fishing nets and coffee grounds to used tyres and post-consumer cotton and wool, all geared towards the safeguarding of the oceans. Photos and videos document their project “Upcycling the Oceans,”³⁸ in which marine litter is collected by the fishing boats that sail the Mediterranean daily.³⁹ All of their design thinking revolves around these commitments, including the design of their clothing, which adopts the same cosy and pragmatic features discussed earlier (Fig.4). As an example of their product presentation:

We’ve created 8 unique and essential pieces for your wardrobe without compromising the planet’s health. Therefore, each piece of the collection is named after a blend of human and natural elements: Ocean, Aura, Earth, Wind, Fire, Core, Lava and Spirit. Unique because of the natural dyes behind each piece. Made from 100% cellulosic materials of vegetal origin that promote the circular economy. A collection of essentials that are respectful with the planet to empower women in their everyday lives. Each piece is created with the utmost transparency and sustainable materials so you can have durable, genuine, traceable, and high-quality summer basics that are respectful to our planet.⁴⁰

Also in the case of Rifò (Fig.5), which throws the revival of an old tradition into the mix, innovation is essential. Their website and social media promote the recycling of wool fibres by Reverso, a supply chain of local companies that for years have been working to give new life to textile fibres⁴¹ and also involve members of the public in the collection of materials. The language has changed: there is no mention of dreams or aspirations, but rather the principle of responsibility generates a coherence of style, narrative, and the visual.

35. Luciano Floridi, *Il verde e il blu. Idee ingenue per migliorare la politica* (Milan: Raffaello Cortina, 2020)

36. With reference to the advertising campaign “Don’t Buy This Jacket”.

37. Elisa Pervinca Bellini, “Moda e Sostenibilità: l’intervista al founder di Ecoalf,” *Vogue Italia*, accessed 6 March 2021, <https://www.vogue.it/moda/article/moda-sostenibile-intervista-ecoalf-javier-goyeneche-agenda-sviluppo-sostenibile-podcast>.

38. https://ecoalf.com/en/p/upcycling-the-oceans-15?/_adin=0692095637.

39. Marine litter is collected in special containers and, after sorting, the PET recovered is transformed into polymer and then into yarn. “Ecoalf e Conad Nord Ovest lanciano Uto-Italia,” *La Repubblica*, 13 October 2020, https://www.repubblica.it/economia/rapporti/osserva-italia/conad/2020/10/13/news/ecoalf_e_conad_nord_ovest_lanciano_uto-italia-270472873/.

40. https://ecoalf.com/en/p/blanca-padilla-limited-edition-134?/_adin=0692095637.

41. This allows Rifò to give members of the public the opportunity to contribute to a circular economy project, recovering old clothes that would be thrown into general waste, so that they can be transformed into a new raw material in the form of yarn.

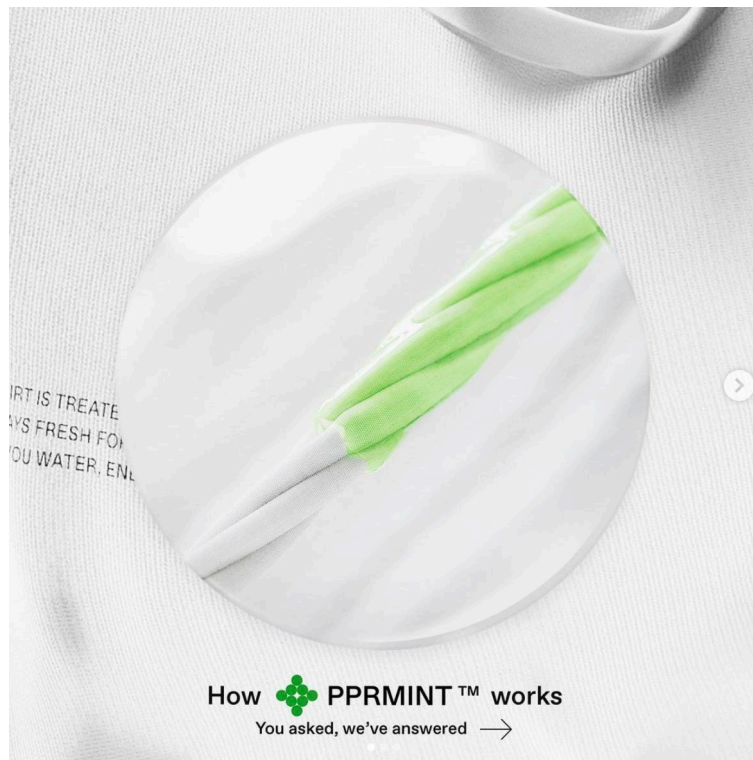


Figure 2. PPRMINT™ technology Pangaia's (@thepangaia) Profile on Instagram, 18 November
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CHvV3b8ARa3>



Figure 3. Ecoalf Foundation - Ecoalf official website
https://ecoalf.com/en/p/foundation-33?_adin=11551547647



Figure 4. Ecoalf by Blanca Padilla - Ecoalf official website
https://ecoalf.com/en/p/blanca-padilla-limited-edition-134?_adin=1133736124

The benefits of a local production



FUEL CONSUMPTION REDUCED

We are able to save on fuel consumption during production.



AVOIDING OF INTERMEDIARIES

By producing locally we manage to go directly to the source, avoiding intermediaries.



LOCAL ECONOMY

We want to support the local economy, promoting the creation of new job opportunities.



CUTTING PRICES

All these factors allow us to reduce the final price of our products.

Figure 5. o Miles Fashion <https://rifo-lab.com/en/pages/moda-a-km-o>

Another form of storytelling is possible

A fashion brand can be said to have four dimensions. First there is the “transcendent”, which pertains to the emotional, the spectacular, and the aspirational. Then there is the “external”, relating to society, culture, cinema, art, design, and music. Brands, especially luxury ones, have always tended to make use of the remaining dimensions — the “surrounding” and the “internal” — for the purposes of heritage storytelling only. Now that they are controlled by the DTC brands themselves, the surrounding and the internal have become, both in a narrative and visual sense, two new ways of shaping brand identity and value proposition. In the tension between the surrounding and the internal, we can observe the rise of a new regime of realism in which classic rhetoric gives way to a narrative technicism based on presentative aesthetics. Let us take the example of photography. As has been noted, advertising photography operates in both “presentative and representative” terms.⁴² Photography presents us with the object itself and represents it as a means to achieve a certain emotional state. Beyond the well-known mechanism of denotation/connotation common to all communicative languages, the essential factor involves recognising that this double possibility derives from the realistic, the basic function universally acknowledged in photography. For years, the connotative level seemed at first glance to emerge to counteract the excessive realism exhibited by photography at the denotative level. This contrast with denotative realism led fashion photography to set foot in the realm of the fantastic. It has never simply exploited the realistic, nor the purely representative. The visual and narrative representation of fashion has always sought application in the world of the imaginary. In recent years, this representation has often completely renounced the denotative sphere — that of the direct presentation of the item—to restrict itself to suggesting an aura, an atmosphere, a dream.⁴³ This often translated into a “distancing from” or a “hiding” of the garment itself. We are now witnessing a transformation: on the horizons of the social and the communicative, new trends in textuality and narration are emerging from a renewed denotative necessity. The aesthetics of transparency thus becomes a narrative/visual practice that seeks to bridge the gulf that, to create for its objects a sense of distance and inaccessibility, fashion has long nurtured. Yet even now the “curtain has been drawn back”, the air of mystery often lingers.

Chiaroscuro, use of black, softly-lit photography and low lighting, high/low angles and close-ups: the first version of the new narrative, which had less to do with an idea of transparency and more with an idea of unveiling, was aimed, once more, at suggesting an atmosphere, a mood, a dream. Think back to the first Louis Vuitton campaigns⁴⁴ to put artisans at centre stage,⁴⁵ the Dolce & Gabbana shop windows featuring seamstresses at their sewing and the countless other digital campaigns by luxury groups.⁴⁶ In these cases, however, the image of the artisan know-how behind the quality product certainly served to highlight a dimension once hidden, but wrapped it even tighter in the mystery of “storytelling”, where the emphasis on the expressive and the figurative took precedence over the content: connotation had also intruded on the field of industrial fashion photography. For luxury brands, the hidden dimension unveiled was a gift: the chance to peek behind the scenes. And though their mode of portraying transparency is evolving,⁴⁷ this distance between brand and consumer remains. Still closely tied to spectacu-

42. Claudio Marra, *Nelle ombre di un sogno. Storia e idee della fotografia di moda*. (Milan: Mondadori Bruno, 2010)

43. Cfr. Marra, 42.

44. “Meet the Artisans: LVMH Fires New Shot in Luxury Marketing War,” *The Business of Fashion*, 14 June 2013, <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/news-analysis/meet-the-artisans-lvmh-fires-new-shot-in-luxury-marketing-war>.

45. Jean-Noël Kapferer, “The Artification of Luxury: From Artisans to Artists,” *Business Horizons* 57 (1 May 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2013.12.007>.

46. An interesting example is “Cashmere: The Origin of a Secret”, the documentary shot for Loro Piana by Luc Jacquet, ecologist, director, and winner of an Oscar for “March of the Penguins”. As the title suggests, it favours the aesthetics of unveiling, the opportunity to embark on a journey to an inaccessible and enemy place. <https://cashmere.theoriginofasecret.loropiana.com/it/>.

47. For the presentation of Maison Margiela’s Autumn-Winter 2020 Artisanal collection, John Galliano enlisted the photographer Nick Knight to create a video that would reveal the genesis of the collection: from the discussion of the project to the sketches, to the staff meetings over Zoom. <https://www.showstudio.com/collections/autumn-winter-2020-haute-couture/maison-margiela>.

larisation,⁴⁸ the garment remains a narrative object and the brand a desire, the distance bridged through collaborations, leaps from one segment of the market to another, and brand stretching. Yet the prodigious growth of the language of social media, which takes a lot from the languages of photography, cinema, and television, has in some ways overturned the rules of classic fashion representation and brought it closer to the concept of presentation. On the very surface of the brand, on its digital channels, a saturated, stratified space is constructed providing information and ushering in a path towards authenticity that is different from that of historical luxury brands, one linked to the need to behold the invisible. There are two reasons for this: on the one hand, there is the need to keep consumers informed, and, on the other, there is the awareness that the major driving force of consumption comes from wider society. Contemporary brands align themselves with the spirit of the times through a perfect understanding that within these new folds of narrative representation nestle the consumer incentives of our times. In shifting from spectacle to presentation, it is no longer a question of mere aesthetic exploration: we leave more space for the real. With contemporary DTC brands, therefore, we are witnessing attempts to make exploration of the most symbolic imaginary dovetail with pragmatic necessity. They can no longer be built upon fictitious narratives but must act as the counterpart of certain typical corporate values which are then echoed in the running of the company. And so the imperative for valorisation of the invisible — of everything once out of sight and mind of the consumer — finds a powerful technical counterpart in turn in the narrative, in the assembly of communications, and in campaign creation.

Let us think back to the posts dedicated to the fruit peel transformed into trainers (Fig.6) (Pangaia), to the volumes of CO₂ saved (Rifò), to the tons of plastic recovered from the sea (Ecoalf), and to the trees of the Amazon (Veja). The communications of these brands speak to a shortened distance, such that the narrative of the production process becomes a genuine process of signification. The huge success of this new functional, conscious, ethical and sustainable storytelling lies also in this. There is no doubt that the chiaroscuro of the Renaissance workshop (still a staple of luxury campaigns) had this need for openness in mind; however, the new narrative, based by necessity on transparency, must have “augmented denotation” as its guiding aesthetic principle.

The visual appeal of the new aesthetics of transparency derives directly from its clear reference to photography “zero degree”, based on the pure power of realistic denotation, and the also clear limitations of the connotative. Yet it is precisely by focusing all their energies on the zero degree — by presenting themselves as immediate, head-on — that these images are able to display their link to transparency and, moreover, connote transparency and readability. This, too, is a code, one which triggers another type of desire: the dream of a life project where even the very things themselves respect this philosophy. This denotative redemption is the source of a reassuring sense of transparency and truth. Unburdened of the semantic complexity generated by the connotative, these stylistically sophisticated and deeply refined communications are also an exercise in the candour and naturalism required to create an optimal realm of the real and the imaginary, and not “simply” the fantastic.⁴⁹

48. Marketa Uhlirova, “The Fashion Film and the Photographic,” *Aperture* Fall, no. 216 (August 2014), <http://www.aperture.org/magazine/>. Marketa Uhlirova, “The Fashion-Film Effect,” in *Fashion Media: Past and Present*, ed. Djurdja Bartlett, Agnès Rocamora, and Shaun Cole (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), <http://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/fashion-media-9780857853073/>.

49. Claudio Marra, *Nelle ombre di un sogno. Storia e idee della fotografia di moda*. (Milano: Mondadori Bruno, 2010)

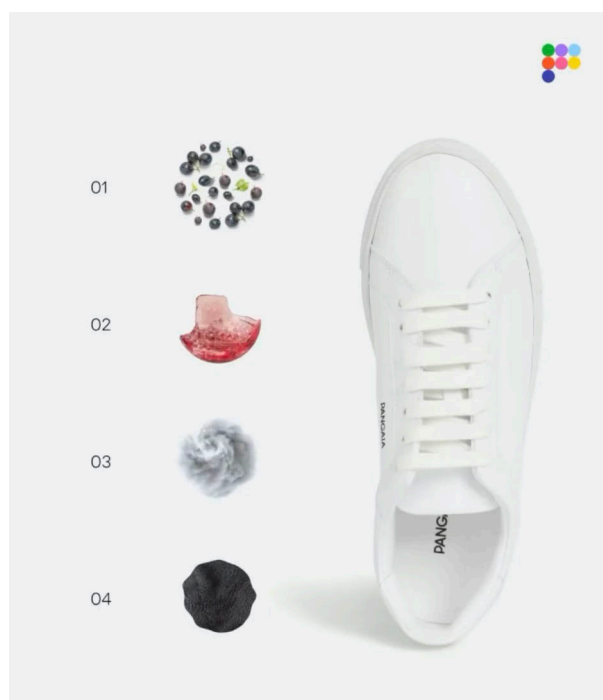


Figure 6. Grape Leather Sneakers Pangaia's (@thepangaia) Profile on Instagram, 10 March
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CMP14gsggbw>

Conclusion

In analysing these cases, we have seen how creativity is increasingly measured in terms of commitment, actions and impact, and how brands modulate their production strategies to allow them to respond simultaneously to the demands of the market and the calls for ethical business. Furthermore, a swerve towards the documentary style has reset the classic equilibrium of the narrative: the result is a modular product, the fruit of a combinatorial system born not of dreams but of responsibility and awareness. What we have defined as the pragmatic function of images works to reduce the atmospheric impact of the brand and shift the focus towards information, thus altering the thymic regime. This profound rewriting of fashion's communications archetypes establishes transparency as the bud from which all new visual metaphors bloom. Where once storytelling made sensibility its protagonist, now the object itself is given voice through its process. The choice to relate how things are made allows us to perceive in this transparency a form of defence to protect ourselves against the risks of globalisation and also from slipping up on our quest for ethical consumption.

One of the challenges of future analysis will therefore be that of turning the spotlight back on the things themselves and relating the strategy of construction of meaning ever more to these new forms of constructing authenticity.

As the semiologist Floch states,⁵⁰ every visual identity can be defined as a difference and a permanence. It is a difference in that it ensures company recognition and specificity, while its permanence lies in realising the persistence of the company's industrial, economic and social values. Permanence should not be considered as a simple repetition but as a becoming, with its own oriented logic. The concept of authenticity therefore becomes essential in the broader project of corporate design and brand identity.

50. Jean-Marie Floch, *Visual Identities*, trans. Pierre Van Osselaer and Alec McHoul (London; New York: Continuum Intl Pub Group, 2000)

The “knowing how a thing is made” places this narrative within the broader concept of deprogramming as a process of liberation, allowing individuals to regain possession of their material culture and to express projectuality. In this way, transparency of narrative aligns itself with the will of consumers who wish to downshift while maintaining the concept of high innovation. The sparkling transparency of some brands is now also a clear tool of internal competition. Promoting such a crystalline narrative renders yours unique value proposition (UVP) flawless and exposes the greenwashing of your competitors.

The notion of authenticity is therefore rediscovered as it was originally conceived, bringing together concern for the self and for others. In future analysis, we should seek to explore the narratives around authenticity as constructed on social media and consider them in relation to early philosophical concepts of “authenticity” as a core ethical principle of modernity.⁵¹ Authenticity is linked to ethics and the new ways in which brands are deciding to embrace activism.

To face the great difficulties ahead and to make sense of the radical changes triggered by the infosphere revolution, there is a need to equip ourselves with data stories,⁵² maps for communication,⁵³ visual journalism, and information architecture that understands how to map our “onlife” lives. As society looks increasingly towards inclusiveness, ethics, sustainability, and other factors that may arise in the years to come, the brand — in complete dialogue with the macro-text of society — will find a way to make them a cornerstone of its narrative and perhaps even stay ahead of the game. And we must do the same. In this essay, we have tried to establish coordinates for future analysis of the communicative style of those brands that embrace transparency and authenticity as a corporate philosophy. As part of a multidisciplinary approach, this could also enrich marketing studies and communication studies that now focus on purpose and activism, leading us to create more complex dynamics of representation better modelled on the contemporary mediascape and dynamics of brand management that are part of increasingly sophisticated and calculated global and multiple narrative strategies.

51. Georgia Gaden and Delia Dumitrica, “The”Real Deal“: Strategic Authenticity, Politics and Social Media,” *First Monday*, Volume 20, Number 1–5 January 2015, <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v20i1.4985>. For more information on the concept of authenticity, see: Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 1992; Marshall Berman, *The Politics of Authenticity: Radical Individualism and the Emergence of Modern Society*, 2009.

52. Stefanie Posavec and Giorgia Lupi, *Dear Data*, 1st ed. (London UK: Particular Books, 2016).

53. Alberto Cairo, *L'arte del vero. Dati, grafici e mappe per la comunicazione* (Pearson, 2016). Alberto Cairo, *L'arte funzionale. Infografica e visualizzazione delle informazioni* (Milan; Turin: Pearson, 2013). Luca Rosati, *Sense-making. Organizzare il mare dell'informazione e creare valore con le persone* 1st ed. (Roma: UXUniversity, 2019). Andy Kirk, *Data Visualisation: A Handbook for Data Driven Design*, Reprint ed. (S.I.: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2019)

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