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# Framing Sustainable Fashion Concepts on Social Media. An Analysis of #slowfashionaustralia Instagram Posts and Post-COVID Visions of the Future

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**Abstract:** The global fashion industry poses a significant threat to sustainability, occasioning the emergence of sustainable fashion concepts such as slow fashion. However, sustainability as a principle is mostly established in corporate communication and reporting and sustainable fashion is mostly debated from a marketing and consumer perspective. The study at hand fills the existing gap in research on how slow fashion is portrayed on social media, focusing particularly on slow fashion, Instagram, and an Australian context. An explorative content analysis was conducted following the hashtag #slowfashionaustralia; open-coding methods were employed to enable three thematic frames to emerge from the data; namely, slow fashion as Business 2.0: An eco-marketplace, as an authentic experience of self-expression, and as a community value. Further analysis of the identified themes yielded the framing process of slow fashion on Instagram, mainly representing empowerment for women. Methodological limitations are outlined, as well as new research potential in the area of sustainability communication.



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**Keywords:** slow fashion; framing; Instagram; social media; Australia; sustainability; communication; sustainable consumption practices; COVID-19

## 1. Introduction

The fashion industry's substantial environmental and social impacts, which threaten global sustainability, have been exposed in recent years. These impacts are exacerbated by the "fast fashion" model that currently dominates the industry and is characterized by reduced garment shelf-time production and consumption and reduced costs to encourage excessive consumption of disposable fashion [1]. Years after the sustainable fashion movement started, which was accompanied by an increase in awareness for related marketing and communication strategies [2,3], at the beginning of the new decade of the 21st century, a global pandemic revealed the continued unsustainability and fragility of the fashion market through the disruption of consumer practices and values [4], supply chains, and logistics [5]. COVID-19 challenged the market as well as individuals to reflect on their individual consumption practices and to develop a vision for these practices in the future—for either going back to normal or shifting towards more sustainable practices. Thus, next to threat, insecurity, and anger, the COVID-19 pandemic stimulated conversations towards a more "slow" and sustainable fashion future, not only from a marketing perspective but in a broader media environment and on a very individual level as well.

Slow fashion is an emergent concept of sustainable fashion, which can be understood as a change in worldview that introduces different economics, business models, values, and processes [6]. It is a holistic approach to sustainability in fashion with opportunities for enhancing sustainability at every stage of the product life cycle, including individual practices and behavior. There is an increase in empirical research and literature on sustainable consumption [7–10] and, more generally, on sustainability as a principle, social

norm, and therefore, a moral compass, which influences individual (pro-environmental or pro-social) behavior [11], and consumer behavior, in particular [12,13]. The awareness for “slow fashion” as a framework for certain practices has increased; however, it has to be stated that consumers still prefer to follow fast and cheap fashion trends [14–16]. Tangible evidence for sustainability and fashion-related communication processes or specific definitions, interpretations, or practices of “slow fashion” remains scarce [17–19].

In 2009, Kolandai-Matchett [20] stated that communication about sustainability is essential to encourage people to take responsibility for their environment and society. Indeed, sustainable fashion is a trending topic represented in the media—at least, on social media. Here, the communication presents lifestyles, looks, and therefore, a high level of consumption [21,22], and recently, how COVID-19 made us more sustainable [11]. Orminski et al. [23] studied sustainable fashion from an environmental communication perspective. In their study, the authors focused on social media, mainly Twitter, which provides a platform to communicate sustainable fashion concepts like slow fashion to a wide audience—without exclusively focusing on marketing and consumer engagement [2,24]. The authors offer a new understanding of perceptions of sustainable fashion based on the diffusion of innovation framework; they identified influencers as opinion leaders in the public (online) sustainable fashion debate. The study at hand goes beyond this analysis.

We firstly identified Instagram as the primary platform for following fashion conversations on social media [25]—with significant penetration in Australia [26]. Secondly, instead of focusing on the flow of information via social media influencers, who fuel users’ fashion addiction [21], we seek to understand the concept of slow fashion, in particular, and, mainly, its definition and interpretations. We do not assume that slow fashion is a trend; however, it is a concept and “frame” used in communication that is directly related to sustainable fashion as a trending issue, as explained above. Thus, in the study at hand, we dug deeper to understand the interpretations, framing, and therefore, arguments that are communicated to explain and justify the idea of sustainable fashion and advocate specifically for slow fashion. We bring in framing theory and related storytelling concepts of sustainability communication [11,27,28] to understand which moral values are used to problematize and validate the practices of slow fashion and which specific practices are offered as remedies for issues related to fashion after experiencing COVID-19 and lockdown times.

Initially, a review of the literature is presented for the contextualization of this study. The significant concepts and theoretical frameworks are defined, including slow fashion and framing theory, and the research gap is discussed. The methodology is then outlined, which positions the study as qualitative research and explains the data criteria, content analysis, and open-coding that have been applied in this study. The results reveal three thematic frames and interpretations that were identified. Lastly, the limitations of this study and opportunities for future research are reviewed and discussed.

## 2. Theoretical Background

There is an increasing awareness of the negative impact that the fashion industry has on global sustainability [29,30]. Statistics reveal that the fashion industry produces 10% of global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions [31], consumes 79 trillion liters of water [32], pollutes approximately 20% of industrial water [31], releases 190,000 tons of microplastics into the ocean [33], and delivers roughly 92 million tons of textile waste to landfill annually [34]. These figures demonstrate the high environmental impact that results from production processes such as cotton farming and fabric dyeing that employ the intensive use of chemical products and natural resources [35]. The prolific use of polyester, a non-biodegradable and fossil-fuel-based fabric, reveals another environmentally damaging practice in the fashion industry due to the release of roughly 700,000 microplastic fibers in one polyester wash-load, significantly contributing to microplastic pollution [30]. Additionally, the fashion industry functions on the back of a complex and global supply chain and has been identified as among the top two products most at risk of having modern slavery present

along the supply chain [36]. Modern slavery refers to the severe exploitation of people for commercial or personal gain and may occur in the form of human trafficking, child slavery, forced labor, or forced marriage [37]. The fashion industry demonstrates cases of slavery by exploiting the poorest people on the planet, whose labor is cheap, to make clothing [38]. The Rana Plaza tragedy, in 2013, brought global attention and criticism to the fashion industry and its associated sustainability issues when an eight-story garment factory collapsed in Bangladesh, killing over 1000 workers [39]. The entirety of the fashion supply chain contributes to sustainability issues due to its inherent characteristics and practices [35]. Consequently, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe [31] declared the fashion industry as an environmental and social emergency.

The negative environmental and social impacts of the fashion industry have provided the imperative to address sustainability issues [27,40,41] and facilitated the emergence of sustainable fashion concepts [42]. Sustainable fashion concepts typically reflect fair working conditions, a sustainable business model, organic and environmentally friendly materials, traceability, and certifications employed within the fashion industry [24]. Emerging sustainable fashion concepts include the following: circular fashion, collaborative fashion consumption, cradle-to-cradle, eco/green fashion, ethical fashion, fair-trade fashion, local fashion, vegan fashion, minimalist wardrobe, and slow fashion [43].

The conceptual development of slow fashion is attributed to the Slow Food movement [44], which is recognized as one of the most significant “decelerated living” movements in the world [45] (p. 20). The Slow Food movement originated in Italy in 1989 and is a manifestation of the desire for, and the implementation of, slow living in the context of food—and it has had an apparent impact on other areas of consumption, such as fashion [44,46,47]. The way of life promoted by the Slow Food movement reflects the characteristics of slow living, which is defined as a practice that is founded on a commitment to living attentively and mindfully and allows individuals to differentiate themselves from the dominant culture of speed [46]. Thus, the concept of “slow” is introduced as an opposition, and solution, to “fast” culture and its associated damaging impacts, which has facilitated the conceptualization of slow fashion as the counteraction to the increasing demand for fast fashion [48].

In the early 21st Century, the fashion industry was revolutionized with the emergence of global fashion brands, such as H&M, Topshop, and Zara, providing consumers with trendy, short-cycle, and relatively inexpensive clothing [44,49]; this production and promotion of cheap and readily available “disposable” clothing is referred to as fast fashion [50]. The emergence of fast fashion was assisted by technological developments enabling “just in time” manufacturing and faster retail turnover, the exploitation of workers and resources, the globalization of markets and culture, and enhanced consumer impressionability from the connectivity offered by new media [44,50,51]. The global presence of fast fashion and the increasingly vast scale of its operations have enormous implications [44], and the accumulative impacts of the industry’s toxic dyes, greenhouse gas emissions, water use and contamination, soil depletion, pesticide use, and landfill waste contributions are proving to be increasingly unsustainable [51,52]. Hence, the fast fashion model has essentially propagated and exacerbated the environmental and social sustainability issues that are intrinsically linked to the contemporary fashion industry and its global supply chain. Slow fashion, thus, evolved as an opposition to fast fashion and is proposed to mitigate the environmental and social impacts of fast fashion by fundamentally changing the fashion industry; slow fashion presents itself as the sustainable future for the fashion industry [52].

Slow fashion is an emergent sustainable fashion concept that functions to address the sustainability issues exhibited by the contemporary fashion industry. It suggests a possibility of fashion that excludes many of the worst aspects of the current global system, in particular, the significant wastefulness and lack of concern for environmental issues [44]. Slow fashion is most frequently defined as a contrast to fast fashion, as is evident in a variety of fashion blogs; explicitly, slow fashion is defined as the exact “opposite of fast fashion” [53,54], or “the widespread reaction to fast fashion” [55], which presents fast

fashion as a conceptual foundation from which to understand slow fashion. However, slow fashion is not simply the antithesis of fast fashion [48]. Fletcher [56] conveys the notion that, in the context of slow culture, fast and slow are not in opposition but rather they are different worldviews, resulting in different economic logic, business models, values, and processes. This perspective is shared by Clark, who presents slow fashion as “something more than a literal opposite to fast fashion” [44] (p. 428) and applies characteristics of slow culture to identify three necessary features of slow fashion: the valuing of local resources and distributed economies, transparent production systems with closer producer and consumer relationships, and sustainable and sensorial products that are more valued and offer a longer usable life than existing consumables. Slow fashion, hence, presents a role in facilitating systemic change in fashion and the fashion industry to achieve holistic and sustainable outcomes. Following Fletcher [56], slow fashion is a manifestation of slow culture, which provides an opportunity to influence the entire fashion system and create intrinsic change in fashion.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges for the fashion industry, which highlighted the systemic issues within the industry and revealed the fragility of the entire system [4]. Jones [5] revealed that consumer spending on apparel declined more than 50% in major markets, including the U.S., the U.K., and Germany, since the start of the pandemic. The significant reduction in clothing demand prompted the cancellation of apparel orders from suppliers; Devnath [57] reported the cancellation of Bangladesh garment orders to the unpaid value of USD 1.5 billion by EU and US buyers, which impacted 1089 garment factories and 1.2 million workers in Bangladesh. This event instigated public awareness regarding workers’ rights and social sustainability issues in the fashion industry and triggered the development of the #PayUp campaign on social media, which functioned to shame fashion brands into paying their suppliers [58]. Furthermore, COVID-19 findings indicate shifts in consumer practices and values, resulting in an increase in people making their own clothing [58] and heightened consumer demand for sustainability, transparency, and products that are higher quality and durable [4]. These disruptions have generated significant negative impacts, resulting in an “existential crisis” for the fashion industry [59].

The Australian fashion industry was significantly impacted by COVID-19 and, subsequently, demonstrated a resurgence of a “slower” industry post-COVID-19. The Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources [60] announced that the pandemic “wreaked havoc on the Australian fashion industry” and acknowledged that disruption to business practices and supply chains had occurred. The degree of impact experienced by the industry was captured in a survey conducted by the Australian Fashion Council. It was found that 75–80% of Australian fashion companies agreed or strongly agreed regarding being negatively impacted by COVID-19, with a reduction in in-store and online sales of 87% and 56%, respectively [61]. Moreover, only 34% of companies reported that they were confident in their ability to rebound post-COVID [61]. Australian fashion brands reported experiencing supply chain disruptions, including delays from fabric suppliers, closures of off-shore production facilities, increased freight costs, and canceled orders, as well as impacts to retail, such as closing retail stores to comply with government lockdowns, excess unsold stock, and shifting consumer sentiments, which functioned as a catalyst for brands to reassess their business models [62]. Fashion brands with existing commitments to social purposes and sustainable manufacturing methods, such as made-to-order models, in-house manufacturing, and garment re-purposing, were least impacted by COVID-19 [63,64].

Social media also functioned as an important tool for continued retail and marketing activities. In particular, Instagram enabled fashion brands to sell, promote, and connect with their consumers following the emergence of COVID-19 [62]. Consequently, COVID-19 facilitated the development of “post-covid” strategies by Australian fashion brands, which included the amplification of digital sales and marketing, a renewed investment in the Australian supply chain, and embracing more sustainable practices, such as incorporating a circular economy and waste recycling principles [61]. COVID-19 has evidently triggered a new conversation about the necessity of a systemic change and solutions that counter

the fast fashion concept on which contemporary fashion is built. This study acknowledges COVID-19 as a key event that has triggered contemporary discussions of the slow fashion concept in Australia—mainly on social media, as it is particularly interactive and participatory [65]. The ever-increasing relevance of social media in current communicative dynamics indicates an essential change in the physics of information diffusion and public communication, with a specific significance of hashtags in conveying information relating to the conceptualization of slow fashion in Australia—here, mainly on visually strong channels such as Instagram [66–68]. As of 2021, there was an estimated 1.074 billion Instagram users globally, with users spending an average of 53 min per day on the application [69]. In Australia, there was a reported 9 million Instagram users in May 2019, which accounted for 35.8% of the population [26]. The highly visual nature of Instagram positions the application as useful for fashion [70]. Borboni argued that the increasing success of Instagram has made fashion “open to everyone and accessible from everywhere”, as it allows people to be in contact with the world of fashion photography [70] (p. 183). In this sense, Instagram has democratized fashion in the digital space, reducing the former exclusivity of high-fashion that existed among privileged groups [71]. Nash [25] reported that Instagram was the primary platform of choice for social media users who are interested in fashion due to the benefits of being able to view visual content. Eva Chen, the director of fashion partnerships at Instagram, confirmed the popularity of fashion content on Instagram, stating fashion represents the third most followed type of account on Instagram, with fashion followers opening Instagram an average of 32.5 times a day [72,73].

Thus, in this study, we investigated Instagram playing a significant role in sustainable fashion consumption [74] and promoting sustainable and innovative practices of fashion businesses, such as recycling and reusing, creating active groups of individuals interested in sustainability and stimulating autonomized subjectivity by promoting alternative consumption practices [75]. In addition, strategically framed mediated messages about sustainable consumption were found to enhance perceptions regarding sustainable consumption and functioned as a step towards facilitating relative social change [20]. These findings indicate that the consumption of mediated, visual content portraying strategically framed messages regarding sustainability has the potential to impact consumer perspectives and may facilitate social change. There is, however, a lack of focus on the specific impacts of Instagram content and communication [23], despite Instagram being acknowledged as the primary social media platform for following fashion content [25,72,73,76], and there is insufficient empirical research on social media, fashion, and lifestyle as a cultural complex and the interpretations of sustainable and slow fashion. Therefore, we introduced framing theory, conceptualizing individuals’ “organization of experience” [77] (p.11). Frames establish and organize the foundation for the understanding of certain phenomena—such as sustainability and slow fashion practices. Framing provides a more detailed focus on a specific issue and facilitates the understanding of how meaning is constructed to reflect a phenomenon. The process of framing involves selection and salience; it is the practice of selecting an aspect of a perceived reality and making it more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to an audience via a form of communication [78], and can be used to produce four dimensions of communication—define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and offer remedies. While frames offer themselves as static, interpretative packages, framing serves as an active and strategic process that reveals “how a communicated text exerts its power” [78] (p. 56). Framing theory has provided significant findings for sustainability in numerous studies and has contributed to the body of empirical knowledge relating to sustainability communication [79], CSR communication [80,81], climate change [82], and collaborative economy communications [83]. Furthermore, Kolandai-Matchett [20] confirmed that the strategic framing of mediated messages regarding sustainable consumption enhances public awareness and perceptions about the issue and functions as a step towards facilitating social change. Despite this knowledge, research on framing in sustainability communications and the resulting empirical knowledge is limited. Atanasova [84] examined the framing process for sustainable consumption in news articles with a focus

on fashion and concluded that sustainable fashion products were presented as better for the environment and workers. The articles analyzed conveyed the idea that consumers can help the fashion industry become a positive impact by buying sustainable fashion products [84].

The study at hand builds on the existing knowledge by expanding the application of framing on sustainability communication in terms of tracing back arguments and interpretations around sustainability and, more specifically, slow fashion; thus, it fills identified research gaps at the intersection of sustainability consumer and communication studies.

### 3. Methodological Framework

The focus of the research was on the representation and constructed meaning of a cultural phenomenon (slow fashion) located on Instagram. The focus, therefore, aligns with a qualitative content analysis method, which has been identified as the most appropriate for research that seeks to understand or capture constructed meanings, subjectivities, and/or cultural phenomena and their processes [85–87]. Creswell [88] further indicated the suitability of qualitative research methods for the purposes of understanding social phenomena in natural settings. This was demonstrated by this study, in which we performed a content analysis of data collected from the site where the issue under question naturally exists, specifically, Instagram.

**Data collection:** Data were collected from Instagram, specifically, content that was published by users on Instagram that relates to the slow fashion concept. Data were identified as relevant by the inclusion of #slowfashionaustralia in the post. The data search was limited to a date range of 1 December 2020 to 31 December 2020, which was determined as a significant post-COVID period of heightened consumerism as a “traditionally busy Christmas period” [89] and enabled an examination of representations of slow fashion during a post-COVID period. The included criteria for data in this study were Instagram posts that (1) included the hashtag (#slowfashionaustralia) in the description or comments sections, (2) was public, (3) contained text that was exclusively written in English, and (4) was posted between 1 December 2020 and 31 December 2020. The collected data was harvested using the data scraping tool Instaloader, according to the established criteria, and provided 247 Instagram posts. The dataset was comprised of 643 text, image, and video data pieces, of which there were 247, 384, and 12 data pieces, respectively. The 12 video data pieces were omitted, as the data analysis software Nvivo 12 Plus does not support the mp4 file type. As a result, 631 data pieces, comprised of image and text data, were included for analysis.

**Data analysis:** The data was analyzed using coding methods. Open-coding was used to ascribe labels to component parts of the visual and textual data that were identified as salient or presented potential theoretical significance [90]. The coding process was performed on Nvivo 12 Plus, qualitative data analysis software, to enhance the organization of the coding of the data. Visual and textual data that comprised a single post on Instagram were coded with recognition of their communicative value as a single unit. The ascribed labels were aggregated into categories (see Table 1), which were then developed into abstract themes that respond to the research question. Here, the indicators for coding were the dimensions of sustainability (economic, social, and environmental), as well as principles of slow fashion derived from the literature.

**Table 1.** Thematic frames detected from codes-to-themes (# of coded references in data).

Codes	Categories	Themes
<b>Imperfect world (17)</b> <b>Uncertainty (7)</b> <b>Synthetic fabric toxicity (6)</b> <b>Excessive consumption (3)</b> <b>Carbon emissions (3)</b>	Species extinction (3) Inequality (2) Throw away (1) Waste (1) Anthropocene (1) Cheap (1) Seasons (1)	Mainstream businesses are wasteful and unethical (46)
<b>Brand (121)</b> <b>Ethical (43)</b> <b>Sustainable (40)</b> <b>Waste minimization (21)</b> <b>Long-lasting (20)</b> <b>Superior quality (18)</b> <b>Antithesis of fast fashion (16)</b> <b>Seasonless (16)</b> <b>Made to order (15)</b> <b>Slow speed (14)</b> <b>Small batch (13)</b> <b>Reduced emissions (7)</b>	Vegan (6) Renewable energy (5) Living wage (4) Zero plastic (2) Safe working conditions (2) Water reduction (2) Minimal (2) Traceable (1) Health insurance (1) Transparency (1) Pollution reduction (1)	^Slow fashion businesses are the opposite (371)
<b>Business (16)</b> <b>Media exposure (13)</b> <b>Discount (13)</b> <b>Digital fashion (2)</b> <b>Home office (2)</b>	Work (1) Global market (1) Expensive (1) Recruitment (1)	Slow fashion is business and marketing (50)  Business 2.0: An eco-marketplace (1752)
<b>Positive impact (33)</b> <b>Progress (33)</b> <b>The future (31)</b> <b>Persistence (13)</b> <b>Change (12)</b> <b>COVID (10)</b>	Staying home (2) Urgency (1) Crises (1) Social distancing (1)	Change for a better future (137)
<b>Shopping (142)</b> <b>Newness (92)</b> <b>Seasons (31)</b> <b>Excess (9)</b>	Free prize (9) Fast speed (8) Afterpay (1)	Slow fashion consumption is a sustainable practice: Consume more. (292)
<b>Accessories (169)</b> <b>Top (99)</b> <b>Dress (90)</b> <b>Underwear (42)</b> <b>Skirt (33)</b>	Pants (18) Shoes (17) Uniforms (10) Jumpsuit (9) Loungewear (8)	Forms of slow fashion—a broad variety (495)
<b>Natural fabric (90)</b> <b>Outdoor setting (70)</b> <b>Flowers (65)</b> <b>Environmentally sustainable (51)</b> <b>Plants (50)</b> <b>Organic (11)</b>	Water (7) Animal (6) Healthier (4) Beach (3) Digital detox (3) Sea shells (1)	Aligns with nature—is natural (361)

Table 1. Cont.

	Codes	Categories	Themes
Happy (75) Comfort (61) Positive experience (45) Ease (36) Relationship to clothes (33) Emotional (26)	Hopeful (16) Special event (11) Calm (11) Peaceful (7) Luxury (7) Leisure (5) Home (2) Candles (2)	A human experience—sensorial and emotional (337)	
Conscientiousness (40) Personal values (35) Appreciation (33) Inspired (21) Passionate (20)	Simplicity (13) Minimize consumption (5) Reflection (5) Inclusivity (2) Open-minded (2)	A more considered form of fashion (176)	An authentic experience of self-expression (1116)/(7)
Choice (43) Individual (42) Self-care (22) Wishful (18)	Body image (9) Selfie (6) Identity (1)	All about the wearer (141)	
Female (203) Children (20) Elegant (17)	Motherhood (12) Outlier: Male (7)	For women and femininity (252)/(7)	
Attractive (121) Colorful (71) Sexy (8)	Styling tips (6) Photoshoot (4)	Aesthetics/vanity (210)	
Handmade (68) Australian (60) Construction detail (49) Collaboration (35) Community (30) Creation (29) Creative (29)	Locally produced (28) Knitting (27) The creator (27) Collective (5) Family (3) Sewing (2) Hobby (1) DIY (1)	A process of creation in your community (394)	Sustainable value in the community (612)
Second hand (29) Vintage (8)	Recycled (8)	Circular consumption (45)	
Christmas (56) Gifting (31) Tradition (6)	Food (5) Wine (1)	A cultural form and practice (99)	
Daily lives (19) Multipurpose (17) Wardrobe staples (14)	Functional (12) Street (11) Unisex (1)	Utilitarian (74)	

The researcher performed a central role in the research process and functioned as an interpretative instrument in the coding process. Interpretations of the data are impacted by the researcher's biases, values, and personal background. The application of the constant comparative method, however, functioned to enhance the validity of the findings by ensuring theoretical results were expressed in a variety of data that was collected from different Instagram users and published on different days within the sampling period.

#### 4. Findings

The analysis identified three thematic frames—Business 2.0: An eco-marketplace, an authentic experience of self-expression, and sustainable value in the community (see Table 1 for an overview). The codes-to-themes approach [91] was applied to identify the thematic frames. The open-coding process resulted in the emergence of 154 codes from the 3,487 references in the dataset. The following were the dominant codes: female

(203), accessories (169), shopping (142), brand (121), and attractive (121). The codes were organized into the following categories, which suggest the meaning of the aggregated codes: forms of slow fashion—a broad variety (495); a process of creation in your community (394); slow fashion businesses are the opposite of fast fashion (371); a human experience—sensorial and emotional (337); for women and femininity (252). The development of the categories allowed themes to emerge. Business 2.0: An eco-marketplace was identified as the prevailing theme within the dataset.

In Section 4.1, the interpretations of slow fashion, the degree of problematization, and the morality that comes in with sustainability are further explored, with a specific focus on the three main interpretations and related narratives that we found in the online communication referring to slow fashion in Australia.

#### 4.1. Business 2.0: The Emergence of an Eco-Marketplace

The new generation of businesses that espouse social and environmental sustainability are portrayed as positive practices of fashion production and consumption, while mainstream businesses (those understood as fast fashion) are presented as the problem. The posts that contributed to this frame communicated a moral evaluation of mainstream businesses. Fast fashion businesses were presented as damaging to the environment, with references made to their products being “cheap and on trend” (Insta#54, 29 December) and their practices resulting in high carbon emissions. One post posed the question, “Did you know fast fashion produces more carbon emissions than international flights and shipping combined?” (Insta#11, Dec3). Another post made the statement, “Then I found out what cheap and on trend meant to the environment and our planet . . . ” (Insta#54, Dec29). In contrast, slow fashion businesses were presented as “minimis[ing] the environmental impact of the fashion industry” (Insta#3, Dec27), creating “versatile pieces that go the distance” (Insta#59, Dec19). Textual data presented an emphasis on slow fashion as a movement that “discourage[s] a throw away attitude toward fashion” (Insta#23, Dec15) and “as the alternative to the seasonal binging of fast fashion” (Insta#33, Dec1). One post exemplified:

*I wanted everything to be unique, special and not mass-made. I wanted the designs to be luxurious, versatile and inclusive of different sizes, body shapes and style preferences. I wanted everything to be sustainable, zero waste, zero plastic and created from only the highest quality traceable, certified fabrics, materials and dyes (Insta#8, Dec6).*

Slow fashion emphasized their practices and products as “clean” (Insta#53, Dec9; Insta#13, Dec29) and “natural” (Insta#5, Dec10). This trait conveys the environmentally sustainable characteristic of slow fashion. For example, one post stated “slower and cleaner production using less resources, lower carbon footprints, and the use of natural fibers will all contribute to a more sustainable earth” (Insta#20, Dec17). Another post similarly expressed “our ‘clean’ clothes are carbon neutral and toxin free” (Insta#31, Dec31).

Moral evaluation is invited through the problematization [78,79] through the contrasting representation of both fast fashion and slow fashion. Consumers are invited to perform the evaluation and make a consumer decision. Textual data within the posts revealed slow fashion as a process towards an improved future (remedy promotion). Posts expressed a desire to “create systemic change within our industry” (Insta#12, Dec9) and to “continue to improve and develop collections that are better suited to you and the environment” (Insta#32, Dec14). Slow fashion was presented as a “symbol of growth” (Insta#40, Dec12) and a “movement” (Insta#57, Dec22) that will continuously “evolve” (Insta#19, Dec3)—a new and changing fashion business model that is in a constant state of evolution towards a state of sustainability.

Slow fashion businesses were portrayed as better for the environment than mainstream fashion due to slow fashion practices being less wasteful as well as being altogether more “clean” and “natural” and providing consumers with “sustainable” fashion shopping options. The data explicitly communicated a practice of consumption by including “for sale” and “link to item” (Insta#38, Dec2; Insta#20, Dec12; Insta#59, Dec19) in the textual component of the post. Statements that conveyed the promotion of consumerism in slow

fashion included “Click the link in our bio to get yours, I can’t wait for you to try them!” (Insta#39, Dec2) and “To purchase, be the first person to comment SOLD then DM within 1 hour for bank details and make payment” (Insta#50, Dec15). Further posts conveyed locations at which consumers can shop for slow fashion products, such as “available now on Etsy and Ravelry” (Insta#42, Dec3) and “have you had a chance to check out our website today?” (Insta#45, Dec1). The coding results indicated that there were 142 references to “shopping” in the data, the third most applied code, which reveals the prevailing message that slow fashion is a practice of consumption that is better for the environment. The message was provided that consumers of slow fashion are a key component to a sustainable form of fashion business, which, in this case, is slow fashion. The framing process of slow fashion, categorized by the identified themes, is depicted in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Framing process.

	<b>Business 2.0: An Eco-Marketplace</b>	<b>An Authentic Experience of Self-Expression</b>	<b>Sustainable Value in the Community</b>
<b>Problem Definition</b>	- Mainstream businesses are environmentally unsustainable due to high waste and emission contributions	- None identified	- Waste, such as fashion and plastic waste, is detrimental to our environment and economy
<b>Causes</b>	- None identified	- None identified	- None identified
<b>Moral Evaluations</b>	- Mainstream businesses are wasteful and unsustainable - Slow fashion businesses are the exact opposite	- Consumers should practice and wear the fashion that reflects their personal values	- Repurposing waste products is more sustainable - Local fashion production is beneficial for our community and local economy
<b>Solutions</b>	- The slow fashion marketplace - Consumer demand for slow fashion products	- Slow fashion enables consumers to practice their values and express their individuality	- Locally-made fashion - Recycled and shared fashion

#### 4.2. Slow Fashion Is an Authentic Experience of Self-Expression

As summarized in Table 2, slow fashion is also narrated as an experience and a form of expression of the self. In the data, we detected the promotion of the idea that a significant amount of conscious thought is involved in the decision to purchase and wear slow fashion, and consequently, it is a reflection of the wearers’ personal values, individuality, and femininity. Posts within this frame convey the concept of individual choice that exists with the producer of slow fashion—“I choose the fabric and the style” (Insta#24, Dec1)—and with the consumer—“each item ordered is made by hand to your size and special requirements” (Insta#33, Dec1). Moreover, there is an emphasis on orders being “custom made” (Insta#11, Dec28), which indicates an individuality that exists with each piece of slow fashion.

Textual and visual content conveyed a significant relationship between fashion and an alignment with personal values. Posts communicated a need for fashion to “fit your values” (Insta#31, Dec1) and for the construction and consumption of slow fashion to reflect personal beliefs. For example, posts spoke of their values of “togetherness, simplicity, and a conscientious approach to waste and consumption” (Insta#41, Dec3), “ethical sourcing & production” (Insta#36, Dec12), and expressed “our future should involve a shift towards clean energy sources ~ our studio is powered by Solar and Battery” (Insta#53, Dec9). The values that are communicated are presented as a foundation of slow fashion as something that “was & still is a non-negotiable aspect” (Insta#23, Dec15), and practitioners of slow fashion state that they will “not compromise my values, no matter what” (Insta#8, Dec6). Another post exemplifies this by the inclusion of the hashtag “#wearyourvalues” (Insta#18, Dec18). The data conveys the conscientiousness that exists at the core of slow fashion

through a demonstration of personal values. Posts within this frame brought concepts of women and femininity to the spotlight. The data produced 203 references to the code “female”, which was the most frequently occurring code in the data. The message promoted is that slow fashion is an experience for women across the entirety of the fashion supply chain. Posts communicated that slow fashion is produced by women; for example, it is “ethically produced by a small community of women in Bali, Indonesia” (Insta#19, Dec11), and functions to support women, including “vulnerable, marginalized women in an empowering way” (Insta#8, Dec6). Slow fashion options are then promoted as being for women. In one post, consumers are told they are able to “choose something that’s just right for her” (Insta#28, Dec8), demonstrating that women are the targeted consumers for slow fashion. Furthermore, consumers and wearers of slow fashion are described as “feminine” (Insta#58, Dec22; Insta#58, Dec30; Insta#6, Dec3) and their expression is described as one of “femininity” (Insta#19, Dec3; Insta#48, Dec10). In contrast, the data produced only seven references to the code “male”, which are considered outliers in the results. The data demonstrate that slow fashion is almost exclusively for women, which could be explored in future research, and is further elaborated on in the discussion.

#### 4.3. *Slow Fashion Fosters Sustainable Value in the Community*

In this theme, community is depicted as a vital component of sustainable fashion through the facilitation of creativity, circularity, and cultural practices. Slow fashion is portrayed as a process of creation by individuals within a community who designed and/or constructed fashion and communicated the experience on Instagram. Textual content emphasized that fashion is “handmade” (Insta#5, Dec4; Insta#35, Dec4; Insta#13, Dec7) and is being made locally within the community. One post highlighted that the fashion was “handmade by me in Sydney” and “hand dyed locally in my bathtub” (Insta#44, Dec8). Visual content contributed to this frame by depicting the experience of fashion construction. This is demonstrated in the posts, which communicate the process of knitting, shoemaking, and sewing to create fashion within the community.

The concept of circularity is also represented within the data, conveying the message that second-hand, recycled, and vintage fashion retains value within the community. Instagram was used as a platform to promote the re-selling of second-hand clothes in the community. Often, posts functioned as an advertisement to sell fashion, specifying that it is “preloved—good condition” (Insta#59, Dec14; Insta#50, Dec15), as well as to promote practicing fashion that is “passed on to others” (Insta#46, Dec1). One post revealed a practice of buying “second hand as much as I can” (Insta#54, Dec29) and another spoke of “gifting Designer thrift finds” (Insta#26, Dec6). Furthermore, an appreciation for “vintage” (Insta#54, Dec3; Insta#41, Dec15; Insta#46, Dec28) fashion emerged from the data to communicate a practice of retaining and wearing fashion pieces from previous fashion seasons and years, promoting the idea that fashion that is old can hold value.

The concept of retaining value within the community was exacerbated by the focus on recycled materials for the purpose of fashion. Posts stated that fashion was constructed from “recycled nylon mesh and laces leftover from larger productions” (Insta#7, Dec9) and that a practice of “recycling or repurposing costume elements wherever possible” (Insta#37, Dec12) is implemented. One post revealed, “our last range of jackets were made almost entirely from recycled products which includes our insulation which is made using 100% recycled PET plastic bottles” (Insta#49, Dec30). The message conveyed within this frame presents a focus on the value that can be created and retained within a community, as the practices of fashion creation, second-hand consumption, and recycling are dependent on the existence and participation of a community where the principle of sustainability as a moral compass and a guiding normative framework becomes obvious.

## 5. Discussion and Outlook

The aim of this study was to explore how slow fashion is represented on Instagram, with a focus on the interpretations and narratives around slow fashion, related social

practices, and sustainability as a moral compass. Generally, slow fashion is associated with environmental and resource awareness; however, as a multifaceted concept, slow fashion often reflects a quasi-antithesis to the market-driven consumerism on which fast fashion is facilitated. The analysis of Instagram posts in Australia during a global pandemic shows five main interpretations, which will help future sustainability communication research to understand, re-define, and re-narrate sustainability:

- A positive representation: slow fashion as an environmentally sustainable practice

Slow fashion is largely communicated to be “good” fashion for environmental sustainability and is characterized by a heightened awareness of resource and time consumption in fashion production, as well as normative principles such as equity, quality, social justice, and a balanced human–nature relationship. The concept of slow fashion is consistently communicated comparatively with fast fashion, and its apparent “unsustainability”, which ultimately exacerbates the message that practicing slow fashion is positive for environmental sustainability. The initiatives of slow fashion to surpass fast fashion’s ability to function sustainably are expressed in statements that highlight certain practices, for example, the use of “plant-based fabrics to protect our oceans from microplastic pollution” (Insta#57, Dec22). Thus, representations of slow fashion as being “sustainable” on social media primarily exist on a practical level and relate to both industry and individual behavior.

- The contrary to all things “bad” in fashion

The issues associated with fast fashion are communicated to produce a need for slow fashion and suggest that slow fashion is the “logical” reaction to all the bad things that exist in the fashion industry, such as issues of modern slavery, environmental pollution, excessive resource consumption and, interestingly, the oppression of women. The data references “vulnerable, marginalized women” (Insta#8, Dec6) in the fast fashion supply chain, and feelings of “identity loss” (Insta#47, Dec7) experienced by women as a result of fashion. This reflects the sentiment that the contemporary fashion system is a feminist issue that identifies women as victims of consumerism, people who are “controlled, repressed and enthralled”, dating back to 1963 [92]. Slow fashion, alternatively, is represented as a statement and a medium for empowerment, which opposes the industry-determined and seasonal definitions of fashion while providing a means to address the systemic issues of fast fashion.

- Validated: slow fashion as the exclusively sustainable option

Sustainability is presented as the core principle for the communication of slow fashion practices, which reflects the sentiment that slow fashion is a manifestation of “sustainability” itself. Slow fashion is consistently represented as superior to the contemporary fashion system from a sustainability perspective and is explicitly labeled accordingly; slow fashion is referred to as “sustainable” (Insta#55, Dec18), using “sustainable materials” (Insta#23, Dec15), and employing “sustainable practices” (Insta#32, Dec14). A considerable amount of data represents slow fashion as environmentally sustainable, as previously discussed, and social issues were also raised presenting slow fashion as a form of fashion that recognizes the need for employees to be paid a living wage and have safe working conditions. This contrasting representation results in a moral evaluation of fashion, and presents slow fashion as the sustainable solution to contemporary fashion issues while reinforcing the notion that slow fashion is applied as a label for sustainability to represent a certain awareness and engagement for the environment and society as a whole.

- Remedial fashion consumption: the power of “slow” consumption

Slow fashion is used to label a certain way of “practicing” fashion, with a focus on consumption; specifically, consuming fashion from “sustainable” brands, consuming second-hand fashion, and creating fashion at home. The principal practice was buying “eco-fashion”, which aligns with the economic growth and consumer demand paradigm and represents a story of “green growth”, where the promoted solution to sustainability issues is for consumers to embrace slow fashion products, which were referred to as “eco-friendly” (Insta#1, Dec30), to consequently enable a market-driven sustainable future.

This remedial frame suggests an optimistic representation of businesses—a supposedly new generation of businesses characterized by the ability to enact effective sustainability initiatives. Alternatively, consuming second-hand and home-made fashion offers solutions that reflect the features of slow fashion as distinguished by Clark [44]—specifically, the valuing of local resources, which is recognized here as the fashion circulating within the community and the value of local labor to create fashion, production systems with closer producer and consumer relationships, which are facilitated through the sale of second-hand or homemade productions sold directly within the community, and sensorial products that are valued and offer a longer usable life, which is enhanced through the ability to design, customize, and experience the creation process with the fashion product. Moreover, the practice of consuming second-hand fashion exhibits characteristics of a circular economy whereby fashion resources are retained within the economy and potential fashion waste is eliminated. Slow fashion is, thus, portrayed to be concerned with how fashion is consumed and presents a multifaceted approach for sustainable fashion consumption.

- Slow fashion as an emblem of sustainability

Slow fashion is represented through a communicative process that is inclusive of slow fashion's position as "sustainable" and in contrast to the "unsustainability" of the contemporary fashion system, which is associated with significant environmental and ethical issues. Slow fashion is reflected as being conscientiousness intertwined with the decisions made by consumers and producers of fashion to be "sustainable" and meaningful. Slow fashion carries the meaning of the empowerment of women and is the expression of femininity and human experiences. Additionally, slow fashion is a way to consume fashion that is presented as more "sustainable" through consumption from "sustainable" brands, second-hand consumption, and creating fashion at home. In the context of this study, slow fashion was not communicated to be the entirely different worldview and economic logic that was expressed by Fletcher [56], but rather a fashion that is better than the fashion that is globally understood. Slow fashion is an emblem of sustainability that exists as an opportunity to produce, consume, and be better in a broad range of ways.

Overall, the qualitative content analysis of posts containing #slowfashionaustralia indicated that the slow fashion concept is communicated to embody sustainability, with an emphasis on environmental sustainability, through practices enacted by both consumers and producers of fashion. The results revealed three themes that reflect the dominating interpretations of slow fashion on Instagram—Business 2.0: An eco-marketplace, an authentic experience of self-expression, and sustainable value in the community. These themes revealed a promotion of fashion consumption from companies that are presented as more sustainable, the importance of self-expression and sensorial experiences enabled by fashion, and the recognition of the value that exists within the community through the form of individual creators of fashion and second-hand consumption practices. The scope of the findings suggests that slow fashion exists in the realms of both the consumers and the producers of fashion and can be identified through the exhibition of sustainability-focused practices occurring anywhere along the supply chain and product lifespan. The holistic presence of sustainability in fashion was acknowledged as a primary characteristic of the slow fashion concept in this study.

This study was limited mainly by its focus on the Australian context. Slow fashion is a sustainable fashion concept that is not exclusive to Australia. Furthermore, Instagram is a social media platform with significant, global penetration. Therefore, this study has contributed to understanding a portion of how slow fashion is represented on Instagram, and is not representative of the whole, dynamic depiction of the slow fashion concept on Instagram. Instagram enables users to communicate specific messages to their audience in their posts; however, the users' contextual and motivating factors behind their communication are not revealed. Complementary interviews could be conducted to enable Instagram users to define and explain slow fashion and to provide insight regarding their perspective of the slow fashion concept. Additionally, the scope of this research did not allow for an analysis of the consumer impacts from the consumption of slow fashion content on Insta-

gram. The research could be expanded to investigate the content production and reception inspirations and impacts to explore the influences for creating slow fashion content and messaging, and the impacts of its consumption—especially from a gender perspective.

The exploration of slow fashion in this study revealed an emphasis on expressions of femininity. This was an unexpected finding that stimulates further questions regarding the promotion of sustainability concepts as symbiotic with femininity. Research that focuses on whether sustainability is communicated as exclusively feminine and how this impacts the broader audience's perceptions and practices relating to sustainability would assist in furthering the understanding of how sustainability concepts such as slow fashion are communicated to consumers and what impact that may have on the larger society. Additionally, a comparison with media representations of slow fashion in other cultural, non-Western contexts, is highly recommended.

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