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EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION FOR SUSTAINABLE FASHION BRANDS: CHALLENGES AND APPROACHES IN THE VALENCIAN COMMUNITY

COMUNICACIÓN EFECTIVA PARA MARCAS DE MODA SOSTENIBLE: RETOS Y ENFOQUES EN LA COMUNIDAD VALENCIANA

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: This research aims to comprehend the current challenges in the communication sector faced by sustainable fashion brands in the Valencian Community. The main purpose of this research is to understand the paradigms experienced by Valencian consumers when acquiring this category of garments, in order to more efficiently focus communication strategy. **Methodology:** A qualitative approach was employed using the Delphi method, consisting of a panel of twelve experts from the sustainable fashion sector in the Valencian market. This method was conducted in two stages. The first stage focused on identifying relevant variables to measure factors related to the Valencian consumer's choice of sustainable fashion. In the second stage, the results of the first stage were presented to the experts for consensus-seeking. **Results:** It was determined that the additional cost associated with consuming sustainable fashion, compared to fast fashion, does not constitute a

barrier to the acquisition of sustainable fashion in the Valencian market. Instead, it was identified that the main difficulty lies in deficient communication or ineffective marketing strategies by the brand. **Conclusions:** Valencian consumers opt for sustainable fashion consumption based on their knowledge of the brand rather than the final selling price.

Keywords: sustainable fashion; communication; marketing; slow fashion; Valencian Community; Spain.

RESUMEN

Introducción: La dimensión visual del teatro centró desde muy pronto la atención de Mariano Fortuny, cuyos principios de reconsideración estructural del espacio escenográfico van a dirigirse en su proceso experimentador hacia dos frentes inseparablemente ligados entre sí: la concepción física del espacio escenográfico y la iluminación de escena, tanto en lo relativo al reajuste de los problemas derivados del uso de la nueva luz eléctrica como a la radical reforma de sus sistemas de proyección.

Metodología: Revisionismo crítico a la luz de los postulados de la teatrología, la escenología o los *Performance Studies*, de tipo transversal y no experimental.

Resultados y discusión: La relación entre texto, ambientación histórica y evocación estilística o libre abstracción ha constituido el desarrollo de la figuración teatral del último siglo. En este contexto, Marino Fortuny aporta múltiples implicaciones expresivas proporcionadas por las nuevas posibilidades de este tipo de luz que concurren con un replanteamiento sustancial de las bases del realismo naturalista, según el cual el diseño escenográfico se desvinculaba progresivamente de la adherencia mimética a la realidad en aras de su interpretación creativa.

Conclusiones: La escenografía da un paso más hacia la llamada "espaciografía" y la luminotecnia se convierte en instrumento dramático, narrativo, locativo y diegético a instancias del acontecer espectacular, vector dramatúrgico y sustancial de la escenificación.

Palabras clave: Escenificación; electricidad; luminotecnia; vanguardia; Fortuny.

1. INTRODUCTION

Today's society is immersed in an environmental crisis, where the second most polluting industry is Fashion, after the oil industry, according to the United Nations Organization (2019). Since it is an industry that annually emits more than 1,000 megatons of carbon dioxide equivalents (Orús, 2022). Therefore, the actors of the Fashion sector have a fundamental role to play in order to meet the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda. The industry employs approximately 300 million people throughout the value chain, many of whom are women, and the industry is expected to continue to grow in the coming years (United Nations Alliance for Sustainable Fashion [UN Fashion Alliance], 2023).

The Spanish textile industry at the end of 2022 presented a situation reflected in figures such as (in reference to the previous year): a 1.7% decrease in the number of companies (7,823), a 2.5% increase in employees in the sector (131,000), a 13.2% increase in turnover (11,850 million euros), a 32.1% increase in imports (26,938 million

euros) and a 12.9% increase in exports (19,721 million euros) (Fashion United, 2023).

The Valencian Community is currently the fifth largest textile exporting region in Spain, 5% of Spain's total. It is also the second largest exporter of household textiles, representing 24% of Spain. The main destination of textiles from the Valencian Community is Portugal (14% of exports), followed by Italy (12%) and France (12%). The industry generates a production valued at 1,706 million euros, which is equivalent to 3.4% of the total industry of the community. Of the total number of active manufacturing companies in the Spanish textile and clothing industry, 15% are located in the Valencian Community (IVACE, 2022).

Given the existing relevance of the textile and clothing industry in the Valencian Community, and the environmental repercussions generated by this industry, it is considered a relevant topic of study in the Sustainability Clinic of the European University of Valencia.

The European University's academic model focuses on experiential learning, where the educational approach is based on the idea that students learn by "doing" and "being", acquiring skills and knowledge through practical experience and critical thinking about this learning. The model focuses on providing students with opportunities to actively participate in meaningful and innovative learning situations, providing students with a real context where they must carry out a practical application of theoretical knowledge. This encourages students' active participation and allows them to develop critical skills throughout the learning process.

Experiential learning is carried out with an integrative and transdisciplinary approach that aims to prepare students for a global and diverse world. Through these experiences, students have the opportunity to face authentic challenges that address complex and relevant problems in a global context. This approach is not limited to a single discipline but promotes the integration of diverse perspectives. Students can explore issues from multiple areas, allowing them to understand the complexity of problems and develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Romero, 2010).

Within this academic model and in response to an increasing demand for qualified professionals specialized in the field of sustainability (Interempresas, 2023), the teaching innovation model called the Sustainability Clinic of the European University of Valencia was born. The Clinic represents a dynamic learning space, where students are immersed in the understanding of contemporary environmental and social challenges. Here, learning goes beyond the classroom, allowing students to engage directly in real projects and practical situations. This experiential learning approach not only gives them the opportunity to acquire theoretical knowledge, but also to apply it effectively, contributing to the promotion of sustainability in society (Clínica de sostenibilidad, n.d.).

After the completion of several master classes given by professionals in the field of sustainability, but each from their own specialty, during the academic year 2022-2023, it was possible to draw a main conclusion at the end of the course: Sustainability is a pillar that is entering with exponential speed in the main Valencian industries. From the most innovative industries, as could be considered the design and manufacture of

packaging, with the case of International Paper; or in the most traditional, as in sports, with the case of Valencia C.F. (both entities gave master classes on the implementation of sustainability in the value chain). This trend is likely to remain in the future, and not to be considered as just another option, but as the only or main one on which to base the entire value chain of Valencian companies.

From this conclusion it can be drawn particular conclusions for each industry. However, it is true that in these masterclasses and subsequent round tables, also managed by the Sustainability Clinic, the importance of the additional cost involved in selling a sustainable product to the end customer was discussed. When analyzing the issue, no definitive conclusion was reached on the willingness of the Valencian consumer to assume the associated extra cost.

For all these reasons, the present research analyzes whether the extra cost involved in selling a sustainable product to the end customer is a key determinant for the Valencian consumer not to opt for a more sustainable fashion. In order to reach a conclusion, with predictive capacity, a Delphi method has been used.

2. OBJECTIVES

This study analyzes the perception of key actors (researchers and professionals) in the sustainable fashion sector in the Valencian Community about the behavior of the Valencian consumer in reference to the brands of this sector.

In this sense, the aim is to identify the relevant variables in the behavior of the Valencian consumer, in order to subsequently be able to carry out brand communication decisions focused on them.

In addition, this study involves the active participation of students and professors at the European University of Valencia with the aim of promoting sustainability, from an innovative teaching approach focused on experiential learning, based on its transdisciplinary university environment. Multidisciplinary experiential learning provides real-life problem-solving skills and prepares students as responsible and active citizens (Gleason and Rubio, 2020).

3. METHODOLOGY

After a bibliographic review of the existing literature regarding the consumption of sustainable fashion in the Valencian Community, it was found the absence of previous studies that are obtained from the opinion of experts and experts, and not the opinion of consumers who can provide inconsistent answers only by the lack of knowledge of the environmental aspects of the textile sector.

Consequently, the Delphi method was resorted to, as it allows obtaining objective information, thus increasing the reliability of the answers (Reguant-Álvarez and Torrado-Fonseca, 2016), the support in sustainability experts in the fashion sector, favors knowing and predicting the behavior of Valencian consumers.

As in other academic research, the Delphi method was used, as it is one of the different research strategies for the identification of research questions and problems, selection

of critical variables, or the construction and validation of instruments for the collection or analysis of information (Cabero, 2014).

The Delphi method consists of the systematic consultation of a panel of experts (Linstone and Turoff, 2002) "who are asked their opinion on issues related to future events" (Astigarraga, 2003, p. 2). The experts consulted must belong to an area and are intended to "obtain the most reliable consensus opinion of the group consulted" (Reguant-Álvarez and Torrado-Fonseca, 2016, p. 88). This qualitative method consists of carrying out a series of stages of successive questions, among which, it can be limited to two stages without affecting the quality of the results (Cabero and Infante, 2014). Between these stages, the experts are fed back with statistical information obtained in the previous stage (Reguant-Álvarez and Torrado-Fonseca, 2016).

4. RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT

As has been explained, this is a research carried out to respond to an issue without previously obtained conclusions, raised by the Sustainability Clinic of the European University of Valencia in the 2022-2023 academic year. Therefore, at a geographical level, this Delphi method focuses on the direct scope of application of the Clinic, i.e., the Valencian Community. In addition, it has been considered pertinent to focus the research on sustainable fashion. The selection of the panel of experts was based on two criteria: experts in sustainability in the fashion sector and with the main location in the Valencian Community.

To carry out the research, the "modified Delphi" method was used, i.e., two rounds of questions were asked to the same panel of experts. The objective of carrying out two consecutive rounds is "to reduce the interquartile space, i.e. how much the expert's opinion deviates from the opinion of the whole, specifying the median of the answers obtained" (Astigarraga, 2003, p. 3). In the first phase of questions, we have raised the issue of the acceptance of sustainable fashion in Valencia, by consumers, at a general level. Thus, in the second phase, we went to the particular, that is, to see the consensus, or lack thereof, of opinion about the possible acceptance that Valencian consumers have and will have when paying the extra cost that is implicit in the fact of being a sustainable fashion.

The first stage was carried out online by means of an individual questionnaire, with a maximum reception date of March 10, 2023, and the second was carried out in person at the School of Social Sciences and Communication of the European University of Valencia on March 29 of the same year. Subsequently, the results obtained were analyzed.

One of the basic characteristics of this method, according to some authors, is anonymity (Cabero, 2014), a fact that was strictly maintained in the first phase. In the second phase, face-to-face was chosen, where the discussion among experts was prioritized for two reasons. The first was to eradicate the limitation of uncertainty due to not being able to directly control the way in which the forms were filled in (Landeta, 2006). The second, because it is a research focused on experiential learning from the Sustainability Clinic of the European University, it was considered appropriate to do it in person so that students would have a deeper immersion in scientific research and,

in addition, it allowed students to ask the experts directly, a fact that increases the added value of experiential learning.

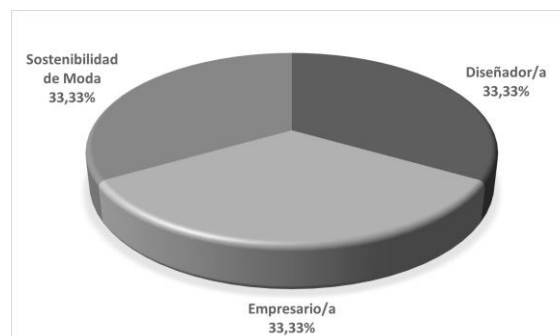
4.1. Panel of experts

In published research there are no specific rules regarding the necessary number of participants to be able to carry out the Delphi method (Steurer, 2011). There has been research on what the optimal number should be, but no conclusive results have been reached that would be useful for all applications and uses of such methodology (Galanc and Mikuś, 1986). Among the different researches, we would like to highlight that of Powell (2003), in which the conclusion is obtained that the selected number of experts to carry out the Delphi method will vary depending on the research problem and the present resources available to the researchers. Furthermore, according to Skulmoski et al. (2007), the number of experts will also depend on the nature of the panel. Thus, the more homogeneous the group, the smaller the sample will be, 10-15 experts, while heterogeneous groups, as in the case of multi-industry or international research, will require a larger number. Considering the case of the present research, it was decided to focus it on knowing the opinion in reference to the Valencian consumer and specifically on the consumption of sustainable fashion, it is considered pertinent to follow the indications of Skulmoski et al. (2007) and the sample will be composed of 12 experts.

Our selection has been made via LinkedIn making use of keywords related to the research criteria: "sustainable fashion", "fashion sustainability" and with the location of "Comunidad Valenciana". The number of experts was distributed proportionally by expert typology (Figure 1). The sample was divided into 9 women and 3 men.

Figure 1

Typology of experts.



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Because the participants agreed to participate in the study without publicly disclosing their names, for privacy reasons, from this moment on all published data will not be directly linked to any particular expert.

4.2. Stages of the Delphi method

As in the research by Rivera et al. (2021), the first stage questionnaire has close-ended questions and after each of them, an open-ended question to finally determine the variables. With the open-ended questions, the experts are encouraged to formulate new variables that they consider relevant to measure the factors related to the choice of the Valencian consumer of sustainable fashion. The qualitative analysis of these responses, grouped by themes, allows us to obtain a more complete list of variables for the analysis.

The first stage consisted of two blocks, the first entitled "Sustainable fashion at a global level" in which in a closed form two questions were asked, being able to answer "yes or no" to: "do you consider that the production of sustainable fashion implies a higher final cost compared to the production of fast fashion?", and "do you consider that the production costs of sustainable fashion are communicated to the consumer in a correct way?". After these two questions, each expert had to answer another open-ended question entitled "briefly elaborate on the previous answer". Therefore, in total, four questions were developed in this first block.

The second block of this first stage was entitled "Sustainable fashion in the Valencian market". Again, it consisted of two closed questions where the answer could be "yes or no" and two open questions where the answers to these questions had to be briefly elaborated. In this case the closed questions were: "do you think that sustainable fashion can be demanded in the Valencian market based on tastes or trends (not by cost of the garments)?", and "do you consider that the final price of sustainable fashion garments would be accepted in a majority way by Valencian consumers with an average purchasing power?".

In the second and last stage of questions, a previous presentation of the results obtained from the previous stage was made (see figure 2).

The development of this second face-to-face stage was based on the order of the blocks and the results obtained from the first stage. Therefore, the results obtained from the block "Global sustainable fashion" of the first stage were explained and then two closed questions were developed where they could only answer "yes or no" and after each one of them they could move on to an open question, to elaborate individually on the previous answers. The closed questions were: "do you consider that there is a lack of knowledge on the part of the final consumer of the production process of clothing garments?", and "do you consider that having a law that obliges fashion brands to inform their production processes, would be a favorable action to eliminate misinformation about it among consumers?".

Figure 2

Presentation of the results of the second stage of the Delphi method on March 29, 2023.



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

In reference to the second block entitled "Sustainable fashion in the Valencian market", the closed questions were: "how do you consider that the culture of sustainable fashion could be promoted in the Valencian market?", and "do you consider that a consumer is willing to buy a *Bimba y Lola* garment for 100€, but perhaps not a sustainable brand without so much renown?". With all the information collected, the analysis of this information was then carried out.

5. RESULTS

For the presentation of the results obtained, the two thematic blocks present in both questioning phases were taken into account.

5.1. Sustainable fashion at a global level

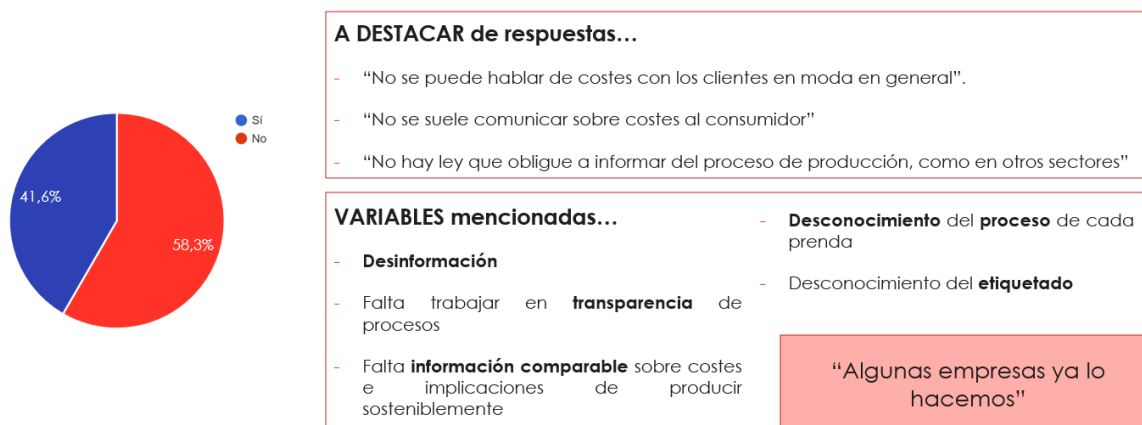
In the first stage of the Delphi method, 83.3% of the experts stated that the production of sustainable fashion implies a higher final cost compared to the production of fast fashion. Among the responses of this group of experts, it would be appropriate to highlight the following arguments: "working with materials, whose cultivation is scarcer and more careful and respectful of the environment, involves higher initial costs" and, on the other hand, another of them added that "however, the environmental, social and economic cost of fast fashion production is enormous".

While, from the group of experts who were in the perspective that this final cost was not higher, it is convenient to quote the following statement: "in the case of garment finishing production and especially in denim, producing in a sustainable way implies producing with less resources: less water, energy, less chemicals... It is changing the way of producing by using technology. Technology is an investment with a very quick ROI. So, at the very least, it would seem that sustainable production has a zero/neutral cost compared to fast fashion".

On the other hand, in the first stage, it was also wanted to know if the costs of producing sustainable fashion were communicated to the consumer in a correct way. Considering that, with this, consumers could understand what is the reason for the extra cost of this type of garments compared to fast fashion. The result of this aspect by the panel of experts was not close to consensus, as 58.3% of them considered that these implicit costs were not well communicated, compared to 41.6% who considered that they were well communicated. Most of them consider that in communication they should not or usually do not communicate about costs to the consumer, a fact totally opposite, in particular, with one expert who explicitly communicated that in his company they already do so. In addition, Figure 3 shows the variables mentioned by the experts in relation to this particular topic.

Figure 3

Results obtained to the following question: Do you consider that the production costs of sustainable fashion are communicated to the consumer in a correct way?



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

However, in the second stage, based on this theme of questions about sustainable fashion at a global level, the experts agreed that the lack of knowledge of the process of garment production by the end consumer is very large. This could be considered as a reason why the consumption of sustainable fashion garments is not so high.

On the other hand, since the first stage emphasized the absence of a law obliging fashion brands to report their production processes (see Figure 2), in the second stage the authors of this article inquired about it.

The majority response, with 91.66% of consensus, urges that the fact that there is a law obliging brands to report their processes, need not be a favorable action to eliminate the existing misinformation in this regard in consumers, but rather a way to ensure that companies that are not proactive in terms of sustainability communication are punished. Thus, the majority of experts considered that the way should be sought to reward companies that seek to be leaders in terms of sustainability, and not so much to penalize companies that are not proactive in terms of sustainability communication.

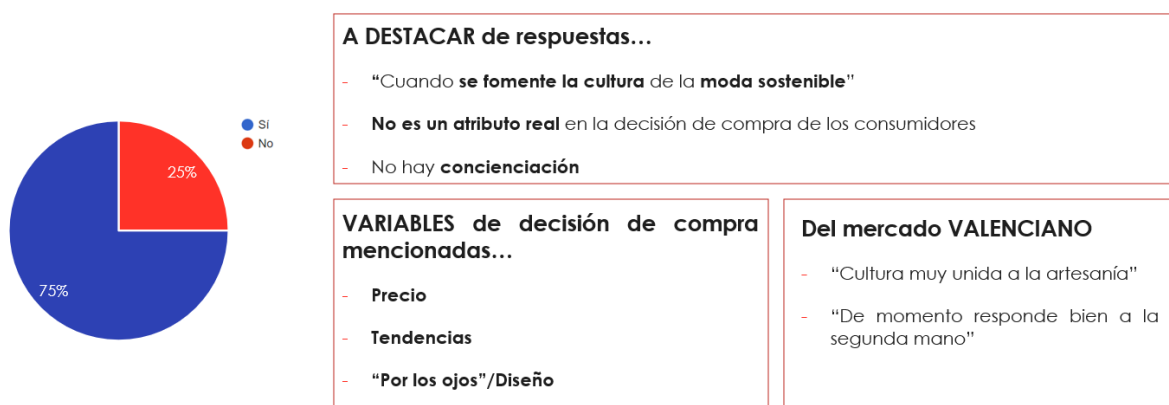
5.2. Sustainable fashion in the Valencian market

With regard to the second subject of both stages, that is, to know the opinion of the experts on sustainable fashion, specifically in the Valencian market, the first thing done was to present the results about the demand for this type of garments in the Valencian market.

In the first stage of the method, the experts were of the majority opinion, with 75%, that sustainable fashion is indeed demanded in the Valencian market, based on tastes or trends. However, as can be seen in Figure 4, some of the experts believe that, although there is demand for this type of garment, the fact that a garment is sustainable or not is not a real attribute in the purchasing process of Valencian consumers, but rather the variables most repeated by the panel in terms of the purchasing decision are: price, trends and design.

Figure 4

Results obtained to the following question: Do you think that sustainable fashion can be demanded in the Valencian market based on tastes or trends (not by cost of the garments)?



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

In relation to the price variable, in the first stage it was found that 66.66% of the experts consider that the final price of sustainable fashion garments is mostly accepted by Valencian consumers with average purchasing power. As long as consumers "perceive the added value of sustainable fashion", "are willing to have a lower quantity for higher quality" and / or "if the price is in line with the design". In addition to this, a particular appreciation obtained in the same phase of the stage is exposed: "the Valencian fashion market is very strange and unpredictable".

In the second stage, knowing that the experts consider that the price variable is very important in the decision to purchase clothing in the Valencian market, we wanted to know their opinion in the following situation: the choice of a consumer faced with the possibility of purchasing a garment of a popular brand (such as, for example, *Bimba y Lola*) or another of a sustainable brand, both with the same final price. The 83.3% of the experts came to the conclusion that the decision before garments of the same amount is not affected by the characteristic of sustainability, but that the knowledge of the brand that they have has more weight in the final choice. Thus, in this specific

situation, the consumer would opt for the garment of the brand that is best known by the social group, in this case *Bimba y Lola*. The fact that a garment is sustainable would only be considered as one more characteristic of the product and not as a differential value such as brand value.

To conclude with the results obtained in this research, it is valid to state that the experts consider that, by means of fairs and urban parades of sustainable fashion, together with the existence of associations and/or cooperatives that promote sustainable fashion in the Valencian Community, the culture of sustainable fashion can be promoted in this market.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

In reference to sustainable fashion at a global level, it is concluded that, in general, sustainable fashion implies a higher final cost compared to fast fashion production. However, there are technological tools, especially for denim garments, with which to produce with fewer resources, which means that the cost is zero or neutral compared to fast fashion. These costs, in some brands, are already being explained in their own media. These companies, with this, seek to make the consumer understand what is due to the possible extra cost of this type of garments compared to fast fashion. This helps the consumer to know the production process and thus increase the consumption of sustainable fashion garments.

In reference to sustainable fashion, specifically, in the Valencian market of average purchasing power, it is concluded that this type of garments are indeed demanded by the Valencian consumer, both in terms of tastes or trends, but also in terms of price due to their purchasing power.

On the other hand, the extra cost involved in the sale of a sustainable product, for the final Valencian consumer, is an important variable in the final purchase decision, but not the most important for the Valencian consumer to choose a more sustainable fashion. The variable that will determine that a Valencian consumer chooses a sustainable fashion garment is that the consumer has knowledge or awareness of the brand. Therefore, at present, for a sustainable fashion company to be successful in the Valencian market, it must focus on promoting its brand and products, thus making it easy for consumers to distinguish its product from that of its competitors.

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Effective communication for sustainable fashion brands: challenges and approaches
in the Valencian Community

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