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Gender equality: a tool for legitimacy in the fast fashion industry

Giorgia Miotto
Associate Professor. Ramon Llull University. Blanquerna School of Communication and International Relations.
ORCID: 0000-0002-0973-6597.

Sandra Vilajoana-Alejandre
Associate Professor. Ramon Llull University. Blanquerna School of Communication and International Relations.
ORCID: 0000-0001-6231-1021.

giorgiam@blanquerna.url.edu, sandrava@blanquerna.url.edu

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Abstract

Gender equality is an extremely important issue for all businesses, nevertheless the fast fashion industry, which targets mainly the female population, faces major challenges related to women wellbeing and labor rights, employees professional and personal development. The objective of this paper is to analyse how three leading fast fashion companies include gender equality in their sustainability reports as part of their communication strategy and as a tool for legitimations. The main findings show that fast fashion industry focuses the communication based on gender equality issues explaining the improved working conditions and professional development opportunities for the female employees from all around the world along the entire Supply Chain Management.

Keywords

Legitimacy; fast fashion; gender equality; sustainability reports; CSR; communication strategy.

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1. Introduction

According to the *Global Gender Report 2017* published by the World Economic Forum, despite the fact that women represent half of the world's population, they do not have access to the same level of health assistance, education, economic participation, potential earning and political decision making power (Bruggeman & Chan, 2016). The "Economic Participation and Opportunity gap" represents the 42% of the population, stressing the great differences that gender still makes in the potential achievement of wealth and happiness (Schwab, Smans, Zahidi, Leopold, Ratcheva, Haussman & Tyson, 2017).

Through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Sustainable Agenda 2030, the United Nations made a strong call to action to all kind of companies in order to foster the accomplishment of the 17 Goals. Goal 5 is dedicated to promote Gender Equality to "Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life and to adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels" (United Nations, 2019). More than 100 countries committed to this Agenda and companies from all around the world are creating strategies and policies for improving a better and more equal world. These strategies and policies are managed under the CSR and Sustainability framework.

Gender equality is an extremely important issue for all businesses, nevertheless the fast fashion industry faces major challenges related to women wellbeing, employees professional and personal development and, at the same time, may represents an opportunity for the biggest consumer target: women for all around the world.

The majority of the academic literature related to gender equality is focused on women's inclusion into boards or executive teams (Cucari, Esposito De Falco & Orlando, 2018; Furlotti, Mazza, Tibiletti & Triani, 2019; Setó-Pamies, 2015).

This paper is aimed to analyse how gender equality related topics may be used as a resource for corporate sustainable communication and legitimation strategy.

The objective of this paper is to analyse how three leading fast fashion companies include gender equality in their sustainability reports as part of their communication strategy and as a tool for legitimations. We identify which topics related to gender equality have more protagonist in this companies' socially responsible and sustainable storytelling. In fact, through sustainability reports organizations voluntary communicate their values and impacts to the economic, social and environmental sustainable development and they are an important communication and legitimation tool (Hartman, Rubin & Dhanda, 2007; Kolk, 2010; Kozlowski, Searcy & Bardecki, 2015).

The paper is organized as follow: first we define a theoretical framework about the concept of gender equality as part of the Social Corporate Responsibility and sustainability strategies and as a tool for corporate legitimacy. Afterward, we describe the state of the fast fashion industry, mainly from a CSR and sustainability point of view. Then, we explain the research methodology based on the sustainability reports' content analysis of three leading fast fashion companies. Finally, we outline the research's results, conclusions and managerial implications.

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Gender equality is an important dimension of the corporate ethics, affecting directly the decision-making process and the corporate governance at a whole, being related with: transparency, accountability, fair opportunities for human personal and professional development and, finally, economic profitability

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Gender equality as a tool for corporate legitimacy

Gender equality is an important dimension of the corporate ethics, affecting directly the decision-making process and the corporate governance at a whole, being related with: transparency, accountability, fair opportunities for human personal and professional development and, finally, economic profitability (Commission for Justice Consumers and Gender Equality, 2018; Guijarro & Poyatos, 2018; Setó-Pamies, 2015; Windscheid, Bowes-Sperry, Jonsen & Morner, 2018).

According to the United Nations approach (United Nations, 2019) and the model defined by Nancy Fraser (Fraser, 1997), we consider gender equality as a multifactorial concept based on distinct normative principles as: anti-poverty, anti- exploitation, income equality, leisure time equality, equality of respect, anti-marginalization, anti- androcentrism, equal access to education, anti-violence, equal access to health care and equal access to economic, politic and professional power.

Following this approach, the term gender equality in this article refers to all these concepts applied to the work environment, corporate governance and companies' stakeholders impacts and management.

Gender diversity and inclusion in board of directors is of vital importance for good corporate governance (Furlotti et al., 2019), assuring responsible behaviors and strategic decision making (Michelon & Parbonetti, 2012), increasing effectiveness and performance (Rao & Tilt, 2016) and reducing the legitimacy gap thanks to a transparent and accountable information management (Mio, Venturelli & Leopizzi, 2015).

Actually, recent researches show that companies with an higher rate of female participation in the Board of Directors develop better CSR strategies and manage stakeholders' relationship in a more profitable and responsive manner (Furlotti et al., 2019; Harjoto, Laksmana & Lee, 2015) since they focus on accountability and ethical behavior (Galbreath, 2018). Recent literature states that companies with more women in the BOD are more determined on disclosing information about environmental and social impact (Kassinis, Panayiotou, Dimou & Katsifaraki, 2016; Liao, Luo & Tang, 2015).

Nevertheless, access to top corporate positions is still a big issue for the female population (Setó-Pamies, 2015) and, especially in the developing countries, women labor rights and conditions do not respect the correct standards, affecting their health, independency and opportunities to personal and professional development (Commission for Justice Consumers and Gender Equality, 2018; Plantenga, Remery, Figueiredo & Smith, 2009; United Nations, 2019).

From a corporate point of view, the lack of gender equality, besides being a management failure through all the different dimensions, it also may cause a lack of legitimacy and affect negatively the brand perception and reputation (Miotto, Polo López & Rom Rodríguez, 2019).

According to Suchman (1995), corporate legitimacy is: "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructive system of norms, values, believes and definitions" (Suchman, 1995). Legitimacy depends on the stakeholders' perception and is grounded

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on shared values and beliefs (Díez Martín, Blanco González, Cruz Suárez & Prado Román, 2014).

Corporate legitimacy depends on the capability to fulfil stakeholders' expectations, developing Corporate Social Responsible and Sustainable strategies and policies which provide companies with credibility and trust (Beddewela & Fairbrass, 2016; Deephouse & Carter, 2005; Du & Vieira, 2012; Khurana & Nohria, 2008; Lamberti & Lettieri, 2011; Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006; Palazzo & Scherer, 2006).

Legitimacy is necessary to get the vital resources to survive (Alajoutsijarvi, Juusola, & Siltaoja, 2015; Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Deephouse & Carter, 2005; Díez-Martín, Prado-Román & Blanco-González, 2013; Díez Martín, Blanco González, Cruz Suárez & Prado Román, 2014; Patriotta, Gond & Schultz, 2011; Suchman, 1995; Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002).

Legitimacy improves firm reputation and positive reputation enhances legitimacy providing brand awareness and stakeholders' trustful perception and organization's sustainable competitive advantages based on firm's growth and future performance (Deephouse, Bundy, Tost & Suchman, 2017; Li, Chen & Ma, 2016; Rindova, Williamson, Petkova & Sever, 2005).

According to several recent researches, CSR is a fundamental tool for legitimation (Davis, 1973; Díez Martín, Blanco González, Cruz Suárez & Prado Román, 2014; Du & Vieira, 2012; Green & Peloza, 2011; Maxfield, 2008; Porter & Kramer, 2006, 2011; Simcic Brønn & Vidaver-Cohen, 2009) and, therefore, corporate social performance leads to competitive advantages (Furlotti et al., 2019; McWilliams, Siegel & Wright, 2006; Porter & Kramer, 2006), since it contributes to improve financial performances and contributes to firms' financial performance, cost and risk reduction (Orlitzky, Schmidt & Rynes, 2003).

Through sustainability reports organizations voluntary communicate their values and impacts to the economic, social and environmental sustainable development and they are an important communication and legitimation tool (Hartman et al., 2007; Kolk, 2010; Kozlowski et al., 2015). Actually, disclosing non-financial information, as socially responsible activities or environmental impacts, affects positively the market performance and may improve the relationship with stakeholders (Cucari et al., 2018). Non-financial disclosures generate more trust for investors (Del Bosco & Misani, 2016) and legitimase the corporate performance and improve stakeholders management (Michelon, Pilonato & Ricceri, 2015).

2.2. The fast fashion industry and ethical brands

Nowadays, consumers built their relationships with brands also based on ethics and shared values. Products and services quality is given for grant, and brand's election is based on the customer identification with the brand ethical values (Barile, 2009; Kotler, Hessekiel & Lee, 2012; Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiewan, 2010; Porter & Kramer, 2006; Szmigin, Carrigan & O'Loughlin, 2007).

Consumers are increasingly asking to their favorite brands to behave ethically and include ethical commitment in their positioning (Iglesias, Markovic, Singh & Sierra, 2019). Brands are facing a crisis of trust and legitimacy and public opinion often considers multinational corporations as guilty of unsustainable economic, social and environmental development (Scherer, Palazzo & Seidl, 2013).

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CSR practices are key factors for consumers' ethical brand perceptions, positive reputation and, therefore, for corporate legitimacy, but at the same time, companies need to deal with the gap between consumers' ethical attitude and real buying decision

Brands with an higher ethical commitment, possess a stronger competitive advantage (Kotler et al., 2010, 2012; Porter & Kramer, 2006), increase customer trust (Swaen & Chumpitaz, 2008), improve financial performance (Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006) and purchase intention (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Szmigin et al., 2007).

The millennial generation has high expectations regarding the brands' purpose (Amed, Berg & Kappelmark, 2017). According to Nielsen, the 73% of global consumers would change their consumption habits to reduce their impact on the environment and up to the 90% of the millennials say that they're highly willing to pay more for not polluting products Nielsen (2019).

Nevertheless, we are living in a complex environment, where consumers have ambidextrous behavior in their purchase election: they want easy access to all kind of goods, but at the same time they expect brands behaving ethically, environmental sustainably and social responsibly (Brunk, 2010; Iglesias et al., 2019). Attitudes and behaviors are often not consistent, and even if consumers declare a preference for ethical brands, afterward their buying decisions do not fit with this believes (Govind, Singh, Garg & D'Silva, 2017).

CSR practices are key factors for consumers' ethical brand perceptions (Brunk, 2012), positive reputation (Blombäck & Scandelius, 2013) and, therefore, for corporate legitimacy (Deephouse et al., 2017), but at the same time, companies need to deal with the gap between consumers' ethical attitude and real buying decision (Govind et al., 2017). Sharing information and communicating corporate positive and negative impacts creates a feeling of trust and influence positively the consumer's attitudes towards the brand (Govind et al., 2017).

In recent years, fast fashion retailers, like Zara, H&M and Mango, have transformed the fashion industry, democratizing access to fashion and providing trendy and affordable garments for everybody, imitating current luxury fashion trends but with extremely accessible prices (Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang & Chan, 2012). Sustainability and ethical concerns have begun to be relevant in the fashion industry, especially in the low cost segment (Aspers & Skov, 2006).

Fast fashion business is particularly under public opinion scrutiny, since consumers consider that this industry produces an excess of pollution and waste, boosts an exaggerated consumerism of not long-lasting goods, does not respect labor right, especially outsourcing the major part of the production in developing countries and competes fiercely with traditional small businesses (Abrahamson, 2011).

Actually this industry is ranked among the most polluting and it most of the labor-intensive part of their Supply Chain Management is outsourced in the less-developed countries (Garcia-Torres, Rey-Garcia & Albareda-Vivo, 2017). These negative perceptions affect the brands' reputation (Shahryari Nia, Olfat, Esmaili, Rostamzadeh & Antucheviciene˙, 2016). For example, Zara was recently accused to do not respect labor rights in their Argentina's factories and this information influences negatively the brand perception (Govind et al., 2017).

Therefore, fast fashion brands are implementing ambitious CSR strategies and they are communicating them through their sustainability reports, which are considered very important tool for improving positive reputation and gain legitimacy (Garcia-Torres et al., 2017).

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3. Methodology and data collection

The focus of interest of this paper is in the area of sustainability reporting, communication and corporate legitimacy. The main objective of this research is to explore how the most important fast fashion brands build their gender equality's storytelling in their sustainability reports and in order to gain legitimacy and manage the different stakeholders.

For this research we applied a comparative exploration based on a content analysis of the sustainability reports published by three of the most important fast fashion brands: Zara, H&M and Mango (Özlen & Handukic, 2013; Tokatli, 2008). We use a case study approach because it is suited to our objective to deeply explore the communication strategy related to gender equality of the fast fashion industry represented by these three very worldwide relevant brands (Creswell, 2003; Gummesson, 1991; Muñoz Torres, Fernández Izquierdo & Escrig Olmedo, 2013; Yin, 2003). We adopted a synchronic, qualitative and interpretative semantic content analysis based on text coding (Friese, 2011; Olabuénaga, 2012).

The sustainability reports are a voluntary tool for stakeholders' engagement and, at the same time, an instrument for sustainable and responsible management development (Lahbil & Wahabi, 2017). The analysed documents have different formats, lengths and structures. They were retrieved from the brands webpages. They all refer to the years 2017-2018.

To perform the content analysis and to systematically manage the collected data, we used the CADQAS software Atlas.ti (Abela, García-Nieto, & Pérez Corbacho, 2007; Piñuel Raigada, 2002; Silver & Lewins, 2014; Trinidad Requena, Carrero Planes & Soriano Miras, 2006; Valles, 2001).

The first step of the content analysis was encoding the content of the sustainability reports. Text encoding is necessary to reduce the large number of words included in the analysed documents in a much smaller number of categories which will be later the subject of the semantic analysis (Friese, 2011; Olabuénaga, 2012).

The framework used for the content analysis is based on the "UN 2030 Sustainable Agenda" (General Assembly of United Nations, 2015; Red Española del Pacto Mundial de Naciones Unidas, n. d.) and, specifically, the "Sustainable Development Goal 5 gender equality: achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" (General Assembly of United Nations, 2015; United Nations, 2019).

The codes for the content analysis have been defined taking into consideration previous research on gender equality (Furlotti et al., 2019; Galbreath, 2018) and the items included in the "SDG 5" indicators (United Nations, 2019), in the "Gender-related Development Index", the "Development Index and Gender Empowerment Measure" and the "Gender Gap Index" (GGI) (Demetriades, 2007; Dijkstra & Hanmer, 2000).

Each text's quote could be assigned to more than one code, because the mentioned topic could refer to different indicators.

The effect or result variable used is the number of times which each fast fashion brand, directly or indirectly, in its sustainable report, mention a concept or topic or project related to gender equality. These results are collected in a "Codes Frequency Report". Table 1 show the collected data for the research.

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Table 1
Data collection: Codes Frequency Report

	Zara (Inditex)			H&M			MANGO			Totals
	Absolute	Comparison with the other brands	Comparison with the others Gender Equality Codes	Absolute	Comparison with the other brands	Comparison with the others Gender Equality Codes	Absolute	Comparison with the other brands	Comparison with the others Gender Equality Codes	Absolute
Access to education	3	60.00%	6.38%	1	20.00%	11.11%	1	20.00%	5.88%	5
Equal oportunities for professional development	6	46.15%	12.77%	1	7.69%	11.11%	6	46.15%	35.29%	13
Female employment access	3	75.00%	6.38%	0	0.00%	0.00%	1	25.00%	5.88%	4
Salary gap information	1	20.00%	2.13%	0	0.00%	0.00%	4	80.00%	23.53%	5
Sexual arrassment protocols	6	100.00%	12.77%	0	0.00%	0.00%	0	0.00%	0.00%	6
Social Action for Women's Communities	0	0.00%	0.00%	2	50.00%	22.22%	2	50.00%	11.76%	4
Women health and working condition	14	87.50%	29.79%	0	0.00%	0.00%	2	12.50%	11.76%w	16
Women image	0	0.00%	0.00%	2	100.00%	22.22%	0	0.00%	0.00%	2
Women on Board of Directors	7	70.00%	14.89%	2	20.00%	22.22%	1	10.00%	5.88%	10
Work-life balance	7	87.50%	14.89%	1	12.50%	11.11%	0	0.00%	0.00%	8
Totals	47		100.00%	9		100.00%	17		100.00%	73

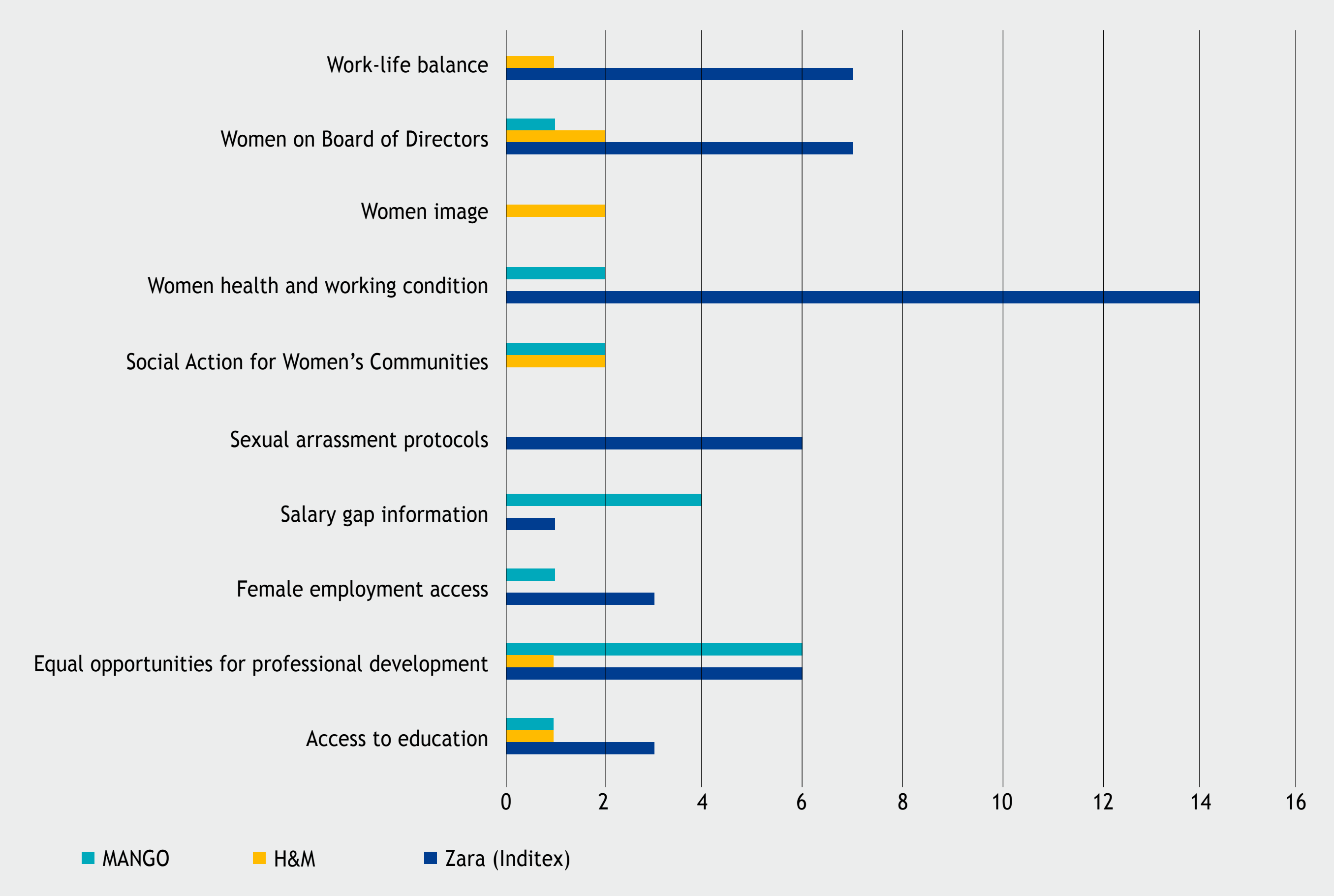
Source: author's elaboration.

4. Results

Figure 1 shows that "gender equality" is present in all the three analysed sustainability reports storytelling, nevertheless it has a different weight and the narrative is defined by different indicators.

Zara is the brand that mention more often topics related with gender equality, followed by Mango and, lastly, by H&M. If we take into consideration the overall results, the most important topic is "Women health and working condition", followed by "Equal opportunities for professional development" and "Women on Boards of Directors".

Figure 1
Code frequency results



Source: author's elaboration.

At the other side, "Women image" is considered not so important and neither "Social Actions for women's communities" nor "Female Employment Access".

Considering each brand, Zara concentrates its communication mainly on topics related to "Women health and working condition", while Mango "Equal opportunities for professional development" and, H&M has a more fragmented narrative, reporting mostly information about "Women image", "Women on Boards of Directors" and "Social Actions for women's communities".

5. Conclusions and implications

The aim of this paper is to contribute and enrich the understanding of the gender equality related topics narrative for the fast fashion industry through the analysis of three case studies. Through the content analysis of the sustainability reports of three main and most paradigmatic fast fashion brands, we focus on the projects and information related to gender equality matters.

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The main concern and the main topic for seeking legitimacy by the fast fashion analysed brands is assuring the improvement of women work conditions, labor rights, professional development opportunities and equal access to promotions and remuneration

Considering the sustainability reports as tool for corporate legitimation (Garcia-Torres et al., 2017; Hartman et al., 2007; Kolk, 2010; Kozlowski et al., 2015) we may affirm that gender equality related topics are part of the communication and legitimation strategy for the fast fashion industry. Nevertheless, we found some differences in the three analysed cases.

Zara (Inditex) focuses their communication reporting projects and information about women health and working condition. According to the theoretical framework, fast fashion industry is facing a lack of trust and a lot of criticism for the low labor conditions and scarce respect for human rights especially in the factories based in the less developing countries (Abrahamson, 2011; Garcia-Torres et al., 2017; Govind et al., 2017). Zara clearly replies to these critics (Govind et al., 2017) providing extent information about the improved labor conditions and the projects developed to preserve women health in the factories.

The majority of the academic literature related to gender equality is focused on women's inclusion into boards or executive teams (Cucari et al., 2018; Furlotti et al., 2019; Setó-Pamies, 2015), stating that a diverse and inclusive management team provide better financial results and improve intangible assets as reputation and legitimacy. The three brands provide information about the absolute number and percentage of women in their Board of Directors. Even if the vast majority of the executive team members are men, we found interesting that the brands communicate this data in a positive way, focusing the issue of lack of equality with a large set of information about new policies and project to foster equal opportunity for women professional development, salary gap decreasing and work-life balance. Mango is the most transparent brand in disclosure information about their equal salary policy.

At the other side, since the majority of the fast fashion industry workforce is formed by women, especially along the Supply Chain Management all around the world (Garcia-Torres et al., 2017; Joy et al., 2012; Özlen & Handukic, 2013), female access to employment is not a topic that brands use as a tool for legitimacy.

Analysing the results, we found surprising that the brands communicate very few projects related to women access to education since training and schooling are considered the best solutions for the gender gap closing (Miotto, Rom & Ordeix, 2017; World Economic Forum, 2018).

We also identified a missed opportunity in the brands communication and legitimacy strategy. Besides the critics for unsustainable Supply Chain Management, the fast fashion industry is accused to be not inclusive for large sizing and different female body shapes (Aagerup, 2011). Only H&M makes a brief reference about broad sizing and women body respect and inclusiveness.

Finally, we concluded that the main concern and, at the same time, the main topic for seeking legitimacy by the fast fashion analysed brands is assuring the improvement of women work conditions, labor rights, professional development opportunities and equal access to promotions and remuneration.

Following research will be conducted in order to understand the effectiveness of the legitimation strategy based on gender equality's issues and if communicating projects related with these matters improve brand legitimacy, reputation and purchase intention and action.

6. Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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