

Victims or agents for change? Argumentative strategies related to women's discursive representations in the social media debate surrounding sustainable fashion

In recent years, the sustainability of the fashion industry has been the object of an argumentative public controversy on social media, considering both environmental damage and garment workers' human rights (Greco & De Cock, 2021). This debate is intertwined with questions of gender, for example because many garment workers are women, women are seen as the main consumers of fashion and some are leading NGOs and small brands that advocate for sustainable fashion. This raises the question of how women are represented in the debate and what argumentative strategies are associated to these representations.

In this paper, we set out to answer this question. We contribute to studies on social media discourse, highlighting the hitherto rarely considered topic of gender in fashion sustainability and providing an original empirical methodology that combines linguistics and argumentation. Drawing on studies on the representation of *agentivity in discourse* (van Leeuwen 1995; De Cock & Michaud Maturana, 2014, 2018), we analyze women's representations. For example, women may be represented as *victims* of an unfair supply chain (e.g. garment workers), or as positive *agents* who bring about change in the system and strive towards a more sustainable fashion system. We then reconstruct argumentation behind the different agentivity constructions, considering different *stock issues* (Ihnen Jory, 2012). Introduced as an argumentation tool to analyze policymaking and other public discussions, stock issues can be used to analyze what types of recurrent issues and arguments are advanced. We advance the hypothesis that representations in which women are portrayed as *victims* are related to the stock issue of *ill*, in which a problem is denounced, without making concrete steps towards a solution. On the opposite, the stock issue of *cure*, in which a way towards a possible solution is presented, correlates with representations of women as *receivers* of someone else's initiatives (women *rescued*, or *empowered*) as well as of women as *agents* who promote change. In the latter case, we have a significant use of *argumentation by example*, which shows that solutions are possible because they have already been activated in specific cases.

Our analysis is based on a corpus containing around 2000 tweets and 15000 Instagram posts that include the hashtag *#fashionrevolution* published in the 2020 and 2021 Fashion Revolution Weeks. We select tweets and posts that mention women in English, German, French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese to discover correlations of agentivity and argumentative strategies.

Selected References

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