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American *Vogue* and Sustainable Fashion (1990–2015): A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

Discursive practices employed by American *Vogue* to recontextualize sustainable fashion between 1990 and 2015 were explored through the lens of a discourse-historical approach and multimodal critical discourse analysis. References to sustainably minded values and actions were found throughout the 26 years studied with notable peaks and valleys in coverage that, at times, contradicted changing social interest in the subject. Over time, *Vogue* recontextualized sustainable fashion discourses and encouraged a passive revolution by moving from a contentious positioning of either/or sustainable fashion to one that embraced a both/and positionality by narrowing focus to lifestyle and product features. Additionally, *Vogue* celebrated social actors engaged in sustainable behaviors though these were increasingly positioned as lifestyle choices rather than revolutionary collective action. *Vogue* continuously recontextualized the sustainable fashion discourse as "new" and desirable while neutralizing most negative considerations of fashion consumption through a variety of articulations and by drawing on well-established semiotic resources.

Keywords

Vogue, sustainability, critical discourse analysis

In *Vogue*'s March 1990 issue, Carol Leggett did not mince words when she stated: "There's no doubt about it. Our world is going to hell in a hand basket" (1990, p. 472).[1] Leggett was commenting on rising environmental degradation brought on by mass industrialization. Though Leggett noted fashion designers working with rather than against nature, the tone was decidedly apocalyptic. In the accompanying photo spread, a mostly nude model traipsed through the forest in found objects—a wistful reminiscence of humanity's humble beginnings, suggesting a fashion *or* nature dichotomy. In November 2009, *Vogue*'s "Steal of the Month" was a rain jacket by "eco-conscious company" Patagonia (Holgate, 2009, p. 247). Here, a scrub-faced model stood at the sea, a rudimentary tent behind her, as she squinted into a sunny future unseen by the reader. The text and imagery worked in

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tandem to present one viable solution to a specific consumer problem: how to be both fashionable *and* environmentally conscious. Though the discursive tactics were drastically different, *Vogue* was making a pointed effort to engage what we now term "sustainable fashion." The magazine's construction of this discourse had undoubtedly evolved in the time between these two editorials.

Vogue's sustainable fashion discursive practices between 1990 and 2015 are herein explored. To do so, I employ the discourse-historical approach (DHA; Reisgl & Wodak, 2016), in which critical theory and history combine in humanistic inquiry in order to analyze complex social problems. Multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA)—which assumes studying texts can reveal how humans use language and imagery to persuade, influence, and constitute meaning (Machin and Mayr, 2012)—is utilized as the theoretical framework. I argue that tracing the discursive practices of *Vogue* as an institution over time elucidates the boundaries of the sustainability paradigm within the fashion press. A specific fashion mass media outlet's role in the progression of sustainable fashion ideologies is the focus of inquiry. *Vogue*'s editorials that (re)constructed the meaning of sustainable fashion—inclusive of text and image produced by the print magazine—are analyzed. MCDA helps sketch the limits of an established discourse, revealing the roadblocks that have potentially hindered progress toward a sustainable fashion industry. Sketching these limits thus enables stakeholders to reconsider sustainable fashion's future discursive forms.

Literature Review

Magazines are the cultural intermediaries of the fashion industry in that they "possess a very great cultural capital of familiarity and social capital of 'connections'" (Bourdieu, 2013, p. 360). In cultural studies, magazines are a specific form of "representation" in that the words and images assist in the meaning-making process for objects and practices contained therein (Hall, Evans, & Nixon, 2013). *Vogue* is a media institution that shapes and represents knowledge about fashion. Historically, the magazine has held a disproportionate amount of power in the industry in terms of information molding and dissemination (David, 2006). Though *Vogue*'s power has been challenged in recent decades with the rise of fashion influencers and social media (Rocamora, 2013), it has maintained some cultural capital via popular culture and industry connections as well as through the machinations of Editor in Chief Anna Wintour.

Editorial choice is a means through which magazines express power and influence, manipulating perceived importance by granting editorial space (Kawamura, 2005). Conversely, editors make an equally impactful choice by omitting, barring, or otherwise reducing the visibility of topics in their pages. Hence, *Vogue*—through its inclusion of some sustainable fashion language and imagery—has acknowledged the potential negative impacts of the industry. However, moving beyond content inclusion is necessary to reveal the ideologies informing *Vogue*'s sustainable fashion discourse.

The exploration of environmental and sustainability messaging in mass media is a growing field. Specifically, critical analyses of the media's "greenwashing" and branding of the environmental movement in text and image have helped reveal the ideological work behind these media messages. Maier (2011) and Hansen and Machin (2008) noted in their respective studies that sustainability discourses in mass media benefited individuals or groups already in positions of power. In so doing, they upheld the status quo and marginalized challenges to entrenched power and ways of life.

Sustainable fashion discourse has manifested in both mainstream and niche media outlets. Winge (2008) explored the glamorization of sustainable fashion in *Vanity Fair*, noting the reliance on celebrity idolatry to present sustainability as both desirable and achievable. Beard (2008) noted the rise of niche media, such as *Sublime*, to cater to those already aligned with sustainable ideologies. Thomas (2008) argued that journalists' approach to eco-fashion was "playful although it [sidelined] accuracy in the pursuit of amusement and attention," leading to confusion and a loss of lexical specificity (p. 528). More recently, Jones and Hawley (2017) explored *Vogue*'s "Style Ethics"

editorials as a site of meaning construction for *Vogue*-sanctioned sustainable fashion, noting the magazine's attempts to align sustainability with preestablished tropes of luxury fashion. Sustainable fashion's fluid lexicon, as noted by other scholars, suggests an ability for easy manipulation by content creators to frame the industry's environmental and social issues on their own terms—hence the need for critical analysis of discursive practice in these influential sites.

Theoretical Framework

I align with the Foucauldian stance that discourse is "a system of rules regulating the flow of power . . . which serves a function of promoting interests in a battle of power and desires" (Brown, 2000, p. 31). Fundamentally, this stance is rooted in a social constructivist epistemology with an assumption that reality is not fixed and purely external to humans but rather is constantly negotiated. Discourse studies grounded in this approach cite discursive practices (e.g., texts, language, conversations, and imagery) as the mechanisms that constitute reality and make it meaningful. Furthermore, power relations—such as those among fashion media, fashion designers, and consumers—are negotiated and contested in and through discursive means. MCDA is an initiative to reveal the ideological work behind a discourse that (re)constitutes and (re)contextualizes meaning and power relations among subjects.[2]

Fairclough (2001) argued that a critical reading of texts can "show how language figures in social processes" (p. 229), thus drawing connections between ideology and practice. In the tradition of Van Leeuwen (2008), I approach discourse as recontextualized social practice where discourse producers transform and (de)legitimize knowledge. As Kaiser (2012) noted, when examining the intersection of two distinct discourses, "each . . . offers a lens through which to make sense of simultaneity: How different ideas or processes not only coexist but also interact dynamically" (p. 13). The intersecting discourses of interest here are sustainability and fashion within the context of American *Vogue*.

This critical, diachronic exploration of *Vogue*'s sustainable fashion discourse published between 1990 and 2015 was conducted using DHA and MCDA. This "critical" perspective works to "denaturalize" language, "to reveal the kinds of ideas, absences, and taken-for-granted assumptions in texts" (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 5). DHA grounds historical texts in their sociopolitical context and "[analyzes] the historical dimension of discursive actions by exploring the ways in which particular genres of discourse are subject to diachronic change" (Wodak, 2001, p. 65). A genre, such as the fashion editorial, "is a use of language associated with and constituting part of some particular social practice" (Fairclough, 2010, p. 56). Since 1892, *Vogue* has constituted for many of its readers what it means to *be* fashionable. What I add here is how *Vogue* has constituted what it means to be both sustainable *and* fashionable.

DHA is a diachronic analysis of numerous, heterogeneous texts and images that also employs the critical perspective of MCDA. Social semiotics theory underlies my approach to MCDA. Rather than the static codes of semiotics, social semiotics explores *potential* meaning construction when considering the words and images on a page. Reading it as potential meaning acknowledges the fluid and context-dependent aspects of how these communications are received (Van Leeuwen, 2005). For example, fashion magazines have well-established conventions—also known as semiotic resources—within which their editorials are constructed. Semiotic resources commonly drawn upon by *Vogue* are on-location photo stories or celebrity interviews. This does not mean that all discourses produced within the same conventions will have the same meaning, but conventions limit meaning potential since both producers and viewers are accustomed to certain norms for specific contexts (Lister & Wells, 2001). Each time a semiotic resource is engaged, there is an opportunity to recontextualize it, which may reinforce or challenge previous interpretations. Fashion magazines are one site among many in which sustainable fashion discourse as a semiotic resource has been recontextualized and made meaningful.

Vogue's reputation is built on its social capital through fashion industry connections with a mission statement that reads, in part, "*Vogue* immerses itself in fashion, always leading readers to what will happen next. Thought-provoking, relevant and always influential, *Vogue* defines the culture of fashion" (Condé Nast, 2019, para. 1). *Vogue*'s proximity to and influence in the fashion industry positions it as a powerful voice in the historical evolution of sustainable fashion discourse. Exploring how this discourse evolved in *Vogue*'s pages offers a new perspective on environmental and social activism within the fashion press. I presuppose the connection between discourse and social practice by arguing that the critical approach of DHA and MCDA will help expose *Vogue*'s limits as an institutional force for change as the ideology of sustainable fashion is recontextualized for its audience.

Research Questions

The connections among discourse, ideology, and social practice underpin the overarching research question: How does *Vogue* recontextualize sustainable fashion through its discursive practices as an institutional voice in the industry? Applying this perspective to *Vogue*'s iterations of sustainable fashion is vital to understanding the ideological work behind fashion media's sustainable fashion discourse and any feasible social action it promotes. More specifically, two key points of inquiry guided this initiative (a) How did *Vogue*'s sustainable fashion discursive practices change over time? and (b) How did *Vogue* explicitly and implicitly recontextualize sustainable fashion in its editorial content through text and image?

Data Collection and Analysis

I conducted data collection and analysis in two phases. First, I read every September issue—the magazine's most lucrative each year—between 1990 and 2015 cover-to-cover. *Voguepedia*'s "Eco Fashion" page highlighted seven additional *Vogue* issues (March 1990, May 2007, December 2007, March 2009, June 2009, November 2009, and November 2010) that significantly contributed to their sustainable fashion discourse. Thus, the cover-to-cover analysis included a total of 33 *Vogue* issues. During this initial stage, I focused on editorial content including any article or photo shoot produced exclusively by or for the magazine but excluded advertisements. While ads are notable discursive practices with well-established semiotic resources, they are a distinct genre, tangent-to-editorial text. Further, I was interested in the content over which *Vogue* had the most creative control.

To avoid limiting *Vogue* to preconceived definitions of sustainability—the intersecting dependencies of people, planet, and profit—I remained open to the broadest possible representation within the magazine's pages. To do this, I engaged Clark's (2008) conception of slow fashion that celebrates material quality, labor, and human agency, while established power dynamics, artifice, and newness are challenged. I deemed any editorial that appeared to frame its subject within this lens as relevant to this inquiry.

Next, I conducted a keyword search in the digital *Vogue* archive of all content (excluding indices and advertisements) published between 1990 and 2015. Keywords searched included variants of sustainability, environmental/-ism, social responsibility/activism, and common lexicon such as "fair trade," "slow fashion," and "eco fashion." In all, 333 relevant editorials surfaced from Stage 1 and 2 for further, in-depth analysis.

Since this was a multimodal exploration, I also analyzed imagery included with the editorial text if the corresponding text was deemed relevant. For example, if a photo shoot featured the work of known eco-conscious designer Stella McCartney, but the text did not acknowledge a sustainable fashion connection, it was deemed irrelevant to this inquiry. The visual analysis

Table 1. Common Discursive Strategies With Illustrative Examples From *Vogue*'s Sustainable Fashion Discursive Practice.

Discursive Strategy	Definition	Example From a *Vogue* Editorial Text
Abstraction	"the level of information or concrete details about an event or process are reduced or replaced by generalizations or broader concepts" (p. 219)	"This past holiday season, sales of Aveda's 'environmental candle' provided funds that the company donated to an appropriate organization" (p. 472). Details such as what makes the candle "environmental," how much was raised, and where the funds were donated are entirely omitted
Modality	"modals are an indication of an author's commitment to the truth of a statement or necessity" (p. 221)	"After a century of abuse, the poor planet is starting to fall apart at the seams" (p. 472). This is a high-modality statement as it indicates a strong belief. However, the author hedges and undermines her initial high modality on the source of the abuse when she states climactic change "*may be* a by-product of our neglect" [emphasis added] (p. 472)
Transitivity	"the study of what people are depicted as doing and refers, broadly, to who does what to whom, and how" (p. 104)	"Norma Kamali *expressed concern* for ecology in her spring fashion collection, which was *shown against* the greenery of Central Park last fall" [emphasis added] (p. 472). Here, *Vogue* positioned Kamali as a relatively passive social actor while Patagonia, who "tithes" to environmental groups, is a more active social actor (p. 472)
Salience	"certain features in compositions are made to stand out, to draw our attention to foreground certain meanings" (p. 53)	The entirety of the text—from the activities described to the photo story that accompanied the editorial—foregrounded environmental activism and "green" semiotic resources

Note. All definitions come from Machin and Mayr (2012), and all examples were extracted from Leggett (1990).

employed social semiotics theory by exploring the interaction between text and image as they collaboratively constructed potential meaning and/or offered contradictory representations of sustainable fashion. Of the 333 editorials analyzed, only 21 (all pre-1995) did not contain visual material.

Iterative reading then ensued, using MCDA as a lens to delineate discursive strategies (see Table 1) implemented in text and image within and across editorial content. As each editorial was read, specific discursive strategies *Vogue* employed to recontextualize the editorial subject were identified, allowing strategies to then be compared across texts and over time. I explored editorials spanning 26 years, penned by numerous writers with visuals produced by a bevy of photographers and graphic artists. The resulting narrative is an "interpretive bricolage" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 12), in the spirit of critical qualitative inquiry (Denzin, 2017) in cultural and media studies. I bring together disparate elements to offer a new perspective and understanding of human behavior and meaning-making, recontextualized by *Vogue* as a significant discursive site and cultural institution.

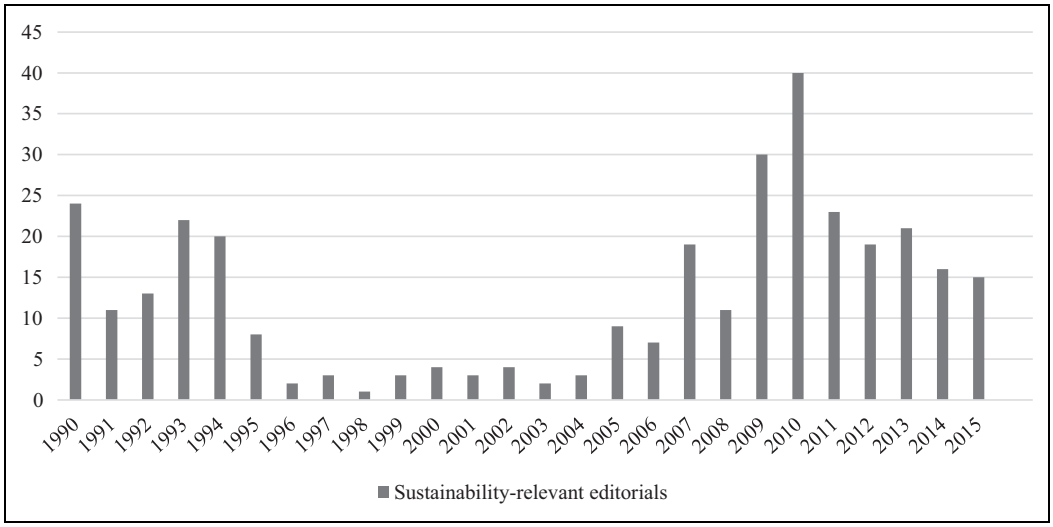

Figure 1. Distribution of sustainability-relevant editorials in *Vogue* magazine, 1990–2015.

Findings

Below, I offer two distinct narratives of *Vogue*'s sustainable fashion discourse and how it has evolved over time. The first narrative is broad and sweeping to situate *Vogue*'s sustainable fashion discursive practice in a changing sociocultural context. The second narrative explores the evolution of three specific discursive strategies *Vogue* employed to recontextualize sustainable fashion product and practice over the 26 years studied.

A DHA to Vogue*'s Sustainable Fashion Discourse*

In total, sustainability-related editorials accounted for 1.9% of all *Vogue* editorial content between 1990 and 2015. On average, *Vogue* published 56 discrete editorial items in each issue. Thus, if spread equally across all 26 years, a reader would encounter one sustainability-relevant editorial in each issue. However, upon closer inspection, some notable peaks and valleys emerge. Figure 1 offers a visual summary of sustainability editorials published over time.

Sustainability waxes and wanes. Between 1990 and 1995, sustainability-related content occupied 2.84% of *Vogue*'s editorial space. *Vogue*'s coverage coincided with increased coverage of environmental concern, like the growing hole in the ozone over Antarctica (Browne, 1989), and environmental activism, like a *Wall Street Journal* report on Brazilian companies fighting for the right to use the Amazon forest for economic prosperity while the West attempted to protect it (Cohen, 1989). This was the context in which *Vogue*'s first eco-conscious editorial, "Natural Selection," was published in March 1990.

The early enthusiasm found in 1990–1995 contrasts sharply with 1996–2005. Just 0.34% of content between 1996 and 2000 and 0.59% between 2001 and 2005 were deemed relevant to this study. For 10 years, *Vogue*'s discourse rarely incorporated sustainability ideals. *Voguepedia* mirrored this dearth with zero entries referencing *Vogue* contributions or other milestones in the movement between 1995 and 2000. However, though fewer overt sustainability editorials were published, there were several that aligned with elements of slow fashion (Clark, 2008). For example, *Vogue* de-emphasized the "new" by promoting brands that focused on quality over arbitrary changes

in silhouette, encouraging readers to repair their old luxury goods rather than replace them. In this way, luxury good status was a precursor to the object being worthy of conservation. Jones and Jones (2018) have explicated the conflation of luxury and slow fashion/sustainability in media discourse and the potential drawbacks to this entanglement. *Vogue* relegated overt environmentalism to travel, food, and beauty/health editorials.

The period of 2006–2010 surpassed pre-1996 levels of sustainably minded content, with 3% of editorials devoted to environmental and/or social concerns. Social disenchantment with global politics and unrepentant consumerism was also present in *Vogue*. Peak editorial focus occurred in 2010, when 40 relevant editorials appeared in this year alone. Three of the issues highlighted by *Voguepedia* as significant to their eco-fashion contribution were published in 2010 as well. Furthermore, *Vogue* introduced two recurring segments: Style Ethics in 2009 and "Social Responsibility" in 2010, both of which became a significant site of sustainability discourse in the magazine during the remaining years studied. This was the same period when the fashion academy was building a case for sustainable fashion, illustrated by a notable rise in sustainability-related studies published in *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* (Ha-Brookshire & Hawley, 2014). Public reception of sustainability messages in this period was mixed, however, as illustrated by a *New York Times* article in March 2007 on Al Gore's controversial *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006). The *Times* explored the calls to, as the article title put it, "Cool the Hype," emanating from right-wing activists and centrist scientists alike. The disconnect between *Vogue*'s coverage and waning social support will be further explored.

Throughout 2010–2015, with 3.12% editorial content, the magazine shifted to an object-centric discourse, increasingly focused on eco and ethical goods rather than collective social action. In this period, the climate change crisis became increasingly dire, with the *New York Times* reporting in April 2011 that scientists were predicting a sixth mass extinction due to human-driven climactic changes. In the fashion industry, multiple apparel factory tragedies once again shed negative light on fashion production processes. The April 2013 Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh became a synecdoche for gross negligence and exploitation in the industry. In the weeks that followed the tragedy, *Women's Wear Daily* coverage suggested that both governmental organizations and the industry seemed poised for real change. However, *Vogue* tempered the ideology/praxis connection in this same period. I discuss how they did so below.

Compartmentalized sustainability. To establish the variety and breadth of *Vogue*'s sustainability discourse, I classified each editorial based on content, and nine core subject areas emerged. Clothing and Accessories editorials (21% of sustainability-relevant content) featured fashion objects available in the marketplace, often emphasizing how they were made. Designer editorials (20%) featured the fashion maker's point of view, often considering their larger body of work and not just a current offering, while retail editorials (1%) featured business-to-consumer contexts. The combined category of beauty/health (13%) broadly discussed the relationship between beauty/health industries and environmental degradation. For example, a popular topic in *Vogue* beauty editorials between 1990 and 1995 was ozone depletion, requiring regimens and products that would protect the skin from these developments.

The largest category, lifestyle articles (31%), emphasized ways of living that promoted sustainably minded and practical changes to behavior (e.g., switching out plastic bags for canvas), often exemplified by a notable individual. Though mostly focused on privileged persons or those catering to the elite, like garden designers, the articles also featured less glamorous activists like Nobel Peace Prize laureates and scientists working to preserve biodiversity. Travel (4%) was a distinct category of lifestyle article that promoted ecotourism. Politics editorials (5%) highlighted government officials or agencies actively promoting or enacting sustainability-minded policies in the United States and around the world. Art and culture editorials (5%) included books, film, architecture, and art

installations that engaged the subject. Lastly, food editorials (6%) discussed environmentally conscious developments in agriculture and restaurants.

There are a few general trends to note here. First, there was an even distribution among these emergent categories in the first 5 years. During the 10 intervening years of 1996–2005, the discourse concentrated into clothing product features and designer profiles. There was a notable rise in lifestyle-oriented editorials after 2006. Lifestyle journalism blurs the lines between culture and consumption (Kristensen & From, 2012). As Meinhold (2013) noted, "Lifestyle, in fashion terminology, does not . . . mean 'style of *life*' but 'style of *consumption*' because life is only a good life with these or those particular consumer goods" [emphasis original] (p. 153). Over time, *Vogue* increasingly offered sustainable living as one possible trope of consumer identity.

The downward trend of including sustainably minded discourse between 1995 and 2005 requires further analysis. The beginning of this trend was explicitly tied to economic recovery by Wintour (1994) when she stated: "The early-nineties guilt trip—or maybe just the recession—is over . . . the era of penitence has ended, and fashion is fun again" (p. 68), implying that economic and environmental conscientiousness during the previous 4 years had not been enjoyable. Economic prosperity did indeed return to the United States at the close of the millennium. *Women's Wear Daily* highlighted strong retail reports in May 1999 and a 31-year peak in consumer confidence in December the same year.

However, *Vogue*'s turn away from sustainably minded discourse in 1995 contradicted contemporary public opinion. Scruggs and Benegal (2012) found that from 1995 to 2000, Gallup Poll respondents were increasingly worried about climate change, peaking in 2001 with 40% of the American population responding they were "very worried" about global warming (p. 506). Conversely, when *Vogue* was producing the most sustainability-relevant articles in 2009 and 2010, public opinion had turned against the idea of an anthropocentric influence on climate, supporting the strong correlation between the poor economic outlook post-2008 recession and reduced support of environmental policy found by Scruggs and Benegal (2012). Political polarization has also contributed to the downturn in concern about climate change, with the political right increasingly skeptical of the scientific evidence (Marquart-Pyatt, McCright, Dietz, & Dunlap, 2014). American *Vogue* has largely aligned itself with the political left in the 21st century, most notably when it chose to endorse a presidential candidate—Democrat Hillary Clinton—for the first time in its history ("Endorsement: And at last—It's time to vote," 2016). Though more recent than the years studied and though the endorsement did not mention Clinton's climate policy, this ideological inclination may explain *Vogue*'s continued inclusion of sustainable discourses even as broader public interest waned.

Vogue *Recontextualizes Sustainable/Fashion*

The following section offers a closer analysis of the microlevel discursive practices utilized by *Vogue* to construct meaning and shape perceptions of sustainable fashion for its readers. The 333 editorials analyzed within the sustainable fashion lexical field ranged from one-off mentions of a celebrity's eco- or social consciousness to multipage spreads devoted to sustainability-minded fashion labels. In the interest of space, I will focus on three of *Vogue*'s recontextualizing practices that were most common and persistent.

Sustainable fashion as either/or. *Vogue*'s sustainability discourse often revealed a conflicted engagement with sustainable fashion that demonstrated the tensions created in an either/or fashion worldview (Kaiser, 2012). While inclusion suggested a manner of support, *Vogue*'s semiotic resources often undermined or otherized sustainability issues. In multiple instances early on, those who were making strides toward embodying their eco-conscious ideologies were diminished as sanctimonious.

River Phoenix was a Hollywood idol in May 1990 but "irritating" when he spoke his mind about environmental concerns and was reminded of his large family by the author when he brought up population control as a solution (Woods, 1990, p. 284). In 1995, a profile of an eco-retreat in the Caribbean described the hotel desk clerk as "patronizing" and implied it had a cultish atmosphere by noting "They used 'we' a lot" (Siebert, 1995, p. 86). *Vogue* not only established the limits of feasible action but also how their readers may interpret those actions.

The either/or tension was most apparent when *Vogue* attempted to recontextualize an eco-fashion aesthetic. The delegitimization of sustainable fashion's aesthetic occurred regularly with the incorporation of terms like hippie, granola, and, to some extent, ethnic. The use of such terms harkened back to a well-established semiotic resource associated with 1960s counterculture. Throughout the 26 years studied, *Vogue* struggled to present the aesthetic as both sustainable *and* fashionable. They were technically fashionable because *Vogue* included them, but they were presented as "other" due to their aesthetic components. For example, when promoting the edicts of slow, sustainable fashion, one author noted, "In the past, clothes with a conscience made you look, at worst, like some crazy survivalist, or, at best, ready to spend every waking hour practicing Ashtanga yoga. Now they've turned sophisticated" (Holgate, 2007, p. 200). To better align the products featured with what the author deemed a "noncrunchy" aesthetic (i.e., not granola, or of the unfashionable hippie variety) and within the traditional ethos of the magazine, the author described the luxurious elements of the products, including production time and level of artisanship. Harkening back to the old image of sustainability allowed the author to introduce the discourse of the new, reducing tensions with sustainable fashion as either/or. While the tradition of living organically and ethically engaged with a product's supply chain was not new, it was repackaged as inherently modern and of-the-moment.

Visual representations illustrated an evolving attitude toward the discourse over time, though it stagnated for the first 20 years. The corresponding photo spreads that appeared up through 2010 often employed visual clichés (or highly successful semiotic resources). Windswept and barefoot models and activists standing in fields, digging in gardens, posing at a desolate beach or an otherwise outdoorsy setting remained de rigueur, even as *Vogue* attempted to disentangle sustainable fashion from these tropes. For example, eco-fashion's connotations of "earth tones and itchy knits" were bemoaned in a Style Ethics editorial featuring Erdem (Guiducci, 2015, p. 638). In the corresponding photo, Sienna Miller was styled in a full-length, flowered gown paired with hiking boots and thick socks, standing in the middle of a field and fulfilling the very stereotype the editorial text lamented. The literal "green" trope remained prominent up through 2015, when a Stella McCartney dress was photographed on a model in mid-distance walking alone through an overgrown field with trees as the backdrop. Even typographical choices illustrated a reliance on green semiotic resources, with many of the editorials in the mid-2000s featuring green banners or fonts to demarcate sections of the magazine devoted to environmental impacts.

It was not until the last 5 years of editorials analyzed did both/and sustainable fashion representation start to appear. In November 2010, *Vogue* published "Naturally Refined," featuring one-off sustainable creations by well-known designers like Michael Kors and Vera Wang. If one did not read the captions, it would have been difficult to pinpoint this photo spread as eco-minded. In November 2015, a feature titled "Reform School" further normalized sustainable fashion as both/and by showing the eco-fashion brand Reformation worn by celebrities in their daily lives. The overall recontextualization marked the brand and the ideologies outlined in the corresponding editorial as equal to the magazine's mainstream discourse. No longer demarcated by green typography or models traipsing outdoors, the two qualities of being "Insta-chic" and "eco-friendly" (Holt, 2015, p. 146) perfectly captured the new narrative: Sustainable fashion had to look good and this was one such brand that could provide ideology *and* aesthetics.

Abstracted impacts. The implementation of a sustainability lexicon largely abstracted and nominalized the fashion industry's environmental and social impact. Specifically, the lexicon used to discuss environmental degradation caused by fashion practices was often imprecise. While still appearing to engage in socially relevant conversations, abstraction diffused blame on any one practice or object. For example, *Vogue* noted that "environmental concerns" in the beauty industry were "sending today's fragrance makers back to nature as never before" to incorporate "natural" scents (Lord, 1992, p. 220) but not to evaluate the environmental effect of chemicals used in production. In 2007, common denim manufacturing chemicals like "thiox (for the indigo), potassium permanganate (for the distressing), sandblasting (for the worn-in look)" (Herman, 2007, p. 136) were clearly delineated, with scientific language lending credibility to the discussion. However, the negative impacts of such chemicals were left ambiguous. Once readers were acquainted with all the harmful processes used to create their favorite jeans, they were warned against overreacting. "Loving the [denim] we own less because of the damage they've already done is not the answer . . . we'd actually do more good wearing our favorite offenders forever" (Herman, 2007, p. 138). Again, the damage done was indeterminate, but consumers' consciences were eased anyway.

These ambiguous connections between fashionable consumption and social or environmental impacts were further abstracted when discussing the more pervasive and complex issue of air pollution. Comparing three different articles that engaged the subject and intersected it with consumption illustrates how *Vogue* repeated semiotic resources over time. In October 1990, beauty products were "saving the planet" by encouraging consumers to "return, refill, and recycle," while in the corresponding photo spread, defending against particulate matter while looking chic was as simple as pairing a dust mask with a smoky eye (Lord, 1992, pp. 394–399). In 2007, *Vogue* noted, "Nearly half of the nation's air pollution comes from the exhaust fumes emitted by vehicles in the United States—almost a quarter billion in all. Bike, walk, take public transportation, or carpool, and breathe easy" (Goodman, 2007, p. 721). This pronouncement appeared in an offset textbox alongside a photo spread featuring menswear elements in women's wear. The imagery with this factoid is of "model environmentalist" (p. 712) Shalom Harlow, holding a handkerchief to her face as she traversed a futuristic cityscape. Air quality was again addressed in 2008, noting, "Particulate matter is the stuff that fills the air as a result of . . . the power plants and industries that we count on to power us and our economy" (Sullivan, 2008, p. 132). Again, a dust mask appeared to illustrate the scourge of pollution, though the body was absent in this instance. Instead, the mask sat on a backlit table with an unidentified black powder that was manipulated to look like an abstract face above it. That these power plants and industrial enterprises may very well be producing the garments within the magazine's pages was left unsaid in all three editorials. In the first two editorials, the tongue-in-cheek visual discourse undermined the seriousness of airborne pollutants. While the third editorial was more serious in tone, the visual representation disembodied any negative impact.

Representing sustainable actors. MCDA and DHA offer opportunities to evaluate not just how objects are connected to ideology through discourse but also how individuals and groups (i.e., social actors) are represented enacting ideologies. Social actors possess varying degrees of social capital. Their capital impacts perception of their authenticity and the authenticity of the discourses to which they contribute and promote. Various processes of "legitimation" in discourse help authenticate social action (Van Leeuwen, 2008, pp. 105–123). When the authority of *Vogue* was not enough to authenticate the sustainable fashion discourse, they relied on the authority of individuals with social capital (i.e., role models) as well as moral evaluation.

Much of the discourse of the early 1990s grouped multiple individuals acting similarly together, suggesting a broader movement within society and the industry. Political action by "the greenies," as *Vogue* dubbed vocal environmentalists in 1994, illustrated what could be gained through persistent campaigning and lobbying, as well as what was at stake if they failed. *Vogue* noted, "If we don't

[collectively change course], our *planet* will look different in wholesale ways—hotter, more arid, more crowded, less diverse" (McKibben, 1994, p. 64). The dire predicament mirrored the tone found in other early 1990s articles, though by segmenting this as a political editorial, the collective social action outlined was disassociated from fashion consumption.

Over time, collective action was dismantled, and *Vogue* highlighted individual consumers/activists or one sustainability-relevant object/practice per editorial. Individuals engaged in social and environmental activism appeared throughout the years studied (e.g., Al Gore, Naomi Klein, Livia Firth, Jessica Seinfeld, and Laurie David). They offered pointed critique of issues both tangent and directly related to the fashion industry as well as specific action readers could take to live more sustainably: call their senators, switch out light bulbs, avoid plastic; but also, avoid sanctimony. The editorial featuring Naomi Klein's book, *This Changes Everything* (2014), illustrated how *Vogue* recontextualized a well-known critic of fashion industry practices within its pages. The editorial acknowledged that Klein's politics put her to the far left of many Americans but easily brought her back into the fashion fold with descriptors like "unobtrusively stylish" and relaying an anecdote in which she claimed the one thing she liked about capitalism was the shoes (Powers, 2014, p. 464). Keeping in step with other semiotic resources, Klein was photographed mid-distance, windswept on a beach. The activist-author's political ideologies and her embodied practice of stylishness were unrelated, but by pulling them together *Vogue* recontextualized Klein as an authority—but an appealing and less threatening authority.

Vogue also used moral evaluation to legitimize the sustainable fashion practice, "that is, legitimization by (often very oblique) reference to value systems" (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 106). For instance, when *Vogue* profiled "environmentalist and supermodel" Amber Valetta's Master & Muse collection, they presented Valetta's products as superior eco-friendly goods (Holt, 2013, p. 604). By recontextualizing Valetta as an "environmentalist" *and* a "supermodel" (both/and representation), *Vogue* engaged two specific value systems that highlighted Valetta's authority, stating, "Who better to bring a sharp, informed eye to a genre that too often is more hippie-dippie than hip?" (p. 608). Similarly, a profile of model Miranda Kerr's organic beauty line Kora recontextualized the product within Kerr's lifestyle. A description of the "antioxidant-rich" "organic" ingredients in Kerr's beauty products parlayed into a description of her "bohemian" home (Regensdorf, 2013). "Bohemian" here is a more oblique value system, but the magazine had developed a shorthand semiotic resource to connect a bohemian/hippie aesthetic and a sustainably minded ideology.

Social elite like HRH Prince Charles also helped cement this connection between sustainability as a value system and (luxurious) lifestyle. In September 2010, Prince Charles penned a one-page editorial enticing *Vogue* readers to engage in sustainable fashion practices. Though Prince Charles admitted he did not consider himself a fashionable person, he saw the value of harnessing fashion's ability to "make new ideas attractive and to do so rapidly and on a grand scale" (2010, p. 666). The editorial "urges" readers to start wherever they can, making the movement open to any action and not demanding a complete lifestyle overhaul. Notably, aside from granting him editorial space, *Vogue* was largely absent here, with Prince Charles addressing the reader directly—both in the text and in the accompanying garden-backdropped portrait.

Moral authority was tantamount as *Vogue* started to include more references to human-to-human interactions as central to a sustainable ethos after 2010. For example, *Vogue*'s recurring feature "social responsibility"—which began in April 2010—implied a discussion on fashion industry initiatives to address social impact. However, what it actually provided was a platform for celebrities, socialites, and models to highlight their charitable work and bring awareness to pet causes. Images accompanying these stories foregrounded the well-known individual rather than the individuals or communities assisted through their actions.

In a rare instance where *Vogue* highlighted the work of skilled craftspeople engaged in sustainable fashion production, the representation was problematic. The article discussed Indian women

employed by an artist who established a workshop to connect Western brands, like Anthropologie. "The result is a kind of anti-sweatshop" *Vogue* explained in an abstracted acknowledgment that not all fashions were produced in such an environment (MacSweeney, 2002, p. 504). Though the women profiled were exchanging their skilled labor for payment, "charity" was set in large font right in the middle of the editorial, devaluing the Indian craftswomen's labor while also limiting their agency and autonomy. The social good done by the Western, philanthropic entrepreneur was thus the social action celebrated and foregrounded.

Discussion

Vogue's adoption and recontextualization of the sustainable fashion discourse was largely a green "passive revolution" whereby "neoliberal capitalism adjusts to crises arising from conflicts within itself" (Wanner, 2015, p. 23). The discourse employed within the magazine's pages rarely challenged the economic ideologies motivating unsustainable consumption patterns, largely promoting the concept of buy better, not less. A buy better mentality is central to the passive revolution in sustainable fashion discourse and indicative of late-stage capitalist solutions to social ills. On a larger scale in the context of mass media, *Vogue* exhibited an increasing trend toward marketization. It is dubious to assume *Vogue* has ever been a model Habermasian public sphere "in which people, as citizens, are drawn into serious debate on the issues of the day" (Fairclough, 2010, p. 11). However, when the early years studied here are compared to more recent, there is a noticeable decline in articles devoted to complex political and social issues such as climate change. What emerged instead was a growth in lifestyle segments that turned serious public issues into infotainment articles illustrating the good life informed by environmental or social conscientiousness.

Considering the magazine's social position, it is not in *Vogue*'s interest to challenge the status quo. Sustainability and its concomitant discourses of questioning production practices, contemplating long-term consequences, and integrating efficiency with sufficiency would undermine the fashion system *Vogue* has helped build and within which it thrives. At the same time, and as de Burgh-Woodman and King (2013) argued, maintaining sustainability as a symbolic discourse grants individuals a high level of agency in terms of how they engage and embody these practices. In this way, sustainable fashion can also be viewed as an "articulation" (Kaiser, 2012, pp. 4–7). Some of the articulations noted in *Vogue*'s discourse included environmental awareness: fashion/nature entanglement; environmental degradation: fashion as protection; and sustainable living: luxurious living.

Vogue focused predominantly on environmental impacts rather than the social impacts of sustainable fashion. Social impacts are not entirely absent, but fashion production's environmental impact was the primary concern as well as the key semiotic resource drawn upon for visual representation. For much of the time studied, *Vogue* relied heavily on predictable semiotic resources connected to environmentalism including green fonts and idyllic outdoor settings. From 2010 to 2015, *Vogue* moved away from stereotypical imagery of fields and flowers toward high-fashion photo spreads that helped normalize a both/and view of sustainable fashion.

Lastly, *Vogue*'s move over time to highlight individual rather than collective action coincides with the mass individualization of consumers in postmodern society (Bauman, 2007). In *Vogue*, sustainable fashion began as a political, collective effort, while in later years embodied sustainability was best realized through individual consumerist action. This position helped further normalize sustainability within its pages to make sustainable fashion action nearly indistinguishable from other types of fashionable consumption. Van Leeuwen (2008) argued the rise of homogeneous discursive formats ensures "social action becomes increasingly regimented, homogenized, and proceduralized" (p. 1). By 2015, the discursive site of the fashion magazine ultimately superseded distinct differences between sustainable and unsustainable social practice. Further exploration is needed to better understand the implications of this phenomenon.

Reflexivity Statement

As Denzin (2017) noted, "The qualitative researcher is not an objective politically neutral observer who stands outside and above the study of the social world" (p. 12). Thus, like the editorials analyzed herein, this qualitative inquiry is itself a discourse and should be critically reflected upon. MCDA is often applied to social issues deemed problematic; thus, narratives often dwell on negative or harmful representations. By phrasing the questions as I did, I tried to avoid taking an initial stance against the magazine. The intent of this inquiry was to present sustainable fashion from *Vogue*'s perspective without pitting it against a utopian ideal. Furthermore, viewing the magazine in context with DHA avoided applying modern conceptions of sustainability to *Vogue*'s past. Though every effort to ensure *Vogue*'s voice and perspective was centralized, I did enforce a predetermined lexicon on the magazine during the keyword archival search.

Conclusion

The goal of MCDA is not to offer definitive answers to research questions but rather new perspectives on complex social processes. The perspective that emerged here was that over time, *Vogue* recontextualized sustainable fashion discourses and encouraged a passive revolution by moving from a contentious positioning of either/or sustainable fashion to one that embraced a both/and position by narrowing focus to lifestyle and product features. Additionally, *Vogue* increasingly celebrated social actors engaged in sustainable behaviors, though also increasingly presented their actions as lifestyle choices rather than revolutionary collective action. *Vogue* continuously recontextualized the sustainable fashion discourse as new and desirable while neutralizing most negative considerations of fashion consumption through a variety of articulations and by drawing on well-established semiotic resources.

This inquiry illustrates the value of applying a critical lens to media and diachronic narratives. Future critical examinations of the fashion media's sustainability discourse engagement should expand into additional media landscapes, including new media. Consumers, scholars, and activists frustrated by the slow pace at which the fashion industry is addressing these issues should examine discursive practices for the limits and barriers to fundamental change these practices (re)establish. The work of removing these barriers and harnessing the power of institutional discourses may then begin.

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Notes

1. *Voguepedia*—a Vogue.com compendium denoting the most significant people and ideas covered by the magazine—proclaimed this article to be the magazine's "first" eco-fashion article in its entry on the subject. *Voguepedia* was removed as a resource during Vogue.com's 2014 redesign. I used a web archive to revisit the resource for this inquiry.
2. For a primer on the field, see Fairclough (2013) and Wodak (2001).

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