

# VICTIMS OR AGENTS OF CHANGE? THE REPRESENTATION AND SELF-REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA DEBATE SURROUNDING SUSTAINABLE FASHION

Cet article analyse le débat sur les médias sociaux concernant la mode durable en se basant sur un jeu de données multilingue de messages Instagram et de tweets. Nous nous concentrons sur la façon dont les femmes sont représentées dans le discours en termes d'agentivité et sur la question de savoir comment ceci est associé à différentes stratégies argumentatives. Nos résultats montrent un lien clair entre l'argument de dénoncer le « mal » du système de la mode et la représentation des femmes comme victimes ; et entre les arguments proposant un « remède » au problème et la représentation des femmes comme recevant des actions positives ou comme des agentes causant un changement. La représentation positive des femmes comme agentes est souvent réalisée par le biais d'arguments basés sur des exemples concrets, qui montrent que le changement est déjà en cours.

● Sara Greco | USI,  
Chiara Mercuri | USI,  
Barbara De Cock |  
Université catholique  
de Louvain

## Introduction

The recent lively debate on the sustainability of the fashion industry touches upon environmental damage and respect for garment workers' human rights. This debate, largely conducted on social media, is intertwined with questions of gender for a variety of reasons: many workers are women, women are seen as the main consumers of fashion and it is often women who are leading the NGOs and brands that advocate for sustainable fashion. This raises the question of *how women are discursively represented* in this debate. Women can be represented either as *victims* of an unfair supply chain, or as positive *agents* who bring about change and strive towards a more sustainable system in the fashion industry. Drawing on studies on the representation of *agentivity in discourse* (van Leeuwen, 1995; De Cock & Michaud Maturana, 2014, 2018) in general, and in the discourse around fashion sustainability in particular (Baker Jones, 2020), we analyze the (self-)representations of women in the

debate surrounding sustainable fashion. In order to examine how different categories of agentivity are related to different argumentative strategies, we link the different representations to different argumentative *stock issues* (Ihnen Jory, 2012), which define recurrent issues in the debate. Our analysis is based on a dataset of tweets and Instagram posts (henceforth: Ig posts) containing the hashtag *#fashionrevolution*, which were published during the 2020 Fashion Revolution Week, created to commemorate the 2013 Rana Plaza accident in Bangladesh, which killed more than a thousand garment workers (mostly women and children) and injured many others (De Castro, 2021).

## Women's (self-)representations and argumentative strategies

### Agents or victims?

The importance of representations of agentivity in discourse concerning societal problems has been demonstrated in studies on reports concerning human

rights violations (De Cock & Michaud Maturana, 2014, 2018), abortion debates (Pizarro Pedraza & De Cock, 2018), campaigns around HIV transmission (Avila & Gras, 2014) and sustainable fashion (Greco & De Cock, 2021). Indeed, the linguistic representation of situations can lead to participants being represented as agentive, that is, as deliberately carrying out certain actions in an intentional way, thus showing a causal link between their action and a particular impact.

Our approach in this paper goes well beyond strictly semantic-syntactic definitions of ‘agent’, which typically focus on the semantic role of the person intentionally carrying out the action or on the syntactic position of the agent complement. We distinguish between women who act as agents in a broad sense, namely as persons having an active function with respect to sustainable fashion vs. women being victims, i.e. persons who suffer physical, economic, social or psychological harm as a result of the fashion production system. Crucially, we analyze how women are represented in the analyzed tweets and Ig posts. This does not mean that the actual lives of these women may not be more complex. Thus, garment workers can be both agents and victims, but the way in which they are represented in the messages analyzed often very clearly privileges one facet, sometimes to the point of entirely erasing the other one.

### An argumentation perspective: stock issues

Originally introduced in policymaking studies, stock issues have gone on to be considered by argumentation scholars as a useful tool for understanding what issues are addressed by a speaker when they discuss problems that exist in society (Ihnen Jory, 2012).

Stock issues relate to the fundamental matters that speakers need to tackle when arguing for a change in existing policies. Various different models have been proposed, and in our paper we adopt the framework identified by Ihnen Jory (2012). Drawing on this theory, we find that two stock issues are particularly relevant to our dataset: the *ill*, which refers to a problem that the speaker identifies in society, and the *cure*, which relates to the proposed solution to the problem identified. With regard to the *ill*, each

stock issue can be formulated through the question, “Does a problem exist in society”, whereas for the stock issue of *cure*, the question becomes “Will the proposed change solve the problem?” (Ihnen Jory, 2012: 41-46). In our analysis, the model of stock issues is used to identify argumentative strategies used in the Fashion Revolution social media campaign. In fact, the whole social media campaign relating to Fashion Revolution Week can be seen as a means of raising awareness of an existing problem and proposing solutions; it is likely, therefore, that the discourse used in the different messages will touch upon these two stock issues.

### Dataset

The general dataset used for this article consists of 254 tweets and 3209 Ig posts in various languages. All contain the hashtag #fashionrevolution, and were published during the 2020 Fashion Revolution Week (20-26 April). Tweets were collected through the Centre de Traitement Automatique de Langage of UCLouvain (Naets, 2018), while Ig posts were collected through Picodash (<https://www.picodash.com>).

In order to address our research question of how women are represented in the debate and what stock issues are associated with the different representations, we restricted our general dataset to a women-related dataset, which contained words relating to women; we limited our search to seven languages (Table 1). The words and languages that form the basis of our selection are represented in Table 1; these terms are not always perfectly equivalent in translation but are selected because they were found recurrently in the various languages in our preliminary searches.



Sara Greco is Associate Professor of Argumentation at USI – Università della Svizzera italiana, Institute of Argumentation, Linguistics and Semiotics. She has published widely on argumentation theory, focusing on argumentation as an alternative to conflict and on the analysis of public controversies.



Chiara Mercuri is a PhD student at USI – Università della Svizzera italiana, Institute of Argumentation, Linguistics and Semiotics. She works on conflicting frames in the controversy surrounding fashion sustainability.



Barbara De Cock is Professor of Spanish Linguistics at the Université catholique de Louvain. Her main research interests are the pragmatics of Spanish person reference and impersonal constructions, and the discursive analysis of a variety of societal discourses including human rights reports and political discourse on social media.

**Table 1**

Words searched per language – in order of frequency in the dataset

Language	Noun(s)	Adjective(s)
English	Woman/en	Female
Spanish	Mujer(es)	Femenino(s)/a(s)
Portuguese	Mulher(es)	Femenino(s)/a(s)
Italian	Donna/e	Femminile/i
French	Femme(s), dame(s)	Féminin(e)(s)
German	Frau(en)	Weiblich(e), Feminin(e)
Dutch	Vrouw(en), dame(s)	Vrouwelijk/e

This selection resulted in a restricted dataset of 7 tweets (out of 254) and 278 Ig posts (out of 3209) that mention these words in the text and/or the hashtag of the post. We disregarded repetitions of identical posts and a few posts in other languages. The 7 tweets are in English, while the Ig corpus is multilingual. Overall, in the restricted dataset, English is predominant, followed by Spanish and Portuguese; Italian, French and German are less represented, while Dutch is not represented. Some posts are multilingual, with hashtags in English, and the body of the text in a different language.

We coded the occurrences against the following categories: the category of woman (e.g. garment workers); whether it was a general mention of the category of women or it referred to specific examples (e.g. providing the name of a woman working at a specific brand), and whether it was representation or self-representation; agentivity; and stock issues.

## Findings

In a first step of our analysis, as we were examining the relation between women's representations in Fashion Revolution Week and related argumentation based on stock issues, we excluded purely commercial messages (54 Ig posts and 2 tweets), which only mentioned "women's collections" of clothes without having any relevant argumentative content related to Fashion Revolution.

In the resulting data, we did find some clear tendencies, which are indicated in Table 2, based on our qualitative analysis of the data. Table 2 provides a representation of tendencies in terms of the co-occurrence of the types of agentivity representations (victims, agents, recipients) and stock issues. When a post includes two stock issues or two different agentivity categories, it is inserted in both of the relevant columns. The results of our coding are striking in that they show that the stock issue of *ill* occurs exclusively in conjunction with the representation of women as victims; very often, these coincide with garment workers. The stock issue of *cure* involves two different representations. The first is with women-agents, who actively promote change. These might be artisans, designers, entrepreneurs, women in business, brands, activists or consumers. The second is women who are more passively represented as "recipients" of someone else's action, e.g. they are empowered or given an opportunity to work in different conditions.

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**Table 2**  
Quantitative overview of findings

Stock issue	Victims		Agents		Recipients		Unclear		Not related to women's representations	
	IG	tweets	IG	tweets	IG	tweets	IG	tweets	IG	tweets
<b>Ill</b> tot. 56 IG = 54 tweet=2	49	2	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
<b>Cure</b> tot. 141 IG = 138 tweets =3	0	0	96	2	31	0	4	1	11	0

Table 2 relates to self-representations as well as representations made by others. However, it is notable that, while agents might be either represented by others or self-represented, victims and recipients are systematically found in representations (made by the writer, who tends to be a different person).

Example 1 shows the representation of women as victims associated with the stock issue of *ill*, where there is emphasis on the problem rather than on the cure.

Example 1. “Un 24 de Abril del 2013, un día como ayer hace 7 años, **péridas humanas en su mayoría mujeres**, murieron bajo una **causa injusta**. Dejando ver el lado oscuro de la industria de la moda. Personas que hacían servicios de confección por unos cuantos centavos o menos, **arriesgaban sus vidas** para alimentar y sostener a sus familias en Bangladesh, **TRAGEDIA DEL RANA PLAZA**. (...)” (IG, 25 April)<sup>1</sup>

In Example 2, cure is correlated with an agent (referring to a sustainable fashion designer):

Example 2. “Sustainable **fashion designer @mrsemily** creates skirts of wonder truly for #everywoman with our #zerowaste #zerocarbon fabrics - the perfect end to our #fashionrevolutionweek posts! (...) (IG, 26 April)”

Example 3 is typical of women recipients, who are always associated with passive verbs (*rescued*, *getting paid*) and the word *recipients*. The stock issue is *cure* because the post shows that change is possible and indicates a way to achieve it.

Example 3. “(...) I'm still taking orders for Larimar bracelets made by **women rescued** from trafficking (...). The purpose of the drive is to provide orders for these women to continue **getting paid** during this time and encouragement for the **recipients** to know others have made it through similar difficulty, and they can too. (...)” (IG, 26 April)

## This raises the question of how women are discursively represented in this debate.

### Discussion

In general, we found two main categories of messages: those issuing an alarming warning about a huge problem (the *ill*) at the level of the environment and human rights, and those (the majority) that go a step further and present possible solutions (the *cure*) to that problem. In some of the posts (25) and one tweet, both stock issues appear; often these messages include a longer narrative that explains the problem and how to solve it. Notably, the two stock issues are connected as a *cure* presupposes an *ill*; as does the term *revolution* (as in the hashtag we looked at, #*fashionrevolution*), which calls for an overthrow of the *status quo*.

In some cases, the *cure* includes representations of women as passive recipients of someone else's action; but in the majority of cases, women are presented as agents who contribute to a solution. Notably, where there is a correlation between the *cure* and women as agents, in the significant majority of cases (70 out of 96 IG and 2 out of 2 Twitter examples), women are presented not only as a general category but also (or exclusively) as *concrete examples*. Specific mentions are made of individuals and brands, often giving the names of artisans or activists who are changing the situation (see Example 2). If we adopt a more fine-grained level of argumentation analysis based on inference in argumentation (Rigotti & Greco, 2019), this use of examples exploits an inferential rule or maxim stating that *a certain action or situation is possible, because it already happens* in specific concrete cases (Rigotti & Greco, 2019). Finally, it is noteworthy that women are never presented as the *cause* of the *ill*. In this sense, our dataset might be said to include an idealized representation of women, presenting them as victims of the fashion industry, sometimes as recipients of change, and sometimes as change agents – but never as co-responsible for the current situation.

<sup>1</sup> “On April 24th 2013, a day like yesterday 7 years ago, human losses, mainly women, died for an unjust cause. Showing the dark side of the fashion industry. Persons who did tailoring services for just a few pennies or less, were risking their lives to feed and support their families in Bangladesh, TRAGEDY OF RANA PLAZA. An April 24th of 2013.” (our translation)

## Conclusions

Analyzing the social media debate surrounding fashion sustainability, this paper has shown that there is a clear link between types of women's (self-) representations and the presence of the argumentative stock issues of both *ill* and *cure*. We noted that mention of a *cure* is associated with women as agents, often including concrete examples that show that change is possible, rather than only focusing on an *ill*. In future research, this analysis could be extended to cover a broader dataset and include multimodal elements (such as images, videos and emoticons).

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