

INFLUENCERS, ICONS, AND ILLUSIONS

MYTH-MAKING IN INDIAN FASHION

SRIJANA BARUAH

School of Art and Design, Woxsen University, Hyderabad, India

srijana.baruah@woxsen.edu.in

Orcid: 0000-0002-2541-9057

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Abstract

As the world faces the effects of climate change, and with fashion being one of the major contributors, the global industry faces backlash and stricter protocols to incorporate sustainable methods of operation. Thus, sustainability has become a significant discourse in contemporary fashion marketing.

In India, fashion influencers play a vital role in defining people's perceptions of craft, culture, and sustainability. These influencers translate the marketing efforts of brands that seek to position themselves as sustainable into everyday practice: they make 'eco' legible, desirable, and aspirational for large numbers of consumers. The study examines how Indian fashion influencers construct sustainability and the communicative patterns that characterise this discourse. This semiotic work contributes to the normalisation of greenwashing discourse. While influencer posts may not intend to deceive, a lack of material substantiation often makes them appear misleading to consumers.

Combining semiotic theory (Barthes), Eco's concept of hyperreality, and Lotman's semiosphere, the paper analyses how influencers reproduce and normalise sustainability myths.

The paper focuses on social media posts of eminent Indian fashion influencers.

The findings identify four recurring communicative patterns, namely — symbolic amplification, aestheticisation, temporal displacement, and omission, through which sustainability is rendered visible yet weakly substantiated.

Keywords: *Influencer marketing; Greenwashing; Fashion myth; Semiotics; Sustainability.*

INTRODUCTION

As the world grapples with the effects of climate change, every industry faces increasing responsibility to adopt sustainable practices (IPCC, 2023). The global fashion industry, which has been a major contributor to environmental pollution and inequalities (Niinimäki et al., 2020), finds itself facing stricter regulations to maintain sustainability standards, particularly in European nations (European Commission, 2022). While this marks a positive shift, the race to be established as a sustainable or ethical brand has also become a marketing strategy for many fashion houses. This is particularly true in developing countries like India, where the industry is vast, scattered, largely unorganised, and subject to limited regulatory

enforcement. With increased consumption and the expansion of social media, the era of influencers has emerged. These individuals occupy an advantageous position as representatives of the 'common person' and often enjoy reach and trust comparable to, or even greater than, traditional celebrities (Abidin, 2018; Khamis et al., 2017). Recent studies further indicate that trust in influencers can increase sustainable fashion adoption in emerging markets (Londóño-Bedoya et al., 2025). In India, influencers are trusted not because they are experts but because they appear relatable (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). This dynamic is further strengthened by long-standing cultural associations between craft, tradition, and moral value. Influencers frequently draw on these

associations to frame sustainability as inherently Indian, timeless, and natural.

A typical Indian influencer's Instagram feed often features cotton and linen garments, soft lighting, and captions referencing 'conscious choices' and 'slow fashion.' Through such content, influencers translate brand-led sustainability narratives into everyday practice, making 'eco' legible, desirable, and aspirational for large numbers of consumers. This aligns with studies showing that influencers shape perceptions of sustainable fashion consumption among younger consumers (Johnstone & Lindh, 2022). At the same time, these representations can be easily absorbed into marketing logics, where the appearance of sustainability may begin to matter more than its material reality (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). Consumers, many of whom lack the knowledge to evaluate fabric quality or authenticity, often rely on such content when making purchasing decisions (McNeill & Moore, 2015). This paper examines how Indian fashion influencers contribute to greenwashing, not necessarily through deliberate deception, but through everyday practices of storytelling, visual curation, and selective emphasis. It argues that sustainability claims within influencer content often function as symbolic performances with limited material grounding. By situating influencer discourse within a semiotic and cultural framework, drawing on Barthes' notion of myth, Eco's concept of hyperreality, and Lotman's semiosphere (Barthes, 1972; Eco, 1986; Lotman, 1990), the paper analyses how sustainability is constructed, circulated, and normalised within influencer-led fashion communication.

This paper addresses the following research questions:

1. How do Indian fashion influencers construct sustainability through visual and textual content?
2. What semiotic patterns define influencer-led sustainability discourse?
3. How do these patterns contribute to the normalisation of greenwashing in India?

THEORY: MYTH, HYPERREALITY, AND THE SEMIOSPHERE

This study approaches sustainability in influencer-led fashion communication not as a fixed material condition but as a cultural construct produced through signs, narratives, and systems of meaning. To analyse this process, it draws on

semiotic and cultural theory, particularly Barthes' concept of myth (Barthes, 1972), Eco's notion of hyperreality (Eco, 1986), and Lotman's framework of the semiosphere (Lotman, 1990). These frameworks are used as analytical lenses to guide the interpretation of influencer content.

Barthes' concept of myth explains how fashion operates as a second-order semiotic system in which signs acquire connotative meanings and ideological significance. In influencer discourse, terms such as 'handwoven', 'artisan made,' and 'conscious' function as signifiers that suggest ethical qualities. Through the process of mythologisation, meanings grounded in material or historical realities become naturalised and appear self-evident. Thus, visual and textual references to craftsmanship, tradition, and slow fashion transform sustainability into an inherent and unquestioned attribute.

Eco's concept of hyperreality helps explain how mediated representations can appear more authentic than material reality. In influencer content, curated imagery and aesthetic presentation produce an intensified sense of sustainability that may exceed or replace verifiable evidence such as certification or transparency. As a result, sustainability is experienced as a visual and affective condition rather than a material one.

Lotman's concept of the semiosphere provides a framework for understanding how meaning circulates within cultural systems. Rather than occupying the centre of meaning production, influencers operate at the periphery as mediators who translate complex fashion discourses into accessible and desirable forms. In doing so, they simplify, amplify, and circulate dominant meanings of sustainability for broader audiences.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives enable an analysis of influencer content as a site where sustainability is constructed through semiotic transformation (Barthes), affective intensification (Eco), and cultural mediation (Lotman). They guide the analysis by focusing on how meaning is produced, how it becomes persuasive, and how it is stabilised within the fashion semiosphere.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative discourse and semiotic approach to examine how sustainability is constructed within influencer-driven fashion communication in India. Such approach-

es are widely used in cultural and media studies to analyse meaning-making processes (Rose, 2016). It draws on publicly available digital content on the four chosen influencers. The anonymous examples presented in the findings are combined illustrations, developed from recurring visual and textual patterns identified across multiple posts in the dataset. To illustrate recurring communicative patterns, the analysis includes a small number of anonymised example captions. These examples are not direct reproductions of individual posts but are composite representations derived from multiple posts within the dataset. They are constructed to reflect recurring linguistic, visual, and narrative patterns identified during analysis, including the use of key signifiers, aesthetic framing, and omissions. This approach enables analytical clarity while avoiding over-reliance on individual posts. While some captions were reconstructed from secondary sources, analysis focused on recurring patterns across multiple posts, reducing reliance on any single instance. Patterns were identified through repeated occurrence across multiple posts within the dataset. Each pattern was observed consistently in at least 6 to 8 posts per influencer, ensuring that findings reflect recurring communicative tendencies rather than isolated instances. As a qualitative semiotic analysis, this study does not seek to measure sustainability practices directly but to examine how sustainability is represented and communicated within influencer discourse. All analysed content is drawn from publicly available sources and used solely for academic research and critique.

SAMPLE SELECTION

Around 40 social media (Instagram) posts and marketing materials were included in the dataset. This included social media posts (primarily Instagram) from four well-known Indian fashion and lifestyle influencers namely, Masoom Minawala, Komal Pandey, Kritika Khurana, and Sonam Kapoor. Each case study draws on a broader dataset of approximately 10 posts per influencer, with selected examples presented as representative illustrations of recurring communicative patterns. These influencers were picked based on three key criteria:

1. High visibility and reach in Indian fashion media and internet channels.
2. Active participation in brand collaborations focused on sustainability, craft, or ethical fashion.

3. Diverse representation in fashion communication, including global influencers, trend creators, lifestyle influencers, and celebrity figures.

The sample includes:

- Brand collaborations and sponsored posts.
- Editorial-style content (such as red carpet appearances and curated photo shoots).
- Influencer-generated posts that reference sustainability, craft, heritage, culture or ethical consumption.

ANALYTICAL APPROACH

The study used a semiotic framework, drawing on the theories of Barthes, Eco, and Lotman, to investigate the construction of meaning in influencer content. Each post was examined based on four major dimensions:

1. Visual Signs

Clothing (types of fabric, styling, and references to craft, heritage, culture, etc).

Setting (domestic spaces, heritage locations, and nature-based imagery).

Aesthetic elements (colour palettes, lighting, and composition).

2. Textual Elements

Captions and hashtags (e.g., 'sustainable', 'handmade', 'conscious').

Narrative tone (aspirational, intimate, or educational).

References to ethical considerations (such as artisans, slow fashion, and tradition).

3. Omission

Absence of information related to production processes, labour conditions, sourcing, or environmental impact.

Lack of verifiable indicators such as traceability or certifications.

4. Framing of Narratives

The positioning of sustainability (e.g., as a moral obligation, aesthetic preference, or lifestyle option).

How much attention is placed on sustainability or how it fits into larger fashion narratives?

IDENTIFICATION OF PATTERNS

The patterns were identified by comparing various posts across the dataset. A pattern was considered important when similar visual, linguistic, and narrative aspects occurred consistently across several posts and influencers.

More specifically:

- Repetition refers to the consistent use of similar signs (such as handloom imagery or 'artisan')

language, reference to heritage) across a large portion of the dataset.

- Visual tropes refer to repeated symbolic configurations (for example, sunlit courtyards, earthy tones, or handcrafted textures) that denote ethical or sustainable value.
- Omission is evaluated in connection to expected disclosures of sustainability (including materials, sourcing, and labour conditions), which are frequently absent.
- Framing of Narrative is identified through the dominant lens used to depict sustainability (such as aspirational, aesthetic or moral).

Through this process, four recurring communicative patterns were identified. These are presented as evidence-based findings, supported by representative examples grounded in the dataset.

USE OF ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES

The anonymous examples presented in the findings are combined illustrations, developed from recurring visual and textual patterns identified across multiple posts in the dataset. They are not direct reproductions of individual posts but are composite representations derived from multiple posts within the dataset. They are constructed to reflect recurring linguistic, visual, and narrative patterns identified during analysis. This approach enables analytical clarity while avoiding over-reliance on individual posts.

CASE STUDIES

MASOOM MINAWALA: HERITAGE AS CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

Masoom Minawala is an Indian fashion influencer and entrepreneur with a significant global presence, recognised for her appearances at international fashion events such as Cannes and the World Economic Forum in Davos. Her content draws on a rich vocabulary of Indian craft, heritage, and cultural pride. This case study draws on a dataset of approximately 10 Instagram posts (2022–2026) that reference craft, heritage, and sustainability.

A recurring pattern in Minawala's content involves the use of Indian textiles and craft traditions as markers of cultural identity and sustainability. In a post depicting her appearance at Cannes 2025 (Fig. 01) (see Appendix A1:1), mirror-work embroidery is framed through a vocabulary of cultural symbolism — 'protection, reflection, celebration' — without reference to sourcing, artisan attribution, or impact data. Similarly, a post from January



Fig. 01

2026 (see Appendix A1:4) references Jamawar and Kantha textiles in relation to 'communities' but provides no sourcing, labour, or economic data. In both instances, heritage functions as an ethical proxy. From the perspective of Barthes, these references function as mythic signifiers: 'Indian heritage' and 'craft community' naturalise the ethical value of the garment without grounding it in material verification. In terms of Eco's hyperreality, the visual scale and aesthetic appeal of Minawala's global fashion imagery produce an intensified sense of cultural and ethical legitimacy. Within Lotman's semiosphere, Minawala occupies a peripheral yet highly visible mediating position, translating Indian craft into the language of global luxury and sustainability.

KOMAL PANDEY: AESTHETICISATION OF CRAFT

Komal Pandey is a fashion influencer whose content is characterised by dramatic visual transformations and cinematic presentation. This case analyses Instagram posts and reels (2022–2026) with such words as 'handcrafted,' 'traditional,' and 'craftsmanship.' For instance, in a reel from 2023 (Fig. 02) (see Appendix A2:5), she uses the words 'handcrafted,' and 'rich craftsmanship.' Again, in a

reel involving Chanderi saree (see Appendix A2:4), traditional textile aesthetics are embedded within dramatic visual presentation, without accompanying details regarding sourcing, labour practices, or environmental impact. In both cases, the language of craft functions as an aesthetic qualifier rather than an evidentiary claim, enhancing the perceived value of the product without substantiating its ethical credentials. From the perspective of Barthes, these are floating signifiers that imply certain ethical qualities without grounding them in reality. For example, in one of the posts, a saree is referred to as ‘rich in craftsmanship’ without further information about sourcing and labour. Pandey’s visual storytelling which includes cinematic transformation and editing prioritises

aesthetics over verification. According to Eco, sustainability becomes an aesthetic and affective experience rather than a material claim. Within Lotman’s semiosphere, Pandey translates fashion discourse into a visual and aesthetically coherent language that does not prioritize ethical aspects. In reels showing traditional textiles, sustainability becomes part of visual spectacle without material grounding.

KRITIKA KHURANA: LIFESTYLE

NORMALISATION OF SUSTAINABILITY

Kritika Khurana, who is popularly known as ‘That Boho Girl’, is one of the most popular influencers when it comes to lifestyle and fashion in India. She has an online following which numbers in the millions due to her content which revolves around Bohemian style, travel, fashion and occasional messages which encourage people to promote Indian art, crafts, handlooms and homegrown brands. This case study draws on a dataset of Instagram posts (2021–2026) focusing on recurring references to ‘homegrown,’ ‘local,’ and lifestyle-oriented fashion narratives.

Kritika Khurana’s narratives integrate sustainability into narratives of routine consumption, framing it as a natural part of the consumer’s lifestyle. In one of Kritika Khurana’s Instagram posts, where she is seen wearing the DC Mumbai ensemble at Jaipur (Fig. 03) (see Appendix A3:1), there is an emphasis on lifestyle appeal and authenticity through organic discovery by mentioning that it was created ‘without incentive.’ The visual narrative includes elements like travelling, fashioning one’s own style, and the relatable aspiration of consuming products, thus depicting fashion consumption as easygoing and personally tailored. Likewise, in another Instagram post where Kritika Khurana features her ‘handcrafted’ dupatta cape (see Appendix A3:2), the use of the term ‘handcrafted’ becomes a part of the fashion language while not elaborating on sourcing, labour practices, or any other sustainability-related concerns. Following Barthes’ conceptual framework, ‘homegrown’ becomes a mythic signifier implying ethicality in relation to locally produced goods. In Khurana’s posts that feature ‘Jaipur-based’ clothing or ‘handcrafted’ clothing, sustainability becomes apparent through the discourse of authenticity and experience without material references.

From the visual perspective, Khurana creates images that include natural lighting, casual



Fig. 02



Fig. 03

environment, and familiar clothes. These elements create a sense of truthfulness and trust that are rooted in Eco's notion of hyperreality. In terms of Lotman's semiosphere, Kritika Khurana translates the notion of sustainability into language of everyday life, embedding it into routines of consumption rather than treating it as a separate aspect of ethical decision-making.

SONAM KAPOOR: MORAL SIGNALLING AND CELEBRITY AUTHORITY

Sonam Kapoor enjoys a unique status in the fashion semiosphere of India. She is a famous celebrity whose style on red carpet events and other international platforms garners attention and is seen as culture in itself. This makes Kapoor not an ordinary influencer but an authoritative figure whose fashion choices take on a cultural meaning due to her influence. Sustainability is discussed by Sonam Kapoor from the perspective of her authority as a celebrity. The case considers her posts and interviews (2019-2026) that utilize the terms 'heritage,' 'craftsmanship,' and 'responsible choices'

and show how ethical meaning is constructed through celebrity discourse.

For example, in posts (Fig. 04) (see Appendix A4:1) depicting the use of Banarasi textiles and handmade couture clothing, Kapoor highlights the aspects of heritage and craftsmanship as indicators of ethical value. In another post (see Appendix A4:2) Kapoor has stated that she tries to 'make responsible choices' thereby positioning sustainability as a practice of personal ethics. According to Barthes, these terms become mythic signifiers that imply the relationship between cultural value and ethicality. When discussing Banarasi textiles or couture dresses, the emphasis is on heritage that implies ethical nature of the garment without mentioning any information about the system of production. When considering the visual aspect of her narrative, the presence of high-end visuals that includes red-carpet shots or editorials create an illusion of sustainability through the lens of Eco's concept of hyperreality. In Lotman's semiosphere, Kapoor is close to the cultural center. Statements that she is making responsible choices become a signal of her moral stance on the issue of sustainability.



Fig. 04

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The modes of repetition, omission, visual tropes, and framing narratives differ based on the role of the influencer in each of the four cases studied above. Even as they use symbols instead of empirical reality for their communication strategies, while Minawala uses culture to define herself, Pandey highlights aesthetics, Khurana embraces consumption as an everyday practice, and Kapoor mobilizes celebrity authority. This reveals the heterogeneity of the sustainability discourse

despite its common characteristic of using symbolism instead of materiality for communication, depending on the role of the influencer within the fashion semiosphere (Tab.01).

FINDINGS: COMMUNICATIVE PATTERNS IN INFLUENCER-LED SUSTAINABILITY DISCOURSE

The analysis of approximately 40 posts created by four influencers between 2018 and 2026 reveals

Comparative Analysis of Influencer-Led Sustainability Discourse in India

Influencer	Example Context	Key Signs	Visual Tropes	Narrative Framing	Omission	Construction of Sustainability
Masoom Minawala	Cannes mirror-work post (A1:1, fig. 01); Davos craft post (A1:4)	Craft, heritage, community	Global luxury with craft aesthetics	Cultural representation	No sourcing, labour, certification	Cultural authenticity as sustainability
Komal Pandey	Craft reel (A2:5, fig. 02); Chanderi saree (A2:4)	Craft, traditional, craftsmanship	Stylised transformation and cinematic presentation	Aspirational / aesthetic	No sourcing, labour, certification	Aesthetic desirability as sustainability
Kritika Khurana	Jaipur post (A3:5, fig. 03); handcrafted dupatta (A3:6)	Homegrown, local, handcrafted	Lifestyle settings with natural aesthetics	Lifestyle normalisation	No sourcing, labour, traceability	Everyday ethical consumption framing
Sonam Kapoor	Banarasi post (A4:1, fig. 04); 'responsible choices' (A4:2)	Heritage, craftsmanship, responsibility	Luxury spectacle and couture imagery	Moral/ aspirational	No production, labour, certification	Status and intention as sustainability

Note: Table 01 summarises recurring semiotic patterns across influencers; By repetition, it implies the recurrence of sustainability symbols in posts analysed for each influencer (n=10 per influencer). Omission is based on the presence or absence of sustainability metrics such as sourcing, working conditions, certification, and environmental footprint compared to a baseline of sustainability markers.

Tab. 01

four recurring communicative patterns that shape the construction and circulation of sustainability discourse in influencer-led fashion communication: symbolic amplification, aestheticisation, temporal displacement, and omission. These patterns align with broader research on greenwashing as a communicative phenomenon rather than purely a material practice (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015).

Drawing on Barthes' concept of myth, Eco's notion of hyperreality, and Lotman's semiosphere, the analysis shows how sustainability is constructed through culturally loaded signifiers, visual and affective experience, and selective disclosure rather than verifiable material practices. These patterns recur across different influencers and content types, indicating a consistent semiotic framework shaping sustainability discourse.

The anonymised examples presented in this section are composite representations derived from recurring visual, textual, and narrative patterns identified across the dataset. They are not direct reproductions of individual posts but are constructed to reflect typical communicative features observed during analysis.

SYMBOLIC AMPLIFICATION: ETHICAL SIGNIFIERS

Symbolic amplification refers to the repeated use of culturally charged signifiers such as 'heritage,' 'craftsmanship,' 'hand-woven,' and 'homegrown,' which imply ethical value.

Following Barthes, these terms function as mythic signifiers whose repetition naturalises sustainability as an inherent attribute rather than a claim requiring verification.

This pattern is evident across all four influencers. In Minawala's content, terms such as 'Indian fashion' and 'heritage' frame sustainability as cultural authenticity. In Pandey's posts, 'craftsmanship' operates as a stylistic descriptor rather than evidence of ethical production.

Khurana's use of 'homegrown' suggests ethical value through locality, while Kapoor invokes heritage and tradition as markers of sustainability. Anonymous post example A (symbolic amplification):

"Woke up in this handwoven linen kurta from @brandx, supporting our weavers and loving the natural feel. #SupportLocal #SustainableStyle"

This shorthand use of terms such as 'handwoven' and 'supporting weavers' signals ethical consump-

tion without clarifying labour conditions or production processes, encouraging interpretation without verification.

AESTHETICISATION: SUSTAINABILITY AS EXPERIENCE

Aestheticisation refers to the transformation of sustainability into a visual and affective experience rather than a material condition.

Drawing on Eco's concept of hyperreality, influencer content produces an intensified sense of sustainability through imagery, styling, and atmosphere. This pattern is particularly visible in Pandey's reels, where dramatic visual transformation and cinematic presentation foreground aesthetics over information. Minawala's global fashion imagery, Khurana's lifestyle-oriented visuals, and Kapoor's luxury aesthetics similarly frame sustainability as desirable and experiential rather than evidentiary.

This reflects broader observations that Instagram-based fashion communication often aestheticises sustainability through curated visual identity and platform aesthetics (Marcella-Hood, 2023).

Anonymous post example B (aestheticisation):

"Soft neutrals and conscious choices today.

Outfit by @brandz (link in bio).

Felt so calm wearing it."

Here, emotional tone and visual styling encourage viewers to associate feeling with ethical value, while material details such as sourcing or certification remain absent.

TEMPORAL DISPLACEMENT: SUSTAINABILITY AS INTENTION

Temporal displacement refers to the presentation of sustainability as an ongoing or future-oriented process rather than a verifiable present condition. Sustainability is framed as aspiration, improvement, or intention, delaying the need for substantiated claims. This pattern is evident in Kapoor's references to 'responsible choices,' which position sustainability as personal intention.

Khurana's collaborations frame sustainability as an evolving journey, while Pandey and Minawala embed sustainability within broader narratives rather than presenting it as a measurable outcome.

Anonymous post example C (temporal displacement):

"Excited to partner with @brandq on their new conscious range—the team is committed to improving waste streams and we'll share progress soon!"

Such statements substitute future promises for present evidence, encouraging trust without immediate verification.

OMISSION AND SELECTIVE DISCLOSURE

Omission refers to the absence of key sustainability indicators such as sourcing, labour conditions, certifications, or environmental impact. Across the dataset, this emerges as the most consistent pattern. Despite frequent references to craft, heritage, or responsibility, influencer content rarely includes verifiable information about production processes. Sustainability is therefore constructed through symbolic and aesthetic cues while remaining weakly substantiated at a material level (Tab. 02).

SYNTHESIS

When viewed together, these findings illustrate how sustainable fashion discourse is constructed by combining several semiotic processes. Symbolic amplification provides a basis for establishing sustainability as a culturally loaded term, while aestheticisation turns it into something desirable. The process of temporal displacement makes sustainability something aspirational rather than an immediate issue that needs to be addressed. Finally, omission ensures that sustainability remains weakly substantiated. Different combinations of these semiotic processes can be found in the discourses of different influencers, such as cultural authorities, trendsetters, lifestyle influencers, or celebrities.

Sustainability Construction, Omission, and Theoretical Interpretation

Influencer	Omission	Construction	Instagram Links (with Appendix refs)	Theoretical Alignment
Masoom Minawala	No sourcing, labour, certification, or production transparency	Cultural authenticity = sustainability	Appendix A1:1; A1:4	Barthes: myth; Eco: hyperreal; Lotman: translation
Komal Pandey	No sourcing, labour, certification, or production transparency	Aesthetic desirability = sustainability	Appendix A2:5; A2:4	Barthes: sign; Eco: spectacle; Lotman: mediation
Kritika Khurana	No sourcing, labour, certification, or production transparency	Lifestyle = sustainability	Appendix A3:5; A3:6	Barthes: local myth; Eco: authenticity; Lotman: lifestyle translation
Sonam Kapoor	No sourcing, labour, certification, or production transparency	Status and intention = sustainability	Appendix A4:1; A4:2	Barthes: heritage myth; Eco: hyperreality; Lotman: centrality

Note: Table 02 provides dataset linkage and theoretical interpretation.

Tab. 02

WHY THE INDIAN CONTEXT AMPLIFIES THESE DYNAMICS?

There are three local features that intensify influencer-driven greenwashing.

When influencers focus on handloom or artisanal processes, they draw on deep associations between heritage, authenticity, and moral value; yet craft alone does not resolve questions of labour conditions or environmental impact (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009). Again, luxury fashion is often framed as ethical through bespoke and made-to-order couture. Celebrity endorsements of Indian designers frequently equate exclusivity with sustainability, even as luxury production involves intensive materials, embellishment, and global logistics that complicate this narrative (Joy et al., 2012). Finally, India's fast-paced influencer-brand economy enables rapid visibility through capsule "sustainable" collections promoted online, while core production models remain intact, a pattern consistent with broader critiques of greenwashing in global markets (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

Importantly, the communicative patterns found in this study do not act in isolation but are augmented by cultural and economic aspects of the Indian fashion ecosystem. These include the moral weight of craft, the ethical construction of luxury, and the accelerated growth of influencer-brand economies. These dynamics are essential to understanding how sustainability is formed, circulated, and evaluated in the Indian case. To start with, the cultural authority of craft is critical. Craft in India does not only refer to production techniques, but it is also a signifier that carries moral weight and associations of heritage, authenticity, and craftsmanship.

This allows terms like 'craft,' 'heritage,' and 'artisan' to acquire ethical meaning when used. In this case, repetition alone guarantees credibility, regardless of material validation (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009).

Secondly, aestheticisation is enhanced by centuries-long cultural associations between purity, ethics, and simplicity in India. The visual code that comprises the use of organic materials, earth tones, and handmade aesthetics is symbolic of sustainability because of the cultural meanings associated with them. Celebrities and influencers use these meanings to promote sustainability as part of the aesthetics of fashion rather than its analysis.

This trend is especially apparent in the promotion of sustainability in luxury fashion, since bespoke fashion is considered sustainable because of its craftsmanship and longevity. Celebrities often

frame exclusive fashion as ethical without considering the extensive materiality involved in the creation of luxury clothing.

Thirdly, the narrative of temporal displacement is driven by the discourse of revival and preservation in the Indian fashion industry. Influencers and brands frame sustainability in India as a continuous effort in the form of 'preservation of craft,' 'support for artisans,' and 'promotion of heritage.' In this case, sustainability can be understood as an aspirational and future-oriented concept. Hence, there is no need for immediate accountability in matters of sustainability.

Finally, the omission strategy is enhanced by features of the fashion production landscape in India. The decentralised and informal nature of the fashion production process makes it difficult to determine where labour and materials come from and how production impacts the environment. At the same time, it allows for selective disclosure of information concerning production processes, including culture-specific narratives, but not specifics.

CONSEQUENCES: CONSUMER, MARKET, AND POLICY EFFECTS

The practice of greenwashing through influencers impacts consumer behavior, markets, and policies. On the consumer front, it fosters the phenomenon of moral licensing, whereby consuming 'eco-friendly' products gives a sense of righteousness, minimizing scrutiny of excessive consumption (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015).

In addition, the lack of sustainability knowledge among many individuals makes them rely on influencers rather than independent sources.

In terms of markets, symbolism in sustainability is lucrative because it allows companies to build their reputations and generate revenues without altering their production processes, whereas other invisible yet sustainable organizations are disadvantaged.

The current framework for regulating sustainability-related activities through institutions like ASCI is indeed an important step in the direction of accountability.

Unfortunately, they have certain limitations especially concerning influencer sustainability campaigns regarding enforceability and disclosure (Advertising Standards Council of India, 2023).

DISCUSSION OF IMPLICATIONS

These strategies of symbolic amplification, aestheticisation, temporal displacement, and omission contribute to the normalisation of greenwashing by focusing on symbolism rather than evidence. The analysis reveals that sustainability in Indian fashion influencer rhetoric acts less as a concrete practice and more as a semiotic, culturally constructed ideal. Rather than relying on confirmed acts, it emerges through repetition, visualisation, and selective disclosure, fundamentally altering our understanding of greenwashing, influencer credibility, and fashion communication.

While some influencers may engage in more transparent or evidence-based sustainability communication, such cases remain less visible within dominant aesthetic-driven discourse.

First, greenwashing is not always an intentional brand strategy. While previous research has framed it as purposeful deceit (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015), this study demonstrates that it can result from ordinary storytelling, visual framing, and omission within influencer content. Second, influencer reputation is not based on competence or verification, but rather on perceived genuineness.

In India, this is strengthened by culturally significant symbols such as craftsmanship and local manufacture, which position influencers as ethical figures. Third, fashion communication is better viewed as meaning creation rather than information transmission. Fashion influencers construct sustainability through the use of words, images, and discourses, creating ethical value through continuous symbolism. This is influenced by the cultural and economic context of India, which includes the moral value of craft, the ethical framing of luxury, and the influencer economy, making sustainability symbols highly effective.

In general, sustainability in Indian fashion is cultural and semiotic, highlighting the need to examine how ethical value is constructed.

There is an urgent need to strengthen sustainability communication in India, which requires coordinated action: influencers must adopt evidence-based language and practices, brands must provide transparent and verifiable information rather than token claims, and platforms and regulators must enforce standards that ensure accountability and substantiation.

CONCLUSION

The study found four recurring patterns in how sustainability is constructed in Indian fashion communication: symbolic amplification, aestheticisation, temporal displacement, and omission. Rather than representing a material reality, sustainability arises as a semiotic construct generated by these patterns. Terms such as 'craft,' 'heritage,' and 'homegrown' develop ethical significance through repetition, becoming naturalised as intrinsically sustainable rather than requiring substantiation, reflecting Barthes' concept of myth. Visual aesthetics and emotional appeal help reinforce this process. Viewed through the lens of Eco's concept of hyperreality, influencer content generates a sense of ethical authenticity that can stand in for material proof, portraying sustainability as a desirable lifestyle.

Influencers also act as intermediaries, translating brand messaging into culturally suitable formats. They accomplish this by stressing topics such as craftsmanship and legacy while minimising less visible issues such as labour conditions and supply chains. These findings redefine greenwashing not as intentional deceit, but as a discursive outcome of everyday communication practices that prioritise symbolic appeal over material detail.

In broader terms, the study demonstrates that fashion communication is performative, meaning that it actively produces sustainability rather than simply describing it. Craft and heritage hold cultural power in India, which reinforces this. Overall, sustainability in Indian influencer fashion relies on exposure and cultural legibility rather than proof, making it compelling even when its material foundation is uncertain.

CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] Masoom Minawala at Cannes 2025, featuring mirror-work embroidery framed as cultural heritage and craft. The post invokes notions of tradition and authenticity without providing information on sourcing, labour, or production processes. Source: Instagram, May 2025.

[Fig. 02] F. Komal Pandey Instagram reel (2023) presenting a saree described as 'rich craftsmanship,' where stylised visual transformation and aesthetic presentation foreground fashion spectacle over material or sustainability-related details. Source: Instagram.

[Fig. 03] Kritika Khurana in Jaipur (2023), where fashion consumption is embedded within a lifestyle-oriented narrative emphasising authenticity and everyday experience, without accompanying information on sourcing, labour, or environmental impact. Source: Instagram.

[Fig. 04] Sonam Kapoor (2025) featuring Banarasi textile and couture styling, where heritage and craftsmanship are

invoked as markers of ethical value without reference to production systems or sustainability metrics.

Source: Instagram.

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A1. Dataset: Masoom Minawala

No.	URL	Date	Claim type	Caption theme	Missing evidence
1	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DJyyixXo5g-/	15 May 2025	Heritage / Craft	Mirrorwork framed as cultural symbolism ("protection, reflection, celebration")	No artisan attribution, sourcing, or impact data
2	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DJyyixXo5g-/	May 2025	Craft / National Identity	"Not just fashion—this is a movement" (#VocalForLocal)	No measurable impact or artisan details
3	https://www.instagram.com/reel/CXyJKAnFqYp/	Sept 2025	Craft / Legacy	Patola saree framed as legacy of craft and community	No weaver identity or production data
4	https://www.instagram.com/p/DTzabWpAuaP/	Jan 2026	Heritage / Sustainability	Jamawar and Kantha linked to communities	No sourcing, labour, or economic data
5	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cgi4vqGMYs6/	July 2022	Sustainability / Lifestyle	"Made from hemp" framed as eco-material	No labour conditions or environmental verification
6	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DVTaXqvqkYY/	Feb 2026	Heritage / Fashion	Heritage artistry framed within contemporary styling	No sourcing or artisan transparency
7	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DNspf0oxARd/	Apr 2026	Craft Awareness	"Few know the craft behind this"	No explanation or traceability
8	https://www.instagram.com/p/DWEQNWmCaH0/	Mar 2026	Craft / Heritage / Luxury	Traditional jewellery framed through styling narrative	No sourcing, labour, or certification
9	https://www.instagram.com/p/DU2wkiOKgM3/	Feb 2026	Craft / Cultural	"Heritage layered with modernity"	No sourcing or environmental data
10	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DWba0DsAmqm/	Mar 2026	Craft / Handmade	Handcrafted labour framed as experiential value	No labour structure or production transparency

A2. Dataset: Komal Pandey

No.	URL	Date	Claim type	Caption theme	Missing evidence
1	https://www.instagram.com/reel/CxUauwrPgCD/	~2024	Craft / Handcrafted	"#Handcrafted" as aesthetic tag	No sourcing, labour, or certification
2	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cam60YKtfJb/	~2023	Craft / Handcrafted	Craft as styling descriptor	No sourcing or labour data
3	https://www.instagram.com/p/CamjSz_tXOI/	2023	Craft / Handcrafted	Visual emphasis on craftsmanship	No material transparency
4	https://www.instagram.com/reel/CfzlTmj5Ah/	July 2022	Traditional / Craft	Chanderi saree and custom blouse	No sourcing or verification
5	https://www.instagram.com/reel/CzDcvjrvSBL/	Oct 2023	Craft / Traditional	'Rich craftsmanship' in styling narrative	No sourcing or labour data
6	https://www.instagram.com/p/CliYldSDmz0/	Dec 2020	Traditional / Cultural	Saree styling across multiple looks	No sustainability data
7	https://www.instagram.com/reel/CnPQN9fLYxr/	~2023	Traditional / Craft	Festive styling and craftsmanship	No sourcing or certification
8	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DLCfjFzIqyU/	2025	Traditional / Statement style	Styling reel emphasising outfit transformation and visual appeal of fabric	No sourcing, labour, certification, or production details
9	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cgr0959PX7c/	2022	Traditional / Aspirational	Festive styling	Embroidered dress without any reference to sources of labour
10	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DGILHYIINEa/	2025	Craft Aesthetic / Heritage	Fashion reel focused on performance, expression,	No sourcing, production information

A3. Dataset: Kritika Khurana

No.	URL	Date	Claim type	Caption theme	Missing evidence
1	https://www.instagram.com/reel/CwPGWmulM2s/	~2023	Sustainability / Lifestyle	Sustainability framed through everyday styling and personal expression	No sourcing, certification, labour, or environmental data
2	https://www.instagram.com/p/DLFdD9Vytbj/	~2025	Lifestyle / Cultural	Fashion embedded within lifestyle narrative and aspirational identity	No sustainability definition, sourcing, or production details
3	https://www.instagram.com/p/DNQUoQahBFx/	~2026	Sustainability / Lifestyle	"Sustainable fashion" framed through personal styling and relatability	No certification, sourcing, labour, or environmental metrics
4	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DPMNGtPAQpQ/	~2026	Lifestyle / Consumption	Fashion presented through travel-oriented and aspirational narrative	No sustainability explanation or production transparency
5	https://www.instagram.com/p/DPy_wkMATA3/	~2026	Heritage / Cultural	Cultural identity and place-based styling foregrounded	No artisan attribution, sourcing, or labour data
6	https://www.instagram.com/p/DQ16WYkgY0R/	~2026	Craft / Sustainability (implicit)	Craft or "handmade" implied within aesthetic storytelling	No labour conditions, certification, or traceability
7	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DV3p1PegeTL/	~2026	Lifestyle / Sustainability (implicit)	"Conscious" consumption framed through everyday fashion	No definition of sustainability or verification
8	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DTdO19GAdSn/	~2026	Heritage / Lifestyle	Cultural references embedded within casual lifestyle content	No sourcing, labour, certification, or environmental data
9	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DPwapUjASE0/	~2026	Lifestyle / Consumption	Fashion framed as routine consumption and self-expression	No sustainability indicators or production information
10	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DWSc4qjJoo/	~2026	Sustainability / Lifestyle (implicit)	Ethical value implied through tone, aesthetics, and narrative	No sourcing, certification, labour, or impact data

A4. Dataset: Sonam Kapoor

No.	URL	Date	Claim type	Caption theme	Missing evidence
1	https://www.instagram.com/p/DR57M92isov/	~2026	Heritage / Craft	Traditional textile framed as cultural and aesthetic value	No sourcing, labour, certification, or environmental data
2	https://www.instagram.com/htcity/p/C1tb87Uobso/	~2024	Sustainability / Discourse	Sustainability framed as responsible fashion choices in public discourse	No measurable standards, sourcing, or production details
3	https://www.instagram.com/p/BxuS3RjFHo4/	~2019	Craft / Heritage	Traditional craftsmanship highlighted within luxury fashion styling	No artisan attribution, sourcing, or labour data
4	https://www.instagram.com/p/BvgYZD7Ffua/	2019	Sustainability / Journey	Sustainability framed as a personal or ongoing journey	No metrics, timelines, or verifiable benchmarks
5	https://www.instagram.com/p/DQD16bgEfmW/	~2026	Craft / Emotion	"Handcrafted" or emotional value embedded in fashion narrative	No production transparency, labour conditions, or sourcing
6	https://www.instagram.com/reel/CyIK8jWvS-y/	~2023	Craft / Heritage	Craft and traditional aesthetics presented through visual styling	No sourcing, artisan details, or certification
7	https://www.instagram.com/p/DBnm07iTxp0/	~2024	Sustainability / Lifestyle	Ethical fashion framed as part of everyday lifestyle and identity	No sustainability definition, sourcing, or environmental data
8	https://www.instagram.com/reel/CpU7ASmqosM/	~2023	Cultural / Heritage	Cultural symbolism used as aesthetic marker	No sourcing, labour, or production transparency
9	https://www.instagram.com/p/DUKPG3YCuZo/	~2026	Craft / Luxury	Couture and craftsmanship framed within luxury discourse	No traceability, certification, or environmental impact data
10	https://www.instagram.com/p/DUvVovnk6wD/	~2026	Heritage / Luxury	Heritage positioned within global luxury fashion	No sourcing, labour, certification, or environmental metrics

