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Capstone

### Context/Description Paper

**Introduction:** The research object is the quotes taken from the Coachtopia website of what the sustainable bags represent and who they are for, and two of the videos on Coachtopia's Instagram reels showing how the bags are sustainably made. And, tanner.leatherstein's video claiming that Coachtopia is greenwashing, along with the audience's reaction to the greenwashing. The controversy of the Coachtopia greenwashing claims made by tanner.leatherstein on the Instagram platform is productive to the communication studies discipline, because this object studies how power and ethics influences an audience. For instance, with Coachtopia making their brand around sustainability, and telling their audience that their bags are more sustainable because they are made of recycled materials.

This paper will discuss what is around the research object. The history of Coach, and the creation of Coachtopia. Who tanner.leatherstein is, and how he began as an Instagram anti-influencer. The celebrities used by Coachtopia to sell the bags, and what are similar brands to Coachtopia with sustainability and greenwashing claims.

**Description and Context:** Coachtopia is a sub-brand created by the leather fashion company Coach in the year 2023, as a way to be more environmentally friendly. Essentially what they do is take the scraps of leather that make the original purses Coach sells, repurposing the leather scraps into a new purse. This all is for Coach to be more sustainable, and is a way for the company to showcase how it is recycling the leather that is left behind during the making of the bags. On the Coachtopia Instagram, an advertisement shows one of the leather crafters creating a

leather Tabby bag for Coach, and then using the scraps from that bag to make another “alter ego shoulder bag” for the Coachtopia side. How the crafter does this is by taking the scraps, cutting the leather into squares and sewing the squares together like a patchwork quilt, creating the “alter ego bag.” A man voicing over the video discusses the crafting process of the bag describing how the master craftsman is choosing the “finest leather” to create both bags. By the end of the advertisement, the man voicing the video says “two distinct bags crafted from the same leather” while showcasing both bags. In this advertisement, Coach is pushing the idea that they are using sustainable practices, and not leaving waste behind. Their claim is that each purse made by both Coach and Coachtopia is of the same high quality leather, and the only difference is how the bags are put together.

Another video on the Coachtopia instagram, shows two men walking through a factory setting to look at what is used to make the “Coachtopia leather” that some of the other bags are made of. The video focuses on the process of how the leather fibers are broken down from the mass of leather scraps to smaller cut pieces. The video does not show how the leather itself is binded, but one of the men states that the quality of the bags are “really really durable, and really really strong.” (Coachtopia Instagram) While this video is informative, it is the only video discussing the quality of Coachtopia leather. The rest of the pictures and advertisements on the instagram page are discussing the bags made from the recycled squares of leather, which Coachtopia is advertising more frequently than the Coachtopia leather. Going to the Coachtopia website, there is a quote at the bottom of the purse selection page that is titled “More sustainable bags from Coachtopia.” The quote says “Step into the world of Coachtopia. Our diverse range of more sustainable bags offers something special for every fashion and environment enthusiast. Made with recycled materials, each piece in the Coachtopia more sustainable purse collection is

a testament of our dedication to environmentally friendly fashion. Our handbags are crafted with sustainable and recycled materials without compromising on style. When the weight of the world gets to be too heavy, our more sustainable bags will help carry some of the weight for you.”

(Coachtopia) With these quotes and continued marketing, Coachtopia is creating an image of sustainability that is being sold to the company's audience, with the promotion of being a sustainable brand.

Tanner.leatherstein is a social media content creator, who regularly reviews the quality of leather products, and discusses the authenticity of different luxury brand bags. He has built a reputation on being trustworthy to his audience, by taking apart the luxury leather products on camera after purchasing the purses with his own money. Tanner.leatherstein shows his authenticity that he is legitimate by using his own money, but also videoing his process of taking the bags apart. To also show the authenticity of the bags, tanner.leatherstein will show a picture of the bag with the price from the brands website, for proof that the bags and prices are authentic.

On January 9th, 2026, tanner.leatherstein released an Instagram reel, stating “Coach just scammed their customers with sustainable leather claims, and here's the proof”(tanner.leatherstein). In the video he starts with a leather Coach bag, and a Coachtopia bag made with “Coachtopia leather” He then begins to take each bag apart, and discusses the quality of the bags. While the coach bag remained intact with its leather when being scraped across with a knife, the Coachtopia bag's leather came apart in crumbles when put through the same knife test. During the dissection, tanner.leatherstein talks about how the bag made from recycled leather is actually plastic leather, with glued fibers keeping the bag together, with some leather fibers mixed in. Tanner.leatherstein makes the statement that the fake leather of this bag has, “zero performance, zero durability, zero value”(tanner.leatherstein). For him, the irony of the

sustainable leather, is that the Coach original leather bags are more sustainable because of their durability. “Durable leather that lasts decades is more sustainable than plastic marketed as eco-friendly”(tanner.leatherstein). The video concludes with tanner.leatherstein encouraging his audience to buy the original Coach bags, instead of the Coachtopia bags. “They will outlast the greenwashing by decades” (tanner.leatherstein).

The responses to tanner.leatherstein's video are in favor of what he is saying, and against Coachtopia. Many of the viewers are against the fake leather, while others reminisce about the original Coach leather bags' quality. One viewer wrote in the comments of the video, “I bought one of those bags!!! Its cute! But them saying it was made from scraps of their other leather made me buy it. Now to know its not even leather, and will be crumbling in a few years pissing me off even more. I stick with Coach leather bags because of their history. Not good @Coachtopia not good at all.....”(@pammiliciousone)

The brand Coach began in the year nineteen forty one, on Manhattan's 34th street. The company began with six artisan designers, “with a collective love for leather.”(Jules B). The designers originally would make men's leather goods and wallets. The company was bought by Lillian and Miles Cahn in 1961, the Cahn’s were “owners of a leather handbag manufacturing business, and were knowledgeable about leatherworks and business.” (Coveted). The Cahns joined the company in 1946 and made changes to the Coach brand by having the idea and creating Coach’s leather goods using the same leather that baseballs are made from. Coach also began creating women's products around the same time. In 1962 Coach hired their first lead designer, Bonnie Cashin who was known for her “whimsical approach to fashion design” (Jules B). Cashin helped move forward the Coach brand by designing the “Cashin carry bag” in 1969. The Cashin carry bag is the first of many Coach bags available for purchase today that represents

the history and craftsmanship of the Coach brand. Today, Coach continues to follow the tradition and craftsmanship that was created during the brand's beginning, “Today, as in 1941, we are shaped by our unique story—and committed, in everything we do, to celebrating craft, our hometown and the optimism of authentic American style” (Coach).

Coachtopia is a brand created by Coach in August 2023. The idea behind the sub-brand was to create purses and designer bags that are, “Designed for and with a new generation of consumers who are increasingly passionate about addressing the climate crisis and determined to drive change”(tapestry). Coachtopia’s advertising revolves around the basis that the company is recycling the leather used to make the Coach handbags, and repurposing the leather into new purses that are sustainable to the environment. “The production of new materials accounts for 38% of the fashion industry’s greenhouse gas emissions.\* That's why, in Coachtopia, we are minimizing our use of virgin raw materials and crafting from what already exists. For example, our Upcrafted leather bags and accessories are made from luxury leather production scraps left over after our bag patterns are cut from leather hides” (Coachtopia).

Coachtopia’s marketing strategies involve using the Instagram platform to showcase how the products are made, and voice their message of sustainability to their audience. “Coachtopia is Coach’s Gen Z-focused sub-brand” (Green Behavior). Coachtopia produces marketing strategies through their Instagram platform by using Gen Z celebrities, such as Lola Tung from Amazon Prime’s *The Summer I turned Pretty*, to be the face of their most recent “Alter ego campaign” that was launched in October 2024. The “alter ego bag” is said on the Coachtopia website to be created with, “left over leathers from the Coach Tabby.”(Coachtopia) The Coach tabby was a recreation of a vintage design created by Bonnie Cashin, Coaches first lead designer. The campaign also used, “hand-drawn animations, behind-the-scenes shoots, and innovative

campaign work that set Coachtopia apart” (Riot). The Two videos on the Coachtopia platform represent these innovative techniques by taking the audience on a journey behind the making of the bags.

Coachtopia collaborated with Gen Feonix to create the Coachtopia leather that is seen on the instagram page. “Gen Phoenix has long produced recycled leather for mass transportation, such as seating in buses and planes made from unfinished scraps left over during the tanning process” (Generation Phoenix). The two brands are focused on collaborating through the use of tapestry leather, to create purses and bags out of the recycled leather materials.

Another luxury purse brand that uses similar marketing strategies is Gucci. In the year 2018, Gucci created “Gucci Equilibrium”, with the description on their website being, “Powered by creativity and collaboration, we are reducing our environmental impact and protecting nature, while also prioritizing inclusivity and respect, so that everyone in our global #GucciCommunity is free to express their authentic, diverse selves.”(Gucci). With this information, Gucci is said to be using its stores to recycle products and reduce waste. Another thing the brand is doing, “The company also monitors Co2 emissions, so that it can set real targets for reduction”(Luxiders). Unlike the Coachtopia brand, Gucci Equilibrium does not use an instagram account, most of the information for sustainability is found on the Gucci website. The brand also does not use celebrities to advocate for the cause, and instead focuses on using celebrities to promote the brand itself, and the fashion camagns..

Tanner.leatherstein began his career as an Instagram leather anti-influencer in May of 2022. Since his start, he has built a reputation for being an honest leather enthusiast who will go over the quality of a product and be honest in his findings, an example is his video released in July of 2022, where he discusses what happens to the hair during a leather process involving

sheep skin with the wool still attached. Tanner.leatherstein takes his camera with him as he looks through pelts of sheep's skin. He takes the time to explain to his audience “Most sheep skins are processed without the hair.”(Tanner.leatherstein). After creating this video, tanner.leatherstein would continue to create content discussing the quality of leather goods, including luxury brand purses. Today, he is known for creating videos revealing the “truth” behind different products. Some of these videos include other luxury brands such as Louis Vuitton, and Gucci.

Tanner.leatherstein released a video February 4th, 2026 titled, “They call this sustainable?” In the video he calls out Gucci, Coach and Louis Vuitton for saying they are being sustainable brands. He goes into how the bags are still being created, and the production of all of these bags will cause issues to the environment. “More production, more leather, more bags. Means more waste” (tanner.leatherstein”. Then he goes on to say that the brands consider themselves sustainable for recycling a fraction of the waste they produce. “When a brand worth billions puts ‘sustainable’ front and center, that's not science, that's marketing. You cannot have hypergrowth and sustainability in the same equation” (tanner.leatherstein). He concludes the video by telling his audience to trust their intuition on what feels right about sustainability, and to be weary of brands that state they are sustainable with no real proof.. This video, and the ones discussed for the research object are important to understand, because tanner.leatherstein is an anti-influencer. He uses his power and his platform to sway his audience with his words and actions. Tanner.leatherstein is special to his platform because instead of building and sewing the bags, he is taking them apart for scientific reasons. He proves to be authentic by purchasing the luxury bags with his own money as well.

Greenwashing is the, “act or practice of making a product, policy, activity, etc. appear to be more environmentally friendly or less environmentally damaging than it really is”(Merriam

Webster). Luxury purse brands tend to fall into the category of greenwashing, or of not being completely sustainable, as described in the article by *Leafy Looks* titled “Luxury Handbag Brands Sustainability: A Look at Their Eco Claims”. The article opens by discussing the “Carbon Neutral and Emission Offsetting” (Leafy Looks), in the brands Gucci and Prada. Both brands have expressed “ambitious carbon neutral goals”(Leafy looks). But while these goals of offsetting emissions are valuable, “experts argue that offsetting emissions is not the same as actively reducing them. True sustainability requires cutting carbon output at its source, rather than compensating for pollution after it has occurred”(Leafy Looks). Sustainability is defined as, “the integration of environmental health, social equity and economic vitality in order to create thriving, healthy, diverse and resilient communities for this generation and generations to come”(UCLA). The greenwashing seen by brands such as Gucci and Prada are being called out, because the carbon emissions brought on by the companies will only be reduced, but not stopped. The article by *Greenleaf* is similar to tanner.leathersteins claims because both groups focus on how these luxury companies are not being honest with their sustainability, and hiding behind name recognition.

### **Initial Conclusion:**

The advertising of Coach and Coachtopia do not hide the rapidly growing sustainability issues that the brands cause. Companies such as Coach and Gucci hide behind name recognition when faced with the task of trying to become more environmentally friendly. My question is, How can a company that is based off of mass production of purses be able to decrease the amount of energy and trash being wasted? What is the power behind both tanner.leatherstein, Coach, and Gucci to create these brands and campaigns with no real explanation into how the products are being recycled and made?

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