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Are Adidas and Nike's "Recycled" and "Sustainable" products a marketing ploy or a genuine product of change for the future?

Brand analysis of Adidas and Nike.

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Introduction

What does "sustainable" and "recycled" mean? Cambridge dictionary defines "sustainable" as "Able to continue over a period of time" (Cambridge Dictionary, ND) and "recycled" as "Having been used before and then put through a process so that it can form a new product" (Cambridge Dictionary, ND). With these definitions in mind, why do sportswear companies use them for marketing their apparel and sneakers?

Adidas and Nike are two of the world's largest sportswear brands and are two of the largest brands in the world. Both brands are tackling sustainability within their brand's ethos by offering sneakers and apparel for lifestyle and performance made from sustainable materials such as plastics harvested from the ocean with Adidas's partnership with Parley of the ocean and Nike with their Nike Grind program. Both brands have been developing their sustainable practices since the mid to late 1990s, with Nike first launching their Nike grind program in 1992, as stated on their website about the program (Nike, Inc. 2018). With Adidas, their care for sustainability and the environment started back in 1989, but the cornerstone of their sustainability practices kicked off in 2007 (Adidas, AG. 2021). This begs the question, just how sustainable are the two brands sustainable range? Are they offering these products and marketing them to gain more sales from consumers who are more protective of the environment and who make more conscious decisions about the materials and how their ethically made when making their purchase? Or, Are they just another marketing gimmick made by these brands? In this brand analysis, I will be focusing on the brand's sustainability strategies, how they are implementing the changes needed for the future sustainability of sportswear, and how they are marketing their practices with their products. This analysis will determine whether the sustainability footwear these two powerful brands put out are a genuine product for the future or are just a marketing gimmick by the brands to sell their footwear more. The words 'sustainability' and 'recycled' are quoted daily when products are made from non-virgin materials such as plastics. And in today's age, many companies, regardless of what products they specialise in, pay close attention to the issue of corporate sustainability; this is highlighted within the case study "The importance of sustainability in the fashion sector: ADIDAS Case Study" (Graziella Sicoli, G. Bronzetti, G. Baldini, M. 2019). This suggests that more and more companies within the sportswear industry and the fashion industry are making the conscious decision to implement sustainability practices into their company for the future, profit, and market image.

I will be highlighting just how 'sustainable' these two major sportswear brands are with their efforts towards a more sustainable future within sportswear. I will be highlighting mainly the two most prominent aspects of these brands: footwear (performance and lifestyle), their practices, and how they make these products sustainable. And where do the materials used come from? This is important to this argument as just for Adidas alone in 2020; the Three Stripes sold 379 million pairs of shoes as shown within a graph (Blázquez, A. 2021). How sustainable are these products for long term use, and how strong are the materials and the processes used? And where will these processes take the companies into the future? The aim is also to identify just how these products will be for the future. The future of footwear is never sure, with styles and trends coming and going quickly now more than ever, where consumers discard a sneaker when it isn't on trend anymore. This brings into question the sneakers life cycle and sustainability. Are Adidas and Nike looking at this issue and planning the future of footwear already with these initiatives? Or are they making these products for another avenue to say they've entered to gain more profit?

With all this said, I will be identifying, discussing, highlighting and comparing these sportswear brands on their sustainability aspects and how each is tackling this issue differently with their footwear and performance footwear—comparing them on how similar they attack it.

Chapter 1: Adidas and their battle with sustainability

Since 1989 Adidas has been aware of the environmental impact and its sustainability. As a brand with the materials, they use within their products. In 1989 they banned the use of chlorofluorocarbons (CFC) within all their products, as stated by (Adidas, AG. 2021). The SF6 gases used within their products are the deadliest for the ozone layer. Because of this, Adidas has never used these substances within their products as they are aware of the environmental impacts they cause, as stated by (Adidas, AG. 2021).

The cornerstone year for Adidas was 2007 for its sustainability program. This year, they became completely transparent as a company and released their global supplier factories list, not being the first in the industry to do so but a step in the right direction for the brand and its future. Since 2015 Adidas has partnered with Parley of The Oceans and aims to eliminate ocean plastic by gathering the plastic and turning it into performance footwear and apparel. As stated on Parley's website, "not only by phasing out single-use plastics and microbeads but by launching entire product lines and new collaborations to build a better future for our oceans and planet" (Parley, ND). Adidas have used their status as a big brand sportswear company to partner with Parley to help with their efforts and turn the plastic harvested into recycled plastic thread to produce their performance footwear models and apparel. This collaboration is a serious help for Parley's efforts and boosts Adidas as a company making drives to be more sustainable. The partnership boosts the efforts both companies make for the environment and gets wider consumers to see their efforts than before. This could lead to more consumers making more and more conscious decisions when purchasing a sneaker or piece of apparel; this can also lead the consumers to believe that Adidas is a marketing stunt to make the brand look more conscious and better. On Parley's official website. it shows images of the prototype for Adidas's first Ultra Boost performance sneaker using their new thread from the plastic gathered from the ocean. "The Ultra Boost prototype featured on the upper made of yarns and filaments reclaimed and recycled from ocean waste and illegal deep-sea gillnets" (Parley, ND). The images of the sneaker being on display and shown to the world for the first time in 2015 proves the steps Adidas is making to create these products. Adidas and Parley produce a collection of apparel and new versions of the UltraBoost each year. And again, this answers one of the questions asked when this sneaker was first launched: Adidas can make these sneakers on a mass scale. As stated by Business insider, "Adidas melts these pellets to create a filament, which is spun into what they call Ocean Plastic, a form of polyester yarn. Adidas uses Ocean Plastic to form the upper parts of shoes and clothing like jerseys. Each item in the Parley

collection is made from at least 75% intercepted marine trash. And they still meet the same performance and comfort standards as Adidas' other shoes. Recycled polyester uses less water and fewer chemicals and helps prevent plastic pollution." (Morgan, C. 2020). This shows that Adidas has done numerous tests and is proving since 2015 that this unique thread and material used and developed by Adidas is leading the industry with their sustainability front by developing this new way of creating uppers for their performance footwear and in performance apparel. And to make each item from at least 75% ocean waste is an incredible feat, but to make the performance footwear just as durable as footwear designed for performance using virgin materials is ground-breaking. This proves Adidas are thinking about the longevity of their footwear and the materials they are using for these products. Adidas are smart in getting people already invested in the brand and its ethos and drawing in new, more environmentally friendly consumers. The way Adidas do this is, as stated on Parley's website, "Limited edition products and sponsorships have engaged a massive global audience" (Parley, ND). Adidas has made football uniforms for some of the top European teams; examples are Manchester United, FC Bayern Munich, Real Madrid and AC Milan. As well as these European teams, Adidas makes the uniforms for every team in Major League Soccer (MLS) in the United States of America. Adidas provides the Uniforms for the National Hockey League (NHL). Adidas branched out into creating the uniforms for the New Zealand All Blacks rugby team; all these collaborations allow consumers and new ones to buy into their sustainability aspects. The issue raised with these uniforms is that they all seem to have a recycled styling. It is as if Adidas wants the consumer to know that what they are purchasing is made from recycled materials. For the first time within its history, Adidas, in 2021, is using more than 60% recycled polyester, as stated by (Luxider, ND). Also stated by (Luxider, ND) Adidas will be using only recycled polyester from 2024 onwards to actively move towards its 2050 goal of achieving global climate neutrality within its entire supply chain. CEO of Adidas Kasper Rorsted said, "Not only does our commitment make Adidas more sustainable but also drives the development of the whole industry" (Luxider, ND). This shows the brands aim to lead the industry within sustainability fronts by taking the leaps of faith and setting out goals to change their supply chain and turn it into a supply circle where materials get recycled and reused rather than single-use materials. As stated by (Luxider, ND), becoming a more sustainable company to Adidas means using fewer virgin materials and animal leather. This is shown within the multiple different ranges the brand offers. These ranges include Prime Green and Prime Blue, which both are produced using recycled materials and are used in their performance wear. Adidas offer some of their classic sneaker with new vegan leather ranges. These include the Stan Smith

sneakers and the Superstar. Adidas is also developing plant-based leather, recycled cotton, and a climate-friendly running shoe, as stated by (Luxider, ND). Adidas as a brand is a leader in the sense of sustainability; they are innovating new ways of sustainable practices and implementing them within their brand at all levels by setting clear goals for the future and delivering in them year after year. The brand is open about operating with its goals and aims for its sustainability sector. Adidas wants the consumer to know what products are sustainable and what the products are constructed of and be transparent with their company. The Fashion Revolution Transparency Index stated that Adidas scored a 54% Transparency rating in 2021. "The companies that have shared more about their suppliers, as well as information about processes and manufacturers have achieved 50% transparency" (MDS, 2020). This shows how Adidas provides the consumer with their sustainability fronts and isn't afraid to show how they are running the company.

Chapter 2: Nike and how they are tackling sustainability

Nike has taken a different approach to the sustainability front. In 1992 Nike launched its 'Nike Grind' program 1992 in a localised fashion. This program, as stated Nike on their official website, *"What began as a grassroots initiative to collect and recycle shoes to create basketball courts is now a global sustainability innovation that spans the sports industry and beyond."* (Nike, INC. ND). Nike has always been an advocate for grassroots sports and mainly Basketball. This initiative helped create the rubber outdoor basketball courts for young children to play and develop skills. But what is Nike Grind exactly? Nike Grind, as stated on Nike's website, *"Nike Grind is a collection of recycled materials originating from Nike manufacturing scrap, unsellable products and worn-out sneakers"* (Nike, INC. ND). This means that Nike takes the sneakers that are deemed *"unsellable"* as well as *"worn-out"* and reuses the materials on basketball courts in its earlier stages of the program. Nike Grind reuses the offcuts from their cutting patterns and reuses them for new Nike products such as their sneakers, athletic footwear, garments and athletic performance wear. Nike states on their website that they also use Nike Grind for other purposes such as Turf Fields such as the Bo Jackson field in Nike World Headquarters, running tracks, Nike fleece sweatshirt, Nike and Converse footwear and Nike's retail spaces within their shelving displays, mannequins, modular display blocks, flooring and seating (Nike, INC. ND). Nike calls this initiative *"Move to Zero,"* which is to push zero carbon and zero waste for the future of sports. (Nike, INC. ND). By 2025 Nike has set its aims to divert 100% of its waste from landfills and have at least 80% of that waste be reused into its products, as stated in the article by (Driver, R. 2021). Nike also aims to lower its freshwater usage within its textile dyeing and finishing sector. *"Nike aims to achieve a reduction of 25% in freshwater usage per kg in its textile dyeing and finishing"*, as stated by (Driver, R. 2021). These statements show Nikes aims for the future within its supply and production chain and make them more sustainable for the future of the company as well as its products with the help of Nike Grind. In the 2000 Olympic games, Nike Introduced their first garment made with recycled polyester for performance wear, according to Noel Kinder from Nike (Mahirova, S. 2021). This statement from Kinder demonstrates that Nike's sustainability efforts are not just a recent push from the brand but decades of improvement and vision by the brand. Nike has implemented its sustainability pushes into its products just like its competitor Adidas, but Nike has placed its Nike Grind within its products. These products mainly consist of sneakers within basketball and Jordan Brand's sneakers. Nike's main sneaker with Nike Grind and recycled materials is the basketball performance sneaker 'Cosmic Unity' released in early 2021. This performance sneaker is produced out of 25% recycled content by weight, according to (Nike, INC. 2021). This sneaker's release has

pushed Nike's efforts with their 'Move to Zero' campaign further along to lower carbon and waste but also not compromise the sneaker's performance. Currently, 78% of all Nike's products, as well as the Jordan brand, are made up of recycled materials in some form; Nike is aiming to increase this number because materials are 70% of their carbon footprint (Nike, INC. ND). Nike has implemented that their supply chain must be sustainable and their materials; Nike's Air soles which is one of the company's greatest innovations, is now created from at least 50% recycled materials. Nike has made single-digit adjustments to their product manufacturing which have resulted in 3.5 Million Kg of material waste being prevented; this is closing the gap for Nike's goal of 100% extended waste being diverted from landfill and 80% of the waste being reused into Nike products, this is stated on Nike's impact report on their website, *"we've made single-digit centimetre adjustments across product manufacturing, meaning more than 3.5 million kg of waste was prevented. At scale, these adjustments and innovations are our paths to achieving our aims of 100% of the waste from our extended supply chain diverted from landfills and at least 80% recycled back into NIKE products and other goods"* (Nike, INC. 2021). This statement by Nike shows how the brand is battling sustainability and aiming to make their whole process sustainable rather than just the materials and products. In the 2021 Fashion Transparency Index, Nike scored a 55% transparency rating, with the Jordan brand also scoring 55% (MDS, 2020). This means Nike is pushing for more transparency within their company to their consumers and allowing the consumers of their products to know how their products are made as more and more consumers are becoming more environmentally friendly. As stated by (Evantage, 2021) Nike believes that no company can grow without being sustainable, *"there are global organisations like Nike that believe without sustainability efforts no business can grow to become successful and sustain that mindshare from the public."* As a brand, Nike is thinking long term and the effects the products, they produce have long term wise rather than short term. As of this, Nike puts the needs and interests of its consumers first, just as the company has always done in its history, *"email marketing, product packaging, footwear marketing as a whole, and your company's over-arching position on sustainability"* (Evantage, 2021). Nike believes that knowing their customers will help them with their push for sustainability within their brand and products. It is also about what the customers associate with their brand Nike as a brand believe that sustainability is one way, they want to be associated with their consumer base. The future of Nike and its innovation within sneaker technology shows that their plans for sustainability can already be achieved without fail. Still, to make these changes, the band will set a five-year goal; their current goal is to reach full sustainability within the company by 2025.

Chapter 3: Adidas and Nike comparison

This chapter will be comparing Adidas and Nike's sustainability efforts by both brands. By doing this, I will be analysing just which brand does it better and how their practices are changing how sportswear is improving because of the continuous efforts made by the brands.

Both sportswear brands value transparency with their consumers, and this is clear to see within the 2021 Fashion Transparency Index. The 2021 Fashion Transparency Index shows how much a company is transparent with their human rights policies, environmental policies, supply chains and product manufacturing as stated by (*Fashion Revolution, 2021*) "*The Fashion Transparency Index analyses and ranks 250 of the world's biggest fashion brands and retailers based on their public disclosure of human rights and environmental policies, practices and impacts, in their operations and their supply chains.* In 2021 where do these giants of the sportswear industry sit? According to the 2021 Fashion Transparency Index, Adidas sits with 54% transparency within the brand; this is very good as Adidas aims to total transparency within its company in the future. Nike, along with the Jordan brand, scored 55% transparency in the 2021 Fashion Transparency Index; this is also very good for Nike and Jordan brand because as well as Adidas, Nike aims to have a transparent company by creating the company supply and product management chains to be a circle and reuse waste, products that are unacceptable for sale and old Nike shoes from athletes and consumers. In the 2020 Fashion Transparency Index, Adidas scored 64% transparency rating, which is compared to 2021 the brand has suffered a 9% decrease in rating. Nike and Jordan's brand scored 55% in 2020, which reached to 2021 is the same rating (*Fashion Revolution, 2020*). These scores alone show how both companies are pushing to be more transparent with their consumers each year; Nike seems to be more consistent than Adidas with their transparency in the past two years. But overall, both companies are pushing for the same goal, however by what the ratings show, Nike is currently just edging out Adidas.

The following comparison is the brand's sustainable products, mainly their sneakers. Adidas and both offer performance sneakers using their sustainability efforts. Adidas, with its Ultraboost, is made using recycled ocean plastic. As stated by (*Parley, ND*), the Ultraboost collaboration with Adidas, which was first released in 2015, is constructed of at least 75% ocean trash. On the other hand, Nike has their Nike Grind program, which, as stated by (Nike, INC. ND) Nike Grind uses "Nike Grind is a collection of recycled materials originating from

Nike manufacturing scrap, unsellable products *worn-out sneakers*". The most notable sneaker to include Nike Grind within it is Nike's performance basketball sneaker Cosmic Unity, being made from at least 25% recycled content. These brands have both shown they can create a unique product from the sustainable efforts and practices they are using and creating performance sneakers without hindering the performance within them. Comparing these two sneakers is difficult, as The Adidas Ultraboost, as seen in Figure 1 (*Sneaker Freaker. 2015*), is a performance running sneaker compared to Nike's performance basketball sneaker, the Cosmic Unity, as seen in Figure 2 (*Hypebeast. 2021*). These two sneakers are the brand's flagship sneaker using their sustainability efforts.



(Fig 1, Parley of the Oceans x Adidas Ultra Boost, *Sneaker Freaker. 2015*).



(Fig 2, Cosmic Unity, *Hypebeast. 2021*).

Adidas and Nike have both marketed these shoes and their sustainable apparel ranges, but how easy is it for the average consumer to find sustainable products on the brand's apps? To find this out, I conducted a test in which I had average consumers use each brand's shopping apps without using any search engines to search for a piece of sustainable clothing or sneaker. The reasoning behind this test is to see just how easy it is to find something sustainable within the companies' apps and how do they market them on the app compared to standard forms of

advertising such as adverts and billboards. The aim is to see which brand makes it easier for the consumer to find sustainable garments and sneakers on their app and how do the brands show off their products, and are there any search engine features that help with this? I asked six willing participants to help with my test. With the test hypothetically not taking long to complete and locate a piece of sustainability.

The first brand conducted within the test was Adidas, with the results varying from every participant. I have compiled all the results gathered into a table and worked out the average time it had taken to find a sustainable piece of clothing.

Test results:

<i>Adidas</i>	
<i>Participants (initials)</i>	<i>Time taken to find sustainable item</i>
M. M.	2 minutes 0 seconds
Y. H.	1 minute and 36 seconds
R. O	2 Minutes and 16 seconds
N. D	3 minutes and 34 seconds
P. A.	1 minute and 54 seconds
C. M.	1 minute and 30 seconds
<i>Total time taken:</i> 12 minutes and 10 seconds (702 seconds)	
<i>Average time taken:</i> 2 minutes and 17 seconds (117 seconds)	

And secondly the following brand is Nike, with again the results varying from participant to participant I have compiled the results into a table. Once completed, I calculated the average time it had taken between all 6 participants to find an item of sustainable value.

<i>Nike</i>	
<i>Participants (initials)</i>	<i>Time taken to find sustainable item</i>
M. M.	4 minutes and 1 seconds
Y. H.	1 minute and 4 seconds
R. O	3 minute and 56 seconds
N. D	5 minutes and 3 seconds
P. A.	3 minutes and 34 seconds
C. M.	1 minute and 30 seconds
<i>Total time taken:</i> 18 Minutes and 28 seconds (1,096.80 seconds)	
<i>Average time taken:</i> 3 minutes and 5 seconds (182.8 seconds)	

(O'Leary, R. 2021)

Comparing the test results from all six participants, there is a clear indication that with the Nike app, the participants found an item that was sustainable slower than with the Adidas app. The average time taken from the Adidas part of the test was 2 minutes and 17 seconds, which when compared to the Nike part of the test was 3 minutes and 15 seconds to find an item of sustainable value. These results show that the Adidas app makes it easier for users to find a sustainable item when scrolling casually.

Both apps feature a search engine which allows the user to 'sort by' sustainable materials. When participants who didn't have the Nike app installed before the test found that when first opening the app Nike asks the user what they are most interested in, such as sports and activities and one section being 'Sustainable Materials' it is to note when conducting the test users did not click this feature. Adidas, however, do not do this with their app when first installing it.

After the test conducted and comparing the brand's apps together, Nike is doing this better than Adidas by making sustainable products easily accessible for the consumer using their apps.

Conclusion

To conclude this brand analysis of Adidas and Nike, it is clear to see that both powerful sportswear brands are thinking, implementing and innovating with their sustainability efforts by looking to the future of the life cycle of their apparel and sneakers. With Adidas on one end of the spectrum with gathering ocean plastic with Parley of The Oceans and turning the plastic gathered into recycled plastic threads to create apparel and performance sneakers, to Nike with their Nike Grind program with collecting off-cuts of materials from their own factory's and reusing the materials into new apparel and sneakers.

Where do I see these brands and their sustainability efforts leading? With how both brands are pushing their sustainability efforts by creating sneakers with their different ways of impacting the ways we see and envision sustainability within the sportswear industry. I see these two brands influencing other significant brands within the sportswear industry to do the same and create a sustainable environment within their company, with a supply and product chain being a circle rather than a straight line. In ten years, time, brands within the sportswear and sneaker industry will adopt Adidas and Nike's sustainability efforts in my view. The brand's flagship sneakers show how they can produce important pieces that showcase the steps and importance of taking steps towards sustainable sneakers and clothing. Do I believe these products are a marketing gimmick or a genuine product from these companies? By studying and analysing the products themselves and how these brands have both tackled sustainability in two ends of the spectrum, in my own views these products are a mix of both, a genuine product for change for how we, the consumer of these products, view sustainability from something that implies 'second hand' to a new product and a marketing gimmick on how the products are marketed in a way that when you purchase these products you the consumer are actively helping the environment. But these views are to be seen in a positive light as the marketing side feeds into the product themselves and helps consumers make more conscious choices. This leads to my belief that within ten years, brands will not have to market these sustainable products as both brands are now implementing these practices within their whole brand and therefore making every product a sustainable bi-product of the future rather than a select product line within the brand. Making a sustainable product such as a sneaker is essential. Still, brands, in my view, need to create a sustainable environment within the company to be able to create sustainable products.

There are downsides to creating sustainable products, such as the designs of the products always have an aesthetic of “recycled”. It seems to me in my view that the design teams want the consumer to know that the product is recycled and have that as its main element. I believe in years to design units will incorporate the recycled elements into products and have them aesthetically replicate the effects of virgin materials. The future is in capable hands with these major sportswear brands.

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