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Undressing Sustainability Communication: An exploratory study of sustainable fashion brands' online messages

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this thesis is to provide an understanding of how successful sustainable fashion brands communicate online, since communicating sustainability efforts effectively has been identified as essential to contribute towards closing the attitude-behaviour gap. Therefore, the company perspective is taken, exploring message content and composition on corporate websites and Facebook. This thesis further takes brand identity as a basis for developing a communication strategy.

Methodology: A qualitative method with an abductive approach is guiding this thesis, allowing to develop an in-depth understanding of the sustainable fashion brands' online communication. A twofold material collection process is applied, namely semi-structured interviews with experts in the field of sustainable branding and communication, as well as, an analysis of sustainable fashion brands' communication on corporate websites and Facebook, the focus of this work.

Findings: The findings cover nine themes illustrating the message content and composition of sustainable fashion brands' online communication. The themes unfold the imperative of aligning brand identity to fashion's sustainability communication, connecting the message elements to ensure credibility. Further, the study reveals the brands' approach to counteract the attitude-behaviour gap, conveyed by communicating to the respective interests of the consumer while staying true to their own purpose. The themes disclose that this twofold ambition is communicated by balancing sustainability and fashion content.

Research implications: This thesis provides a modified theoretical framework illustrating how fashion brands with sustainability at the core can devise and communicate their efforts, while ensuring to appeal to consumers' wants and needs. Further, this work introduces the sweet spot as an emerged concept and enhances existing knowledge on the importance of brand identity in communication by revealing how both elements are connected.

Practical implications: This thesis implies that a credible sustainability communication in fashion is aligned with the brand identity. With regard to the content, mingling fashion and sustainability content fulfils the imperative to make sustainability communication inspirational and fun in order to keep the consumer engaged. The study further indicates that great efforts need to be made regarding explicitness of messages to support the perception of trust and comprehensiveness.

Originality/value: With regard to the attitude-behaviour gap, this thesis enriches literature from the company perspective, highlighting the role of sustainable fashion brands' communication towards solving this paradox. Another noteworthy value lies in the rich empirical material, enabling a better understanding of sustainability communication and gaining latest practical knowledge.

Keywords: sustainability communication, online communication, sustainable fashion brands, brand identity, attitude-behaviour gap

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This thesis has delighted, fascinated and haunted us daily for the last weeks. For both of us, it marks the end of our academic careers and the start of an exciting new chapter in our lives. Being passionate about fashion and sustainability, we have decided to dedicate our last university related efforts to diving into the ‘look and feel’ of sustainable fashion brands’ communication, again highlighting that there is no ‘black and white’ perspective.


Looking back, the Bachelor already seemed like a big mission that we accomplished, but now, making the final touches to our Master thesis, we feel like we truly made it. Therefore, we would like to thank a few selected people who supported us on our academic journey.

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Jasmin Langguth



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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

“... 2018 will bring to fruition the ‘next level’ of sustainability and offer the potential of a competitive advantage for fashion companies who embrace it fully” (McKinsey & Company, 2018, p.63).

In recent years, consumption behaviour has changed and decisions are no longer solely based on price and quality (Caruana, 2007), but increasingly consumers favour companies that care and offer meaning by exemplifying authentic traits (Vallaster, Lindgreen & Maon, 2012). This growing awareness of the impact of consumption on the environment and people (Beard, 2008) is, for example, reflected by a 17 percent increase within only one year in millennials’ willingness to pay more for products and services from companies committed to positive social and environmental impact (Nielson, 2015).

Overall, it becomes apparent that in order to meet consumers’ expectations, many companies are now promoting sustainable products and services (Bocken, 2017), actively measuring their success not only in terms of financial performance, but also their impact on the environment and the society (Norman & MacDonald, 2004). This ambition is often referred to as triple bottom line (Elkington, 1998), used to measure and report corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts (Carroll, 1979; 1991). Here it is important to mention that CSR and sustainability, recognised as the basis of CSR (van Marrewijk, 2003), are used interchangeably throughout this thesis, denoting the efforts of the brands to contribute to environmental or social issues.

Pressure on industries with significant environmental and social impact, as well as, strong public exposure is particularly high (D’Souza, 2015). The fashion industry, based on its volume, production processes, creating a large ecological footprint (D’Souza, 2015), poor labour conditions (Han, Seo & Ko, 2017), and issues regarding excessive waste (Caniato, Caridi, Crippa & Moretto, 2012; D’Souza, 2015) is increasingly held responsible by conscious consumers for environmental and social problems caused. Consequently, the second largest industrial polluter after oil (Conca, 2015) experiences increasing pressure to embrace environmental sustainability (D’Souza, 2015) and ethical conduct (Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang & Chan, 2012).

The extensive range of available fashion brands, accounting for 2 percent of the world’s GDP and employing about 60 million people (Arthur, 2016), has started to adapt to sustainability demands due to different motives. Important to mention here are tactical reasons to, for example, avoid taxes or negative public attention, the intention to exploit market niches, to gain trust, as well as, moral reasons (Biloslavo & Trnavčević, 2009; Saha & Darnton, 2005). Overall, when executed properly, the fashion industry, due to its volume, can have a big positive impact on sustainable practices.

Based on brands' responses to the question of environmental and social protection, they can be divided into two main groups: organisations heavily focussing on integrating their sustainability efforts into their marketing strategy, and others that are founded with sustainability at the core (Vallaster, Lindgreen & Maon, 2012). Talking about the former, 'the followers', established apparel companies, such as Levi Strauss (Yan, Hyllegard & Blaesi, 2012) keep responding to the changing market environment by launching green labels and modifying their production processes (Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017; Thomas, 2008), thereby jumping on the "bandwagon by adopting overtly 'green' strategies" (Phau & Ong, 2007, p.772), incorporating environmental terms in their promotional messages on corporate websites (Yan, Hyllegard & Blaesi, 2012). Overall, Caniato et al. (2012) state that large companies, due to reasons of scale, are mainly only able to implement incremental changes, whereas small organisations are often capable of reshaping their entire supply chain. Challenges here are balancing sustainability and business needs, as well as, the contradiction in itself when fast-fashion claims to become sustainable. This discrepancy becomes evident when looking at respective attributes such as the inbuilt obsolescence of clothing, fast cycles in design and manufacturing based on trends (Joy et al., 2012) or the disposability and limited durability of fashion (Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017). Many fast-fashion companies have therefore been accused of 'greenwashing' (Saha & Darnton, 2005), where a mismatch between words and deeds exists. Moreover, sustainability as a term is often misused (Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017).

Fashion companies having sustainability anchored in their core values, shaping the brand identity and consequently actions, are commonly referred to as 'eco-fashion' (Cheng, 2017; D'Souza, 2015) or 'green fashion' (Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017). Their 'raison d'être' is described by Lundblad and Davies (2016) to be grounded on striving to "correct a variety of perceived wrongs in the fashion industry including animal cruelty, environmental damage, and worker exploitation" (p.150). Even though the global market for sustainable apparel is still relatively small (Yan, Hyllegard & Blaesi, 2012) and attracting limited numbers of consumers (D'Souza, 2015), in recent years more and more companies have been founded with sustainability at their core. Patagonia is described as a "paradigmatic example of implementing environmental practices in the fashion world" (Caniato et al., 2012, p.661), however, there are more brands, such as armedangels (Fair Wear Foundation, 2018), Filippa K (Stål & Jansson, 2017), or Reformation (Chaykowski, 2017), striving to transform the fashion industry by developing new approaches to fashion and creating transparency, authenticity and credibility.

1.2 Problem Formulation

Over the past decade, literature has emphasised the imperative for the fashion industry to become more environmentally and socially responsible in regard to sustainability (D'Souza, 2015; Joergens, 2006). When discussing solutions for the issues in the fashion industry, research on sustainable fashion mainly bases its approach on the consumer perspective, meaning that it aims to develop an understanding of consumers' behaviour in relation to purchase decisions (Beard, 2008; Han, Seo & Ko, 2017; Joergens, 2006; Niinimäki, 2010), as well as, on the design of new business models to mitigate a negative impact within the fashion value chain (Caniato et al., 2012; Stål & Jansson, 2017). Research focussing on purchase

decisions linked to consumer behaviour is driven by the paradox often coined as ‘attitude-behaviour gap’ (Han, Seo & Ko, 2017; Niinimäki, 2010). The attitude-behaviour gap expresses that even though consumers share sustainability concerns and expect fashion companies to act sustainably, they sometimes neglect pro-sustainable attitudes and rarely buy sustainable apparel for various reasons (Beard, 2008; D’Souza, 2015). In an effort to disclose the motivations that could affect the gap, researchers have identified many explanations. Interestingly, the dissonance in regard to consuming sustainable fashion can be explained by the fact that the perceived style of eco-fashion is disliked by consumers (Beard, 2008; Joy et al., 2012; Niinimäki, 2010; Ruane & Wallace, 2013), or barriers such as price, knowledge and cynicism explain why consumers refrain from buying eco-fashion (Angel, 2013; Joergens, 2006; Yan, Hyllegard & Blaesi, 2012). Given that fashion consumption grows with every new generation of consumers (Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017) and simultaneously drives production (Joy et al., 2012), it becomes apparent that the consumer, as one important driver of a more sustainable fashion industry, has to be considered. Overall, much research has focussed on the consumer perspective, however, solely paying attention to the attitude-behaviour gap from this viewpoint might undermine the role businesses can play in changing sustainable fashion perceptions and behavioural barriers.

The responsibility to change shoppers from awareness to advocacy is on sustainable fashion brands, naturally being driven by the “force for good” (Zady, 2018) and directly involved with consumers. Determining how they can work towards reducing the attitude-behaviour gap, literature on sustainable fashion brands highlights the importance of communication (Han, Seo & Ko, 2017; Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017; Phau & Ong, 2007). However, sustainable apparel brands often lack knowledge of an effective communication strategy, necessary to evoke engagement and consequently influence consumers’ purchase decision in regard to sustainable fashion (Dawkins, 2004). Overall, literature on sustainable apparel is limited in terms of how brands can make use of findings from the consumer perspective as a basis for overcoming behavioural barriers, where an essential driver is the design of appealing communication. Therefore, we argue that creating meaningful progress towards sustainable fashion requires a change in brands’ communication practices, where a deeper understanding of the consumer perspective and their reasons to refrain from ‘walking their talk’ are crucial. Ultimately, in this thesis we aim to examine the communication practices of sustainable brands based on the issues within the consumer paradox, targeting the consumer as a stakeholder.

However, according to academics and practitioners within brand management, communicating sustainability itself is not sufficient, sustainable fashion brands need to align their identity respectively (Futerra, 2018a; Ind, 1997 cited in Stuart & Kerr, 1999; Kline, 2008 cited in Biloslavo & Trnavčević, 2009). Consequently, at worst, brands risk to be denounced to ‘greenwash’, deceptively claiming to operate thoroughly sustainable (Saha & Darnton, 2005; Yan, Hyllegard & Blaesi, 2012), and with the lack of trust, they miss the opportunity to engage consumers (Gruber, Kaliauer, Schlegelmilch, 2017). Notably, to our knowledge, literature on communication of sustainable (fashion) brands has merely taken into account communication strategies ‘per se’ to activate consumers’ consciousness but has not contemplated the alignment of the brand itself. Overall, literature on communicating sustainable apparel is insufficient in regard to how those brands can formulate identity-aligned messages in order to be perceived as credible, a foundation to engage consumers (Coombs, 2012; Kolster, 2016).

Literature on brands' sustainability communication, in this thesis also applicable to sustainable fashion brands' communication, has looked at the channel choice targeting consumers (Fieseler, Fleck & Meckel, 2010; Gruber, Kaliauer and Schlegelmilch; 2017; Kotler, 2011; Yeomans, 2013), as well as, the formulation of the message, looking at 'what' to communicate (message content) (Angel, 2013; Futerra, 2015; Joy et al., 2012; Kibbe, 2013; Niinimäki, 2010; Townsend & Niemtow, 2016) and 'how' to phrase it (message composition) (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Dahlstrom, 2014; Dawkins, 2004; Hawksworth, 2014; Hede & Watne, 2013; Maxwell, 2013; Moisander, 2007; Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017; Polonsky, 2011; Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012). Determining the channel where to place the sustainability message, literature emphasises to direct different communication to consumers based on their level of sustainability awareness (Gruber, Kaliauer and Schlegelmilch, 2017), as well as, using online platforms, among others the corporate website and social media (Fieseler, Fleck & Meckel, 2010; Yeomans, 2013), arguably the most sustainable promotion channel among the marketing mix for sustainable brands (Kotler, 2011). Remarkably, literature discussing the formulation of the message is growing, mentioning the ambition of authenticity and credibility of messages as a basis to engage with consumers (Coombs, 2012; Kolster, 2016; Schmeltz, 2012; Sustainly, 2016). Further, inside and outside academia, a highly thematised topic is how to balance sustainability and fashion content due to the negative associations with eco-fashion and the common over-emphasis of sustainability messages (Angel, 2013; Joy et al., 2012; Kibbe, 2013; Niinimäki, 2010). Literature on the composition exemplifies the delicacy of designing messages towards the sceptical consumer (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Dawkins, 2004), where various elements are provided to facilitate an effective sustainability communication. Much emphasis is put, for example, on expressing clear, transparent and explicit messages, drawing complexity from the sustainability message (Moisander, 2007) while preventing to use "fluffy language" (Futerra, 2015, p.11). Further, literature on the composition of messages proposes to choose only certain vocabulary (Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017), to proactively educate consumers on their consumption behaviour (Polonsky, 2011), to disseminate emotions (Hawksworth, 2014; Maxwell, 2013) and lastly, to use the tool of storytelling to appeal to consumers (Dahlstrom, 2014; Hede & Watne, 2013; Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012). Taken together, the existing research on sustainability communication provides an overview to academics and practitioners of approaches available to be applied, however, it remains open how these elements refer to another and are expressed in practice.

Considering literature on brands' sustainability communication in depth, it becomes apparent that aspects remain unclear and lack research. With regard to the message formulation, contributions are scattered, tending to focus only on a few specific elements of the message content and composition, rather than providing a coherent idea of the 'big picture' of brands' sustainability communication. Further, looking at the message composition, it remains unclear how the elements can concretely be applied in practice. More precisely, taking the example how to integrate the element of 'explicitness' in a brand's sustainability communication, or how to express emotions in different contexts lacks practical illustrations. Du, Bhattacharya and Sen (2010) share this lack of depth, remarking that implementation guidance for sustainability messages is missing. Looking at other considerations for an effective sustainability communication, to the best of our knowledge, research to date has not determined how messages are guided and aligned with the brand identity, necessary to prevent being perceived as 'greenwashing'. Ultimately, literature on communication for sustainable fashion brands in

particular has received scant attention. The few authors that have taken an interest in this topic, like Peirson-Smith and Evans (2017) on green semantics, or Joy et al. (2012) on the balance of fashion and sustainability content, mentioned above, only contribute to literature on non-industry specific sustainability communication. Lastly, no studies have been found examining and illustrating the communication of specific sustainable fashion brands by presenting practical cases to learn from.

Concluding, as aforementioned, there exist credible successful sustainable fashion companies that seem to communicate effectively, referring to brands like Patagonia, Filippa K, armedangels, or Reformation, serving as role models in this area. We put forward that an understanding of the communication of sustainable fashion brands is essential to create awareness of sustainability among consumers, as a foundation to perceive brands as credible, in order to engage consumers. Through engagement, sustainable apparel brands have the chance to reduce respective behavioural boundaries within the consumer paradox. Further, to create a positive impact on the growth of this industry, the support of the biggest number of consumers possible is crucial. Therefore, we consider all types of consumers with different degrees of awareness affected by the attitude-behaviour gap related to the consumer paradox, although non-green fashion consumers might be part of the paradox only with growing consciousness, as relevant to our thesis.

1.3 Purpose and Research Question

Given the imperative to change the fashion industry, as well as, the paradox of consumers wanting sustainability but not necessarily purchasing sustainable fashion, often explained by the negative perceptions of the garments, there exists a need to communicate sustainability convincingly. In order to contribute towards solving parts of this paradox, the company perspective of communicating sustainability effectively is explored. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is to investigate how successful sustainable fashion brands communicate online, the key channel for brands to communicate nowadays (Biloslavo & Trnavčević, 2009). We argue that looking at communication itself is not enough, and therefore consider brand identity as a basis for developing a communication strategy. Consequently, the primary objective of this research is to address the following question:

How do fashion brands with sustainability at the core design their online communication?

‘Design’ in this context implies looking at the formulation of the message content and composition of sustainable fashion brands’ communication, understanding ‘what’ to say to make it appealing to the consumer (message content) and ‘how’ to devise sustainable fashion messages (message composition with communication elements) aligned with a brand’s core. This includes various aspects of sustainability messages, among others, the vocabulary applied, the explicitness of the message, as well as, the alignment of fashion and sustainability topics. Lastly, it has to be highlighted that this thesis focuses on communication targeting the consumer as a stakeholder.

1.4 Aimed Contribution

An answer to the mentioned question presents a threefold theoretical contribution, as well as, provides company actors, marketers in particular, with a better understanding of how to design sustainable fashion brands' online communication. However, we want to emphasise that we are not providing a 'recipe for success', but rather one particular perspective.

First, we contribute to literature on the attitude-behaviour gap within the sustainable fashion industry, significantly shaped by eco-fashion not being perceived as fashionable, by adding the understanding from the company perspective. This enhances knowledge as there is limited research on what brands can do to work towards closing the gap and, hence, further investigation is needed. An answer can contribute a new perspective for sustainable fashion brands on how to create their online communication to address issues consumers have with sustainable fashion, as well as, gain trust and authenticity, an achievement needed to influence consumer behaviour. In addition, since an inclusion of too much sustainability information in fashion communication can be disadvantageous, leading to disinterest (Beard, 2008), the art lies in intertwining sustainability with fashion content. The question of how to devise and communicate the sustainable message, using the most effective and understood balance of fashion and sustainability content, is critical in terms of moving people from awareness to advocacy, ultimately impacting consumption attitudes and behaviours. Overall, this approach is supported by Du, Bhattacharya and Sen's (2010) call for research on exploring mediating elements accounting for corporate social responsibility communication to be either effective or ineffective.

Secondly, since we not only focus on sustainable brands' communication strategies but take a brand's identity as the point of departure, we enrich existing literature on sustainable brand building by answering how successful sustainable fashion brands are constructed. We do so because literature highlights that successful sustainability communication starts at the core, implying that designing communication itself is not sufficient. To reach this goal, we argue that brand identity and in-depth investigations of sustainable fashion brands' online communication strategies are in need of research.

Thirdly, this research is different from previous work as it investigates sustainable fashion brands' communication from a novel perspective by providing a more coherent conceptual idea of how sustainability messages can be designed, and efforts successfully communicated online, considering the brands' identity. Building on literature on brand identity and incorporating valuable findings on communication elements and message content proven successful for sustainable brands, other sustainable fashion brands can improve their understanding of how to bridge the gap between what companies intend and what consumers desire. Thereby, a healthier state can be achieved, neither too strongly focussed on communicating sustainability, nor portraying fashion only.

Furthermore, the investigation of sustainable fashion brands' online communication strategies will provide marketers with insights into the potential for a brand to achieve both, relevance for consumers in terms of fashion appeal, but also being perceived as credible, authentic and striving to have a positive social and ecological impact. Moreover, it adds knowledge to using

communication as an instrument to not only differentiate a brand, but also to achieve consistency between brand identity and the created brand image. Furthermore, insights into brands' communication strategies provide practitioners with guidance in regard to which aspects need to be paid attention to when constructing online communication. Lastly, by examining different sustainable fashion brands, various types of brand personalities are presented, offering marketers different insights and inspiration on how successful online communication, highlighting both, fashion and sustainability, can be designed.

1.5 Delimitations

This thesis focuses on the company perspective of sustainable communication strategies in order to work towards closing the attitude-behaviour gap. However, it will be limited to the examination of communication strategies online, covering the corporate website and Facebook as a social media channel. Consequently, investigating offline or further social media channels is beyond the scope of this research.

Additionally, to get an understanding of the design of communication, brand identity is looked at from a strategic brand management perspective. Therefore, this thesis does not devote primary attention to evaluating the receivers' side, meaning brand image and brand reputation.

Lastly, as mentioned, various factors influencing the attitude-behaviour gap have been highlighted in literature. This research, however, mainly takes 'not fashionable' and the related need to perceive eco-fashion as valuable as underlying reasons against buying sustainable fashion into consideration.

1.6 Outline of the Thesis

The first chapter of this thesis highlighted the existing attitude-behaviour gap in the sustainable fashion industry and the importance of understanding the construction of a balanced sustainability communication online. The problem formulation revealed that further research is needed from a company perspective in order to communicate credibly as a basis to influence consumer behaviour. The purpose of investigating communication strategies of sustainable fashion brands commonly mentioned in marketing literature was expressed, followed by stating the research question, as well as, the aimed contribution and delimitations. The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows: In the subsequent section, relevant literature discussing the context of the sustainable fashion industry, brand identity and sustainability communication is presented. The literature review concludes with the presentation of a theoretical framework, indicating the interplay between the illustrated themes from theory. We then present a reflection on philosophy of science, the research approach and design, method, and a reflexive evaluation of the quality of our research in regard to trustworthiness, ethical considerations and limitations. Thereafter, the empirical findings are described, followed by a detailed analysis, supported by integrating relevant literature. The discussion of our findings, including a modified theoretical

framework, provides answers to the research question. The thesis concludes with theoretical and managerial contributions, as well as, limitations and suggestions for future research.

2 Literature Review

In the subsequent chapter, we aim to review relevant prior literature in order to provide knowledge on the phenomenon under study in this thesis. Since the context of our thesis is set in the sustainable fashion industry, the first sub-chapter introduces the issues and terminologies within this industry, as well as, relevant aspects on consumers' motivations in regard to fashion are included. The next sub-chapter presents literature with respect to brand identity. The concept of brand identity is deemed suitable for the study at hand because we suppose that it provides both, a support for studying the company view on the present phenomenon, and a foundation for designing an authentic communication strategy for sustainable fashion. Lastly, in line with the purpose of the study, we introduce relevant literature in regard to sustainability communication, covering the respective online channels for a consumer-oriented sustainability communication, research on how to formulate the sustainability message, as well as, the intertwined relationship between fashion and sustainability content. The chapter concludes by establishing a theoretical framework depicting themes from theory.

2.1 The Sustainable Fashion Industry

2.1.1 The Context of the Sustainable Fashion Industry

Before reviewing literature on what signifies the sustainable fashion industry, the term 'sustainability' will be specified. The most prominent definition can be derived from the Brundtland report in 1987 that has consequently been accepted by the United Nations' World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED): "Sustainability means being able to satisfy current needs without compromising the possibility for future generations to satisfy their own needs" (WCED, 1987). A conceptualisation of sustainability in the business context corresponds to CSR, respecting the following categories: economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic (Carroll, 1979; 1991). Nowadays, the question how to provide value for society, while at the same achieving economic success for the business, is becoming increasingly important (Kolster, 2018; Porter & Kramer, 2011). Due to our focus on the company perspective and the fashion industry, doing business at people's and planet's expenses, a focus will be put on the CSR concept, most importantly the environmental and social dimensions.

Sustainability in fashion can be coined as a dominant concern of the twenty-first century (Joy et al., 2012), pointing out both, environmental and social frivolity connected to clothing. Additionally, as a consumerist society, a major challenge is to disenchant consumers' constant need for new clothing (Joy et al., 2012), having evoked a 60 percent increase in the global production since year 2000 (Arthur, 2016) and as a future outlook, fashion consumption is set to increase with upcoming generations (Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017). In particular, the phenomenon of 'fast fashion', known for low-cost production overseas, cheap prices and trend-focus, has changed the fashion industry over the past decade (McNeill & Moore, 2015) and

triggered impulse purchasing (Joy et al., 2012). Moreover, a depiction of how difficult the issues in fashion are can be drawn from the highly complex and fragmented global supply chains, where a lack of transparency results in difficulties to resolve ethical and environmental problems (Joy et al., 2017). Further on, when looking at the fact that every pair of jeans consumes “70 litres of water, 1.5KWh of energy and 150g of chemicals throughout its life” (EcoTextile News, 2012 cited in Fletcher, 2014, p.52), the negative impact of clothes on the environment becomes evident. Widely unknown is that the biggest negative impact occurs during the use phase and comes from the process of laundering, for example, almost two-third of the energy used arises from washing and drying a pair of jeans (Fletcher, 2014). Overall, the sustainable fashion industry is often coined as an oxymoron in itself as fashion is constantly under change, presenting the ever-newest trends, the opposite of the connotation of ‘sustainability’ (Clark, 2008; Futerra, 2018b). Having recognised these issues, there is a growing interest among academics, practitioners but also consumers to solve them, pushing the industry towards becoming more sustainable.

Despite the increasing interest in the sector, there is no agreed upon definition of what sustainability in fashion implies. Freya Williams, CEO of Futerra North America, an international sustainability consultancy, proposes the following:

“[S]ustainability in fashion encompasses both environmental and social aspects, which means everything, from the making of the garment to the end of its life, has to be considered, including the materials used to make a garment (whether it's sustainably sourced or made from recycled content), the impact of said materials (how the cotton is grown, how much carbon is emitted, water usage), how workers are treated (human rights, fair wage), and finally, whether it can be recycled after or left in the landfill” (Williams, 2017 cited in Cheng, 2017).

Sustainable fashion as a buzzword is discussed among academics and practitioners as ‘eco-fashion’ (Cheng, 2017; D’Souza, 2015), ‘green fashion’ (Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017), ‘slow fashion’ (Fletcher, 2014), and ‘ethical fashion’ (Beard, 2008). Overall, the complexity of issues in the fashion industry becomes evident by looking at the fragmented global supply chains, the consumers’ constant desire for new clothes, the ecological footprint of laundering, the richness of the term’s definition itself, and the many synonyms used.

Major drivers of progress for the fashion industry to become more sustainable are supposed to be third party organisations providing stringent and global guidelines (Cheng, 2017). In contrast to the food industry, the fashion industry lacks an overarching and guiding organisation setting rules and standards. However, initiatives and certifications for sustainable fashion are arising, such as the initiative the ‘Fair Labor Association’ (FLA, 2012) committed to end sweatshop conditions in garment factories world-wide, or the certification ‘Global Organic Textile Standard’ (GOTS, 2017) that was founded in collaboration with leading organisations aiming to consolidate eco-textile and to specify sustainability standards for the whole supply chain. Implementing certifications and joining initiatives strikes two aims, it provides measurements towards sustainability and aids to promote sustainable actions to consumers (Futerra, 2018a).

Commonly integrated principles of sustainable fashion brands are the ‘4Rs’, namely ‘recycle’, ‘reuse’, ‘reduce’, and ‘repair’ (Hendriksz, 2016; Ng, Yan & Dong, 2013). These principles are

adapted from the '3Rs' of waste management, as the fashion industry aims to reduce the amounts of fabric waste produced (Fletcher, 2014). For example, "in Germany about 1.9 million tonnes (around 23 kg per person per annum)" (Fletcher, 2014, p.116) of fabric is disposed into household or civic waste (Fletcher, 2014). Besides regulating the discarded waste, the '4Rs' aim to reduce consumers' fashion consumption (Hendriks, 2016; Ng, Yan & Dong, 2013). Overall, we propose that this concept works towards disrupting the linear model in fashion, using raw material from nature and returning pollution to the environment or purchasing an item and discarding it (Fletcher, 2014; Hendriks, 2016). Instead, the fashion model should become more circular based on these four principles.

Given the purpose of this thesis, literature regarding CSR and sustainable fashion will be taken into consideration. The major issues in the fashion industry, like consumption, pollution and the tangled supply chain itself, make our study worthwhile. Moreover, the authors of this thesis suggest that the knowledge on certifications and initiatives in fashion, and the '4Rs' principles provide valuable knowledge for the empirical investigation.

2.1.2 The Consumer Paradox

Nowadays, consumers' awareness of sustainability in fashion is increasingly impacting their purchasing decision, searching for authenticity in brands (Beard, 2008), but the awareness causes scrutiny of brands in regard to their sustainability efforts (Biloslavo & Trnavčević, 2009; Yan, Hyllegard & Blaesi, 2012). The vast amount of research on the consumer perspective in sustainable fashion emphasises the consumers' power to impact the fashion industry and brands themselves, making them the ultimate driver for evoking a change in this sector. When discussing the consumers' impact on fashion, academics and marketers are puzzled about the paradox coined as 'attitude-behaviour-gap' (Han, Seo & Ko, 2017; Kolster, 2012; Niinimäki, 2010), implicating that words and deeds part ways in regard to purchasing sustainable fashion. Brand management literature and marketers are trying to tackle the roots of consumers' sustainability behaviour by looking at different motivations and attitudes (Angel, 2013; Joergens, 2006; Yan, Hyllegard & Blaesi, 2012) and the fashion phenomenon itself (Joy et al., 2012). Recognising the different expressions and reasons for the attitude-behaviour gap and finding suitable implications is necessary to convert fashion consumers' sustainability concerns into shapeable actions.

When motivations and attitudes of the consumer in regard to the paradox of the attitude-behaviour gap are researched, a common explanation for not committing to one's awareness is that fashion is not directly related to personal health (Joergens, 2006; Joy et al., 2012). This is because clothing is not integral to the body, compared to fair trade or organic products when looking at food (Joergens, 2006) or cosmetics (Joy et al., 2012). Hence, we can assume that consumers only care about products intrinsically connected to their health. Moreover, since most apparel is produced in developing countries, consumers argue to be choiceless (Joergens, 2006). When making an advance to buy sustainable fashion, shoppers find it difficult to identify those brands given the available communication, being sceptical about whether sustainability efforts are genuine (Beard, 2008; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Pickett-Baker & Ozaki, 2008; Yan, Hyllegard & Blaesi, 2012). Another major barrier to buy eco-fashion is related to the perceived product-design, appearing not as fashionable but rather non-aesthetic and literally

‘eco’ (Beard, 2008; Joy et al., 2012; Niinimäki, 2010; Ruane & Wallace, 2013). It was found that consumers are reluctant to buying sustainable brands because the brand image does not meet their expectations (Joergens, 2006) or is identified as ‘green only’ (Meyer, 2001; Phau & Ong, 2007). These findings are supported by literature saying that consumer needs and desires are prioritised to the environment (Joergens, 2006; Meyer, 2001; Perry & Chung, 2016). Other motivations preventing consumers to ‘walk-their-talk’ are related to price, lacking knowledge of eco-labels and production processes, as well as, the cynicism regarding the trustworthiness of brands’ sustainability actions (Angel, 2013; Joergens, 2006; Yan, Hyllegard & Blaesi, 2012). Another justification for not buying sustainable apparel is that buying ‘eco’ clothing does not actually save the environment, doubting one’s individual impact on a much bigger problem and pointing towards the industry overall to make a difference instead of asking consumers to buy sustainable clothing (Joergens 2006; Perry & Chung, 2016). Lastly, it can be highlighted that motivations and attitudes, the sustainable fashion’s image in particular, are likely to be influenced by communication, as an image results from decoding a message, namely the communication coming from the brands (Kapferer, 2012).

Literature looking at the fashion phenomenon itself in regard to the paradox of the attitude-behaviour gap, highlights the intrinsic need for identity-creation of the consumer by the means of fashion (Ruane & Wallace, 2013; Thompson & Haytko, 1997), since fashion is strongly related to the construction of self-image (Ruane & Wallace, 2013). Displaying one’s identity through clothing implies sustainable fashion to match personal taste, be ‘fashionable’, and therefore, outweighs the need to be sustainable (McNeill & Moore, 2015). This might explain, why consumers are not buying eco-fashion.

Regardless of what drives consumers’ attitude-behaviour gap, there exist some so-called “ethical-hard liners” (Niinimäki, 2010, p.152) or “deep greens” (Yan, Hyllegard & Blaesi, 2012, p.152) or the “eco-conscious shopper” (Angel, 2013), referring to consumers taking sustainability into consideration when buying fashion. Even though the number of these consumers is growing, they are still less common (Niinimäki, 2010). To get sustainability in fashion off the page and into people’s life, brands need to convince the majority of consumers of the value of sustainable apparel (Phang, 2018). In order to reduce the attitude-behaviour gap and activate consumers’ consciousness, it is crucial for sustainable fashion companies to make the topic essential to their branding strategies, and consequently communicate effectively (D’Souza, 2015; Han, Seo & Ko, 2017; Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017).

To sum up the learnings from the literature discussed above by respecting the purpose of this thesis, we believe that taking the consumer paradox as a point of departure for the investigation of communication of the brands is crucial in order to work towards closing the attitude-behaviour gap. Additionally, understanding the motivations and attitudes might support an appealing sustainability communication, possibly convincing more consumers to become ‘eco-conscious shoppers’.

2.2 Brand Identity

“Communication strategy is about integration: the development of a coherent plan based upon the reality of the corporate identity ...” (Ind, 1997 cited in Stuart & Kerr, 1999, p.170). Futerra (2018b) in its work with the Swedish brand Filippa K “managed to innovate and develop [the brand’s] language while keeping the Filippa K tone and culture intact”, again supporting that a brand’s identity, its DNA, is taken as the starting point for all further decisions made, where, in this case, particularly the language used when communicating sustainability has to be aligned. However, in the area of sustainability, brand identity and communication do not always match, where Kline (2008 cited in Biloslavo & Trnavčević, 2009) supports this statement by writing about the ‘green misleading’, saying that non-green industries communicate the most beautiful green messages. Taking on the brand management perspective, we have a look at the concept of brand identity as a basis for developing a communication strategy. Moreover, we assume that communication can become more credible and authentic by looking at the brand identity in more detail, where the concept and strategies will be elaborated on in the following.

The concept of brand identity, its meaning and implications, is discussed extensively in brand management literature, with Kapferer (2012) guiding the way. While Kapferer’s brand identity prism (2012) is mainly applicable to product brands, Urde (2013) developed a framework, namely the corporate brand identity matrix (CBIM), enabling the respective definition and alignment. Identity is primarily taking an internal perspective (Roper & Fill, 2012) and ‘corporate’ indicates that the brand identity is about the organisation itself (Balmer, 2012), which is of relevance to our work. According to Urde and Greyer (2013), a corporate brand identity provides answers to the following internally rooted questions: “Who are we? Where do we come from? What do we stand for? What is our raison d’être? and, what is our wanted position?” (p.97). Nine interrelated elements build the basis of the matrix, integrating the market- and brand-orientation paradigms, helping in closing gaps between a current and ideal corporate brand identity. A strength of this matrix is the visibility of interconnectedness between the core and all other elements in all three dimensions, external, namely value proposition, relationships and position, internal, referring to mission and vision, culture and competences, and both, external and internal, where expression and personality are elements besides the core (Urde, 2013).

A brand’s core, its values, the “guiding lights” (Urde, 2003, p.1019) and promise, forms the centre of the identity, highlighted by Urde (2003), taking a core value-based approach to corporate brand building. In the case of truly sustainable brands, the core values should express the socially and environmentally responsible behaviour (Biloslavo & Trnavčević, 2009). De Chernatony (2009) further highlights a brand’s vision as the starting point for brand building, which is essential for achieving consumer commitment, where the corporate mission indicates the corporation’s reason for existence (Collin & Porra, 1998 cited in Urde, 2013). The communication to stakeholders is looked at in the expression element, which should be unique and serve to differentiate the brand (Urde, 2013).

Literature states that excellent sustainability marketing starts with a clear value proposition (Futerra, 2015), supporting to build beneficial customer relationships (Aaker, 2004) and

answering the following questions: “What are our key offerings and how do we want them to appeal to customers and non-customer stakeholders?” (Urde, 2013, p.754). The position element determines a brand’s ‘wanted position’ in both, the market, as well as, hearts and minds of stakeholders (Kapferer, 2012; Urde, 2013). De Chernatony (2009) further claims that the functional benefits of a brand should meet customers’ expectations, which consequently need to be clearly understood by brands in order to win consumers. Moreover, CSR positioning indicates “the extent to which a company relies on its CSR activities to position itself” (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010, p.15) and can lead to a higher perceived authenticity in the eyes of stakeholders (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010).

The brand personality is described in literature as the core nature of a brand (Fill, 2009), the “human characteristics associated with a brand” (Aaker, 1997, p.347), a way of differentiation and a brand’s character (Urde, 2003). The core values chosen and their expression reflect the brand personality and must, therefore, be in agreement (Urde, 2013). Literature in the field of brand humanisation draws on the brand personality and emphasises that by acquiring human characteristics, consumers tend to connect more emotionally with brands (Hede & Watne, 2013). Through personification, brands are often referred to by consumers and marketers with adjectives describing human personality traits (Grohmann, 2009).

To sum up, it is important to understand and clearly define a brand’s identity, expressing to the stakeholders ‘who they are’ and ‘what they stand for’ (Roper & Fill, 2012). Even though literature indicates the importance of aligning brand identity and communication, limited research was found specifically applying the concept to sustainable brands, which, according to us, could give an idea of how sustainable brands’ identity elements look like and further how the related sustainability communication is aligned. Therefore, we argue that the concept of brand identity should be applied and investigated for sustainable fashion brands and connections drawn to the communication itself.

2.3 Sustainability Communication

Consumers relate to brands to get suitable information in order to come to a purchasing decision (Phau & Ong, 2007). Given the attitude-behaviour gap and the growing consumption with every forthcoming generation, it is essential for brands to communicate their responsible behaviour to their stakeholders in order to activate consumers’ consciousness towards sustainability actions and challenges in fashion, and also get them to bond with the brand (Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012). However, communicating sustainability in fashion is a sensitive topic and sustainable fashion brands have only taken small steps towards finding a communicational approach to improve the eco-fashion brands’ perception or emphasise the organisations’ sustainability progress (Futerra, 2015).

Not only fashion brands have difficulties in finding the right approach to communicate sustainability to their stakeholders, as “corporate social responsibility is an extremely difficult message to convey” (Morsing, 2005, p.84). Morsing (2006) defines CSR communication as “communication that is designed and distributed by the company itself about its CSR efforts”

(p.171), a delicate matter with key challenges being the ability to minimise stakeholder scepticism and conveying the brand's internally rooted motives to engaging in CSR activities (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010). In order for brands to appeal to consumers, they need to understand their audiences' attitudes about sustainability to match them with their communication on their socially and environmentally responsible performance (Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012), thereby increasing the effectiveness of the message (Kotler, 2011). In this thesis, the term 'message' is used interchangeably with communication, illustrating the aim to convey an effective consumer-directed communication.

2.3.1 Consumer-Oriented CSR Communication Online

2.3.1.1 Consumers as a Diverse Stakeholder Group

A diversity of stakeholder groups is targeted by the company in its communication. With regard to sustainability communication, it is of importance to consider what information is provided to which stakeholder group (Ott, Wang & Bortree, 2016). A lot of attention in research has been devoted to investors, business partners and governments, overlooking consumers as a whole (Schmeltz, 2012). It has been found in research that consumers, representing the target of communication in this work, tend to talk about sustainability but develop this interest less quickly than other stakeholder groups (SB Insight, 2018). Moreover, consumers seem to be particularly sceptical about CSR initiatives undertaken by companies (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004), again highlighting the importance of the communication function in managing corporate responsibility. While there exist 'ethical-hard liners', or 'deep greens', many consumers are still lacking knowledge about sustainability as a topic, emphasising the need for companies to reconsider and differentiate their communication strategies.

“If we are to reach beyond the ‘green consumer’ (those who actively seek out products with purpose), then we need to rethink our vocabulary so that we’re speaking a universal language. We need to get creative about telling the sustainability story in different ways” (Grace, 2015).

Experts in the field indicate that there is a need to go beyond targeting 'green consumers', which has been the strategy for more than a decade in the hope that these advocates normalise sustainable consumption behaviour (Bemporad, 2013 cited in Chynoweth, 2013). Instead, it is suggested to focus on the "aspirational", "... materialists who love to shop" (Bemporad, 2013 cited in Chynoweth, 2013), care about what others think of them, but surprisingly also support the view that reduced consumption is essential to save the environment, characteristics valuable to driving sustainable consumption. Moreover, the opportunity is perceived to lie in the "fun side of sustainability" (Bemporad, 2013 cited in Chynoweth, 2013) by engaging consumers and encouraging them to co-create. However, in order to engage consumers, a certain degree of awareness of CSR topics is needed, which not all consumers share (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004).

These findings indicate that in order to target audiences with relevant sustainability communication, a distinction between different types of consumers has to be made (Gruber, Kaliauer & Schlegelmilch, 2017; SB Insight, 2018). As mentioned, this can be based on the degree of sustainability awareness and engagement. Gruber, Kaliauer and Schlegelmilch (2017)

distinguish between two types of consumers with distinctive needs, namely the ones already portraying an interest in sustainability, possibly actively looking for companies' information on CSR efforts, and consumers not having developed an attitude towards sustainability yet, therefore, still open to be influenced by receiving information. In regard to the latter group, Bhattacharya and Sen (2010) add that besides stakeholders with no awareness of CSR actions, consumers being aware but suspicious can be positively influenced by effective CSR communication.

SB Insight (2018) in its 'Sustainable Brand Index 2018' goes even further by distinguishing four types of consumers based on overall characteristics, as well as, behaviour and attitudes towards sustainability topics, namely "ego", "moderate", "smart", and "dedicated" (pp.11-12). Where the category 'ego' does not care about sustainability at all, 'moderates' believe that sustainability "can be a bit interesting" (SB Insight, 2018, p.11), the 'smarts' are "curious and interested in sustainability" (SB Insight, 2018, p.12), and last but not least, the ones being 'dedicated' are "zealous and well-informed on sustainability" (SB Insight, 2018, p.12).

2.3.1.2 The Internet as the Channel of Interest

The internet has proven itself as a powerful communication channel for companies to publicise sustainability efforts (Adams & Frost, 2006; Biloslavo & Trnavčević, 2009; Capriotti & Moreno, 2007; Chaudhri & Jian Wang, 2007; Esrock & Leichty, 1998; Wanderley, Lucian, Farache, & de Sousa Filho, 2008). Corporate websites allow to disseminate much information, quickly, easily and in a controlled manner (Chaudhri & Wang, 2007), and target all stakeholders by providing an official perspective, where consumers can pursue their desire to get to know the company behind the brand and products (Lewis, 2001). This, according to Esrock and Leichty (1998), has the potential to improve the brand's CSR reputation through disclosing CSR activities, information which is likely to be more proactively sought by consumers highly involved with sustainability (Golding, 2009).

The internet not only allows for flexibility, detailed up-to-date information (Wanderley et al., 2008), but also facilitates a more personal communication between brands and consumers, thereby allowing for an interactive, two-way communication process (Capriotti, 2011). While corporate websites are mainly used to inform, social media facilitates symmetrical communication, creating a dialogue between consumers and the organisation (Fieseler, Fleck & Meckel, 2010). Social media as a communication platform can be used for various reasons, such as responding to consumer questions, to market products, and also to educate stakeholders about sustainability efforts undertaken (DeMers, 2013 cited in Reilly & Hynan, 2014). By empowering consumers and giving them the sense that their voice matters, brands increasingly realise the need to use social media to highlight their sustainability activities (Yeomans, 2013).

All in all, targeting communication to consumers, as the stakeholder group of interest in this thesis, displays great potential, however, lacks guidelines and the effectiveness needs to be improved if purchase behaviour is aimed to be influenced. It becomes apparent that developing an understanding of consumers' wants, needs, attitudes, as well as, awareness level is of importance in order to target them effectively. By taking consumer-oriented communication online as a basis, a powerful channel to inform and interact, light on measures taken to communicate effectively will be shed.

2.3.2 Message Formulation – What to Say and How to Phrase it

Research on designing the message takes two different perspectives, one discussing the content of a narrative and the other one how the content is conveyed. In other words, authors are talking about the ‘what’, (specific content of the message) and the ‘how’ (communication elements incorporated in the message composition). Literature within both perspectives considers issues consumers face with sustainability communication strategies and offers solution approaches. However, it is important to mention that this field in literature is very scattered, meaning that many authors write about rather specific areas within sustainability communication. However, inspired by the eminent author on sustainable fashion, Kate Fletcher (2014), we suggest, that an effective sustainability communication needs to be coherent, since it is about “how the parts work together, not how the parts work in isolation” (p.XVI). Before discussing the ‘composition’ and ‘content’ in more detail, we unfold the overarching ambition of sustainability communication, namely making the brand and the respective sustainability efforts being perceived as credible and authentic.

Credibility and Authenticity

Becoming an authentic citizen and achieving credibility (Gillespie, 2011), is aimed at by sustainable brands in order to have the chance to engage with consumers (Kolster, 2016). To be perceived as such, there are different ‘ingredients’ to consider. When formulating the sustainability message, brands should reveal what they are actually doing instead of what is intended to be done (Sustainly, 2016), reasonable goals should be expressed. Moreover, applying a precise language and providing explicit information about the impact of CSR instead of broad references is mentioned to enhance credibility (Gruber, Kaliauer, Schlegelmilch, 2017; Schmeltz, 2012). Another ‘ingredient’ is transparency, which can be worked towards by doing both, communicating failures, as well as, successes in regard to becoming sustainable (Coombs, 2012). That way, also the brand might gain benevolence from its audience and failures might be overlooked (Hicks, 2017). With major issues in sustainability being ascribed to the supply chain, sustainable brands should disclose information of the garment’s journey (Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017).

2.3.2.1 What to Say – Message Content

Consumers increasingly expect companies to engage in CSR activities (Dawkins, 2004), however, despite considering sustainability issues as important, several challenges in regard to content communicated can be observed. Firstly, consumers relatively easily accuse brands “utili[s]ing green as a marketing tool to attract further business and to paint a positive image” (Saha & Darnton, 2005, p.120) of ‘greenwashing’ (Saha & Darnton, 2005; Yan, Hyllegard & Blaesi, 2012). Secondly, sustainability is not about making a sacrifice, consumers are not willing to purchase a sustainable product without knowing how it is better for themselves (Futerra, 2015; Townsend & Niemtow, 2016) and others (Laroche, Bergeron & Barbaro-Forleo, 2001). Consequently, consumers refuse to purchase products from brands concentrating on “greening their products” (Meyer, 2001, p.318) as the only product benefit. Related to this statement is the fact that consumers often accept extrinsic motives, referring for example to ecological attitudes and collectivist values of consumers (Laroche, Bergeron & Barbaro-Forleo, 2001), as valid arguments to purchase sustainable products as long as intrinsic motives are also touched upon in CSR initiatives (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010; Sen, Bhattacharya &

Korschun, 2006). Thirdly, as there tends to be a negative connotation between fashion and sustainability and due to the fact, that “[g]iven the importance of identity construction to many consumers, drivers to be ‘fashionable’ often outweigh drivers to be ethical or sustainable” (McNeill & Moore, 2015, p.212), acceptance of ‘green’ clothing is often rather low (Beard, 2008; Niinimäki, 2010; Joy et al., 2012).

Given the aforementioned issues, brands have to find suitable communication strategies in regard to content to circumvent commonly mentioned issues found in research and practices. Overall, Gruber, Kaliauer and Schlegelmilch (2017) advise brands to use “informative, substantial approaches” (p.407) to promote CSR activities. In regard to the issue of greenwashing, literature highlights the importance of a CSR fit, matching sustainability efforts and core corporate activities (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010; Schmeltz, 2012). Accordingly, to ensure a fit, a brand should be active in initiatives logically related to the area of business, dealing with problems in their field of expertise, indicating that sustainable fashion brands should engage in supply chain related issues.

Referring to the second mentioned issue, individual benefits need to be highlighted since sustainability is not about making a sacrifice. Researchers, therefore, propose to convince the consumer by linking the individual benefit to the product (Phau & Ong, 2007) and praising the value added (Futerra, 2015; Townsend & Niemtow, 2016). ‘What is in it for me, the consumer?’, the question that often remains unanswered for sustainable products and behaviour (Futerra, 2015; Townsend & Niemtow, 2016). However, communicating ‘the more’ for the consumer is supposed to be crucial to influence the decision-making towards sustainable purchasing of the majority (Phang, 2018), as many people are not caring much about sustainability in their daily life (SB Insight, 2018) and, therefore, a message linked to their personal benefit might rather draw their interest. Futerra (2015) developed a value equation, highlighting that only a compelling human-centred value proposition about sustainability can lead to successful products with good intentions and convincing campaigns. Based on the three value types from standard marketing, which consumers look for when making a purchase, namely functional, social and emotional benefits, Futerra (2015) has developed some guiding questions that companies can ask themselves to identify the benefits their products offer to consumers: Regarding functional benefits, can the product enhance performance? To deliver an emotional value, can the product provide a thrill of excitement? Lastly, to deliver a social benefit, is the product proving how smart, cool and able the consumer is, as well as, provides the feeling of being part of a group? Overall, to tackle the issue of an often-perceived mismatch between fashion and sustainability, a balance between fashion, or any other product related topic, and sustainability content is suggested. Given the purpose of our work, respective solution approaches are discussed in the following separate sub-chapter.

2.3.2.2 The Balance Between Fashion and Sustainability Content

The fashion industry, being all about appearance, faces a particular challenge, as “fashion and sustainable fashion must meet and mingle” (Kibbe, 2013), meaning that sustainable fashion as an alternative has to seem more appealing to consumers (McNeill & Moore, 2015), “it’s gotta be cool” (Kibbe, 2013). Green and fashion are not naturally linked (Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017), indicating that consumers are not willing to substitute fashionable with ‘green only’ clothing (Beard, 2008; Joy et al., 2012; Niinimäki, 2010). In fact, there tends to be a negative

connotation of sustainability in fashion in regard to style (Kibbe, 2013). Therefore, in order to convince the mass-market of sustainable fashion's value and incorporate sustainability wisely in communication, a balance between sustainability and fashion (or other product related) content, has to be found.

Literature on sustainable branding discusses different solutions how this balance can look like. Authors discuss to refrain from leading the message with 'sustainability' as a topic, others state to drop the word 'sustainability' overall (Angel, 2013), partly to avoid getting a bad 'aesthetic rap' (Kibbe, 2013). Instead, it is suggested to rather focus on communicating in a way making the fashion piece stand out, while 'in the background' ensuring that the product itself is sustainable (Aflalo, 2017 cited in MacCarthy, 2017). Angel (2013) suggests the solution to prioritise the communication of fashion over sustainability content. In particular, she promotes that communication should be 'design-led', which can be achieved by talking about innovation in the fashion context, such as garments with inbuilt body temperature control. Grace (2015) supports this opinion, calling it 'passive activism', where "social and environmental issues should be a gift at purchase, not a purchase driver", highlighting that the product is good for both, the consumer and the planet (Grace, 2015). Thereby, the brands take roles as change agents (Grace, 2015), communicating fashion as priority, possibly linked to innovation, while making sustainability implicit or secondary.

Regarding the studied phenomenon of how sustainable fashion brands construct their online communication, keeping a balance of fashion and sustainability content reveals one aspect how to devise the message to make it heard by the consumer. To sum up, literature suggests communicating sustainability not as a main topic but together with other content, such as fashion. This is due to the fact that the consumer perceives sustainable fashion not as attractive and that the sustainability message is overtly used in communication. Hence, we strive to generate knowledge on how the four brands observed in this thesis combine content to achieve 'the balance'.

2.3.2.3 How to Phrase it – Message Composition

Authors focussing on the composition of communication highlight that answering 'how' to construct sustainability narratives is no straightforward matter, but a delicate, controversial discussion (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). As a lot of consumers do not actively seek information about company behaviour (Schmeltz, 2012), communication needs to be prominently displayed and integrated into the corporate website, as well as, social media. However, even if consumers get exposed to sustainability messages, they are often sceptical and cynical (Dawkins, 2004). There are four other challenges commonly mentioned in literature on sustainability message composition. Firstly, consumers argue to be uninformed about sustainability initiatives (Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017; Yan, Hyllegard & Blaesie, 2012), expressing their interest to be educated (Gruber, Kaliauer & Schlegelmilch, 2017). Second, consumers claim to be confused by the vast amount of terms in regard to sustainability used, thereby becoming an 'apposition of empty words' (Joy et al., 2012). Thirdly, consumers tend to be overwhelmed by an overload of sustainability information from various sources, having to learn and understand new information, making it difficult to actually adopt sustainable consumption in one's own life (Berg, 2011; Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017).

To overcome the mentioned challenges in sustainability messages, researchers and practitioners have different approaches to work towards finding respective solutions. Overall, literature in this area has looked at the need for explicit, transparent and clear messages (Cheng, 2017; Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010; Gruber, Kaliauer & Schlegelmilch, 2017; Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017; Schmeltz, 2012; Yan, Hyllegard & Blaesie, 2012), green semantics used, also coined as vocabulary (Futerra, 2015; Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017), using an educational tone of voice (Beard, 2008; Caruana & Crane, 2008; Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017; Polonsky, 2011; Yan, Hyllegard & Blaesie, 2012), conveying information by taking an emotional approach (Hawksworth, 2014; Maxwell, 2013; Williams & Kolster, 2013), as well as, using storytelling to convince consumers (Dahlstrom, 2014; Escalas, 2006; Hede & Watne, 2013; Sandelowski, 1991; Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012).

Making Messages Explicit, Transparent and Clear

Accusations of ‘greenwashing’ towards sustainable brands often arise when the environmental message is too complex (Moisander, 2007) and, with respect to fashion, rather generic (Yan, Hyllegard & Blaesie, 2012), or vague (Schmeltz, 2012) sustainability terms are incorporated. These are also referred to as “clichéd words” (Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017, p.394) or “fluffy language” (Futerra, 2015, p.11), lacking meaning and not filling the sustainability knowledge gap of consumers. In regard to fashion brands in particular, explicitness is crucial, looking at the ever-upcoming new developments in sustainability with an overload of information. To respond respectfully to these issues, CSR communication needs to be factual, explicit and precise (Schmeltz, 2012). According to Yan, Hyllegard and Blaesie (2012), this can be achieved by providing clarity about the ecologically-sound values of the fashion product through the use of descriptions, for example, about the fabrics and manufacturing processes applied. In a similar vein, Morsing and Schultz (2006), as well as, Futerra (2015) add that descriptions and information become more valuable by providing factual data. Moreover, Gruber, Kaliauer and Schlegelmilch (2017) found that consumers are more likely to act responsibly if they receive programme-specific information, demonstrating the firm’s improvements of the social or environmental situations, instead of reading about general claims to “protect the environment” (p.406). If explicitness is conveyed properly, consumers’ scepticism can be reduced and ultimately lead to more positive perceptions of sustainable fashion brands (Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017; Yan, Hyllegard & Blaesie, 2012).

Choosing Certain Vocabulary

Zooming in to sustainability messages, the semantics used, Peirson-Smith and Evans (2017) have based their research on the twelve key words commonly linked to sustainable fashion found by Thomas (2008). Particularly, they have looked at how consumers perceive the following keywords originating from the ‘eco-lexicon’: “green, environmental, fair trade, eco, eco-fashion, sustainable, ethical, recycled, organic, upcycling, recycling, and downcycling” (Thomas, 2008, p.531). According to Peirson-Smith and Evans (2017), positively and trustworthy perceptions were found to be connected to the words ‘eco’, ‘green’ and ‘fair trade’, implying a good way of living. ‘Fair trade’ is trusted most due to its certified governance and hence, the authors recommend using the term in communication as a way to draw interest and create engagement (Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017). On the contrary, the authors dissuade from using the word ‘ethical’, as it intrinsically implies unfair practices of firms and is, therefore, negatively connoted, as well as, the expression ‘organic’, due to the lack of trust regarding the word as organic labels have been found to be misused. Moreover, since the term ‘sustainability’

is often not integrated into an appropriate context and is “neutrali[s]ed in the green business frame alongside a range of synonyms” (Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017, p.375), it is recommended to ‘drop’ the term sustainability completely (Angel, 2013). Overall, Peirson-Smith and Evans (2017) contend that those keywords need to be in balance with respective activities of the brand in order to use them wisely. Moreover, literature suggests avoiding too technical vocabulary (Maxwell, 2013) or science-related terms (Futerra, 2015), and suggests incorporating simple words instead (Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017), to avoid consumers from ‘tuning out’ (Cheng, 2017). If, however, abstract words are crucial to convey the message, an explanation is claimed to be necessary (Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017).

Applying an Educational Tone of Voice

Using education in communication is particularly important to raise awareness and knowledge of consumers with a lower eco-mindset (Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017; Yan, Hyllegard & Blaesie, 2012). To do so, literature suggests proactively educating consumers on particular activities (Polonsky, 2011), where the guiding principle should be ‘how to consume sustainably’, instead of deciding whether to consume sustainable at all (Caruana & Crane, 2008). This can be further supported by revealing the effect of taking actions as a consumer as opposed to not acting (Polonsky, 2011). When disclosing these actions, attention should be paid to not sound enforcing, too political (Beard, 2008), but rather actions should be conveyed in a manner empowering the consumer (Caruana & Crane, 2008). Additionally, to make the reason to act sustainably as a firm more comprehensive and increase knowledge, firms should specify what difference their actions can make to the environment or society (Allison, 2018). Overall, a ‘spin-off’ of using a tone of education is to increase credibility in the eyes of consumers (Laroche, Bergeron & Barbaro-Forleo, 2001).

Conveying Information by Taking an Emotional Approach

Simply put, communicating emotional messages makes sense from the viewpoint that people are not complete rational beings (Williams & Kolster, 2013) and emotions to some extent reason our actions (Hawksworth, 2014). The fact that emotions are integral to messages is also explained by brand management literature, stating that the sentiments about a brand are evoked by emotions induced by communication (de Chernatony, 2009). Even though emotions can be coined as the “currency of communication” (Maxwell, 2013), sustainability messaging has not yet succeeded to capture the hearts and minds of consumers (Hawksworth, 2014). This might be somewhat reasoned by the fact that sustainability is a sensitive topic, with some words implying positive and others negative emotions among consumers, as mentioned previously.

Using Storytelling to Convince Consumers

Storytelling is widely used to develop relationships between brands and consumers (Hede & Watne, 2013) and is further argued to be an effective tool to educate on sustainable consumption behaviours (Schwartz, 2013). Compelling stories get consumers emotionally connected to the brand (Escalas, 2006; Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012), where important factors mentioned are, among others, actors, plot and place (Sandelowski, 1991). Dahlstrom (2014) found that stories are a great source for non-experts to learn about more complex topics, as they offer increased comprehension and engagement. Sustainability, due to its complexity and by creating tension among consumers, is well suited to be communicated through stories (Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012). Stories can facilitate the communication of the firm’s sustainability impact by creating empathy and awareness among consumers, as well as, giving meaning to the brand (Gensler,

Völckner, Liu-Thompkins, & Wiertz, 2013). If a brand's identity revolves around sustainable practices, the stories told will be perceived as authentic, natural, and linked to the bigger narrative of the brand (Schwartz, 2013).

With respect to the purpose of this thesis, two perspectives on how to design the online communication of sustainable fashion brands were investigated, one discussing the content of a narrative and the other one how the content is conveyed with different communication elements. Summarising, literature discusses the guiding content with respect to CSR fit, individual benefits and the balance between sustainability and fashion. In regard to the composition of messages, research suggests making messages clear, transparent and explicit, to only use certain vocabulary, to apply an educational tone of voice, to convey messages by taking an emotional approach, and finally, to use storytelling as a tool to convince consumers. All in all, even though there is much literature on what elements to consider, authors do not go in depth in describing how the elements can be applied in practice, for example how explicitness is conveyed, but rather literature states why those elements are important to consider. To conclude, both perspectives, 'what' and 'how' with respective communication elements will be applied during our online investigation since we consider it as beneficial to revealing how sustainable fashion brands devise their message.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

This literature review aimed at presenting an overview of previous research on the sustainable fashion industry, brand identity, as well as, sustainability communication and provides respective knowledge on the phenomenon studied in this thesis. The resulting theoretical framework (figure 2.4) illustrates the relationship between the elements included in the research question and important concepts from literature. However, it has to be noted that this rather coherent picture is given due to our grouping of literature streams, since, as aforementioned, literature is relatively scattered. The framework encompasses the sustainable fashion context, the brand identity, as well as, sustainability communication online, which is rooted in the consumer paradox. We take this framework from theory as a starting point and develop it through the collection of empirical material during the course of our thesis.

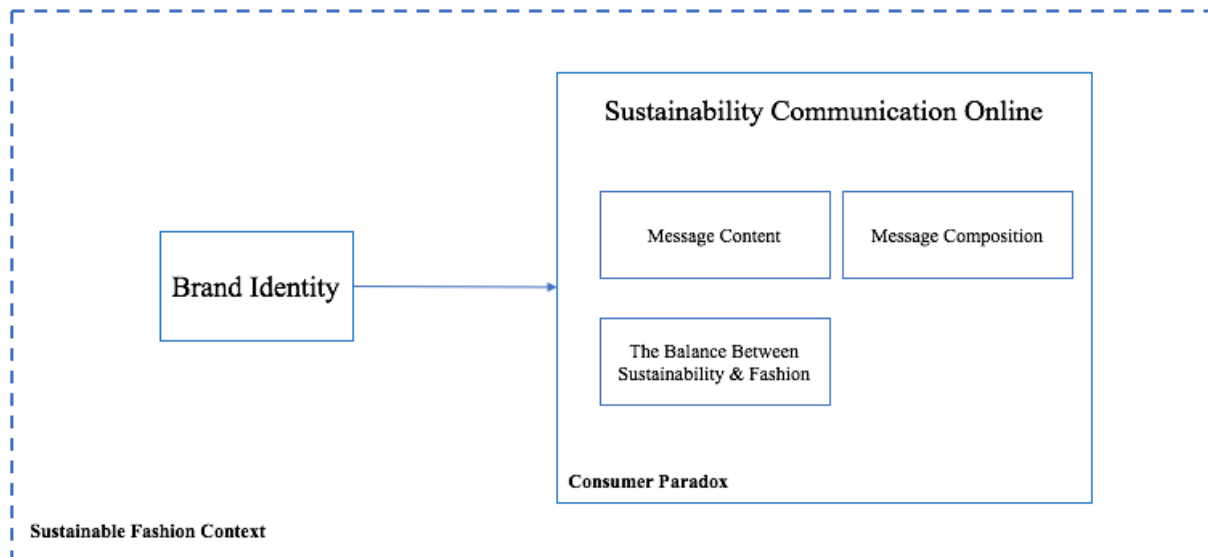


Figure 2.4 Theoretical Framework

The literature review covered the sustainable fashion context, setting the boundaries for our work, where trend orientation, as well as, fast and cheap fashion are highlighted as major issues, pointing out the related environmental and social frivolity connected to fashion (Arthur, 2016; Joy et al., 2012; McNeill & Moore, 2015; Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017). As the purpose of this thesis is to understand how brands can communicate sustainability topics effectively, the brand identity is another central concept in the theoretical framework, indicating ‘why the brand exists’. Literature further emphasises that a brand’s core values serve as “guiding lights” (Urde, 2013, p.1019) and become the theme of communication, supporting the necessity to include brand identity in our observation on brand communication.

The consumer paradox is taken as a foundation for the examination of communication coming from the brands since literature highlights the need to convince consumers of the value of sustainable fashion (Phang, 2018) in order to work towards closing the attitude-behaviour gap by activating consumers’ consciousness. Understanding the consumers’ motivations and attitudes is mentioned to be crucial to communicate effectively (D’Souza, 2015; Han, Seo & Ko, 2017; Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017), therefore, the consumer paradox is represented as the building block encompassing the communication within the theoretical framework.

Within sustainability communication as such, which is looked at from an online, consumer-oriented perspective, three main themes are mentioned in literature: the message content (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010; Futerra, 2015; Gruber, Kaliauer & Schlegelmilch, 2017; Phang, 2018; Phau & Ong, 2007; Townsend & Niemtzow, 2016), the related balance between sustainability and fashion content, imperative to the fashion industry, as well as, the message composition with communication elements. The balance between sustainability and fashion content (Angel, 2013; Beard, 2008; Joy et al., 2012; Kibbe, 2013; McNeill & Moore, 2015; Niinimäki, 2010) implies finding a suitable way in regard to combining sustainability with fashion content. The communication elements incorporate clear, explicit and transparent messages (Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017; Schmeltz, 2012; Yan, Hyllegard & Blaesie, 2012), certain vocabulary (Angel, 2013; Thomas, 2008; Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017), an educational tone of voice (Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017; Yan, Hyllegard & Blaesie, 2012), an emotional

approach (de Chernatony, 2009; Hawksworth, 2014), as well as, storytelling (Hede & Watne, 2013, Schwartz, 2013, Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012).

Taking the company perspective, in this study we aim to reveal how sustainable fashion brands communicate online, meaning what content is conveyed, how the message is composed, namely what communication elements from theory are applied, how the identity is reflected in communication, and how fashion and sustainability content are combined. To ensure clarity, the following terminology will be used throughout the paper: Brand identity and sustainability communication are 'concepts' of interest to our study. Overarching topics summarising various elements are referred to as 'themes', such as 'message content'. Within the theme of 'message composition', various 'communication elements' are looked at, such as vocabulary or explicitness.

3 Method

This chapter outlines our methodological choices applied when working towards answering the research question ‘*How do fashion brands with sustainability at the core design their online communication?*’. As illustrated by the theory-based framework, the underlying aim of this thesis is twofold due to the interrelation between brand identity and communication strategy: (1) Revealing how successful sustainable fashion brands are built, as a basis for assessing what elements of communication are used, and (2) how the connection to the brand identity is established. Based on the explorative nature of our work, a qualitative method with an interpretative position is guiding this thesis. The chapter is divided into five sections. First, the philosophical stance is discussed, explaining the reasoning for our relativist and constructionist departure. Second, we present our overall ambition in terms of the research approach applied. Third, the research design, namely choosing a limited number of four cases, is elaborated on. Fourth, we outline the methodological approaches guiding the collection of empirical material for our work. The chapter closes with a reflection on the quality of our research, ethical considerations, as well as, methodological limitations.

3.1 Research Philosophy

Before providing the reasoning for our methodological choices, we want to highlight that our research endeavour is guided by our philosophical stance taken, namely our ontological and epistemological position. To start off, philosophical debates about ontology and epistemology describe assumptions about the nature of reality and ways to generate knowledge about it, respectively (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). This research aims to explore sustainability communication by looking at various company examples and using more than one method of data collection. Moreover, we do not believe in the existence of a ‘recipe for success’ for communicating sustainability efforts but are rather interested in different approaches. This thesis is, therefore, subscribing to a relativist ontology. To us, reality is relative and many truths and perspectives exist, being highly dependent on the researchers’ viewpoints (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015), allowing us to answer our research question only by considering the context.

Already our open research question, focussing on ‘how’, reflects our epistemological departure, opting for a constructionist view on the design of communication and identity in relation to sustainable fashion brands. Constructionism as such views reality as socially constructed and given meaning by people through social interactions (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Therefore, the focus of this study lies on identifying how companies make use of textual and visual elements, as well as, brand building when designing their communication, thereby interacting with consumers, the receivers of brands’ messages online (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). As a consequence, an examination of language used in the brands’ communication, such as vocabulary or explicitness, is essential to understand the phenomenon,

supported by gathering multiple perspectives through a mixture of qualitative interviews with experts and an analysis of the respective online communication itself. As constructionists, we are not interested in creating generalisable findings, but rather in exploring the phenomenon and understanding the companies' point of view, thereby revealing various perspectives on how sustainable fashion brands can create their online communication to gain credibility and authenticity.

Our philosophical stance has numerous implications for the way in which we design, conduct and interpret our empirical material collected, in order to answer our research question. Moreover, awareness of our position taken can increase the overall quality of research by increasing the reflexivity upon our roles as researchers conducting this study (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). The discussion about the quality of our research will be continued in the last sub-chapter, where particularly credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability of our work are discussed.

3.2 Research Approach

3.2.1 Qualitative Strategy

As outlined in chapter 1, the purpose of our research is to investigate and develop an in-depth understanding of how successful sustainable fashion brands communicate online. This will be achieved by looking at the brand identity as a foundation for developing a communication strategy, while overall providing details about the sustainable fashion context, in our thesis shaped by the consumer paradox, in which the phenomenon can be observed. Therefore, it is deemed appropriate to follow a qualitative approach (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015; Patton, 2002), conducting an exploratory study of how sustainability communication is designed and aligned with the brand identity, elaborated on in the following.

A qualitative approach allows for flexibility when collecting and analysing the empirical material in order to avoid imposing an inappropriate frame on the research subject (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This is deemed advantageous to our work, given that literature on the attitude-behaviour gap and the related consumer paradox for the sustainable fashion industry from a company perspective is limited and lacking a coherent idea of the 'big picture' of brands' sustainability communication and the application of communication elements in practice. Moreover, knowledge is limited on how to achieve a balance between sustainability and fashion content, and how messages are guided and aligned with the brand identity. Taking an exploratory approach further supports the choice of a qualitative research design as our research process will be guided by openness and curiosity to explore and understand new angles (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009), shown by using an evolving framework. Furthermore, literature highlights the qualitative research's emphasis on processes, namely how events unfold over time, including an understanding of how an organisation's past shapes its present situation (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Pettigrew, 1997). By including an evaluation of brand identity in our analysis, we consequently consider a brand's origin and development of mission and vision.

We recognise that we, as the authors, inevitably attribute meaning to observations made. In a quantitative approach, in contrast, researchers mainly take a distant position and focus on numbers, not text, and on measuring the phenomenon, as well as, testing theory as opposed to generating it, often in line with a positivist philosophical stance (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Moreover, quantitative research is striving for generalisation instead of understanding the phenomenon in its context (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

3.2.2 Abductive Strategy

In regard to the nature of the link between theory and research, inductive, deductive and abductive theories are mentioned in literature (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Inductive approaches, on the one hand, are concerned with systematically generating theory from data (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Deduction, on the other hand, is described as testing theoretical propositions, therefore, appropriate when studying topics covered by literature extensively (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Abduction is argued to lie somewhere in-between, investigating the relationship between everyday language and concepts (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015) by looking for patterns and structures (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Dubois and Gadde (2002) explain that the abductive approach “creates fruitful cross-fertili[s]ation where new combinations are developed through a mixture of established theoretical models and new concepts derived from the confrontation with reality” (p.599).

Although we start from theory in order to modify our theoretical framework, the approach we adopt in this research is more of an abductive than deductive nature. We make use of theory to understand the concepts of communication and brand identity, necessary to identify patterns and develop our initial theoretical framework. This can be described as being loose and emergent, providing us with a set of initial guidelines and evolving over the course of our work (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Overall, our aim is not to test existing theories, often done in quantitative research, or to generate new ones, but to develop and combine existing findings in the field of brand identity and sustainability communication.

3.2.3 The Interconnectedness of our Research Process

To elaborate more on our research process, we started off by looking into literature and developed our initial theoretical framework (1) (figure 2.4). Thereafter, we collected the empirical material, first in the form of semi-structured expert interviews (2). We intended to use the findings from the interviews to define further themes and elements implemented by brands in their sustainability communication, consequently using them to define further criteria for our online observations. More specifically, after having conducted the interviews, ‘the sweet spot’ emerged as a new theme within the consumer paradox, which will be explained when presenting the findings in chapter 4. Understanding from theory has often been confirmed, such as the importance of choosing appropriate vocabulary or the need for explicit information, and further communication elements of interest arose, namely the impact area, giving names to sustainability programmes, and the measurability of efforts. For the online observations (3), the

second and main part of our empirical material collection process, we examined the four brands' corporate websites and Facebook channel based on criteria defined from theory and the interviews. We looked for co-occurrences of characteristics by comparing similarities and differences between findings on each brand, as a result, discovering patterns. This way we modified (4) the initial theoretical framework, providing a perspective on how fashion brands with sustainability at the core can successfully communicate sustainability practices online. This research process, namely how expert interviews (2) and online observations (3) helped us to alter the initial theoretical framework (1), resulting in the modified theoretical framework (4), is depicted in figure 3.2.3

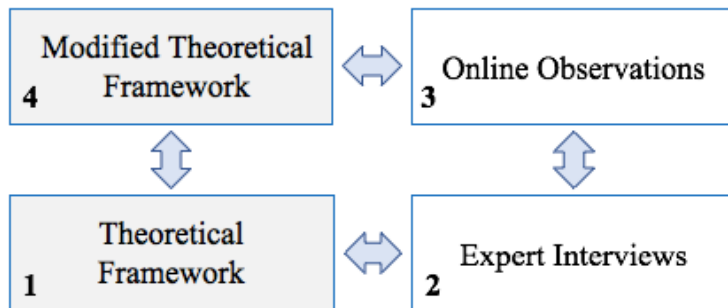


Figure 3.2.3 Outline of our Research Process

3.3 Research Design

The research design provides the structure guiding both, the execution of our research methods, namely semi-structured interviews and online observations, and the analysis of our empirical material (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The ambition for this section is to illustrate how we organise our research activity in order to most likely achieve the purpose of our thesis, and to find an answer to our research question (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). We decided to approach our objective by applying a qualitative, multiple-case study design, being interested in a particular phenomenon instead of striving for generalisability (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

3.3.1 Case Study Design

Ragin and Becker (1992) in their book on case studies in social science elaborate on different case conceptions influenced by the researchers' philosophical stances. In regard to ontology, they state that “[r]ealists believe that there are cases (more or less empirically verifiable as such) ‘out there’. Nominalists think cases are theoretical constructs that exist primarily to serve the interests of investigators...” (p.8). Given our ontological standpoint as relativists, our view on what defines a case is similar to the nominalists' view, namely that they are created and developed in the course of our research. Through the literature review and semi-structured interviews, themes and elements included in the online observation of the brands are identified and emerge, guiding the data collection process. While different philosophical stances are taken in case study research, we have found much of our inspiration in the works of Eisenhardt (1989), Dubois and Gadde (2002) and Stake (1995).

When establishing a research design, the number of cases studied needs to be decided on. Different epistemological standpoints are present in academia. A positivist departure is taken by Yin (1981), being concerned with the reliability and validity underlying the experimental research design and emphasising the need to look at various cases to achieve generalisability (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Stake (1995), in contrast, subscribing to a constructionist stance, argues that a small number of cases can be studied to ensure depth, maximising the learning outcomes about the phenomenon under study. Lastly, Eisenhardt (1989) describes his approach to case studies as: "... a research strategy which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings" (p.534), striving to create internal validity.

We apply an extension of the traditional case study, a comparative method, by looking at multiple, but a limited number of cases. On this account, we join researchers striving to understand and interpret a specific, often complex phenomenon (Bryman & Bell, 2011), as, according to them, "the real business of case study is particulari[s]ation, not generali[s]ation" (p.8), putting emphasis on uniqueness and interpretation (Erickson, 1986). We chose a number of four cases, which according to Eisenhardt (1989) is sufficient to conduct a thorough analysis in favour of identifying patterns, similarities and differences between the brands' communication strategies and by focussing on more than one case, it implies a better understanding of the phenomenon (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Hence, we put the focus on developing an in-depth understanding of how the themes from literature are applied in practice, what respective communication elements are used, how they interrelate and how they reflect the brand identity. Further, by selecting cases simultaneously, we do not work with the principle of saturation, indicating to stop once the level of variation in findings is levelling off, but rather aim at including different perspectives on the phenomenon studied to maximise learning outcomes (Stake, 1995).

Stake (1995) distinguishes between instrumental, intrinsic and collective approaches to working with case studies. Where instrumental implies using cases as means to achieving general understanding, intrinsic indicates an interest in and desire to learn about the case itself. Lastly, a collective case study is based on the instrumental approach but includes more than one case. Moreover, a qualitative case study research design tends to combine different data collection methods (Eisenhardt, 1989) and implies tracking a case over time in order to understand the dynamics (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

We follow the collective case study approach (Stake, 1995), including four cases which are used to get an understanding of sustainable fashion brands' online communication. In addition, by conducting interviews and doing an online observation, we combine different data collection methods. Lastly, as our timely resources for this work are limited, we make use of Facebook's timeline function, allowing to look at all posts made by the brands within the last six months, where the time frame will be argued for in the chapter on channel selection.

3.3.2 Selecting the Cases

"The cases may be chosen to replicate previous cases or extend emergent theory, or they may be chosen to fill theoretical categories and provide examples of polar types.

While the cases may be chosen randomly, random selection is neither necessary, nor even preferable” (Eisenhardt, 1989, p.537).

Given Eisenhardt’s (1989) statement, in qualitative case study research, purposeful sampling is preferable, driven by the need for specific information in order to answer the research question. This sampling method has been applied by us, therefore, in the subsequent sections we argue for the choice of cases and how we determine the boundaries, as the focus on a bounded situation is what differentiates case studies from other research designs (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

The area of sustainable fashion brands was selected for three major reasons. First, being the second largest industrial polluter (Conca, 2015) pressure on the fashion industry to becoming more sustainable increases and sustainability is supposed to be leading innovations this year, working towards making sustainable fashion mainstream (McKinsey & Company, 2018). Second, the sustainable fashion industry and the respective brands are known to incorporate sustainability efforts into their communication to highlight their actions and to call on other fashion brands and consumers to together become more sustainable in their practices (Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017). Thirdly, an effective communication of sustainable fashion brands is necessary to stop consumers’ growing consumption (Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017), evoking the global production of clothing (Arthur, 2016), and consequently increasing the ecological footprint. Overall, by focussing on one industry, same market conditions are given.

To make a purposive selection (Creswell, 2013), four established, well-known brands, likely to exemplify consistent communication patterns were selected. To be included in the sample, the sustainable fashion brands must fulfil the following four criteria: Firstly, all companies have been founded with sustainability at the core, meaning that sustainability efforts have shaped the objectives of the brands from the beginning. Secondly, the brands are commonly studied in marketing literature or listed by third party sustainable fashion organisations. Therefore, they are claimed to act as role models in the sustainable fashion industry, proven to be built on a successful business model, generating sales from consumers’ purchases and providing a great opportunity to learn (Stake, 1995). Thirdly, the brands have been existing for several years, thereby we could select for consistency in communication by investigating the social media communication over time. Our last criterion requires the fashion brands to be present on the social media channel Facebook and have a corporate website with a separate section communicating sustainability efforts. Country of origin is not considered when making our selection as all brands operate and are known internationally and each case adds a different perspective, as well as, learning outcome on designing online communication. Overall, the communication of each fashion brand on the corporate website, the landing page and ‘about us’ section, together with information shared on the social media network Facebook within the last six months, provide boundaries to our cases.

Based on the criteria mentioned, and given the ease of access to the respective online information needed, the following sustainable fashion brands were chosen simultaneously and purposively: the Swedish brand Filippa K (Kant Hvass, 2014; Stål & Jansson, 2017), the US brand Patagonia (Caniato et al., 2012; Fletcher & Grose, 2012), the German brand armedangels (Belz, Höfeler & Schagen, 2009; Fair Wear Foundation, 2018), and the US brand Reformation (Chaykowski, 2017; MacCarthy, 2017). All brands have distinct personalities, communicating in different ways, thereby allowing for various perspectives on the phenomenon studied. More

information on the brands follows at the beginning of chapter 4 where the findings of our work are presented.

3.4 Research Method

A research method is described to be a technique for the collection of empirical information (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Given our research question, our material collection process is twofold, firstly, semi-structured interviews with experts in the field of sustainable branding and communication are conducted, followed by an analysis of sustainable fashion brands' communication on the corporate website and Facebook. Where the latter is the main focus of our work, the interviews serve as a prior step, providing a source of inspiration and to get ideas about what elements of communication and identity are focussed on by branding and communication agencies when designing sustainability messages.

3.4.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

The interview, as one of the most widely employed method in qualitative research, can be classified into different types (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Where structured interviews are mostly used in quantitative research, qualitative interviewing is of explorative nature, attempting to develop an understanding from the respondents' point of view (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Therefore, to gather natural language material, unstructured or semi-structured interviewing is common (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In our work, we conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews via telephone or online communication tools, such as Google Hangouts or Skype. This type of interviewing is described by literature as synchronous mediated remote interviewing (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015), deemed appropriate when researchers and respondents are based in different geographical locations, consequently allowing not only for practicality, but also for cost and time savings.

As mentioned, the interviews provide us with knowledge on how experts in the field of sustainability approach the phenomenon under investigation with their clients. By studying their perspectives, we can take communication and identity elements that they focus on in their work into consideration when making our online observations afterwards. Therefore, the interviews help to identify communication themes within the consumer paradox and define further elements for the collection of information from the brands' messages online. Literature describes this process as 'sensitising concepts', providing "a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances" (Blumer, 1954, p.7). According to Blumer (1954), the use of themes serves as giving a rough overall sense of what to look for without constraining the later work. By following this approach, we start with considering the themes of our theoretical framework and develop it during our data collection process.

Taking a constructionist point of departure, sampling of interviewees is not about quantity, but rather implies the identification of a limited number of respondents, relevant to the given research objective (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). By conducting five interviews,

the participants are few in number but of high relevance to the subject under study and deemed sufficient to develop further understanding of the topic investigated. When trying to label our sampling strategy applied, we argue that purposive sampling is most suitable (Creswell, 2013). Interviewees were selected by researching European sustainability branding and communication agencies online, looking for good public recognition and familiar clients. The reasons for choosing location as a boundary is mainly due to feasibility, different time zones complicating the interview process, as well as, providing similar market conditions. We looked for agencies only working with sustainable brands, developing respective branding and communication strategies. Even though our research question is industry specific, we did not only select experts working with clients in the fashion industry, mainly due to three underlying reasons: Firstly, it would have limited our chances of finding potential interview candidates. Secondly, sustainable brands have been described to share the commonality of having difficulties in communicating appealingly to consumers, therefore, we presume that conveying sustainability messages should follow certain patterns applicable to all sustainable brands regardless of the industry. Thirdly, and most importantly, our purpose of interviewing is focussed on getting a first idea of sustainable brands' communication in general in order to accomplish a more reliable online observation, which, in contrast, will be industry specific. Nevertheless, ultimately most agencies happened to have sustainable fashion brands as clients. After finding suitable agencies, we researched contact persons, mainly directors or employees with a title related to 'communication' or 'branding' and with expertise in the researched topic, judged to the best of our knowledge by studying their LinkedIn profiles. Thereafter, we contacted them via email or LinkedIn. Initially, we reached out to fourteen experts and received ten responses, ultimately resulting in five 30 to 45-minute interviews. In regard to our final participants, we interviewed experts from the field of building sustainable brands, developing toolkits for sustainable communication, as well as, sustainability advocates and marketing experts.

Before conducting the actual interviews, we prepared a document with collected background information on the respective agency. Given that the respondents were often busy at work, the interviews were scheduled via email a few weeks in advance. Between the initial contact and the final interviews, interviewees were given further information on the purpose and interest of our thesis. Ultimately, the respondents were interviewed individually, however, the researchers met in person to conduct the interviews jointly. Being a research team of two, one author conducted two, the other three of the interviews, taking notes for the remainder. The main interviewer asked most of the questions, allowing the other researcher to take a more detached and reflexive role, ensuring that all important questions are covered in the interview session, asking follow-up question if needed. Since the interviewees were of different European origin, all interviews were conducted in English. After an approval was given from respondents, all interviews were recorded using a respective online tool. Given that we conducted semi-structured interviews, our interview guide (Appendix A) contained a prioritised set of open-ended questions that could, however, be addressed and prioritised in a flexible manner (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015) based on the core area of the agencies' work. As suggested by Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015), we prepared the research guide in order to have 'meaningful conversations' by revisiting our research question, design and sampling strategy. Moreover, we paid attention to formulating clear, non-leading questions that are easy to understand (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Open questions are

useful for exploring new areas of knowledge and allow respondents to answer in their own terms (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The topic guide helped us to gather information on both, the creation of a strategic intent of sustainable brands, namely the identity, and the design of the means to communicate sustainability efforts, including relevant concepts applied by the agencies. Regarding the structure of the interviews, we started off with some background information on us and our work, followed by an ice-breaker asking about the overall interest in sustainability topics. Thereafter, questions around the main topic, namely on brand identity, sustainability communication, communication strategies overall, and, if applicable, sustainable fashion, followed. After having conducted the interviews, the essential findings from the recordings were transcribed.

Even though interviews taking place via telephone do not allow for body language and verbal expression monitoring, bias is not considered an issue as interviews were kept short and covered only general concepts and understanding. Furthermore, final interpretations were compared with statements in existing literature on sustainable brand building and sustainability communication, drawing interferences.

3.4.2 Online Observations

Without direct access to the respective companies, making use of information provided by the brands themselves online offers a great opportunity to develop an understanding of choices made in regard to brand identity and communication strategy. As we are not interested in consumer insights or interactions, a netnographic approach was not deemed appropriate (Kozinets, 2002). Instead, taking roles as complete observers (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015), we collected publicly available information from the corporate websites and the Facebook pages of the respective four brands to get an understanding of their perspectives. This type of information can be classified as organisational documents in the public domain or virtual ones, appearing online on the company websites (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The first step was to construct an overview of elements found on brand identity, mainly on the websites. Thereafter, elements on sustainability communication on both online channels, corporate websites and Facebook, were looked at, defining certain boundaries according to the focus of the study. Primary attention was devoted to textual elements, where detailed information follows in the section on elements of interests, supported by visual content on websites and Facebook, namely atmosphere displayed, playing an important role in “constituting an organi[s]ation’s image and identity” (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.553). Finally, the promotion of activities, such as Facebook events, was analysed from an informational and strategic perspective. In essence, the aim was to first understand the elements of brand identity, such as personality traits. Second, we wanted to observe how the themes and elements from theory and interviews are applied in practice.

3.4.2.1 Channel Selection

The selected brands apply the current most popular channel of communication, online, where convenience and identity creation are mentioned as supporting arguments for an online communication strategy (Biloslavo & Trnavčević, 2009). Moreover, online channels are highly useful to inform about sustainability practices (Adams & Frost, 2006; Biloslavo & Trnavčević,

2009; Capriotti & Moreno, 2007; Chaudhri & Wang, 2007; Esrock & Leichty, 1998; Wanderley et al., 2008), where consumers, can be targeted with respective relevant information (Biloslavo & Trnavčević, 2009). Additionally, for sustainable fashion brands, the internet offers the most sustainable promotion channel along the marketing mix (Kotler, 2011). Lastly, online allows for easy public access and feasibility to complete the study within the given time frame. Due to these arguments, the online communication of the respective brands is subject to our research, consequently mainly secondary data is analysed.

Primarily, the corporate website is studied due to the rich information provided regarding sustainability, all in one place. To be consistent in our work, we always looked at the international website of the brands, characterised by '.com' in the web address. Moreover, the main focus of our investigation is the landing, as well as, the 'about us' page, including related sub-pages. The landing page is of interest to get an understanding of how fashion and sustainability content is grouped together, whereas the 'about us' section is used to evaluate how sustainability efforts are communicated in detail.

Communication strategies of sustainable brands have been strongly influenced by the emergence of social media, allowing companies to not only expose, but integrate stakeholders into their CSR activities, thereby creating a dialogue (Fieseler, Fleck & Meckel, 2010). The social media channel Facebook, easy to access and utilised by many consumers (Brogan, 2010), serves as an imperative to the study as it has become an integral part of brands' online communication (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010). Facebook was chosen for three main reasons: its textual elements, which are main components of sustainability narratives (Sandelowski, 1991), its differentiator from other networks to attract businesses by providing "a privileged marketing channel enhanced with social ads" (Pereira, de Fátima Salgueiro & Mateus, 2014, p.696), and therefore, arousing consumers' interest, as well as, the fact that about 70 percent of consumers state that finding information about brands and products is one of the main reasons for joining Facebook (InSites Consulting, 2011), explaining why brand profiles have achieved high popularity among firms (Pereira, de Fátima Salgueiro & Mateus, 2014). Instagram, in contrast, being rather visual in nature, was excluded from the study to ensure feasibility to conduct an in-depth investigation of textual elements within our set time frame. Overall, the choice was made to look at communication posted within the last six months (November 2017 to April 2018). The time frame was chosen given that not all brands communicate frequently, and even if they do, sustainability content is often rare. Therefore, by considering a longer time frame, more posts will be relevant to our evaluation, allowing for a better understanding of what is communicated and how. Striving to understand the company perspective, user generated content, comments and reactions were excluded.

3.4.2.2 Elements of Interest from Theory

To get a clear understanding of what themes and elements have emerged from theory, a more detailed illustration of the elements looked out for when making the online observations can be found in figure 3.4.2.2. To the left, the themes are displayed, whereas the respective elements are shown in the column right beside the themes. The meaning of the themes and elements will be explained in chapter 4.

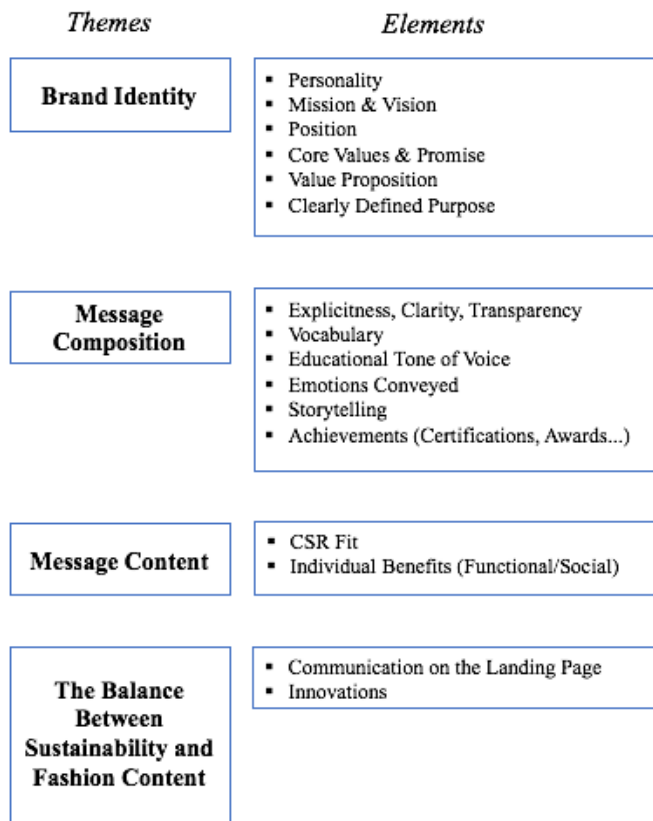


Figure 3.4.2.2 Themes and Elements from Theory Guiding the Observation

3.5 Method of Analysis

This section discusses qualitative content analysis of brand websites and Facebook posts as our main method used. However, we do not want to constrain our work by narrowly following a certain methodological approach, but rather use content analysis as a guidance, as well as, inspiration to our way of proceeding.

A suitable method for studying company documents like websites or company reports is a content analysis of textual empirical material, an interpretative approach identifying patterns resulting in themes (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Content analysis is often used in quantitative research, quantifying textual elements and taking a deductive approach (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In qualitative research, in contrast, the method of analysis is not concerned with statistical significance of the occurrence of concepts or themes but deals with “any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings” (Patton, 2002, p.453).

The point of departure of the analysis process was an Excel spreadsheet (Appendix B). Here, the themes with respective elements in regard to brand identity and communication strategy from theory (figure 3.4.2.2) and interviews were listed, determining the criteria for the selection

of relevant empirical material (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Since we were working as a team of two researchers, we had to define our roles and tasks. We decided to both observe all four brands on Facebook, as well as, the websites, and collected the findings in the spreadsheet. This way we ensured to get an in-depth understanding, encouraged reflexivity and got different perspectives from two observers on the respective brands. Moreover, the predefined themes and elements of interest ensured consistency in the empirical material collection process.

Having all information in an organised structure enabled to transparently and systematically compare and contrast, first within, and thereafter across cases (Eisenhardt, 1989). The collected material was analysed with a view to what emerging themes provide answers to our research question (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). During the process, we analysed every relevant Facebook post and statement made on the corporate website, the landing page and 'about us' section more specifically, by thinking about what meaning is encompassed. Given our qualitative and abductive approach, these emerging themes were either determined by pre-existing theory and interview findings answering 'what' and 'how' to communicate sustainability topics, or identified and refined in the process of analysing the empirical material. More precisely, on the one hand, when going through the empirical findings in the spreadsheet, patterns were observed in regard to message content and composition between the four brands. On the other hand, implications from theory helped us to watch out for commonly mentioned sustainability communication characteristics, such as the importance of highlighting individual benefits. Themes were identified based on Ryan and Bernard's (2003) statement that "[y]ou know you have found a theme when you can answer the question, What is this expression an example of?" (p.87). Appendix C illustrates the themes that emerged from the analysis, with respective patterns observed in the empirical material, providing implications for message content and composition.

3.6 Quality of the Research

3.6.1 Trustworthiness of the Research

When assessing the trustworthiness of this research, it is important to mention that validity, as applied to quantitative research (Kvale, 1994), is not the aim, since the focus is on the particular rather than the general. Consequently, other criteria are used for assessing the trustworthiness. Lincoln and Guba (1985) have introduced a different terminology drawing parallels with the quantitative criteria, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, generally accepted by researchers in the qualitative field. Another interesting position is taken by Hammersley (1992), strongly supporting validity as a criterion, however, redefining it as plausibility and credibility, and emphasising relevance as another criterion to judge the quality of qualitative research. Relevance, according to him, is defined as the "importance of a topic within its substantive field or the contribution it makes to the literature on that field" (Hammersley, 1992 cited in Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.44). Where the relevance of the phenomenon studied has been argued for in chapter 1, in the following, a few examples are given showing our reasoning when planning the research. Reflexivity for this work can be

looked at as a multi-perspective practice (Alvesson, Hardy & Harley, 2008); the objective being to look at various ways how sustainability efforts can be communicated online, ensuring consistency with the brand identity, and a balance between fashion and sustainability content.

Credibility determines how believable the findings are and parallels internal validity in the area of quantitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As this research primarily collects publicly available information published in the name of the brands, bias coming from the data itself can be excluded. Taking an interpretative approach, self-awareness of the researchers is critical (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Being a research team of two, we could include two perspectives and interpretations, increasing the degree of credibility. Furthermore, we aimed at using diverse approaches when looking at how brands design their communication. Hence, various communication strategy, as well as, brand identity elements from both, the corporate websites and Facebook, were investigated. This gave us different points of views on designing communication online, jointly strengthening credibility. Denzin (1970) further argues that triangulation helps to increase credibility, where the main focus lies on applying multiple methods of investigation and sources of data. By conducting both, interviews and online observations, we ensured to make use of more than one data collection method. An additional facet of credibility refers to the fact that researchers should be transparent on how data is analysed and how findings are interpreted (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004), which we elaborated on in detail in the present method chapter. Commenting on how credibility is achieved when conducting interviews, participants with various experiences were chosen to contribute to this work, increasing the possibility to shed light on the given research question (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Moreover, interviewees were informed of the autonomy of this research in order to dispel scepticism.

Transferability investigates whether the findings can be applied to other contexts (Bryman & Bell, 2011), thereby paralleling external validity, however, being significantly different. Overall, it is of importance to highlight that we do not intend to follow the positivistic stance and, therefore, distance ourselves from striving for generating generally applicable findings. Ultimately, the authors make suggestions about transferability, however, it is up to the reader to decide whether findings are transferable to other contexts. As mentioned, we agree with Kvale (1994), aiming to create local knowledge, as well as Geertz (1973), since focus lies on uniqueness and producing “thick descriptions” (p.3). It is the researchers’ task to provide the reader with an “index of transferability” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.316), therefore, the research process needs to be well argued for and described in detail. Consequently, detailed descriptions are provided in the method chapter, covering decisions made and reasoning regarding the data collection process, also ensuring transparency and credibility. To allow the reader to make own interpretations of our findings (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004), empirical material collected and analysis are presented separately, and findings are supported by including quotes from the websites and Facebook.

Confirmability discusses whether the researcher’s own values have influenced the work to a high degree and, therefore, substitutes objectivity (Bryman & Bell, 2011). ‘How much of the conclusions can be confirmed by someone else?’ (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); this requires a balancing act in qualitative research. On the one hand, the researcher’s perspective is desirable and essential for the investigation of the phenomenon, on the other hand, the text should talk for itself without imputing meaning (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Two main strategies have

been applied to increase confirmability of our work. First, a research team of two has conducted the work, referred to as investigator triangulation, allowing for different perspectives, cross-checking and verifying the interpretation of the findings (Denzin, 1970). We jointly decided on evaluation criteria. Moreover, both looked at all companies individually and in-depth, and regularly came together and shared perspectives, asking for the other's opinion, thereby decreasing the potential of bias (Denzin, 1970). Second, in order to ensure accurate representation of the empirical material (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), interviews were recorded, key findings transcribed, and quotations from the online observation are presented, helping to counter accusations that the analysis might have been influenced or biased by our own values (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Dependability, closely corresponding to the notion of reliability in quantitative research, describes the likelihood of achieving the same results at another time (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Similar to achieving confirmability, dependability can be fulfilled by peer auditing procedures (Seale, 1999). This can be reached by keeping records of the entire research process, thereby exercising reflexivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this thesis, we initially clearly defined our research question, which consequently guided all further decisions made. Moreover, we included a transparent description of our research process within chapter 3, explicitly stating our reasoning process and theoretical stances. This enables other researchers to theoretically collect the same information. However, as we cannot control information published online by brands, Facebook posts might be deleted, and website content changed. Moreover, the interviewees' concepts applied in their work can alternate with time. Overall, given our efforts in providing transparency of our methodological process, we feel that a sufficient level of dependability is given, allowing for replication.

3.6.2 Ethical Considerations

When doing research, ethical considerations have to be taken seriously to protect the interests of informants and avoid any privacy concerns (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Given the twofold design of our research method, interview participants from branding and communication agencies, revealing their opinions and attitudes, are protected by not disclosing any personal information on them and the respective agency. Moreover, when specific clients are mentioned, names are not transcribed, unless publicly mentioned on the agency's website. Taking these ethical precautions, informants will be protected the best way possible. Since the main focus of this work revolves around collecting publicly available content from websites and Facebook, as opposed to analysing user-generated content, ultimately no ethical issues are associated with the collection of information for this thesis.

3.6.3 Limitations of the Study

Despite carefully designing this research to ensure trustworthiness, limitations regarding the choice of method need to be highlighted, namely the role of the researchers, the shortcomings by only using secondary data for the cases themselves and channel choice, as well as, the implications of the limited timely resources. The first limitation draws on general concerns of

qualitative research, namely subjectivity. Even though the influence of the researchers is inevitable and even partly desirable in qualitative research, reflexivity on our roles as researchers is of high importance (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). In order to minimise bias, we ensured to constantly challenge our assumptions and analysed empirical material individually at first, before discussing findings together. Thereby, we avoided influencing each other's opinions and incorporated both viewpoints into our research.

Secondly, the choice for a multiple-case study design solely based on secondary data in regard to case information, entailed certain limitations on understanding choices made by the brands. From the beginning, we were aware that primary data from interviewing employees working for the brands could have provided us with different perspectives and explanations regarding 'why' communication is designed in a certain way. This could have enriched the work with findings from a different angle. However, feasibility, given time frame and company access did not allow for this research design. Since we have been aware of these conditions from the beginning, we strongly incorporated existing literature from the field of branding in general into our work, as well as, organised interviews with experts from the field, thereby looking at the phenomenon from a slightly different perspective.

Thirdly, in regard to channel choice, Facebook as a social media platform was selected. We are aware that other channels such as Instagram or Snapchat are of high relevance to some brands and could have enriched findings, as well as, the fact that Facebook is highly important to brands nowadays, but might lose followers in the future. Lastly, another possibility would have been to conduct a longitudinal study, observing online communication for an extended period of time, applying in particular to the corporate website of the brands. This would have allowed for more empirical material available to study, observing further patterns, and most importantly for evaluating the degree of consistency in communication strategies and respective changes. However, by using Facebook as an online channel, past communication is accessible. All in all, given the aim, purpose and conditions of this research, the method applied was deemed the one most appropriate.

4 Findings

This chapter commences with a short summary of the important findings from the interviews with experts in the area of sustainability branding and communication, highlighting confirmation and extension of theory, as well as, further emerging elements used in the online observation afterwards. Subsequently, information on the four case study brands, Filippa K, Patagonia, Reformation, and armedangels is outlined and the identity element of the company mission is unfolded, aiming to provide a better understanding for the empirical findings presented thereafter. As the brand identity is subject to our observations, detailed information follows. The structure of the collected empirical material is guided by the theoretical framework, meaning brand identity as a concept and the three communication themes with relevant elements. Moreover, the ‘sweet spot’ as the theme emerging from the interviews, the ‘impact area’, and the concept ‘me, my world, our world’ are elaborated on. The chapter concludes by providing an understanding of how the different channels, website and Facebook, are used to communicate, by first presenting findings from the website, followed by observations from Facebook.

4.1 Experts’ Perspectives

The conversations with experts in the area of sustainable branding allowed to get insights into their points of view and understanding in regard to sustainability as a topic overall and the design of communication by aligning brand identity specifically. There are two central perspectives which are shared between interviewees. Firstly, all agree that sustainability in itself is a very complex topic, which is particularly difficult for consumers to grasp, as you cannot deal with it in a “...*black and white manner, sustainability is somewhere in the ‘weird greys’, difficult for us people since we want to see the world in black and white*” (Anonymous, Interview). Secondly, core values need to guide a brand’s communication, “[s]*ustainability by itself does not sell. To be able to tell a good sustainability story, the respective values have to be integrated in your company, they have to be convincing simply by themselves*” (Anonymous, Interview).

To start off, regarding the message composition, the ‘how’, several criteria have been mentioned, such as ‘being educational’:

“Most products have a higher impact in the use phase than in the production phase... So, whatever brand tells their customers to be aware is always applaudable! Because it is a responsibility and I think the more we as customers hear it, the more important it gets...” (Anonymous, Interview).

Furthermore, authenticity, measurability, meaning an alignment between saying and doing, and honesty have been highlighted as essential elements of communication. In regard to choosing the right vocabulary, an interviewee states that companies tend to use a lot of technical terms,

which makes their efforts less approachable and appealing to consumers. Additionally, ‘intrusive advertising’ on social media, for example, should be avoided as it does not match a brand with sustainability at the core, contradicting the promotion of conscious consumption.

Interviewees emphasise that an overload of communication regarding CSR activities should be avoided. This can be achieved by being disruptive in the ideas used to reach out to the audience, ‘surprise, differentiate yourself’, how one interviewee summarised it. However, respondents agree that ultimately it comes down to what the company actually does and that this is acknowledged by consumers. Furthermore, storytelling is perceived as valuable to convey sustainability messages as it reinforces a firm’s credibility and helps to ‘bring sustainability alive’. Lastly, giving one’s sustainability programme an explicit name is recommended:

“A lot of big companies that have good sustainability work would name it in a specific way, not just ‘our sustainability work’, but certain names, such as Unilever – sustainable living. They are perfectly clear on what the key areas are, what they work on, they have clear goals for the next five years or so, clear results for every year and activities in these fields...” (Anonymous, Interview).

Looking at the second element, message content, a respondent brings up the ‘impact area’, suggesting firms to follow a focus strategy in their environmental or social actions:

“We mostly recommend companies to focus on one or two [sustainability] topics that fit their company really well, instead of doing all topics and communicating sort of fragmented activities...” (Anonymous, Interview).

Furthermore, one agency works with the so called ‘me, my world, our world’ concept, determining the scope of a firm’s sustainability initiatives.

“It is about three layers: ‘me’ is your brand, it is your position, ‘my world’ are all the stakeholders around your brand, and all the groups of people that are most important to your company. So that can be your major stakeholders, your suppliers, so all the stakeholders relevant to your company. And the ‘our world’ is the bigger picture, the world in its spatiality, so to say“ (Anonymous, Interview).

Consequently, a brand can decide if its efforts are only product related, referring to supply chain efforts, or go beyond. Regarding the latter, a bigger picture is taken by focussing on social and environmental issues not directly connected to the products offered.

With regard to the last theoretical element, the balance between sustainability and other content, a common viewpoint was that *“sustainability [should not be] in the centre of communication” (Anonymous, Interview)*, implying that sustainability content cannot be a ‘stand-alone’ but has to be enriched by other information. One interviewee expressed that instead, sustainability content should be integrated as a secondary message:

“I think a lot of brands are doing this [sustainability] message. I think, if you are already more desirable than other brands, which are in the same field, then sustainability should be a secondary message” (Anonymous, Interview).

An emerging new theme is the so called ‘sweet spot’, meaning ‘how does the brand approach to fulfil the wishes and needs of the consumer’ while making a positive impact on society or environment, linking fashion and sustainability. ‘What do your consumers value your brand for and how can this aspect be used to make a positive environmental or societal contribution?’, thereby going beyond the CSR fit, solely emphasising the need to match sustainability issues and core corporate activities. An interviewee explains what she recommends to brands:

“Think about what your customers value most and what the impact areas will be, areas that the company wants to be known for in particular. These really depend on your corporate values, the strategy and they predict what your future vision of the world is” (Anonymous, Interview).

4.2 The Brands under Investigation

“In the fast changing world of fashion, we see a rise of brands that are founded with a different mindset: a mindset that’s social and sustainable from the start” (Rainbow Collection, 2018), this attitude is shared and lived among all four brands studied in this thesis. A short introduction of the brands, their work, mission, and purpose follows.

Patagonia

The outdoor gear and clothing company Patagonia, established 1973 in California, USA, offers products for men, women, kids, and babies. The brand is seen as a front-runner in the sustainable fashion industry (Caniato et al., 2012). Its mission statement reads: “build the best product, cause no unnecessary harm, use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis” (Patagonia, 2018b). The company started as a climbing equipment startup and expanded into other outdoor sports categories, however, solely focussing on ‘silent sports’, meaning that “none require a motor; none deliver the cheers of a crowd. In each sport, reward comes in the form of hard-won grace and moments of connection between us and nature” (Patagonia, 2018b).

Reformation

Founded in California, USA, in 2009, the company offers sustainable women’s clothing and accessories, with the first plus-size range launched early 2018 (Reformation, 2018a). Around 80 percent of the company’s revenues come from e-commerce, with a few stores supporting to attract consumers (Chaykowski, 2017). The brand advertises with the bold statement “Being naked is the #1 most sustainable option. We’re #2” (Reformation, 2018b) and managed to make trend-right fashion both, sustainable and affordable (MacCarthy, 2017). Reformation’s mission can be summarised as “...to make effortless silhouettes that celebrate the feminine figure. We make our pieces from super sustainable materials, rescued deadstock fabrics, and repurposed vintage clothing. As we grow, our goal is to push harder to create more sustainable fabric options” (Reformation, 2018b). The brand is particularly known for its ‘Ref Jeans’, tackling the production of denim, the worst polluting type of clothing (MacCarthy, 2017).

armedangels

“We make fashion. Eco and fair” (armedangels, 2018a), the promise made by the German

sustainable fashion label armedangels. The brand was founded in 2007, has the mission “to combine fair working conditions and sustainable, high quality materials with beautiful design” (armedangels, 2018b) and offers timeless apparel for men, women and kids. armedangels’ philosophy can be summarised as being good to the environment, supporting fair trade and donating to charity (armedangels, 2018b).

Filippa K

The conscious brand with Swedish roots, Filippa K, was established in 1993 with the idea “to offer long lasting fashion with the mission to build the brand on substance and truth, not following trends” (Filippa K, 2018b). Filippa K’s vision is “fashion where sustainability is the guide to growth” (Filippa K, 2018b), driving the minimalist design approach. The brand offers lines for men and women and is particularly known for its efforts in regard to the circular economy, integrating the ‘4Rs’, for example offering the possibility to lease clothes for four days (Filippa K, 2018b). In 2018, Filippa Knutsson, the founder, returned as a designer to the company, wanting to ensure that the brand keeps the focus on its core (Bogefors, 2018).

4.3 Observed Elements on the Corporate Websites

4.3.1 Brand Identity

Before looking at several identity elements in detail, it has to be highlighted that expression, culture, relationships, and competences (Urde, 2013) have not been found to add value to our observation and are, therefore, not considered further. Expression was excluded since communication is our overall topic of interest, culture is fully internal and not directly visible in sustainability communication, the relationship with customers and non-customer stakeholders is not relevant as it is, for our purpose, reflected in the communication as such, and lastly, competences are considered but integrated into the impact area.

As mentioned, the four brands have sustainability at the core, meaning anchored in the core values and promise, either directly expressed or implicitly rooted in some vocabulary, such as ‘timeless’. armedangels’ promise reads “*We make Fashion. Eco and Fair*” highlighting that “[they] love beautiful product, [we] think organic and [we] believe that fairness is never out of fashion” (armedangels, 2018b). Filippa K is less explicit about its sustainability efforts in its core values, which are ‘style’, ‘simplicity’ and ‘quality’. Reformation also takes a slightly different approach, making ‘trend’ and ‘sustainability’ part of its core values. Lastly, Patagonia, promises to not only deliver ‘quality over quantity’, but also stands for environmental protection and functionality, expressing its focus on environmental sustainability.

The value proposition does not clearly state sustainability, but rather companies offer “*natural timeless fashion*” (armedangels, 2018b), ‘long-lasting simplicity’ (Filippa K, 2018b), ‘functional clothing and gear produced the best way possible’ (Patagonia, 2018b) or ‘sustainable vintage fashion adopted to feminine silhouettes’ (Reformation, 2018b). Even though all brands sell sustainable clothing, their positioning in the market, as well as, hearts and minds of consumers and other stakeholders varies significantly. Patagonia, the pioneer and role

model in regard to sustainability wants to ‘provide the best possible products for active, silent sports’, where

“Alpinism remains at the heart of a worldwide business that still makes clothes for climbing – as well as for skiing, snowboarding, surfing, fly fishing, paddling and trail running. These are all silent sports. None require a motor; none deliver the cheers of a crowd. In each sport, reward comes in the form of hard-won grace and moments of connection between us and nature” (Patagonia, 2018b).

Filippa K wants to be known for its Scandinavian design, as a “conscious brand ... combining classic craftsmanship with modern knowledge” (Filippa K, 2018b). armedangels designs ‘everyday favourites’ (armedangels, 2018b) and lastly, Reformation highlights its focus on women, designing ‘sustainable vintage clothes adapted to the feminine body’ (Reformation, 2018b).

Several identity elements have now been looked at in more detail, however, to clearly understand the brands’ raison d’être, we looked for statements summarising why the business is doing what it is doing. All brands want to make a change, an impact that guides all actions taken as a business. “At Patagonia, the protection and preservation of the environment isn’t what [they] do after hours. It’s the reason [they are] in business and every day’s work” (Patagonia, 2018b), where again the environmental focus is highlighted, building the foundation of the company’s existence. Filippa K wants to promote conscious consumption, consequently heavily focussing on the circular economy, having the “... overall ambition to create fashion inspired by long-lasting simplicity, ... a carefully curated wardrobe” (Filippa K, 2018b). armedangels aims to make a difference in the industry, guided by the statement “it’s on us to change the world for the better” (armedangels, 2018b). Lastly, Reformation’s objective is to ‘make sustainable fashion fashionable and transparent’ (Reformation, 2018b), since

“[a]t Reformation [they] think about all the costs in creating fashion... so [the consumer] can make empowered choices, and [they] can keep creating better solutions when it comes to making clothes” (Reformation, 2018b).

When observing how the companies communicate their mission, reason for existence or core values, personality traits can be identified, forming the corporate character and making each brand unique. Patagonia is “the activist company” (Patagonia, 2018a; 2018b), taking its purpose to protect the environment very seriously by providing extensive information on the projects. Filippa K can be described as ‘the minimalist’, keeping clothing lines simple, communicating in a reserved Swedish way (Filippa K, 2018a; 2018b), armedangels acts as a ‘change agent’, wanting to make a difference in the industry (armedangels, 2018a; 2018b), and finally ‘the feminist millennial’, Reformation, combines fashion with trends, targeting primarily millennials (Reformation, 2018a; 2018b).

4.3.2 What to Say – Message Content

The Impact Area

It can be observed that the four brands all choose a particular topic in regard to sustainability that they focus on consistently. Overall, this content can be described as closely related to the products sold or the business model. For Patagonia, this impact area can be clearly defined as protecting wildlife, where social sustainability comes secondary. The brand mainly takes a bigger picture beyond clothing, for example by setting up a petition to stop building dams to ensure saving the habitat for species. Furthermore, Patagonia has specific names for its sustainability programmes in place, such as ‘Worn Wear’, its efforts in regard to the circular economy, ‘recycling’ more specifically, or ‘The New Localism’ (Patagonia, 2018b):

“For us at Patagonia, a love of wild and beautiful places demands participation in the fight to save them, and to help reverse the steep decline in the overall environmental health of our planet. We donate our time, services and at least 1% of our sales to hundreds of grassroots environmental groups all over the world who work to help reverse the tide” (Patagonia, 2018b).

Filippa K takes a different approach and dedicates its efforts towards the promotion of conscious consumption and an extended product life cycle, implementing several programmes such as ‘Collect’, ‘Care’, ‘Lease’, ‘Front Runners’. The latter refers to the 100 percent sustainable collection, leading the way to making the entire collection sustainable by 2030 (Filippa K, 2018b). Consequently, the focus of sustainable activities revolves around the products themselves, which are *“designed for ourselves and those around us” (Filippa K, 2018b)*. For armedangels, a fair production is the primary objective, having several initiatives in place to work towards providing the best possible products in regard to sustainability. Ultimately, Reformation looks at the environment as a whole, doing both, working on projects returning of what is used from nature in the form of planting trees, investing in clean water solutions and more, and focussing on ‘care’, providing detailed instructions on aftercare and fabrics:

“So we give back to the environment in the form of offsets. Basically, in exchange for the emissions and water used by our clothes, we help plant forests to naturally capture CO2 from the air, invest in clean water solutions, and purchase landfill gas offsets (The Earth be like, thank you)” (Reformation, 2018b).

Individual Benefits – Functional and Social

The common denominator when formulating the content of the message on their website is to implicitly highlight the individual benefits for the consumer, implying ‘the more’. To do so, the sustainable fashion brands focus on communicating majorly (1) functional and (2) social benefits. To influence the decision-making by emphasising the (1) functional benefits, all brands, except for Reformation (2018), refer to the durability of their garments. Words and terms used to indicate this quality are “long-lasting”, “timeless” “keeps your gear in action longer” (Filippa K, 2018b). Patagonia, the outdoor brand, highlights the functional benefit of durability in the following quote:

“One of the most responsible things we can do as a company is to make high-quality stuff that lasts for years and can be repaired, so you don’t have to buy more of it” (Patagonia, 2018b).

Additionally, Patagonia, offering gear for active silent sports, often refers to the ‘functionality’, of clothes, like its climbing pants, which *“were made to be ... for movement so that you can stay focused” (Patagonia, 2018b)*. Lastly, Reformation takes a different approach to communication, not referring to a sustainability connotation to promote functional benefits. Instead, the brand focuses on the comfortable wearing experience of its clothes, framed as “effortless silhouettes” (Reformation, 2018b), fitting any body shape.

When (2) the social benefits are aimed for, all brands try to create a feeling of belonging to some group for the consumer. However, each brand offers a different club to become part of. Patagonia, ‘the activist company’ (Patagonia, 2018a, 2018b), asks people to be an ambassador of ‘team Patagonia’; armedangels (2018a, 2018b), ‘the change agent’, to join the ‘change-makers’; Reformation (2018a; 2018b), ‘the feminist millennial’, creating the ‘glamour group; and Filippa K (2018a; 2018b), ‘the minimalist’, tries to attract customers to its trendy ‘conscious club’ of circular fashion, for example by the following statement: *“Renting clothes, like swapping and upcycling, is a service on the rise” (Filippa K, 2018b)*.

Me, My World, Our World

With respect to the brands’ communicated position (‘me’) and what their actions are in the sphere of the most important stakeholders (‘my world’) and the bigger picture (‘our world’), we found some spheres to be more similar and others to vary among the brands under study. In particular, when looking at their position, the brands take different stances, despite all selling sustainable clothing. To state their positions briefly, Patagonia (2018a; 2018b) focuses on Alpinism and silent sports, Filippa K on Scandinavian conscious fashion, armedangels offers “everyday favourites” (armedangels, 2018b), and Reformation wants to be positioned as a trendy and feminine-friendly fashion brand (2018a; 2018b).

When looking at the communicated actions in ‘my world’, the findings somewhat coincide. Both, Filippa K and Patagonia, aim to impact their most important stakeholders by offering clothing that lasts, while acting sustainably in regard to people and nature. Additionally, Filippa K combines durability with minimalistic fashion, “long-lasting simplicity” (Filippa K, 2018b), in order to reduce consumption. In contrast, armedangels and Reformation only relate to the fashionable aspect of their products, while being environmentally and socially friendly.

Lastly, promoting their efforts beyond the business, ‘our world’, all brands have found their own way to do so. Especially, Patagonia, and to some degree also Reformation run initiatives to protect the well-being of the planet. Patagonia has established *“The New Localism...[to] have something to save the planet” (Patagonia, 2018b)* and as an activist company itself, will do anything to combat the ecological crisis. Reformation takes care of the nature, having implemented environmental initiatives, such as growing trees or subsidising in *“clean water solutions” (Reformation, 2018b)*.

4.3.3 ‘The Sweet Spot’ – Appealing and Contributing Positively

The sweet spot, addressing how the brands connect sustainability efforts and their products in order to appeal to consumers, is rooted in the value proposition. Taking the example of armedangels with its value proposition to provide “natural timeless fashion” (armedangels, 2018b), the sweet spot can be defined as offering ‘timeless, long-lasting, contemporary fashion’. Timeless fashion appeals to consumers in its simplistic design and at the same time is never out of fashion, therefore, can theoretically be worn unlimitedly and is thereby sustainable in itself. Patagonia, as an outdoor brand, not only sells products related to nature but also has the purpose to protect wildlife, making ‘the outdoors’ the sweet spot. Filippa K “*is a personal affair, providing long-lasting and classic [minimalistic] products that can be combined with anything*” (Filippa K, 2018b), indicating that minimalism as such is the brand’s sweet spot, seen as ‘fashionable’ and at the same time promoting a rather ‘slow fashion movement’. Lastly, Reformation takes on the mission to promote ‘self-worth’, selling garments for any body type and embracing feminine silhouettes.

4.3.4 The Balance Between Sustainability and Fashion Content

As highlighted previously, fashion and sustainability meet in the ‘sweet spot’, however, how much weight is given to one or the other topic? Patagonia mainly communicates with nature images, where the scenery dominates the picture and the garments are only a part of the whole (Patagonia, 2018a) (Appendix D). Further, by using claims such as ‘does style matter’, the brand’s focus on functionality and sustainability is highlighted, as style is only argued to matter if the sport matters in the first place. ‘The Dam Project’ or ‘Repair as a Radical Act’ dominate the landing page communication, showing that environmental matters are seen as the firm’s priority (Patagonia, 2018a). Filippa K uses the nature as a tool to show naturalism, but places its focus on fashion, as can be observed when looking at images (Filippa K, 2018a) (Appendix D). The fact that sustainability is not an element on the landing page supports the first impression. Reformation also does not incorporate sustainability into the landing page, only by clicking on the header ‘about’ more sustainability information becomes visible. The brand rather supports its sweet spot, ‘sustainable fashion matching any body type’ by launching sustainable clothing for plus-sizes (Reformation, 2018b), instead of talking about environmental topics. armedangels takes a position in the middle, as reflected in its promise “*Fashion. Eco and Fair*”, or statement such as “*Love for Wool. Respect for Sheep*” (armedangels, 2018a), highlighting that the brand values both equally, a nice wool sweater but only if sourced sustainably (Appendix D). Further, armedangels innovates in the area of sustainability by providing shipping boxes made from grass as raw material (armedangels, 2018a; 2018b).

4.3.5 Message Composition

Explicitness and Clarity

The four brands under study seem to put a lot of effort into expressing their message as clearly as possible, whether it is by explaining the materials’ ecologically sound quality and their

journey, certifications gained, or by illustrating achievements and weak spots by exemplifications. Fabric-wise, instead of leaving the consumer puzzled about the implications, all brands feel the need to go in depth when describing what is particularly sustainable about ‘EcoVero’ (armedangels, 2018b), ‘recycled wool’ (Filippa K, 2018b), ‘recycled polyester’ (Patagonia, 2018b), ‘Tencel’ (Reformation, 2018b) or ‘organic cotton’ (Patagonia, 2018b), such as:

“Hemp is a natural fiber that’s cultivated with low impact on the environment. It requires no pesticides, synthetic fertilizers or GMO seeds. Cultivation of hemp improves soil health by replenishing vital nutrients and preventing erosion” (Patagonia, 2018b).

Patagonia seems to be the most explicit in illustrating its initiatives, leading from one sub-page to another, offering readings about ‘The New Localism’, ‘Materials and Technologies’ and specifications to each outdoor sport among other topics (Patagonia, 2018b).

A further step towards making efforts comprehensive to the consumer seems to be made by exemplifications. Here videos and data are used to make issues, achievements and weak spots measurable. Exemplifications by videos show, for example, how fabrics are handled, like in the case of “100% recycled down” (Patagonia, 2018b) or how the grass of armedangels’ grassboxes is processed (armedangels, 2018a). First, data seems to be used for illustrating the issues in the fashion industry, thereby making their message more impactful and inviting consumers to measure their own impact, like Reformation does:

“Americans throw away 68 pounds of clothing and textiles per person, per year. That’s almost enough to meet most airlines’ overweight luggage fee. Americans also donate or recycle less than 15% of clothing and shoes, though nearly all of it could be recycled or reused. Let’s get on this” (Reformation, 2018b).

Secondly, achievements are explicitly addressed and proven by using data, like Filippa K (2018b) mentioning its impact of not using dyeing as a technique or armedangels illustrating its savings since 2008 by providing the exact amount of water saved, namely *“about 1.117 Olympic swimming pools, or about 20 million bathtubs” (armedangels, 2018b)*. By comparing the weight to familiar objects, the message again becomes more comprehensive and impactful.

Thirdly, even though achievements are shown, the brands also seem to put importance on exemplifying their weak spots or the status quo of their efforts towards sustainability, sometimes supported by data. Interestingly, two brands are using a ‘tool’ or specific name to show what has been achieved and what still has to be done. As such, Reformation writes about its tool the ‘RefScale’ (Reformation, 2018b), where the total costs beyond the price tag of its fashion product manufactured are listed in detail by using data on the product pages, looking at *“carbon dioxide emitted and gallons of water ..., and pounds of waste [generated]” (Reformation, 2018b)*. Thereby, the brand shows that it is still making a negative impact, but at the same time, also depicts its positive contribution. Filippa K has created the Front Runner collection, which is considered to be the guiding programme towards a completely sustainable collection until 2030 by overhauling the whole supply chain (Filippa K, 2018b). Presenting the Front Runner initiative on its website, the brand provides an understanding of what it implies

for all steps in the supply chain to become sustainable, such as ‘traceability’, ‘minimum cutting waste’ and a ‘polybag for transport’ (Filippa K, 2018b).

Lastly, the level of explicitness of the brands’ messages seems to be increased by explaining the certifications obtained. All brands, except for Filippa K, are communicating their certifications or third-party endorsements, namely ‘bluesign system’ (Patagonia, 2018b; Reformation, 2018b), ‘Sustainable Apparel Coalition’ (Patagonia, 2018b), ‘Fair Trade’ (Patagonia, 2018b), ‘B Lab’ (Patagonia, 2018b), ‘GOTS’ (armedangels, 2018b), or ‘PETA’ (armedangels, 2018b), among others.

Transparency

The brands all seem to make an effort to provide consumers with an idea what is actually being done by giving them a glimpse ‘behind the scenes’ of their sustainability activities. Therefore, some talk more, others less about their failures and successes in regard to sustainability and reveal information about where their garments come from. With respect to failures, all companies are taking a stand, like Filippa K generally admitting that “[n]ot all collections are sustainable yet” (Filippa K, 2018b), or Reformation (2018b) conceding not having reached its targeted recycled waste goal, or Patagonia (2018b) openly speaking about the still existing negative impact of its many activities, whether in the stores or by dyeing techniques. An interesting ‘story of failure’ is communicated by armedangels (2018b), confessing a failed audit of one of its manufacturing sites. The Sustainability Manager is shown to take responsibility for this issue, while having done her best, which is communicated as follows: “*Julia gives it her all, always – but sometimes, that’s not enough*” (armedangels, 2018b).

However, the brands also seem to implicitly ‘celebrate’ their successes, like Filippa K (2018b) announcing that its second completely sustainable Front Runners are ‘hitting’ the stores, or Reformation (2018b) illustrating having reduced the sustainability cost of garments by using the ‘RefScale’ on the product sites. Further, certificates pointed towards under the section on ‘explicitness’ could be seen as successes. Overall, looking at how the brands communicate successes, it rather seems to be done implicitly with data and certificates obtained instead of being celebrated with directly expressed claims.

Finally, illustrating their current activities, the brands commonly reveal insights about the garments’ supply chain. Patagonia seems to feel particularly responsible to be transparent to its consumers, having incorporated the ‘the footprint chronicles’ (Patagonia, 2018b), a map where the fabric facility for every product available is listed. In a similar vein, armedangels names the production site of every product on the respective page. Lastly, Reformation also offers insights about its factory, illustrated in the following statement: “*We host tours of our factory so you can see ... and meet the people who make your clothes.... We have hosted a little over 1,000 visitors this year ...*” (Reformation, 2018b).

Vocabulary

When communicating their sustainability message, all brands pay attention to devise the message comprehensively by using simple language, which will be further illustrated below. If though, there is the need for a technical word, it is translated into a simple and short manner, such as for the certification ‘fair trade’: “*Because it supports the workers who build our gear*” (Patagonia, 2018b). Apparently, some brands especially focus on environmental and others on

social sustainability vocabulary. Environmentally-laden words are particularly used by Patagonia and Reformation, using words such as ‘natural’, ‘resources’, ‘habitat’, ‘renewable’, ‘green’, ‘recycled’, or ‘organic’. Social sustainability seems to have no such variety in terms to be expressed, therefore, ‘fair’ or ‘safe’ are majorly used by all brands except for Filippa K. Instead, Filippa K (2018b) makes use of words related to the circular fashion concept, communicating the respective expressions such as ‘upcycling’, ‘swapping’, ‘reuse’, ‘collect’, or ‘lease’. Patagonia and Reformation also apply terms related to this concept, but less.

An interesting application of vocabulary is used by Reformation, trying to sell sustainability as a fun topic to its audience, using rhetorical devices such as “*Fabric is the magic*”, “*Wash smart*”, “*Tencel is the holy grail*” (Reformation, 2018b). Instead of using formal language to highlight the sustainability section on its landing page, commonly referred to as ‘about us’, Reformation (2018a) is expressing sustainability in a more accessible way, namely as ‘our stuff’. Moreover, looking at the vocabulary incorporated under a fashion lens, we can see that the brands follow the motto ‘sustainability meets fashion’ in their word choices. Hence, the brands use terms like ‘timeless’, ‘long-lasting simplicity’ or ‘minimalist’. Lastly, all brands use the stem, ‘sustainability’, in different instances, like Reformation (2018b) for the announcement of a sub-page ‘sustainable practices’ or Filippa K made the word integral to its vision: “*Fashion where sustainability is the guide to growth*” (Filippa K, 2018b).

Educational Tone of Voice

The four fashion brands also speak to their consumers by educating them. One message most of the brands seem to hold for important is the aftercare of the garment, providing their consumers with detailed instructions on how to extend the life of their clothing while reducing the environmental impact. Thereby, they are empowering consumers to take actions themselves. Doing so, for example Filippa K provides a detailed guide supported with pictures on “*How to Wash, Mend & Care*” (Filippa K, 2018b) its clothes. Often those wash guides are supported by information what impact the right aftercare can have. In the following quote, a wash advice of Reformation is illustrated:

“Keep it cold. When you do the wash, set your washer to ‘cold’ to save energy and help your clothes live a little longer can help prevent 500 lbs of CO2 from entering the atmosphere every year. That’s the same energy as a 30-minute blow dry twice a week for a year” (Reformation, 2018b).

Emotions Conveyed

Looking at how the brands share certain emotional messages, a significant theme seems to be the ‘call-to-action’ to make a change in the fashion industry. Promoting conscious consumption, armedangels appeals to the consumers telling them that they together, “*it’s on us*” (armedangels, 2018b), have to change the world for the better. Moreover, Reformation starts the section on how to reduce the environmental impact of aftercare by setting the scene, “*Here are some easy ways to make a difference*” (Reformation, 2018b). Patagonia energetically uses the call-to-action for its initiatives, like ‘The New Localism’, where athletes work in local communities to make a change for the environment. As part of the initiative, the following message is used by Patagonia to activate consumers’ consciousness: “*We have all a chance to make a difference. Take a stand*” (Patagonia, 2018b).

Further on, the brands seem to emotionalise their message by using nature images, humanisation or feminism as a topic. In regard to nature photos, Patagonia (2018a) almost only illustrates inspiring landscape images matching the outdoor category in focus (Appendix D), or Filippa K (2018a), evokes the feeling of summer by shooting its latest collection on the beaches of California. Humanisation can be observed for Filippa K, devising expressions such as, “[g]ive your garment a second life”, “from raw material to afterlife” (Filippa K, 2018b). Reformation seems to emotionalise its communication by telling consumers not to worry about sizes, by offering smaller and plus-sizes and, consequently, inviting them to “celebrate the feminine figure” (Reformation, 2018b).

Storytelling

Not all brands apply storytelling as a technique, but Patagonia and armedangels take interesting, quite different approaches. Patagonia has incorporated manifold thematic anchors to build a story, one of them is implied in the ‘Worn Wear’, a repair and reuse initiative, where people talk about their Patagonia journey. Another narrative approach used by Patagonia is letting ambassadors talk about their ambition for sustainability and outdoor sports, like presenting “Léa [who] has adopted a nomadic and minimalist lifestyle” (Patagonia, 2018b). The boldest story in regard to educating consumers about sustainability seems to be Patagonia’s current movie ‘The Dam Truth’, educating about the necessity to protect natural habitat.

The brand armedangels almost only uses storytelling techniques, usually by accompanying Sustainability Manager at work, visiting the supplier’s cotton field, being part of her daily routine or visiting a production site in Turkey. Another story provides insights into the working conditions by profiling one of the factory workers, exemplified in the following quote:

“This is Sultan. Sultan is 18 years old. She came to Turkey three years ago when she and her family fled from Syria. We met Sultan in April 2017 when visiting our production partner in Izmir where young Sultan found work” (armedangels, 2018b).

4.4 Observations on Facebook

The social media channel Facebook is used by all four brands, however, the importance of the channel for a brand’s communication and the emphasis on sustainability topics varies significantly. Overall, information provided on Facebook is rather limited compared to the corporate websites and often links to brand website content. Further general findings include that the language used is conversational as opposed to formal, where “relax ladies” (Reformation, 2018c) can be mentioned as an example, and a tone of voice calling for engagement and actions is applied.

To start off, Patagonia mainly makes posts to show its activism and promote own documentaries about environmental topics or other sustainability programmes, often in several languages, emphasising “we’re in business to be an agent of environmental change” (Patagonia, 2018c). Instead of putting the garments in the centre, images portray active professional sports ambassadors wearing Patagonia clothing, creating a sense of inspiration, excitement, action, and passion. Only the caption is sometimes used to inform about the clothing itself, but again a

deeper sense is underlining the statement: *“Our rock pants were made to be minimalist and articulated for movement so you can stay focused on the things that matter”* (Patagonia, 2018c). This is supported by the fact that no product sales are posted on Facebook.

Filippa K uses Facebook mainly to post links to its own blog, ‘Circle’, providing educational and emotional content on sustainability topics or to promote latest fashion lines:

“The key to a long-lasting wardrobe? Think twice before washing. Airing your clothes and spot-cleaning when needed will extend the life of your garment and save water. A win for the planet, as well as your wardrobe” (Filippa K, 2018c).

A balance between fashion and sustainability is found by using simple short messages on fashion content, expressing the quality of fashion by informing about sustainable materials:

“The Bomber Jacket: ... The bomber jacket is a true style icon and ... is made from 100% recycled polyester, making it a mindful choice, too ...” (Filippa K, 2018c).

“Wear to Work: The Sustainable Set” (Filippa K, 2018c) another example of how language can be skilfully used to express both, being conscious and fashionable, as well as, it provides an idea of how Filippa K appears as a fashion advisor. armedangels rarely publishes posts on Facebook, however, if done, it balances talking about sustainable material or calling people to take action, and showing the latest collection. Holidays such as Christmas are used to encourage people to make a change and to highlight that there is more to fashion than ‘being fashionable’:

“... [Christmas is] there to remind you and people out there that we shouldn’t limit doing good to the Christmas time only. It’s on us to change the world for a better ...” (armedangels, 2018c).

Lastly, Reformation communicates regularly on Facebook and uses the channel mainly to promote new fashion items and invite to events, such as vintage sales. Moreover, articles from fashion magazines are reposted, showing celebrities suitable to the target group of millennials, endorsing their fashion items. Further supporting the brand’s targeted communication is the use of vocabulary, such as *“here’s to another year of killing it...”* (Reformation, 2018c). In addition, by using the word ‘vintage’, sustainable clothing is promoted in a fashion context. To underline its feminist approach, a campaign fronts female leaders in a variety of male-dominated fields, bringing a new meaning to the word ‘power-dressing’, thereby addressing a serious topic in a way appealing to its target group. Finally, we observe that Reformation does communicate sales, however, at the same time calls consumers to make mindful choices: *“Sale is now up to 70% off, and we also added more stuff ... Shop responsibly”* (Reformation, 2018c).

5 Analysis and Discussion

The present chapter analyses and discusses the findings previously presented by refining and combining elements from observations and theory, identifying patterns, resulting in nine themes. Further, the findings are linked to the relevant literature presented in chapter 2 to support the analysis. Overall, this thesis is set out to examine how sustainable fashion brands devise and communicate online by looking at ‘what’, the message content, and ‘how’, the message composition. Moreover, the alignment of the brands’ messages with their core is investigated. The following sub-chapters aim to fulfil this purpose by providing a more coherent picture of the sustainable fashion brands’ communication online, where the ‘what’ and ‘how’ are reflected in the themes. The first sub-chapter presents each individual theme, while including the concept of brand identity, as well as, literature on consumer-oriented sustainability communication with a focus on message formulation. Given our intention to provide explicit suggestions how the communication design can look like in practice, statements are supported by examples. Progressing to the discussion in the second sub-chapter, we finalise with a modified theoretical framework depicting a more coherent picture of how sustainable fashion brands communicate online. Collectively, this chapter discusses the empirical study in relation to the purpose and provides an answer to our research question.

5.1 Themes Emerging from Analysing Communication

5.1.1 The Sweet Spot Guiding the Communication

The sweet spot is guiding ‘what’ and ‘how’ the brands devise their messages as an overarching theme. It can be defined as a thematic focus in a sustainable fashion brand’s online communication which unites consumers’ wants and needs with the brand’s core values.

To visualise the aforementioned definition, the Chinese philosophy of yin and yang (Amien, 2017) can be applied. In our case, ‘yin’ is represented by consumers’ wants and needs, and the brand’s core values are depicted by ‘yang’. Both concepts are relative to another, even though opposite positions are taken, meaning that consumers tend to desire fashionable design and the brands strive to convey their sustainability efforts. Therefore, to ensure an effective communication for sustainable fashion brands, a sweet spot should always unite both orientations, the wants of consumers and the core of the brand, implying that no message is exclusively yin or only yang (Amien, 2017).

Based on the empirical material, Patagonia is loved by consumers for its functional, durable outdoor fashion products and makes wildlife protection the impact area. Consequently, the sweet spot is ‘the outdoors’ with a focus on silent sports, thereby making its efforts genuine and undermining the brand’s spirit. Furthermore, essential for understanding are the brand’s core

values of functionality and environmental protection, as well as, the value proposition of offering ‘functional outdoor clothing and gear produced the best way possible’.

By making communication consumer-oriented, directly addressing their wants and needs, interest in the products is evoked. We believe that the sweet spot helps brands to create awareness, according to Bhattacharya and Sen (2004) a foundation to engage people. Moreover, by finding a thematic anchor in their communication, brands might be more likely to sell their clothes. This assumption can be reasoned by the fact that the brand image might not be perceived as ‘green only’ but appealing, more likely to meet consumers’ expectations (Joergens, 2006; Meyer, 2001; Phau & Ong, 2007). These arguments are supported by literature stating that people prioritise their own needs and desires to the environment when making a purchase (Joergens, 2006; Meyer, 2001; Perry & Chung, 2016). Finally, as consumers are less quickly to develop an interest in sustainability topics than other stakeholder groups, the importance of finding such a sweet spot is emphasised (SB Insight, 2018).

The sweet spot has been examined to be rooted in the brands’ core values, the centre of the identity (Urde, 2003). Further, it is rooted in the value proposition, however, differs as it specifically combines sustainability and fashion content to develop a favourable relationship between brands and consumers.

5.1.2 Focus Strategy by Having an Impact Area

Instead of engaging in a broad variety of sustainability activities and communicating all efforts undertaken, we have examined that the brands tend to focus on a limited number of environmental or social impact areas that are in line with the core nature of their products. Overall, the brands choose impact areas striving to tackle bigger issues within the fashion industry, however, interpret them in their own way and base their actions on it.

Literature emphasises the importance of a CSR fit, matching sustainability issues and core corporate activities in order to be perceived as credible (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010; Schmeltz, 2012). We view the CSR fit as a foundation of the impact area, meaning that within the possible activities allowing for a CSR fit, certain limited initiatives should be chosen and focussed on. This gives brands the opportunity to be known for doing specific sustainability work instead of being perceived as generalists. To do so, brands have to, as argued by Singh and Sonnenburg (2012), develop an understanding of their audiences’ attitudes of sustainability to match them with their communication on socially and environmentally responsible performance. Consequently, as has been stated, all sustainable fashion brands should be active in a specific area, connected to their offerings, within the supply chain to ensure a CSR fit.

Relating to the concept of brand identity, when looking at a brand’s mission and comparing it to the impact area, we found the impact area to be anchored in a brand’s ‘raison d’être’ (Collin & Porra, 1998 cited in Urde, 2013). Based on our empirical findings, we reason that for sustainable brands the mission is particularly important to highlight explicitly what engages the firm beyond making money, the positive contribution to society.

Moreover, we identified that a connection between the scope of the impact area and a brand's core values can be drawn, which, according to Biloslavo and Trnavčević (2009), should express sustainability behaviour. Brands with core values only implicitly indicating sustainability efforts have been found to not offensively communicate socially and environmentally responsible behaviour. On the contrary, our findings imply that brands explicitly incorporating sustainability into their core values tend to engage in activities going beyond the product and serve greater environmental or social needs. In this respect, we infer that there is no right or wrong since the choice of strategy has to match a brand's nature.

Overall, we propose that a CSR fit has to be ensured when deciding on the impact area. Therefore, as a first step, core values and the mission statement have to be defined in order to anchor the impact area within the brand identity and avoid being accused of 'greenwashing' when communicating one's efforts. Saha and Darnton (2005) also highlight the necessity of drawing a connection between efforts and a brand's nature, expressing caution against using 'green' as a marketing tool only.

5.1.3 The Balance – Juggling Likeability and Purpose

In contrast to literature suggesting to refrain from leading the communication with sustainability as a topic (Angel, 2013), we found that brands like Patagonia actually put more weight on 'green' topics than on fashion or the products. Overall, all brands convey both, fashion and sustainability content, while different ratios of the two subjects can be observed.

When trying to understand the reasons for prioritising one aspect over the other, literature on different types of consumer attitudes, behaviour or motivations can be taken into consideration. Our research indicates that brands targeting the 'smart' or 'dedicated' consumers (SB Insight, 2018), already searching for information and consequently, more involved with sustainability (Golding, 2009), can prioritise sustainability topics over fashion related content.

Knowing about the balance itself, it is of interest to understand how it can be expressed and what communication elements are applied. Our observation has revealed the importance of channel choice, the image material, innovations, as well as, language used as supporting tools. To start off, we believe that by combining both channels, the corporate website and Facebook, the balance can be supported. On the one hand, it has been found that the landing page of corporate websites, in particular, provides a great opportunity to indicate which side of the balance is prioritised, as it offers the first impression for a consumer exploring the website and is, therefore, critical in terms of setting the 'scene'. Images displayed on the landing page can give an indication of a brand's focal point, as depending on whether sustainability or fashion is in the centre, one over the other becomes the brand's guiding theme. Is fashion meeting nature or nature meeting fashion? (Appendix D). The 'about us' page is mainly used to communicate sustainability information. It provides in-depth material on the topic, arguably reaching the more eco-conscious consumer already interested in sustainability. Facebook, on the other hand, is advantageous to making sustainability 'fun' and 'approachable', engaging consumers with a lower sustainability awareness and clearly highlighting product related content, not responsible behaviour. Furthermore, innovations in terms of sustainable material, aftercare products or plus-size collections can help to combine fashion with sustainability. Aftercare products, for

example, provide a benefit to consumers by helping to keep the garment ‘fashionable’, and also ensure having a longer-lasting product, thereby making a positive environmental contribution.

In regard to language used, our findings do not support literature by Angel (2013) proposing to avoid applying certain vocabulary that is not perceived as fashionable. All brands somehow use the words ‘sustainability’ or ‘organic’ in their communication. However, most often implicit terms are used such as ‘timeless’, ‘long-lasting’, or ‘minimalist’. Timeless, as an example, implies being ‘never out of fashion’ and consequently can be worn ‘unlimitedly’, therefore expressing the sustainability component without explicitly stating it and supporting the need for a balance, as all terms are related to fashion as well. Furthermore, short phrases can skilfully combine both, fashion and sustainability statements. Therefore, it is suggested that even if a brand decides against leading the communication with sustainability, social and environmental efforts can be seamlessly integrated into messages, where the ratio between communicating to be liked (fashion) and expressing one’s purpose can be decided on by each brand individually.

Similar to what has been mentioned in regard to the core values’ connection to the scope of impact, we analysed that when core values are explicitly mentioning sustainability efforts, higher weight is put on sustainability communication than on other content. All in all, promoting this balance, regardless of where the focus is put, is essential as “fashion and sustainable fashion must meet and mingle” (Kibbe, 2013).

5.1.4 Putting the Product First

We observe products to be at the centre of the brands’ communication, leading the messages to consumers. Even though the need for combining fashion and sustainability topics has been elaborated on in the previous section on ‘the balance’, we now want to illustrate that all brands, except for Patagonia, avoid putting too much weight on sustainability information, which, according to Beard (2008), could lead to consumer disinterest. This finding was also reported by Angel (2013) and Grace (2015), suggesting to put fashion first and sustainability second, making it a gift not a purchase driver.

The main question now is what tools the brands use to assure consumers that they are not sacrificing a fashionable product for something sustainable only, which literature highlights to be one of the major barriers to purchasing sustainable fashion (Futerra, 2015; Townsend & Niemtow, 2016). We identified four patterns in the brands’ communication in regard to this aspect, namely promotions on Facebook, vocabulary, the design of the landing page, images in particular, as well as, free shipping options. First, communication on Facebook strives to engage consumers (Fieseler, Fleck & Meckel, 2010), therefore, it is interesting to observe that three of the brands rely on fashion topics, not sustainability. In this regard, promotions on Facebook have been evaluated, where the brands tend to heavily communicate their products through sales. This contradicts being sustainable, as extensive shopping opposes conscious consumption. Reformation exemplifies this contradiction by combining sales with responsible shopping behaviour. This behaviour could be reasoned by the fact that the brand, despite offering sales, still wants consumers to rethink purchase decisions, an interesting approach to combining consumers’ wants with the brand’s purpose.

Second, sustainability vocabulary tends to be implicit, as aforementioned, where terminologies such as ‘timeless’, ‘simplicity’, or ‘long-lasting’ are used to avoid the ‘green tone’. Third, sustainability topics are integrated into a product dominated landing page and Filippa K, for example, uses images putting nature in the background and fashion in the foreground. Given that, according to Schmeltz (2012), a lot of consumers do not actively seek information about company behaviour. Filippa K and Reformation, by not explicitly integrating any sustainability content into their landing page, either do not want consumers to link their brand to sustainability, again highlighting the product first approach, or risk that people do not get informed about their sustainability practices, as they are not actively looking for it. Fourth, by communicating free shipping for any amount, offered by Reformation and Filippa K, selling fashion comes before caring for the environment again.

The brand identity element of value proposition captures the ‘product first’ approach well, as the brands highlight to the consumer that they primarily want to offer a good product, as has been expressed throughout this sub-chapter. Therefore, this study confirms that in order to build beneficial customer relationships, the consumers’ wants and needs have to be respected, captured as fashionable clothes primarily, which starts with a clear value proposition (Aaker, 2004; Futerra, 2015).

5.1.5 Highlighting Individual Benefits

While the previous theme emphasised the fashion piece to stand out as integral to the brands’ sustainability communication, the empirical material reveals that also the value-added feature of sustainable fashion, coined as the ‘more’, is communicated. According to Phang (2017), communicating the benefits referred to sustainable fashion might positively impact the purchasing decision of consumers, especially since most consumers are reluctant to sustainability in their daily life (SB Insight, 2018), therefore, a message linked to the personal benefits might rather arouse their interest.

Concerning the cases at hand, we suggest that all brands make use of communicating individual functional and social benefits, sharing the suggestion of Futerra (2015). Consistent with the suggestion of Phau and Ong (2007) to link the benefit for the consumer to the product, the brands seem to have found ‘durability’ as a functional benefit (Futerra, 2015). Finding a point of interest consumers value in fashion is crucial, as fashion lacks the advantage of food or cosmetics being directly related to health (Joergens, 2006; Joy et al., 2015). Interestingly, ‘durability’ as a term is not communicated explicitly, but is wrapped in respective vocabulary that combines sustainability and fashion, pointing at words such as ‘timeless’ used by armedangels or ‘long-lasting simplicity’ by Filippa K. A possible explanation is that the brands aim to avoid the negative association with sustainable fashion and, therefore, express ‘durability’ in a twofold way. When social benefits are conveyed, the brands make use of the collectivist values that might influence consumers’ purchase decision (Laroche, Bergeron & Barbaro-Forleo, 2001). The findings show that the teams addressed by the brands differ significantly, from speaking to activists, conscious shoppers, or millennials, which could be explained by the fact of differentiation and speaking to distinct target groups with diverse levels of sustainability awareness.

Getting into a dialogue about individual benefits with consumers, the brands seem to majorly rely on Facebook, where we have examined that the brands embody fashion advisors, recommending what to wear for certain occasions, for example at work, with Filippa K's claim of 'Work Wear', or celebrities occur to present the brands' clothing, as they know how to 'stand out' in the eyes of certain consumer groups. Thereby, the brands might try to satisfy the needs of the consumer seeking to create an identity through clothing (Ruane & Wallace, 2013; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Lastly, communicating the '4Rs' might evoke the benefit for consumers to save money by using the service of leasing or buying second-hand clothing, services that counteract the opinion of sustainable fashion being costly (Joergens, 2006; Yan, Hyllegard & Blaesi, 2012).

Linking brand identity to the communication of individual benefits, we found that advantages become apparent in the value proposition of the brands under study. Thus, the formulation of the value proposition integrates a response to consumer expectations (de Chernatony, 2009), whether it is the promise of 'long-lasting simplicity' by Filippa K or 'natural timeless fashion' by armedangels, the message of benefits is simple and clearly expressed. Henceforth, we suggest mentioning the functional and social benefits in the value proposition is particularly important for sustainable brands in order to arouse consumers' interest.

5.1.6 Humanisation

As can be drawn from the empirical material, the brands refrain from being perceived as superficial and instead express their underlying human traits. armedangels reflects human traits by disclosing how one of its audits with a supplier failed or Reformation celebrates itself for every gallon of water saved during production.

Human to human, encountering consumers on an equal footing, is an approach that all brands share. Formulating such a message can be understood by looking into how human characteristics are conveyed and what communication elements are applied. When observing the brands online, we have examined that the communication of failures and successes, certain vocabulary and storytelling underline the brands' efforts of humanisation in messages.

Our research corroborates and slightly extends the findings on transparent messages of Coombs (2012), who proposes that a sustainable brand needs to communicate both, successes and weak spots. Therefore, we suggest that research on transparency and explicitness in communication somewhat coincides with what we refer to as humanisation in sustainability messages. When communicating failures, the brands do not hide, but explicitly express what went wrong, using clear words, for example not having reached the targeted goal of reducing their waste, like Reformation. By admitting mistakes, one can play on consumers' emotions (Williams & Kolster, 2013) and goodwill can be obtained (Hicks, 2017) in order to work towards reducing scepticism (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). In contrast to clearly communicating weak spots, strengths are presented in a more humble way by using data, sharing the notion of Morsing and Schultz (2006) and Futerra (2015). The brands 'celebrate' their successes by means of explicitness, using data to announce the savings in numbers at armedangels, or, by talking about certifications, such as ensuring fair labour at Patagonia. According to Sustainly (2016), by

showing progress through tools like the ‘RefScale’, the brands become more credible and we suggest also human, since improving abilities coincides with human behaviour.

Drawing on Gensler et al.’s (2013) statement, suggesting to tell stories about one’s positive sustainability impact to create empathy and awareness, it can be deduced that the brands bring sustainability ‘alive’ by telling stories about the factory work or having consumers tell their personal journey about living sustainably. Exemplifying how such a story can be composed, a depiction is presented by armedangels, walking consumers visually through the factory, introducing them to ‘Sultan’ as an actor (Sandelowski, 1991), who has found a safe work environment in one of the brand’s partnering factories, having left behind Syria. Further, we suggest that storytelling about factory life is a particularly important component to ensure transparency in sustainability communication due to the fact that this is one of the most complex and opaque issues within the fashion industry (Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017).

Another way to reduce complexity of sustainability can be achieved, in our view, by using ‘humanised’ vocabulary. This can take the form of humanising clothing, like Filippa K’s formulation to give a garment a ‘second life’, meaning to donate for second hand uses, as an example. The latter application seems particularly strong as it is related to Filippa K’s initiative ‘Collect’, supporting the findings of Peirson-Smith and Evans (2017) that sustainability vocabulary is more effective when in harmony with respective activities. A further explanation for humanising words may be to call on consumers’ awareness to treat their clothes more carefully, just like they would treat humans.

Sketching the inferences of sustainability communication to brand identity of the cases at hand, we view that the brand personality, built on its core values, is leading the messages of weak spots and successes, storytelling and choice of vocabulary to humanise the brand. Looking at armedangels, the ‘change-maker’ (Aaker, 1997), the brand takes a new approach by emphasising the employees working behind the brand, reflecting armedangels’ core values (Urde, 2013), fair working conditions in particular. By coherently representing its brand personality, the brand might be able to connect emotionally with consumers (Hede & Watne, 2013). Reformation’s approach to humanisation appears less authentic at first sight, since the personality and respective characteristics as ‘feminist millennial’ do not seem to comply with its sustainability activities. However, due to the fact that it targets the ‘millennials’, part of them referred to as ‘aspirational’, who expect a brand to be fun, the personality is suggested to match with sustainability initiatives like using the ‘RefScale’ as an innovative tool to show progress. Lastly, we propose, the explicitness and transparency support the brand’s human ambition to make a change, which should be aligned with its core values.

5.1.7 Educating Consumers

We argue that sustainability communication strategies can be advantageous for moving people from awareness to advocacy. However, initially consumers’ awareness needs to be built, where Peirson-Smith and Evans (2017) found that they are uninformed about sustainability initiatives. Consequently, education, taking complexity out of sustainability content, is essential to empower consumers to become more sustainable (Allison, 2018).

Our findings indicate that all brands follow Polonsky's (2011) advice to proactively educate consumers. By conveying information in regard to their impact area, brands avoid an information overload and strive to develop consumers' in-depth understanding of a narrower area within sustainability. These findings match those observed in earlier studies by Berg (2011) and Peirson-Smith and Evans (2017), suggesting to focus on a particular sustainability topic. Interestingly, Patagonia communicates its efforts extensively, potentially risking an information overload. However, given the explained target group, actively seeking information, as well as, its personality as an 'activist company', the behaviour can be explained.

The topic mostly covered by the brands is aftercare, which, knowing that the biggest negative environmental impact occurs in the use phase (Fletcher, 2014), seems well-considered. The brands' provided guides on how to wash and maintain garments are very explicit. They explain why the advice should be followed by portraying twofold benefits, the increased durability of clothes, as well as, the reduced environmental impact, again highlighting individual benefits as noted in chapter 5.1.5. Consistent with Polonsky (2011), Reformation reveals the positive effect of taking actions as consumers and in this way shows them that they, against doubts, can make an individual impact (Joergens, 2006; Perry & Chung, 2016). It is inferred that providing these guides aims at empowering consumers, as they give explicit advice on how to consume sustainably, encouraged by Caruana and Crane (2008), to increase the motivation for a behaviour change.

When assessing the vocabulary used, the findings can be associated with literature by Maxwell (2013) and Peirson-Smith and Evans (2017), as all brands avoid using too technical terminologies (Maxwell, 2013), or if so, provide simple explanations (Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017), which is often done when talking about certifications, supply chain processes, or sustainable technologies. As suggested by Yan, Hyllegard and Blaesie (2012), explicitness is guiding the educational tone of voice. Moreover, in accordance with Dahlstrom (2014), to teach about complex topics, we found that storytelling is applied by the brands, such as armedangels telling about the material and the workers in production facilities or involved in farming. Overall, it was found that the website is primarily used by the brands to educate consumers, where Facebook can be seen as a complement, reducing the seriousness of the topic by utilising a conversational language and making sustainability 'fun', working against sounding too enforcing or political (Beard, 2008).

Summarising, by educating consumers, the brands counteract the issue of lacking knowledge in regard to production processes (Angel, 2013; Joergens, 2006; Yan, Hyllegard & Blaesie, 2012) or scepticism about sustainability efforts preventing consumers from making a purchase (Beard, 2008; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004), as explained in the consumer paradox. Given the fact that consumers are even expressing their interest in educational content (Gruber, Kaliauer & Schlegelmilch, 2017), proactively providing a limited amount of information, matching a brand's impact area, seems to be a favourable communicational approach.

5.1.8 Engaging Consumers

The brands apply a 'call-to-action' to engage consumers in order to activate their sustainable consumption behaviour. Discussing how engagement can be created in sustainability

communication, we suggest literature about emotions. The brands use emotions for arousing engagement, for example they call on ‘togetherness’ and ‘making a difference’, supporting authors claiming that people do not act completely in accordance with rationality (William & Kolster, 2013) and emotions are seen as the foundation of respective actions (Hawksworth, 2014). The vocabulary supporting the call-to-action is composed by driven and energetic terms, like ‘take a stand’ from Patagonia, and simple and short expressions getting to the heart of what to do, ‘here are some ways’, by Reformation. Further, applying the feeling of togetherness and being able to make a difference in combination with the proper wording may speak to consumers’ emotions, and consequently, activate their sustainable consumption behaviour.

Facebook is the brands’ voice for engaging people, which our findings also indicate in regard to sustainability topics. Reformation, Patagonia and Filippa K invite consumers to attend events discussing sustainability topics, thereby making sustainability fun, important to attract consumers according to Chynoweth (2013). This finding can be associated with Yeomans’ (2013) suggestion to use social media in order to give consumers a voice and illustrate the positive impact of their individual actions, reducing the feeling to be ‘choice-less’ (Joergens, 2006). Targeting communication to particular consumer groups seems to be purposefully done in order to place a call-to-action. Thus, the content on Facebook differs among brands. While we assume that Reformation tries to make sustainability fun for its millennial customers, taking the approach of Bemporad (2013 cited in Chynoweth, 2013), Patagonia in contrast, seems to appeal to its consumers by providing informational video content and events related to the environment. Exemplifying how such a targeted sustainability message is formulated to engage consumers, Reformation demonstrates the use of celebrities, certain vocabularies and events related to vintage and feminism, with the latter addressing a serious topic in a way appealing to its target group.

Considering how brand identity is linked to the present theme, we propose, that the brands’ personalities match the voice of the consumer among the cases under study. Hence, Reformation, ‘the feminist millennial’, applies a modern language with feminist topics. Summarising, using emotions of togetherness and making a difference, connecting the themes with respective vocabulary, as well as, using Facebook as a channel to call-to-action by using a targeted approach, seems to be an effective strategy to engage consumers.

5.1.9 Being Explicit to Gain Trust and for Comprehensiveness

By now it has been repeated several times that brands make use of explicitness in their message composition, therefore, we have decided to devote a separate theme to it. Literature clearly suggests making messages clear, transparent and explicit (Moisander, 2007; Schmeltz, 2012), but provides limited suggestion how explicitness can look like in practice. Our findings indicate that explicitness serves two main objectives, namely to gain trust and be perceived as credible, as well as, to offer comprehensiveness.

Regarding the former, trust, Reformation and Patagonia invent their own tools, the ‘RefScale’ and ‘footprint chronicles’ respectively, providing transparency by letting consumers track their supply chain processes. Furthermore, third-party certifications are explained in detail by all brands, which is presumably due to the fact that independent certifications tend to evoke

credibility in the eyes of consumers by making sustainability efforts measurable (Futerra, 2018a).

To provide comprehensiveness, fabrics and initiatives are described extensively, explained by Gruber, Kaliauer and Schlegelmilch's (2017) findings that programme-specific information as opposed to general claims tend to increase consumers' likelihood to act sustainably. Further tools applied by the brands are exemplifications by videos, detailed explanations, and well-known sustainability terminology like 'organic' or 'fair trade'. The latter is particularly interesting, as researchers express their scepticism in regard to using the term 'organic', as organic labels are often criticised and consequently, the word is argued to lose trust (Peirson-Smith & Evans, 2017). Overall, it is inferred that the brands, by being very explicit, try to avoid creating confusion, resulting in an 'apposition of empty words' (Joy et al., 2012). Additionally, we perceive that the brands' core values and purpose can explain their drive to be explicit, namely because they all aspire to make a change in the industry and know that this is only possible when being understood and trusted.

5.2 Discussion and Modified Theoretical Framework

As indicated in chapter 1, this thesis aims to answer the following research question:

How do fashion brands with sustainability at the core design their online communication?

Nine themes highlighting different aspects of sustainability communication have emerged from the empirical material and provide answers to our research question. Each of the nine themes presented contributes towards a better understanding of how online communication can be designed in order to activate consumers' consciousness.

The modified theoretical framework differs from the initial theoretical framework by clearly depicting the central roles of the *brand identity*, and the *sweet spot* as an emerged concept. The brand identity is now positioned in the centre of sustainable fashion brands' online communication. Moreover, the balance organises the communication with the respective themes into *I want to be liked* (fashion content) and *I have a purpose* (sustainability content). Overall, the modified framework as a whole supports our ambition to reveal the brands' communication as a 'big picture', identified as lacking in literature by Du, Bhattacharya and Sen (2010). 'Message content' and 'message composition' as building blocks of the theoretical framework are now part of the developed themes.

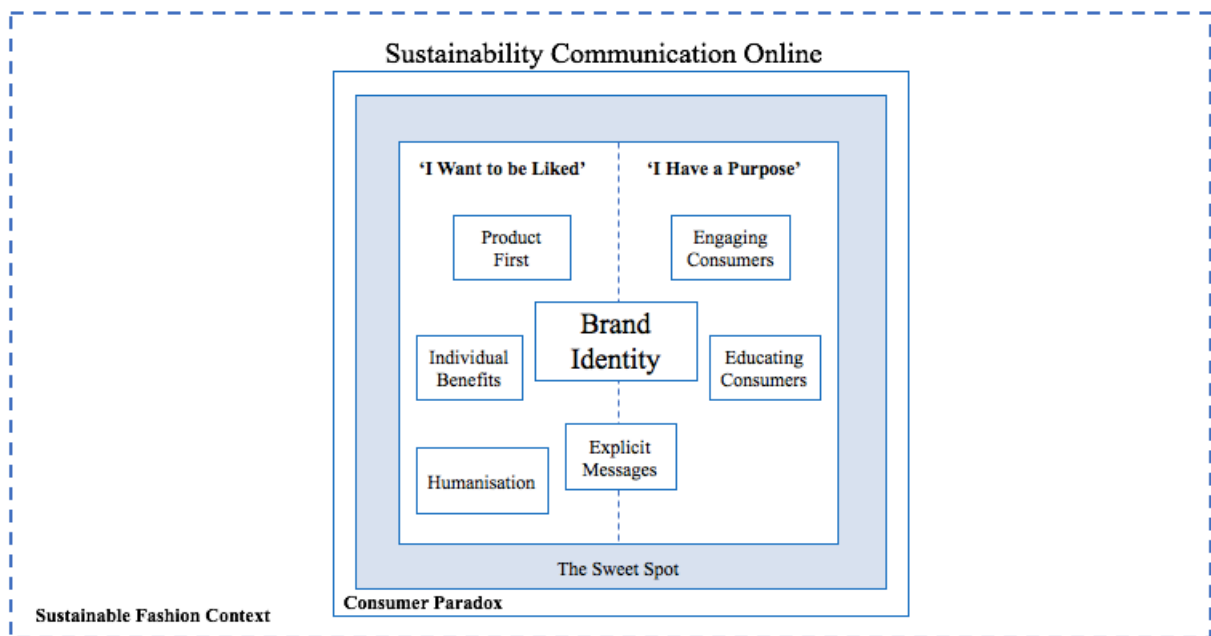


Figure 5.2 Modified Theoretical Framework

In the following we aim to reflect on the modified theoretical framework. In line with the framework from theory (figure 2.4), the boundaries are set by the *sustainable fashion context*, where the sustainable fashion brands take action by communicating their efforts in order to work towards closing the consumers' attitude-behaviour gap. This gap, signifying the *consumer paradox*, is the foundation for the brands' consumer-oriented communication online. An understanding of people's motivations and attitudes shaping the consumer paradox is crucial for an effective sustainability communication in order to convince more consumers to become 'eco-conscious shoppers'.

Brand Identity

We first reflect on the frameworks' element 'brand identity' since it occupies a central role for the sustainable fashion brands' studied and the modified theoretical framework. Hence, we have purposefully identified the brand identity as central to each theme. The brand identity acts as a backbone for any communication strategy (Ind, 1997 cited in Stuart & Kerr, 1999; Urde, 2013), therefore, aligned to brands' messages, and was indeed found to have the same relevance for sustainable fashion brands. Based on a brand's identity elements, such as core values, value proposition, personality, or position, the communication is given a direction, thereby ensuring consistency. Therefore, the brand identity is reflected in all other themes presented. Our observations indicate that brands communicate coherently with their identity, and, hence, express themselves in different manners. To start off, armedangels wants to be perceived as a very genuine brand, almost like a good friend wanting to make things better within a 'tainted' industry. The brand does so by being innovative, telling stories and embodying the German 'perfectionist'. Filippa K fits the Swedish 'lagom' mentality, being quite reserved when it comes to sustainability communication but knowing exactly what it wants, which is mainly to extend the product life cycle. Reformation wants to make sustainability fun, trendy and simple by bringing in some 'Hollywood glam'. Lastly, Patagonia is the outdoor guy that everyone likes and ambitiously fights for its goals, namely to save the planet. Overall, these short

characterisations indicate that communication strategies cannot be generalised, however, certain message patterns can be observed which each brand interprets in its own way.

The Sweet Spot

The sweet spot as a thematic focus in a sustainable fashion brand's online communication unites consumers' wants and needs with the brand's core values. In figure 5.2, it is represented as a layer, a mediator between the consumers' needs and wants (expressed in the consumer paradox), and the core values (central to the brand identity).

Balance – 'I Want to be Liked' and 'I Have a Purpose'

Even though all brands convey both, fashion and sustainability content, the balance indicates the ratio of the two subjects. The decision in regard to which side of the balance is prioritised is influenced by the brands' identities. It can be given more weight to either fashion or sustainability content, represented in the framework by (1) 'I want to be liked' (fashion) and (2) 'I have a purpose' (sustainability), however, both topics have to be covered. Hence, "fashion and sustainable fashion must meet and mingle" (Kibbe, 2013). Since sustainability is not about making a sacrifice (Futerra, 2015; Townsend & Niemtzwow, 2016), weight is put on 'I want to be liked', expressing the brands' 'fashionable' side. Communicating 'I have a purpose', represents the brands' desire to have a positive impact on people and the planet.

Further themes can be categorised based on the two subjects of the balance, (1) 'I want to be liked', namely putting products first, highlighting individual benefits, and humanisation, as well as, (2) 'I have a purpose', namely engaging and educating consumers. A short presentation of each theme follows.

'I Want to be Liked'

Putting Products First

The findings reveal that the brands, in the need to be perceived as fashionable, prioritise product to sustainability content in their communication. We believe that there can be several reasons for this behaviour. One driver could be to be perceived as fashionable and avoid being trapped in an 'eco category', where sustainability together with clothes indicates unfashionable to consumers (Beard, 2008; Joy et al., 2012; Niinimäki, 2010; Ruane & Wallace, 2013). Thereby, these brands take the approach 'the consumers should like our clothes first', thereafter, the sustainability efforts will make the brand even more appealing. Our findings do not fully support Afalo's (2017, cited in McCarthy, 2017) statement that sustainability should only be taken care of in the background, as despite not being all in the foreground, sustainability is communicated and actively incorporated. Further, we argue that it could be due to the fact that consumers are not ready yet for too much sustainability information and are still mainly driven by their individual benefits, the theme to be addressed next. Lastly, promotions on Facebook, vocabulary, the design of the landing page, as well as free shipping options can be highlighted.

Highlighting Individual Benefits

Ensuring to create awareness among consumers, the brands communicate 'the more', the individual benefits in regard to sustainable fashion, by highlighting the aspect of durability (functional benefit) and sense of belonging (social benefit) (Futerra, 2015). Further, the brands occur directly or indirectly as fashion advisors themselves or use third-parties such as celebrities in order to satisfy the needs of the fashion-savvy consumer, using clothes to create an identity

(Ruane & Wallace, 2013). Price-sensitive shoppers see their personal benefit by services such as renting or buying second-hand clothes, part of the '4Rs'. Lastly, the brands apply vocabulary uniting sustainability and fashion, and make use of Facebook to personally engage with consumers.

Humanisation

The empirical material suggests that the brands communicate on the same eye level in order to be sympathised, to be liked, by consumers. Therefore, superficiality is nothing the brands identify with, instead communication aims for an association with human traits. Clear words are used to explicitly state failures, whereas successes are communicated more indirectly by using data (Morsing & Schultz, 2006) and certifications as proof. Like a human, meticulously working towards reaching their goals, brands show progress instead of intentions by using tools and data exemplifying how their ecological footprint is gradually reduced. Expressing successes and failures is particularly carried out by means of transparency and explicitness, as proposed by Coombs (2012). Moreover, human traits are conveyed by storytelling about factory work and giving consumers a voice in regard to their own sustainability journey, as well as, by applying humanised vocabulary that reflects respective brands' activities, proposing to create a more effective communication according to Peirson-Smith and Evans (2017). In all matters, emotions are subject to humanise the brand (Hede & Watne, 2013), providing benevolence towards the brand (Hicks, 2017) and creating awareness among consumers.

'I Have a Purpose'

Educating Consumers

A means to communicate 'I have a purpose' was found to be conveyed by educating consumers. Education on sustainability topics is mainly about the individual impact a consumer can make (Joergens, 2006; Perry & Chung, 2016), encouraging a change in behaviour (Allison, 2018), such as aftercare, and openly informing about supply chain processes to create transparency and overcome scepticism. By using aftercare or supply chain processes as topic, the brands concentrate on a specific topic in order to prevent the consumer from being confronted with an overload of content difficult to grasp, supporting the findings of Berg (2011) and Peirson-Smith and Evans (2017). The educational message is supported by using storytelling, as well as, clear, simple and explicit statements.

Engaging Consumers

The findings reveal that the brands' purpose is further expressed by using communication patterns conveying to 'take a stand together' and 'make a difference'. Doing so, the brands communicate to engage consumers, using 'call-to-actions'. These call-to-actions are not uniform among brands, instead the content associated, from informational to fun, differs depending on the target group addressed and the type of sustainability 'team' the brand is representing. This finding supports the one of Chynoweth (2013), suggesting to make sustainability fun to create interest among the target group of 'aspirationals'. Transmitting this theme is mainly done through Facebook, provided by energetic vocabulary, appealing events, all communicated through emotions as a mediator to activate consumers' engagement, in line with Hawksworth's suggestion (2014).

Explicit Messages

Lastly, explicitness as a theme is used for both building blocks of the balance. Our findings revealed that explicitness helps to create trust and comprehensiveness, the former is essential ‘to be liked’, meaning to drive engagement, and the latter to communicate one’s purpose, to raise awareness. Trust through explicitness was found to be incorporated by different communication elements, such as supply chain tracking tools, making progress credible according to Futerra (2015a). Comprehensiveness is conveyed by explaining fabrics, initiatives and certifications in detail, or using video exemplifications, supporting Gruber, Kaliauer and Schlegelmilch’s (2017) argument that those elements contribute to people’s knowledge and therefore, the likeliness to act sustainably might increase.

Concluding, the modified theoretical framework with the key concepts being brand identity and the sweet spot, provides a perspective on how sustainable fashion brands with sustainability at the core can design their online communication. In contrast to existing scattered literature, it reveals “how the parts work together, not how the parts work in isolation” (Fletcher, 2014, p.XVI).

6 Conclusion

This thesis aimed at investigating the phenomenon of sustainability communication of sustainable fashion brands online. In order to allow for an in-depth understanding, four brands within the sustainable fashion industry have been chosen. Consequently, the following research question has guided our work in order to shed light on the company perspective:

How do fashion brands with sustainability at the core design their online communication?

Given this research question, insights have been gained through expert interviews and observations, resulting in a modified theoretical framework depicting knowledge about sustainable fashion brands' approach on designing sustainability communication in order to counteract the existing attitude-behaviour gap. These insights constitute nine themes, which partly evolved from patterns observed in the empirical material and partly from theory, illustrating brands' sustainability message content and composition: (1) the sweet spot as an emerged concept, (2) focus strategy by having an impact area, (3) the balance – juggling likeability and purpose, (4) putting the product first, (5) highlighting individual benefits, (6) humanisation, (7) educating consumers, (8) engaging consumers, and (9) being explicit to gain trust and for comprehensiveness.

Summarising, the way sustainable fashion brands communicate is shaped by the brand identity and is, therefore, highly distinct. Nevertheless, some general conclusions can be drawn. First, sustainability as a topic can be fun, exciting and inspirational, where we find that brands, by clearly understanding their target group, can educate and engage consumers. Storytelling, inviting consumers to events or providing detailed information on aftercare through guides are great examples in this regard. Additionally, it is of importance to highlight that identifying one's sweet spot is in our opinion the essential driver to make sustainability communication appealing and consequently effective. Secondly, since literature highlights that many consumers are not fully open yet for too much sustainability information, focussing on 'what is in for the consumer' in one's communication is recommended. Here, the use of fashion vocabulary implicitly linked to sustainability, such as 'timeless', 'long-lasting' or 'natural', is a commonly used approach. Third, being transparent, explicit and clear, avoiding too technical terminology, being innovative within the sustainability field to catch attention, as well as, creating a feeling of belongingness and inviting to become part of a 'team', are patterns of behaviour found across the four brands' online communication. Lastly, by looking at the consumer paradox, the brand identity and communication elements, the findings suggest that, most importantly, a credible sustainability communication needs to be coherent, since it is, as Fletcher (2014) stated, about "how the parts work together, not how the parts work in isolation" (p.XVI).

Literature overall, to the best of our knowledge, mainly examines the consumers and their issues with sustainability, captured in the consumer paradox, creating a mismatch between attitudes and behaviour. This thesis, on the opposite, looked at what brands in particular can do to counteract some of these obstacles leading to the attitude-behaviour gap, where communication is an important factor. Communication can be beneficial to activate the consciousness of

consumers having difficulties identifying truly sustainable brands. Moreover, we argue that if sustainability communication online is designed well, where the modified theoretical framework provides possible strategies on message content and composition, the ‘fashionable side’ of sustainable apparel can be highlighted, while ensuring to educate consumers about social and environmental actions taken.

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

The nine themes illustrated above, as well as, the identity as the communication’s backbone, constitute the following theoretical contributions:

First, this thesis makes noteworthy contributions to the rather scattered existing literature on sustainability communication, more explicitly, consumer-oriented CSR communication online, by reacting to Fletcher’s (2014) call for a more coherent idea of how sustainability is communicated. Therefore, a modified theoretical framework, depicting how fashion brands with sustainability at the core can devise and communicate their efforts, ultimately working towards increasing consumers’ sustainable activities within the fashion industry, was developed. In addition, we introduce the concept of the sweet spot, namely a thematic focus in a sustainable fashion brand’s online communication uniting consumers’ wants and needs with the brand’s core values. Further, by providing explicit examples of how the value added for the consumer can be conveyed and incorporated into communication strategies, contributions to literature by Futerra (2015) and Townsend and Niemtzwow (2016) are made.

Secondly, this thesis enhances existing knowledge on the importance of brand identity in communication by revealing how communication and identity elements are connected. Therefore, this study strengthens Ind’s (1997 cited in Stuart & Kerr, 1999) perspective that the development of a coherent communication plan is based upon the corporate brand identity. We do so by applying Urde’s (2013) CBIM to sustainable fashion brands and identifying respective identity elements reflected in a brand’s communication.

Thirdly, this work contributes to research on the consumer paradox and the related attitude-behaviour gap by taking the company perspective as opposed to identifying issues consumers have with sustainability and finding possible explanations for it. To be more explicit, we enrich literature on particular aspects of the consumer paradox by providing examples how the brands can, firstly, communicate to be perceived as fashionable (Beard, 2008; Niinimäki, 2010; Joy et al., 2012; Ruane & Wallace, 2013), secondly, ensure consumers’ awareness of truly sustainable brands (Beard, 2008; Pickett-Baker & Ozaki, 2008; Yan, Hyllegard & Blaesi, 2012), thirdly, communicate the individual impact a consumer can have on a much bigger problem (Joergens, 2006; Perry & Chung, 2016), and finally, work towards reducing consumers’ cynicism regarding trustworthiness of sustainability actions overall (Angel, 2013; Joergens, 2006; Yan, Hyllegard & Blaesi, 2012).

Lastly, our work shows that sustainability content can be an integral part of a brand’s communication without losing appeal in the eyes of consumers, contradicting statements made by Angel (2013) and Kibbe (2013). Accordingly, we contribute to the theme of ‘the balance’

between fashion and sustainability topics by providing specific suggestions on what message content and compositions can be incorporated to communicate either side of the balance.

6.2 Managerial Contributions

It is about time for marketers in fashion, and brand managers in particular, to better understand and devise sustainability communication. A glance in the future indicates that sustainable apparel will guide the fashion industry. The themes identified in our thesis, provide practical implications on what is most important to be done in order to exchange consumers' scrutiny for engagement.

First of all, our practical cases provide explicit examples of eco-fashion brands' online messages, illustrating the implementation of communication elements in practice. Marketers receive first-hand ideas, having chosen successfully established brands. Moreover, the modified theoretical framework illustrates the 'big picture' on communication as a way of inspiration and to provide an idea of what aspects of message content and composition can be applied to the individual context. Lastly, we propose that Facebook can be used for engaging consumers, in particular the ones less aware, and corporate websites serve to satisfy the curiosity of the more conscious consumers.

Further, this thesis contributes by making marketers aware of the fact that brand identity and communication have to go 'hand in hand'. Hence, as a first step of designing sustainability communication, there should be a clear understanding of what the brand stands for, the identity, because messages should be aligned respectively. Through alignment the brand will rather be perceived as credible to the consumer, the goal of sustainability as a basis to create engagement. Overall, brands embody a distinctive personality guiding the communication that needs to be consistent once defined.

Turning towards the communication, our study suggests that great efforts in regard to establishing the sweet spot need to be made. It aids to understand how to communicate sustainability appealingly by linking the consumer's interest with the brand's own purpose. Before choosing the sweet spot, the brand should, therefore, determine the target audience, and itself respectively.

With regard to the content, it is of vital importance to mingle sustainability and fashion in communication to avoid an overload of sustainability topics, risking the consumer to 'tune out' and develop disinterest. Therefore, the ratio of sustainability and fashion content can be individually adapted by brands, depending on the core values and the level of awareness of the targeted consumer. Our findings contribute by providing at hand how to convey likability and purpose. Generally speaking, we perceive that sustainability has to be communicated in a way that it sounds fun and inspirational. Lastly, it seems that all brands put particular effort into communicating explicit and transparent by staying true to their core. Other approaches that could provide inspiration are namely: putting products first, highlighting individual benefits, humanisation, as well as, educating and engaging the consumer.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

The present exploratory study provides a modified theoretical framework illustrating how fashion brands with sustainability at the core can devise and communicate their efforts. However, it has to be noted that the framework is the result of an investigation of only four case studies, namely four well-established sustainable fashion brands. Moreover, data have been collected from the corporate website and the social media channel Facebook, where only information coming from the brands was observed. Consequently, it is suggested to conduct more research in the field, looking at different fashion brands and potentially expanding into other social media channels, brands' own blogs, or consumer-focussed newsletters. Thereby, the modified theoretical framework could be expanded. By looking at other brands, for example some relatively new to the market or with a different approach to sustainability, identified themes might be confirmed or further ones revealed. Here it is also important to add that we take the brands' existence for more than ten years, as well as, the fact that they are commonly mentioned in literature, as indications for having a successful communication strategy, which could be backed by an investigation of financials and marketing analytics. Additionally, it would be interesting to also evaluate consumers' reactions to certain brand messages on social media, providing a consumer perspective on what is perceived as appealing and credible communication.

Another limitation is that we used secondary data only in regard to the brands' communication. Even though we talked to experts in the field and got a general understanding of what themes and elements are to be considered when designing the communication, it would be of high interest to talk to representatives from the respective companies, such as brand managers, to understand their perspective and strategic choices made. This would allow to get an idea of the reasoning behind decisions made, potentially shedding further light on the topic studied. Therefore, we suggest that another study applying the method of interviews only for the cases at hand could be conducted.

Additionally, although we made the conscious decision to focus on online communication alone, offline and online channels are somehow intertwined, and we realised that contributions could be enriched by combining our findings with a study on offline sustainability communication, particularly in physical stores, if possible. Given Urde's (2013) CBIM element of 'culture', the employees' behaviour is strongly influencing the image created in consumers' minds. Therefore, an investigation of brand communication displayed in stores, but also messages communicated by employees could bring new insights, as overall, the best online sustainability communication cannot be successful if offline activities are not aligned.

Lastly, the concept of the sweet spot evolved from our findings during the course of the work. Given that it unites interests of the brand and the consumers, it could be valuable to connect the sweet spot to theory on brand and market orientation as these concepts have been found to have a hybrid, bringing together identity- and image-driven approaches (Urde, Baumgarth & Merrilees, 2013).

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Appendix A – Interview Guide

Interview Guide: Questions for Agencies

Short Introduction

Opening Questions

Main questions

- What is your personal motivation to work in the field of sustainability?
- What are major barriers when working with clients on sustainability? In what area (brand building, major communication...)?

Optional questions

- Is there a fact about sustainability (very general) related to your work that you find particularly interesting?
- When working on a ‘new’ sustainability strategy for a client, what is usually the first step you work on?
- What is your approach in regard to working towards closing the attitude-behaviour gap?

Brand Identity

Main questions

- What frameworks/concepts/strategies do you use when building sustainable brands with clients?
- Is there a particular element of the brand identity (e.g. personality, vision, positioning) that you focus on in particular and why?
- How are sustainable brands’ identities different from the one of ‘normal brands’? What are the different degrees of sustainable brands (radical ones to just becoming sustainable) and how do they differentiate from your experience?

Optional questions

- Brands are often described to have different ‘human’ traits. How do you work with brand personality traits in the brand building process?

Sustainability Communication

(Mention that the focus is on online)

Main questions

- What communication tools/concepts are applied when creating a communication strategy for sustainable brands? If applicable, how do those concepts look like?
- How do you work with narratives/storytelling (e.g. purpose, reason for growing importance, difference for sustainable brands, design, etc.)?
- How would you describe the differences in communication of sustainable brands compared to ‘normal’ brands?
- What do your clients expect from sustainability communication? What is the most common focus of your briefing in regard to sustainability communication?

Optional questions

- Is the same attention paid to visuals and text? What role play visuals when creating sustainability communication?

- What should the content of sustainability communication fulfil (e.g. level of explicitness, degree of sustainability content, etc.)?
- What are different strategies used/recommended for different online channels (social media vs. website)?
- What role does humanisation play in sustainability communication?
- How do you choose the tone of voice for a brand?
- What, according to your experience, are the biggest obstacles when creating the communication strategy for sustainable brands? What do the brands mostly struggle with?
- What is your attitude towards having sustainability marketing campaigns (non-permanent communication)?
- What do you think is the strategic foundation for an effective (trustworthy & authentic) communication of sustainability?
- What elements of communication are looked at (tone of voice, emotions, ...)?
- What is the role of online communication for sustainable brands? Which channels are most important for sustainable brands?

Strategy and Communication

Main questions

- What strategic decisions towards the brand have to be made before designing communication to avoid greenwashing? What is the interplay between those strategic decisions and the brand?
- How do you align communication and brand identity?

Optional questions

- What role does the identity of a brand play when building communication?
- How do you ensure consistency?

Sustainable Fashion

Main questions

- Do you work with sustainable fashion brands? / 'we know you work with brand X'
 - What are the differences to sustainable brands from other industries in regard to branding or communication?
 - How to align doing good, which is at the heart of the business, with the needs of fashion-loving consumers?
 - What are some of your 'favourites' of sustainable fashion brands that are successfully communicating?

Optional questions

- How does sustainable fashion communication's content have to be designed to be effective/appeal to the consumer?
- When we look at the websites of sustainable fashion brands such as Patagonia, most information is on the 'about us' section, however, also hints are given on how to wash garments etc. Where on the website do you see sustainability communication and why (i.e. most effective positioning)?
- What do you think are main barriers to communicate sustainable fashion?

Appendix B – Spreadsheet for Observation and Analysis

Corporate Websites

Website	Patagonia	Filippa K	armedangels	Reformation
Sustainable Fashion Context	Worn Wear: heavily focus on repair (as a radical act - Tour) Ironclad Guarantee: when customers aren't satisfied with our products, they may return them to us for repair, replacement or refund. Product Recycling	Filippa K Collect, Lease, Care (more details stated in Sustainability programme) - Recycle, reuse, repair, reduce		
Brand Identity				
Core Values & Premise	Philosophy: Quality over quantity + environmental protection	Core values: style, simplicity and quality	Philosophy: We love beautiful product, we think organic and we believe that fairness is never out of fashion. + We want to design modern favorites that hold for longer than just one season – not only because of the quality, but from a design point of view, as well.	Premise: We put sustainability at the core of everything we do.
Value Proposition	Functional clothing and gear produced the best possible way Role model and pioneer in sustainable clothing. Provides the best possible product for your active silent sport: <i>Alpinism remains at the heart of a worldwide business that still makes clothes for climbing – as well as for skiing, snowboarding, surfing, fly fishing, paddling and trail running. These are all silent sports. None require a motor; none deliver the cheers of a crowd. In each sport, reward comes in the form of hard-won grace and moments of connection between us and nature.</i> The activist company	Long-lasting simplicity	Premise: We make fashion. Eco and fair Natural timeless fashion	Core values: trend, sustainability Sustainable vintage fashion adapted to individual silhouettes
Position		Pioneer in defining Scandinavian fashion: conscious brand (...) combining classic craftsmanship with modern knowledge The minimalist	We design everyday favorites The change agent	Designing sustainable vintage clothes adapted to the feminine body The feminist millennial
Personality				
Mission & Vision	Mission: Build the best product, cause no unnecessary harm, use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis. Vision: Fashion where sustainability is the guide to growth.	Mission: Brand built on substance and truth, not following trends. Vision: To become the fairest fashion label in the world.	Mission: To combine fair working conditions and sustainable, high quality materials with beautiful design Vision: To become the fairest fashion label in the world.	Mission: To make effortless silhouettes that celebrate the feminine figure. We make our pieces from super sustainable materials, rescued deadstock fabrics, and repurposed vintage clothing. As we grow, our goal is to push harder to create more sustainable fabric options. Making sustainable fashion fashionable and transparent
WHY does the business exist/ WHY are they doing what they are doing /Purpose	At Patagonia, the protection and preservation of the environment isn't what we do after hours. It's the reason we're in business and every day's work.	Spreading conscious consumption implied by own programs: Collect, Care, Lease, Front Runners (...) overall ambition to create fashion inspired by long-lasting simplicity. (...) carefully curated wardrobe.	Wants to make a difference in the industry It's on us to change the world for the better!	At Reformation we think about all the costs in creating fashion (RefScale). This way we all get to see the total cost of fashion so you can make empowered choices, and we can keep creating better solutions when it comes to making clothes.

Website	Patagonia	Filippa K	armedangels	Reformation
<p>Works with many partners: e.g. 1% for the planet</p> <p>Much of what needs to be done to improve business practices relies on the co-operation of enterprises that compete with one another.</p> <p>Patagonia relies on the brains and resources of several key partners who work to improve labor conditions worldwide, restrict the use of dangerous chemicals, increase transparency of social and environmental practices throughout the supply chain, and help redefine business health to include the safeguarding of natural systems and thriving human communities.</p> <p>For us at Patagonia, a love of wild and beautiful places demands participation in the fight to save them, and to help reverse the steep decline in the overall environmental health of our planet. We donate our time, services and at least 1% of our sales to hundreds of grassroots environmental groups all over the world who work to help reverse the tide.</p> <p>- Rooted in their reason for being, outdoor sports gear - saving the nature, strong link</p> <p>Happy to share their learnings with others, created a doc Green Business Practices</p> <p>Patagonia is often asked by other businesses what they can do to make their practices more environmentally friendly. The frequency of this question inspired us to create a document that would offer guidance. Below is a list of tips and resources that can be used to help get businesses started</p>	<p>Collect: In Sweden, we also work with Circle, an app that guides individuals to stores that collect used clothes.</p> <p>Local partners:</p> <p>Sweden: Sidsomstationen</p> <p>Norway: Fretex</p> <p>Denmark: Røde Kors</p> <p>The Netherlands: Het Rode Krans</p> <p>Belgium: Oxfam</p> <p>Finland: Fida International</p>	<p>Fair, organic, social responsibility...are, anyone can say that. To show that these are not just empty words, we work together with these independent organisations. (Fairtrade- and GOTS-certified, member of the Fair Wear Foundation)</p>	<p>We also give back through sustainability-focused collaborations like our Earth Day Sweaters whose sales went to support TreePeople, and our No Red Carpet Needed Collection of which 25% of the revenue went to support sustainable education at the MCSF School, CA. In 2017, we created Action Tees—for each tee purchased, we donated \$30 to the ACLU, Planned Parenthood, or EDF.</p>	
Collaborations				
Meaning of Sustainability to Company		<p>'Designed for ourselves and those around us'</p> <p>- Reason for being links design and responsibly taking care for people now and future</p>	<p>The products they produce should be the best way possible in regard to sustainability</p>	<p>Giving back + sustainable clothing for females</p>

Website	Patagonia	Filippa K	armedangels	Reformation
Message Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reducing the environmental impact of our company and supply chain - Supporting grassroots activists by paying an Earth Tax - Using our company voice to advocate for systemic change - Empowering our customers by making quality products that can be repaired - Supporting regenerative practices in ranching and agriculture - Envisioning a new approach to business 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'Filippa K Lease' concept as a way to sustainable consumption - Front Runner project to overhaul the supply chain, becoming more transparent and sustainable - Empowering consumers to care for their products by providing instructions and tools to do so (Filippa K Care) - sales and marketing explore ideas of <i>leaving the collections in store and collecting the garments customers no longer desire to put them to renewal use rather than in landfills</i> - Filippa K Collect: - As a step towards a circular economy, we welcome you to return old Filippa K garments that you no longer use. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - sustainable materials - fair working conditions - contemporary design - transparent supply chain - try to make shipping as sustainable as possible with DHL GoGreen (Germany and Austria) + sustainable grassboots 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Paying back in form of offsets, returning of what is used from nature in form of planting trees, investing in clean water solutions, etc. - So we give back to the environment in the form of offsets. Basically, in exchange for the emissions and water used by our clothes, we help plant forests to naturally capture CO2 from the air. Invest in clean water solutions, and purchase landfill gas offsets. (The Earth be like, thank you.) - Pro-social and eco-friendly factory - Our factory uses the most efficient, eco-friendly and pro-social technologies and practices available. We invest in green building infrastructure to minimize our waste, water, and energy footprints.
WHAT company does to fulfill core belief	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Supporting regenerative practices in ranching and agriculture - Envisioning a new approach to business 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - As a step towards a circular economy, we welcome you to return old Filippa K garments that you no longer use. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - sustainable materials - fair working conditions - contemporary design - transparent supply chain - try to make shipping as sustainable as possible with DHL GoGreen (Germany and Austria) + sustainable grassboots 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Energy-efficiency (LED and wind power at supplier and office) - We source electricity offsets from 100% wind power suppliers and use LED lighting and Energy Star-rated appliances in our offices. - We're working to install on-site solar at our new factory--stay tuned! - Supplier standards - We currently require that suppliers meet our standards for: social responsibility, safe & non-toxic, and better materials. - Local sourcing
Impact Area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Environment For us at Patagonia, a love of wild and beautiful places demands participation in the fight to save them, and to help reverse the steep decline in the overall environmental health of our planet. We donate our time, services and at least 1% of our sales to hundreds of grassroots environmental groups all over the world who work to help reverse the tide. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sustainable/Conscious Consumption designed for ourselves and those around us 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fair Production 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Environment Care Instructions, fabrics (Tencel, Sustainable Viscose, Modal, etc.) projects - returning of what is used from nature in form of planting trees, investing in clean water solutions - So we give back to the environment in the form of offsets. Basically, in exchange for the emissions and water used by our clothes, we help plant forests to naturally capture CO2 from the air. Invest in clean water solutions, and purchase landfill gas offsets (The Earth be like, thank you).

Website	Patagonia	Filippa K	armedangels	Reformation
Names of Sustainability Programme	<p><i>The New Localism</i> --We can no longer pass through or visit remote wild places and trust they will remain that way. Patagonia's friends have always brought us news of places they loved that are threatened. Patagonia is committed to bringing our resources and connections to bear on these threats to wilderness, air and wild.</p> <p><i>Worn Wear</i> The Worn Wear program celebrates the stories we wear, keeps your gear in action longer and provides an easy way to recycle Patagonia garments when they're beyond repair.</p>	<p><i>Filippa K Care, Collect, Lease, Front Runners</i></p> <p>Care: Advise on how to make clothing last longer and providing specific tips, well explained. <i>How to Wash, Mend & Care, Reduce & Reuse</i> <i>Extending the average life of your clothes by just three months leads to a 2-10 percent reduction in carbon, water and waste footprint.</i></p> <p>Collect: Return/recycle program <i>Give your garment a second life. As a step towards a circular economy, we welcome you to return old Filippa K garments that you no longer use. These will either be sold in our own second hand store or given to a selected humanitarian organisation. .</i></p> <p>Lease: Renting clothes <i>A way to sustainable consumption. Our collections are available for rent.</i></p> <p>Front Runners: sustainable collection throughout supply chain, fabric used, production processes, labour <i>How we work to make our wool garments last forever. The Front Runners go through thorough sustainable life-cycle assessments, where every phase of the garments' lifecycle, from raw material to afterlife, is examined and adjusted with minimal eco-system impact in mind. Looking at one material at the time, our plan is to make our entire collections sustainable by 2030 -- with the Front Runners leading our way</i></p> <p>Clothing is matched to the modern life of a men and women.</p>	<p>Functional benefits <i>Filippa K is a personal affair, 'designed for ourselves and those around us' (...) carefully curated wardrobe of now, a modern interpretation of the life</i></p> <p>Long-lasting simplicity <i>Renting clothes, like swapping and upcycling, is a service on the rise</i></p> <p>Social benefits <i>being part of a conscious 'club; Renting clothes, like swapping and upcycling, is a service on the rise</i></p>	<p>RefScale Measures CO2, water, waste of products produced at each product page</p>
Individual Benefits	<p>Functional benefits <i>long-lasting garments, functionality, keeps your gear in action longer</i> <i>One of the most responsible things we can do as a company is to make high-quality stuff that lasts for years and can be repaired, so you don't have to buy more of it.</i></p> <p><i>were made to be ...for movement so that you can stay focused</i></p> <p>Social benefits <i>you are part of the 'club' - many professional, successful brand ambassadors represent 'team Patagonia'</i></p>	<p>Functional benefits timeless, organic fashion</p> <p>Emotional benefits You are part of the change to make the industry better You are naturally beautiful</p> <p>Social benefits Show that you care and are part of the change, taking place step by step</p>	<p>Functional benefits make life easier by fitted clothes <i>Effortless silhouettes, clothing for extra sized</i></p> <p>Social benefits be cool by being trendy, belong glamour group</p>	

Website	Patagonia	Filippa K	armedangels	Reformation
	<p>My World garment that lasts long and is produced without harming neither nature nor people</p> <p>Our World The New Localism - we have to do something to save the planet + The activist company in itself: <i>We believe the environmental crisis has reached a critical tipping point. Without commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, defend clean water and air, and divest from dirty technologies, humankind as a whole will destroy our planet's ability to repair itself.</i></p>	<p>My World clothes that follow the principle long-lasting simplicity in order to reduce consumption and projects that protect people and nature (e.g. Front Runner)</p> <p>Our World <i>designed for ourselves and those around us, create fashion with a minimal footprint</i></p> <p>Visualisation: fashion meets nature, e.g. images showing women dressed in Philippa K. at the beach aesthetic, smooth colours</p> <p>Implying that modern wardrobe comes first, focusing on the benefit (combating challenges for men and women) for consumer. Sustainability is mentioned in second part of sentence. <i>Dedicated to a carefully curated wardrobe of now, a modern interpretation of the life and challenges of women and men today</i> <i>Filippa K has over the last few years created a clean slate for itself, building the company structure of a curious and conscious brand that recognises innovative sustainability as its guide to growth.</i></p> <p>Free shipping worldwide</p> <p>No sales section at the moment</p>	<p>My World we love beautiful, organic and fair products.</p> <p>Our World promote the Four must-see Fast Fashion Films to show the bigger impact of fast fashion consumption</p> <p>No free shipping (DHL Go Green, shipping box made of grass)</p> <p>Sales sections on website</p> <p><i>Love for wool. Respect for sheep.</i></p>	<p>My World <i>We source the most beautiful and sustainable fabrics possible to bring those designs to life quickly. We believe the perfect fit is the most important part of our clothes.</i></p> <p>Our World Taking care of the nature by ecological initiatives. <i>we help plant forests to naturally capture CO2 from the air, invest in clean water solutions, and purchase landfill gas offsets. (The Earth be like, thank you.)</i></p>
The Balance	<p>Nature images allowing to explore e.g. hiking or climbing fashion per click</p> <p>E.g. the surf shop combines inspiring images/videos with statements about FairTrade in a seamless, natural manner</p> <p>These are all silent sports. None require a motor, none deliver the cheers of a crowd. In each sport, reward comes in the form of hard-won grace and moments of connection between us and nature.</p> <p>Minimum amount required for free shipping</p> <p>No sales section on website</p>	<p>Selling products for aftercare of product, such as brush, ecological soap, pilling stone</p> <p>Sustainability focus becomes only visible in the bottom of the page (Care), Collage of banners focusing on spring fashion images: - <i>Prepaw for Fairies</i> - <i>Dress for Spring</i> - <i>Key Pieces for Spring</i> - <i>Soft Sport Spring 2018</i> - <i>Care (you do not directly imply it with sustainability)</i></p> <p>No header implying sustainability Is integrated in bottom of page.</p>	<p>Carousell of images - Natural Beauty Needs Natural Fashion - It's on us to Change the World for the Better</p> <p>Box integrated in between fashion images. We make fashion eco and fair - click to get more information</p> <p>Eco & Fair - visible in the header</p>	<p>Fashion First <i>to make effortless silhouettes that celebrate the feminine figure. We make our pieces from super sustainable materials, rescued deadstock fabrics, and repurposed vintage clothing. As we grow, our goal is to push harder to create more sustainable fabric options.</i></p> <p>Free shipping within US</p> <p>No sales section</p> <p>Sustainable fashion for plus sizes <i>We also launched a petites collection designed for ladies 5'2 and under, as well as a collection specially designed to fit women with a full C-DD cup</i></p>
Fashion Content	<p>Micro Puff (light, packable, from sustainable sources), Yulex (natural rubber)</p> <p>Carousell of images - The Dum Truth (sustainability) - Does Style Matter - only if the sport matters - Repair is a Radical Act</p> <p>'Inside Patagonia' - visible in the header</p>	<p>Free shipping worldwide</p> <p>No sales section at the moment</p>	<p>Collage of fashion banners and one banner about sustainability (most sustainable jeans).</p> <p>Only by clicking on header 'About' more sustainability information becomes visible.</p>	
Innovations				
Landing Page Information				

Website	Patagonia	Filippa K	armedangels	Reformation
<p>Message Composition</p> <p>Every single initiative is explained in detail, telling how much grants were given to what organisation</p> <p>Use of 'virgin nylon -so we still find ourselves relying on virgin nylon for its durability. Is this the right decision? Is it possible to quantify all the details needed to understand if this is the best choice?'</p> <p><i>Reference Library</i></p> <p><i>In an effort to build the best product and cause no unnecessary harm, we carefully consider our use of textiles, treatments and processes. Here you'll find our thoughts and practices on everything from paper use to compostability</i></p> <p><i>Hemp, recycled polyester, organic cotton, recycled wool</i></p> <p>Example: Hemp is a natural fiber that's cultivated with low impact on the environment. It requires no pesticides, synthetic fertilizers or GMO seeds. Cultivation of hemp improves soil health by replenishing vital nutrients and preventing erosion.</p> <p>Video on 100% recycled down</p>				
<p>Explicitness & Clarity</p>		<p>Explaining fabrics - material, what 'corozo' is: We use corozo buttons. Corozo, known as "vegetable ivory", is the fruit of <i>Philetophus Macrocarpa</i>, an autochthonous palm-tree which grows in Ecuadorian micro-climates.</p> <p>No dyeing</p> <p><i>The scraps of fabrics used -cutting left overs- get sorted in to colours before being recycled, which means we do not have to dye or finish the fabrics. This means we use 96% less CO2, 89% less water and 76% less energy than in a regular dyeing process.</i></p> <p>Recycled wool explained</p> <p>'traceability': 'minimum cutting waste' and 'polybag for transport'</p>	<p>Use of lot of videos to show e.g. how the grass for their grassboxes is processed or how they visit their production facilities</p> <p>Achievements clearly exemplified</p> <p><i>Over the last 10 years we have... never used pesticides, neonicotins or other chemical abscardilizers for our organic cotton. Thus, we were able to spare the environment of roughly 2,700 kg of pesticides and about 350,000 kg of fertilizers - about 350 fully loaded mid-sized moving trucks</i></p> <p>saved about 2.8 billion liters of water just by using organic cotton. That's about 1.117 Olympic swimming pools, or about 20 million bathtubs</p>	<p>Ref-Scale shows efforts</p> <p><i>We also publish the totals for all the resources we used, saved, and offset. We can't wait to see how all these little costs add up and actually make a big difference in the RefScale.</i></p>
<p>Measurability of Efforts (Saying and Doing)</p>				<p>Open eyes about footprint of care</p> <p>Good news: up to two-thirds of clothes' carbon footprint occurs after you take it home.</p> <p><i>Americans throw away 68 pounds of clothing and textiles per person, per year. That's almost enough to meet most airlines' overweight luggage fee. Americans also donate or recycle less than 15% of clothing and shoes, though nearly all of it could be recycled or reused. Let's get on this.</i></p> <p><i>At Reformation we think about all the costs in creating fashion—not just the price tag. RefScale tracks our environmental footprint by adding up the pounds of carbon dioxide emitted and gallons of water we use, and pounds of waste we generate. Then we calculate how Reformation's products help reduce these impacts compared with most clothes bought in the US. We share this information on every product page of our website</i></p> <p>Explaining fabrics, e.g. Tencel</p> <p>Using data to illustrate recycling issue - comparative to measure own impact</p> <p>According to the Environmental Protection Agency, Americans throw away 68 pounds of clothing and textiles per person, per year. That's almost enough to meet most airlines' overweight luggage fee. Americans also donate or recycle less than 15% of clothing and shoes, though nearly all of it could be recycled or reused. Let's get on this.</p> <p>Ref-Scale shows efforts</p> <p><i>We also publish the totals for all the resources we used, saved, and offset. We can't wait to see how all these little costs add up and actually make a big difference in the RefScale.</i></p> <p>Illustrating what has been reached so far, e.g. waste reduction</p> <p><i>Zero waste is our goal. Right now, we recycle about 75% of all our garbage. Our goal is to reach over 85%. Every little thing adds up.</i></p>

Website	Patagonia	Filippa K	armedangels	Reformation
<p>Achievements (Certifications, Awards...)</p>	<p>Fair Trade: Fair Trade costs us a bit more—but we believe it's worth every cent (explained)</p> <p>Certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)</p> <p>Buesign system</p> <p>Sustainable Apparel Coalition</p> <p>BLab</p> <p>Fair Labor Association</p> <p>Planetary Boundaries</p> <p><i>To understand how best to prioritize our efforts now and in the future, Patagonia is presently guided toward 2050 by a concept called Planetary Boundaries.</i></p>	<p>Naming where FrontRunner collection is produced</p> <p><i>The recycling companies and fabric supplier are located in Prato, Italy.</i></p> <p>Illustrating how a certain product is sustainable besides material, providing insights how a product is produced:</p> <p><i>The farmers collect the ripe nuts when they have fallen from the trees and then sun-dry and process the nuts into button "blanks" in a 100% natural way. When sent to the button supplier, where all the remaining steps are undertaken to fashion a button "blank" into a finished product, the "blanks" that are not perfect are ground together and used to polish buttons. Dyeing is executed using natural substances where at all possible.</i></p> <p>Showing how much CO2, water, energy was saved by not using dyeing techniques:</p> <p><i>This means we use 96% less CO2, 89% less water and 76% less energy than in a regular dyeing process.</i></p> <p>Humble in admitting where they are at</p> <p><i>Not all collections are sustainable yet.</i></p> <p><i>Filippa K's journey towards sustainability is guided by our Front Runners – our garments developed as sustainably as is possible today.</i></p> <p>Explicitness in explaining what is being done e.g. Front Runner: all aspects are clearly explained</p> <p>The second set of Front Runners</p>	<p>For every product you can see certifications applicable: GOTS, made with organic, CERES-008, PETA approved vegan</p>	<p>Explaining certifications:</p> <p><i>Blesige certified dyeing facilities only use safe input chemicals, monitor their air and water emissions and ensure worker safety so that the dyed fabric is safe for the end user, workers and the environment. As of 2017, all of Reformation silk and velvet is Blesige certified.</i></p> <p>Oeko-tex® Standard 100</p>
<p>Transparency</p>	<p>The footprint chronicles: showing textile mills factories and farms for every product in the shop</p> <p>Openly talking about their negative impact and how they are trying to make up for it</p> <p><i>We know that our business activity—from lighting stores to dyeing shirts – creates pollution as a by-product. So we work steadily to reduce those harms. We use recycled polyester in many of our clothes and only organic, rather than pesticide-intensive, cotton.</i></p> <p>Reference library</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - List of our finished goods factories. - Find out here how Patagonia measures compliance with each of our Code of Conduct standards - Hours, wages, workers' rights: Read how we expect our suppliers to treat their employees and the communities in which they live and do business. - SER staff scores factories on performance to help Patagonia and our suppliers see where they are on the corporate responsibility journey 	<p>Transparent illustration of status quo on becoming more sustainable by using the RefScale on product page, showing water usage, CO2, waste</p> <p><i>We also publish the totals for all the resources we used, saved, and offset. We can't wait to see how all those little costs add up and actually make a big difference in the RefScale.</i></p> <p>Illustrating what has been reached so far, e.g. waste reduction</p> <p><i>Zero waste is our goal. Right now, we recycle about 75% of all our garbage. Our goal is to reach over 85%. Every little thing adds up.</i></p> <p>Offering Factory Tours</p> <p><i>The PETA-Approved Vegan Logo marks products in the ARMEDANGELS online shop that contain no animal derived components whatsoever, making it clear to shop vegans.</i></p> <p>ARMEDANGELS fashion is 98% vegan.</p>	<p>For every product information on the the production partner goes wrong</p> <p>PETA Vegan label</p> <p>The PETA-Approved Vegan Logo marks products in the ARMEDANGELS online shop that contain no animal derived components whatsoever, making it clear to shop vegans.</p> <p>ARMEDANGELS fashion is 98% vegan.</p>	<p>Transparent illustration of status quo on becoming more sustainable by using the RefScale on product page, showing water usage, CO2, waste</p> <p><i>We also publish the totals for all the resources we used, saved, and offset. We can't wait to see how all those little costs add up and actually make a big difference in the RefScale.</i></p> <p>Illustrating what has been reached so far, e.g. waste reduction</p> <p><i>Zero waste is our goal. Right now, we recycle about 75% of all our garbage. Our goal is to reach over 85%. Every little thing adds up.</i></p> <p>Offering Factory Tours</p> <p><i>The PETA-Approved Vegan Logo marks products in the ARMEDANGELS online shop that contain no animal derived components whatsoever, making it clear to shop vegans.</i></p> <p>ARMEDANGELS fashion is 98% vegan.</p>

Website	Patagonia	Filippa K	armedangels	Reformation
	<p>Minimalist, simplicity, utility, repair, reuse, responsible, natural, change, resources, greenhouse gas emissions, habitat, wilderness, fair, safe</p> <p>Simple <i>Because it supports the workers who build our gear.</i></p>	<p>Long-lasting simplicity, upcycling, swapping, reuse, second life, lease, collect, circular economy</p> <p><i>Fashion where sustainability is the guide to growth.</i></p>	<p>Timeless, organic, fair, eco, contemporary, care, natural</p>	<p>Vintage, high standards low maintenance, safe, smart, renewable, fair, recycled, footprint, green, emissions, organic, afterlife, sub-page sustainable practices</p> <p>Simple language: "our stuff" synonymously to material → also audience related</p> <p>Word plays: <i>Fabric is the magic. Wash smart. Tencel is the holy grail of fabrics</i></p> <p><i>Being naked is the #1 most sustainable option. We're #2.</i></p> <p>Honest about not being fully sustainable yet, commencement is published on product page: <i>We're not totally sustainable just yet - we need to invest in programs that actually replace what we've used and spent.</i></p> <p>Education How to aftercare for product <i>Keep it cold</i></p> <p><i>When you do the wash, set your washer to "cold" to save energy and help your clothes live a little longer (heat can break fibers down). Also, switching from hot water to cold or warm can help prevent 500 lbs of CO2 from entering the atmosphere every year. That's the same energy as a 30-minute blow dry twice a week for a year. Pass the round brush</i></p> <p>Explaining what certified dying means <i>The dying stage in textile manufacturing not only uses a lot of energy and water, but it also introduces the fabric to chemicals found in dyes and pigments. Advanced technologies allow for water recycling and chemical re-use, and we are starting to test these out. Here are some easy ways to make a difference. Say no to perc. - call-to-action</i></p> <p>Feministic Over three-quarters of Reformation's management team are women (our!) or people from underrepresented populations. Celebrate feminine silhouettes Our math range is fit on multiple women that are between 5'9 and 5'10. We also launched a petites collection designed for ladies 5'2 and under, as well as a collection specially designed to fit women with a full C-DD</p>
Educational Tone of Voice	<p>Washing & repairing advice promote movies such as 'Seabird'</p> <p>shared learning experience - for other companies</p>	<p>Frontrunner collection shows how the brand teaches itself and shares their learnings with consumer (...) with minimal eco-system impact in mind</p> <p>- positive result of frontrunner collection on environment</p> <p><i>Here is a peek into the process of making the Front Runners: Recycled Wool.</i></p> <p>- share learning with consumer</p> <p>Empowering consumers to care for their clothes by providing a detailed guide supported by images on how to do so (Filippa K Care)</p>	<p>Explicitly explain all material used</p>	
Emotions Conveyed	<p><i>We all have a chance to make a difference. Take a stand - engages, energetic, driven</i></p> <p>Nature images - inspirational</p>	<p>Nature images keeping your wardrobe curated and updated - evokes excitement</p> <p><i>Give your garment a second life, from raw material to afterlife - humanise garment itself, treat it like a human</i></p>		
Website	Patagonia	Filippa K	armedangels	Reformation
	<p><i>Worn Wear - The Stories we Wear</i></p> <p>People talk about their Patagonia garment's journey, the repair, the life</p> <p>Stories of ambassadors</p> <p>Inspiration and excitement for outdoor sports</p> <p><i>The Damn Truth movie</i></p>	<p><i>Stories from an Eco & Fair Fashion Brand</i></p> <p>- Tell stories about the material, the workers in production facilities, their philosophy</p> <p>- Sustainability Manager Julia at work, at cotton field, at production site</p> <p>Example Story to Provide Insights into Working Conditions: <i>This is Sultan</i> <i>Sultan is 18 years old. She came to Turkey three years ago when she and her family fled from Syria. We met Sultan in April 2017 when visiting our production partner in Izmir where young Sultan found work.</i></p> <p>Example Story Behind the Fields: <i>Visiting the organic cotton farmer Bihnazul</i></p> <p>- Transparency, authenticity, humanisation</p>	<p>It's on to change the world for the better! - calling on people to join promoting conscious consumption</p>	
Storytelling	<p>Initiatives about nature as products are about outdoor (e.g. the Damn Project)</p>	<p><i>Filippa K is a personal affair, providing long-lasting and classic (minimalistic) products that can be combined with anything.</i></p> <p>- Minimalism</p>	<p>Timeless, longlasting, contemporary fashion.</p>	<p>Sustainable fashion that matches any body type.</p> <p>- Embracing feministic silhouettes in design, trend - stay authentic as a person</p>
The Sweet Spot				

Facebook

Facebook	Patagonia	Filippa K	armedangels	Reformation
Brand Identity WHY does the business exist/ WHY are they doing what they are doing/ Purpose	<i>We're in business to be an agent of environmental change.</i>			
Collaborations	Work with their ambassadors to show their gear in action	Collaborations with people of sustainable fashion sector to share their view on Filippa K's blog 'Circle'. <i>Read our latest 'State of mind' interview with Columbine Smile</i>	Announce their new PETA certified products <i>Our new PETA-approved products: sustainable and animal-free. We advocate fair working conditions, sustainable materials and animal-friendly production. Neither animals nor people should suffer for our fashion. With PETA, we have the right partner on our side to ensure our high standards and try to motivate people as well as the fashion industry to rethink their choices.</i>	Collaborative event with milkbar <i>Swing by our Melrose store Saturday Feb 24th where the pretty delicious Milk Bar will have a pop-up all day. Free treat (VERY EXCITING) with any purchase.</i> Celebrity collaboration wearing Reformation's clothes: Selena Gomez
Message Content				
Individual Benefits		Functional benefits Gives consumer more time during the day, makes life easier Style the Suit: Simply add a washed poplin shirt and high top sneakers, and you are ready for every occasion.		Functional benefits Safety Social benefits Looking good <i>The things we do to make sure you're both safe and good looking when summer hits</i>
Message Composition				
Explicitness & Clarity	Very explicit when communicating new technology innovations <i>10 years of development. 4 years of field testing. 120 hours to make the first prototype. It all adds up to nothing.</i>	When promoting products, product specifications on material are provided: <i>Minifitly made from wrinkle-resistant Triacetate, they're a more sustainable choice, ideal for travelling or long office hours.</i> Simple and short messages on fashion content, quality of fashion expressed by writing about materials Classic, The Sustainable Set, mindful, Everyday Ease: Spring Trousers		
Vocabulary	Minimalist, style, light	Simple and short messages to announce fashion content Style Investment: The Bag Collection	For our future	Simple and short messages to announce fashion content <i>Shop the new</i> Shop responsibly

Facebook	Patagonia	Filippa K	armedangels	Reformation
Educational Tone of Voice	<p>Taking political stance - e.g. against Trump</p> <p>Promotion of their campaigns and explanation of why they do what they do</p> <p>Interesting messages that probably are most important to them are communicated in different languages</p>	<p>Care instruction</p> <p><i>The key to a long-lasting wardrobe? Think twice before washing, drying your clothes and spot-cleaning when needed will extend the life of your garment and save water. A win for the planet, as well as your wardrobe.</i></p> <p>Link to interview of Sustainability Director explaining how water issues is solved by Filippa K.</p> <p><i>A word from our Sustainability Director Elin Larsson on how we address the issue of excess water usage at Filippa K</i></p>	<p>-</p> <p><i>We are not perfect - we can make mistakes but we need to try ARMEDANGELS is made by humans.</i></p>	<p>Feministic</p> <p><i>The brand cast women who are leaders in a variety of male-dominated fields to front its campaign, bringing a new meaning to power-dressing</i></p> <p><i>Repost of magazine glamour</i></p> <p>Events: <i>inviting people on discussion about sustainability in own office</i></p> <p>THE REF PANEL #1: BUSINESS FOR GOOD</p> <p><i>Please join us for a very hot discussion about how we incorporate sustainability in everything we do here at Ref.</i></p> <p>Attendees:</p> <p>Yael Afilalo, CEO & Founder</p> <p>Hali Borenstein, VP Merchandising, Design, Ecommerce and Retail</p> <p>Kathleen Talbot, VP of Operations and Sustainability</p>
Emotions Conveyed	<p>Promote the screening of their documentaries</p> <p><i>"As consumers we have become used to the cheap and quickly delivered goods from around the globe, we are 'Sea Blind' to the serious consequences of shipping our stuff" - Co-director, Sarah Robertson.</i></p> <p><i>What would you do to protect the last healthy rivers in your own backyard? Our new film Blue Heart by Farm League documents local activists in the Balkans fighting to save their rivers—the last pristine, free-flowing waterways in Europe</i></p> <p><i>#thedamtruth. No money=No dams. Tell international banks to stop investing in the destruction of Europe's last wild rivers.</i></p> <p><i>Isaveetheblueheart</i></p> <p><i>Sign the petition</i></p> <p><i>We're nearly there! Our tiny repair crew is ready to kick off the Warm Wear Extended play tour tomorrow in Engelberg, Switzerland. We'll have hot chocolate to keep you warm while we get your gear back up to scratch and back on the mountain. Hit the link and head to our events page for all the details on the full tour</i></p> <p>Let it flow - screening of documentary</p> <p><i>Discover the river Yrsa together with Sean Villanueva and Nicolas Favresse, who have paddled, climbed and paraglided its entire course from lofty heights. This important river is one of the last in Europe to have been spared by dams along its entire length</i></p>	<p>Special occasions related to sustainability</p> <p><i>A word from our Sustainability Director Elin Larsson on how we address the issue of excess water usage at Filippa K #worldwaterday</i></p> <p>Participation in conferences: Copenhagen Fashion Summit</p>	<p>Lottery, newsletter sign-up</p> <p><i>Feeling lucky? Play The Ref Lottery - Sign up for our newsletter for a chance to win \$4,000 in cold hard Ref credit (that's like 20 dresses or 400 t-shirts). Some might say it's even better than money.</i></p> <p>Promoting events on special sales and collaborations</p> <p>Vintage Sales in own stores</p> <p>Colabs with brands from other industries that are hip (Milkbar)</p> <p><i>PLANTS AT PLATTFORM</i></p> <p><i>Our floral favorite Home Grown will have a pop-up in our Platform store. Swing by and get yourself some beautiful plants in various shapes and sizes.</i></p> <p>Educational event</p> <p>THE REF PANEL #1: BUSINESS FOR GOOD</p> <p>Please join us for a very hot discussion about how we incorporate sustainability in everything we do here at Ref.</p> <p>Attendees:</p> <p>Yael Afilalo, CEO & Founder</p> <p>Hali Borenstein, VP Merchandising, Design, Ecommerce and Retail</p> <p>Kathleen Talbot, VP of Operations and Sustainability</p>	
Special Occasions				

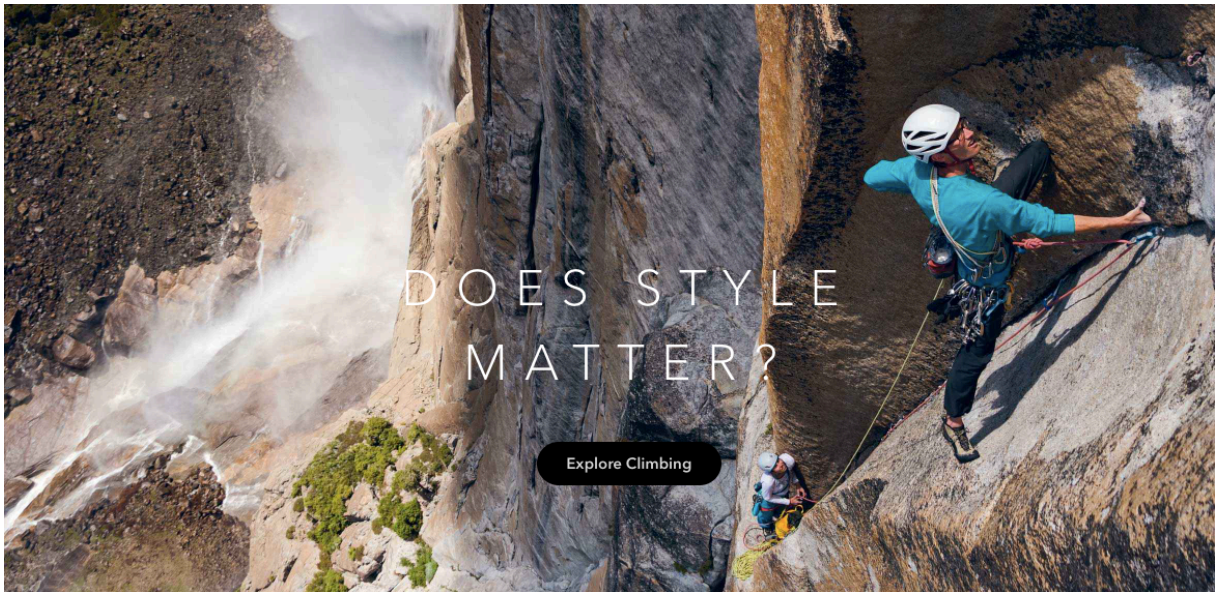
Facebook	Patagonia	Filippa K	armedangels	Reformation
<p>Consistency</p> <p>The Balance</p>	<p>Combining Fashion with Communication of Higher Purpose</p> <p>Our rock pants were made to be minimalist and articulated for movement so you can stay focused on the things that matter.</p> <p>No sales posted, only garments in action in the nature</p> <p>- Inspiration, excitement, action, energy</p>	<p>Fashion content in a minimalist manner, images combined with products, images depict nature</p> <p>The Bomber Jacket: Style 1: With <i>The bomber jacket is a true style icon and our "Viktor Bomber Jacket" is made from 100% recycled polyester, making it a mindful choice, too. Wear it over a crisp white tee, a merino sweater and classic chinos for a simple yet stylish everyday look.</i></p> <p>- Fashion first</p> <p>Sample Sale</p> <p>Clothes sample pieces are given to public</p> <p>Welcome to the last day of our Sample Sale with styles from Spring 2018 and earlier collections. New pieces are added throughout the day!</p> <p>Limited Sale Time</p> <p><i>This weekend only, 20% off selected Spring favourites.</i></p> <p><i>Wear to Work: The Sustainable Set</i></p>	<p>Fashion is portrayed very minimalist, natural, and also diversity is given due to having black models</p> <p>Use Christmas as an Occasion to Call People to do Good</p> <p><i>Let's care beyond christmas. This scarf is meant to keep you warm and protect you from the cold world out there. It has an important message: It's there to remind you and people out there that we shouldn't limit doing good to the Christmas time only. It's on us to change the world for a better. We would love if you help us spread the word. LET'S CARE ALL YEAR!</i></p> <p>Communication of their New Kids Collection</p> <p><i>For our Future. For our Kids</i></p> <p>Communicate their launch of a new material</p> <p><i>Say Hello to our new sustainable material ECOVERO</i></p> <p><i>This is the most environmentally friendly and cleanest viscose one can produce.</i></p> <p><i>In comparison to conventional viscose production: 50% less emissions. Half as much energy.</i></p> <p><i>Half as much water.</i></p>	<p>Language: sarcastic and millennial tone of voice (Website and facebook)</p> <p><i>Relax ladies. It's just some brand new prints that we made for you.</i></p> <p><i>Ch-ch-ch-ch... 🍷 the Julien Dress in Kate.</i></p> <p>Consistent use of how to announce fashion content:</p> <p><i>Stop the new</i></p> <p>Fashionable content directed at millennials:</p> <p><i>Everything you wore in Junior High is cool again</i></p> <p>Announcing fashion for plus sizes</p> <p><i>For the last year or so we've been receiving a lot of comments and requests for more inclusive sizing - and rightly so. It's obviously unfair that we've only been offering clothing to a limited size range. So today we're super happy to launch a Spring collection available in sizes 0-22, in collaboration with @ali_tate_cutter.</i></p> <p><i>The Weekend Trip Collection is here</i></p> <p><i>Relax ladies. It's just some brand new prints that we made for you.</i></p> <p>Sales</p> <p><i>Sale is now up to 70% off, and we also added more stuff. Online and in the Lower East Side and SoHo stores (NY). Shop responsibly.</i></p>
<p>Fashion Content</p>				
<p>Innovations</p>				

Appendix C – Themes Emerged from the Analysis

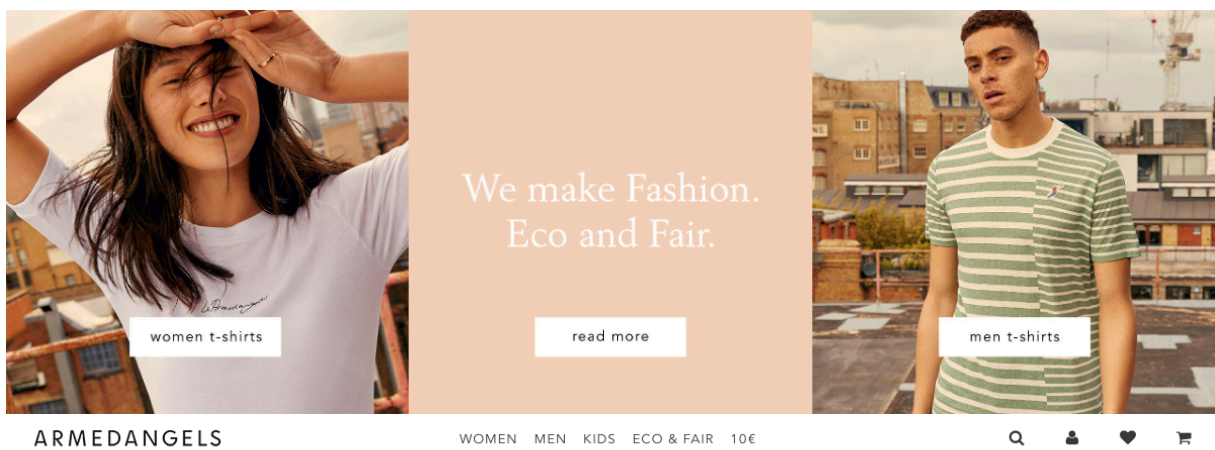
Themes	Message Content and Composition
The sweet spot	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rooted in the value proposition and core values • Thematic anchor combining product with impact area
Focus strategy by having an impact area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CSR fit as foundation • Reflected in the mission statement
Defining the scope of impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘My world’ – product related actions directly influencing stakeholders • ‘Our world’ – beyond product related actions • Reflected in the core values: Implicit: ‘My world’ Explicit: ‘Our world’
The balance – juggling likeability and purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ratio sustainability and fashion content • Influenced by the type of consumers targeted • Reflected in the core values, sustainability mentioned: Implicitly: Fashion dominates Explicitly: Sustainability dominates • Image material on landing page with either nature or products in the foreground • Innovations in terms of sustainable material, aftercare products or plus-size collections • Language used (implicit sustainability vocabulary, e.g. ‘timeless’, ‘long-lasting’, or ‘minimalist’)
Putting the product first	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotions on Facebook: Fashion content used to engage consumers • Implicit vocabulary in terms of sustainability • Design of the landing page: Sustainability topics are integrated into a product dominated landing page Images dominated by fashion/products • Free shipping options • Reflected in value proposition: primarily want to offer a good product
Highlighting individual benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Functional benefits related to durability communicated through words such as ‘timeless’ or ‘long-lasting simplicity’ • Social benefits by creating a sense of belonging to a group • Facebook to engage: Product recommendations, celebrities as product endorsers, communicating the ‘4Rs’ • Reflected in the value proposition which is kept simple and clear • Making use of an emotional approach
Humanisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication of failures and successes • Vocabulary used is explicit and clear • Storytelling to bring sustainability ‘alive’ • Reflected in the brand personality • Anchored in core values, mission statement and purpose
Educating consumers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education on impact area • Aftercare as a popular topic by providing guides • Highlighting individual benefits and impact

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoiding too technical vocabulary • Providing explanations in regard to certifications, supply chain processes, or sustainable technologies • Explicitness • Storytelling to achieve empathy
Engaging consumers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making use of an emotional approach by creating a feeling of ‘togetherness’ and ‘belonging, and the power to ‘make a difference’ • Driven and energetic phrases • Simple and short expressions getting to the heart of what to do • Facebook to engage consumers by inviting to participate in events, informational video material • The brands’ personalities match the voice of the targeted consumer group
Being explicit to gain trust and for comprehensiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To gain trust: Tools allowing consumers to track the supply chain • For comprehensiveness: Fabrics and initiatives are described in detail, exemplifications by videos, detailed explanations, well-known sustainability terminology

Appendix D – Example Images from Brand Websites



Landing Page Patagonia, Source: Patagonia (2018a)



Landing Page armedangels, Source: armedangels (2018a)



Landing Page Filippa K, Source: Filippa K (2018a)