



SCHOOL OF  
ECONOMICS AND  
MANAGEMENT

# Green Trust Issues: Communicating Sustainability Through Website Design Elements in International Online Fashion Companies

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## **Abstract**

Extant literature has not explored the establishment of green trust through website design elements which communicate sustainability, within the context of international online fashion firms. This study contributes to this topic by exploring how green trust is generated through sustainability-communicating website design elements. To accomplish this, it examines literature that is previously cross-fertilized in limited amounts, concerning website design elements, sustainability communication, and green trust. In particular, the study provides an insight into how firms can use brand websites as a green marketing tool, to cater to consumers' subjective preferences. By employing an explorative qualitative approach and exposing participants to brand websites – stimuli – the study uncovers user needs and preferences for sustainability communication. Specifically, the study emphasizes aesthetic design, embodying sustainability and transparency as contributing website design elements to green trust, through sustainability communication. Additionally, it finds that transparency may be improved by considering presentation efficiency and external validation. Consequently, practical implications are derived to recommend best practices to managers of international fashion firms in optimizing website designs to foster green trust establishment.

**Keywords:** Website Design Elements, Sustainability, Sustainability Communication, Green Trust, Online Fashion, Aesthetic Design, Embodying Sustainability, Transparency

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# 1 | Introduction

The introduction chapter prefaces the topic of green trust building through website design elements that communicate sustainability by presenting the theoretical problem. It outlines the aims and objectives of this explorative qualitative study and its purpose and derives the research question that will be answered. Finally, it discusses the paper's delimitations. This study advances the limited literature that cross-fertilizes website design and green trust building through sustainability communication streams. The paper contributes to the literature by employing the specific perspectives of examining *what* website design elements communicate sustainability and *how* these elements contribute to green trust building.

## 1.1 | Background

The global fashion e-commerce market is projected to reach over \$1 trillion U.S. dollars by 2025 (Statista, 2023) and has sustained growth due to offering a more economical and convenient purchasing approach than traditional shopping at brick-and-mortar stores (Vasic et al. 2019; Cavazos-Arroyo et al. 2024). On the supply side, this digitalization facilitates easier internationalization as fashion firms may operate as non-scale-free digital businesses that can expand their geographical boundaries without physical presence (Shaheer, 2019; Kotta et al. 2023). On the demand side, this phenomenon has revolutionized consumption behaviors, as now, consumers may purchase products on the go and receive them at the place of their choice (Cavazos-Arroyo et al. 2024; Frick & Matthies, 2020).

However, the convenience of online shopping has engendered overconsumption from consumers (Reisch, 2001), resulting in heightened production from suppliers to satisfy demand (Lorek & Spangenberg, 2014). Thus, the global fashion industry is plagued by environmental and social concerns (Li & Kang, 2024), including excessive material use, production wastes, textile wastes, and considerable greenhouse gas emissions, up to 10% of global carbon emissions (European Parliament, 2020). With much of these concerns being attributed to fast fashion (Cavazos-Arroyo et al. 2024), consumers have become increasingly aware of the negative externalities associated with the overconsumption and mass production of fashion products (Noubar et al. 2023),

prompting slow fashion-oriented consumers to shift to brands that prioritize sustainability and its communication (Cavazos-Arroyo et al. 2024; Kumar Bishnoi & Guru, 2024; Frick & Matthies, 2020).

Due to the digitalization of fashion shopping, the point of sale is now the website itself, which serves as an interface between the buyer and seller (Guo et al. 2023). Thus, the website design of fashion firms is vital in attracting customers, convincing them to make a purchase, and retaining them (Ganguly et al. 2010; Lee & Koubek, 2010), but also a forum through which a firm can engage in sustainability communication (Kotta et al. 2023; Siano et al. 2016). It is commonplace now to have website sections dedicated to communicating a firm's corporate social responsibility (CSR) to its stakeholders (Siano et al. 2016). In sum, websites are promotional tools to communicate sustainability and shape a firm's overall green image, influencing customer perceptions and green trust (Martínez, 2015). In turn, green trust serves as the antecedent to creating green purchasing intentions or fostering green customer loyalty, thereby underscoring the importance of effective sustainability communication on websites – the point of sale (Martínez, 2015; Srisathan et al. 2024).

The increasing importance of curbing overconsumption through sustainable consumption practices and the ongoing shift to digitalized consumption causes sustainability communication on websites to be an increasingly relevant topic for multinational fashion firms. Kolk and Pinkse (2008) explain that while climate change is not the primary source of profitability in the fashion industry, operating visibly and credibly in the field of climate change may serve as a mechanism to obtain legitimacy and green trust. Brauns (2015) explains the need for firms to be dynamic in order to respond to a more volatile business climate and survive. This is especially pertinent regarding sustainability, where regulatory bodies set ambitious goals to strive to decrease negative environmental impacts (UNFCCC, 2015). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the possibility of overconsumption due to increased online fashion shopping and an altered focus on reaching customers online (Wulff, 2022). The Global Consumer Insights Pulse Survey, conducted in 22 countries during the first quarter of 2021, shows that most consumers have a more digital lifestyle than pre-COVID (Valente & Nogueira, 2023).



Against this backdrop, the necessity for scholarly attention on green trust building through website sustainability communication is apparent. This paper fills this gap by employing explorative qualitative methods in which interviewees compare and contrast stimuli—in this case, brand websites—of two multinational digital fashion firms; accordingly, individuals describe their subjective perceptions of *what* website elements are effective in communicating sustainability and *how* these elements establish green trust. The findings propose a model with three contributing and two improving elements for sustainability communication and green trust building that suggest practical implications for website optimization.

## 1.2 | Problematization

The previous section justifies the need for scholarly research on this topic due to the pressing need to promote sustainable practices within the ever-digitalizing fashion industry. Unfortunately, there is currently a shortage of research within this field to address this need as extant literature is concentrated in two streams: (a) studies that examine the relationships between website design elements, trust, and satisfaction (Cyr, 2008; Ganguly et al. 2010; Guo et al. 2023; Lee & Koubek, 2010), and (b) studies that focus on sustainability communication, not always through websites, and find it to be an antecedent of *green trust* (Barchiesi et al. 2018; Martínez, 2015; Srisathan et al. 2024; Xu & Shi, 2022). These two streams will be discussed shortly. Moreover, it remains important to distinguish between trust and green trust; the latter strictly concerns the consumer's trust in how sustainable a firm is.

Nevertheless, in most cases, studies within either stream are not undertaken within the context of the online fashion industry but rather on online stores of other industries or within tourism. This is in agreement with Cavazos-Arroyo et al. (2024), who state that “there is evidence that little attention has been paid to understanding the electronic fashion sector” (p. 46). Furthermore, due to the prevalence of quantitative techniques, these studies do not generate theory on the specific website elements that communicate sustainability and the role these elements play in shaping green trust, thereby calling for qualitative research, which may be more suited to examining the complex and subjective nature of trust (Martínez, 2015). This gap is perceived not only by the authors of this study but also by previous studies (Parker et al. 2010).

In general, studies within stream ‘(a)’ above express a need for further research into the specific elements of website design that influence trust. One study recommended that future research should “identify and describe” website design elements and understand their role in developing customer trust (Taheri et al. 2024, p. 9). At the same time, another suggested exploring the specific roles that product display, color, text, and background play (Saoula et al. 2023). Finally, an eye-tracking study conducted by Boardman and McCormick (2022) within online fashion shopping websites found that users avoid text, prompting a research direction to investigate whether product information should be displayed visually instead of verbally.

Studies that fall into the above stream ‘(b)’ find sustainability communication to be an antecedent to establishing green trust (Siano et al. 2016; Srisathan et al. 2024) and a fundamental requisite of green marketing (Martínez, 2015). Martínez (2015) asserts that corporate communications in the hospitality sector largely shape customer perceptions of a firm’s overall green image and thus stresses the need to place scholarly attention on the development of green trust. Similarly, on online recycling websites, a study found that providing sustainability-oriented information to consumers incites green trust and, by extension, green behavior (Wang et al. 2020). However, neither of these categories of literature connects website design to sustainability communication and its effect on green trust specifically.

Nevertheless, this research topic has received gradually increasing attention in recent years and has attempted to fill the aforementioned gap. Srisathan et al. (2024) identified innovative website design as a green trust antecedent. However, they emphasized the lingering need to identify other factors that may influence green trust, highlighting user experience as one of the potential factors. This justifies the need for a qualitative study as it can identify customers’ subjective viewpoints on needs and preferences, thereby informing green trust-fostering website design.

Moving past quantitative research, a couple of studies have aimed to create operational models to evaluate corporate websites on their sustainability communication. These include the ‘CSR Communication Framework’ developed by Parker et al. (2010) using website content analysis and the ‘OSEC Model’ developed by Siano et al. (2016) through literature analysis. While these

models have fulfilled their purpose, they are limited to corporate websites outside the fashion industry and do not consider the subjective nature behind green trust building. Thus, the studies accentuate the demand for future research in other sectors and on product websites in addition to corporate websites (Parker et al. 2010; Siano et al. 2016), which is in congruence with other studies that examined CSR communication on corporate websites (Hetze & Winistörfer, 2016; Xu & Shi, 2023). In sum, the importance of sustainability communication through websites in establishing green trust and the need for studies considering individuals' needs and preferences make for a distinctly interesting research focus.

### **1.3 | Research Aim, Objectives, and Purpose**

The research focus highlighted in the preceding problematization motivates the overarching aims of this paper: to identify *what* website design elements communicate sustainability and *how* those elements contribute to the establishment of green trust for multinational digital fashion firms. Accordingly, two streams of research will be reconciled to facilitate a nuanced understanding: extant literature on website design and its elements will be synthesized with existing research on sustainability communication and green trust building. Therefore, the study aims to explore how green trust is generated through sustainability-communicating website design elements. This thesis achieves these aims through two principal objectives: (1) collecting data on the process of green trust building by exposing sustainability-oriented customers to the brand websites of two multinational digital fashion firms and (2) creating a proposed model by identifying themes within the empirical data to further the cross-fertilization of the two previously mentioned streams of literature.

The purpose of this study is to bolster the understanding of this historically understudied yet crucially relevant topic, as discussed in the problematization. Consequently, the paper aims to understand which website design elements drive sustainability communication and, thus, green trust building. By fulfilling this purpose, the study could bring several theoretical contributions. Firstly, identifying the website design elements that communicate sustainability contributes to the ongoing research synthesizing the two research streams. Secondly, describing the impact of these sustainability-communicating website design elements on green trust extends the

applicability of the research to sustainability-oriented international firms. Hence, the findings and analysis of the empirical data and the proposed explanatory model can reveal specific practical implications that website designers may consider to cater to the preferences of users. Lastly, this report can assist as an indication of the increasing significance of sustainability communication on websites and catalyze future studies to shed light on this field.

Subsequently, to realize the aims, objectives, and purpose, the paper presents the following research question:

*How do website design elements communicating sustainability generate customer green trust in online fashion shopping?*

This research question may be divided into two sub-questions as follows for specificity:

1. *What website design elements communicate sustainability in online fashion shopping?*
2. *How do those website design elements generate green trust in online fashion shopping?*

#### **1.4 | Delimitations**

The paper's research scope and methodology are consciously chosen to facilitate a thorough analysis by employing certain delimitations. These include medium, industry, interviewee origin, firm size, and stage of the consumer journey, which are presented and justified in this section.

Firstly, the study is restricted to websites as a medium of sustainability communication. As outlined above, several studies examine establishing green trust through sustainability communication through other mediums. Of those studies that do examine the chosen medium, they focus on corporate websites. Thus, the expressed need to focus on brand websites (Hetze & Winistörfer, 2016; Xu & Shi, 2023) and the lack of research in this field offer a theoretical justification for this delimitation. Secondly, the scope of this study is confined to the fashion industry to maintain a homogenous context for respondents in interviews. Additionally, the backdrop to this study, namely the trend of consumers to shift away from fast fashion to slow

fashion (Cavazos-Arroyo et al. 2024; Frick & Matthies, 2020; Kumar Bishnoi & Guru, 2024), explains this narrowing of scope. The need for more focus on this industry within the chosen topic also substantiates this delimitation (Cavazos-Arroyo et al. 2024).

Thirdly, the origin of interviewees is restricted to Sweden. This step was taken to ensure that differences in sustainability attitudes across cultures do not cause discrepancies in the findings (Ur Rahman et al. 2021). Henceforth, alongside the limited time frame and resource constraints, this delimitation is justified both theoretically and practically. That being said, it may be possible to apply these findings to other countries that exhibit sustainability awareness cultures that mirror the Swedish context.

Only two fashion company websites were chosen as stimuli to simplify the interview process and reduce the fatigue imposed upon interviewees and the effort required. While the study is limited to the subjective perceptions of these two websites, respondents were asked similar open-ended questions about each website alongside prompting and clarifying questions that arise in semi-structured interview methods. Hence, including a third stimulus would have been mentally exhausting (Bell et al. 2018).

Lastly, the study is limited to examining only the ‘affective’ stage of the consumer journey. Martínez (2015), by employing the Cognitive-Affective-Conative psychology model, explains that the establishment of green trust takes place as a response to stimuli – the Affective stage. Thus, this paper does not explore the following ‘conative’ stage and therefore avoids delving into how to overcome the risks that serve as barriers in online fashion shopping to make the purchasing decision (Martínez, 2015). These risks may be economic (Boardman & McCormick, 2022), so the study will not consider price or the economic elements of sustainability theories. Overall, while this study may elicit compelling directions for future research, readers should cautiously apply the results arrived at by this paper to other contexts.

## **1.5 | Disposition of the Thesis**

This thesis is structured into five distinct chapters. Chapter 1 has presented the background, problematization, research purpose and question, and delimitations. Chapter 2 will review the existing literature to develop an understanding of relevant concepts. Subsequently, Chapter 3 will detail the research strategy and motivate the choice of methodology while addressing the methodological limitations. The study's findings are presented and analyzed using the Gioia method in Chapter 4. Finally, Chapter 5 will analyze the main findings, discuss the theoretical contributions and practical implications, and finish with future research directions.

## **2 | Literature Review**

This section delves into a comprehensive review of key literature relevant to the topic of sustainability communication through website design in online fashion shopping. The literature review begins by contextualizing the fashion industry's role in sustainability and firms' methods in addressing the matter by introducing various marketing strategies. Secondly, relevant papers will be explored regarding how these attempts to sustainability communication are perceived by consumers, particularly how transparency and validated green claims contribute to green trust. Lastly, the section will present the existing literature on website design elements and how they have been used for sustainability communication up to the present day. The previous literature and the existing research gaps will later in the paper assist in explaining and discussing the findings of the interviews, as well as identifying their possible implications.

### **2.1 | Sustainability in Fashion**

Over the past few decades the awareness of sustainability has vastly increased and has become the leading issue of the 21st century (Joy et al. 2012). The most frequently used definition of sustainability, formulated by the United Nations Brundtland Commission, is “meet[ing] the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland, 1987, p. 7). The conversation on sustainability has been particularly intensive in the fashion industry as it has an immense impact on the world’s environmental, social, and economic environment (Li & Kang, 2024). The most crucial aspects of sustainable fashion, which the existing literature focuses on, is supply chain management, material innovation, and consumer behavior (Rehman et al. 2024). Literature suggests that there is a need to change the paradigm for sustainable fashion, with the key approaches being “limiting growth, reducing waste, and promoting circular economy” (Niinimäki et al. 2020, p. 196).

### 2.1.1 | *CSR and the Triple Bottom Line*

The UN's sustainability goals and overall social pressures have forced corporations to align their business models with sustainable practices addressing the 3 P's – People, Planet, and Profit (Savitz et al. 2006). These three P's represent another broadly assumed sustainability concept, namely Elkington's triple bottom line, which explains that a company is sustainable if it can ensure a balance between economic, environmental, and social considerations (Quaddus & Siddique, 2011). This orientation has also been referred to as corporate sustainability, where the company creates value so that it is (1) environmentally sustainable by maintaining a long-term stability and resilience in the ecosystems vital for human survival, (2) fostering social sustainability by accounting for human rights and efficient governance, and (3) economically sustainable in the way that it meets the economic needs for preserving stable societies (Liao et al. 2022). Siano et al. (2016) further presses on the topic, underscoring that the sustainable corporation is continuously developing to an essential business paradigm in order to stay competitive on the market.

Aligning with these sustainability trends and expectations, fashion companies have shifted their focus from solely economic aspects to social and environmental dimensions as well, and a surge in corporate social responsibility (CSR) and transparency has taken place (Villa Todeschini et al. 2017). CSR is broadly defined as “the discretionary allocation of corporate resources to improving social welfare that serves as means of enhancing relationships with key stakeholders” (Barnett, 2005, p. 17). Corporate social responsibility assumes that the corporate managers have an ethical responsibility to address the society's needs, and not only act in their own and the shareholders' interests (Wilson, 2003). However, it must be noted that the concept of CSR has been criticized for a lack of a clear definition due to its interdisciplinary nature, leaving gaps for differing interpretations in different industries (Quaddus & Siddique, 2011). Moreover, Carroll (1979) himself questions the vagueness of the word ‘social’ in CSR as it does not concretely address to whom the corporation is responsible.

Nevertheless, one can notice a clear movement in the global corporate perspective, away from Milton Friedman's perspective saying that the only social responsibility of a corporation is to



maximize their profits (Friedman, 1970). Instead, the approach taken is in alignment with R. Edward Freeman's stakeholder theory of the modern corporation (Freeman, 2002), arguing that a corporation is responsible for creating value for *all* stakeholders. Nowadays, involving stakeholders in the company's issues regarding environmental, social, and economic sustainability issues is considered a key aspect in the organization's management (Greenwood, 2007).

Having highlighted the importance of all stakeholders that make up the company and the increasing relevance of CSR, it is now crucial for the corporations to communicate their actions to the stakeholders (Greenwood, 2007). Although the information should be conveyed to all groups, the customers have emerged as one of the main stakeholder groups (Cuesta-Valino et al. 2023). It has been observed that consumer purchasing decisions are increasingly influenced by brands' engagement in CSR (Nguyen et al. 2023). An insight into the company's social responsibility enhances the customer-brand relationship by generating consumer trust and a positive brand image (Hur et al. 2014; Sen et al. 2016). Supporting this, Bolton and Mattila (2015) claim that CSR is expected to increase customer satisfaction and loyalty due to the augmented perception of the company's warmth.

### *2.1.2 | Green Marketing as a Strategic Tool*

The correlation above has not only been stated in connection to social responsibility, but also environmental. Due to the environmental problems we are encountering today, consumers are increasingly mindful of making 'green' decisions; thus, companies are ensuring to provide green alternatives through green marketing (Martínez, 2015). Polonsky (1994) explains that consumers often associate 'green marketing' with terms such as 'environmentally friendly' and 'recyclable'. The concept is sometimes described as the activities which generate and ease the exchanges that satisfy a human need in a way that leaves minimal impact on the natural environment (Polonsky, 1994).

Since green marketing has become a way of positioning and differentiating a brand (Moravcikova, 2017), it has been widely adopted as a strategic tool (Badhwar et al. 2024). Martínez (2015) notices that the motives behind green marketing strategies vary from achieving corporate goals, to competitive and political pressures, and to developing a benefitting brand image and reputation. From the consumers' point of view, an enhanced green corporate image increases green behaviors and the willingness to pay a premium price for green products (Gam et al. 2010; Martínez, 2015). On the other hand, although there is a theoretical consensus on the upsurge of responsible preferences, socio-demographic characteristics affect those decisions (D'Souza et al. 2007) and that the readiness to pay premium is limited to the segment that has a genuine interest in corporate responsibility (Devinney et al. 2011).

Another green marketing strategy, including more ethical aspects of the business engagements, is Cause-Related Marketing (CRM), which is the incorporation of a charitable initiative in the promotion of a product (Dathe et al. 2024). This is often done by allocating a percentage of the revenue from a product to a social cause, which Dathe et al. (2024) suggests communicates a philanthropic message of 'doing good', leading to a higher customer satisfaction and long-term customer loyalty (Dathe et al. 2024; Vanhamme et al. 2012). Nan and Heo (2007) argue that consumers exposed to a company's CRM assume a favorable attitude toward it, meaning that such marketing enhances a company's overall image. Therefore, the need to consider all elements of the triple bottom line is evident. Additionally, as CSR is not solely focused on a firm's environmental impact, when this study uses the term 'green', it refers to the social elements of the triple bottom line too. Therefore, *sustainability communication* in this study refers to the environmental and social elements.

Unfortunately, in the midst of sustainability marketing and green image enhancement the concept of greenwashing has evolved, which is the act of misleading consumers in regards to the environmental impact of a product or the company's practices, or by neglecting certain discrete aspects of the triple bottom line and solely focusing on the notable ones (Reck et al. 2022). Companies portraying a false image of being environmentally conscious causes more consumers to be skeptical towards firms' potential opportunistic behavior (Szabo & Webster, 2020) which in turn contradicts the entire idea of CSR and green marketing. To decrease this suspicion from

consumers, it is beneficial to establish customer green trust (Chen & Chang, 2013). This is by and large done through efficient disclosure, transparency, and other sustainability communication, which have become key aspects to ensure consistency between firm commitment and action (Garcia-Torres et al. 2017; Szabo & Webster, 2020; Siano et al. 2016).

## **2.2 | Green Trust**

Previous literature has highlighted the importance of customers' trust in a brand as it is known to affect their purchase decisions (Gefen & Straub, 2004). It is believed that trust is a decisive factor for a consumer's decision-making, especially in an uncertain environment such as the online marketplace (McKnight et al. 2002). It is no exception when it comes to trusting green and sustainable products. Chen (2010) defines green trust as “a willingness to depend on one object based on the belief or expectation resulting from its credibility, benevolence, and ability about environmental performance” (p. 309).

An enhanced green trust has been shown to directly impact green purchase intentions (Tran & Uehara, 2023). Furthermore, in the same way as scholars have argued for a positive relationship between brand image and customer trust (Flavian et al. 2005), Chen (2010) confirms that this is also the case regarding the relationship between green brand image — defined as “a set of perceptions of a brand in a consumer's mind that is linked to environmental commitments and environmental concerns” (p. 309) — and green trust. Although much of extant literature defines green trust strictly confined to the environmental aspects, this paper adds to this term by incorporating the social aspects as well. Considering the growing sustainability awareness among customers and stricter environmental regulations, embodying a green brand image has become competitively beneficial, as it satisfies the consumers' environmental desires, expectations, and needs (Chen, 2010).

### *2.2.1 | Transparency Generating Green Trust*

To enhance this green trust through fostering a green brand image, scholars suggest using green marketing as a strategic tool to position their brand and products (Chen et al. 2006). However,

for green marketing to generate green trust, there is a coherent agreement regarding the need for increased transparency (Fu et al. 2022). Deng and Yang (2021) pinpoint that green trust in products depends on the green attribute transparency, meaning the tangible proof of the products' positive environmental contribution.

One universally used tool to demonstrate sustainability contribution is certifications (Nygaard, 2023), for example Certified B Corporation and Fair-Trade certificates (Lou & Xu, 2024). Nygaard (2023) explains that certifications denoting sustainable practices have significantly increased and are presumed to help customers make informed decisions and evaluate the products they purchase. According to Adamkiewicz et al. (2022) eco-labelling and certificates work as marks of superior quality, higher value, and are good means of gaining consumer trust. However, for the certifications to be legitimate for consumers, they must understand the meaning of them.

Current literature highlights that there is a general lack of knowledge among consumers about the implications of sustainable certifications (Tran & Uehara, 2023) thus it is highlighted the importance of companies providing accurate information about sustainability denotations, which would educate consumers and mitigate misinterpretation (Badhwar et al. 2024). Contrasting this, Kim et al. (2020) found that disclosure of information regarding the production of fashion items has a limited impact on consumer perception of the product or brand. This is partly explained by the potential information overload on websites and the consumer is better off with a downsized set of signals (Jacoby et al. 1974). This will be further explored in Section 2.3.2.

Chen and Chang (2012) suggest that companies should invest in green marketing to enhance the green perceived value and decrease the green perceived risk of their products. Their empirical study suggests that including these concepts in a company's strategic planning enhances long-term customer trust (Chen & Chang, 2021). Furthermore, Montecchi et al. (2021) highlight that timely transparency about product quality, production and supplier labor conditions contributes to customers' awareness of the related aspects to a product's value. Transparency has been reported to decrease information asymmetry between the buyer and the seller, which, on the one hand, fosters customer trust, but also makes it a double-edged sword (Zhu, 2004).

Communication about production might not always be beneficial for the seller and a more in-depth investigation on the costs and potential negative effects of full disclosure is needed (Fu et al. 2022). Nonetheless environmental claims, expressions and terms are diligently used by companies striving towards a green brand image.

### 2.2.2 | *Greenwashing*

To enhance their green brand image, companies increasingly embody green marketing strategies (Akram et al. 2024). However, it is common for firms to resort to false and deceptive claims about their products and processes (Chen & Chang, 2012). This phenomenon is referred to as greenwashing which Parguel et al. (2011) defines as the act of mislead[ing] consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service” (pp. 15-16). In the fashion industry, greenwashing can for instance be observed in claims on sustainability, but only improving an imperceptible part of a collection, or by promoting take-back programs to encourage guilt-free consumption (Adamkiewicz et al. 2022). Consumer awareness of these opportunistic acts have increased, which creates a barrier when developing green marketing strategies (Chen & Chang, 2012; Pomering & Johnson, 2009). The scholars explain that greenwashing increases consumer skepticism regarding sustainability initiatives and creates uncertainty when consumers attempt to separate true claims from false ones.

Chen and Chang's (2012) study on Taiwanese consumption of electronics products show that greenwashing negatively affects green trust and that green perceived risk and green consumer confusion are mediators in this relationship. Accordingly, Pang et al. (2022) explain that trust is an efficient way to avoid these risks associated with information asymmetry and consumer skepticism. Following the realization that greenwashing may destroy the sustainable market, the discrepancy contributes to the complexity of green clothing consumption (Pang et al. 2022). Scholars have thus indicated that to reduce the customers' suspicion, companies need to allow the consumers to obtain enough information to be able to compare it to other brands concerning sustainability considerations (Hoedeman, 2002) and provide straightforward evidence for those initiatives, not just claim that they are ‘green’ (Chen, 2008; Chen & Chang, 2012).

### 2.2.3 | *Validation of Green Claims*

It must be noted that there is a receiving end of the sustainability communication, the consumer, and although the companies might communicate their initiatives, today's social networks and information technology allows the consumers to explore the brands outside of their own websites (Ha et al. 2022). For instance, Tran and Uehara (2023) suggest using key opinion leaders (KOLs) as a marketing strategy to promote green fashion products. These could be individuals or organizations “influenc[ing] the opinions, attitudes, beliefs, motivations and behaviors of others” (Valente & Pumpuang, 2007, p. 881). In the context of green fashion consumption, some examples are fashion bloggers and vloggers, local celebrities and sustainable fashion advocates (Tran & Uehara, 2023). The study concludes that KOLs have a notable positive impact on consumers' green online fashion shopping behavior. Nonetheless, in a study on Gen Z's expectations of online fashion shopping, Copeland and Masa (2022) noted that although external validation such as social media and celebrity endorsement can affect their green purchase intentions, the consumers were more interested in the company's own claims. Thus, the authors suggest that brands should focus on sustainability marketing through their own channels, such as brand websites.

### 2.3 | **Website Design**

An online store serves as a marketing tool (Ganguly et al. 2010), and plays a significant role in establishing green trust through sustainability communication (Martínez, 2015). As consumers exhibit green purchasing behavior as green trust increases, the role of website design to deliver effective sustainability communication is paramount (Martínez, 2015), especially in a digitalised age. Today, consumers face low switching costs (Hasan, 2016; Boardman & McCormick, 2022), largely attributed to the convenience of online shopping and the substantial reduction in search costs (Frick & Matthies, 2010; Szócs & Schubert, 2023). As the website serves as the interface between the non-scale-free digital business and its customers, who may purchase the product from anywhere on the planet, the design of the website must be optimized to establish green trust with customers and maximize international performance (Srisathan et al. 2024).

Early research conducted by Cyr (2008) examined the relationship between website design to trust, satisfaction and loyalty. In this study, website design was defined to be composed of three elements: visual design, navigation design, and information design. Since, there have been a multitude of studies that accept this definition, thereby making it the most universally accepted (Guo et al. 2023; Ganguly et al. 2010; Lee & Koubek, 2010). Visual design concerns the overall graphical look and aesthetic beauty of a website, while navigation design covers the scheme designed to permit accessibility to all parts of the website, and information design refers to the content of the website (Cyr, 2008; Guo et al. 2023).

While these elements are not explicitly referred to in all of the articles connecting website design to sustainability communication, the following two sections will be structured to follow this understanding of website design elements. This is due to (a) this definition being the collectively accepted one and (b) a lack of consensus on sustainability communicating website elements. Finally, this section will discuss extant models that have cross-fertilized website design with sustainability communication.

### *2.3.1 | Visual Design*

Within visual design, current literature on sustainability communication finds mainly color to be an important factor. This is prevalent in marketing literature that has examined color, such as a study conducted by Aslam (2006) in which color is found to reveal product attributes, as individuals have the propensity to judge a book by its cover. Moreover, the efficacious use of color enables emotional branding, as colors are associated with specific emotions (Aslam, 2006; Pichierri & Pino, 2023). This may be accredited to color psychology, where the leveraging of the psychological associations of color permits quick communication and results in sound subconscious responses (Barchiesi et al. 2016; Aslam, 2006).

A study conducted by Barchiesi et al. (2016) analyzed the consumer response to sustainability communication through packaging color of consumer packaged goods. The findings of the study indicated that for effective sustainability communication, green is not the optimal choice of color in establishing clarity and credibility in the CSR message, and the aesthetic appeal of the

packaging. Rather, blue was overwhelmingly preferred as the most effective color, with white as a close second (Barchiesi et al. 2016).

This is contrary to the predominant association between the color green and concepts such as ‘sustainability’, ‘eco-friendliness’, and CSR, which has been shaped due to previous marketing efforts that have adopted green as a tool for emotional branding (Labrecque et al. 2013; Underwood, 2003; Chu & Rahman, 2010). Therefore, Seo and Scammon (2017) assert that the products in green packaging will be associated with environmental superiority, owing to the conceptual association between color and nature. Similarly, Lim et al. (2020) and found that respondents perceived green to symbolize eco-friendliness, and that the color influences green purchasing intentions.

On the other hand, some studies offer more nuanced understandings of sustainability communication through color. Another study on packaging color conducted by Felix et al. (2022) concluded that green conveys multiple connotations, as while it signals sustainability and eco-friendliness, it may also be associated with lower product effectiveness. Meanwhile, Barchiesi et al. (2016) posit that although green is associated with environmental sustainability, it is not associated with the social and economic responsibilities, and therefore cannot effectively communicate all three parts of the triple bottom line. Hence, a lack of consensus on the effectiveness of green particularly in sustainability, but also other colors may be observed.

Aside from color, the definition of a website’s visual design includes the balance and consistency of a website’s visual appeal – the design style – to be a crucial element of website design (Guo et al. 2023; Ganguly et al. 2010; Lee & Koubek, 2010; Cyr, 2008). However, there is, to the best of the authors knowledge, no papers that explore whether this has any relevance in sustainability communication. Additionally, none of the studies cited explore sustainability communication through color or design style in the context of digital website marketing, thereby constituting it a historically understudied topic within the relevant context of this study.



### 2.3.2 | *Navigation and Information Design*

Navigation design is mainly concerned with the accessibility of the website (Cyr, 2008; Guo et al. 2023). One pertinent factor in accessibility is the homepage, or landing page, as it serves as the gateway to other parts of the website, and is the first page seen by visitors (Shin & Huh, 2009). Therefore, both the visibility of sustainability information and accessibility to sustainability information are crucial components of a homepage (Srisathan et al. 2024).

Hetze and Winistörfer (2016) analyzed the corporate websites of the world's 106 largest banks to identify patterns in sustainability communication. Consequently, their findings suggested that CSR communication is given an important role in corporate communications, as “silence on the matter of CSR [would] also [be] a form of communication” (Hetze & Winistörfer, 2016, p. 510). In sum, this implies that CSR information should be placed prominently at the first level, such that visitors are able to see it immediately as they visit the website, as implicated by Hetze and Winistörfer's research, and emphasized by Xu and Shi (2022). Szöcs and Schubert's (2023) study of fashion consumer responses to stimuli with varying degrees of sustainability communication emphasized the role of reducing search costs. In particular, the clear presentation of sustainability information at early stages of the search process was highlighted (Szöcs & Schubert, 2023).

The prevailing method of reducing search costs and permitting accessibility to sustainability information is the inclusion of a ‘About Us’ or a ‘Sustainability’ section on the navigation bar, which should be present on the homepage (Hetze & Winistörfer, 2016; Xu & Shi, 2023). Alternatively, a study aimed to identify the sustainability-related headings used by Fortune 500 companies found that ‘Community’ and ‘Environment’ were used by the vast majority of retail companies, thereby covering the ‘people’ and ‘planet’ of the three Ps (Smith & Alexander, 2013). Nevertheless, previous research suggests that it is imperative for websites to have visible and accessible sustainability communication, however, they have only studied corporate websites, as opposed to brand websites (Xu & Shi, 2023).

The last of the three elements of websites, information design, refers to the content on the website which communicates sustainability. As previously discussed under Section 2.3, consumers value (a) transparent information about production processes, supported by certifications, (b) information that can be validated externally by other sources, and (c) information that is communicated in a way that does not raise suspicion of greenwashing. Thus, the demand for more detailed information regarding a firm's sustainability initiatives is everpresent.

That being said, studies show that too much information serves as a detriment to the consumer journey, and to the usability of the website (Caldiroli et al. 2017; Hu et al. 2017). This may be explained by Cognitive Load Theory, which builds on the fact that finding information on a website involves cognitive tasks such as decision-making, information processing, learning and memorizing (Hu et al. 2017). Therefore, the Theory suggests that to maximize the useability of a website, the cognitive load associated with it should be minimized to permit the efficient navigation of a website, the filtering out of irrelevant stimuli, and the absorption of relevant information (Caldiroli et al. 2017).

Hu et al. (2017) explain that a cognitive load may be germane, intrinsic, or extraneous, and pinpoint the lattermost to be the most relevant in the context of a website, as it relates to "how the information is organized and presented" (p. 978). Caldiroli et al. (2017) propose a few considerations to reduce cognitive load on websites, including firstly, simplifying the website to remove all unnecessary items. Secondly, pages should be designed to be similar to each other, as to foster senses of conformity and familiarity, while finally, characteristics such as text size, line spacing, words per line and the spacing of paragraphs should be considered. Furthermore, examples of information design that imposes a high level of cognitive load upon the user includes too much information, either in the presentation of text or visuals (Rukonic et al. 2021). Notwithstanding, the scarcity of studies that explore individual's opinions on website design and the extent to which the presentation of information is perceived as stressful (imposing a high cognitive load) makes for a gap, which this study aims to investigate.

### 2.3.3 | *Website Design and Sustainability Communication Models*

The cross-fertilization between the streams of research of website design and sustainability communication have been limited, however, two models stand out that aim to reconcile the two fields. The first model is developed by Parker et al. (2010) who explain that although there has been extensive research on sustainability communication, little of this research has been linked with small and medium enterprises (SMEs), and with content analyses of websites of these companies. Subsequently, a content analysis was conducted on a sample of 267 Australian SMEs in the information media and telecommunications, and accommodation and food services sectors, and a framework was devised, referred to in this study as the ‘CSR Communication Framework’

This framework, in many ways, parallels the traditionally accepted definition of a website as consisting of the visual, navigation and information designs. Specific findings, which have not already been explored throughout this section, include the incorporation of CSR taglines, slogans, and accreditations, and the use of prominent navigation links. The latter is highlighted as particularly important by the authors, as it facilitates the easy navigation of the website to access particular content (Parker et al. 2010). Furthermore, the model accentuates the significance of CSR communication that relates to the firm’s vision, mission and policies (Parker et al. 2010). This is especially vital considering that the suspicion of greenwashing can be reduced by an effective integration of communication to action, or aspired action (Garcia-Torres et al. 2017). Finally, the model details the role reviews play in establishing green trust with other consumers on the sustainability of products, along with sustainability-related stakeholder engagement tools, such as blogs, FAQ sections, and newsletters (Parker et al. 2010).

Alternatively, another model developed by Siano et al. (2016) offers a different understanding of sustainability communicating website elements, this time within the context of fashion companies. Similar to Parker et al. (2010), the paper outlines the need for sustainability communication practices to be established for websites, as currently, the research in the area is limited. By conducting a literature review and identifying four key dimensions, the authors constructed an operational model that “impact[s] the effectiveness of sustainability

communication on websites”, known as the OSEC model (Siano et al. 2016, p. 4). While the entire model is extensive in nature, for the purposes of this study, it is too complex to be discussed in its entirety, though, there is merit for a basic understanding of the four key dimensions.

The first of these key dimensions is *Orientation*, which includes those strategic elements that define the corporate identity in regards to sustainability. Thus, it consists of the mission and vision statements, and the explicit reference made to all three parts of the triple bottom line (Siano et al. 2016). SanMiguel et al. (2021) slightly altered this definition to rather just constitute general texts in which the firm details its commitment to sustainability within the ‘About Us’ or ‘Sustainability’ web sections.

*Structure*, meanwhile, is concerned with the website tools, and especially those that exist to support the credibility of the sustainability information communicated (Siano et al. 2016). *Ergonomics* mirrors navigation, as it is strictly related to the ability of a website to ensure a simple navigation process to enable the proper viewing of sustainability content and information (Siano et al. 2016; SanMiguel et al. 2021). Finally, *Content* is similar to information, in that it includes the corporate sustainability presented throughout the website, such as the sustainability initiatives (Siano et al. 2016), and, after re-modification by SanMiguel et al. (2021), reference to the industry-specific green issues.

Although these models highlight fundamental aspects of what on a website communicates sustainability effectively, there exists no academic consensus, or extensive research on this matter. Moreover, these models have observed sustainability communication on corporate websites, and not on brand websites, thereby constituting a theoretical problem. Finally, as these studies were both conducted in manners that do not consider the interpretivist nature of reality, the subjective needs, preferences and realities of users are not explored. This study aims to fill these gaps.

## 2.4 | Chapter Summary

This chapter examined the significant role of website design in effective sustainability communication, which is essential for generating customer green trust. Previous studies have explored website design in terms of visual, navigation and information elements (Cyr, 2008). Visual components, particularly color associations, can influence sustainability communication (Felix et al. 2020; Lim et al. 2020), while navigation can affect the accessibility and prominence of the communicated information (Srisathan et al. 2024). Information design mainly approaches the clarity and transparency of the information provided on the website to avoid the risk of greenwashing suspicion. Moreover, the chapter reviewed existing models for sustainability communication on websites – the OSEC model (Siano et al. 2016) and the Parker et al. (2010) CSR Communication Framework – which provide structures for this kind of communication to a certain level. It was found that a research gap exists in terms of sustainability communication on *brand* websites, as well as on the subjective experiences of consumers on online fashion websites.

### **3 | Methodology**

This chapter outlines the research methods and the inductive approach employed to explore how sustainability communication through website design elements influences the formation of green trust in online fashion shopping. The exploratory qualitative design has been carefully chosen to ensure a thorough exploration of the research questions, as presented in Section 1.3, which consequently will allow for constructing significant and relevant conclusions. Furthermore, the chapter proceeds to outline the data collection methods, centering on semi-structured interviews, purposive sampling, as well as interview design. As the chapter progresses, the data analysis procedures and the coding process employed are described. The chapter concludes with the quality of the research, methodological limitations, and ethical considerations to ensure the integrity and quality of the research.

#### **3.1 | Research Approach**

This research adopts an inductive approach to understand how website design elements communicate sustainability and influence the building of green trust. The inductive approach is chosen due to the absence of existing theoretical frameworks on this specific topic. As highlighted in Section 1.2, there are no studies focusing solely on sustainability communication through website design elements in online fashion shopping, and their influence on building green trust. As the study intends to generate theory from collected data to fill the aforementioned gap, an inductive approach is appropriate (Eisenhardt et al. 2016).

In terms of ontological positioning, this study adopts a constructivist approach in order to understand how sustainability is constructed as participants interact with the website design elements. As constructivism emphasizes how reality is built by individuals through their cognition (Shannon-Baker, 2023), this position is especially useful for studying how participants' green trust building and understanding of sustainability is influenced by elements in website design that communicate sustainability.

Regarding the epistemological position, an interpretivist approach has been chosen for this study in order to examine participants' interaction with the website design elements and their reaction to them, especially in the context of sustainability. To truly capture the participants' perception of sustainability communication in the website design, they were not provided with a definition of sustainability, thus allowing their subjective views on the matter to emerge. This approach is grounded in the need to understand the underlying motives behind people's actions and their interactions within the broader cultural and societal context, which is central to interpretivism (Chowdhury, 2014). Therefore, the interpretivist approach is relevant and valuable for this research, as it aims to explore how trust and perceptions are shaped in the online fashion industry and thus aids in understanding the factors that weaken or strengthen green trust.

### **3.2 | Research Design**

An exploratory qualitative research design, with an inductive approach as mentioned earlier, was selected as the research design for this paper. This design was chosen since the study intends to gain a better understanding of a problem that hasn't been defined yet (Mbaka & Isiramen, 2021), i.e. to identify *what* website design elements communicate sustainability and *how* those elements contribute to the establishment of green trust for multinational digital fashion firms. Thus, the exploratory design of this study allowed for obtaining a qualitative understanding between the factors of website design elements, sustainability communication and green trust. Moreover, this study intends to understand participants' perceptions of the sustainability communication of the stimuli, and consequently how green trust is built. Hence, this approach allows for flexibility and adaptability as new data and insights emerge, meaning the direction of the study can be adjusted as new data and insights are discovered (Mbaka & Isiramen, 2021).

### **3.3 | Data Collection Method**

#### *3.3.1 | Case and Interviewee Selection*

For the selection of the stimuli in this study, the brand websites of two international fashion companies, both rated as 'great' for their sustainability efforts by the Good On You website

(Good on You, 2024a; Good on You, 2024c), were carefully chosen. The Good On You website rates brands on their sustainability by gathering and verifying public information on key issues affecting people, the planet, and animals. The Good on You website utilizes data from brand reports, certifications, and third-party indices (Good on You, 2024b). Additionally, their ratings cover labor practices, animal welfare, and environmental policies which further aids in helping consumers to make informed choices when shopping online (Good on You, 2024b).

Furthermore, the selected brands to serve as stimuli were The Common Good Company (TCGC) and Etiko. These companies were specifically chosen not only for their high sustainability ratings but also because they provide a strong contrast against each other in how they communicate their sustainability initiatives through their website design elements despite offering similar products for both men and women. To be specific, differences were identified by referring to current literature, and recorded in the placement of sustainability information on the homepage, in the lack of a ‘Sustainability’ button on the navigation bar on the Etiko website, in the color scheme employed, and in design style (see Appendix A).

Furthermore, purposive sampling was chosen for this research to strategically select participants who were familiar with the concept of sustainability. This approach ensured the inclusion of individuals who were likely to provide relevant and insightful information (Campbell et al. 2020), particularly as awareness concerning sustainability is vital in engaging in green purchasing behaviors (Cavazos-Arroyo et al. 2024) By identifying and choosing specific participants, purposive sampling allowed the effective utilization of limited research resources and ensured that participants with unique and important perspectives were included (Campbell et al. 2020).

Particularly, 10 participants within the age range of 18 to 29 with an academic background were chosen (see Appendix B). The rationale for this choice lies within the fact that people within this age range and background are most conscious about sustainability issues of our generation (Wu & Long, 2024). Furthermore, due to the time constraints and availability of participants, purposive sampling enabled researchers to quickly identify and select appropriate participants for the study.



### 3.3.2 | *Interview Design*

The interviews followed a semi-structured interview design, in order to better understand how website design elements that communicate sustainability generate green trust. Even though the questions were designed to follow a structured scheme, the interviews themselves took a more conversational approach. These conversational-style interviews hence led to certain questions to differ from one interview to another, mainly due to follow-up and probing questions. This format thus effectively allowed the capturing of spontaneous thoughts that would possibly arise since there exists a need for comprehensive, subjective data collection on the predetermined topic (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

A pilot study was conducted prior to data collection for the researchers to understand how to minimize interviewee fatigue, rearrange the structure of the questions and allow for comparative responses. For instance, it was found that asking consumers about how sustainability communication affects their trust was found to be confusing, and rather, more insight was gathered by asking about purchasing tendencies, allowing consumers to detail the ‘affective’ stage of the consumer journey (Martínez, 2015).

Moreover, prior to each interview, participants were briefed about the format, potential duration, and language of the interview and the topic was concisely explained to them. They were also assured about the anonymity of the interviews and that GDPR policies were being followed. The participants were told to expect an interview length of 45 to 60 minutes, depending on the depth of their responses. The participants were also told not to consider the financial aspects or price ranges of the products on either website, to delimit the study as explained previously. Additionally, all the interviews took place in person. In terms of the interview setting, they were all controlled for being conducted in the same room, providing a similar atmosphere for all participants. All interviews were conducted by the same person, with no other authors present. Finally, for all interviews, two laptops were used to showcase both stimuli to the participants. The laptops were the same resolutions, and participants were allowed to engage with the stimuli how they liked to understand their preferences.

The interview questions were principally designed to capture participants' understanding of sustainability and sustainable fashion. As seen in the interview guide (see Appendix C), the interviews consisted of demographics-related questions (part 1), the participants perception of sustainability and fashion (part 2), and lastly on sustainability communication, website design elements, and green trust (part 3). The questions in Part 3 of the interview guide were divided into three categories of website design elements: visual, informational, and navigational (Cyr, 2008). This question order strategy allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how website design elements promote sustainability, how they are perceived by participants, and finally whether they established green trust.

### **3.4 | Data Analysis**

Once the interviews were completed, an analysis of the collected data was conducted. The data analysis process for this study was designed to primarily transcribe the data from semi-structured interviews and subsequently import them to the data analysis software Nvivo 14 where they were coded to conduct thematic analysis. The mobile application Otter.ai was used for recording and transcribing the interviews which were later on manually cleaned up by the researchers and imported into Nvivo 14 individually by each researcher.

Consequently, each researcher began to independently code each interview line by line to avoid any bias. The coding process of each researcher employed the Gioia method, and involved identifying first order concepts that summarized participants' responses. Subsequently, second order themes were abstracted. Finally, these themes were later grouped into aggregate dimensions (Gioia et al. 2013), and then discussed among the authors to facilitate triangulation (Patton, 1999). The insights derived from the thematic analysis were then contextualized within the broader literature on website design, sustainability communication, and green trust to provide a comprehensive understanding of how specific design elements on online fashion websites influence consumer reactions, contributing both to academic knowledge and practical applications in website design for fashion e-retailers.

### 3.5 | Research Quality

Given the selected epistemological and ontological positions of interpretivism and constructivism, and the emphasis placed on the customer's subjective understanding of phenomena, Lincoln and Guba (1985) advocate for evaluating the study on two dimensions – trustworthiness and authenticity.

Authenticity is acknowledged by highlighting the paper's importance, expressed in the Introduction and Literature Review by describing the study's gap and theoretical contribution. In contrast, the paper's theoretical and practical implications reflect the educative, catalytic, and tactical authenticity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). On the other hand, within trustworthiness, Korstjens and Moser (2018) identify five sub-criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity.

Credibility was ensured in this study by adhering to the canons of good practice (ALLEA, 2023) and focusing on three forms of triangulation (Patton, 1999; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Firstly, the study uses the triangulation of sources by incorporating multiple data sources – multiple interviewees – to examine consistencies across the data (Patton, 1999). Secondly, it utilizes investigator triangulation by involving multiple individuals to analyze and interpret findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Patton, 1999). Lastly, it uses perspective triangulations by employing the multiple perspectives of this study's authors (and different theories) to elucidate findings. Additionally, the accounts arrived at by research were ensured to correspond to the intended responses of participants through respondent validation (Birt et al. 2016), thus reflecting a high truth value of research findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Regarding transferability, the challenges associated with generalizing findings to a broader population in qualitative research were mitigated by producing a 'thick description' (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As seen in the Methodology section and the Appendix, the detailed accounts contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the research context and process, including the participant selection criteria (sampling), stimuli selection, and interview design. Meanwhile, the introduction section illustrates the fashion industry context and delimits

the study to arrive at its chosen scope, intending to facilitate an educated discernment on whether the findings are applicable in other contexts.

Dependability and confirmability were addressed by establishing an audit trail, where complete records of all stages of the research process (Korstjens & Moser, 2018) can be provided if necessary. Furthermore, interviews were conducted by the same person to minimize the role of the interview effect and achieve consistency (Salazar, 1990). Inter-observer consistency was accounted for through investigator triangulation in separately reading, coding, and interpreting data. Neutrality was furthered by facilitating a discussion of the individual interpretations to arrive at a peer-reviewed consensus (Patton, 1999).

Finally, reflexivity is managed by the authors' acknowledgment of their role in data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). It is recognized that personal biases, preconceptions, values, and assumptions are inherently imparted to various parts of the resource process. However, the vastly international backgrounds of the authors contributed to multiple discussions and positive challenges of each others' views from various perspectives – perspective triangulation – which may have improved the quality of the paper (Patton, 1999).

### **3.6 | Methodological Limitations and Ethical Considerations**

In conjunction with the research quality concerns highlighted in the previous section, there are several limitations concerning the study's transferability, consistency, and neutrality, with noteworthy ethical considerations. By using purposive sampling of sustainability-aware, bachelors'-educated individuals within the ages of 18 to 29, the representative nature of the sample is decreased when compared to a random sample (Andrade, 2020). This lack of generalizability is intensified by the findings and analysis being based on a small sample size of ten respondents, the focus on these individuals' subjective perceptions, and the choice of two stimuli, which may result in theory building being highly distinctive to these stimuli (Eisenhardt, 1989). Therefore, it is pivotal that the study's results are deemed as strictly relevant to the context of the study. On the other hand, Smith (2018) underscores the importance of clarifying

that qualitative methods' epistemological and ontological considerations limit the extent to which they can be evaluated on the merits of statistical-probabilistic quantitative generalizability. Therefore, this study has fewer limitations concerning transferability, as it aims to examine specific, unique phenomena in rich detail (Smith, 2018).

Nonetheless, the researchers' personal biases, as acknowledged, affect the findings' neutrality and consistency. This is attributed to the personal desire of the authors to arrive at interesting findings, which is exacerbated by the limited time frame and resource constraints of the study. To counteract this, the project is structured such that theory and data drive the focus rather than the personal interests of the authors. Moreover, conducting the interviews in English creates a language barrier for both the participants and the interviewers, as not everyone is a native English speaker. Awareness of participants' struggle to communicate what they intended, and interviewers' misinterpretation of their responses' meaning were noted. However, handling interviews in English minimizes the chances of translation errors. It should be noted that the interviewers are assumed to have the prerequisite proficiency needed as they study a program in English.

Finally, the trustworthiness of the study is limited by ethical considerations. Consent was acquired freely without coercion, permitting participants to decline participation. Extensive information on the interviewees will not be disclosed, and the interview records will be deleted post-completion of the paper. Finally, findings are reported without misrepresentation in an honest manner that respondents validate. These considerations reflect those recommended for qualitative studies by Arifin (2018); however, doing so may constitute a limitation as there is reduced transparency and illustration of a 'thick description'.

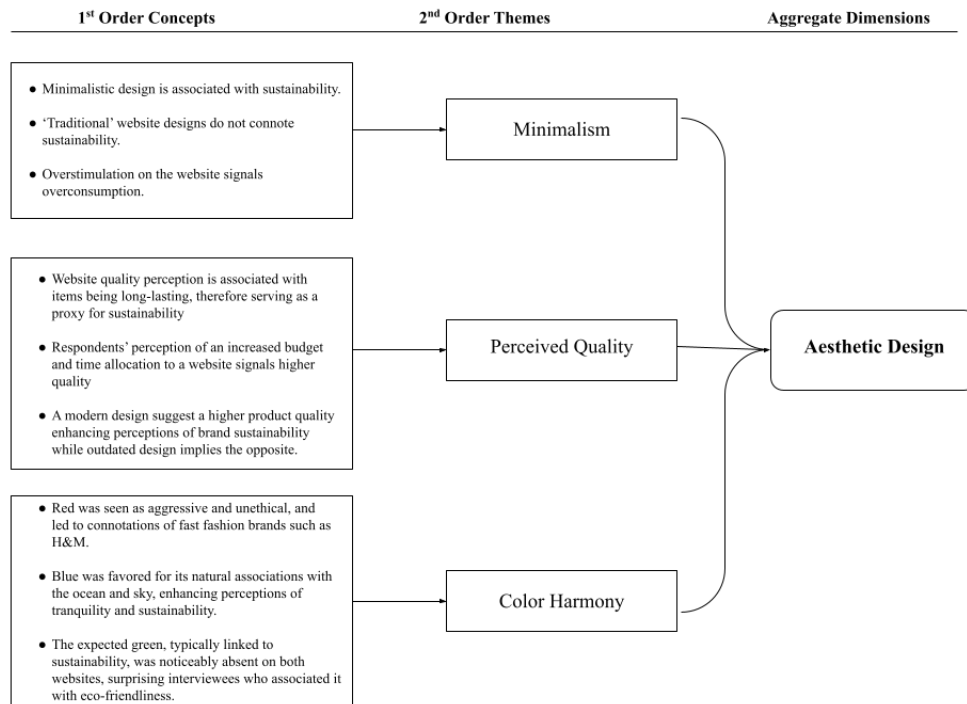
### **3.7 | Chapter Summary**

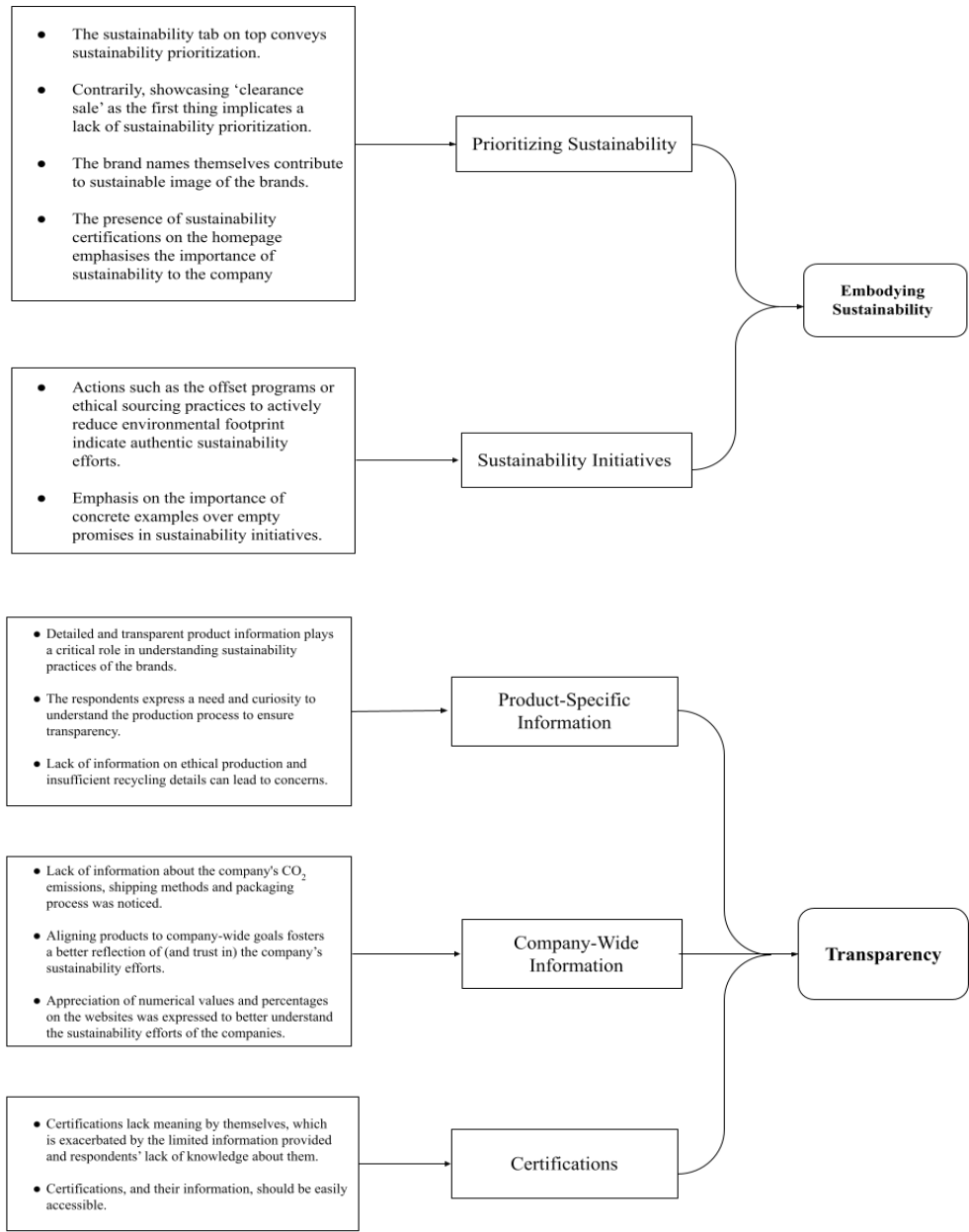
This chapter centers on the methodological choices, considerations, and motivations behind each. The study utilizes an explorative qualitative, inductive research approach to facilitate theory generation. The study assumes an interpretivist epistemological position and a constructivist ontological position to facilitate understanding the subjective aspects of consumers' perceptions

of website elements, sustainability communication, and green trust establishment. Semi-structured interviews are the data collection method, and the reasons for employing purposive sampling and selecting the case websites are outlined. The use of thematic analysis in data analysis and the Gioia method are explained. The mechanisms to improve the research quality are evaluated, considering the paper's philosophical underpinnings. The chapter concludes by discussing the limitations and ethical considerations of the study.

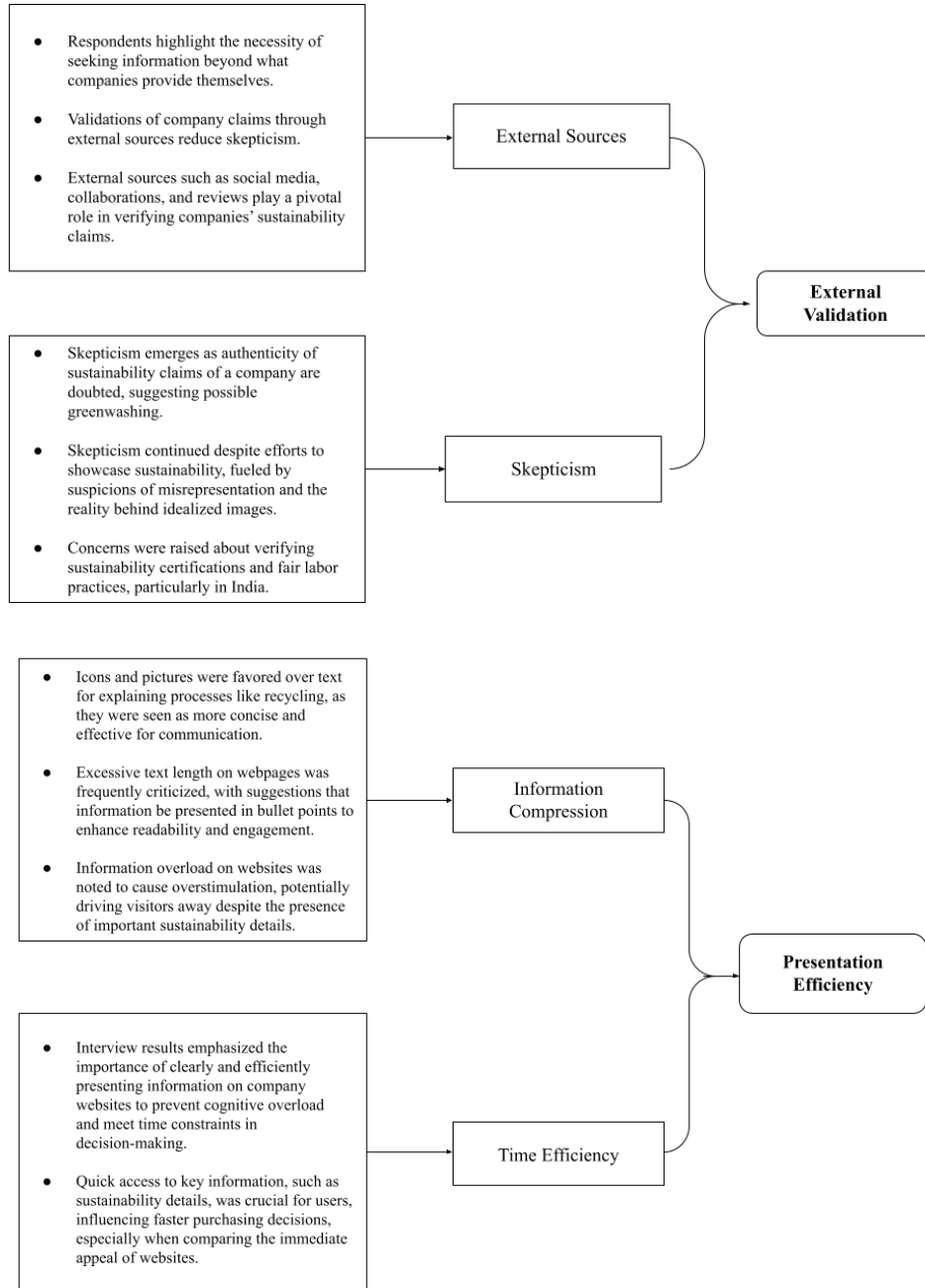
## 4 | Findings

This chapter aims to present the findings of the interviews conducted by the researchers. The interviews revealed that sustainability communication through website design elements cause diverse reactions from participants, depending on when and where these elements were introduced by the website and subsequently encountered by the participants. In this section, each aggregate dimension is broken down into second order themes derived from first order concepts (Gioia et al. 2013), and presents selected quotes from the interviews to illustrate this process. This approach effectively illustrates the link between the collected data and the concepts derived from it. Following this explanation, the data structure is visually represented in a graphic that demonstrates the systematic progression from first-order concepts, through second-order themes, to the aggregate dimensions (Gioia et al. 2013).









*Figure 1: Data Structure For Sustainability Communication through Website Design Elements and Creation of Green Trust*

## 4.1 | Aesthetic Design

The data structure as presented above illustrates how sustainability is impacted by aesthetic design. In this study, aesthetic design refers to the visual elements of a website that create an appealing and engaging experience for users, as defined by participants. Figure 1 also illustrates three second order themes that constitute the aesthetic design element: minimalism, modernity and overall visual appeal.

**Minimalism** within the data of this research refers to the use of simple, uncluttered layouts and clean lines that contribute to a straightforward user interface. Minimalism emerged as a significant consideration among three participants. They emphasized that a minimalist approach to visual design on a website substantially influences their perception of the company or brand's sustainability. More specifically Interviewee 2 mentioned that they perceive The Common Good Company's website as modern and minimalistic – qualities they associate with sustainability. Additionally they express a contrasting view on Etiko's website which they consider to resemble a typical fashion website where sustainability does not immediately come to mind. Moreover, Interviewee 8 stressed their perception of sustainability by mentioning how they associate minimization of consumption with minimalism and on the contrary how they do not associate overconsumption with sustainability. They mention:

*“I mean, it goes back to that first impression matters. And if I see the website is more minimalistic, I'm more drawn since I associate minimalism more with sustainability ... While when I immediately am overwhelmed by a lot of information. I'll just say a lot of information is the opposite of minimalism on the website, then I'm quick to leave the website again and search for something else.”.*

The third interviewee to bring up minimalism was Interviewee 6. They commented on the minimalistic design of The Common Good Company's website and its effectiveness in communicating sustainability. They noted the restrained use of color and minimalistic features, which they felt highlighted the website's sustainability focus which ultimately created a sense of trustworthiness and a way to build green trust.

**Perceived Quality** was associated with how the aesthetic design of the websites demonstrated good quality through modernity and the perceived investment into the website. It explores how the overall quality of the websites influenced participant's impressions of the websites' sustainability communication. The quality of the two websites, Etiko and The Common Good Company, was perceived to stem from various factors, including budget allocation and time invested, by the participants. Several participants emphasized on the importance of perceived quality of the websites. Moreover, Interviewee 7 provided insights into their assessment of product quality based on website presentation. They stated, "*I believe it serves as a proxy to determine the quality [of the products] and how long [they] might potentially last*". This response highlights the connection between website design quality, product longevity, and perceptions of the brand's sustainability. This sentiment was highlighted by Interviewee 1, who expressed skepticism towards Etiko's website, noting that it '*looks cheap*' and suggesting that the perceived lack of investment in the website design could impact its trustworthiness.

Modern website design emerged as a key factor influencing perceptions of quality and sustainability across several interviews. For instance, Interviewee 1 noted that the modern design of The Common Good Company's website suggests higher product quality and substantial investment, enhancing the overall impression of quality. Similarly, Interviewee 2 associated modern design with sustainability, highlighting its connection to recent social movements, which suggests that modernity in design can signal a company's commitment to sustainability. Conversely, Interviewee 7 reinforced that an older-looking website might convey that a company is more established but possibly less focused on sustainability. In addition Interviewee 7 felt that a modern and superior website design evokes green trust and reduces the likelihood of the site being fraudulent. In line with that, Interviewee 4 stated "*So if you have an older feeling website, like an outdated one, it can feel as if it's like an older company, it's more established, it's probably less concerned with sustainability.*" Ultimately, this made participants trust the sustainability of a brand with an outdated looking website less compared to a modern one.

Notably, participants emphasized the importance of **Color Harmony** in shaping their impressions upon encountering a website, and indicated how colors were linked and associated

with sustainability. When participants were asked to address question number 7 (see Appendix C) their responses uniformly inclined towards an analysis of the color scheme utilized across the two websites. They highlighted the presence of colors red and blue and the absence of the color green. Furthermore, participants brought up how these colors, and their arrangement within the website design, contributed to their perceptions of sustainability principles of the two companies.

Red, a color highlighted by eight participants, immediately caught their attention when they first interacted with Etiko's website. Participants remarked that the prominent use of red as a primary color in Etiko's website design evoked feelings of aggression and a perception of unethical and unsustainable principles. Interviewee 7 even compared Etiko's color scheme to that of H&M, noting that this Swedish clothing is well known as a fast fashion brand which is not very sustainable in its fashion practices. Furthermore, Interviewee 4 expressed how they perceive the color red to be the least associated with trusting in a firm's sustainability among colors.

Blue, however, which was predominantly featured on The Common Good Company's website, drew attention from five participants. The color blue featured in The Common Good Company's website design generated more favorable initial impressions among participants. It was more closely associated with the sustainability practices typically expected from a fashion company. When asked about The Common Good Company, Interviewee 2 stated “... *I think the blue one's a bit more sustainable.*” They even compared it to that of Etiko's website by mentioning that The Common Good Company, with its blue color scheme and background images, emphasizes sustainability and sustainable practices more prominently compared to a website using white and red colors. Moreover, the color blue on The Common Good Company's website was particularly pronounced. Interviewee 8 provided an insightful perspective on the calming nature of the color blue, associating it with natural elements such as the ocean and sky. They stated that “*blue is calmer*” and “*I also associate blue more with nature, with the ocean, with the sky immediately comes to my mind*” fostering a sense of tranquility and connection with nature.

Green was, surprisingly, not used extensively in the website design of either firm, and four participants remarked upon its absence within the first few minutes of interaction with the websites. Three of the participants even mentioned that green is what they associate directly with

sustainability when they were prompted about what sustainability meant to them. Interviewee 2 mentioned “*green is the color associated most with sustainability, which I don't see a lot of in the initial pages of this for either websites*”. A similar impression was given to Interviewee 6 who stated that the color green is commonly associated with eco-friendliness across various products because it symbolically connects to nature, trees, and environmental preservation, leading to affections of trust.

## 4.2 | Embodying Sustainability

This aggregate dimension explores how participants perceived and assessed the sustainability efforts of the two companies, focusing on the integration of sustainability messaging and sustainability initiatives. Throughout the interviews, a prevalent topic emerged regarding the embodiment of sustainability by both companies. Participants noticed the prioritization of the sustainability efforts of these brands through the placement of sustainability communication, including elements like certifications, and even the names of the websites. Furthermore, the accessibility of sustainability-related information on the websites significantly contributed to this overarching theme. The other second order concept that emerged during the interviews was the importance of visible and trustworthy sustainability messaging regarding concrete sustainability initiatives like carbon offset programs. This eventually shaped the perceptions of the participants' view of the company's commitment to sustainability which eventually served as an indicator for formation of green trust.

**Prioritizing Sustainability**, according to the participants, meant placing the sustainability related information on the homepage. Prioritizing sustainability was the subelement that allowed the participants to quickly identify the level of commitment of the brands to sustainability by the type of information they had chosen to prioritize on their websites. For instance, Interviewee 10 mentioned “*And then they also have a tab for sustainability. which I like because you can see it right away and you can click for more information very easily*”, highlighting the positive impact of The Common Good Company's approach, where the presence of a dedicated sustainability page at the top of their website contributed to a favorable impression.

Moreover, the alignment of website design with sustainability values was highlighted by Interviewee 2, who remarked on the importance of visible sustainability messaging upon entering the website. Interviewee 2 stated that *“I think it's important that if the focus is around sustainability, they need to have it like, as soon as you get onto the website, it needs to be visible. The first thing I see here is that it's a clearance sale up to 50% off...”* The interviewee later connects Etiko to be *“... more focused on, like, the budget aspect of it”*. In addition, both company names were perceived as aligning with sustainability values, enhancing consumer green trust and confidence. The straightforwardness of the names reflected a commitment to transparency and ethical practices, influencing purchasing decisions positively. Participants appreciated the simplicity and clarity of the name ‘Etiko,’ associating it directly with ethical practices. Similarly, respondents found the name ‘The Common Good Company’ to be indicative of a strong commitment to social and environmental causes, with Interviewee 5 mentioning that *“... the name is like ‘they are doing good things’*’.

Finally, a prominent method to increase the visibility of communications was found to be placing sustainability certifications on the homepages of both websites. However, the presence of the certifications on websites and the interviewee’s reactions to them will be further discussed under Section 4.3.

**Sustainability Initiatives**, such as carbon offset programs or ethical sourcing practices, were viewed positively by participants. They were mainly associated with actions that the companies actively take in order to embody their commitment to sustainability matters. Interviewee 3 praised companies that actively reduce their environmental footprint, stating, *“I'm more likely to support a brand that takes real steps to minimize their impact on the planet”*. Similarly, Interviewee 6 expressed admiration for companies that prioritize fair labor practices, noting, *“It shows they care about more than just profits.”* Overall, participants emphasized the importance of authentic sustainability efforts in shaping their perceptions of companies.

Participants consistently emphasized the importance of visible sustainability messaging on company websites. For instance, Interviewee 1 highlighted the impact of clear sustainability statements, stating, *“When a brand openly talks about their sustainability efforts, it creates a*

*sense of trust and authenticity.*" This sentiment was echoed by Interviewee 4, who emphasized the need for concrete examples of sustainability initiatives, noting, *"I want to see what they're actually doing, not just empty promises."* In summary, respondents praised that by going the extra mile, these companies signal their commitment to sustainability.

### 4.3 | Transparency

Apart from the manner in which the information was given on the websites, one could notice a common discontent among the participants regarding the actual information provided. The participants expressed a need for additional sustainability information as well as clearer and more in-depth explanations – meaning more transparency. Participants expressed need for further clarification in regards to product-specific information, company-wide information, and certifications and their implications in the practices of the two companies.

A common second-order theme emerged from the responses, emphasizing the critical role of detailed and transparent **Product-Specific Information** in fostering green trust and understanding of sustainability practices. Interviewee 10 encapsulated the general sentiment, stressing the need for comprehensive details about materials and production processes: *"I will consider [the company] sustainable for...the material and the fact that they use less water. I will need to read more about their packaging and the actual information about where they get their product, the material."*

This perspective was echoed across the responses, highlighting a keen interest in the ethical dimensions of production. Many participants appreciated the use of recycled materials in the products. However, there was a notable curiosity about the ethicality of the production processes. The lack of detailed information on supply chain processes notably led to a sense of concern among some participants. For instance, Interviewee 6 pointed out the importance of transparency by stating *"I'm concerned because it doesn't really talk about the recycling methods being employed"*.

Furthermore, participants underscored the concurrent need for more detailed, **Company-Wide Information**. Interviewee 4 would've liked to see a numerical comparison of the company-wide resource usage to the industry average and noted that the information provided next to the product influences the overall perception of the brand as they state "*I think that I would find it more honest or I'd have an easier time believing in the company-wide goals, if I could see how each individual product contributes toward that goal.*" Moreover, in interviews 1, 3, and 4 there was a desire for more information about the company's CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, as well as their shipping and packaging methods, as the customers associate these topics with sustainability.

**Certifications**, such as Fair Trade, 'Global Recycled Standard' and 'B Corporation', on company websites were often visible but not well-understood among the participants. Many participants recognized sustainability certifications but were confused about their significance, noting the inability to access more detailed information. For instance, Interviewee 5 mentioned, "*Can I click on that? No. So when I have the mouse over the certifications it tells me a little bit about it, but I can't click on it to read more*". Furthermore, even when certifications were noticeable, their meaning remained unclear to some of the participants. For instance, Interviewee 3 stated that "*The sustainability markers, they stand out quite a lot but I don't really know what they mean... You see it and you're like okay, that's good they have sustainability markers, even though I don't know what these are*". This quote summed up the sentiment of other participants' expression over the subject matter highlighting that while certifications can initially seem positive, their true value is lost without sufficient explanatory context, limiting their effectiveness in establishing green trust by conveying genuine sustainability efforts.

#### **4.4 | External Validation**

A majority of the participants turned to external sources in attempts to reduce skepticism and validate the legitimacy of the brands' statements, regarding sustainability practices such as the production process. Although all of the participants ultimately trusted the companies, this aggregate dimension will exhibit the most prominent complaints and suggestions concerning the information provided on the web pages, as well as to what extent they trust the companies.



Participants found it impossible to ignore the fact that generating trust requires more than one perspective of the company as they brought up the integration of **External Sources** on the brand website, including blog posts, social media, and links to other websites. The information provided by the company itself seemed sufficient for the majority of the participants in the study, however, many indicated in their answers that their trust is or would be based on external information as well. Interviewee 5 mentioned “*I don't know if I trust the source when the source is the company itself*” and Interviewee 2 said “*I wouldn't say I distrust [the website] but I would certainly want to look at external sources before fully trusting it.*”

To assure themselves about the companies' sustainability, the participants turned to various sources: Interviewees 4, 5, 6, and 7 perceived that brand collaborations and sustainability programs showcased the firms' engagements aside from sales. According to Interviewees 7 and 10, reviews could potentially confirm a product's quality, which relates to the sustainable preference for long-lasting clothing. Furthermore, Interviewee 3 and Interviewee 5 acknowledged external blog posts encouraging sustainable behavior linked in the website as a positive verification of the brand's sustainability. Lastly, Interviewees 4, 5, 6, 8, and 10 clicked on the companies' social media icons, with Interviewee 1 pointing out that having linked social media is preferable as it makes the brand experience more personal and interactive. These are all approaches of establishing a better overview of the company's sustainability, which will be discussed further on.

**Skepticism** emerged as a pattern of suspicion towards sustainability communication on the companies' websites was expressed by the participants. Specifically, due to the prevalence of greenwashing, respondents were prone to doubt the legitimacy of the companies' transparency and sustainability. Although the participants noted the brands' efforts to look sustainable on their websites, there were indications on awareness of greenwashing. This was expressed for instance by Interviewee 2 saying “*although, it could be a scam*” and Interviewee 7 stating “*at least that's what they seem to show to the customer*”. In the fifth interview, Interviewee 5 even expressed suspicion towards the front page pictures on The Common Good Company:

*“It feels like they're trying to tell me that this is very small-scale and personal, you know? ‘Oh, it's this person being here, just like doing this print on the shirt or whatever’, but immediately, I'm like this is not how it looks like in their actual warehouse. I'm not believing it.”*

However, after a follow-up question, they admitted that this is due to their own skepticism, and that the website gives off the ‘vibe’ of being sustainable both environmentally and socially. Additionally, all except for two, Interviewee 7 and Interviewee 9, expressed their concern about the clothes being made in India, questioning the ‘fair wage’ due to India's wage standards and the preconception of ‘those countries’ not being sustainable. After noticing the Fair Trade factory certification in India, Interviewee 7 mentioned *“but given the perceptions that most people have regarding the Asian factories, it might not give me much information about how Fair Trade that is...”*. Relating to this, Interviewee 8 states *“There are a lot of certificates that I need to trust if I want to be sure, but...I don't see a way to verify that information myself.”*

#### **4.5 | Presentation Efficiency**

This aggregate dimension delves into the concerns about the compression of information and the efficiency of its presentation on the two brand websites. It explores how participants responded to the volume and accessibility of content, emphasizing their preferences for a time efficient engagement with the presented information. This section highlights the balance needed between detailed content and the cognitive load it imposes.

**Information Compression** emerged as a second-order theme as the majority of the interviewees emphasized the facilitating nature of icons and pictures in showcasing transparency. A clear majority of the participants noticed the figures explaining The Common Good Company's recycling processes on their material page (see Appendix D). The icons were perceived as a more concise and comprehensible way of explaining this process than only text. Both Interviewee 2 and Interviewee 5 expressed that the pictures created a feeling that the company wanted them to understand and learn and not only state information. Interviewee 8 also noted *“I think that it would be easier to convey their message if they used more universally understood signs instead of so many words.”*

Relating to information overload, one of the most recurring complaints was regarding the length of informational texts on the websites, as brought up by Interviewees 1, 3, 5, 7, and 8. For instance, Etiko's paragraph on the main page, or the paragraphs explaining Etiko's transparency and accreditations were both seen as too long by the participants. Several participants mentioned that no one would read these texts and that packing information in this manner makes it less accessible. Interviewee 5 particularly mentioned that if they were an ordinary customer, they would not go through all of the paragraphs. It was also mentioned that organizing the information in bullet points and dividing it into shorter sections helps the understanding of it. Interviewee 8 further mentioned that they would quickly leave a website if they are overwhelmed by too much information, even if it might contain indicators of the company's sustainability practices and principles. Interviewee 1 appreciated that The Common Good Company used links, as the user has a choice in accessing further information if they wanted to do so.

Additionally, Interviewee 7 mentioned “... as a customer, given my laziness sometimes I might not be interested in reading a paragraph that might not give me any valuable information which in this case it does”. Other results corroborated this perspective, indicating that the information provided on a company's website not only needs to be clear due to cognitive overload, but also from a **Time Efficiency** perspective. For instance, Interviewee 6 mentioned:

*“I would still purchase a product from the Common Good Company just because it caught my eye in like very few seconds. And if I were to prioritize time as one of the crucial parameters in the decision-making of me buying a product then I would definitely buy a product from the Common Good Company compared to Etiko”.*

The Interviewee further mentioned that Etiko's website had more detailed information, but if time was a priority, the sustainability information is noticeable in just a few seconds.

## 4.6 | Chapter Summary

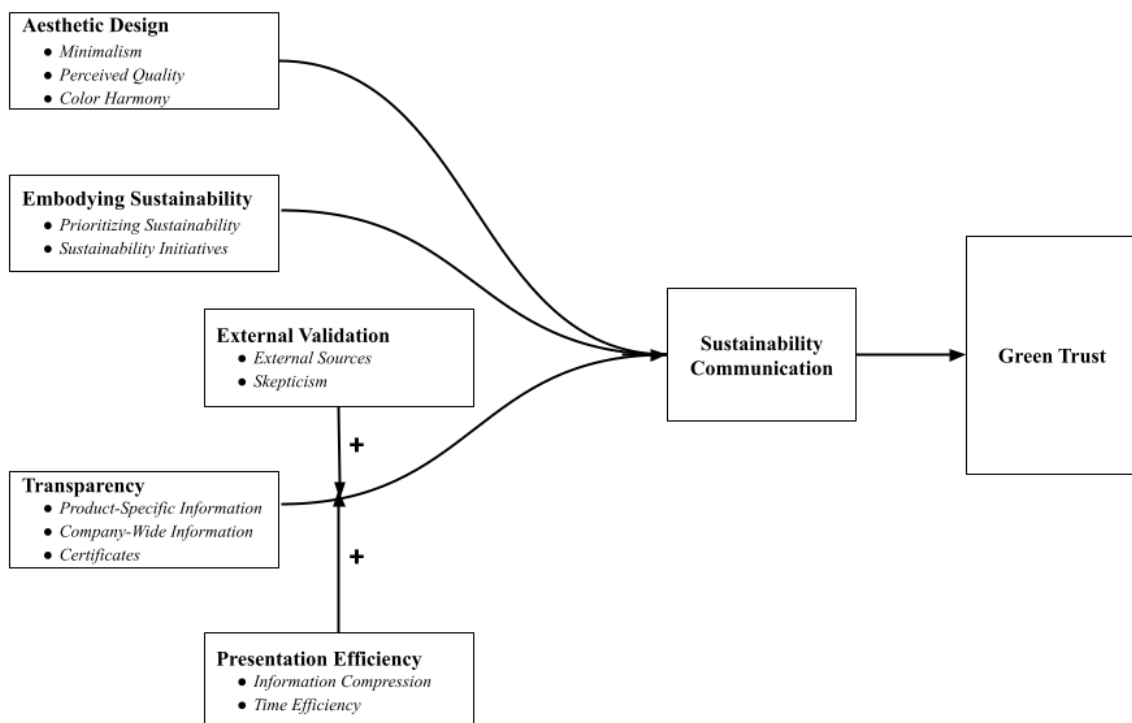
In conducting the interviews, it became evident that participants often revised their initial opinions about the brands, after more thoroughly exploring the websites and acquiring deeper knowledge about the companies, especially in the case of Etiko. Initial impressions of a firm's sustainability communication were heavily influenced by the *aesthetic design* of the websites, and the extent to which they *embody sustainability*. *Transparency* was emphasized through the inclusion of *product-specific information*, *company-wide information* and the *certifications* that are evident on each webpage. *External validation* interconnects respondents' need and appreciation of external sources on the websites to minimize skepticism. Finally, the findings detailed how the *presentation efficiency* of information in a compressed and *time-efficient* manner is crucial to improve the *transparency* of sustainability communication on websites. In summary, the findings detail how communicating sustainability through these user-preferred elements influence the building of green trust.

## 5 | Discussion and Conclusion

Having presented the findings and the themes that were derived from the interviews, they will now be discussed and contrasted with the existing literature. The results were finally synthesized into a proposed model, explaining the connections between the recognized aggregate dimensions. Thus, with the help of the developed model, the following discussion will attempt to answer the research question: “*How do website design elements communicating sustainability generate customer green trust in online fashion shopping?*”, and its two sub questions:

1. *What website design elements communicate sustainability in online fashion shopping?*
2. *How do those website design elements generate green trust in online fashion shopping?*

### 5.1 | The Proposed Explanatory Model



**Figure 2:** A Proposed Explanatory Model of Building Green Trust through Sustainability Communicating Website Design Elements

In developing the model, the aggregate dimensions identified are classified to belong to two different categories. First, there are the *contributing website design elements*, including *Aesthetic Design*, *Embodying Sustainability*, and *Transparency*. The findings presented these three components as fundamental if a company aims to communicate its sustainability. If a brand includes each of the specified sustainability elements in their website design, they will successfully communicate sustainability.

The second category is *improving website design elements* — External Validation and Presentation Efficiency. The two elements are not necessarily directly communicating sustainability, but they significantly influence the way the brands' transparent information is perceived and to what extent it is understood. It was realized that although the brand could present its sustainability information transparently, it had to do it in an efficient manner as well as provide the consumers an opportunity to externally verify the information. The presence of these two components positively affect the information transparency of a company and the extent to which it succeeds in communicating sustainability.

The last connection in the model between Sustainability Communication and Green Trust demonstrates the clear finding in our study showing that by accessing the full sustainability information on the website, the potential consumer would gain trust for the brand. This study not only identified three contributing and two improving website design elements, but also explored potential consumers' thought processes, their subjective understandings of the brands' sustainability communication, and how or why that leads them to trust. Synthesizing the identified elements with previous literature this study established the effects of the presence or absence of certain website design elements.

First, implicating components communicating sustainability stimulates a sense of genuineness and displays an honest effort to the customer, leading to a trustworthy image. Secondly, a lack of specific informational or explanatory elements rather forges suspicion on the consumer's behalf, which is often a consequence of individual preconceptions and beliefs. The third main analytical component to the second sub-question is that how a website is designed will affect whether a

customer accesses the information at all. If they do not, whether it is due to inefficient navigation design or cognitive overload, the company has failed to communicate their sustainability. The consumer will have nothing to base their opinion on and will therefore not develop green trust for the brand.

Lastly, this study explored the subjective thought and perspectives of different individuals. Therefore, it did not determine objectively must-have website design elements as different persons perceive both sustainability and website design in various ways. Ultimately, the identified elements only improve the sustainability communication in the sense that the absence of the element would worsen the sustainability communication from one perspective, but that the company could still succeed in communicating through other elements and still foster green trust. This was proven when interviewees distrusted a company because of its aesthetics but when they had accessed other sustainability disclosure, they ended up trusting in it. Therefore, the following elements determine the *extent* to which sustainability is communicated.

### 5.1.1 | *Contributing Website Design Elements*

*Aesthetic design* appears to be one of the most significant website design elements when it comes to a company's sustainability communication. Adoption of certain visual design elements into brand websites incites consumer associations to sustainability. For instance, in alignment with Aslam's (2006) study on color theory, customers experience different psychological associations with different colors. Although there are some discrepancies in research regarding colors associated with sustainability, this study confirmed that blue is associated with nature and conveys a more sustainable image than red. Further, in agreement with Barchiesi et al. (2016), Seo and Scammon (2017), and Lim et al (2020), the recognized connection between green and the environment and the obvious absence of green on the webpages suggests that a website design including green, blue and natural colors communicates a sustainable ambiance through effective emotional branding (Pichierri & Pino, 2023).

The aesthetic appeal of the web page appears to leave a strong first impression on customers. As mentioned, specific aesthetic design elements associated with sustainability is a relatively

unexplored topic, in need of further research. Although the CSR Communication Framework (Parker et al. 2010) identifies website design elements explicitly stating sustainability, this study reveals the significance of the overarching aesthetic of the web page, due to underlying individual associations to sustainability. A minimalistic and modern design affects the overall sustainability image and thus trustworthiness of the brand and the opposite could potentially drive customers away. Therefore, it is crucial for companies who base their businesses on sustainable practices to project that through their website's visual appeal.

In connection to the first element, *Embodying Sustainability* on the website also emerged as a contributing website design element. Just as Hetze and Winistörfer (2016) suggested in their research on corporate websites, this study confirmed an appreciation for straightforward sustainability communication on the brands home page, indicating that this preference extends from corporate to brand websites. A company's orientation towards sustainability should be largely prioritized in the sense that it should be presented among the first things you observe when you enter their website, such as The Common Good Company's 'Sustainability' tab on the top navigation bar. Similarly, prioritizing sales promotions on the first page confuses customers' perception of the company's main aim. Ensuring that a company aligns with its mission and vision through website design is an agreement with the Orientation aspect of the OSEC model developed by Siano et al. (2016). Thus, the information which a company chooses to highlight significantly affects a consumer's perception of the firm, meaning that it, from a consumer's perspective, reflects the intended brand image.

Furthermore, acknowledging the lack of knowledge about certificates, the sustainability markers still offer a positive impression, and, in line with Adamkiewicz et al. (2022), convey a higher quality of a brand's products. Moreover, integrating Cause-Related Marketing in the form of presenting take-back programs and other compensation programs websites can indeed increase satisfaction. Agreeing with previous CRM literature by Dathe et al. (2024), companies' active engagements in sustainability-related causes show a corporate effort aside from making profit. A combination of previous literature and this study's findings indicates that when a company shows the customer that they care for the cause, a form of green brand image is augmented, contributing to the sustainability communication.



The third contributing element for communicating sustainability surfaced as *Transparency*. Just as Fu et al. (2022) acknowledged, to generate green trust, the marketing and information must be transparent. Sufficient information allows for the consumer to exit the wondering stage regarding the different sustainability-related company claims. Referring back to Hetze and Winistörfer's (2016) claim that omitting information is a form of communication itself, insufficient information about, for instance, production, emissions, ethical considerations, packaging and shipping may raise customers' concern, especially to *why* the company has not mentioned it. Therefore, providing detailed sustainability information is required for the customer to make an appropriate assessment of the brand and products.

Similarly, more transparency is necessary when it comes to certifications. Although certifications serve as means of transparency themselves, in the sense that their presence engenders *some* green trust, it is nowadays not transparent enough to just showcase symbols. In agreement with Badhwar et al. (2024), and Tran and Uehara (2023) certifications must be explained and legitimized due to the consumers' general lack of knowledge. The need for transparent information aligns with Parker et al.'s (2010) CSR Communication Framework, which argues for the importance of clear and accessible communication regarding a firm's vision, mission, and policies to reduce suspicions of greenwashing. This study found, indeed, that detailed sustainability information helps build green trust.

An evident wondering stage of the consumers indicated that there's a gap in the sustainability communication leading to discontent. However, it is possible for a consumer's perception of a company to change, as they progressively access more sustainability information. Even if the first impression of the company's visual design may raise suspicion, accessing the sustainability information can convince the consumer to gain green trust towards the brand. Following, one may assume that to resolve this problem, the website should simply disclose all potentially desired information. Nonetheless this appeared not to be the case. While full transparency is required, the manner in which the information is presented might be definite, which will be discussed in the section below.

### 5.1.2 | *Improving Website Design Elements*

For transparent sustainability information to properly reach the end target receiver, the customer, it must consider *Presentation Efficiency*. Jacoby et al. (1974) motivated the efficiency of disclosure due to its informational overload, and in accordance with Caldiroli et al.'s (2017) application of the Cognitive Load Theory on websites, consumers certainly prefer a reduced information load on webpages. Excessively long texts overwhelm customers as it requires additional information processing and is time-consuming. Keeping informational texts short and using icons and pictures for explanations facilitates effective communication. This implies a more comprehensive presentation, urging the target receiver to understand the material. In the case of cognitive overload there is a risk that the consumer will not even attempt to apprehend the information provided, regardless of its transparency, meaning the sustainability communication would be unsuccessful.

Therefore, by acknowledging the time-efficiency perspective and the inertia of today's consumerism, there is a need for sustainability communication to be simplified. This, again, agrees with Szócs and Schubert's (2023) study of reducing search costs, leading to a higher probability of the customer finding the right information. However, it must at the same time include enough information for the company to be perceived as transparent. Thus, brands must find methods of producing information without causing a cognitive overload. Consumers appear to appreciate the possibility to *choose* the amount of information they need by, for instance, clicking on links or tabs leading them to more detailed descriptions rather than being forced upon reading and dissecting long paragraphs.

Due to the existent greenwashing awareness and suspicion among today's fashion consumers, this study identified *External Validation* as an improving website design element. Contradicting Copeland and Masa's (2022) research saying that Generation Z are satisfied with the company's website as a source, this study identified that, in fact, potential customers desire external sources. This is due to the highly present suspicion and skepticism of consumers, which is partly connected to their knowledge of the fashion industry's bad environmental and social reputation.

There is a cost associated with some transparency, just as Fu et al. (2022) claimed, as it may increase suspicion.

Nonetheless, if a company identifies a piece of information which would potentially heighten skepticism, they should explain it more thoroughly, rather than omit it. For instance, as certifications need to be clarified, this could be done by referring to the organizations for further explanations, which gives the consumer the opportunity to voluntarily deepen their knowledge. Emphasizing external validation further aligns with the OSEC model by Siano et al. (2016), particularly the Structure dimension, highlighting the need for tools that support the credibility of sustainability information. By including references and links to external websites, blogs, reviews, and social media, the fashion brand demonstrates an effort to support their claims and rebut consumers' various negative preconceptions.

Synthesizing the arguments above, there are three main elements contributing to a brand's sustainability communication through which they establish green trust. However in some cases there is a need for additional precautionary measures – improving elements – for the contributions of the former components to be fully successful. The model suggests that incorporating the aforementioned elements increases the extent to which sustainability is communicated, and therefore affects the effectiveness of green trust building.

## **5.2 | Theoretical Contributions**

This study makes theoretical contributions in a threefold manner. Firstly, the paper contributes to the gap in the literature by developing a model that explores the establishment of green trust by communicating sustainability through website design elements. This further cross-fertilizes the two major streams of current literature: (a) studies that examine the relationship between website design elements and trust and (b) studies that focus on sustainability communication, not always on websites, and find it to be an antecedent to green trust.

Such a model is particularly relevant in the fashion context, given that consumers are more sustainability aware (Noubar et al. 2023), and thus, international fashion firms must cater to

these interests to remain competitive and sustain profitability (Brauns, 2015; Martínez, 2015). Thus, secondly, the paper contributes to further filling literature gaps by catering to the recognized needs of expanding research into the online fashion industry (Cavazos-Arroyo et al. 2024) and evaluating sustainability communication on brand websites, as opposed to corporate websites (Xu & Shi, 2023; Hetze & Winistörfer, 2016). Within these contexts, the findings suggest that *embodying sustainability* contributes to sustainability communication, along with *transparency*, which may be improved by considering *presentation efficiency* and *external validation*.

Finally, this study's most vital contribution adds to the recent studies that have developed operational models for evaluating sustainability communication on websites by linking user preferences and needs to green trust establishment. The need to consider users' subjective perceptions surrounding sustainability communication on websites has been underscored to better user experience and further understand trust building (Srisathan et al. 2024). In this process, this study links the *aesthetic design* of a website to the communication of sustainability and, therefore, a contributing factor to green trust building. To the authors' knowledge, this is novel, as such a relationship has never been found. Thus, it remains imperative for academia to consider the impacts that minimalism, perceived quality, and color harmony have on the first impressions of green trust building in brand websites' visual design.

### **5.3 | Practical Implications**

The findings of this study suggest practical implications for managers. The importance of the brand website as a tool for green marketing is highlighted extensively, indicating that international fashion firms should invest time and resources into optimizing their website design to leverage sustainability for sales. This thesis provides best practices that should be considered in website design to increase the effectiveness of sustainability communication and the extent to which green trust is established.

In particular, this study finds that *aesthetic design*, *embodying sustainability*, and *transparency* contribute to green trust through sustainability communication. The latter may be improved

through communicating in an understandable and visual manner to reduce cognitive overload – *presentation efficiency* – and ensuring that people believe sustainability claims with positive perception – *external validation*. These findings contribute to a more holistic understanding of what users perceive as a website’s most critical sustainability communicating green trust antecedents. With these insights, international fashion firms that emphasize sustainability and their management must more effectively optimize their brand website design to reflect this commitment and affect green trust in the customer, prompting them to take the next step in the customer journey: purchasing a product in the ‘conative’ stage (Martínez, 2015).

#### **5.4 | Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Although the paper provides valuable theoretical contributions and practical implications for international fashion firms on green trust establishment through sustainability communication on websites, there are some limitations. Firstly, the paper is limited to the fashion industry. While this delimitation was in place to enable interviewees to respond in a homogenous context, the findings are only generalizable within this context. Secondly, the paper is limited as the sample of respondents was restricted to Sweden. Thus, a direction for future research includes research designs that examine cross-cultural contexts, especially as such research that captures the respondents’ subjective reality would be novel. Future qualitative studies could uncover other user preferences that should be catered towards in brand website design in these other contexts.

Thirdly, interviewees mentioned throughout interviews that certain elements establish a first impression of the firm’s green image, which may cause them to continue or terminate the customer purchase journey. While the interview design employed in this study forced respondents to continue regardless of these first impressions, future studies could expand this model by understanding how primary green trust impressions contribute to the retention of customers on websites. In conjunction with this, studies can also examine the ‘conative’ stage of purchasing (Martínez, 2015), to include the economic aspect of the triple bottom line (Liao et al. 2022). Lastly, the theoretical model developed based on the study’s findings should be quantitatively analyzed to test the proposed causal relationships between the contributing elements and the moderating effects of the improving elements.

## 6 | References

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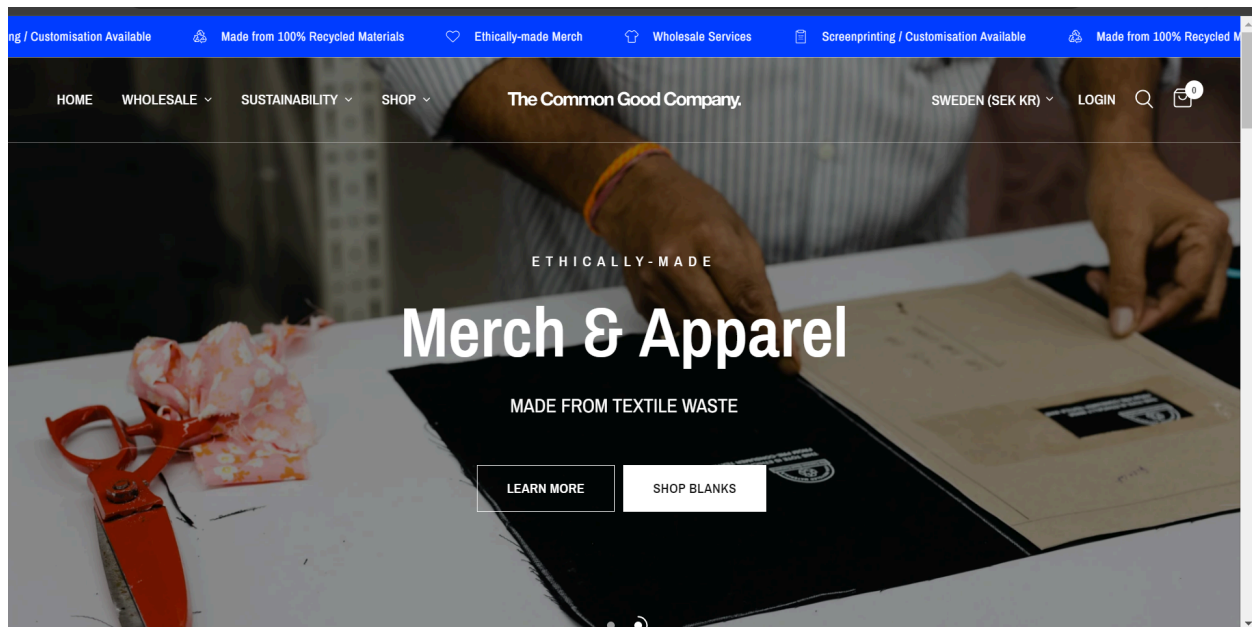
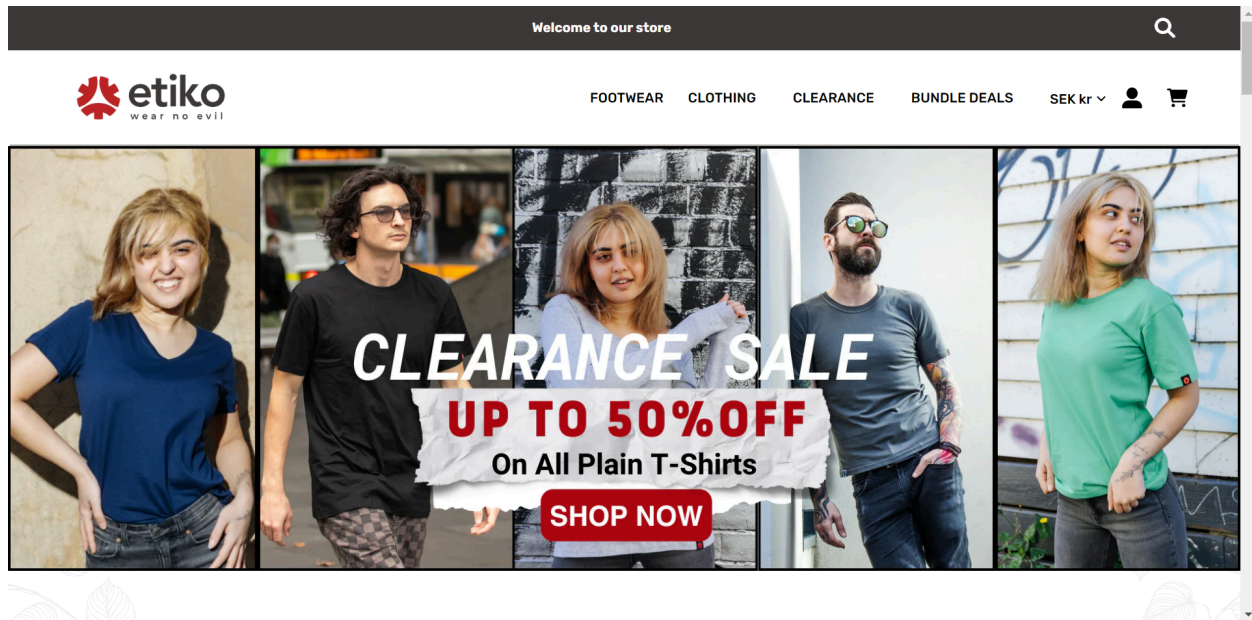
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# Appendix

## Appendix A | The Homepages of Etiko and The Common Good Company





**Appendix B** | Table of Interviewee Demographics

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Length of Interview</b>	<b>Mode of Interview</b>
Interviewee 1	Bachelor's Student	22	42 min.	In person
Interviewee 2	Bachelor's Student	21	44 min.	In person
Interviewee 3	Bachelor's Student	21	43 min.	In person
Interviewee 4	Bachelor's Student	22	39 min	In person
Interviewee 5	Bachelor's Student	25	50 min.	In person
Interviewee 6	Bachelor's Student	25	56 min.	In person
Interviewee 7	Bachelor's Student	21	42 min.	In person
Interviewee 8	Bachelor's Student	21	58 min.	In person
Interviewee 9	Master's Student	27	50 min.	In person
Interviewee 10	Master's Student	24	46 min.	In person

## Appendix C | Interview Guide for the Semi-structured Interviews

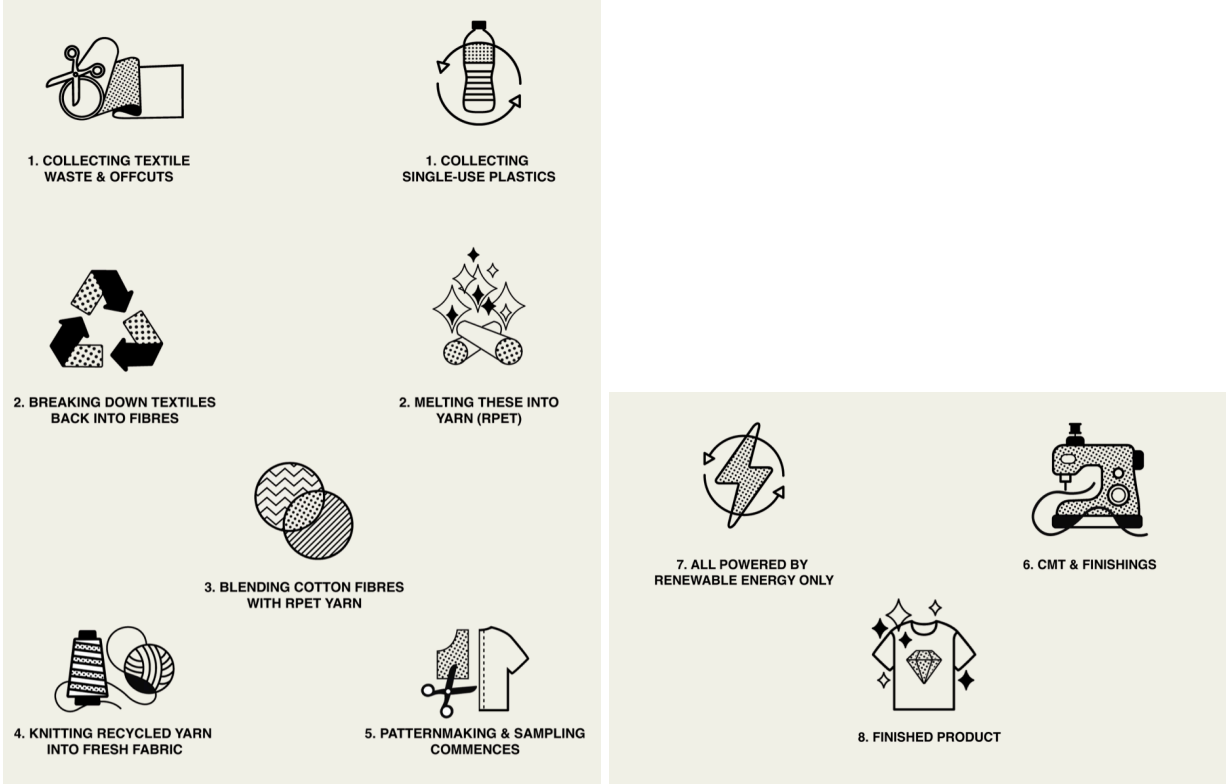
nr	Question
	<b>PART 1 – demographics</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Age?</li> <li>• Education?</li> </ul>
	<b>PART 2 – Background and Perception of Sustainability and Fashion</b>
1	<p>Can you tell us briefly how you perceive sustainability? What does the term sustainability mean according to you?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What words or terms do you associate with sustainability?</li> <li>- What does sustainable fashion mean to you?</li> <li>- Are you familiar with any certifications or symbols that denote sustainable practices in fashion?</li> </ul>
2	Is there anything in particular on a website that you notice in case you are shopping online?
3	<p>Before purchasing a product how much research do you typically do into the product or the brand?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Are you aware of where on a website you can find sustainability related information?</li> </ul>
4	In what way do you think information about the company’s sustainability initiatives, goals and certifications affects your purchasing tendencies?
	<b>PART 3 – Sustainability Communication, Website, and Purchase Decisions</b>
5	Why did you choose that website to start with?
6	What are the key elements on the website that capture your attention during your first few seconds of browsing? (one at a time)

	“Now, let's move to the other website.” <i>Ask question 6 again.</i>
	<b>Evaluation of <u>Visual</u> Elements in Website Design</b>
7	Which of these websites do you think better visually expresses sustainability?
8	To what extent do you think the aesthetic features of a website affects the communication of a firm’s sustainability?
9	How do you think the visual appeal connected to sustainability of a website affects your decision to purchase something?
	<b>Evaluation of <u>Information</u> Elements in Website Design</b>
10	Now, could you find some information about the company’s sustainable practices? Once again, talk us through your processes.
11	Considering your experience with the website, did you find it easy to navigate and access the information you needed? Were there any confusing aspects?
12	In what way do you think the sustainability information that you've spoken about affects your willingness to make a purchase?  <i>Repeat 10-12 with the other website.</i>
13	Could you tell us some sustainability information specifically about this product?
14	Is there anything else you would like to know sustainability-wise about the product?
15	How do you think the product-specific information reflects the company’s sustainability purposes as you’ve perceived it?
16	For what reason would you, or would you not consider that this product is sustainable?

17	<p>In what way do you think the sustainability information of the products affects your willingness to make a purchase?</p> <p><i>Repeat 13-17 with the other website.</i></p>
18	<p>How do you think the company promotes community interaction through the website?</p>
19	<p>Does accessing this information improve your understanding of the company's initiatives?</p> <p><i>Repeat questions 18 to 19 with the other website.</i></p>
20	<p>How do the websites encourage consumers to act on sustainability beyond just making a purchase (like participating in recycling programs)?</p>
<p><b>Evaluation of <u>Navigation</u> Elements in Website Design</b></p>	
21	<p>What is your emotional reaction to the layouts in front of you?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What exactly in the layout/what led you to this emotion?</li> </ul>
22	<p>According to you, what information do you think the site prioritizes?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What on the website makes you think that?</li> <li>- Is there anything in the layout that makes you notice sustainability?</li> <li>- Does the prioritization of information to you show how much a company is oriented towards sustainability?</li> <li>- On which of these two websites do you find sustainability related information easier to access? Why?</li> </ul>
23	<p>Based on your observations, does the design of the website motivate you to explore more about the products or the brand?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Why or why not?</li> </ul>

24	In what way do you think the ease of navigating the website and finding information about sustainability affects how willing you may be to purchase a product?
	<b>Getting a Holistic Understanding</b>
25	<p><i>One website at a time:</i></p> <p>Based on your experience using the website and considering its visual appeal, navigation and information, do you trust the brand in terms of sustainability?</p>
26	<p>Reflecting on both websites, which one do you feel communicates its sustainability initiatives more effectively?</p> <p>- What led you to this conclusion?</p>
27	<p>If you could change any aspects of these websites to better reflect sustainable practices, what would they be (and why)?</p>
28	<p>If you were given the chance to purchase an item from one of these websites, which one would you choose to purchase from (the last question to ask)?</p> <p>- And why?</p>

**Appendix D** | Icons on The Common Good Company's Materials Page Explaining the Recycling Process



## Appendix E | Statement of Authorship

Hereby we confirm that this thesis was written by Yeganeh Ranjbar, Sofija Laurencikaite, and Sanjay Shriram Ganapathy Subramanian. The contents of this thesis are ascribed to all three authors.

## Appendix F | Artificial Intelligence (AI) Statement

Three AI tools were utilized in the process of completing this Bachelor's thesis: ChatGPT 4.0, Otter.ai, and Grammarly. The use of each tool will be explained below. None of these AI tools were used to co-author any section related to the thesis.

ChatGPT 4.0 was employed in three manners: as a thesaurus, as a tool to combine sentences, and in performing citations. The example prompts below disclose how exactly this tool was used in each of these functions. It should be noted that the tool was used throughout the paper to perform these tasks, however, in the case of combined sentences, was then further modified by the author.

- *What are synonyms for furthermore?*
- *Please combine the following sentences: All except for two interviewees expressed their concern about the clothes being in India. This was due to their preconceptions of India as not being sustainable, and the country's wage standards.*
- *Please convert the following source from Chicago style to Harvard: Siano, Alfonso, Francesca Conte, Sara Amabile, Agostino Vollero, and Paolo Piciocchi. 2016. "Communicating Sustainability: An Operational Model for Evaluating Corporate Websites" Sustainability 8, no. 9: 950. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su8090950>*

Otter.ai, as explained in Section 3.4 was used to record and transcribe interviews. Once the software produced transcripts, they were manually cleaned up by authors. This was done by comparing the AI generated transcripts to the recordings of the interviews, as the software does not accurately capture the participants' responses, especially when speech is slurred, fast, or when respondents have heavy accents. It should be noted here that the participants consented to the usage of this software.

Finally, Grammarly was used by the authors in certain parts of the paper to ensure the use of proper grammar. In particular, it was employed in the following sections:

- 1 | Introduction
- 2.3 | Website Design
- 3.5 | Research Quality
- 3.6 | Methodological Limitations and Ethical Considerations
- 3.7 | Chapter Summary
- 5.2 | Theoretical Contributions
- 5.3 | Practical Implications
- 5.4 | Limitations and Directions for Future Research