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The Exploration of Green Blushing in the Fashion Industry

A Case Study of Kappahl

by

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Abstract

Sustainability communication within the fashion industry remains constrained despite a growing focus on sustainability initiatives by brands. This master's thesis investigates this constraint, often referred to as 'green blushing'. Using qualitative research methods, this study examines the phenomenon through a case study of the Swedish fashion brand Kappahl. The findings reveal various factors contributing to Kappahl's limited communication about its sustainability efforts. These include prioritizing profit as the primary goal, perceiving sustainability as a new standard rendering communication unnecessary, struggling to engage consumers due to their limited interest and understanding of complex sustainability issues, and the fear of being labeled as a 'greenwasher', exacerbated by the fashion industry's poor reputation. As green blushing impedes transparency, brands are advised to refrain from it. A promising solution is the Digital Product Passport (DPP), slated for implementation by the European Union by 2030. Kappahl has initiated a pilot study for the DPP, signaling a proactive approach to enhancing sustainability communication. While this study offers valuable insights into green blushing, further research is necessary to generalize findings and explore its manifestations across diverse industries.

Key words: Case Study Research, Sustainability Communication, Green Blushing, Green Hushing, Consumer Education, Digital Product Passport (DPP)

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Table of Contents

1	Introduction	1
2	Literature Review	3
2.1	<i>Sustainability in the Fashion Industry</i>	3
2.2	<i>Greenwashing, Green Hushing and Green Blushing</i>	5
2.3	<i>Consumers Perspective</i>	7
2.4	<i>Consumer Education</i>	8
3	Theoretical Review	10
3.1	<i>Translation Theory</i>	10
3.2	<i>Information Dissemination Theories</i>	11
4	Methodology	13
4.1	<i>Research Design</i>	13
4.2	<i>Case Study: Kappahl</i>	14
4.3	<i>Data Collection</i>	15
4.4	<i>Data Analysis</i>	17
4.5	<i>Limitations of the Research Methodology</i>	18
5	Results	19
5.1	<i>Kappahl's Identity</i>	20
5.2	<i>Green Blushing</i>	21
5.3	<i>Kappahl's Communication</i>	22
5.4	<i>Viewpoint on Consumers</i>	25
5.5	<i>Digital Product Passport</i>	26
6	Data Analysis	28
6.1	<i>Kappahl is under-communicating its sustainability efforts</i>	28
6.2	<i>You are easily criticized and seen as a hypocrite</i>	29
6.3	<i>Consumers lack interest and knowledge</i>	30
6.4	<i>The Digital Product Passport will drive changes</i>	31
6.5	<i>Kappahl's employees are the embodiment of its values and mission</i>	32
6.6	<i>The dusk of sustainability communication?</i>	32
7	Discussion and Conclusion	33
8	Limitations and Future Research	35
9	References	36

1 Introduction

The fashion industry is known for being one of the most ecologically unsustainable sectors. Only less than one percent of fashion textiles get recycled, and every second, a truckload of items ends up in landfills or incinerated somewhere across the globe. Fashion contributes between three to eight percent of global greenhouse gas emissions, highlighting its significant environmental footprint (McKinsey, 2024). This issue stems from the industry's conventional linear approach, where clothes are made, used, and thrown away (BCG Global, 2023).

In the face of the climate crisis posing a threat to Europe and the world, the age of the fashion industry regulating its sustainability practices on its own is coming to an end. New regulations across different regions could significantly affect both consumers and fashion companies. Brands and manufacturers must adapt their business models to embrace these upcoming changes (McKinsey, 2024). One of the recently proposed initiatives is the European Commission's 'European Green Deal'. It holds the potential to transform the EU into the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. All 27 Member States committed to following a set of proposals to make the EU a resource-efficient, competitive, and modern economy that ensures no net emissions of greenhouse gases (European Commission, 2021).

One of the European Green Deal's proposals that has the potential to facilitate sustainability efforts in the fashion industry is the Digital Product Passport (World Business Council for Sustainable Development, 2024). A Digital Product Passport (DPP) is an electronic register of a product's sustainability data. It provides information about all of the stages of a product's lifecycle. Data is digitally stored and brought to the stakeholders through a QR code. The objective is to foster a transition to a circular economy by optimizing the product life cycle, helping consumers make sustainable purchasing decisions, and allowing authorities to verify compliance with legal directives (European Commission, 2021).

Despite sustainability becoming a prioritized factor in the fashion industry, many consumers are still skeptical about companies' environmental and social efforts. As communication about sustainability grows, the public becomes more educated about this important topic (Bringé, 2023). People are often concerned that some companies might not fully share their environmental efforts, possibly to improve their image. Such concerns stem from the fashion industry's generally poor reputation and the history of past corporate wrongdoings of certain actors that affected the entire sector (Leonidou & Skarmeas, 2017). Moreover, with the rise of green products and services, there has been an increase in instances of 'greenwashing', where companies exaggerate their environmental efforts (Szabo & Webster, 2021). Stakeholders' skepticism combined with the industry's reputation and greenwashing laid the groundwork for the emergence of a new phenomenon called 'green blushing'. It refers to the organizations hesitating to talk about their sustainability goals and initiatives, even if they are attainable and well-intentioned (Visram, 2023). Both greenwashing and green blushing go against the principle of transparency, making it challenging for consumers to access accurate information.

Since green blushing is a relatively new concept, there has been limited research conducted on this topic. Falchi et al. (2022) conducted a comprehensive literature review on green blushing supported by anecdotal evidence. Several other researchers have also explored this topic from a theoretical point of view (Font et al., 2017; Visram, 2023). However, no case studies or empirical research have been conducted on this phenomenon so far.

Hence, this master's thesis seeks to examine the presence of green blushing in real-world scenarios to directly observe its occurrence. Our aim is to qualitatively explore this phenomenon, illustrated through a case study of the Swedish fashion brand Kappahl. Key areas of focus encompass understanding the motivations behind under-communicating sustainability initiatives and evaluating the risks linked with green blushing. Ultimately, we aim to enrich the understanding of green blushing within the fashion industry. To accomplish this, we pose the following research question:

How can we understand green blushing from a company perspective in the fashion industry?

Our dissertation will commence with a review of relevant literature, presenting research connected to green blushing and sustainability communication. Subsequently, we will explore some theoretical frameworks, focusing on various theories that provide valuable insights into the challenges faced by fashion brands when communicating sustainability initiatives. Following this, we will outline the methodology section, detailing the research approach used to understand green blushing through our case study of Kappahl, including a comprehensive description of the fashion brand. We will then present the data results, including quotes and interpretations. Subsequent to this, the data analysis chapter will elucidate the thematic analysis of the collected data, aiming to highlight areas of agreement and potential refinement in accordance with existing literature and theoretical frameworks. Finally, the study will conclude with a discussion and conclusion, addressing the research question, discussing study limitations, and proposing directions for future research.

2 Literature Review

In the upcoming section, we explore the relevant literature surrounding the challenges fashion brands encounter concerning under-communicating their sustainability efforts. Beginning with a thorough overview, we delve into the complexities of sustainability within the fashion industry, exploring various conceptual frameworks and emphasizing the significance of both external and internal sustainability communication strategies. Subsequently, we examine the phenomena of greenwashing, green hushing, and green blushing. Following this, we investigate consumers' perspectives on sustainability and their engagement with educational initiatives aimed at promoting sustainable practices.

2.1 Sustainability in the Fashion Industry

Over recent decades, sustainability has surged in popularity within the fashion industry (Alevizou et al., 2016; Bringé, 2023; Henninger, 2015; Watson & Yan, 2013). Not only is there a growing demand for sustainable fashion, but the discourse surrounding the topic is also flourishing. This trend is primarily driven by heightened awareness among both consumers and businesses regarding the industry's environmental and social impacts.

The concept of sustainability is grounded on three primary pillars, as outlined by Mao et al. (2019), alongside other scholars (Frischknecht et al., 2012; Guion, 2020; Safdie, 2024). These pillars encompass the social, environmental, and economic dimensions, each having its distinct values. The social pillar revolves around principles advocating for equality, workers' rights, and the elimination of social exclusion and discrimination. It prioritizes stakeholder well-being and fosters solidarity (Safdie, 2024). The economic pillar underscores companies' roles in fostering economic development and growth while concurrently alleviating environmental risks associated with their operations (Guion, 2020). And third, the environmental pillar, often the foremost consideration, encompasses all aspects related to the environment and climate (Mao et al., 2019). It targets the reduction of carbon emissions, overall waste, water pollution, and other factors driving climate change (Frischknecht et al., 2012).

Although the various pillars of sustainability provide different approaches to sustainable production, they may not necessarily render it more practical for consumers. Hence, we will delve into additional facets that offer further clarity on sustainability. One such concept, clarified by Khandelwal et al. (2023), is circularity. They posit it as a key solution for enhancing sustainability in the fashion industry, advocating for the establishment of closed-loop systems wherein textiles are reintegrated into the value chain. This approach extends the lifespan of materials and optimizes their value, ensuring that no garment becomes waste. Circular practices are closely intertwined with the product life cycle (Kominos, 2003), wherein items are reused

in alternative ways within the supply chain, thereby prolonging their usefulness. Puddu (2024) also underscores the growing significance of circular supply chains, emphasizing their role in bolstering sustainability within the fashion sector. These chains prioritize maximizing product and material utilization through strategies such as reuse and recycling, simultaneously addressing waste and pollution through innovative design approaches.

Puddu (2024) and Khandelwal et al. (2023) concur that traceability emerges as another significant concept within the realm of fashion supply chain sustainability. By furnishing stakeholders with comprehensive data spanning all stages of the product life cycle, traceability facilitates the identification of inefficiencies, management of production or post-consumer waste, and mitigation of financial and reputational risks (Henninger, 2015). Moreover, it ensures credibility and compliance, empowering fashion industry participants to transition towards a circular economy through informed decision-making and strategic partnerships. Henninger's study (2015) even suggests that traceability holds greater value and significance compared to standardized sustainability labels due to the common lack of knowledge and trust associated with these labels. Puddu (2024) aligns with this viewpoint, highlighting the potential abuse of labels or certifications when unsupported by other organizations or authorities. Thus, genuine material tracking enables companies to substantiate their labels' authenticity, serving as a fundamental driver of sustainability practices (Thorisdottir & Johannsdottir, 2019). Authenticity not only enhances perceived value and quality in consumers' minds but also bolsters sustainability claims. However, given the vast and complex nature of many fashion brand supply chains, achieving full traceability poses challenges, raising doubts about their ability to trace every material back to its source (Henninger, 2015).

Bringé (2023) asserts that transparency represents another crucial concept intertwined with sustainability. For a company aiming to assume greater responsibility, transparency should extend from its initial samples to the final garments displayed on racks. This comprehensive transparency not only fosters authenticity and reliability but also enables consumers to make informed choices. According to Alevizou et al. (2016), transparency is indispensable as it elucidates the company's identity and practices to consumers, allowing stakeholders to scrutinize production processes and affirm the company's commitment to openness. However, it is important to note that while a fashion brand may promote traceability and transparency, it does not guarantee sustainability; rather, it offers buyers a better basis for assessing sustainability.

Altogether sustainability is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. However, thanks to higher awareness of the industry's social and environmental footprint fashion brands increasingly often engage in efforts to create circular supply chains, provide full traceability, and become transparent. A crucial part of this process is communicating these efforts to stakeholders, educating them about the company's sustainability initiatives, and empowering them to hold brands accountable. As a result of that companies engage in so-called sustainability communication. It refers to the strategies and messaging utilized to share information about organizations' sustainable practices, initiatives, and objectives. It serves as a vital link between businesses, governments, and individuals, playing a crucial role in increasing awareness and fostering collective efforts towards achieving sustainability goals (Thomas, 2024). However, according to Kaner (2021) the success of sustainable communication relies on upholding credibility. When companies ambiguously employ green terminology and messaging

solely for marketing purposes without integrating them across all aspects of their operations, it damages the trust between consumers and the brand, consequently diminishing the brand's value. Hence, it is imperative to adopt a transparent and approachable communication that conveys every facet of production, distribution, sales, and consumption. This fosters the development of environmentally responsible businesses and strengthens relationships with consumers based on trust and authenticity.

Moreover, it is imperative to acknowledge the significance of internal communication on corporate sustainability. Research by Falchi et al. (2022) suggests that employees who recognize their company's commitment to environmental responsibility are likely to be motivated to contribute in ways that reinforce this ethos, such as engaging more actively and innovatively in eco-friendly initiatives. Hence, it is vital for companies to not merely promote their sustainable strategies externally but embody these values in their daily operations internally (Bryan, 2023). Employees value authenticity and tangible actions above simple language filled with trendy sustainability terms. Effective internal communication is also essential for keeping employees well informed about ongoing sustainability efforts and objectives. Bryan (2023) found that a significant portion of employees lacked a full understanding of their organization's sustainability goals and initiatives. Therefore, company leaders must communicate these aspects comprehensively and ensure that sustainability practices are clearly understood and adhered to throughout the organization. Research also demonstrates that companies with robust internally communicated sustainability practices enjoy benefits such as enhanced employee loyalty, motivation, and overall organizational performance (Casey & Sieber, 2016; Choi & Yu, 2014). This is because it fosters a sense of purpose among employees, leading to heightened engagement. Moreover, this shared commitment to sustainability is likely to attract like-minded business partners, fostering enduring impacts that transcend generations.

2.2 Greenwashing, Green Hushing and Green Blushing

Over recent decades, various stakeholders such as consumers, governments, and investors have been putting pressure on businesses to disclose information regarding their environmental performance and sustainability initiatives (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020). This heightened pressure, coupled with the growing interest in green marketing claims, has led to increased communication and availability of information on sustainability. However, not all of this information accurately represents companies' environmental practices (Szabo & Webster, 2021). Some businesses are exploiting this interest by exaggerating their environmental efforts or making false claims about their sustainability practices. This phenomenon, known as greenwashing, is a significant issue across many industries (Yang et al., 2020). Parguel et al. (2011) defines greenwashing as “the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service”. It occurs when companies with poor environmental performance present misleadingly positive communications about their environmental efforts.

Font et al. (2017) unearthed a novel concept in their examination of sustainability communication within the tourism sector: green hushing. This phenomenon serves as the antithesis to greenwashing, encompassing the withholding of sustainability-related information from both customers and stakeholders. Essentially, it stands for the fact that companies under-communicate their environmental and sustainability efforts. The research revealed that small-scale tourism enterprises in the UK disclosed only 30 percent of their sustainability initiatives, which indicates green hushing. Importantly, the researchers refrain from making value judgments on whether green hushing is positive or negative, maintaining a neutral stance towards the phenomenon.

Other scholars take a more critical stance on green hushing (Dhanani, 2023; Visram, 2023). While acknowledging its opposition to greenwashing, they perceive green hushing as equally harmful, citing three main reasons. Firstly, they argue that by remaining silent about sustainability efforts, companies neglect their responsibility to address significant global issues like climate change and global warming. Given the magnitude of these issues, it is essential for every brand to actively engage in dialogue to influence consumers. Secondly, by withholding information on sustainability practices, customers are deprived of the necessary knowledge to make informed purchasing decisions. Lastly, these authors contend that green hushing can be viewed as a form of greenwashing, allowing firms to hide behind a façade of quiet conscientiousness. They therefore express concern over this new upcoming trend, recognizing the potential of sustainability communication to shape attitudes, inspire action, and foster collaboration.

Then, there is the phenomenon of green blushing. While Falchi et al. (2022) use green blushing and green hushing interchangeably as synonyms, other researchers refrain from employing both terms together (Dhanani, 2023; Font et al., 2017; Szabo & Webster, 2021; Visram, 2023). Research on green blushing generally associates a more positive connotation with the concept. According to Szabo and Webster (2021), some businesses choose to understate their green impact and initiatives for moral reasons. They argue that it is unjust to profit from positive environmental actions and, therefore, opt not to transparently communicate their sustainability efforts. Falchi et al. (2022) also support this positive perspective on green blushing as they say ‘these companies that do green blushing make substantial green achievements but decide not to communicate their greenness’. Moreover, Abhyankar and Selvaraj (2023) and Sonawala (2023) also endorse this favorable view of green blushing, attributing it to a company's good intentions. These positive views on green blushing suggest that firms are not concealing information about their sustainability efforts but rather are more hesitant to share such details.

Despite the uncertainty surrounding the interchangeable use of green hushing and green blushing, the underlying reasons for their existence overlap to some extent. A recurring theme across various studies is the fear among companies of facing criticism and being labeled as ‘greenwashers’ (Abhyankar & Selvaraj, 2023; Dhanani, 2023; Falchi et al., 2022). Additionally, as emphasized by Visram (2023), another significant factor is the uncertainty about when and how to communicate sustainable achievements. Companies often grapple with determining the appropriate timing for such communication: whether it should be before, during, or after the implementation of sustainability efforts. Furthermore, firms may engage in green blushing because they fail to recognize the importance of reporting their green initiatives. Alternatively, a company's strategic priorities may not align with sustainability, leading to a decreased

motivation to communicate sustainability efforts. Abhyankar and Selvaraj (2023) and Dhanani (2023) also underscore two customer-centric reasons. These include the notion that companies may hesitate to promote their sustainability initiatives due to a lack of customer interest and to alleviate customer guilt. When a brand begins discussing sustainability, it may inadvertently trigger feelings of guilt among customers. Therefore, by engaging in green blushing, companies aim to preserve customers' happiness (Dhanani, 2023).

After discussing the primary reasons for green blushing, it becomes pertinent to explore ways to mitigate or avoid its negative consequences. According to Abhyankar and Selvaraj (2023), green blushing can lead to missed opportunities to showcase great sustainability efforts, which could serve as a means to stand out in a competitive market. Demonstrating a strong commitment to sustainability may foster higher customer loyalty, increased employee engagement, and heightened investor interest. Dhanani (2023) outlines four strategies for companies to avoid green blushing. Firstly, companies should prioritize transparency, as every step towards improvement is valued. Secondly, it is crucial to acknowledge that no company is perfect; failure to do so invites criticism. To address this, it is advisable to publish annual sustainability reports that highlight shortcomings and outline meaningful plans for improvement. Thirdly, companies should be mindful of the importance of selecting partners carefully. Lastly, stricter regulations against greenwashing and sustainability communication are on the horizon, so it may be prudent to abide by these regulations and await further developments.

Based on our interviews, we perceive Kappahl's approach not as green hushing but rather as green blushing. Our findings indicate that while Kappahl is actively engaged in sustainability efforts, they face challenges in effectively communicating these initiatives. Therefore, we use the term 'green blushing' to describe their approach, as they are not intentionally hiding information but encountering difficulties in sustainability communication.

2.3 Consumers Perspective

In the last couple of years, there has been a deepened engagement in sustainability among European consumers, as found by research conducted by Granskog et al. (2020). They demand fashion brands act responsibly and take into consideration the social and environmental implications of their business practices. However, it is even more important to younger generations.

According to Reichheld et al. (2023), while both younger and older consumers prioritize brands' competence, such as quality and consistency, younger purchasers place greater emphasis on brands' positive intent, which significantly influences their trust and shopping decisions. When Gen Z and Millennial customers perceive a brand to prioritize its impact on people and the planet, they are 27 percent more inclined to buy from it compared to older generations. This highlights sustainability's significant influence on purchasing decisions within this age group. Given that young consumers will soon hold the majority of purchasing power, it underscores the importance of sustainability for brands aiming to capture this market.

Although young consumers prioritize sustainability, according to Dhawan (2022), only 25 percent of Gen Zers perceive brands as genuinely committed to sustainable endeavors. As true digital natives, young consumers exhibit a heightened level of sophistication and scrutiny towards media consumption compared to any previous generation. Consequently, they are acutely aware of any insincere messaging from companies. Moreover, this demographic is unafraid to publicly denounce a company if they perceive its authenticity to be lacking.

Leonidou and Skarmeas (2017) state that consumer skepticism toward corporate sustainability efforts is on the rise. Society is concerned that companies often share false or incomplete environmental information, earlier described in 2.2 as green washing and green blushing, to manipulate consumer perceptions and improve their own image. This skepticism, often referred to as 'green skepticism,' arises from incidents of corporate wrongdoing, such as financial scandals and environmental disasters. Consequently, more consumers are questioning companies' motives for adopting environmentally friendly practices, and they are unsure about the true environmental benefits of green products (Copeland & Bhaduri, 2019; Leonidou & Skarmeas, 2017).

Despite the sustainability efforts on an organizational and legislative level the final decision often lies in the hands of consumers. Companies and governments, often opt for consumer responsabilization, which stands for transferring responsibility onto individuals to make sustainable choices and put extra effort into weighing all of their consumption decisions (Coffin & Egan-Wyer, 2022). Getting acquainted with all of the sustainability information provided by the company, and based on that, making a purchase decision puts an additional burden on fashion consumers. Gonzales-Arcos et al. (2021) points out that consumers may feel uneasy about interventions that put further responsibility on their daily practices. In return, they can resist them.

However, even when the consumers are provided with feasible sustainable solutions and show interest in them, it does not guarantee that they will adopt sustainable practices. According to White et al. (2019), despite many consumers expressing positive attitudes towards eco-friendly products and services, only a small percentage actually follow through with their purchases. In a recent survey 65 percent expressed a desire to support purpose-driven brands promoting sustainability, but only around 26 percent made such purchases. This disparity between intention and action is commonly referred to as the 'attitude-behavior gap'. Such findings controvert general assumption about consumers increased engagement and interest in sustainability since it does not translate into actual actions and habits.

2.4 Consumer Education

Discussed above issues such as consumer skepticism and resistance or attitude-behavior gap hinder effective sustainability communication and action. Lack of trust in companies and general lack of engagement in sustainable practices may result from insufficient consumer education. Researchers (Goedertier et al., 2023) conducted a study exploring what does sustainability mean in the minds of consumers. They run an online panel of respondents from

seven advanced economies, including France, the UK, Germany, Belgium, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Australia, totaling 5620 participants. The analysis revealed that consumers link sustainability with three main aspects: 'social equality' (like fair wages), 'circularity' (such as recycling), and 'naturalness' (which involves avoiding pesticides and GMOs).

Although the results are satisfactory in a way that they demonstrate that consumers understand sustainability both from the environmental and social perspective they still leave much to be desired. According to Bennetta and Oeppen (2022) many consumers are still uncertain about the concept of sustainability and what defines a brand or product as sustainable. Additionally, researchers suggest that the gap between attitude and behavior often stems from pricing perceptions. This indicates that consumers may not fully grasp the costs associated with creating sustainable garments. To foster change, consumers would benefit from a deeper understanding of supply chain complexities and why sustainable products typically come with higher prices. Study results indicate that consumers are eager to be educated by brands about their sustainability efforts and the impact of their purchasing decisions (Bennetta & Oeppen, 2022). Educating consumers about sustainability can not only facilitate organizations' communication efforts but also has the potential to mitigate the attitude-behavior gap. When consumers grasp the intricacies of supply chain operations and the costs involved in sustainable fashion production, they are more likely to align their attitudes with sustainable behaviors.

3 Theoretical Review

In this section, we will delve into various theories that offer valuable insights into comprehending the topic of this master's dissertation. Each theory is linked in some way to how a fashion brand should communicate its sustainability initiatives. Initially, we will examine the translation theory, which emphasizes the importance of presenting information in an understandable manner. Subsequently, we will discuss information dissemination theories, which highlight that the availability of more information enhances consumers' understanding and exerts a greater influence.

3.1 Translation Theory

An interesting theoretical framework relevant to the challenges posed by effective sustainability communication and implementation of new initiatives such as the DPP is the translation theory. According to Wæraas & Nielsen (2016), translation theory refers to an intricate negotiation process where meanings and claims evolve, gain significance, and are adjusted to the needs and expectations of their recipients.

In her 2022 study, Viciunaite employed translation theory to investigate the extent to which a company's online sustainability communication reflects its sustainable business model within the context of the Norwegian yarn industry, which is a subset of the broader apparel sector. The research collected data from consumer-oriented content presented by Norwegian yarn brands on their websites, newsletters, and social media platforms. Viciunaite (2022) discovered that the notion of sustainability in business is a flexible concept that companies translate into their specific environments as they embrace it. In this way, external ideas of corporate responsibility are adopted into organizational work practices. Internally endorsed notions need to be communicated to the consumers. Presenting sustainability information using familiar or relevant to customers language is necessary for successful communication of the business model elements.

Translation theory holds significance to the topic of this dissertation as it shows that simply offering sustainability data may fall short of making a substantial impact on sustainable consumption practices. Fashion brands should devise methods to convey information to consumers using terms that align with their needs and values. Effectively framing and simplifying complex ideas for the public should be a top priority for companies when communicating their efforts. This imperative extends to internal communication as well, ensuring that all employees are aligned with the latest sustainability initiatives. Thus, the translation of sustainability-related issues into simpler language is essential for both internal and external communications.

3.2 Information Dissemination Theories

There are several theories revolving around providing information and the positive impact of increased data transparency on consumer behavior and approach. One such conceptual framework is the knowledge deficit model. According to Gustafson and Rice (2016) the model suggests that providing more information results in higher levels of public understanding on a specific subject, consequently enhancing attitudes and practices.

In their study, James and Montgomery (2017) discovered that consumer awareness of the clothing supply chain remains limited, with many fashion customers possessing little to no understanding of the origins of their clothing purchases. Despite their familiarity with the retail environment, the journey that each item of clothing undergoes before reaching the point of sale remains obscure to them. This lack of awareness, often termed the 'consumer knowledge deficit' significantly influences their socially responsible purchasing behavior. The clothing supply chain is inherently complex, and with a lack of transparency, obtaining additional information remains challenging for consumers. Without adequate information, consumers are unable to make informed purchasing decisions, rendering their consumer power ineffective. Knowledge empowers consumers to make choices aligned with their values, determining where to shop and which places to avoid.

The knowledge deficit model is relevant to this dissertation's topic since it demonstrates that the better-informed consumers are about sustainability and product specifics, the greater the probability of them developing positive attitudes towards the product and making purchase decisions. It emphasizes how crucial it is for fashion brands to provide consumers with proper sustainability information. Fashion brands that fail to increase consumer knowledge on the topic of sustainability may be unsuccessful in communicating their sustainability efforts, making their messages meaningless and not capable of spurring sustainable change.

Another concept worth exploring is the signaling theory. In marketing interactions, the signaling theory is frequently utilized to explore how buyers and sellers manage information before making a purchase. In situations where buyers lack adequate information regarding the product prior to purchase, sellers offering high-quality products may opt to send signals through marketing practices. These signals aim to authentically communicate information about the unseen product quality to the buyer. Subsequently, the buyer relies on these signals to assess the product (Rao et al., 1999).

In their study Kim et al. (2020) used signaling theory as a framework for exploring how consumers respond to fashion brands that offer transparent information regarding their products. Researchers found out that both price transparency and production transparency contribute positively to the overall brand equity and consumers' intentions to purchase, as long as the information is perceived as fair and valid. Hence a firm's pricing and production transparency can be regarded as positive signals capable of drawing consumers towards the brand and its products.

And lastly, the theory of reasoned action as stated by Bhaduri and Ha-Brookshire (2011) explains how a person who anticipates favorable outcomes from taking an action is more inclined to undertake it compared to someone who does not expect positive results.

Bhaduri and Ha-Brookshire (2011) using the theory of reasoned action demonstrated that familiarity with the global apparel manufacturing industry and businesses' transparency initiatives influenced attitudes towards buying clothing produced through transparent production processes. Research participants demonstrated a willingness to make purchases when they were familiar with a business's transparency efforts or were informed about them. Conversely, they showed little interest in supporting businesses whose transparency efforts they were unaware of. Interestingly, study participants expressed a desire for a standard authorizing agency to verify the claims made by transparent businesses. Additionally, some respondents raised concerns about the legitimacy of certificates and advocated for the establishment of a single consolidated universal standard, such as a government certification, to address these issues.

Such information dissemination theories hold great importance for our research as they emphasize how crucial transparency and information availability are for effective sustainability communication. Brands openly providing valid sustainability data can enhance consumer attitudes and motivate sustainable purchase behaviors.

4 Methodology

This chapter centers on the research methodology employed to enrich our understanding of green blushing within the fashion industry through a case study. We begin by outlining the research design, justifying our choice of a case-based qualitative research approach and selecting Kappahl as our case. Subsequently, we delve into Kappahl's history, mission, and strategies to provide a deeper comprehension of the brand. Following this, we discuss the specifics of data collection, including the identification of interviewees and the formulation of interview questions. Then, we elaborate on our data analysis approach, providing an explanation of the methodology used to analyze the gathered data. Finally, we conclude with an examination of the limitations of our research methodology.

4.1 Research Design

To address our research question, 'How can we understand green blushing from a company perspective in the fashion industry?', we opted for a qualitative research method. This decision was motivated by the necessity to gain in-depth insights from within the industry. Therefore, we selected the Swedish fashion brand Kappahl, which serves as an excellent case for this study. This choice is attributed to the brand's deep involvement and commitment in sustainable initiatives, with sustainability being a significant component of their brand identity. Internally, Kappahl places considerable emphasis on sustainability, although it is not prominently emphasized in their external communications. The contrast between their internal values and external communication suggests their involvement in green blushing, rendering them an ideal case study to explore this phenomenon in practice. Further details regarding Kappahl's background information and values is discussed in section 4.2. *Case Study: Kappahl.*

Through this qualitative case-based methodology, we obtained valuable insights into Kappahl's communication strategies. This approach enabled us to collect detailed and comprehensive data, essential for understanding how Kappahl addresses green blushing. By examining green blushing within a real-world context, we enhanced the practical relevance and significance of our findings. Moreover, the flexibility inherent in qualitative methods allowed us to tailor our approach to different contexts, thereby enhancing the reliability of our findings (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Analyzing Kappahl as a case also provided us with unique primary data that is not yet documented in existing literature or online sources. This enabled us to offer fresh insights and understandings to the literature on green blushing within the fashion industry and beyond. Additionally, our methodology embraced an inductive approach, deriving insights and theories directly from the collected data rather than being influenced by preconceived notions. This approach facilitated the emergence of findings grounded in the authentic experiences of our participants (Bell et al., 2022).

For our data collection, we chose online individual interviews as the most suitable qualitative method. These interviews involved key decision-making employees at Kappahl responsible for its sustainability and communication strategies. Through one-on-one interviews, we gained insights into Kappahl's strategies, perspectives, and motivations concerning their sustainability communication choices. We opted for individual interviews instead of focus groups to ensure we captured both general information and subjective viewpoints, minimizing the risk of socially desirable responses and the influence of dominant opinions within a group setting (Bristol & Fern, 2003). While some authors criticize the virtual environment for interviews (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021; Ecklund et al., 2021; Bell et al., 2022), we concluded that the benefits of online interviews outweighed the drawbacks. Despite concerns about the loss of non-verbal cues and potential technical issues, we found online interviews to be more time-efficient and cost-effective, especially considering the constraints of time and budget in our research. Additionally, conducting interviews online was more convenient, given that most of the employees we interviewed were located in Gothenburg. In today's online-centric working environment, we also believe that the mode of interview, whether in person or online, has minimal impact on data collection, a viewpoint supported by other research findings (Bourke et al., 2023; Domene et al., 2016; Jenner & Myers, 2019).

For conducting these interviews, we employed semi-structured interview scripts, a method that enabled us to ask follow-up questions to clarify responses and explore deeper insights as necessary (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). By incorporating pre-planned questions into the script, we could guide the interview in the desired direction. The semi-structured format of the interviews also allowed flexibility, permitting interviewees to raise issues and topics not initially covered in our list of questions, which was particularly relevant given the novelty of our topic (Cross & Galletta, 2013). This approach also enabled us to pose spontaneous questions outside the script while maintaining focus on the research question, aligning well with the exploratory nature of our research (Bell et al., 2022). Additionally, we conducted follow-up interviews with selected employees to integrate new insights that emerged from Kappahl's perspective and to refine our interview questions and directions based on the analysis of initial interviews. Our overarching goal was to gather a comprehensive range of insights to facilitate thorough analysis in the subsequent stages of our research.

4.2 Case Study: Kappahl

In this section of the methodology chapter, we will provide a brief summary of our case study subject, Kappahl. This summary draws from information accessible on their website and aims to enhance comprehension of the business.

Kappahl, a Swedish fashion brand established by Per-Olof Ahl circa 1953 in Gothenburg, pioneered a business model that catered to women of all sizes, ensuring accessibility to affordable coats (Kappahl, n.d.-c). Today, headquartered in Mölndal, Sweden, Kappahl remains committed to inclusivity and sustainability, offering responsible and reasonably priced clothing for men, women, and children. The fashion brand is convinced that it is possible to operate in full sustainability, and therefore wants to be a role model and inspiration for the entire fashion

industry. With CEO Elisabeth Peregi at the helm, the company had a profit after tax of 316 million SEK in 2022 (Kappahl, n.d.-a).

Since 2010, Newbie has been a part of the Kappahl Group, alongside its main brand, Kappahl, specializing in timeless and environmentally conscious fashion for babies and children up to eight years old (Kappahl, n.d.-a). Newbie's commitment to sustainability permeates its entire collection, crafted from certified materials, with a particular emphasis on durability to facilitate handing down garments to siblings (Newbie, n.d.). Since 2019, Mellby Gård, a family-owned investment firm from Malmö, has held ownership of the Kappahl Group, aligning with the company's ambitious objectives and entrepreneurial principles.

With over 300 stores across Finland, Norway, Poland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, and online presence in approximately twenty European and Asian markets, Kappahl employs over four thousand individuals across nine countries (Kappahl, n.d.-a). The brand represents the belief that fashion and sustainability can coexist harmoniously, with a commitment to achieving zero climate impact by 2040. Other noteworthy sustainability efforts include certifying 100% of their cotton, ensuring traceability of their entire jeans range from fiber to finished garment, and utilizing materials with lower environmental impact in 86 percent of their products (Kappahl, n.d.-b). Furthermore, Kappahl prioritizes the welfare of fashion workers, evidenced by over 1300 women graduating from its training centre in Bangladesh. With an unwavering commitment to progress, CEO Elisabeth Peregi encapsulates Kappahl's ethos:

"We hope to inspire others by putting sustainability at the heart of our business."

In the end, Kappahl wants to shake up the fashion world, leading the change by always keeping their word, caring for the planet, and making sure each piece of clothing has a minimal environmental impact (Kappahl, n.d.-a).

4.3 Data Collection

Our data collection took place from April 5th to May 3rd, during which we conducted a series of seven individual interviews involving five employees from various departments at Kappahl.

These interviewees were chosen based on three main criteria: firstly, they had to be employed by Kappahl; secondly, they needed to have an interesting position within the company; and thirdly, they should be actively involved in Kappahl's communication strategies. We defined an 'interesting position' as a role within communication, marketing, sustainability, and online business development departments, as we believed that insights from these employees would be particularly valuable in addressing our research question. This selection method aligns with non-probability sampling, as we used specific criteria to identify our interviewees (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). To initiate the process, we screened potential participants and extended interview invitations. However, due to the relatively short duration of the research period, not all employees were available to participate. Additionally, it was not logical for us to interview individuals from the same department at different levels, as the head manager would likely possess the most knowledge on the topic, while a junior manager might repeat similar

information. A list of interviewees and their respective job positions can be found in the table below. On average, each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour, conducted remotely via Google Meet in English. To facilitate subsequent data analysis, all interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Table 1: Interviewees and their position within Kappahl

Name	Position
Sandra Roos	Vice President Sustainability
Emma Åström	Online Business Developer
Johanna Flemstrom	Corporate Communication Manager
Camilla Oloffson	Sustainability Manager Supply Chain
Andrea Stenhamre	Marketing Manager Kappahl brand

Our first contact with Sandra Roos enabled a strong connection with Emma Åström, who played a pivotal role in reaching out to other employees at Kappahl. Emma coordinated communication and facilitated together with us the selection of interviewees. In instances where sensitive or proprietary information, such as forthcoming website changes, was revealed during interviews, we established a non-disclosure agreement (NDA) to maintain confidentiality and build trust with Kappahl.

For conducting the interviews, we utilized semi-structured interview scripts tailored to each interviewee, taking into account their respective job and the varied information sought during the research. The questions were organized progressively, starting with simpler inquiries and gradually delving into more complex topics. At the beginning of each session, we provided a clear statement of the research's purpose and expressed gratitude for the interviewee's participation (Cross & Galletta, 2013). To create a comfortable atmosphere, we initiated with broader and casual questions, encouraging participants to openly share their experiences. All questions were open-ended, allowing interviewees to express their viewpoints while remaining focused on the research topic. This approach facilitated unstructured responses, often leading to insightful discussions (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). At the outset of most interviews, we initiated the conversation by posing general questions about Kappahl and the interviewee's daily job responsibilities.

In the middle segment, our questions became more specific, aiming to delve deeper into Kappahl's sustainability communication strategies. Depending on the department in which the employee worked, our focus varied. For example, questions directed towards the communication department centered around existing campaigns and social media messages, whereas those aimed at the website developers focused on online information provision and functionality. Throughout the interview, we sought to reference and expand upon previous answers, demonstrating attentive listening and appreciation for the participants' insights.

At the end of the interview, in the concluding segment, we came back to noteworthy experiences or information that needed further exploration, explored any existing contradictions, and tried to conclude the conversation. Finally, we invited participants to share any additional thoughts or final points before expressing our sincere gratitude for their time and valuable contributions to the research.

We opted for two follow-up interviews, each with a distinct purpose. The initial follow-up session, featuring Emma Åström, was particularly intriguing as it aligned with the recent launch of the new website tailored for the Swedish market, which she and her team had developed. This gave us the opportunity to delve deeper into the latest changes and gather initial impressions on the performance of the new features, which included traceability information. The subsequent and final follow-up interview of our data collection, with Sandra Roos, focused more on reflecting and summarizing our findings. We discussed our research progress thus far and invited Sandra to contribute any additional insights she might have. Given her role as the head of Sustainability and her close involvement in all aspects of Kappahl's operations in this domain, we saw her as the most knowledgeable to provide some concluding insights or raise critical questions regarding our findings.

4.4 Data Analysis

We utilized thematic analysis to scrutinize the data obtained from the interviews. Initially, we familiarized ourselves with the data by carefully reviewing the transcripts (Bell et al., 2022). Following the methodology outlined by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), we began by organizing the data through thematic sorting, which involved categorizing recurring content. This process allowed us to identify different overarching data groups and explore potential connections among them. Subsequently, we condensed the data into themes directly or indirectly related to the research objectives. To streamline the process, we employed the qualitative data analysis software Atlas Ti, which proved invaluable in sorting our codes into broader themes and maintaining a clear overview. This facilitated the development of a code tree, offering a comprehensive visualization of our codes and their interrelationships. In 5. *Results* we delve deeper into the main themes uncovered during our analysis and discuss the structure of our code tree.

The collaborative effort of two researchers greatly enhanced our analysis, ensuring a thorough review and minimizing the risk of oversight. This dual approach served as a safeguard against potential discrepancies or misinterpretations within the transcripts. By independently reviewing the transcripts and generating codes, we guaranteed that all relevant information pertinent to the research was meticulously examined and accounted for.

4.5 Limitations of the Research Methodology

While our research methodology is well-suited to address the research question, it is not without limitations. One of them is moderator bias (Lewis et al., 2019), wherein the interviewer, or moderator, may inadvertently influence the interviewee towards a specific response. This bias can stem from leading questions or the imposition of the moderator's preconceptions on the interviewee. To address this concern, we employed semi-structured interview scripts and had another researcher present during the interviews to reflect on the potential for biased questioning.

Furthermore, as a case-based study, we may question the generalizability of our findings to a broader population (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). On one hand, we can assert that our insights into Kappahl's sustainability communication and their practice of green blushing are deeply rooted in the specific case. Hence, we cannot extrapolate our research findings to other entities in the fashion industry. Incorporating multiple cases in the study could have enhanced the potential for generalizability. This is because if different fashion brands shared similar reasons for green blushing, it is more likely that such reasons would resonate across the industry and beyond. Nonetheless, it remains conceivable that other fashion brands could still derive insights from this research, offering potential avenues for discussion and learning. On the other hand, we uncover real-life motivations behind why a fashion brand like Kappahl engages in green blushing. Although these motivations may be case-specific, there is a strong probability that these findings are relevant not only within the fashion industry but also in other industries facing intense scrutiny for greenwashing and thus confronting sustainability challenges. This enhances the generalizability and transferability of the results.

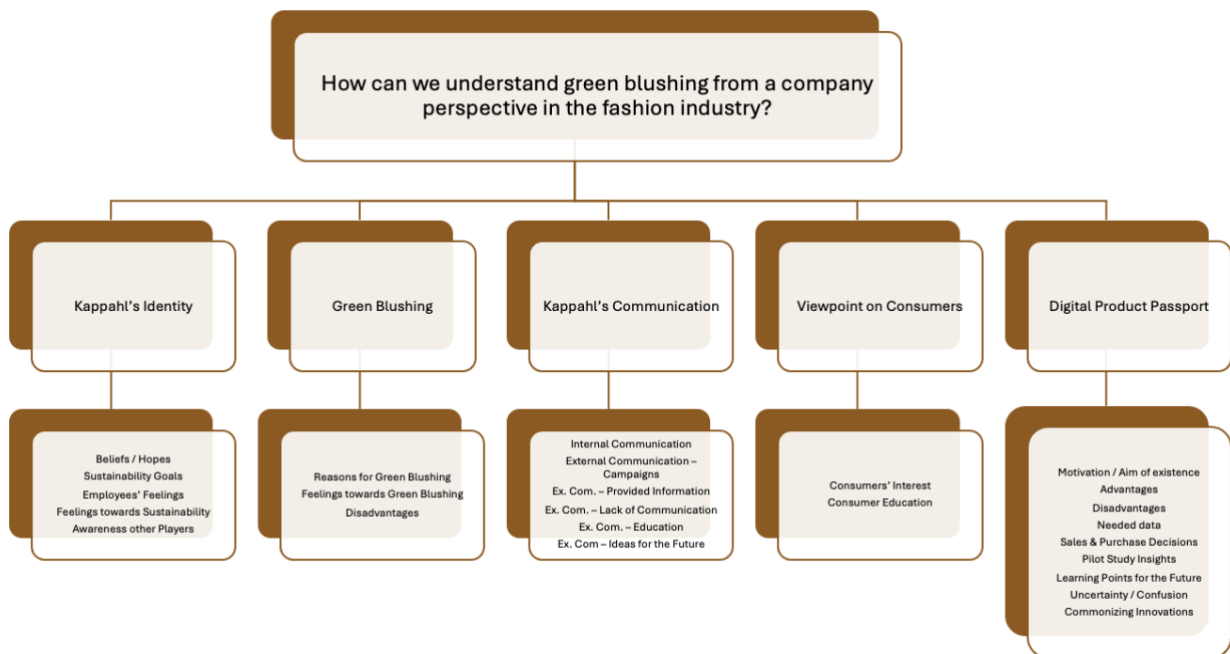
Finally, there may be questions regarding the number of interviews. With this study based on interviews with five different employees, there may be limitations in the range of perspectives covered on the topic. One factor contributing to our limited number of interviewees is the nature of corporate organizations, where employees often have constrained availability for interviews. Additionally, the inclusion of the Easter break during our data collection period further complicated scheduling suitable timeslots with selected employees.

On the other hand, we made a deliberate decision to cease seeking additional interviewees, confident that we had interviewed the most essential employees at Kappahl with expertise and proximity to the topic, aiding us in addressing the research question effectively. We believe that conducting more interviews within the same departments might have led to redundancy. While data saturation is a goal in some studies, in our case, it did not appear necessary. It would have been merely time-consuming without yielding new information. However, these are assumptions, and we cannot definitively assert that this would have been the outcome with more interviews. Therefore, to broaden this research, additional interviews should be conducted with employees from the same departments we have already interviewed.

5 Results

After completing all interviews, we initiated a thematic analysis of our collected data. Upon reviewing the transcripts, we identified five key themes for our coding system. Subsequently, we formulated several subthemes to enhance clarity and organization. An overview of both the primary and secondary themes can be found in the figure below.

Figure 1: Code tree



After analyzing the transcripts, the initial overarching theme that emerged was 'Kappahl's Identity'. Our discussions with employees provided valuable insights into Kappahl's core values, future ambitions, and mission. Given the pivotal role of this aspect in our case study, it was imperative to delve deeper into it and explore how it shapes their decision-making and operational strategies. Subsequently, we incorporated 'Green Blushing' as another theme to capture all insights regarding this phenomenon, including its relevance to Kappahl's employees and the reasons behind the fashion brand's inclination towards this behavior. This theme, along with our third theme, 'Kappahl's Communication', serves as the foundation for addressing our research question. Kappahl's Communication was perceived as a comprehensive category for collecting data on ongoing campaigns, their primary focus in external communication, and their approach to internal communication. It also provided a platform for documenting communication challenges and shortcomings faced by the company. Additionally, we introduced a theme centered around consumers and their perspectives. While our study primarily emphasizes a brand's viewpoint, we found it valuable to incorporate Kappahl's perspective on consumers. After all, Kappahl's communication efforts are directed towards

consumers, making it crucial to understand their thoughts and preferences. Finally, we established a theme revolving around the 'Digital Product Passport', recognizing it as the most prominent sustainability initiative discussed. With significant involvement from numerous employees and anticipated future impact, this initiative garnered considerable attention during our analysis as it can be seen as a valuable solution for green blushing.

5.1 Kappahl's Identity

When we spoke with employees at Kappahl, we discovered that they all shared a very positive mindset and that the company is performing well overall. Several interviewees made it clear to us that Kappahl is not just your typical fashion brand; they place a strong emphasis on sustainability. This was underscored with statements like, "at Kappahl, we really want to be good in this kind of area" (sustainability), "we see sustainability as a stakeholder", and "in our business activities, we always try to look for a balance between profit and sustainability". While sustainability is highlighted in Kappahl's presentation in *4.2 Case Study: Kappahl*, it was particularly encouraging to observe employees embodying this commitment. In a landscape where companies frequently make empty promises, Kappahl's authenticity shines through.

Our interviewees also emphasized that the fashion brand aims to be as informative as possible, with sustainability as its cornerstone. One of Kappahl's primary focuses is therefore on prolonging the lifespan of clothing. By doing so, they aspire to ensure that garments endure longer and can be passed down to siblings and future generations. This philosophy is also reflected in their campaign 'Made for More' which highlights that "our clothes are made for more, made for more occasions, made for more siblings, made for more moments in life". Before an employee elaborated on the campaign's breadth and inspiration, we were unaware of its scope. Kappahl's dedication to the enduring quality of their apparel further elevates our esteem for the brand, emphasizing their commitment not solely to sales and profit, but also the well-being of our planet. Additionally, Kappahl is committed to fostering a safe and inclusive environment for both consumers and employees. An employee mentioned this as the following:

"We see diversity, inclusion, and body diversity as our fundamental values."

By emphasizing these values, we concur that Kappahl demonstrates open-mindedness and awareness of ongoing issues, such as equality. As they explicitly articulate these values as fundamental principles, Kappahl instills optimism for the future trajectory of the fashion industry. Considering that brands often draw inspiration from one another, we anticipate that others will look to Kappahl as a role model for advancing into more socially conscious fashion brands.

With Kappahl's steadfast commitment to sustainability, they have established ambitious targets in this realm. By 2026, they aim to increase their use of renewable energy and achieve full traceability throughout their entire product line. While this may seem straightforward, it is a challenging endeavor, but as one employee noted, "we're coming there, step by step". Once again, this underscores the prevailing positive mindset that exists within the company. Even

though certain decisions and sustainability initiatives may seem modest, each represents a stride toward a more robust sustainability strategy, and every step forward surpasses inaction.

In essence, Kappahl is fully dedicated to understanding emerging sustainability concepts and promptly integrating them into its operations. As conveyed by an employee, "the industry is evolving rapidly, and we're committed to staying abreast of the latest sustainability innovations" and "we aspire to lead the way in sustainability within the fashion industry, ensuring we're well-prepared". Consequently, Kappahl is not reliant on new regulations to spur action; instead, their motivation originates from within, and it is steadfast. This once again highlights their unwavering dedication to sustainability and their ambition to elevate their position in the industry.

One of the most prominent findings from our interviews with Kappahl was their overarching ambition to drive change within the general fashion industry. Their vision extends beyond merely being a sustainable fashion brand; they aim to be a source of inspiration for others in the sector. An employee articulated this sentiment, stating, "with Kappahl, we want to be the brand that invites others to start the conversation regarding sustainability". This illustrates that Kappahl not only focuses on enhancing its own sustainability efforts but also seeks to drive broader industry-wide transformation. With this expansive mission in mind, Kappahl does not view competitors as adversaries; rather, they see them as collaborators: "we need to work together for this (sustainability), because only in this way we can move the entire industry forward", especially because "it's quite a complex world out there".

5.2 Green Blushing

During our interviews with Kappahl's employees, we observed diverse opinions regarding the under-communication of sustainability efforts. Some referred to this phenomenon as 'green hushing', while others termed it 'green blushing'. However, there was unanimous agreement that such approaches are not favorable to effective sustainability communication. One respondent remarked, "I think that the ones that are doing green hushing, are the ones that do not have proper sustainability work going on". Such response highlights one approach to withholding information, where companies deliberately conceal sustainability data due to insufficient endeavors in this field. This opinion was followed by a statement "I think green hushing is a really bad phenomenon that only helps to keep bad products on the market" emphasizing negative connotations for green hushing and implying that it can be just another facet of greenwashing. Another employee offered a more positive perspective on the phenomenon in regard to Kappahl's communication "I believe we are guilty of green blushing because sometimes it's challenging to effectively communicate our sustainability efforts". This viewpoint implies that green blushing is not inherently deceitful tactic and can be a result of lack of knowledge how to effectively and interestingly convey sustainability messages to stakeholders.

When we further questioned why Kappahl is not fully communicating its sustainability efforts, we received several explanations. The first reason mentioned was straightforward: "it's just

because consumers are not interested in sustainability, so it will bore them". The fear of boring consumers thus constrains Kappahl's sustainability communication, though this is not their primary concern. There's a deeper apprehension that the message will not resonate authentically with consumers or, worse, could be perceived as greenwashing. An employee expressed this concern, saying, "when some brand goes out and says ohh our products are more sustainable or it's better for the environment, it falls flat" and "we are in an era where there is a lot of greenwashing, and I think this made a lot of companies very careful with how they talk or even if they want to talk about their sustainability initiatives, which has led us (Kappahl) to not talk much about it". These revelations underscore the dilemma that many fashion brands are currently facing. Transparent sustainability communication runs the risk of either failing to engage recipients and being overlooked or being perceived as deceptive.

One of the reasons mentioned for consumers' skepticism towards sustainability communication, and consequently Kappahl's reluctance to share their efforts, is the phenomenon of fashion brands often being generalized. One of the employees admitted that Kappahl is hesitant to showcase its sustainability endeavors due to the risk of being perceived as 'just another standard fashion brand'. Worse yet, they fear being associated with the negative actions prevalent in the industry: "when there is a negative thing somewhere in the industry, it will always have an impact on us as well," and "the reputation of one fashion brand also spills over on our reputation". One employee even expressed, "the fashion industry has a bad reputation, so it doesn't really matter what a single business is doing, we're all seen as the bad guys". This suggests that Kappahl sees little value in communicating its sustainability initiatives, as they will invariably remain linked to the image of the 'bad, polluting fashion industry'.

The final reason mentioned by Kappahl's employees for their limited communication on sustainability is the challenge of bringing the right message. This difficulty was articulated as "sometimes it's just so difficult to communicate what you're doing" and "it's hard to show the consumer what we do regarding sustainability". Additionally, the underlying explanation appears challenging to articulate in a straightforward manner, as "it's difficult to communicate our 'Made with Less' campaign because it's not that easy to explain how it's made with less water, for example, and when this 'why' question is not discussed, you can quickly be accused of greenwashing". This underlines Kappahl's hardship in translating complex sustainability issues into understandable messages.

Regardless of the reasons behind under-communicating sustainability efforts, Kappahl's employees unanimously agree that green blushing should not occur within the company. They view it as a missed opportunity to convey their genuine intentions. This was clearly stated by:

"The biggest risk is to don't use it (sustainability communication), to don't talk about it, to don't communicate it, to don't make it understandable, then it's all wasted."

5.3 Kappahl's Communication

Kappahl as stated by one of the employees is a "traditional fashion company" concerning its brand communication. They have a few commercial periods that are very important for

customers which include four major seasons (spring, summer, fall, Christmas). Campaigns taking place during these periods of the year are usually focused on relationships that consumers have and how they celebrate them on different occasions, for example Mother's Day. Another major emphasis is put on what the customer needs at the moment, for example "right now people are looking for summer or linen clothing". This indeed indicates that Kappahl employs a traditional communication strategy. In this regard, the brand's communication is not distinct from that of other fashion brands.

Employees at Kappahl recognize that sustainability is not a priority in the ongoing communication. Interviewees acknowledge that as a company Kappahl's main focus is sales and generating profit: "the main business is for the customer to make purchases". They specifically highlight the difficulty of balancing inspiration and fashion with sustainability communication. This is especially interesting as they see sustainability as a crucial element in the daily work, although it is not something they talk about in their campaigns.

"We always want to have sustainability as a part of our communication, because everything that we do at Kappahl has the foundation in the customer promise that sustainability and longevity of clothing are a part of, but sometimes it turns out challenging. "

Employees acknowledge that sustainability communication could be "incorporated more on an always-on level, because right now it gets hidden for the customer under a lot of other, seasonal communication". Such opinions highlight challenges connected with operating a business in both profitable and sustainable ways. However, there are still numerous initiatives at Kappahl dedicated to the company's sustainability efforts. One of them is 'Trace your Jeans' dedicated to 100% traceability on all denim. This initiative includes a dedicated landing page and posters in stores. Nevertheless, one of the employees clarifies that it is not a campaign - "it's not something that we can have paid social media push for" which confirms that sustainability is not an ongoing communication angle. Other sustainability-oriented initiatives are 'Made for More', 'Made with Less' and 'Why not 100%' which are partly incorporated in the ongoing campaigns. They are not stand-alone campaigns but reappear in different contexts to elevate Kappahl's dedication to sustainability. 'Made for more' is dedicated to "talking about the good quality of our products, so you can use them more, and also that they are able to circulate and serve many generations". 'Made with less' is about using less chemicals, less water, less polluting production methods, and so on. Subsequently, 'Why not 100%' is dedicated to "sustainability initiatives in progress, where we are heading and how we're working with this". In that way, Kappahl adds an additional sustainability level to its communication and succeeds in informing consumers about the garment's quality and environmental footprint as well as future undertakings in the field of sustainability.

Besides campaigns, Kappahl also communicates its sustainability efforts through labels accompanying products on its website such as 'Better Cotton' followed by an "informative web page where we talk about each sustainability label as what it is and what it mean". Although Kappahl tries to be as informative as possible concerning sustainability in its campaigns and on its website, employees state that "we cannot have all information in all of the places of the customer journey. We need to prioritize what we will present on a product listing page". One of the pointed reasons was that "sustainability content is not engaging". In the end, employees agreed that sustainability issues are challenging to communicate effectively, as mentioned:

“They (sustainability initiatives) are complex and hard to explain. Sometimes you have to have a little bit more knowledge to actually get it.”

In general, employees recognized the need for better consumer education. One of them stated that “a challenge is to have easy explanations that are easily understood”. Another one pointed out possible creative approaches “we need to take responsibility regarding the way to package it, so that people understand it. Maybe we don't say, did you know your clothes are produced in a traceable way? Maybe we put up a map with the red dot somewhere where the seed has been planted and say, 'Did you know your garments grew here?'”. Some people proposed using other influencers or other partners, who are more closely connected to activism and advocacy. In general, according to Kappahl's employees, consumer education has a lot of potential to facilitate sustainability communication and make it more effective. However, this area seems to be underprioritized and still has a lot of potential for new, creative approaches to raising sustainability knowledge among consumers. Some of the employees pointed out how important sustainability education is, and mentioned:

“We have to be able to explain what we're doing in an understandable way, before we can actually communicate it to the customer.”

Kappahl is devoted to helping its employees navigate issues connected to the company's sustainability agenda. One of the ways in which it is done is the sustainability toolbox. “We actually launched a new toolbox, for our sustainability communication, last year, to make it clear to customers, but also to make it clear to ourselves”. Another way to increase sustainability awareness within the company is internal communication “we highlighted our sustainability content in our Intranet, so it's even easier for our colleagues to find material and information there”. Increasing internal understanding and engagement regarding sustainability is a first step to successfully translating seemingly complex issues to consumers. This further illustrates Kappahl's ambition to enhance its sustainable position in the market, as merely informing employees does not yield profitable benefits.

Internal communication dedicated to the issues of sustainability also results in a lot of positive feelings among employees. One of the interviewees shared “I'm really proud that I work in a company that is really trying to be a frontrunner in sustainability”. Another person added that “I'm very happy to be in this company at this time when I can also be part of the change”. Employees certainly feel that they have agency concerning embracing the sustainability agenda and shaping new standards in the whole industry. Sustainability becomes a factor providing meaning and sense of accomplishment to their daily work “to me it is very important to kind of believe in what I do. I really want to feel that I'm contributing to something and here I do”. Feelings of pride and fulfillment result in a higher motivation to spread a good word about the company and its sustainability efforts, as for example:

“I think that we are doing so many great things and I just want to, you know, stand on the barricades and shout it out loud.”

In general, Kappahl's both external and internal sustainability communication seems to be well intentioned. However, there are still some challenges to be addressed. The most eminent ones include increasing sustainability content's prominence and consumer education. Certainly,

Kappahl does not have to look far for effective solutions. Their ways of internally communicating sustainability initiatives can be a good inspiration for translating complex issues to the public and leading the change in the fashion industry.

5.4 Viewpoint on Consumers

Throughout our interviews, we also collected diverse viewpoints on how Kappahl's employees perceive fashion consumers' attitudes toward sustainability. The prevailing sentiment among the majority of Kappahl's employees was skepticism regarding consumer interest, with many stating: "I don't believe consumers are particularly concerned about it" (sustainability). Overall, employees at Kappahl express a sense of disappointment, recognizing the significance of consumer concern as crucial in driving more sustainable purchasing choices. This was clearly stated by an interviewee:

"I have the perception that consumers are not into sustainability-related issues, which is something very unfortunate."

However, another employee pointed out the existence of a small group of enthusiastic consumers regarding Kappahl's sustainability initiatives but noted that "they are not numerous enough to propel sustainability forward". It can be seen as a starting point, with some enthusiasts already present, more are likely to follow in the future. If Kappahl continues its commendable efforts, it will not be difficult to stand out and attract the attention of these sustainability-minded consumers.

An interviewee also shed light on how consumers perceive and engage with sustainability communication, stating: "they won't react with amazement like, 'wow, this company is so commendable for striving towards sustainability', but rather, they are more likely to respond with 'so what?'". This critical perspective suggests that Kappahl considers communicating sustainability efforts to be less impactful than anticipated. Employees hold this view because they perceive that "sustainability is more and more seen as a hygiene factor", with consumers expecting brands to take accountability. This perspective seems somewhat contradictory to the earlier notion that consumers are not interested. They care so deeply about sustainability issues that they demand it to become a standard. Consequently, we recognize two opposing yet equally hindering sustainability communication beliefs: the perception that consumers either lack general interest in sustainability or believe it should be so commonplace that there is no need to communicate such efforts as groundbreaking or newsworthy.

It is also crucial to emphasize that these interests are influenced by market dynamics, as expressed by one respondent: "I know that we have a couple of markets that are very price sensitive and for example others that are more interested in sustainability". Additionally, the degree of knowledge and interest varies among consumers. For instance, "young parents are more likely to have significant interests in sustainability". This, in turn, indicates that Kappahl possesses considerable insight into its consumer base.

Regarding these interests, Kappahl's employees concur that not all consumers comprehend the implications of sustainability issues and require education. This sentiment was expressed in various ways: "a lot of customers don't understand what that means (having full traceability), so it might go beyond their interests or understanding", "the actual struggle is that many consumers do not understand why traceability is so important" and "I think that consumers only understand sustainability issues in terms of fast fashion and the climate change in general". Consequently, consumers remain unaware of the abundance of issues within the fashion industry and lack the knowledge to make informed purchasing decisions. Therefore, it is imperative to educate consumers about sustainability and its related concepts in the fashion industry because "it's something that needs to be learned; it's something they need to know in the long run". Although employees recognize the need to educate consumers, Kappahl has not yet taken significant steps in this direction, and they are unsure of the most effective approach. This underscores a challenge that fashion brands are facing for the future, as they acknowledge a gap in consumer education but are uncertain how to address it at present.

5.5 Digital Product Passport

The prime illustration of Kappahl's strong emphasis on sustainability and their approach to minimizing green blushing is exemplified by their pilot study on the Digital Product Passport, launched in January 2024. Although initially prompted by an invitation to collaborate with Trace4Value, Kappahl recognized the inherent importance of the initiative. They expressed that it presented "the best opportunity to make the DPP more tangible, get to know the DPP better, and see what it really means". Once again, this underscores Kappahl's dedication to leading the way in sustainability and transparency for their consumers. They articulated this commitment by stating, "we don't need to be informative, we don't need to show this, at this moment it's not a requirement by law or something, but we really want to do this as it's part of Kappahl's strategy to be open and share as much as possible information with our customers". The fact that Trace4Value approached Kappahl for this pilot study further highlights its reputation as a fashion brand that prioritizes sustainability within the industry. Kappahl's acceptance of this opportunity comes as no surprise to us, although some other potential participating brands declined. This discrepancy emphasizes that not all fashion brands share the same focus on sustainability. Kappahl's involvement in the pilot study is motivated by several factors, including preparing for the eventual adoption of the DPP as the new industry standard by 2030, enhancing customer understanding of value for money, and empowering consumers to make informed purchasing decisions. This aligns closely with Kappahl's overarching goal of being as informative as possible.

Although Kappahl's pilot study is presently underway, significant changes have not yet been observed, as the study is confined to only two items from the kid's collection. While this might not seem illustrative at first glance, we view it as a proactive step that sets Kappahl apart from many others in the industry. By piloting the DPP now, they are positioning themselves ahead of other brands, which will ultimately establish them as pioneers in this emerging initiative. The future legislation from the European Union mandating the DPP by 2030, instills optimism for change among Kappahl employees. Consequently, they expect that:

“In a couple of years, people are getting used to the DPP, it will be the new standard and it will feel natural.”

Establishing the DPP as a new standard fosters transparency in the fashion industry, enabling consumers to make informed purchasing decisions. With Kappahl already conducting a pilot study, they aim to ingrain the DPP in consumers' awareness and aspire to be remembered as pioneers in this realm. In regard to future developments concerning the DPP, interviewees expressed ongoing confusion about the initiative. The form and content of the DPP, as well as the information it should encompass, remain unclear at this moment. Consequently, Kappahl's employees are optimistic about the prospect of a standardized version of the DPP that is consistent across the entire fashion industry. They emphasized the need for external institutions to establish clear regulations and foster collaborations, stating: "I think that's something we need, we need external institutions to make clear rules and set up collaborations" and "the development of the DPP, in general, will go much faster when the legislation is in place and when it's actually the law" because "I think what drives the work more forward for many companies, is the upcoming legislation instead of consumer demand". This underscores Kappahl's motivation to implement the DPP for its transparency benefits, rather than as a competitive advantage or an additional means to boost sales. It exemplifies the integrity of the fashion brand, and dedication to sustainable change.

6 Data Analysis

This research aimed to identify the primary challenge Kappahl faces in its sustainability communication efforts. Additionally, we delved into why this challenge persists and explored potential avenues for improvement. In addressing this research question, we present our findings and insights in this section, aiming to illuminate areas of alignment and potential refinement in line with existing literature and theoretical frameworks. To enhance clarity, we structured our discussion into distinct sections that highlight the key findings of our research. Furthermore, we broaden the discussion in subsequent sections, contemplating broader themes such as the viability of sustainability communication in an industry marked by rapid change and innovative initiatives like the Digital Product Passport.

6.1 Kappahl is under-communicating its sustainability efforts

During our study, we quickly discovered that Kappahl is not effectively communicating all of its efforts regarding sustainability-related initiatives. Employees emphasized that the fashion brand is actively engaged in enhancing its sustainability practices. Examples provided include initiatives such as striving for a fully traceable supply chain, along with campaigns like 'Made for More,' 'Made with Less,' and 'Why not 100%'. Despite these initiatives being readily discussed in our interviews, we were unaware of them prior to starting our data collection. This underscores Kappahl's active commitment to sustainability efforts while revealing a gap in communicating these endeavors to the broader audience.

Kappahl's ambition to attain complete traceability across its product line by 2026 showcases a sincere dedication to fostering transparency within the brand and the broader industry. This proactive stance sets them apart from numerous other fashion brands, given Henninger's (2015) assertion that traceability holds greater significance than traditional sustainability labels. Pursuing this objective demonstrates Kappahl's commitment to prioritizing key elements essential for advancing their sustainability efforts and effectively inform their customers.

According to Kaner (2021), the effectiveness of sustainable communication hinges on credibility, which can be attained through the consistent use of green terminology and by prioritizing sustainability across all facets of an organization's operations, including marketing. However, if sustainability is only emphasized in marketing messages without being integrated into other operational aspects, the brand may be perceived as lacking credibility. Interestingly, in Kappahl's case, sustainability is embedded within all its operations but lacks sufficient emphasis in its marketing messages. By enhancing their communication efforts, Kappahl could

easily demonstrate to consumers that sustainability is integrated into every aspect of their business.

One of the primary explanations provided by Kappahl for under-communicating its sustainability efforts is the emphasis on different priorities targeted at consumers. The company prioritizes four major campaign moments, which primarily highlight fashion trends and their latest collections. Consequently, it can be inferred that Kappahl's primary objective remains centered on sales and profitability, which is typical for a profitable corporation. Therefore, there might be a lower motivation to communicate sustainability efforts, as it is not the company's strategic priority.

Another revelation shared by Kappahl is their perspective that they do not perceive the necessity of actively communicating sustainability efforts, as it should be regarded as the standard practice. Accordingly, they believe it should not be exploited for profit-driven purposes, such as marketing campaigns. This leads us to conclude that Kappahl aligns with the concept of green blushing as described by Szabo and Webster (2021), wherein companies downplay their environmental impact for ethical considerations.

Ultimately, we also uncovered conflicting perspectives on green blushing/hushing within Kappahl, as documented in the literature. While some employees suggested that companies sometimes engage in green blushing because they are hesitant to communicate their positive actions, others believed that the primary reason is a lack of a robust sustainability strategy, leading to silence on the matter. Hence, while some employees hold a favorable view of green blushing (Abhyankar & Selvaraj, 2023; Falchi et al., 2022; Sonawala, 2023; Szabo & Webster, 2021), others lean towards its negative connotations (Dhanani, 2023; Visram, 2023).

In conclusion, all employees concur that Kappahl is under-communicating its sustainability efforts, indicating a potential missed opportunity. Whether they classify this behavior as green blushing remains uncertain, given the mixed feelings towards the term.

6.2 You are easily criticized and seen as a hypocrite

In today's rapidly evolving landscape, there is a notable eagerness among individuals to voice their often pessimistic viewpoints, a sentiment echoed by Kappahl. Employees assert that within the fashion industry the widespread occurrence of greenwashing only amplifies consumers' existing skepticism. This observation resonates with the findings of Leonidou and Skarmeas (2017), who identified a growing skepticism among consumers toward corporate sustainability efforts. As a result, consumers are increasingly scrutinizing environmental practices, underscoring the necessity of transparent communication. Failing to provide a thorough explanation, particularly on labels promoting environmental friendliness, can expose a brand to accusations of greenwashing, a label no brand wants to bear. Once labeled as such, it becomes arduous to regain consumer trust, as highlighted in the research of Copeland and Bhaduri (2019). Hence, one of the primary reasons for exercising caution in sharing sustainability information is the fear of being branded for greenwashing.

Furthermore, Kappahl's employees emphasize the influence of the fashion industry's negative reputation on their brand image. Given the industry's status as one of the most environmentally damaging and unsustainable sectors globally, altering consumer attitudes towards fashion brands' sustainability poses a significant challenge. It has reached a point where claiming to be a sustainable fashion brand can even lead to accusations of hypocrisy. Acknowledging this challenge, Kappahl underscores the necessity for a holistic transformation across the entire industry. They remain unwavering in their dedication to spearheading this effort and aspire to motivate others to join them in this pursuit.

6.3 Consumers lack interest and knowledge

Although the literature indicates an increasing consumer interest in sustainability, our research at Kappahl uncovers a different viewpoint among employees. Many harbor doubts regarding the level of importance consumers place on sustainability, expressing disappointment. This creates a contradiction between our observations and the existing literature. Currently, we cannot conclusively ascertain which perspective is accurate, as Kappahl's insights are at odds with studies such as that of Granskog et al. (2020). Conversely, there are other studies (Abhyankar & Selvaraj, 2023; Dhanani, 2023) supporting Kappahl's stance, suggesting that companies struggle with limited sustainability communication due to a lack of consumer interest.

On one hand, Kappahl contends that the mainstream consumer lacks interest, yet they acknowledge the presence of a segment deeply invested in sustainability. One employee shared receiving personal emails from such customers expressing admiration for Kappahl's sustainability efforts. However, the discrepancy between expressed interest and actual purchasing behavior, a phenomenon known as the 'attitude-behavior gap' as described by White et al. (2019), remains a pertinent concern.

Furthermore, our findings align with the notion found in literature (Coffin & Egan-Wyer, 2022; Gonzales-Arcos et al., 2021) that consumers may disengage when confronted with excessive responsibility regarding sustainability. Overwhelmed by information, they may resist sustainable practices altogether. Consequently, Kappahl endeavors to shoulder some of this responsibility while still urging consumers to comprehend and support their initiatives.

A key takeaway from our investigation is Kappahl's recognition of the necessity to educate consumers on the intricacies of sustainability, echoing the sentiments of Bennetta and Oeppen (2022). Employees note consumers' limited grasp of sustainability concepts, indicating a substantial need for educational efforts from companies or external entities. They think that consumers only understand sustainability in its easy format, and not in terms of 'circular supply chains' or 'traceability'. The findings resonate with those of James and Montgomery (2017), who highlighted consumers' lack of knowledge about supply chains and their tendency to understand sustainability in simplistic terms. Viewing this through the lens of the knowledge deficit model, it becomes imperative for Kappahl to bridge the gap in consumer knowledge to effectively communicate new sustainability initiatives. This assertion finds support in the

framework of the theory of reasoned action and signaling theory. Studies by Kim et al. (2019) and Bhaduri and Ha-Brookshire (2011) reveal that transparent information and data availability can positively influence consumer attitudes and purchasing behavior. By educating consumers and enhancing consumer awareness, individuals can comprehend the detrimental impacts of the fashion industry while appreciating the positive strides made by brands like Kappahl.

However, a significant challenge lies in executing effective consumer education. Kappahl, like others in the industry, struggles with how to impart information in a clear and accessible manner. This underscores the importance of employing familiar consumer language, as advocated in translation theory (Wæraas & Nielsen, 2016; Viciunaite, 2022), to facilitate the adoption of sustainable behaviors.

6.4 The Digital Product Passport will drive changes

During interviews with Kappahl's employees concerning the DPP pilot study, they modestly discussed this new initiative, partly due to its current limited scale. Nevertheless, we commend their proactive stance, especially considering that relevant legislation won't be enforced until 2030. Through this pilot study, Kappahl seeks insights into the functionality of the DPP and its benefits for consumers. While acknowledging the road ahead, some employees aspire for Kappahl to be acknowledged as a pioneer of this initiative.

The incorporation of the DPP into clothing items ensures complete traceability and transparency, both of which are integral to sustainability, as highlighted by Bringé (2023) and Henninger (2015). This empowers consumers to make informed purchase choices based on genuine information. This objective resonates deeply with Kappahl, and we perceive it as a driving force behind their early adoption of this new innovation.

It is important to note that Kappahl's employees recognize the necessity for the DPP to become a standardized innovation before it can truly have its impact. They believe that consumers need to become accustomed to the idea of scanning the code and accessing information, as it represents a new concept. However, they remain hopeful that with time, it will become the norm.

We see the implementation of the DPP in the near future as a remedy for green blushing and also for green washing. By compelling companies to disclose comprehensive product information, the DPP eliminates the possibility of hiding positive efforts, as everything will be included. Conversely, companies engaging in deceptive practices will be exposed, as they are now required to provide genuine information. Our perspective on the DPP's role as a solution is supported by Dhanani (2023), who identifies transparency as a key strategy for reducing green blushing. He emphasizes the significance of every step towards improvement, highlighting the substantial impact of initiatives like the DPP. Additionally, Dhanani mentions the importance of publishing annual sustainability reports, a practice already embraced by Kappahl for years. Furthermore, forthcoming regulations will provide additional support. In conclusion, we wholeheartedly agree that Kappahl is making considerable efforts to communicate its sustainability endeavors to the public.

6.5 Kappahl's employees are the embodiment of its values and mission

Kappahl's employees' enthusiasm for the fashion brand was evident as they spoke with pride. Not only did they articulate the brand's values and mission, which center heavily on sustainability ("we hope to inspire others by putting sustainability at the heart of our business"), but they also demonstrated a commitment to these principles in their actions. This alignment is further underscored by comparing 4.2. *Case Study: Kappahl* with 5.1. *Kappahl's Identity*. Although the case study is written based on publicly available information, it closely mirrors what employees shared with us. This high level of brand identity alignment is a significant achievement for the organization. The fact that employees embody the brand's values and mission reflects the authenticity of the brand and instills trust in customers. Falchi et al. (2022) similarly assert that when employees perceive their company's dedication to sustainability, they become more engaged and motivated, a sentiment with which we agree. This tangible manifestation of the brand's values in daily operations enhances its authenticity and credibility with consumers, thereby facilitating sustainability communication efforts in the future.

6.6 The dusk of sustainability communication?

As already mentioned, sustainability has undoubtedly emerged as a critical concern for many stakeholders. Rizvi (2024) even states that it has turned into a mainstream issue across various industries. Today, sustainability is not merely an optional pursuit for businesses; rather, it has evolved into a strategic imperative, fundamentally shaping the practices and priorities of industries globally. While challenges persist in effectively communicating sustainability efforts, coupled with gaps in public education, there is a compelling argument that sustainability is on the verge of becoming a standard, the new norm.

During our interviews with Kappahl employees, we encountered a sentiment suggesting that consumers are becoming increasingly unimpressed when companies communicate their sustainability efforts. They often ask the "so what?" question as sustainability is now viewed not as an accomplishment, but rather as a duty.

Innovative initiatives such as the DPP, with their ability to enforce transparency and eliminate greenwashing, have the potential to solidify sustainability as the standard. When companies are no longer able to conceal their supply chain information or exaggerate their commitment to social and environmental issues, the necessity for additional sustainability communication may diminish. As public awareness expands and new regulations emerge, companies will inevitably be compelled to operate sustainably and responsibly. Consequently, the need for explicitly communicating sustainability efforts may no longer be viable as it will be the only possible way of operating a business. We conclude this discussion with a bold contemplation: if companies, governments, and consumers uphold their professed dedication to sustainability, the field of sustainability communication may ultimately become obsolete.

7 Discussion and Conclusion

By uncovering reasons for green blushing, our study adds depth to the understanding of this phenomenon and highlights the challenges faced by a major fashion brand in communicating their sustainability efforts. Despite Kappahl's aspirations to revolutionize the fashion industry by prioritizing integrity and minimizing environmental impact, the brand struggles to effectively convey their efforts to external stakeholders. Our study sheds light on the phenomenon of green blushing and emphasizes the notion that under-communicating sustainability issues is as detrimental as greenwashing. By recognizing the negative impact of both practices, our dissertation underscores the critical role of transparency and authenticity in sustainability communication.

Although Kappahl faces challenges with their external communication it demonstrates exceptional proficiency in communicating sustainability efforts internally. Our findings contribute to the studies on employees' attitudes by Falchi et al. (2022) which suggest that employees who recognize their company's commitment to environmental responsibility are more likely to be motivated to contribute actively and innovatively to eco-friendly initiatives. Employees at Kappahl are proud, motivated, and inspired to embark on the company's new sustainability ventures.

Regarding the issue of green blushing our case study with Kappahl contributes valuable insights to ongoing discussions in literature (Abhyankar & Selvaraj, 2023; Dhanani, 2023; Falchi et al., 2022; Visram, 2023; Szabo and Webster 2021). While existing studies have been theoretical or anecdotal, our case study provides real-life examples of reasons for under-communicating sustainability efforts within a major fashion brand. Firstly, our findings suggest that as a large company, Kappahl prioritizes the strategic goal of sales and profit, leading them to adjust communication to meet these needs. Kappahl as a profitable corporation faces trade-offs between communicating latest trends that boost sales and talking about sustainability which has lower impact on profits. Secondly, they perceive sustainability as a standard and norm, making their efforts seem less newsworthy. Some of the employees believe that sustainability should not be exploited for profit-driven purposes, such as marketing campaigns. Subsequently, they struggle with effectively communicating complex sustainability efforts to consumers. Some of the employees advocate for translating sustainability issues into simpler, familiar terms due to consumers' limited knowledge of the field. Moreover, they believe that consumers are not interested in sustainability-related issues. Despite this prevalent belief some of the employees acknowledge the presence of a segment deeply invested in sustainability which demonstrates potential for further exploration of consumers' attitudes. Lastly, Kappahl fears being accused of greenwashing due to the fashion industry's tarnished reputation. Although Kappahl is deeply devoted to sustainability issues, fear of being falsely accused of greenwashing hinders their external communication.

Nevertheless, we acknowledge that Kappahl is actively addressing the challenge of green blushing, as evidenced by its participation in the Digital Product Passport pilot study. The DPP has the potential to mitigate both green blushing and greenwashing by mandating comprehensive product information disclosure, fostering transparency, and exposing deceptive practices. Ultimately, Kappahl's dedication to sustainability, coupled with initiatives like the DPP, holds promise for advancing transparency and accountability in the fashion industry, paving the way for more effective sustainability communication and meaningful progress toward a more sustainable future.

Moreover, our dissertation initiates an interesting conversation about the future of sustainability communication in a regulatory landscape where companies are legally obligated to disclose comprehensive information and data. New sustainability initiatives like the DPP hold promise in inducing brands to disclose comprehensive product data, potentially mitigating the issue of green blushing. There is a widespread consensus that brands should adhere to the principle of transparency, however, a pertinent question arises:

Will sustainability communication remain relevant in a future where social and environmental responsibility becomes the new standard?

8 Limitations and Future Research

When considering the limitations of our study, it is important to acknowledge that our findings may not be generalizable to the entire fashion industry. This is due to the fact that our research was based on a case study existing out of one single case. By this, we cannot extrapolate our findings to other fashion brands and determine whether they encounter similar reasons for green blushing and view the phenomenon in the same way. Moreover, we acknowledge another limitation of our research, as we have addressed our research question only from the perspective of Kappahl employees. While our interviews revealed deeper insights on green blushing as Kappahl experienced it, perspectives on the phenomenon from business partners, consumers, and other stakeholders may also offer additional insights.

Moving forward, we propose several recommendations for future research within this research domain. Recognizing the limitation of generalization in our study, it is advisable for subsequent research to incorporate a broader range of case studies encompassing various fashion brands. By doing so, researchers can strive to attain findings with greater generalizability, or alternatively, elucidate instances where generalization may not hold. Additionally, broadening the scope to include cases from other industries could further enrich the research.

Secondly, we advocate for conducting more comprehensive research involving a diverse range of stakeholders. This more inclusive approach enables the exploration of varied perspectives from different entities linked to the subject, potentially revealing additional challenges or alternative viewpoints on the same issue.

Expanding the scope further, after examining the phenomenon of greenwashing during the initial phases of the DPP, it would be valuable to investigate brands' sustainability communication after the official implementation of the initiative. This deeper analysis could provide insights into the impact of the DPP on the fashion industry and how it has influenced organizational communication strategies. Moreover, there is value in exploring the future of sustainability communication with greater specificity. Given the indication that consumers require education about sustainability initiatives, conducting experiments with different communication messages or campaigns to assess their effectiveness could yield valuable insights. This approach would illuminate which strategies resonate most with consumers.

Lastly, examining consumers' educational attainment over several years can provide insights into whether there has been a noticeable increase in awareness and understanding of sustainability issues. This longitudinal approach can offer valuable information on evolving consumer attitudes and behaviors toward sustainability.

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