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# TRANSPARENCY IS THE NEW GREEN: INVESTIGATING THE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES OF EUROPEAN SUSTAINABLE FASHION BRANDS IN THE LIGHT OF THE EMERGING EU GREEN CLAIMS DIRECTIVE

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Fashion, more than any other industry in the world, embraces obsolescence as a primary goal (Abrahamson, 2011). The fashion industry as a cultural and economic phenomenon, is intricately intertwined with the notion of consumption. In contemporary consumer society, an individual's identity and existence are defined by their consumption patterns and material possessions. The motto that encapsulates this phenomenon seems to be „you are what you buy, and you buy to be” (Binet et al., 2019 p. 23).

To shed light on the magnitude of fashion consumption, recent reports highlight concerning trends in the industry. The average consumer now purchases 60% more clothing annually than they did 15 years ago, leading to a significant increase in resource and labour intensity within the fashion industry (Remy et al., 2016; Siegle, 2016). Furthermore, the lifespan of clothing has decreased by half over the past 15 years, contributing to the staggering amount of textile waste that ends up in landfills each year, with approximately 11 kg of textile products per person being discarded annually in the EU (Remy et al., 2016; European Parliament, 2023). According to a 2016 survey conducted by WRAP (Waste and Resources Action Programme) 26% of UK consumers reported that the reason why they threw away the last item of clothing was because they did not like it anymore. These consumer behaviours, together with the resource-intensive production processes, give rise to significant environmental challenges such as water pollution, microplastic release, land degradation and extensive textile waste (Kant, 2012). Besides causing environmental issues, the fashion industry causes socio-economic problems as well. The Rana Plaza collapse in 2013 was one of the deadliest industrial disasters in history and drew attention to the poor working conditions and safety standards in the garment industry (Nagaraj, 2018).

As fashion increasingly influences our lives, consumers are becoming more aware of the stories often hidden behind the glamorous façade of the fashion industry, stories of environmental degradation, exploitation of workers, and unsustainable production practices. Binney (2000) argued that a fresh generation is marching for revolution, and they want to wear clothes that tell a new story: a story about social and environmental responsibility.

The contradiction between consumer values and behaviors, known as the attitude-behavior gap (Han, Seo, & Ko, 2017; Niinimäki, 2010), represents a significant barrier to the adoption of sustainable fashion practices. While consumers often express support for ethical and environmentally conscious brands, their purchasing actions frequently prioritize affordability and convenience over sustainability. This paradox has spurred extensive research aimed at understanding its causes and identifying strategies to bridge the gap. One of the barriers for the adoption of sustainable fashion is trust and knowledge barrier. Consumer trust in sustainability claims is often low, largely due to concerns about greenwashing (Rausch and Kopplin, 2021). Additionally, a lack of knowledge about the environmental impact of fast fashion and the benefits of sustainable fashion can hinder sustainable purchasing behavior.

This thesis addresses these barriers by focusing on the shift from sustainability to transparency as a measurable, actionable strategy for trust-building. It offers unique insights by examining European fashion brands in the period leading up to the EU Green Claims Directive's implementation. This timing positions the research as a valuable baseline for future longitudinal studies that can track how the directive shapes communication practices and consumer perceptions.

The contributions of this research are twofold:

- **New framing of transparency as the "New Green"**: This thesis argues that transparency, rather than traditional sustainability claims, should become the focal point of brand communication. Sustainability is an ongoing and evolving journey, often perceived as ambiguous and unattainable. In contrast, transparency provides a concrete, measurable, and verifiable approach. By embracing transparency, brands can position themselves as open and accountable, clearly communicating what they do well, acknowledging areas where they fall short, and outlining actionable steps to improve. This framework not only addresses consumer skepticism but also helps brands navigate the challenges of greenwashing and regulatory scrutiny effectively. In theorizing future developments, this thesis anticipates a shift in brand communication strategies, with fewer brands claiming to be wholly "sustainable," as achieving 100% sustainability is nearly impossible. Instead, brands are likely to emphasize transparency as a realistic, credible, and actionable pathway for building consumer trust and driving meaningful progress.
- **European focus and regulatory context**: By focusing on European fashion brands before the implementation of the EU Green Claims Directive, this research

provides a unique snapshot of industry practices during a critical transition period. This perspective not only fills a gap in the current literature but also establishes a foundation for future studies to assess the directive's long-term impact.

To answer the main research question, Is transparency emerging as a key driver of consumer trust compared to traditional sustainability claims in the fashion industry*?*, this thesis combines both qualitative and quantitative methods.

The research is structured into three distinct but interconnected studies, with each phase building on the findings of the previous one. This approach not only ensures a logical progression of research but also allows each phase to stand alone as an individual study, contributing to the thesis and broader academic discourse. The first study employs a content analysis method, the second uses a survey method, and the final study incorporates in-depth interviews, thereby demonstrating a comprehensive understanding of using different research methods in communication research.

This thesis concludes that transparency is undoubtedly emerging as a key driver of consumer trust, overtaking traditional sustainability claims in its ability to address green skepticism and regulatory demands. Unlike sustainability, which is often perceived as a broad and ambiguous concept, transparency offers measurable and verifiable criteria that align with evolving regulatory standards and consumer expectations. By examining European brands in the context of the EU Green Claims Directive, this research identifies a shift toward transparency.

Through its focus on transparency as an actionable trust-building mechanism, this thesis provides both theoretical insights and practical recommendations for brands seeking to navigate green skepticism and regulatory pressures. In doing so, it contributes to the broader goals of reducing the attitude-behavior gap and promoting a more sustainable fashion industry.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. A brief history of consumer society

Textile production is intrinsically related to the origin of humanity. Alongside food and shelter, clothing is regarded as a fundamental human need. Moreover, it serves as a powerful form of self-expression, playing an increasingly significant role for both individuals and social groups. (Ha-Brookshire and Labat, 2015).

Historically, in the fashion industry, the concept of “new” did not necessarily mean brand-new garments but rather newly acquired items. For much of history, societies lived with scarcity, including limited access to clothing. Producing new garments was both labor-intensive and costly, as clothing was custom-made and handcrafted. Consequently, the primary goal was to extend the lifespan of garments for as long as possible. Clothing often served multiple generations through alterations and mending and was frequently passed down to family members, neighbors, or even creditors upon the owner's death. In some cases, masters would provide their worn clothing to servants as a form of payment. The exchange of goods, including clothing, often functioned as a form of currency throughout human history (Annear, 2019).

Looking at European society before the 18th century, it is evident that the dominant value system did not provide fertile ground for consumerism. Christianity, alongside other major religions, placed a strong emphasis on the spiritual realm, arguing that an excessive focus on material goods could divert attention from the true purpose of earthly life which is preparing for salvation in the afterlife (Stearns, 2006).

The examples provided illustrate that a substantial transformation in both production practices and value systems was necessary for the emergence of contemporary fast-fashion consumption. The First Industrial Revolution, which began between 1760 and 1830 in Britain and later expanded across Europe and the United States, brought significant changes to economic systems and social structures (Schwab, 2016). It had a significant impact on the textile industry, revolutionizing manufacturing processes. This era marked a pivotal shift in production methods with the introduction of steam engines, which replaced traditional artisan craftsmanship with a system oriented toward rapid, high-volume production of consumer goods (Lu et al., 2007).

Another major innovation of this period was the invention of the flying shuttle by John Kay in 1734, which significantly accelerated the weaving process and facilitated the production of broader fabrics at a much faster rate. This advancement laid the groundwork for other technological innovations, such as the introduction of the Singer sewing machine in 1851, which further transformed the fashion industry by enabling mass production and leading to size standardization, a necessity for lowering costs and increasing accessibility. The First Industrial Revolution, particularly the advancements within the British textile industry, drove a dramatic increase in the demand for cotton, with annual consumption rising from 3 million pounds to over 360 million pounds between 1760 and 1830. However, this surge in production presented a new challenge: the need to generate consumer demand to match the increased output (Goodwin et al., 2008).

This surge in production not only transformed manufacturing processes but also reshaped societal values and consumer behaviors to accommodate the increased output. During the First Industrial Revolution, significant societal changes accompanied shifts in production. The emergence of contemporary consumer culture in North-Western Europe was marked by an evolving value system that placed increasing emphasis on luxury consumption as a means of signaling social status. The merchant bourgeoisie, empowered by greater purchasing power, wanted to emulate and differentiate themselves through the acquisition of luxury goods, often mirroring the opulent lifestyles of the aristocracy. By engaging in the consumption of fashion and luxury items, they fueled consumerist culture (Sburlino, 2019).

Cultural shifts in Great Britan were catalyzed by media like “The Gallery of Fashion” and “The Ladies Magazine,” which popularized rapidly evolving trends in clothing and hairstyles, now subject to yearly changes (Best, 2017). The rise of consumerism was further reinforced by economic philosophies such as Bernard Mandeville’s The Fable of the Bees, which argued that private indulgences could ultimately benefit society by stimulating economic growth. Simply put, Mandeville suggested that what makes a country rich is shopping for pleasure (Ebeling, 2016).

The 18th century saw the emergence of several key institutions that further solidified this trend, such as department stores, the development of attractive packaging, the establishment of historical brand names, and the rise of advertising (Sburlino, 2019).

Department stores enabled women to make purchasing decisions more autonomously, with prices clearly marked on each item, a significant departure from the traditional practice where merchants judged and controlled customers' purchasing capacity. This development highlighted the growing autonomy of female consumers and marked a shift in societal norms, as women began to recognize their own needs and desires, previously reserved for men These institutions played a critical role in promoting and sustaining consumerism by making it an important part of daily life, ultimately rivaling education and religion in shaping people's values and aspirations (Binet et al., 2019).

The 1930s marked the beginning of the Golden Age of Consumerism as society began to recover from the Great Depression, widely recognized as the most severe economic downturn in the history of the industrialized world. Consumerism was deemed essential for revitalizing the economy. Politicians, economists, and business leaders revisited Bernard Mandeville's economic theory, which suggested that shopping for pleasure could stimulate economic growth. However, to persuade consumers to buy products they already owned and that were still functional, new strategies were needed, strategies that continue to shape today's economic practices (Glyn et al., 1988).

The first strategy involved consumer education through advertising. The 1960s became known as the Golden Age of Advertising, characterized by the slogan “new is in, old is out” (Friedman, 2013). Media outlets promoted an aspirational vision of an ideal lifestyle, linking happiness, success, and social recognition to consumption. This message resonated deeply with a society emerging from years of economic recession. Consumerism became associated with the belief that well-being was rooted in the acquisition of material goods. Over time, a culture of consumption flourished, transforming individuals from passive buyers into empowered consumers. This consumer culture was instilled from early childhood by advertisers, corporations, and indirectly by political and economic institutions (Sburlino, 2019).

The second strategy involved maintaining a constant demand for consumer goods. Once purchasing according to trends was established, manufacturers sought additional ways to encourage consumers to replace their belongings more frequently. This led to the implementation of what is now known as planned obsolescence. By utilizing lower-quality raw materials, intentionally designing products with built-in flaws, and withholding repair manuals, manufacturers systematically reduced the lifespan of consumer goods to speed up the repurchase cycle. This approach is particularly evident in the modern fashion industry (Bulow, 1986). Historically, clothing was designed for longevity, often used and repaired over the course of decades. Classic items, such as winter coats, were expected to last a lifetime and were commonly passed down through generations. In contrast, today's winter coats are often designed to last just a single season (Goodwin et al, 2008).

These strategies paved the way for the emergence of the fast fashion system during the latter part of the 20th century. Fast fashion brands like H&M and Zara adopted rapid production cycles and cost-cutting measures, frequently introducing new collections to meet and stimulate consumer demand for trendy, low-cost clothing. This accelerated cycle of production and consumption created a disposable culture, transforming fashion into an industry driven by mass production and rapid turnover (Xuejie, Chang, and GuangHao, 2019).

Just as marketing and media messages have historically been used to cultivate a consumer-driven society, they hold the potential to promote greener, more sustainable solutions for our planet. History has demonstrated that consumer behavior can be shaped and transformed through the power of messaging. This highlights the need for continued research into sustainable fashion communication that could potentially drive positive changes in consumer behavior.

### 2.2. The high cost of fast fashion

The term “fast fashion” was coined by the New York Times in the 1990s to describe Zara’s goal of getting a garment from design to stores in just two weeks (New York Times, 1989). Britannica defines fast fashion as "the rapid production of inexpensive, low-quality clothing that often mimics popular styles of fashion labels, big-name brands, and independent designers" (Britannica, n.d.). While definitions of fast fashion may vary, there is broad agreement that speed and low cost are essential elements. The model thrives on rapid consumption, ever-changing styles, and low-quality garments, prompting consumers to purchase more but discard items quickly, often after just one season (Rathinamoorthy 2019).

It is important to mention that in recent years, the fashion industry has witnessed the rise of a new phenomenon, ultrafast fashion. While traditional fast fashion retailers increased the product cycle, ultrafast fashion moves at an even faster pace. The Chinese ultrafast fashion retailer Shein consistently produces up to 10,000 new designs each day, releasing in just two days what it takes H&M several months to launch (McKinsey & Company, 2022). This affordability, combined with its rapid production cycle, contributed to Shein's explosive growth during the pandemic, when it more than doubled its market share in the United States and became the second-most-popular shopping website for Gen Z consumers, just behind Amazon (McKinsey & Company, 2023).

Despite their low prices, the production of cheap garments often comes with a high cost, resulting in significant social and environmental harm through low-quality manufacturing, unsustainable resource use, and exploitative labor practices.

The fashion industry is a major contributor to environmental degradation, responsible for approximately 8-10% of global $CO_2$ emissions, amounting to 4-5 billion tonnes annually (UNECE, 2018; Quantis, 2018). Water consumption is another significant concern, with the industry using 79 trillion liters per year, predominantly for cotton cultivation and wet processing techniques like dyeing and printing (Global Fashion Agenda and The Boston Consulting Group, 2017). Such practices account for around 20% of industrial water pollution (Kant, 2012) and contribute approximately 35% (190,000 tonnes annually) of oceanic microplastic pollution (Quantis, 2018). The industry also generates over 92 million tons of textile waste each year, much of which ends up in landfills or is incinerated, including unsold items (Dahlbo et al., 2017).

The supply chain worsens environmental impacts, with developing countries facing most of the pollution and resource loss from production, while developed countries do most of the consuming (The Carbon Trust, 2011). High energy consumption is another major concern, particularly in countries like China, where coal-powered energy results in textiles having a 40% higher carbon footprint than those produced in Turkey or Europe (Sandin et al., 2019). Textile manufacturing, consumer usage, and transportation, particularly through air freight, further increase carbon emissions (Munasinghe et al., 2016).

Additionally, the textile industry relies heavily on chemicals, using over 15,000 different types during manufacturing (Roos et al., 2019). For instance, dyes and water repellents used in textile wet processing often enter natural ecosystems. Some of these chemicals, such as chemically stable fluoropolymers used for waterproofing textiles, have been detected in remote Arctic regions and even in the bodies of polar bears and seals (Peters et al., 2014), highlighting the far-reaching environmental impact of textile manufacturing.

Textile waste is yet another pressing issue. Pre-consumer waste, created during the production process, accounts for 10-30% of the material used, depending on the type of garment being made (Runnel et al., 2017). Post-consumer waste, or garments discarded soon after purchase, accounts for around 60% of clothing waste (Remy et al., 2016). Between 1999 and 2009, the USA saw a 40% increase in landfilled textile waste, and globally, textiles make up roughly 22% of mixed waste (Nørup et al., 2019).

The high cost of fast fashion extends beyond environmental damage. Low prices in the fast fashion sector contribute to health, safety, labor, and human rights violations (Williams, 2022). Offshore factories often cut costs on infrastructure and safety measures to remain competitive, a practice highlighted by tragedies such as the 2013 collapse of the Rana Plaza factory, which led to the deaths of over 1,100 garment workers and injuries to more than 2,000 people. This disaster highlighted factors such as insufficient safety audits, low wages, and the pressure on manufacturers to minimize production costs (Drennan, 2015).

Factory fires are another grave concern. In 2012, a fire in a Bangladeshi factory trapped over 100 workers inside due to locked doors and barred windows. Such incidents reflect systemic issues, including flammable chemicals, faulty wiring, and obstructed exits. Structural defects pose serious risks, as illustrated by the collapse of Rana Plaza. Despite being previously closed due to safety concerns, workers were forced to return under the threat of losing their jobs (Lambert, 2014).

Child labor is another persistent issue, with children in countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Egypt working long hours in unsafe conditions due to their small size, speed, and low pay (Drennan, 2015). Hazardous work in cotton production ranks among the worst forms of child labor. Children are exposed to dangerous pesticides, suffer from extreme heat, experience isolation, and face threats from insects and other animals. These conditions present serious health risks (European Commission, 2020). Child labor perpetuates generational poverty and denies children access to education, trapping them in a cycle of labor (Lambert, 2014). In addition to the exploitation of child labor, gender inequality is another deeply entrenched issue within the fast fashion industry.

The industry's workforce is predominantly female, with women comprising about 80% of garment workers in Asia (Colnago, 2019). They face gender-based discrimination, unequal pay, limited rights, and sexual harassment, often working in conditions that lack basic hygiene and safety (Vijeyarasa and Liu, 2022; Global Labor Justice, 2018). Reports highlight repeated violence and harassment, driven by short-term contracts and production targets, even extending beyond factory premises to housing and transportation (Colnago, 2019; H&M Group Annual Report, 2018).

Fast fashion's low wages further deepen poverty. Many garment workers earn below a living wage, barely covering essential expenses. The Clean Clothes Campaign's Europe Floor Wage initiative highlights the significant disparity between current wages and a living wage for garment workers in Europe. Despite the right to a living wage being a recognized human right, many European garment workers earn wages far below the poverty line. In fact, the gap between actual wages and a living wage is often larger in European production countries than in Asian ones. This situation is intensified by brands leveraging the misconception that products "made in Europe" are produced under fairer conditions (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2020).

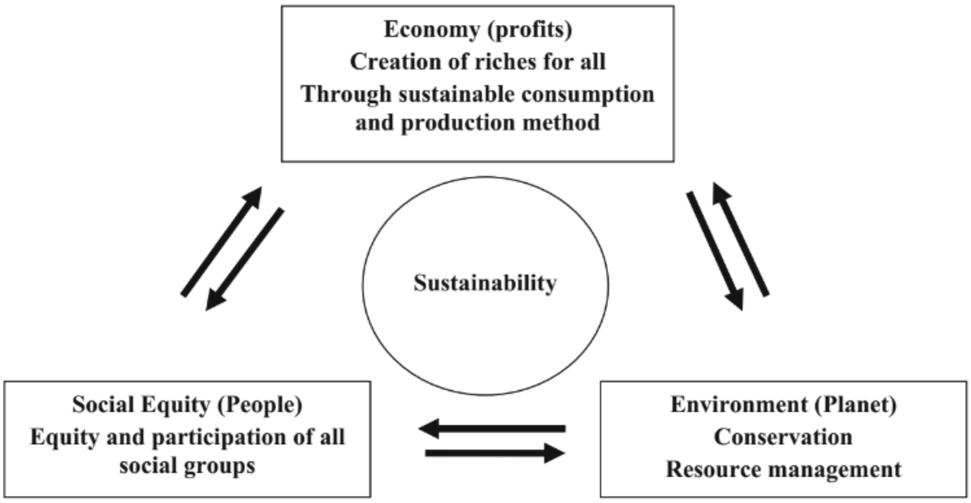
As demonstrated, fast fashion has a profound impact on the environment and society, creating pressing challenges that must be addressed. The future lies in the adoption of slow fashion, which emphasizes sustainability and ethical practices. Achieving this shift requires a comprehensive, system-wide transformation driven by creativity and collaboration among designers, manufacturers, marketers, stakeholders, and end consumers.

### 2.3. Sustainable fashion: definition, brands, and consumption

The sustainable fashion movement emerged as a reaction to the rapid production cycles and unsustainable business practices of the fast fashion industry. Before defining sustainable fashion, it is important to clarify the concept of sustainability. The term "sustainability" was first defined in 1987 by the Brundtland Report from the World Commission on Environment and Development. It refers to meeting the needs of the present without compromising the needs of the future generation.

The Brundtland Report emphasized the interconnectedness between environmental protection, social equity, and economic development, laying the foundation for the triple bottom line concept.

Figure 1: Rathinamoorthy, 2019. Fundamental aspects of sustainability.




The triple bottom line concept is crucial as it forms the foundation of sustainable fashion. The origins of the term sustainable fashion are challenging to precisely trace, as the concept has gradually developed in response to growing awareness of environmental, ethical, and social concerns. However, the emphasis on sustainability within the fashion industry gained significant momentum in the late 20th century, particularly following the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. This landmark event served as a turning point for global sustainability discussions, elevating environmental and ethical considerations across numerous sectors, including fashion.

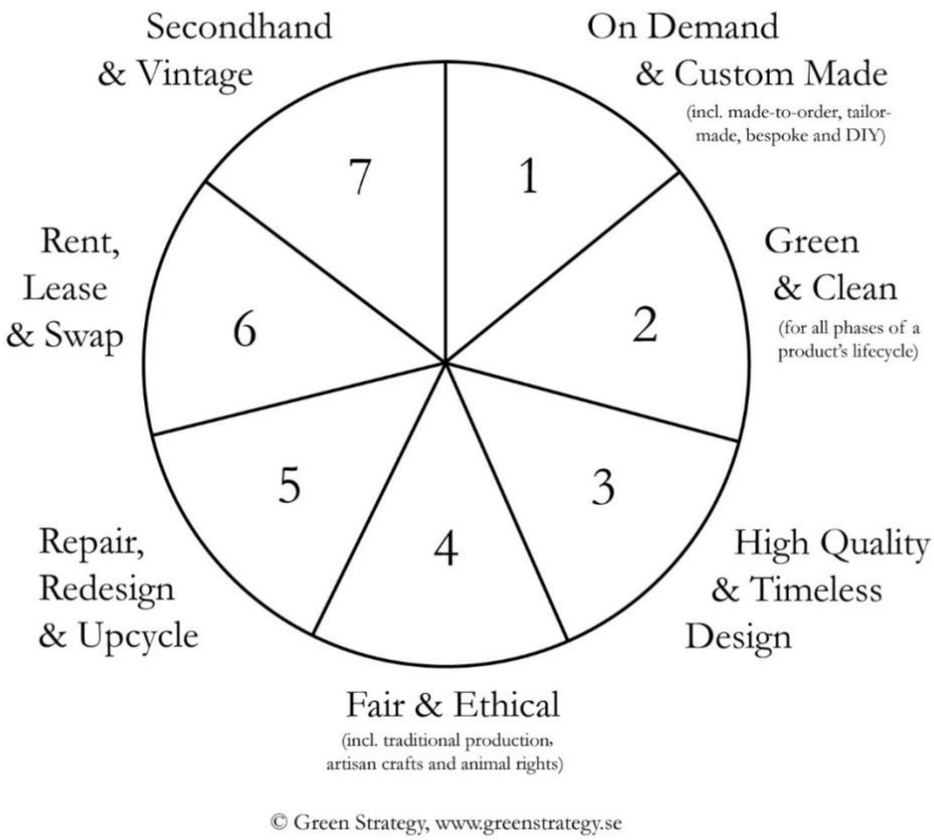
Although references to reducing waste, ethical production, and environmental responsibility in fashion predate this period, the Rio Earth Summit is often regarded as a critical catalyst for bringing the idea of sustainable fashion into mainstream discourse. From the early 1990s onward, the term gained prominence in academic, industry, and consumer discussions, reflecting an increased commitment to integrating sustainability principles within fashion practices.

However, there is no agreed-upon definition of sustainable fashion (Henninger, Alevizou, and Oates, 2016). Sustainable fashion encourages ethical practices, reducing overall production and promoting the purchase of quality products over low-quality items that are quickly discarded (Fletcher, 2010). It aims to empower workers across the supply chain, incorporate upcycling, recycling, and traditional production methods, and utilize renewable and organic raw materials (Johnston, 2013).

The open nature of the term "sustainability" and the interchangeable use of related terms such as "green" and "eco" often lead to confusion among consumers, making it difficult for them to fully understand what sustainable fashion truly means. This ambiguity contributes to the rise of greenwashing practices and consumer skepticism, which will be explored in greater detail in the first study.

An additional layer of complexity arises when distinguishing between sustainable fashion as a broad concept and its various forms. While sustainable fashion serves as an overarching idea, it is evident that there are numerous approaches to achieving sustainable practices within the fashion industry.

**Figure 2: Brismar, 2012. Seven forms of sustainable fashion.**




The "Seven Forms of Sustainable Fashion" framework illustrates how these different elements can work together across the lifecycle of a garment. Ideally, each garment should first be custom-made or produced on demand, with a focus on high-quality craftsmanship and timeless design. This process should be carried out in an environmentally friendly manner, with consideration given to ethical labor practices and other social factors.

Once produced, garments should have a long and well-cared-for life. This includes proper maintenance, repairs, and potential redesigns to extend their use. When no longer wanted by the original owner, the clothing should be passed on to others through secondhand shops, charity donations, swaps, or hand-me-downs, thus further extending its active lifecycle. When a garment is completely worn out, it should be directed to recycling channels to allow the textile material to be reused in the manufacturing of new clothing or other textile products.

The figure thus highlights seven forms of sustainable fashion from both consumer and producer perspectives. However, while these ideals represent a holistic approach to sustainability, the reality often falls short of achieving them. In practice, individuals navigate their own paths toward more sustainable fashion. Some consumers prefer frequently refreshing their wardrobes through options like secondhand and vintage, repair, redesign and upcycle, or rent, loan and swap. This is where challenges arise concerning the triple bottom line approach: purchasing secondhand clothing extends the life of garments and minimizes the use of new resources, which aligns with sustainability goals. However, without transparency regarding the garment's origin, such as whether it was originally produced using sustainable resources or manufactured in a safe working environment assessing its true sustainability becomes challenging.

This complexity underscores why defining sustainable fashion is so difficult as it encompasses a wide range of practices and philosophies. While this thesis broadly addresses the concept of sustainable fashion, it focuses specifically on one form, sustainable fashion brands, with an emphasis on those based in Europe. This distinction is important because both academia and mainstream media often represent the concept of sustainable fashion as being the same as sustainable fashion brands. This perspective limits the broader scope and versatile nature of sustainable fashion as a concept (Khandual and Pradhan, 2019).

Therefore, this research centers on European sustainable fashion brands, which strive to follow the triple bottom line approach. This approach, as mentioned before, emphasizes balancing three key pillars: social responsibility (people), minimizing environmental impact (planet), and ensuring economic viability (profit). Therefore, it is worth noting that the findings of this thesis may not apply to other forms of sustainable fashion.

Lastly, it is important to emphasize the distinction between sustainable sourcing and sustainable consumption. Once again, we encounter the challenge that there is no single, universally accepted definition of sustainable consumption. However, a widely recognized definition was proposed by the 1994 Oslo Symposium on Sustainable Consumption, which describes it as “the use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, while minimizing the use of natural resources, toxic materials, and emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle, so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations.” Similarly, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) simplifies sustainable consumption and production as “doing more and better with less.” UNEP further defines Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP) as “a holistic approach to minimizing the negative environmental impacts from consumption and production systems while promoting quality of life for all.”

The risks of ignoring this balance are evident in the growing challenges faced by the secondhand market, as highlighted in the Vogue Business article, “The trouble with secondhand: It’s becoming like fast fashion.” Consumer behavior on platforms such as The RealReal is increasingly mimicking fast fashion practices, with users seeking constant newness and frequently buying and reselling items. Purchasing from sustainable sources does not automatically equate to sustainable consumption if frequent buying and rapid disposal of items persist.

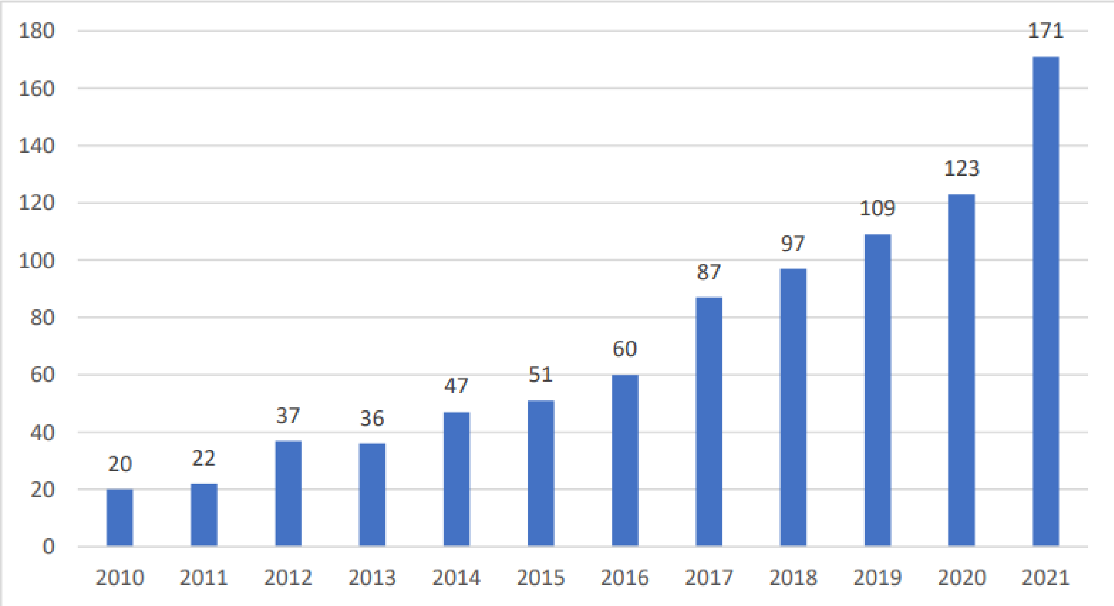
To move the fashion industry toward true sustainability, both sustainable sourcing and sustainable consumption must be integrated and practiced together.

## 2.4. Current research landscape and research gaps

According to Google Search Trends (2010–2021), there has been a notable increase in global search volume for terms like “sustainable fashion,” “fashion clothing,” and “fast fashion” since 2016, with “sustainable fashion” experiencing the most significant rise (Jørgensen and Jensen, 2012).

In a 2023 systematic literature review on the topic of sustainable fashion, researchers analyzed trends in publications on “fashion and sustainability” from 2010 to 2021. The findings revealed a notable rise in publications, with the number of studies increasing from 20 papers in 2010 to 171 in 2021 (Rahman, Hu, and Fung, 2023).

**Figure 3: Rahman, Hu, and Fung, 2023. Number of papers published each year from 2010 to 2021 on the topic of sustainable fashion.**




This surge, including a significant 28% increase from 2020 to 2021, highlights the growing interest and focus of researchers on fashion and sustainability. Why there has been such a rapid increase is difficult to pinpoint, partly due to the academic publishing cycle. However, events such as the Rana Plaza factory collapse in 2013, the launch of Fashion Revolution Week in 2014, and documentaries like The True Cost (2015) may have contributed to the rise (Mukendi, Davies, Glozer, and McDonagh, 2020).

The surge in research and interest surrounding sustainable fashion reflects a broader shift in consumer and societal awareness, driven by major events and increased media attention. The 13th edition of Deloitte's Generation Z and Millennial Survey, covering 23,000 respondents across 44 countries, found that 79% of Generation Z and 81% of Millennials believe businesses should do more to support sustainable purchasing decisions. Additionally, about two-thirds are willing to pay more for environmentally sustainable products, while roughly a quarter have ended relationships with companies due to unsustainable practices (Deloitte, 2024).

However, despite this growing awareness and commitment, consumer behavior often tells a different story. The rise of fast fashion and ultrafast fashion continues to thrive, with shoppers frequently seeking new looks. According to the recent The State of Fashion 2024 report, published by Business of Fashion and McKinsey, 40% of US consumers and 26% of UK consumers have shopped at fast fashion giants Shein or Temu within the past 12 months. Including other fast fashion retailers would likely push these numbers even higher. This contradiction is frequently explained by the attitude-behavior gap (Han, Seo and Ko, 2017; Niinimäki, 2010), which occurs when consumers' values and beliefs about sustainability do not align with their purchasing actions. Although many individuals support the idea of sustainable fashion, they often continue to purchase from fast fashion brands. This contradiction is intriguing and has prompted extensive research aimed at understanding why it occurs and how it can be addressed. Many barriers to sustainable fashion (SF) consumption have been identified, revealing the complexities that prevent consumers' intentions from aligning with their actions:

- **Accessibility and price sensitivity:** Accessibility and convenience are significant obstacles to SF consumption (Harris et al., 2016). Limited availability and low visibility of SF options make it difficult for consumers to find or purchase these products (Ritch and Schröder, 2012; Han et al., 2017a). Many consumers lack the time, resources, or willingness to seek out SF (Perry and Chung, 2016). Additionally, many SF brands operate primarily online, requiring consumers to discover and purchase their products through digital channels rather than in physical stores. This reliance on online platforms can limit access for those who prefer or depend on in-store shopping (Henninger et al., 2016; Han et al., 2017a). High costs also pose a significant challenge. While some consumers are willing to pay more for SF, the price remains a major deterrent for many (Bocti, Zein and Giannini, 2021).
- **Aesthetics and quality:** Mainstream consumers often perceive SF as unfashionable (Joergens, 2006; Gam, 2011; Joy et al., 2012). Research suggests that the less fashionable an item appears, the more sustainable it is perceived to be (Wagner et al., 2019). There is also general skepticism about the quality of SF products among some consumers (Wong and Taylor, 2001; Harris et al., 2016; Jung et al., 2016). However, those who purchase and use SF often rate its quality very highly, revealing a gap between perception and reality (Lundblad and Davies, 2016).
- **Cultural differences**: Cultural preferences and market differences influence SF's appeal (Joergens, 2006; Carey and Cervellon, 2014; Achabou and Dekhili, 2015). SF tends to resonate more strongly in certain regions, such as Scandinavian countries, where environmental awareness is higher. Meanwhile, second-hand

fashion, often proposed as an alternative to new SF products, remains unattractive or stigmatized in some cultures (Goworek et al., 2013; Chipambwa et al., 2016).

- **Trust and knowledge**: Consumer trust in sustainability claims is often low, largely due to concerns about greenwashing (Rausch and Kopplin, 2021). Additionally, a lack of knowledge about the environmental impact of fast fashion and the benefits of SF can hinder sustainable purchasing behavior. Targeted environmental education and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives can positively influence consumer attitudes, especially among younger generations (Soyer and Dittrich, 2021). Furthermore, even those with environmental concerns may feel their individual actions are too small to make a meaningful difference, leading to inaction when it comes to engaging with the SF movement (Ronda, 2023).

This thesis specifically focuses on the trust and knowledge barrier, proposing that effective transparency communication strategies could be a key solution for building consumer trust in sustainable fashion. Transparency in fashion has been shown to influence consumer behavior by improving brand trust, perceived authenticity, and purchase intentions, making it a powerful tool for addressing the attitude-behavior gap in sustainable fashion consumption. The following insights from existing literature highlight the potential benefits of transparent communication in sustainable fashion.

Transparency positively impacts trust in fashion brands, leading to stronger consumer confidence. Studies have shown that transparent practices increase trust among consumers, leading to positive word-of-mouth intentions, though this trust does not always directly translate to increased purchase intentions (Brandão, Gadekar and Cardoso, 2018). Similarly, transparency enhances perceptions of brand integrity, which positively affects consumer behavior and strengthens long-term loyalty (Cambier and Poncin, 2020).

Transparency in pricing and production plays an important role in shaping consumer behavior. Studies suggest that when brands openly disclose information about how their products are priced, such as detailing production costs and fair labor wages, it enhances perceptions of fairness and trustworthiness, which can positively influence consumer purchase intentions. This level of openness boosts brand equity, making the brand more appealing and credible to consumers, but also creates a stronger emotional connection (Kim, Kim and Rothenberg, 2020).

Furthermore, transparency in supplier sustainability practices, such as revealing how materials are sourced or how ethical labor standards are maintained, has been found to increase consumers' willingness to pay a premium for these products. When combined with a known reputation for high product quality, such transparency can also encourage repeat purchase. In cases where product quality is uncertain or unknown, transparency around sustainability practices becomes even more critical. By emphasizing their commitment to ethical and environmental standards, brands can positively influence consumer decision-making, even in the absence of strong product reputation (Catalano and Cui, 2020).

Additionally, transparent communication strategies can shape consumer attitudes and behaviors. When brands openly share information about production processes and costs, it increases perceptions of authenticity and fosters trust, ultimately influencing positive attitudes and behavioral intentions toward the brand (Yang and Battocchio, 2020). Consumers increasingly demand detailed information about ethical practices and sustainability in fashion, making effective communication essential for aligning with these expectations (James and Montgomery, 2017). While radical transparency in supply chain can enhance brand value, it must be implemented thoughtfully to avoid overwhelming consumers with excessive information (Richards, 2021).

Through three different studies, this thesis argues that transparency, rather than unattainable claims of perfect sustainability, provides a practical and impactful pathway for building trust in an increasingly skeptical consumer base, which could help reduce the attitude-behavior gap.

# 3. METHODOLOGY OVERVIEW AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

## 3.1 Methodology overview

Communication research can be approached from multiple perspectives. Traditionally, research methodologies are divided into qualitative and quantitative methods. Some communication questions can only be answered through quantitative analysis, while others require qualitative insights. To comprehensively address my main research question, this thesis combines both qualitative and quantitative methods.

The research is structured into three distinct but interconnected phases, with each phase building on the findings of the previous one. This phased approach not only ensures a logical progression of research but also allows each phase to stand alone as an individual study, contributing to the thesis and broader academic discourse. The thesis focuses exclusively on European sustainable fashion brands and this focus is driven by the EU Green Claims Directive, which directly affects European brands by regulating the use of generic environmental claims. By narrowing the scope to Europe, this thesis aims to provide insights that are specifically relevant to the context shaped by this directive.

The main research question guiding this thesis is: **Is transparency emerging as a key driver of consumer trust compared to traditional sustainability claims in the fashion industry?**

To answer this overarching question, each phase is guided by its own specific research questions, contributing to a holistic understanding of transparency in sustainable fashion communication. Transparency in fashion has the potential to enhance brand trust, perceived authenticity, and consumer attitudes, ultimately leading to increased purchase intentions. Effective and honest communication of transparent practices is essential for achieving these benefits.

### Phase 1: Content analysis of sustainable fashion brands in Europe

**Objective and scope**: the first phase of the research uses content analysis to examine how European sustainable fashion brands communicate sustainability in their mission statements and whether they address the challenges of their sustainability journey. The brands selected for the analysis were taken from the article “Responsible Clothing Brands from Europe You’ll Love” on the Good On You website, which lists 64 sustainable clothing brands rated as “Good” or “Great” using a robust methodology. This article was chosen to avoid personal biases in the selection process and ensure that only highly rated sustainable brands were included in the research. From this initial list, only brands with English-language websites targeting European consumers were selected, resulting in a final sample of 60 brands.

**Rationale**: the Good On You platform was chosen because it serves as a trusted resource for consumers seeking sustainable fashion options. By analyzing brands rated as the "best of the best," this phase provides a snapshot of current communication practices among leading sustainable fashion brands. The content analysis also aligns with the evolving regulatory landscape, particularly the European Union's Green Claims Directive. This directive aims to prohibit vague environmental claims (e.g., "eco," "climate neutral") without substantiating evidence. While the directive is expected to come into force by 2026, this study offers a baseline for future comparisons, enabling researchers to evaluate how the directive influences communication practices over time.

**Research questions:**

The study addresses three research questions:

1. **RQ1**: What proportion of sustainable fashion brands include elements related to people, the planet, and animals in their mission statements?
2. **RQ2**: To what extent do sustainable fashion brands avoid using generic environmental claims in their mission statements?
3. **RQ3**: How do sustainable fashion brands communicate the challenges and limitations of their sustainability practices?

**Rationale behind research questions:**

- **RQ1** explores whether brands provide a holistic definition of sustainability, covering social and environmental dimensions, as many focus disproportionately on environmental aspects.
- **RQ2** examines how closely brands align with the Green Claims Directive by avoiding generic, unsupported environmental claims.
- **RQ3** investigates whether brands acknowledge the inherent challenges and limitations of achieving full sustainability

**Findings and transition to Phase 2**: the findings revealed that few brands openly discuss their challenges or limitations. This gap informed the second phase of the research, which focuses on how consumers respond to transparency strategies that include acknowledgment of a brand's limitations in sustainability practices.

**Phase 2: Consumer reactions to transparency strategies**

**Objective**: this phase builds on the findings of Phase 1, where it was observed that only a few brands openly communicate their sustainability challenges and limitations. Using these examples of transparency strategies identified in the first phase, this phase investigates how consumers react to such openness. The goal is to identify factors influencing these reactions, including consumer green skepticism, knowledge of sustainable fashion, environmental concerns, and demographics. To achieve this, a survey method was employed, and 150 participants from across Europe, all belonging to Generation Z and Millennials, completed the survey.

**Research question**: How do green skepticism, sustainable fashion knowledge, environmental concerns, and demographic factors influence consumer reactions to different transparency strategies employed by sustainable fashion brands?

**Hypotheses**

1. **H1**: Higher levels of green skepticism will lead to more negative reactions to all types of transparency strategies.
2. **H2**: Greater knowledge of sustainable fashion will lead to more positive reactions to transparency strategies, particularly when brands communicate their sustainability progress.
3. **H3**: Higher levels of environmental concern will enhance positive reactions to all transparency strategies.
    - **H3a:** Reactions to transparency strategies will vary based on their environmental concerns from different perspectives—self, other people, and the biosphere.
4. **H4:** Demographic factors (age, gender, education, cultural background) will moderate the relationships between green skepticism, sustainable fashion knowledge, environmental concerns, and reactions to transparency strategies.

**Findings and transition to Phase 3**: The most important finding from Phase 2 was that environmental concern strongly drives trust and willingness to buy from sustainable fashion brands. While sustainable fashion knowledge showed a weak positive link with trust, green skepticism toward brands had little effect on trust or purchase intentions. However, skepticism toward regulations significantly influenced consumer reactions. Building on this, Phase 3 shifts to the brand perspective, exploring how sustainable fashion brands adapt their communication strategies to leverage environmental concern, sustainable fashion knowledge, and green skepticism

**Phase 3: Communications strategies of sustainable fashion brands**

**Objective:** Building on the findings from Phases 1 and 2, Phase 3 examines how sustainable fashion brands adapt their communication strategies to meet consumer expectations, align with EU regulations, and determine their next steps. While Phase 1 highlighted the lack of acknowledgment of challenges by brands and Phase 2 explored how consumers respond to such transparency strategies, this phase focuses on the brand perspective, investigating how they navigate regulatory demands, address consumer skepticism, and prepare for the future of sustainable fashion. The aim is to understand how brands balance compliance with emerging laws, such as the Green Claims Directive. To achieve this, the methodology involved in-depth interviews with founders or marketing experts from various sustainable fashion brands in Europe.

**Research questions:**

1. **RQ1**: Is sustainability a driving factor in purchase decisions for consumers of sustainable fashion brands?
2. **RQ2:** How do sustainable fashion brands address customer challenges such as green skepticism, sustainability knowledge gaps, and environmental concerns?
3. **RQ3:** Do sustainable fashion brands see the value of the EU Green Claims Directive in the sustainable fashion market, and what are the next steps for sustainable fashion brands in Europe?

This research, conducted across three distinct phases using content analysis, surveys, and interviews, offers a comprehensive understanding of transparency in sustainable fashion communication. By integrating different methodologies, the study captures both consumer and brand perspectives, providing a holistic view of the challenges and opportunities in this space while bringing new knowledge to academia and offering actionable insights for practitioners in the fashion industry.

### 3.2. Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed across all phases of this research to ensure the protection of participants and the integrity of the study.

In Phase 1, the study analyzed publicly available information, including mission statements and broader website communications of sustainable fashion brands. No direct engagement with individuals was involved, and all data was obtained from the official websites of the brands listed in the Good On You article. To uphold ethical research practices, all sources were accurately cited, and proper credit was given to the brands for their published content. The analysis was conducted with diligence to respect the intellectual property of the brands studied, ensuring that their communications were represented accurately and responsibly.

In Phase 2, a survey was conducted to explore consumer reactions to transparency strategies in sustainable fashion communication. Participants were provided with an introductory message clearly explaining the purpose, scope, and objectives of the study. The introduction emphasized that the survey aimed to examine their views on eco-fashion, environmental concerns, and transparency in the fashion industry. It also reassured participants that their responses would remain completely anonymous, with no personally identifiable information collected, and that demographic data would only be used for trend analysis. By proceeding to complete the survey, participants implicitly provided their informed consent. This approach ensured that participants were fully aware of the study's objectives and the use of their responses before choosing to continue.

In Phase 3, discussions with representatives of sustainable fashion brands were conducted to gather their insights on the findings from the first two phases and to understand their perspectives on operating sustainable fashion businesses in Europe. Before beginning each discussion, participants were explicitly informed about the purpose and scope of the research. Consent was sought for recording the sessions, and participants were asked if they preferred their brand and/or personal identities to remain anonymous in the study's final report. Audio recordings and related materials are securely stored and will be deleted six months after the study concludes to ensure compliance with privacy guidelines.

Across all phases, this research prioritized ethical rigor by ensuring transparency in its methods, protecting the rights and identities of participants, and attributing content appropriately to its original sources. This approach underscores the study's commitment to ethical and responsible research practices.

## 4. FIRST STUDY – BEYOND GREEN CLAIMS: HOW FASHION BRANDS NAVIGATE MISSION STATEMENTS AND SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGES IN THE LIGHT OF THE EU GREEN CLAIMS DIRECTIVE

### 4.1. Introduction

Over half of consumers in 33 markets believe that brands across all industries are misleading them with green claims, highlighting a global issue of mistrust in green marketing practices (Kantar, 2023). In recent years, there has been a growing interest in sustainable fashion and ethical practices within the fashion industry (Henninger et al., 2016). Investor expectations are rising rapidly, environmental regulations are becoming stricter, and consumer decisions are no longer based solely on price and quality. According to a McKinsey 2019 report, apparel companies worldwide now consider sustainability and traceability their top priorities for action. Sustainability is becoming a megatrend (Mittelstaedt et al., 2014), prompting more companies to incorporate terms like "sustainable," "eco-friendly," "green," or "ethical" into their marketing communications to remain competitive. However, the excessive use of such claims often leads to consumer mistrust, particularly when the credibility of these claims cannot be verified. This growing skepticism has created an urgent need for regulatory measures to restore consumer confidence and ensure accountability.

In response to this growing mistrust, the European Union has introduced a proposed directive on green claims to combat greenwashing and protect both consumers and the environment. By ensuring that environmental labels and claims are credible and verifiable, the directive aims to enable consumers to make more informed purchasing decisions. Furthermore, it seeks to enhance fair competition by providing businesses that genuinely prioritize environmental sustainability with a competitive advantage in the marketplace.

Despite the relevance of the EU Green Claims Directive, there is a notable gap in academic literature, particularly regarding its implications for the fashion industry and its influence on communication and marketing practices. This study seeks to fill this gap by offering a snapshot of the current state of sustainable fashion brands and analyzing how they communicate their sustainability efforts in their mission statements. Specifically, the research investigates whether brands rely on generic green terms, whether they adopt a holistic approach to sustainability by addressing people, the planet, and animals in their mission statements, and whether they transparently communicate the challenges and limitations of their sustainability practices.

To ensure objectivity, this study focuses on European brands rated as "Good" or "Great" by Good On You, a platform renowned for its rigorous evaluations of sustainable fashion. The Good On You platform represents a unique resource for this research, as it has not been widely utilized or explored in academic literature. By capturing the current state of sustainable communication practices, this research lays the groundwork for future analyses. It allows for comparisons to assess whether fashion brands align with the Directive and whether the legislation effectively decreases greenwashing practices within the industry.

#### 4.1.1. Sustainability, a blurry concept

Sustainability is often regarded as a "blurry concept" due to its flexible and open-ended nature, allowing for different interpretations across industries and sectors (Binet et al., 2019). While this adaptability has enabled widespread adoption, it has also led to confusion, inconsistency, and significant challenges in achieving a universally agreed-upon definition.

The term "sustainability" was first defined in the 1987 Brundtland Report by the World Commission on Environment and Development, describing it as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland, 1987). The report highlighted the interconnected relationship between environmental protection, social equity, and economic development, forming the basis for the widely recognized triple bottom line framework.

However, the open and flexible nature of sustainability has allowed industries to tailor the concept to their specific needs, creating further ambiguity (Kates, Parris, and Leiserowitz, 2008). To date, there is no universally accepted definition of sustainable fashion (Henninger, Alevizou, and Oates, 2016). Moreover, the lexicon surrounding sustainable fashion offers alternative terms including green, ethical, ecological, slow, and organic. The interchangeable use of these terms poses a challenge for researchers and consumers and allows for misleading marketing practices (Bly et al., 2015; Thomas, 2008).

A 2014 global study conducted by Buzzback and the Rainforest Alliance, surveying 2,000 participants from the US, UK, China, Brazil, and India, illustrates the varied perceptions of sustainability among consumers. For most, sustainability is primarily associated with concepts such as “green,” “natural,” and “recycling,” with two-thirds of respondents identifying these as their top-of-mind associations. However, social and ethical dimensions of sustainability, such as fair labor practices and resource equity, were less aligned with consumers’ personal values. The study underscores the role of corporate communication in shaping public perceptions, revealing that sustainability is frequently framed in environmental terms, reinforcing the perception of sustainability as predominantly “green” (Buzzback and Rainforest Alliance, 2014).

Another significant challenge lies in the paradox of sustainable fashion, which is often referred to as an oxymoron. Fashion is driven by trends and seasonality, emphasizing constant change, while sustainability focuses on long-term thinking, resource conservation, and reducing waste (Clark, 2008; Walker, 2006).

While sustainable fashion refers to an overarching movement towards ecological integrity and social justice in the fashion industry, a sustainable fashion brand denotes companies that adhere to these principles. Considering the research's specific focus on brands featured on the Good On You application, it is only appropriate to utilize the application's own definition of sustainable fashion brands, as the application has ranked these brands according to its selected criteria for sustainability.

Good On You application does not utilize the term “sustainable fashion brands” but instead refers to them as “ethical brands,” highlighting the interchangeable usage of these terms in the context of sustainable fashion. According to Good On You, an ethical brand prioritizes positive impacts on people, the planet, and animals by ensuring fair treatment of workers throughout the supply chain, including policies against child and forced labour, ensuring worker safety, the right to unionize, and living wages. An ethical brand[1] demonstrates responsibility in resource and energy use, striving to reduce carbon emissions, minimize impact on waterways, and safely handle chemicals. Moreover, an ethical brand aims to minimize or eliminate the use of animal products, and exotic animal skin and hair, ideally striving to be 100% vegan. This definition was located in the introduction of the article titled “Responsible Clothing Brands from Europe You’ll Love”

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[1] *Provided definition is based on the information available as of May 23, 2023, and that definitions and criteria may evolve over time as websites and platforms update their content.*

on the Good On You website. Content is consistent between the website and the application version (Good On You, 2023).

The definition follows the triple bottom line approach, which aims for holistic sustainability across social, environmental, and economic dimensions. It is noteworthy that while not all definitions or criteria for ethical brands place emphasis on animals, the application's focus on animal welfare can be attributed to the rising concern for animal welfare and the growing consumer demand for cruelty-free and vegan products. Reimers, Magnuson and Chao (2016) demonstrated that there is a growing demand for animal welfare, as they identified four factors influencing consumers' perceptions of ethical clothing items: environmental responsibility, employee welfare, animal welfare, and slow fashion attributes. Notably, the study confirmed that animal welfare exerts the most significant influence among these factors. This observation highlights the dynamic and evolving nature of sustainability.

#### 4.1.2. The rise of greenwashing

As previously discussed, sustainability is an open, dynamic, and evolving concept. However, this also represents a potential vulnerability as the open nature of sustainability can be exploited by organizations and brands engaging in greenwashing.

A study conducted by de Freitas Netto et al. (2020) delves into the various concepts and forms of greenwashing due to the existence of multiple definitions. It identifies two primary behaviors that constitute greenwashing: concealing negative environmental performance and the simultaneous presentation of positive information regarding its positive performance. For the purposes of this study, greenwashing is defined using Delmas and Burbano's (2011) framework: the practice of using positive environmental messaging to mask poor environmental performance.

The seven sins of greenwashing, introduced by TerraChoice Environmental Marketing provide a structured framework for examining how brands mislead consumers. These sins are particularly relevant to the sustainable fashion industry, where environmental claims have become widespread in recent years but are often deceptive.

- The sin of no proof arises when brands make green claims without offering credible third-party verification to back their statements.

- The sin of vagueness is particularly prevalent in fashion, as brands use ambiguous terms like “eco-friendly” or “green” without providing clear definitions, leaving consumers uncertain about their true environmental impact.
- The sin of the hidden trade-off is common when brands emphasize the use of natural materials like organic cotton but neglect to disclose the significant environmental costs, such as high-water consumption and chemical usage during production.

Other sins, such as worshiping false labels (falsely implying third-party endorsements), the lesser of two evils (e.g., promoting “organic leather” without addressing broader ethical concerns), the sin of irrelevance (e.g., claiming to be "CFC-free" despite CFCs being banned for decades), and the sin of fibbing (environmental claims that are outright false), further erode trust and complicate consumer decision-making (UL, n.d.).

Unfortunately, the fashion industry’s greenwashing practices are widespread. A 2021 report by the Changing Markets Foundation found that 59% of green claims by European and UK fashion brands are misleading, positioning the sector as one of the worst offenders globally. The rise in instances of greenwashing has led to an increase in green skepticism, posing challenges for genuinely sustainable fashion brands as it becomes more difficult for customers to determine a true sustainable claim (Nyilasy, Gangadharbatla, and Paladino, 2014).

Interestingly, there are signs of progress. For the first time in six years, greenwashing incidents in Europe declined by 20% in 2024 (RepRisk, 2024). This shift can be attributed to heightened scrutiny and the anticipated implementation of stricter regulatory measures, such as the proposed EU Green Claims Directive. However, the decline is limited to low- and medium-severity cases, while high-severity incidents—characterized by deliberate, systematic misrepresentation—have surged by 27%. These trends indicate an evolution in greenwashing tactics, with companies adopting more complex strategies to mislead consumers.

A potential countermeasure to greenwashing lies in the adoption of green transparency, which emphasizes the need for brands to disclose detailed and verifiable information about their environmental and social practices. Nguyen et al. (2017) argue that the absence of such transparency fosters consumer skepticism, making it imperative for brands to embrace open communication to rebuild trust.

### 4.1.3. European Union proposes Green Claims Directive to combat greenwashing

Regulatory measures are being considered to address the issue of greenwashing. Since this study is focusing on European brands, it examines the law enforced by the European Commission. Although the focus is on the EU's law, its influence extends beyond EU member states. Switzerland, as part of the European Economic Area, often aligns with EU regulations to facilitate the flow of goods and services across borders (Swiss Confederation, 2023). Similarly, the UK's departure from the EU has not exempted UK-based businesses exporting to the EU from complying with EU standards to maintain access to EU market (UK Government, 2021).

In March 2022, the European Commission launched the "EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles" as part of the Circular Economy Action Plan. This strategy aims to make textiles, including clothing, more sustainable by 2030, reflecting the urgency to mitigate the sector's environmental and social impacts.

Between 1996 and 2018, clothing prices in the EU decreased by over 30% relative to inflation (Eionet, 2022), yet household expenditure on apparel increased significantly (Köhler et al., 2021). This trend can be attributed to the rise of fast fashion—a linear business model that prioritizes quantity over quality, resulting in wasteful consumption and minimal reuse or recycling of textiles.

To address these challenges, the European Commission has proposed regulations targeting misleading environmental claims and promoting transparency. A key milestone is the draft legislation supported by the European Parliament in May 2023, which focuses on prohibiting vague or unsupported environmental claims. General terms like "eco-friendly," "natural," or "biodegradable" will only be permitted if backed by detailed, verifiable evidence. Similarly, misleading practices, such as suggesting a product's sustainability applies to the entire item when it only applies to a component, or false claims about product longevity, will be prohibited. To further simplify consumer decision-making, only certification schemes approved by public authorities or verified by third parties will be allowed. Non-compliance could result in legal penalties of up to 4% of a company's turnover. Complementing this, the Empowering Consumers Directive, set to take effect in March 2024, restricts the use of unsupported environmental claims and limits sustainability labels to those approved by public authorities or based on recognized certifications. It also bans claims tied to carbon offsetting unless thoroughly substantiated (European Commission, 2023).

The regulatory environment also presents challenges for businesses such as sustainable fashion brands. According to Plan A (2023), tighter regulations will require companies to audit their marketing materials and align communications with the new rules. While these measures impose additional compliance costs, they also offer an opportunity for companies to rethink and strengthen their communication strategies, fostering trust and transparency in the process.

The introduction of these regulations marks a pivotal moment for the fashion industry. By eliminating vague and unsupported claims, the EU aims to empower consumers with actionable information and promote a more sustainable and circular fashion economy. This is not only essential for curbing greenwashing but also critical for setting new industry standards that prioritize transparency and accountability.

#### 4.1.4. Research questions

Despite the extensive body of research on sustainable fashion, several gaps remain, particularly in understanding how sustainable fashion brands communicate their commitment to sustainability, especially through their mission statements, which serve as a formal summary of an organization's core purpose, values, and goals. While previous studies have explored various aspects of sustainable fashion communication, the focus has often been on environmental attributes, such as green, natural, or recycled materials, with less emphasis on the social aspects like fair wages and working conditions (Henninger et al., 2016; Buzzback and Rainforest Alliance, 2014). This discrepancy points to a need for a more holistic examination of how sustainable fashion brands address the full spectrum of sustainability, encompassing people, the planet, and animals in their communication strategies.

Recent developments in EU regulations, coupled with the increasing prevalence of misleading green claims as highlighted by the Changing Markets Foundation (2021), have intensified the need for sustainable fashion brands to adopt a more transparent and holistic approach in their communication strategies. This is further underscored by the growing trend of green skepticism (Nyilasy, Gangadharbatla, and Paladino, 2014). It remains to be investigated how these brands address the challenges and constraints in their sustainability efforts. This study, therefore, aims to bridge this gap by examining the communication strategies of European sustainable fashion brands, specifically those featured on the Good On You application.

Additionally, while the Good On You provides a valuable framework for categorizing sustainable fashion brands, there is limited academic research that utilizes this framework to analyze brand communications. The application's unique approach to categorizing brands based on their impacts on people, the planet, and animals offers a novel perspective that has not been extensively explored in academic literature. By focusing on the unique framework provided by the Good On You application and considering the current regulatory shifts, this study not only contributes to the existing literature on sustainable fashion communication but also offers insights into potential future trajectories in the face of changing regulations and consumer expectations.

Given these gaps, this study aims to address the following research questions:

- RQ1: What proportion of sustainable fashion brands include elements related to people, the planet, and animals in their mission statements?
- RQ2: To what extent do sustainable fashion brands distance themselves from employing generic environmental claims in their mission statements?
- RQ3: How do sustainable fashion brands communicate the challenges and limitations of their sustainability practices?

## 4.2. Methodology

### 4.2.1. Sampling

A selection of sustainable brands in Europe was compiled by collecting information from the article 64 “Responsible Clothing Brands from Europe You’ll Love” on the Good On You website (n.d.). This article presents a list of 64 sustainable clothing brands from Europe, each rated as Good or Great based on a first-class methodology.

Not all brands were selected for the final analysis as only brands who had an English website and are targeting European consumers are considered. The final sample consisted of 60 European sustainable brands. It is crucial to mention that this sampling was collected in May 2023 and it is possible that the website will change the list in the future as blogs get regularly updated. The following section addresses the importance of choosing Good On You as a source for the sampling.

The rating system used by Good On You assigns each brand a clear and easily understandable score ranging from We Avoid (1) to Great (5), taking into account the brand's impact on people, the planet, and animals. To determine these ratings, the platform uses various sources, including company websites, credible third-party reports, and certification schemes such as Fair Trade, Global Organic Textile Standard, and Cradle to Cradle.

This emphasis on analysing company websites aligns with the focus of this study as Good On You's philosophy is that brands should publicly disclose sustainability information to foster accountability and drive positive outcomes for people, the planet, and animals. The platform asserts that consumers have a right to be informed about a brand's impact on the issues they care about, emphasizing the significance of publicly available data.

It is crucial to note that all the information regarding Good On You's rating system, methodology, and emphasis on transparency and accountability comes from the app and website as of May 2023. However, the platform's methodologies or information may change in the future due to updates or revisions in their approach to sustainability ratings.

#### 4.2.2. Website communication

Analysing website communication, as opposed to social media platforms, offers several advantages. Websites serve as the primary mode of communication between brands and consumers in the digital age. As crucial platforms, websites enable brands to demonstrate their sustainable practices, convey their brand identity, values, and mission, and facilitate informed decision-making by consumers (Amritha and Suresh, 2020).

The following advantages of website analysis over social media platforms further support this research approach:

1. Credibility: company websites are perceived as more credible sources of information compared to social media, which is often viewed as more informal and less reliable.
2. Control: companies have greater control over the content and presentation of their sustainability communications on their websites, allowing for more comprehensive and accurate information.
3. Accessibility: websites are accessible to all consumers, unlike social media platforms that may have limited visibility due to algorithms, user preferences, or privacy settings.

4. Depth of information: websites offer greater flexibility and space for companies to provide in-depth information about their sustainability initiatives, surpassing the limitations of social media post formats.
5. Longevity: social media platforms are characterized by their focus on real-time updates and stream of new content. In contrast, company websites provide a dedicated space for showcasing sustainability initiatives and related information, making it more enduring and easily accessible over time.

#### 4.2.3. Measures

In order to address the research questions posed in this study, a content analysis approach was employed. In the forthcoming section, each of the three research questions (RQs) will be addressed sequentially.

To answer RQ1, a dataset was constructed with three primary columns: Brand Name, Mission Statement, and Sustainability Rating as provided by Good On You. Mission Statement is defined as a declaration of an organization's reason for being, revealing what the organization aims to be and whom it intends to serve (David, 1989).

The study sought to evaluate the degree to which the mission statements of these selected brands directly address the welfare of people, the environment (planet), and animals. According to Good On You, an ethical brand prioritizes positive impacts on people, the planet, and animals by ensuring fair treatment of workers throughout the supply chain, including policies against child and forced labour, ensuring worker safety, the right to unionize, and living wages.

To categorize the mission statements, a list of sustainability-related keywords was compiled, structured around three primary categories:

**Table 1: Categorization of mission statements by sustainability keywords**

| Category | Keywords |
|---|---|
| Planet | planet, environment, eco, earth, nature, sustainable, sustainability organic, slow fashion, less waste, fewer seasons |
| People | people, community, makers, workers, artisans, society, social, ethical, employees, human, safety, fair trade |

| | |
|---|---|
| Animal | animal, cruelty-free, vegan, animal welfare, animal rights |

The brands were categorized based on the presence or absence of at least one keyword from each of the three categories: Planet, People, and Animals. This categorization aimed to investigate whether brands incorporate all three aspects (planet, people, and animals) into their mission statements. This inquiry was prompted by prior research indicating that consumers often associate sustainable fashion primarily with environmentally friendly attributes, potentially overlooking social aspects. The inclusion of animal welfare represents a newer dimension of sustainable fashion, highlighting the evolving nature of the concept.

To address the RQ2, it was necessary to establish a definition for generic environmental claims. The generic environmental claims are the words listed in the EU's recent directive, which will prohibit companies from using certain words on product labels unless they can deliver proof of recognized excellent environmental performance relevant to the claim.

The terms included on the EU Parliament and Council's list of generic environmental claims are as follows: carbon-neutral, climate-neutral, environmentally friendly, eco-friendly, eco, green, natural, biodegradable, carbon-friendly, carbon-positive, energy-efficient, bio-based, biodegradable, nature’s friend, ecological, environmentally correct, gentle on the environment, as well as broader statements including the words conscious and responsive.

Each mission statement underwent analysis to determine whether it contained any of the words from the list and to identify the most frequently used terms.

To address RQ3 content analysis methodology was employed to assess the information available on sustainability and about pages of the selected brands. The emphasis was placed on these pages because they are expected to provide information regarding the challenges and limitations associated with the brands' sustainability practices.

Sixty European brands were categorized into three distinct groups based on how they communicated their sustainability challenges and limitations in the study.

1. The first group consists of companies that did not address their sustainability challenges in any form of communication.

2. The second group includes companies that communicated these challenges specifically in their official reports.
3. The third group encompasses companies that disseminated information about their sustainability challenges and limitations through their corporate websites.

The division of companies into separate groups based on their communication channels, one through reports (also available on the website) and the other exclusively on their websites, is driven by the expected reach and accessibility of these communication channels. The underlying assumption is that a wider audience is more likely to access and engage with information presented on a company's website than to delve into detailed reports, which are generally less frequently consulted by everyday customers. Consequently, companies that proactively address environmental challenges on their websites are likely doing so to prioritize transparency and engage with a broader audience.

In this research context, the term communicating challenges is defined as the explicit identification of specific problems, obstacles, or limitations associated with sustainability practices. An example of effective communication of challenges would involve directly addressing a particular concern, for example striving to elevate wages in 2023 for garment workers across the supply chain. On the contrary, vague or general statements such as expressing a commitment to continuous improvement without specifying tangible issues or constraints are not deemed as communicating challenges in this context, and those brands belong in the first group.

The third category, comprising brands that openly communicate their challenges on their websites, is further analysed to identify themes. Themes are instrumental in pinpointing current trends or issues, and they also provide valuable insights into potential future trends.

The definition of a theme in the context of this content analysis, can be described as follows: A theme is a recurring subject, idea, or motif that appears across multiple sources or instances within a dataset or collection of content. While themes are often shared by multiple brands or entities, they can also emerge from a consistent and prominent focus by a single brand. A single brand can belong to multiple themes.

To define the theme within this analysis, the list below details the essential elements a theme must have:

- recurring subject: it is a topic or issue that is mentioned or addressed by multiple entities (in this case, brands) within the collection of data. For example, if several brands discuss sustainability, sustainability becomes a theme.
- reflective of collective focus or concerns: a theme often reflects a shared focus, concern, or trend among the entities being analyzed. It indicates areas of collective importance or interest.
- transcends individual instances: while each entity might address the theme in a unique way, the theme itself transcends these individual instances, capturing a broader, more universal aspect of the content.

## 4.3. Results

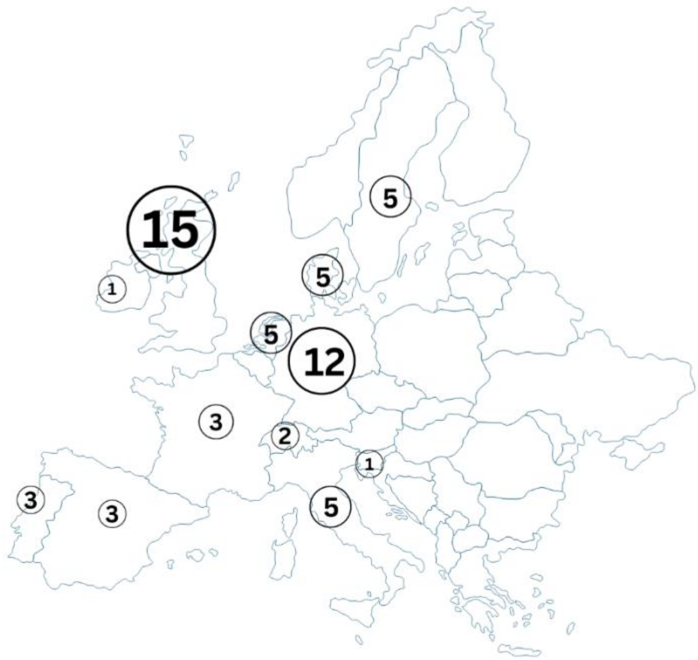
### 4.3.1. Brands overview

Among the 60 brands examined, 14 received a rating of Great, while the remaining 46 were rated as Good according to the Good On You methodology. The complete list of brand names is provided in the Appendix. The analysed brands had English websites or English versions of their websites alongside the language of their respective countries.

Regarding the categorization of these brands based on their type of products, 50 of them were classified as apparel brands, meaning their main focus is production of clothing. Additionally, six brands were identified as specialising in shoes, and four brands focusing on accessories. Most of the apparel brands focused on the production of everyday clothing, while a smaller subgroup of 10 brands concentrated on niche clothing categories such as loungewear, knitwear, or jeans.

Another aspect that was examined is the geographical distribution of the brands. The following map provides a visual representation of how many brands are featured in each European country.

**Figure 4: Frequency of brands in the sample by country, map of analysed brands**

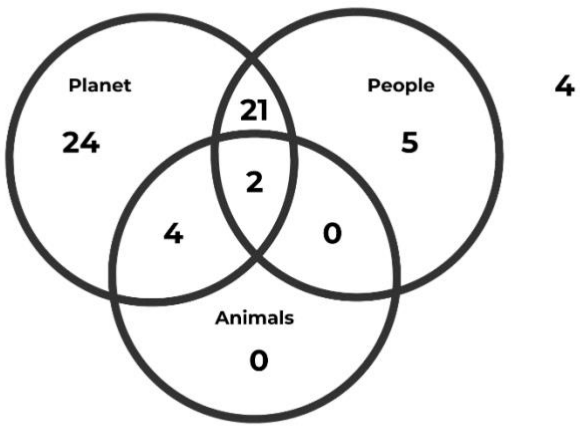



What could be observed is the prominence of sustainable fashion brands in the United Kingdom and Germany, as evidenced by their significantly higher numbers compared to other European countries. Germany and United Kingdom alone represent 45% of the sampling. Additionally, it is crucial to highlight the absence of representatives of sustainable fashion brands in Eastern European countries.

### 4.3.2. RQ1: People, animals and the planet

The following Venn diagram shows the frequencies of brands by the presence of the three mission categories:

**Figure 5: Frequencies of brands by the presence of the three mission categories**



The analysis of mission statements revealed a diverse range of focuses among the brands. Out of the 60 European sustainable brands, 24 predominantly emphasized environmental concerns, aligning with the perception that sustainability in fashion is often associated with environmental claims. Notably, there were no brands that solely concentrated on people and animals or only animal welfare in their mission statements, suggesting that animal welfare remains a relatively underrepresented aspect.

However, a fair number of brands (23) adopted a balanced approach by addressing both people and the planet in their mission statements. Four brands (Avani, Unrecorded, Wires, Woron) did not include any explicit mentions any of the three themes. They include other core values and unique selling points that drive their missions. Their values include a strong emphasis on innovation, product quality, craftsmanship, and style.

#### 4.3.3. RQ2: Avoidance of generic claims

Based on the results, it is evident that sustainable fashion brands do exhibit a degree of distancing from the use of certain generic green terms in their mission statements. Notably, terms such as carbon-neutral, climate-neutral, eco-friendly, carbon-friendly, carbon-positive, green, bio-based, nature's friend, environmentally correct, gentle on the environment, energy-efficient, and responsive were absent from all mission statements. Eco and natural stood out as the most frequently used, each appearing six times.

The below generic green terms appeared with the following frequencies:

**Table 2: Frequency of specific green terms in sustainable fashion brand mission statements**

| Term | Total frequency |
|---|---:|
| Eco | 6 |
| Natural | 6 |
| Conscious | 5 |
| Ecological | 2 |
| Environmentally friendly | 2 |
| Biodegradable | 1 |

#### 4.3.4. RQ3: Communicating Challenges

Among the 60 analysed brands, 33 brands did not engage in the communication of their sustainability challenges. In addition, it is worth noting that two brands' sustainability reports were unavailable for download, while another was presented exclusively in the German language, resulting in its exclusion from the analysis, as stipulated in the research criteria, which exclusively considered English-language communications.

Consequently, the remaining subset of 24 brands actively communicates about their sustainability challenges, and nine of these brands fall within the category of "great" according to Good On You's methodology. Among the subset of 24 brands that actively communicated about their sustainability challenges, less than half of them, specifically nine brands, chose to convey these challenges directly on their corporate websites.

The thematic analysis revealed four recurring themes related to challenges:

Theme 1. Environmental responsibility: six brands are focused on reducing their environmental impact, whether through sustainable production practices, reducing carbon footprints, or ensuring product circularity. For instance, Opera Campi describe the dilemma of durability vs. sustainability as follows: "When we dye our products, we don't always choose the most natural dyeing process. Sometimes natural processes lead to unstable and fading colors: the reason why many people consider a product obsolete and they throw it away" (Opera Campi, 2023).

Theme 2. Transparency and honest communication: six brands are acknowledging their challenges and shortcomings, which is a significant shift from traditional corporate communication strategies. There is a trend towards being more transparent and honest in communication with stakeholders. For example, Organicbasics employs explicit language, such as the term "fuck-ups," to candidly acknowledge their challenges: "Last year we had the goal to implement a pilot project for a take back program in Q4 2021 or Q1 2022. This year, we've been working on developing a blueprint for a take back program, but we're not on track to implement it. We over-promised and under-delivered on this one" (Organicbasics, 2023). ISTO brand took it even further by introducing the concept of a "transparency week" with the explicit declaration: "So here you go, a full week showing what's happening inside our company, who we envy (in a good way), where we're heading and a bit more about our friends. We think it adds. Cheers to more 51 weeks of transparency" (ISTO, 2023).

Theme 3. Operational efficiency and adaptation: four brands address challenges related to supply chain management and adapting to market trends. For example, CARPASUS is addressing the problem of supply chain: “We are not 100% there as it is often difficult to trace back the origin of the raw materials such as organic cotton or linen. We are working on this to have full traceability of our supply chains (CARPASUS, 2023).”

Theme 4. Ethical labor practices and living wages: one brand is advocating for a better living wages and fair working conditions in the supply chain. Yes Friends is the only brand from the sample to put an emphasis on the ethical labor issues: “Our main focus is to continue increasing wages for garment workers throughout the supply chain. We’re proud of the pioneering work we’re already doing, but we’ve still got further to go” (Yes Friends, 2023).

### 4.4. Discussion

This investigation into the sustainability communication practices of European sustainable fashion brands discovered interesting patterns that warrant attention in both academic and industry circles. Brands are increasingly adopting a balanced approach, addressing both social and environmental aspects in their mission statements, suggesting evolving consumer preferences in sustainable fashion evaluation. Sustainable fashion brands tend to distance themselves from employing generic environmental claims in their mission statements, and transparency regarding sustainability challenges and limitations remains limited among sustainable fashion brands, with many refraining from disclosing such information.

Most of the analyzed brands engage in clothing production with a focus on practical and versatile clothing options that cater to consumers' daily needs. There could be several reasons for that such as consumer demand, market competition or reduced risks. Brands frequently adjust their production strategies in response to market demands. If consumers prioritize everyday wear, brands may align their production accordingly. Furthermore, it is vital to take into account the context of the fashion retail industry, which is marked by intense competition and is heavily influenced by changing fashion trends. The creation of niche or specialized garments can lead to a smaller target market, and as trends change quickly brands may choose the versatility of everyday clothing to reduce the risk of being tied to a particular fashion trend.

This competitiveness and the imperative to reach a larger audience are further demonstrated by these brands presenting their content in English on their websites, either exclusively or alongside another language. March version of the article “Responsible Clothing Brands from Europe You’ll Love” on Good On You website featured 64 brands, but the analysis focused on 60 of these brands. These selected brands, representing 94%, meet the criterion of having a webpage available in English. This choice underscores their intent to achieve global visibility, as English is one of the most widely spoken languages worldwide. Additionally, it is worth considering that certain European countries represent smaller markets, thereby making it necessary to attract audiences beyond their boundaries.

Furthermore, the significance of attracting broader audiences becomes evident when considering the varying market sizes across European countries. A significant concentration of sustainable fashion brands exists in Western Europe with United Kingdom and Germany accounting for 45% of the sample. The substantial presence of sustainable fashion brands in Germany and the United Kingdom underscores their ability to thrive in larger markets, while it is noteworthy that no brand representatives from Eastern Europe were identified, suggesting potential untapped opportunities in this region.

The presence of the high numbers of sustainable fashion brands in Germany and United Kingdom can be attributed to factors such as consumer demand and government initiatives and support. According to the 2022 Environmental Performance Index (EPI), United Kingdom is the second-best performing country in the world, while Germany secures the 13th position. Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) employs a strategy that combines both optional and required actions. This strategy is built on three main pillars: collaborating with companies to enhance supply chain practices, assisting consumers in interpreting textile labels more effectively and introducing a certification label that is endorsed by the government (OECD, 2022). In United Kingdom, a recent £6 million investment by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) aims to further improve the fashion and textile industry towards adopting more sustainable and responsible practices (UKRI, 2023).

On the other hand, economic conditions and disparities and lack of education and awareness within Eastern European countries may play a role in hindering the development of sustainable fashion brands. Economic challenges, including lower income levels, limited access to capital, and less developed supply chains, can make it difficult for entrepreneurs to establish and sustain sustainable fashion businesses. The lack of representation can also be due to ineffective marketing or lack of global recognition. For the safety of people, animals, and planet, the development of sustainable fashion needs to happen on a global scale. The sustainable fashion industry cannot thrive if sustainability remains a niche sector targeting one geographical segment of the population.

The analysis of mission statements from 60 European sustainable brands demonstrated that 85% (51 brands) mentioned environmental aspects in their statements, 47% (28 brands) addressed people-centric elements, and a smaller proportion, 10% (6 brands), mentioned animals. While Reimers, Magnuson, and Chao (2016) identified animal welfare as a significant influencer of consumers' perceptions of ethical clothing, the research revealed that this aspect is underrepresented in the mission statements. The discrepancy between consumer interests and brand messaging brings new insights into the areas where the fashion industry might need to evolve to meet growing consumer demands for animal welfare. The analysis further revealed that out of the 60 European sustainable brands, 24 predominantly emphasized environmental concerns, aligning with the perception that sustainability in fashion is often associated with environmental claims (Henninger et al., 2016; Buzzback and Rainforest Alliance, 2014). However, a significant number of brands (23) adopted a balanced approach by addressing both people and the planet in their mission statements. This balanced approach indicates that these brands recognize the importance of both social and environmental aspects of sustainability, reflecting the evolving landscape of sustainable fashion and the dynamic nature of sustainability (Kates, Parris, and Leiserowitz, 2008). It could imply that consumers are increasingly considering both social and environmental aspects when evaluating sustainable fashion brands, challenging the notion that sustainability is primarily linked to environmental concerns.

While it is notable that only four brands refrained from explicitly mentioning the three themes (planet, people, animal), their approach may signal a novel direction within the realm of sustainable fashion. Considering the competitive nature of the fashion industry and the increase of green skepticism, brands operating within the sustainable fashion sector might be strategically adopting alternative forms of communication to distinguish themselves. Rather than prioritizing sustainability claims, these brands may be strategically emphasizing other crucial facets of their brand identity, such as innovation, product quality, craftsmanship, and style.

This aligns with the second research question, as based on the results, it is evident that sustainable fashion brands do exhibit a degree of distancing from the use of certain generic green terms in their mission statements. Specific or technical terms are used less frequently, which might be due to a variety of reasons – they may not be as recognizable to the average consumer, may not apply to the brands' specific practices, or might not be seen as strong marketing terms.

This raises a new question: while sustainable fashion brands may not use the generic terms outlined by the EU Parliament, perhaps these terms are not fully applicable to fashion products, which make use of a vast majority of other green claims. It begs the question of whether the list is relevant to the fashion industry. Will banning certain expressions genuinely improve the practices of brands, or will it merely prompt them to be more creative in their greenwashing endeavors?

As the European Union's new law on greenwashing comes into force, it is important to monitor whether these brands adjust their mission statements and websites to align with the EU's guidelines. The regulations around generic environmental claims, as defined by the EU, may encourage brands to be more explicit in their sustainability messaging or adopt a different approach to communicate their commitment to sustainability. This potential shift could shed light on how regulatory changes impact sustainability communication strategies within the fashion industry.

The analysis of RQ3 revealed a critical gap in transparency within the sustainable fashion industry. In examining 60 brands, it emerged that a significant proportion of 33 out of 60 brands refrained from disclosing their sustainability challenges. Among the 24 brands that did engage in such communication, only nine opted to present these challenges on their corporate websites. This lack of transparency aligns with the concerns raised by Nyilasy, Gangadharbatla, and Paladino (2014), who observed the rise in green skepticism as it becomes more difficult for consumers to determine a true sustainable claim. Furthermore, as Nguyen et al. (2017) suggest, the lack of transparent communication directly feeds into consumer skepticism, highlighting the critical role transparency plays in building consumer trust.

The themes of the nine brands that discuss their challenges on their official websites are: (a) environmental responsibility, (b) transparency and honest communication, (c) operational efficiency and adaptation, (d) ethical labor practices and living wages. Notably, while 21 brands in the sample integrated both social and environmental aspects into their mission statements, the communication on challenges was moved towards environmental impacts, with only one brand highlighting ethical labor issues. Within the theme of environmental responsibility, a noteworthy aspect emerged from Opera Campi's approach, which highlights durability over natural dyeing process. This indicates a focus on creating long-lasting products, which is an important aspect of environmental sustainability. By emphasizing durability, the brand is addressing the environmental challenge of reducing waste and extending the life cycle of products, albeit through a slightly different lens compared to traditional sustainability practices. This represents a good example of the complexity of sustainability, illustrating why achieving a unified definition for sustainable fashion brands is challenging.

Operational challenges, particularly the transparency of the supply chain, were a recurring theme. Fashion supply chains are often complex and involve multiple layers of suppliers, manufacturers, and distributors. Tracing the origins of materials and ensuring sustainable practices at every step can be difficult. This aligns with the observations made by Mihm (2010) and Partridge (2011), who highlighted the difficulties brands face in effectively communicating about their supply chains. Consequently, these challenges could contribute to consumers associating sustainability with environmental aspects, as brands struggle to present the full scope of their sustainability efforts.

An important finding from the study relates to the theme of transparency and honesty. Two brands, Organicbasics and ISTO, adopted notably unconventional communication strategies. Organicbasics used forthright language, including terms like “fuck-ups”, to openly admit their shortcomings. ISTO innovatively introduced a “transparency week” and notably recognized a competitor, ASKET, as a source of motivation and admiration. Such an approach, deviating from standard industry practices, not only highlights a willingness to learn from peers but also promotes a culture of collaboration and knowledge sharing crucial elements for addressing complex challenges in sustainable fashion.

This distinctive communication style, especially in the context of transparency, positions these brands uniquely within the industry, potentially offering them a competitive edge in the realm of sustainable fashion.

Furthermore, Honest Basics brand acknowledges the imperative to enhance their sustainability communication and identifies transparency as a crucial step forward. This stance not only underscores the significance of effective communication in the sustainable fashion sector but also highlights transparency as a pivotal element in fostering a deeper connection with consumers. It suggests that transparent communication is not merely a trend but a strategic direction for brands aiming to align more closely with consumer expectations in the context of sustainability.

#### 4.4.1. Recommendations for businesses

This research offers insights that are not only valuable for academia but also for industry practitioners in the sustainable fashion sector. One key recommendation is the adoption of greater transparency in brand communications. A candid approach, as exemplified by Organicbasics and ISTO, can build trust and loyalty, particularly in an era marked by increasing consumer skepticism about green claims. Transparent communication can act as a crucial tool, equipping consumers with the information needed to make informed and confident choices.

Another important aspect is fostering a collaborative spirit. Emulating ISTO's model of acknowledging and learning from competitors can cultivate an environment of collaboration, which is essential for driving innovation and collective progress in sustainable fashion.

Furthermore, brands are encouraged to broaden their focus in sustainability communications to include both social and environmental considerations. The integration of animal welfare concerns is also recommended, aligning with the growing consumer aversion to animal cruelty and the rising demand for cruelty-free and vegan products. Such a comprehensive approach in sustainability can place brands at the forefront of the industry, catering to a wide spectrum of consumer values.

In anticipation of the European Union's impending regulations on greenwashing, brands should proactively align their communications to ensure compliance and maintain authenticity. Staying ahead of regulatory changes is crucial for brands to remain relevant and trustworthy in the evolving landscape of sustainable fashion. While these recommendations currently focus on the EU, the potential global influence of these regulations, often referred to as the “Brussels Effect,” (Bradford, 2020), suggests that similar standards may be adopted or enforced by markets worldwide. Consequently, brands operating beyond the EU should also consider aligning with these directives to ensure their practices meet the expectations of consumers.

#### 4.4.2. Limitations and future studies

Lastly, it is essential to acknowledge certain limitations inherent in this study. The study's scope was constrained by the analysis of a sample size consisting of 60 sustainable fashion brands. Consequently, the findings derived from this sample may not be readily generalizable to the broader sustainable fashion industry. However, it is worth noting that these findings have illuminated patterns and insights within the selected sample.

Hence, based on the results and limitations, the present study could be extended in multiple directions in the future. For instance, conducting research on the following topics may yield further valuable insights on the communication strategies used in the sustainable fashion sector:

1. Eastern Europe's absence: given the notable lack of sustainable brands in Eastern Europe, further research could delve into the specific challenges and barriers faced by this region.
2. Impact of regulatory changes: post the implementation of the EU's greenwashing laws, a comparative study on brand communications before and after the regulations would offer valuable insights.
3. Consumer perception: investigate consumer perceptions and attitudes towards brands that adopt candid and self-reflective communication strategies. Specifically, it would be intriguing to explore whether transparency is emerging as the new benchmark for sustainability in the eyes of consumers.

In conclusion, while the sustainable fashion industry has made significant strides, there remain areas for growth and improvement, especially in communication and transparency. As the industry continues to evolve, it is crucial for both brands and researchers to continually adapt, innovate, and drive forward the agenda of sustainability.

# 5. SECOND STUDY – I'M CONCERNED, THEREFORE I BUY: HOW ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS, GREEN SKEPTICISM AND KNOWLEDGE INFLUENCE REACTIONS TO SUSTAINABLE FASHION TRANSPARENCY COMMUNICATION

## 5.1. Introduction

While many companies now share their policies and commitments on human rights and environmental sustainability, significant information about the fashion industry's actual practices remains hidden—especially regarding its impact on supply chain workers and the environment. Transparency is increasingly recognized as a cornerstone of sustainable practices in the fashion industry, yet achieving it remains a significant challenge due to the sector's complex, globalized supply chains (Dyer and Ha-Brookshire, 2008). Defined as the public disclosure of credible and comparable information about supply chains, practices, and impacts, transparency empowers consumers to make informed choices and holds brands accountable for their actions (Fashion Revolution, 2021). Despite growing demands for greater transparency, the 2023 Fashion Transparency Index that evaluates 250 of the world's largest fashion brands found that most major fashion brands still fail to adequately disclose critical information about social and environmental practices, with 28% scoring below 10% in transparency evaluations (Fashion Revolution, 2023).

This lack of transparency is contributing to rising consumer skepticism toward green claims. With 60% of global consumers expressing doubt about the authenticity of environmental claims made by brands (YouGov, 2023), the issue of greenwashing continues to undermine trust. Misleading or vague sustainability claims create confusion, reduce purchase intent, and fuel perceptions of insincerity, particularly in industries with a history of environmental controversies like fashion (Farooq and Wicaksono, 2021).

Simultaneously, consumer interest in sustainability is growing, driven by heightened environmental concern and increased awareness of fashion's social and environmental impacts. Millennials and Generation Z, in particular, are prioritizing environmental responsibility in their purchasing decisions, yet they remain key contributors to the fast fashion economy (Deloitte, 2024). As consumer expectations for transparency rise, brands are adopting strategies such as open communication about challenges to rebuild trust and align with evolving demands (Tang and Higgins, 2022).

This study explores the relationship between transparency, consumer trust, and willingness to buy sustainable fashion, focusing on how green skepticism, environmental concern, and sustainable fashion knowledge shape consumer reactions to transparency strategies. It addresses the following research question: **How do green skepticism, sustainable fashion knowledge, environmental concerns, and demographic factors influence consumer reactions to different transparency strategies employed by sustainable fashion brands?**

By addressing this question, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how transparency serves as a driver of trust and purchase intention in the fashion industry, offering insights for both academic research and practical applications. This is achieved through a detailed survey of Millennial and Generation Z consumers across Europe.

### 5.1.1. Transparency in Fashion Industry

In the apparel industry, transparency is important yet challenging to achieve. This complexity arises because the industry is highly fragmented and globalized. Order fulfillment is not controlled by a single business but rather involves numerous decentralized businesses collaborating from across the globe. Consequently, it becomes extremely difficult to trace the origins of components and, therefore, the finished product (Dyer and Ha-Brookshire, 2008). According to nonprofit organization Fashion Revolution, transparency in the fashion industry is defined as "the public disclosure of information that enables people to hold decision-makers accountable". This involves sharing "credible, comprehensive, and comparable information about supply chains, business practices, and the impacts of these practices on workers, communities, and the environment" (Fashion Revolution, 2021).

The 2023 Fashion Transparency Index, developed by Fashion Revolution, evaluated 250 of the world's largest fashion brands and retailers. They were ranked based on their disclosed information concerning social and environmental policies, practices, and impacts in their operations and supply chains. The goal of this Index is to encourage and incentivize major fashion brands to enhance transparency regarding their social and environmental efforts. The Index revealed that although there has been some progress, the majority of the world's largest 250 fashion brands continue to fall short in providing full transparency. Notably, 70 out of 250 brands (28%) still score within the 0-10% range, indicating minimal disclosure. Particularly concerning is the lack of reporting on the conditions of workers in their supply chains; only 1% of fashion brands disclosed the number of workers being paid a living wage. Additionally, these brands often fail to adequately report the environmental impacts of their operations (Fashion Revolution, 2023).

Transparency is crucial as it empowers consumers to make informed decisions. By providing visibility into supply chain practices, brands enable consumers to choose products that align with their values, such as social and environmental responsibility (Egels-Zandén and Hansson, 2015). A 2020 study revealed that when a brand communicates detailed and sensitive information about its production and costs, consumers are likely to view the brand as transparent and authentic. This, in turn, positively influences their attitude towards the brand, increases their and enhances their purchase intention (Yang and Battocchio, 2020).

According to Deloitte's study (2023) on sustainable consumer behavior in the UK, 32% of consumers indicated that their trust in brands would improve if the brands maintained a supply chain that is transparent, accountable, and adheres to social and environmental responsibilities. Another study focusing on the American market, conducted by Sprout Social, revealed that 86% of Americans consider transparency in business to be more important than ever before. Similarly, an equal percentage of respondents confirmed that a consistent history of transparency could persuade them to give a business a second chance after a negative experience. This finding highlights the crucial role of transparency in rebuilding consumer trust; 89% of those surveyed stated that they would be likely to trust a business again if it fully disclosed its mistakes. (Sprout Social, 2018).

As transparency becomes increasingly important in the fashion industry, brands are adopting a variety of strategies to enhance their sustainability reports and build trust with consumers. Tang and Higgins' 2022 study analyzed how ten leading global fashion companies, as ranked by the Fashion Revolution's 2020 Fashion Transparency Index, use various strategies to enhance transparency and build trust through their sustainability reports. One strategy they identified was "Learning, Lessons, and Perspectives," where leading companies openly discuss their challenges and the complexities of sustainable practices. They share their successes but also the areas where they continue to face difficulties, providing a balanced view of their sustainability journey. This transparency about ongoing learning and adaptation fosters trust and demonstrates a commitment to improvement.

Patagonia, for example, openly acknowledged using fluorinated DWR (durable water repellent) finishes on some of their garments, which contain environmentally harmful components that are nonbiodegradable (Patagonia, n.d.). Instead of non-disclosure, the company chose to explain why they continue to use this chemical finish, demonstrating the commitment to transparency and public responsibility for their business practices. Similarly, in 2015 when PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) accused Patagonia of sourcing wool from farms that mistreat lambs, the company responded by detailing the complex decisions and trade-offs involved (O'Rourke and Strand, 2017).

In both instances, Patagonia demonstrated its willingness to engage in open discussions about the challenges underlying its sustainability practices. The company ranked first in an Axios-Harris 2023 poll on the 100 most reputable U.S. brands and stands as one of the most trusted brands in the world (Azar, 2023).

### 5.1.2 The rise of environmental concerns

As transparency issues persist in the fashion world, rising environmental concerns among consumers underscore the urgency for sustainable and ethical practices. Recent studies underscore that climate change has become a key concern for a majority of people across the globe, reflecting a rise in environmental concern, defined as individuals' thoughts and feelings about their own and others' impact on the environment (Fransson and Gärling, 1999). The 2023 Open Society Foundation survey highlighted that respondents consider climate change and poverty/inequality as the most critical challenges facing the world today (Open Society Foundation, 2023). The Edelman Trust Barometer survey reveals that 93% of respondents across fourteen countries perceive climate change as a serious and imminent threat, with many recognizing this threat increasingly over time (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2023). The United Nations Development Program's 2024 Peoples' Climate Vote survey, the largest public opinion poll on climate change, showed that 56% of individuals report thinking about climate change regularly, either daily or weekly, with this figure rising to 63% in Least Developed Countries (UNDP, 2024). Additionally, more than half of the global population expressed increased worry about climate change compared to the previous year. These findings highlight the widespread public recognition of climate change and the rising concern about how personal and societal actions affect the environment.

While there is increasing global concern about climate change, people’s views on the issue remain varied. This variation in attitudes has prompted numerous studies exploring the factors influencing environmental concerns. Liere and Dunlap (1980), for instance, proposed five key hypotheses based on socio-demographic factors: the age hypothesis, social-class hypothesis, residence hypothesis, political-ideology hypothesis, and gender hypothesis. The age, social class, and gender hypotheses are the most relevant for the present study and will be presented in more detail, each examined in relation to recent empirical findings.

- Age hypothesis: Younger consumers tend to exhibit greater environmental concern than older generations. Liere and Dunlap suggest that this is because younger generations are possibly less integrated into the existing social order, which may view solutions to environmental problems as disruptive. This hypothesis continues to be supported today, as Millennials show more concern for environmental responsibility compared to Generation Xers and Baby Boomers (Dabija, 2018). Members of both Millennials and Generation Z are aware that their purchasing decisions directly impact the environment (Smith and Brower, 2012). Additionally, the most recent edition of Deloitte’s Generation Z and Millennial Survey, which included 23,000 respondents from 44 countries, revealed that environmental sustainability continues to be a top priority for both generations. The survey found that six out of ten Generation Z individuals (62%) and Millennials (59%) reported feeling worried or anxious about climate change in the past month, reflecting a two-point increase from the previous year for both groups (Deloitte, 2024).
- Social-Class hypothesis: Environmental concern is positively associated with higher education levels and income. This study only measured the education of participants; therefore, the correlation between education and environmental concern is the primary focus. Support for a positive correlation between education and environmental concern has been found in several recent studies (Zsóka et al., 2013; Torkar and Bogner, 2019; Boca and Saraçlı, 2019; Thompson, Etim, and Etim, 2020). The 2015 study focusing on Europe supported this hypothesis,

revealing that higher education levels lead to increased pro-environmental behaviors, indicating that education enhances concerns for social welfare and promotes environmentally friendly behavior (Meyer, 2015).

- Gender hypothesis: This hypothesis suggests that there are differences in environmental concern based on gender. Research has produced mixed results regarding gender differences in environmental concern. Several studies suggest that women tend to express stronger pro-environmental values, beliefs, and attitudes than men. For example, women show greater concern for environmental issues, although they exhibit minimal gender differences in institutional trust (Xiao and McCright, 2015). Similarly, women display higher levels of environmental concern and behavioral adjustments compared to men, particularly in private environmental behaviors like recycling. (Hunter, Hatch, and Johnson, 2004). However, this trend is not universal. Some studies found that while women show somewhat more personal concern about the environment, they are no more likely to take environmental action than men (Blocker and Eckberg, 1997). These mixed findings underscore the complex relationship between gender and environmental concern, as noted by Chan, Pong, and Tam (2019), who observed that gender differences tend to diminish in societies with greater gender inequality and collectivism.

Environmental concern is gaining increasing importance in consumer shopping decisions, and several studies demonstrate that it plays a crucial role in motivating sustainable consumer behaviors (Newton et al., 2015; Wei, Ang, and Jancenelle, 2018; Vermeir and Verbeke, 2006). Studies focusing on the effect of environmental concern and purchase intention in the context of sustainable fashion confirm that environmental concern is a pivotal factor shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors towards sustainable clothes (Cowan and Kinley, 2014; Leclercq-Machado, 2022). It enhances perceived environmental knowledge and positively influences purchase intentions and behaviors, making it crucial for promoting eco-friendly consumption. A 2021 study revealed that environmental concern acts as an amplifier for trust in sustainable products. Consumers who are highly concerned about the environment tend to scrutinize the sustainability claims of producers more closely. When they perceive these claims as genuine and substantiated by real actions, their trust in these producers increases significantly. This increased trust translates directly into stronger purchase intentions (De Canio et al., 2021).

### 5.1.3. Sustainable fashion knowledge

In recent years, there has been a rise in environmental knowledge, particularly within the realm of sustainable fashion. Surveys conducted during and after the COVID-19 crisis reveal heightened consumer interest in sustainability, partly driven by the increased visibility of environmental issues during the pandemic (McKinsey, 2020). Sustainable knowledge, also called environmental knowledge, includes two main ideas: (1) consumers must know how products and services affect the environment and society, and (2) consumers must know which products are made in environmentally friendly ways (D'Souza, Taghian, and Lamb, 2006). Sustainable fashion knowledge is a specific aspect of this broader sustainable knowledge. It encompasses an understanding of the environmental and social issues that affect apparel and textile production and consumption. This means that consumers need to be aware of the environmental impacts of clothing manufacturing, such as pollution and resource usage, as well as the social implications, including labor conditions and fair-trade practices (Dabas and Whang, 2022). Fashion Revolution's 2020 survey of 5,000 consumers across major European markets showed that a growing number of people are eager to understand how their clothes are made, with 69% of respondents expressing a desire to learn about the manufacturing processes, an increase from 59% in 2018 (Fashion Revolution, 2020).

While consumer awareness about sustainable fashion has risen, significant gaps remain. A 2022 survey highlighted that confusion about what sustainability actually entails is still prevalent. This confusion often arises because consumers primarily rely on brand websites and product tags, which frequently feature ambiguous credentials and claims, impairing consumers' ability to make easy, educated choices (McKinsey, 2022). Knowledge about sustainability as a concept is categorized as factual knowledge, which includes information such as definitions, causes, and consequences of environmental issues (Schahn and Holzer, 1990).

Additionally, there is a gap in action-related knowledge, which is defined as understanding the specific actions that individuals can take to mitigate environmental impacts (Tanner and Wölfing Kast, 2003). A 2017 study revealed a significant lack of consumer knowledge on how to properly dispose of clothing in a sustainable manner (Norum, 2017). To make eco-friendly choices effectively, consumers need a grasp of both factual and action-related knowledge.

Recent studies have expanded the concept of environmental knowledge to include new typologies such as objective and subjective knowledge (e.g., Han, 2019). Objective knowledge refers to the actual knowledge an individual possesses, while subjective knowledge, also known as perceived or self-assessed knowledge, represents how much an individual thinks they know about a product (e.g., Brucks, 1985; Flynn and Goldsmith, 1999; Selnes and Gronhaug, 1986). A 2019 study (Han, 2019) found that subjective knowledge is more effective for pro-environmental behaviors than objective knowledge, corroborating findings from earlier research (Ellen, 1994; House et al., 2004). This is because subjective knowledge is closely connected to individuals' confidence in their knowledge, making them more likely to engage in environmentally friendly actions. Objective knowledge, although factual, does not significantly impact behavior unless individuals believe in and act upon this knowledge (Han, 2019).

In academic discourse, the primary research concerning sustainable fashion knowledge centers on whether it significantly influences sustainable fashion consumption. Empirical research results for the relationship between knowledge and consumption have yielded mixed results. Several studies have demonstrated a direct link between consumer knowledge of sustainability and their environmentally friendly behaviors, which impacts their willingness to purchase sustainable apparel (D'Souza et al., 2006; Kang, Liu, and Kim, 2013). However, some studies, like those by Khare and Sadachar (2017) and Kong et al. (2016), found no significant relationship between knowledge of sustainable fashion and sustainable purchasing behaviors.

The varied findings across different studies could stem from differences in research methodologies. However, another interpretation of the mixed results is that sustainable fashion knowledge alone may not directly lead to sustainable consumption but rather shapes it through other factors (Dabas and Whang, 2022). For example, a 2019 study found that while environmental knowledge directly impacts consumers' purchase intentions, this relationship is moderated by individual attitudes towards sustainability, indicating an interaction between knowledge and attitudes (Warren et al., 2019). This suggests that the effect of knowledge on purchase decisions becomes stronger for those with more positive attitudes towards sustainability, and vice versa. Even if consumers are equipped with knowledge about sustainable practices and products, their actual purchase decisions might still be significantly influenced by their personal attitudes. These findings suggest a more complex interaction, indicating that merely increasing consumer knowledge may not be sufficient to change behavior unless attitudes are also positively influenced.

### 5.1.4. Green skepticism

Leonidou and Skarmeas reported that a Google search performed on August 11, 2015, with the keywords "green products/issues" and "environmental products/issues" yielded more than 16 million results (Leonidou and Skarmeas, 2017). A comparable search in June 2024 reveals a substantial increase, with the results exceeding seven billion. This increase in search results could be attributed to a growing consumer interest in purchasing eco-friendly products (PwC, 2024). In response, companies are expanding their green product lines, investing in promotions, and integrating environmental concerns into their business strategies (Menguc, Auh, and Ozanne, 2010). As reported by Climate Action WWF in 2021, the global market for green products was estimated at USD 44 trillion.

These results, together with the rise in environmental concern and sustainable knowledge, should paint a promising picture of society shifting towards greater environmental consciousness. However, as the market for green products and services expands, studies have observed that consumers are increasingly wondering how much positive impact these efforts truly have on the planet (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006). Green skepticism is defined as the consumers' tendency to doubt the environmental benefits or the environmental performance of a green product (Mohr et al., 1998; Obermiller et al., 2005). A 2023 YouGov study revealed that 60% of respondents globally are skeptical of environmental claims made by brands (YouGov, 2023).

The factors influencing green skepticism are multifaceted, with various studies investigating the underlying causes. Several studies suggest that the increasing number of greenwashing incidents is the key reason for the uncertainty and doubts about the environmental performance and benefits of green products (Walker and Wan 2012; Leonidou and Skarmeas, 2015). Greenwashing can be defined as "the dissemination of false or deceptive information regarding an organization's environmental strategies, goals, motivations, and actions" (Capaldi et al., 2013). It is often used as a tactic to manipulate consumers and drive company profits (Delmas and Burbano, 2011). However, it is important to mention that there are genuine sustainability claims, but the way they are communicated is ambiguous and confusing. Uncertainty and ambiguous sustainability claims cause consumers to be confused about the authenticity of the claim, leading to skepticism as they believe that the claim could in fact be a case of greenwashing (Aji and Sutikno, 2015). This confusion could lead to consumers feeling they are taking a risk by buying that product, making it less likely they will purchase it (Chen and Chang, 2012).

High-profile corporate greenwashing scandals further heighten consumer skepticism about the authenticity of sustainability claims (Farooq and Wicaksono, 2021). The fashion industry is notorious for greenwashing scandals. A 2021 Joint Research Center study suggested that 39% of sustainability claims in the textile, garment, and shoe sector could be false or deceptive (European Commission, 2021). A Greenpeace report revealed that well-known brands such as H&M, Zara, and Mango were guilty of misleading practices, including using confusing labels with false certifications, providing insufficient public information about their production processes, making misleading claims about the circularity of their products by relying on recycled polyester from plastic bottles, and promoting fabric blends like polycotton that are not recyclable (Greenpeace, 2023). The reason why previous incidents and scandals increase skepticism can be explained by the cognitive response model (Greenwald, 1968). According to the model, when consumers evaluate new information, their previous experiences and memories play a significant role in shaping their reactions and attitudes. In the context of greenwashing, past incidents create lingering skepticism in consumers' minds, making them more doubtful and critical of any new environmental claims made by companies.

Additionally, consumer skepticism is influenced by demographics and culture. Research surrounding green skepticism has focused mostly on Western Europe, yet there is a research gap in comparing the differences between green skepticism in Eastern Europe and Western Europe. Generally, Western Europe is more individualistic, while Eastern Europe is more collectivist (Manrai et al., 2001). Individualism is associated with a greater concern for one’s own well-being, whereas collectivism is associated with a greater concern for the welfare of society (Cortina, Arel, and Smith-Darden, 2017). Because individuals in collectivist cultures are often more concerned about environmental and societal impacts, they may also be more critical and skeptical of sustainability claims (Van Kenhove and Biro, 2016). Conversely, other studies suggest that collectivist societies with a long-term orientation are generally more accepting of green products and exhibit lower levels of skepticism (Lobo and Greenland, 2017). Another demographic factor that plays an important role is gender. Studies have shown that women tend to be more skeptical of sustainability claims than men. This might be because women are generally found to be more environmentally concerned, which could lead to higher scrutiny of sustainability claims (Farooq and Wicaksono, 2021).

Lastly, green skepticism could be industry specific. Industries with a poor environmental performance history, such as the oil industry, are more likely to be distrusted. Additionally, industries that are highly regulated might face less skepticism due to the perceived difficulty in making false claims (Farooq and Wicaksono, 2021). This is crucial as regulatory measures are being considered to address the issue of greenwashing in the European Union. In March 2024, the European Parliament voted in favor of implementing the Green Claims Directive. Should this law be passed, it would significantly enhance consumer protections within the European Union by ensuring that environmental claims are accurate and clearly communicated. The directive mandates that environmental claims be based on verifiable and publicly available data, empowering consumer organizations and experts to assess and validate these claims, thereby providing consumers with more reliable and transparent information (European Parliament, 2023).

The existence of green skepticism is problematic because it weakens consumers' willingness to purchase eco-friendly products (Leonidou and Skarmeas, 2017). Green skepticism can also deter consumers from making the most environmentally responsible choices in their buying habits, hindering the overall growth of the green market and leading them to opt for products with a greater environmental impact (Albayrak, Aksoy, and Caber, 2013). However, green skepticism can also have a positive effect. According to a 2017 article, green skepticism can act as a stimulus for consumers and companies. The study found that green skepticism prompts consumers to seek more information about the products. This means that skeptical consumers are more likely to research and verify the environmental claims made by companies, leading to better-informed purchasing decisions (Leonidou and Skarmeas, 2017). Therefore, it is crucial for companies to be clear and transparent to dispel any doubt consumers have (Kreczmańska-Gigol and Gigol, 2022).

#### 5.1.5. Research question and hypothesis

Research suggests that transparency in fashion industry is becoming more important than ever. While transparency does not equal sustainability, achieving a sustainable, accountable, and fair fashion industry would be impossible without it. Despite persistent transparency challenges in the fashion industry, certain brands are implementing a variety of strategies to enhance their sustainability reports and foster consumer trust. However, consumer responses to these strategies remain under-researched. Specifically, if consumers are confronted with multiple transparency initiatives, the extent to which they are likely to trust and purchase from that brand is uncertain. Furthermore, the factors that influence these reactions, such as knowledge of sustainable fashion, green skepticism, and environmental concern, require further examination. While these elements have been previously studied concerning purchase intention, this research provides a novel perspective on how these factors might influence consumer reactions to diverse transparency strategies adopted by existing sustainable fashion brands.

Given these gaps, this study aims to address the following research question and hypotheses:

Research question (RQ): How do green skepticism, sustainable fashion knowledge, environmental concerns, and demographic factors influence consumer reactions to different transparency strategies employed by sustainable fashion brands?

Hypotheses:

- H1: Higher levels of green skepticism will lead to more negative reactions to all types of transparency strategies.
- H2: Greater sustainable fashion knowledge will lead to more positive reactions to transparency strategies, particularly when brands communicate about their sustainability progress.
- H3: Higher levels of environmental concern will enhance positive reactions to all transparency strategies.
    - H3a: Reactions to transparency strategies will vary based on their environmental concerns from different perspectives—self, other people, and the biosphere.
- H4: Demographic factors (age, gender, education, cultural background) will moderate the relationships between green skepticism, sustainable fashion knowledge, environmental concerns, and reactions to transparency strategies.

## 5.2. Methodology

To test the research question and hypotheses, the study focused on the European market. A survey method was employed to collect data. Subsequently, correlational and regression analyses were conducted to determine the relationships between the different study variables, thereby testing the hypotheses and addressing the research question raised in the previous section.

**5.2.1. Data collection and sample**

The questionnaire was distributed using the snowball sampling method via social networks, including Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn, and employed MailChimp and Qualtrics software for administration. The target demographic comprised Millennials and Generation Z from both Western and Eastern Europe. The Pew Research Center identifies 1996 as a cutoff between Millennials and Generation Z for several reasons, including key political, economic, and social factors that characterized the formative years of the Millennial generation. According to the Pew Research Center, Millennials or are defined as individuals born from 1981 to 1996, and Generation Z consists of those born from 1996 to 2012 (Pew Research Center, 2019). This focus was chosen because environmental sustainability is a priority for both generations, who use their digital literacy to evaluate the authenticity of corporate sustainability claims. Furthermore, quarter of Gen Z (25%) and Millennials (24%) have reduced or terminated their relationships with businesses due to unsustainable practices in their supply chains (Deloitte, 2024). Despite their intentions, these generations are major contributors to the fast fashion economy, with ultra-fast fashion brands like SHEIN generating billions of dollars in revenue, primarily targeting younger generations (Statista, 2023). The survey aimed to understand their responses to transparency strategies, as enhancing transparency could potentially bridge the gap between attitudes and behaviors.

A 2022 study examined the evolution of sustainable fashion consumption over the past 25 years and identified areas for future research (Dabas and Whang, 2022). The authors emphasized the importance of cross-cultural research, noting that most current studies are limited by focusing on single-country samples. This is significant because perceptions of sustainable fashion vary dramatically between countries—for instance, it may be seen as stylish and healthy in one country but considered boring and outdated in another (Carey and Cervellon, 2014). To address these disparities, the study collected data from multiple countries, dividing the sample into Western and Eastern Europe based on geographical location and historical-political distinctions, with Western Europe including countries such as Germany, France, and the UK, and Eastern Europe comprising nations like Poland, Hungary, and Romania.

### 5.2.2. Structure of the questionnaire

The questionnaire was divided into five distinct segments, which will be described in the following section. These segments are structured to cover (a) demographic information, (b) knowledge of sustainable fashion, (c) environmental concerns, (d) degree of green skepticism, (e) evaluation of various transparency strategies employed by sustainable fashion brands. All the questions used in the survey can be found in the Appendix section.

#### 5.2.2.1. Demographic information

The initial section of the questionnaire gathers essential demographic information about the respondents, including their age, gender, education level, country of residence, and employment status. This data is crucial because demographic factors have a significant impact on green skepticism and environmental concerns, as highlighted by various studies.

#### 5.2.2.2. Sustainable fashion knowledge questions

The subsequent section of the questionnaire featured 17 statements designed to assess participants' subjective knowledge regarding sustainable fashion. Utilizing a 5-point Likert scale, participants were able to indicate their level of knowledge, ranging from "Very Limited Knowledge - I have little to no information about the topic" to "Extensive Knowledge - I possess comprehensive and in-depth knowledge of the topic." The use of a Likert scale in this section was strategically chosen to quantitatively categorize the participants' self-assessed knowledge of sustainable fashion. By employing a 1 to 5 scale, the method systematically assigns a "grade" to each respondent's level of understanding, ranging from very limited (1) to extensive (5). This numeric grading system enables a clear, structured analysis of data, facilitating comparisons and statistical evaluation of subjective knowledge across the study's sample.

The questions assessing knowledge within the survey were structured into four categories: environmental knowledge, social impact knowledge, knowledge of sustainable practices, and sustainable usage and disposal knowledge. This classification was adopted from the scale development study by Park and Lee (2020) on sustainable consumption of clothing. The first two categories encompass factual knowledge—such as understanding the environmental impacts of raw material production in fashion and being aware of labor issues within the fast fashion industry. The latter two categories address action-related knowledge, which includes skills in clothing repair and alteration, and knowing where to find sustainable clothing options. This structure is crucial for effectively assessing both types of knowledge, as making eco-friendly choices requires consumers to possess a comprehensive understanding of both factual conditions and practical actions.

#### 5.2.2.3. Environmental concern questions

The third section of the survey focused on environmental concerns. It was critical to select an appropriate method to measure these concerns, given the variety of scales available. The study by Cruz and Manata (2020) evaluated the validity of several scales used for this purpose. They found that the large number of scales developed over the years, each based on different approaches and theoretical foundations, presented a significant challenge for researchers in choosing the most effective one. They concluded that the Schultz scale, with its excellent data fit, high reliability, and concise format, was particularly suitable for applied research where survey length is a concern. This scale was chosen for its ability to effectively measure general environmental attitudes, distinctly capturing egoistic, social-altruistic, and biospheric concerns.

The Schultz scale differentiates environmental concern into three dimensions (Schultz, 2001):

1. Egoistic concern: This dimension assesses the concern for the environment as it directly affects the individual. Individuals with high egoistic concern are primarily motivated to protect the environment due to the personal consequences of environmental degradation.
2. Altruistic concern: This focuses on the concern for other people, reflecting a belief that environmental degradation adversely affects human welfare. High scores on this dimension indicate a motivation to prevent harm to others resulting from environmental problems.
3. Biospheric Concern: This dimension evaluates concern for the environment itself, independent of human benefits. It represents a moral or ethical concern for nature and non-human species.

Participants in the present survey were required to respond to statements reflecting the three dimensions of environmental concern as measured by the Schultz scale. Examples of these statements include:

a) Egoistic: “I am concerned about environmental problems because of the consequences for my health.”
b) Altruistic: “I am concerned about environmental problems because of the consequences for children.”
c) Biospheric: “I am concerned about environmental problems because of the consequences for animals.”

Responses were gathered using a Likert scale, asking participants to rate their level of concern for each statement from 1 to 5, where 1 indicates “not at all concerned” and 5 indicates “extremely concerned”. This method allows for a precise measurement of the degree of participants' environmental concerns across different dimensions.

#### 5.2.2.4. Green skepticism questions

The fourth section of the survey was dedicated to measuring green skepticism. According to research from 1998, Mohr, Eroğlu, and Ellen sought to create a valid and reliable measure of consumer skepticism towards environmental claims made in marketing communications.

In the marketing industry, there are generally two approaches to measuring skepticism. The first method examines overall consumer attitudes towards marketing and advertising practices, assessing general distrust or sentiment towards businesses and marketing efforts. For instance, in 1976, Lundstrom and Lamont developed an 82-item scale that addressed broader issues such as the social responsibility of businesses, product proliferation, and the need for consumer information. Their research provides insights into a wide range of consumer attitudes and can indicate overall levels of trust or distrust in marketing practices.

The second approach is more focused and targets consumer reactions to specific types of advertising claims. This method assesses skepticism towards particular aspects of marketing, such as the truthfulness of specific ads or claims. For example, Ford, Smith, and Swasy (1990) and Darley and Smith (1993) used two items to assess how truthful consumers perceived a specific advertisement to be and how skeptical they were about its truthfulness. However, these items were focused on individual ads, making them too narrow to capture consumers’ overall skepticism in a broader context.

For this study, green skepticism was measured with six questions, four of which were adapted from Mohr, Eroğlu, and Ellen (1998). However, these questions were rephrased to fit more closely with the context of sustainable fashion, as their original questions were focused on package labels. This section also included questions related to green skepticism concerning the latest European Union Green Directive explained in the literature review. Thus, the section on green skepticism was essentially divided into two parts: skepticism towards sustainable fashion brands in general and skepticism towards regulations. Participants were required to read each statement and indicate the degree to which they agree, using a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

#### 5.2.2.5. Transparency strategies of sustainable fashion brands

In the final part of the survey, participants were presented with six different transparency strategies implemented by existing sustainable fashion brands from Europe. They were asked to evaluate how likely they are to trust these brands and how likely they are to make a purchase. A 5-point Likert scale was used for responses, ranging from 1 (very unlikely) to 5 (very likely).

Tang and Higgins (2022) identified the “Learning, Lessons, and Perspectives” strategy, where companies openly discuss their challenges and the complexities of sustainable practices. The survey incorporated various scenarios under the “Learning, Lessons, and Perspectives” strategy to determine how likely consumers are to trust or purchase from brands that openly discuss their challenges. One such scenario features a brand that not only highlights its own sustainable efforts but also promotes another brand’s achievements, thereby fostering a community of practice and encouraging collective progress towards sustainability goals.

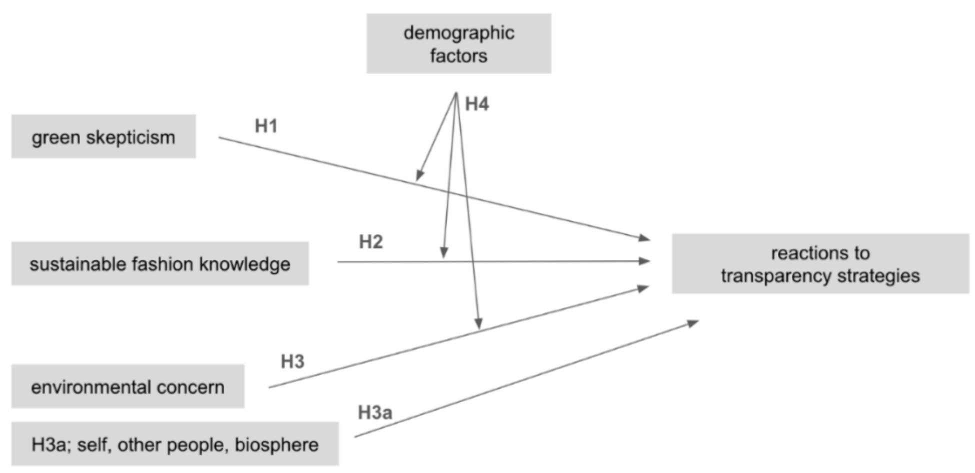
The survey scenarios were categorized based on their relation to biospheric, egoistic, and altruistic concerns, with two scenarios assigned to each category. For example, consider the following scenario: “When we choose the dyeing processes for our products, we prioritize quality and durability over solely using natural methods. While natural dyes are eco-friendly, they often result in colors that can fade quickly, leading many consumers to perceive their clothes as outdated or worn out sooner. By selecting more stable dyeing methods, we ensure that our products maintain their vibrant color and structure for a longer period.” The scenario described is categorized as egoistic because it focuses on the personal benefits that consumers receive from the product's enduring quality and appearance. Egoistic concerns in environmental behavior are centered on the direct impact or advantage to the individual, rather than broader societal or environmental impacts. In this case, the emphasis is on ensuring that the clothes retain their vibrant colors, which addresses the consumers' personal desire for products that look new and last longer.

The balanced distribution of scenarios across the three categories—biospheric, egoistic, and altruistic—enables an exploration of how individuals with varying levels of environmental concern respond. Specifically, Hypothesis 3a (H3a) investigates whether individuals with a high level of biospheric environmental concern, for example, react more favorably to scenarios that align with biospheric values.

### 5.2.3. Research model

The research model proposed in Figure 1 aims to establish the relationships between green skepticism, sustainable fashion knowledge, environmental concern, and reactions to transparency strategies. This model allows for testing the hypotheses described in methodology section, including whether higher levels of green skepticism lead to more negative reactions (H1), whether greater sustainable fashion knowledge leads to more positive reactions (H2), and whether higher levels of environmental concern enhance positive reactions (H3). Additionally, it examines how reactions to transparency strategies vary based on different perspectives of environmental concern (H3a) and how demographic factors moderate these relationships (H4).

**Figure 1: Model for reactions to transparency strategies.**



### 5.3. Results

The initial section of the results focuses on the demographic characteristics of the sample. The sample initially contained 173 respondents. After data cleaning to ensure they met the study's criteria, primarily focusing on the age requirement to include only individuals from the Millennial and Generation Z groups, the final sample was refined to 150 participants.

The first bar graph presents the gender distribution of 150 survey participants. The data indicates that 71.33% of the respondents identified as female, while 28.67% identified as male. This distribution highlights a higher proportion of female participants in the sample.

The age distribution of the 150 survey participants ranged from 20 to 43 years, with a mean age of 30.5 years and a standard deviation of 5.787. The standard deviation suggests that most participants are between approximately 24.7 and 36.3 years old. Visual inspection of the age distribution revealed a roughly mound-shaped and symmetric pattern, indicating a concentration of respondents in their mid-20s to mid-30s. For a more detailed illustration of the age distribution, please refer to the histogram in the Appendix.

The survey participants were categorized into two main educational groups: 'No degree' and 'Degree.' The data shows that 21.23% of participants reported having no formal degree, while 78.77% indicated they have a degree. Additionally, four participants did not provide information on their educational level; however, this omission did not significantly impact the overall distribution of educational attainment among the sample.

The survey participants were categorized based on their place of residence into two regions: Western Europe and Eastern Europe. Although participants initially provided their specific countries of residence, the data was grouped into these broader regions for simplicity. The results show that 69.33% of the respondents reside in Western Europe, while 30.67% live in Eastern Europe. This categorization provides a clearer understanding of the geographical distribution of the sample.

The employment status of the 150 survey participants shows that the majority are employed, with most working full-time. A smaller proportion of the sample includes those who are self-employed, working part-time, interning, or unemployed. Less than one-quarter of the participants fall into categories such as self-employed or unemployed. A detailed breakdown of these employment categories can be found in the accompanying Table 1.

**Table 3: Employment Status of Participants**

| **Employment Status** | **Frequency** | **Percent** |
|---|---:|---:|
| Employed | 99 | 66.0 |
| Self-employed/Freelance | 12 | 8.0 |
| Part-time | 17 | 11.3 |
| Interning | 5 | 3.3 |
| Unemployed – Looking for work | 5 | 3.3 |
| Unemployed – Not looking for work | 4 | 2.7 |
| Other | 8 | 5.3 |
| **Total** | **150** | **100.0** |

The following section presents descriptive statistics for the key variables of green skepticism, sustainable fashion knowledge, and environmental concern. Understanding the distribution and central tendencies of these variables is crucial for establishing a baseline before exploring their interrelationships and correlations. This initial analysis provides insights into the overall attitudes and knowledge levels within the sample.

As seen in Table 2, green skepticism was slightly higher toward brands (mean = 3.32) than toward regulations (mean = 2.75), suggesting that participants were somewhat more critical of sustainability claims made by brands. This pattern suggests that participants may be more critical of brand sustainability claims than of regulatory efforts. The data on environmental concern suggests that participants generally expressed moderate to high levels of concern. While there is some variability in the responses, the overall tendency indicates that environmental issues are a concern for the majority of respondents. The knowledge variables also displayed moderate to somewhat low. mean values, with all dimensions (general, environmental, usage, consumption, and social issues) falling below 3 on average. Interestingly, consumption knowledge, with the highest standard deviation of 1.08430 among the categories, indicating a wider range of responses and moderate knowledge levels.

Prior to further analysis, it is essential to confirm the reliability of the scales used in this study. The scale demonstrated a Cronbach's alpha of 0.823 across 8 items in the bellow table, indicating good internal consistency. This reliability coefficient suggests that the scale items measure a cohesive construct, making it suitable for further analysis.

**Table 4: Descriptive statistics for green skepticism, environmental concern, and knowledge variables**

| Variable | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Green skepticism (brands) | 1.67 | 4.83 | 3.3233 | 0.51893 |
| Green skepticism (regulations) | 1.00 | 4.33 | 2.7489 | 0.63096 |
| Environmental concern | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.6233 | 0.83743 |
| General knowledge | 1.00 | 5.00 | 2.8483 | 0.81971 |
| Environmental knowledge | 1.00 | 5.00 | 2.9570 | 0.90905 |
| Usage knowledge | 1.00 | 5.00 | 2.8500 | 0.90996 |
| Consumption knowledge | 1.00 | 5.00 | 2.7633 | 1.08430 |
| Knowledge of social issues | 1.00 | 5.00 | 2.7489 | 0.92302 |

Building on the established understanding that variables such as age, education, gender, and cultural background influence green skepticism and environmental concern this section outlines the observed patterns and relationships within the data, presenting the ANOVA analysis of demographic factors in relation to environmental concern and green skepticism.

Gender and green skepticism: The ANOVA analysis results show no statistically significant differences between genders in relation to the two dimensions of green skepticism: skepticism towards brands and skepticism towards regulations. For skepticism towards brands, the F-value was 0.906 ($p = 0.343$), indicating no notable variation between male and female participants. Similarly, for skepticism towards regulations, the F-value was 0.839 ($p = 0.361$), reinforcing the lack of significant gender-based differences. These findings suggest that gender does not significantly influence levels of green skepticism in this sample.

Similarly, the ANOVA analysis for residency revealed no statistically significant differences regarding green skepticism towards brands and regulations. For skepticism towards regulations, the F-value was 0.334 ($p = 0.361$), indicating no substantial variation between participants from Western and Eastern Europe. For skepticism towards brands, the F-value was 0.244 (p = 0.343), further confirming the absence of meaningful differences based on residency. Overall, these results suggest that residency (Western vs. Eastern Europe) does not significantly impact levels of green skepticism.

Gender and environmental concern: The ANOVA analysis reveals a statistically significant difference in environmental concern based on gender, where females display higher levels of concern compared to males**.** The F-value of 4.106 and a p-value of 0.045 indicate that this difference is statistically significant. However, the effect size, as represented by Eta-squared (0.027), is small, suggesting that while gender is associated with levels of environmental concern, it accounts for only a modest amount of variance in concern levels across the sample.

Age and environmental concern: The Pearson correlation coefficient between age and concern is 0.164, showing a weak positive relationship. This means that older participants tend to have slightly higher levels of environmental concern. The correlation is statistically significant (Sig. = 0.045), suggesting that age is a relevant factor in determining environmental concern.

Level of education and environmental concern: The ANOVA analysis reveals a statistically significant difference in environmental concern based on education level, where participants with a degree display higher levels of concern compared to those with no degree (coded as 1). The F-value of 5.447 and a p-value of 0.021 indicate that this difference is statistically significant. The effect size, as measured by Eta-squared (0.036), indicates a small but meaningful effect, suggesting that education level accounts for about 3.6% of the variance in environmental concern scores.

### 5.3.1. Testing the hypotheses

The following section focuses on testing the proposed hypotheses by analyzing how the variables: green skepticism (towards brands and regulations), sustainable fashion knowledge, and environmental concerns influence willingness to buy and trust, based on presented scenarios of various sustainable fashion brands. By employing statistical analyses, this section aims to validate or refute the hypotheses, providing a deeper understanding of how these factors interact and influence consumer attitudes and behaviors.

**Hypothesis 1 (H1):** The correlation matrix provides a detailed examination of the relationships between green skepticism (both towards brands and regulations) and willingness to buy and trust the brand based on provided scenarios. There is a strong positive correlation between willingness to buy and trust (Pearson Correlation = 0.751), with a significant p-value (< 0.001). This suggests that higher levels of trust are associated with an increased willingness to buy.

**Table 5: Correlation matrix of the relationships between green skepticism (both towards brands and regulations) and willingness to buy and trust in the brand based on provided scenarios**

| | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Green skepticism (brands) | | | |
| 2. Green Skepticism (regulations) | 0.012 | | |
| 3. Willingness to Buy | -0.074 | -0.332 | |
| 4. Trust | -0.010 | -0.359 | 0.751 |

Note: *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Hypothesis 1 proposes that higher levels of green skepticism would lead to more negative reactions to transparency strategies, measured here by willingness to buy and trust levels. The data indicates that while green skepticism towards brands does not have a significant impact on either willingness to buy or trust, green skepticism towards regulations does. Specifically, greater skepticism towards regulations is significantly associated with lower willingness to buy and lower trust levels.

Thus, the findings partially support Hypothesis 1, demonstrating that skepticism towards regulations, rather than brands, correlates with more negative reactions in terms of reduced willingness to buy and diminished trust.

**Hypothesis 2 (H2):** The correlation matrix provides detailed insights into the relationships between various forms of knowledge (general, environmental, consumption, usage, social issues) and two dependent variables: willingness to buy and trust.

**Table 6: Correlation matrix of the relationships between sustainable fashion knowledge and willingness to buy and trust in the brand based on provided scenarios**

| var. | k.(gen.) | k. (env.) | k. (cons.) | k. usage | k. (soc.) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| WTB | $r = 0.096$ | $r = 0.107$ | $r = 0.074$ | $r = 0.044$ | $r = 0.095$ |
| | $p = 0.244$ | $p = 0.194$ | $p = 0.365$ | $p = 0.590$ | $p = 0.249$ |
| Trust | $r = 0.188$ | $r = 0.171$ | $r = 0.145$ | $r = 0.126$ | $r = 0.206$ |
| | $p = 0.021$ | $p = 0.036$ | $p = 0.076$ | $p = 0.124$ | $p = 0.011$ |

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Hypothesis 2 posits that greater sustainable fashion knowledge will lead to more positive reactions to transparency strategies, indicated by higher willingness to buy and greater trust. The data shows weak positive correlations between various forms of knowledge and both willingness to buy and trust. However, only the correlations between general knowledge, environmental knowledge, and social issue knowledge with trust are statistically significant, suggesting that these specific types of knowledge have a modest but meaningful impact on increasing trust in transparency strategies. Among these, knowledge related to social issues has the strongest association with increased trust. Overall, while there are indications that greater knowledge is associated with more positive reactions (particularly in trust), the effect is small. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 is partially supported.

**Hypothesis 3 (H3):** The correlation matrix examines the relationships between environmental concern, willingness to buy and trust. These relationships are key to testing Hypothesis 3, which posits that higher levels of environmental concern will enhance positive reactions to all transparency strategies.

- Concern and willingness to buy: The Pearson correlation coefficient between environmental concern and willingness to buy is 0.251, indicating a weak to moderate positive relationship. This correlation is statistically significant (Sig. =

0.002), suggesting that higher levels of concern are associated with an increased willingness to buy.

- Concern and trust: The correlation between environmental concern and trust is 0.225, also indicating a weak positive relationship. This correlation is statistically significant (Sig. = 0.006), suggesting that greater environmental concern is associated with higher trust in transparency strategies.

Hypothesis 3 posited that higher levels of environmental concern would lead to more positive reactions to transparency strategies, measured through willingness to buy and trust. The data shows that environmental concern has a statistically significant, positive correlation with both willingness to buy ($r = .251$; $p = .002$) and trust ($r = .225$; $p = .006$). This suggests that individuals with higher environmental concern are more likely to have positive reactions, as reflected in their greater willingness to buy and higher levels of trust. Therefore, the findings support Hypothesis 3, demonstrating that increased environmental concern is indeed associated with more positive reactions towards transparency strategies.

**Hypothesis 3a:** The correlation matrix provides detailed insights into how different types of environmental concerns—biospheric, altruistic, and egoistic—relate to reactions to transparency strategies across various scenarios (self, others, and the biosphere). This analysis aims to test Hypothesis 3a, which posits that reactions to transparency strategies will vary based on environmental concerns from different perspectives.

**Table 7: Concern-Trust in the brands Matrix**

| | Biospheric Concern | Altruistic Concern | Egoistic Concern |
|---|---|---|---|
| Trust (Biospheric) | 0.141 | 0.177 | 0.155 |
| Trust (Altruistic) | 0.133 | 0.157 | 0.142 |
| Trust (Egoistic) | 0.159 | 0.185 | 0.243 |

**Table 8: Concern-Willingness to Buy (WTB) Matrix**

| | Biospheric Concern | Altruistic Concern | Egoistic Concern |
|---|---|---|---|
| WTB (Biospheric) | 0.203 | 0.173 | 0.147 |
| WTB (Altruistic) | 0.189 | 0.195 | 0.213 |
| WTB (Egoistic) | 0.140 | 0.207 | 0.177 |

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The results show that different types of environmental concerns are associated with varying levels of trust and willingness to buy in response to different transparency scenarios.

- Biospheric Concerns: Significant positive correlations with willingness to buy in both altruistic and biospheric scenarios indicate that individuals with higher biospheric concerns are more willing to engage positively when the scenarios emphasize broader environmental benefits. The weak, non-significant correlations with trust suggest that biospheric concerns might not strongly influence trust.
- Altruistic Concerns: This type of concern is significantly associated with trust in biospheric and egoistic scenarios and with willingness to buy across all scenarios, suggesting that those with higher altruistic concerns respond positively across different contexts.
- Egoistic Concerns: There are significant positive correlations with trust and willingness to buy, particularly in egoistic and altruistic scenarios, indicating that personal and social benefits can influence these individuals' reactions to transparency strategies.

In summary, the data support Hypothesis 3A, demonstrating that reactions to transparency strategies do indeed vary based on the type of environmental concern, with specific concerns being more influential in different scenarios.

**Hypothesis 4 (H4):** This hypothesis posited that demographic factor—namely, age, gender, education, and cultural background (represented by residence in Western or Eastern Europe) would moderate the relationships between green skepticism, sustainable fashion knowledge, environmental concerns, and the dependent variables trust and willingness to buy. Table 7 summarizes the statistically significant findings from the regression analyses. These results highlight key relationships between demographic factors, green skepticism, and sustainable fashion knowledge in predicting trust in transparency strategies. The significant interactions indicate meaningful moderation by residence, gender, and education.

**Table 9: Regression analysis summary – statistically significant results**

| Predictor/Interaction | Dependent Variable | Coefficient (B) | Standard Error | t- value | p-value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sustainable fashion knowledge | Trust | 0.415 | 0.184 | 2.260 | 0.025 |
| Residence*green skepticism(regulations) | Trust | -0.423 | 0.167 | -2.541 | 0.012 |
| Gender*sustainable fashion knowledge | Trust | -0.266 | 0.130 | -2.044 | 0.043 |
| Education*green skepticism(regulations) | Trust | -0.399 | 0.197 | -2.025 | 0.045 |

- Age as a moderator: Age does not significantly alter how green skepticism, sustainable fashion knowledge, and environmental concerns influence trust and willingness to buy.
- Gender as a moderator: Gender moderated the relationship between sustainable fashion knowledge and trust. Specifically, the positive effect of sustainable fashion knowledge on trust was stronger for men compared to women, indicating that men exhibit a greater increase in trust with higher sustainable fashion knowledge. Gender did not significantly moderate the relationships between green skepticism, sustainable fashion knowledge, or environmental concern and willingness to buy.
- Education as a moderator: Education moderated the relationship between green skepticism (regulations) and trust. Individuals with higher levels of education (e.g., those with a degree) tend to trust less when they have higher skepticism about green regulations. Education does not significantly moderate predictors for willingness to buy.
- Residence (Western vs. Eastern Europe) as a moderator: Residence significantly moderated the relationship between green skepticism (regulations) and trust. t. Respondents from Eastern Europe were more negatively impacted by skepticism toward green regulations compared to those from Western Europe. Additionally, a marginally significant moderation effect was observed for green skepticism toward brands, suggesting potential regional differences in trust responses. This may indicate that Western Europeans could be relatively more skeptical toward

green brands than regulations Residency does not significantly moderate predictors for willingness to buy.

In conclusion, Hypothesis 4 is partially supported. Gender, education, and residence were found to moderate certain relationships with trust, but age did not serve as a significant moderator. Furthermore, none of the demographic factors moderated the relationships involving willingness to buy, suggesting that trust could be more susceptible to demographic influences than willingness to buy.

## 5.4. Discussion

The study presents valuable insights into the research question: How do green skepticism, sustainable fashion knowledge, environmental concerns, and demographic factors influence consumer reactions to different transparency strategies employed by sustainable fashion brands? To address the research questions, the results of the hypotheses will be presented first, together with an exploration of possible reasons behind these findings, including their alignment or divergence from existing literature.

### 5.4.1. Discussion of hypotheses and answering the research questions

H1: Higher levels of green skepticism will lead to more negative reactions to all types of transparency strategies - partially supported

The study revealed that while skepticism toward brands does not exhibit a significant influence on willingness to buy or trust levels, skepticism toward regulations does. This differentiation implies that consumer skepticism toward regulations may play a more influential role in shaping attitudes and behaviors than skepticism toward individual brands. A possible explanation is that distrust in regulatory measures reflects a broader, systemic concern, suggesting that consumers may perceive brand transparency efforts as insufficient or performative if they already have doubts about regulatory standards. Furthermore, skepticism toward regulations may erode overall trust, diminishing the efficacy of transparency efforts by brands.

H2: Greater sustainable fashion knowledge will lead to more positive reactions to transparency strategies, particularly when brands communicate about their sustainability progress - partially supported

The results for Hypothesis 2 indicate that greater knowledge of sustainable fashion is positively linked with reactions to transparency strategies, particularly in building trust, although the correlations are relatively weak. Statistically significant correlations were found between trust and different knowledge dimensions, including general, environmental, and social issue knowledge. This suggests that consumer responses may vary based on the type of knowledge they possess, with social issue knowledge showing the strongest association with increased trust. Previous research has shown that consumers often associate sustainable fashion primarily with environmentally friendly attributes, like being green, natural, or recycled, while paying less attention to social aspects like fair wages and working conditions (Henninger et al., 2016; Buzzback and Rainforest Alliance, 2014). Therefore, participants with social issue knowledge are likely to have a deeper understanding of the broader scope of sustainable fashion, including social dimensions. As a result, they may place greater trust in brands that are transparent about their actions, recognizing transparency as essential in addressing the complex challenges of the fashion industry.

When discussing sustainable fashion knowledge, it is crucial to consider the level of knowledge possessed by participants. Survey results indicated moderate to low mean values across all knowledge dimensions, with averages falling below 3. This suggests that participants did not have a high level of sustainable fashion knowledge to begin with, aligning with existing literature that highlights a gap between consumer awareness and deeper understanding of sustainable fashion. The modest impact observed may reflect a threshold effect, where having some knowledge is insufficient to drive significant changes in behavior. Achieving a deeper, more critical understanding may be necessary to meaningfully enhance consumers' willingness to buy and trust in sustainable fashion brands. Among the different types of knowledge assessed, consumption knowledge exhibited the highest standard deviation, indicating a wide range of responses. Questions in this category explored familiarity with sustainable clothing brands, awareness of where to purchase sustainable fashion, and knowledge of where to find relevant information about sustainable clothes. This broad variability presents opportunities for brands, as it suggests there is a segment of consumers with limited awareness of sustainable fashion options. Targeted education and engagement efforts could help bridge this gap, potentially increasing trust and driving greater adoption of sustainable fashion.

While knowledge primarily influenced trust, it did not strongly impact willingness to buy. This suggests that although transparency and knowledge alignment can foster consumer trust, other factors such as price sensitivity or personal style may still deter purchasing decisions. Trust-building often precedes buying behavior but does not guarantee conversion to sales.

H3: Higher levels of environmental concern will enhance positive reactions to all transparency strategies - supported

The findings indicate that individuals with higher environmental concern exhibit a statistically significant, positive association with both willingness to buy and trust in sustainable fashion brands based on transparency scenario presented. People with strong environmental concerns could be motivated by a desire to contribute positively to environmental causes. When brands transparently communicate their sustainability efforts, these consumers could feel that their purchasing decisions make a tangible difference. This perceived impact could reinforce their willingness to buy from and support the brand.

The results of Hypothesis 3a reveal that different types of environmental concerns are associated with varying levels of trust and willingness to buy in response to different transparency scenarios, providing an additional layer of insight into consumer motivations. By understanding and targeting these distinct motivations, brands can enhance trust, drive greater engagement, and more effectively influence purchasing decisions.

The survey scenarios were categorized into biospheric, egoistic, and altruistic concerns, with two scenarios assigned to each category. Individuals with higher biospheric concerns exhibited significant positive correlations with willingness to buy in both altruistic and biospheric scenarios, indicating a greater inclination to engage positively when broader environmental benefits are emphasized. This suggests that campaigns focused on global, long-term environmental impacts could be particularly effective. However, since this group showed weaker correlations with trust, marketers may need to reinforce their credibility and authenticity to build consumer trust alongside willingness to buy.

The results show that consumers with altruistic concerns exhibit a willingness to buy across all transparency scenarios. However, their trust levels are greater in response to biospheric, and egoistic scenarios compared to purely altruistic ones. This suggests that brands may benefit from focusing their messaging on egoistic and biospheric elements, such as personal benefits and broader environmental impacts where trust is already higher.

Respondents with high egoistic concerns exhibited significant positive correlations with both trust and willingness to buy, particularly in scenarios emphasizing egoistic and altruistic values. This suggests that egoistic concerns are influential when transparency strategies highlight self-interest, personal benefits, or human welfare. An effective way to engage this group could by praising and showcasing the achievements of other eco-friendly brands. By demonstrating a genuine commitment to improving the entire fashion industry, brands can appeal to egoistic consumers who respond positively to altruistic scenarios.

H4: Demographic factors (age, gender, education, cultural background) will moderate the relationships between green skepticism, sustainable fashion knowledge, environmental concerns, and reactions to transparency strategies- partially supported

Age did not significantly moderate the relationships between green skepticism, sustainable fashion knowledge, or environmental concerns and trust or willingness to buy. This suggests that perceptions of sustainable fashion may be more universally understood or experienced among Millennials and Gen Z, leading to minimal variation within these generational groups. Gender moderated the relationship between sustainable fashion knowledge and trust, with men exhibiting a stronger positive response to higher sustainable fashion knowledge. The finding that men show a stronger positive relationship between sustainable fashion knowledge and trust could suggest that men may seek or respond more strongly to factual, knowledge-based information compared to women. This aligns with some observed patterns in consumer behavior where men may place greater emphasis on objective, data-driven, and factual content when evaluating products or claims, potentially perceiving such information as more credible or trustworthy (Garbarino and Strahilevitz, 2004; Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 1991).

Education moderated the relationship between green skepticism (regulations) and trust, with higher-educated individuals demonstrating a stronger negative reaction to skepticism about green regulations. The depth of knowledge might create more awareness of regulatory shortcomings, increasing distrust if regulatory measures appear insincere. Residence moderated the relationship between green skepticism and trust, with respondents from Eastern Europe exhibiting greater negative impacts from skepticism toward green regulations compared to Western Europeans. This difference may be rooted in historical and political contexts; many Eastern European countries have experienced inconsistent or poorly enforced regulations fostering a general mistrust of regulatory bodies and their ability to uphold environmental standards. In contrast, a marginally significant moderation effect was observed for green skepticism toward brands, with potential indications that Western Europeans may be more skeptical of green brands. This could be driven by greater exposure to corporate greenwashing. Western consumers are often targeted with numerous sustainability claims and may be more critical due to a heightened awareness of misleading branding practices. Furthermore, higher regulatory standards and stricter enforcement in Western Europe may lead consumers to place more trust in government regulations while remaining wary of sustainable claims made by fashion brands.

RQ: How do green skepticism, sustainable fashion knowledge, environmental concerns, and demographic factors influence consumer reactions to different transparency strategies employed by sustainable fashion brands?

Green skepticism, sustainable fashion knowledge, environmental concerns, and demographic factors all play complex roles in shaping consumer reactions to transparency strategies. The results indicate that sustainable fashion knowledge and green skepticism influence consumer trust in sustainable fashion brands but have a limited impact on willingness to buy, illustrating that while trust-building is important, it does not always guarantee a conversion to purchasing behavior. The most significant finding was that environmental concerns can drive both trust and purchasing behavior, with consumer reactions to transparency strategies varying based on the type of environmental concern they hold. Demographic factors further moderate these relationships, emphasizing the need for targeted strategies tailored to gender, education, and regional context. Brands can leverage these insights by customizing communication to align with specific consumer concerns and motivations, maximizing engagement and impact.

### 5.4.2. Demographic factors and environmental concern and green skepticism

The research went beyond four proposed hypotheses and revealed several interesting patterns related to demographic factors influencing environmental concern and green skepticism, some of which align with existing literature, while others diverge.

Previous research has shown that younger individuals and those with higher education levels tend to exhibit greater environmental concerns. The positive correlation between age and environmental concern observed in this study differs from previous research suggesting that younger generations are generally more concerned about environmental issues. It is important to clarify that this study focused on younger generations, specifically Gen Z and Millennials. While both groups may exhibit more concern than older generations, the data suggests that Millennials show greater concern compared to Gen Z. This heightened concern among Millennials could be attributed to their current life stage, characterized by increased financial and familial responsibilities, which may make them more aware of and sensitive to long-term environmental impacts.

On the other hand, the analysis revealed a statistically significant difference in environmental concern based on gender, with females displaying higher levels of concern compared to males, aligning with existing literature. This finding is consistent with studies such as those by Xiao and McCright (2015) and Hunter, Hatch, and Johnson (2004), which suggest that women tend to exhibit stronger pro-environmental attitudes than men. However, the relatively small effect size indicates that, while gender differences do exist, they account for only a modest portion of the variation in environmental concern within the sample. Lastly, The ANOVA analysis revealed a statistically significant difference in environmental concern based on education level, with participants holding a degree exhibiting higher levels of concern than those without a degree. This finding aligns with the social-class hypothesis, which suggests that higher education levels correlate with greater environmental concern.

When it comes to green skepticism the study found no statistically significant differences in green skepticism between genders for both skepticism towards brands and skepticism towards regulations. This contrasts with some prior literature that suggests women may be more skeptical of green claims due to their heightened environmental awareness (Farooq and Wicaksono, 2021). This may hint at a shift towards a more balanced engagement, where both genders are becoming increasingly involved about environmental issues. This balance could also reflect a trend of both men and women critically evaluating sustainability claims, demonstrating a shared commitment to greater transparency in environmental practices. Similarly, no significant differences were found in green skepticism based on residency, which contrasts with literature suggesting potential cultural differences between regions. This alignment suggests that, regardless of gender or regional background, individuals may be growing more united in their critical evaluation of environmental and sustainability claims.

### 5.4.3. Recommendations for businesses

The results of the findings bring important insights for sustainable fashion brands. The study revealed that while skepticism toward brands does not significantly influence willingness to buy or trust levels, skepticism toward regulations does. To effectively address this skepticism, businesses should consider partnering with independent third-party organizations to validate their sustainability efforts. Independent verification provides objective proof of a brand's impact and credibility, helping to counter consumer skepticism. Additionally, publicly advocating for stronger industry regulations demonstrates a brand's commitment to meaningful change beyond its own self-interest. Collaborating with other sustainable brands further amplifies this commitment by fostering collective efforts to raise industry standards. This approach positions the brand as part of a broader movement to transform the fashion industry, rather than as an isolated actor focused on profit.

The results indicate that greater knowledge of sustainable fashion is positively linked with consumer trust in sustainable fashion brands. Consumer responses vary based on the type of knowledge they possess, with social issue knowledge showing the strongest association with increased trust. To build on these findings, businesses should focus on educational campaigns that expand consumer knowledge of the full scope of sustainable fashion. Communicating a holistic approach to sustainability by highlighting both environmental and social initiatives can enhance consumer trust in brands. Additionally, tailoring messaging to different levels of consumer knowledge is essential. By segmenting audiences, businesses can provide foundational education to those with less familiarity while engaging more deeply with consumers who have a greater understanding of the sustainable fashion industry.

The findings indicate that individuals with higher environmental concern exhibit a statistically significant, positive association with both willingness to buy and trust in sustainable fashion brands based on transparency scenario presented. This relationship presents a strategic opportunity for brands to appeal to environmental concern among their target audiences by emphasizing how consumer purchases contribute to positive environmental change, providing practical examples of how buying and using their garments can make a tangible difference. As already mentioned, to further enhance consumer engagement, brands could create educational content, workshops, or campaigns that empower consumers to make more sustainable choices and deepen their understanding of environmental issues. A deeper, more critical understanding of sustainability issues may be necessary to drive significant changes in consumer behavior. By enhancing consumer knowledge and appreciation of sustainability, brands can transform environmental concern and sustainable fashion knowledge from a weaker influence into a more compelling driver of consumer action.

Finally, it is important to mention that demographics play a role in how participants reacted to transparency strategies employed by sustainable fashion brands, and these differences should inform strategic brand actions. In the case where a brand's target audience is men, the brand could develop and promote content that emphasizes factual, data-driven, and objective information about sustainability efforts, such as scientific data, metrics on carbon reductions, or impact statistics. The finding that men show a stronger positive relationship between sustainable fashion knowledge and trust suggests that providing knowledge-based, credible information can significantly deepen trust and engagement within this demographic.

### 5.4.4. Limitations and future studies

Lastly, it is essential to acknowledge certain limitations inherent in this study. The sample population primarily consisted of Millennials and Gen Z participants, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other age groups. However, it is worth noting that, regardless of the sample size, the study uncovered significant patterns and insights regarding consumer trust and willingness to buy when presented with different transparency strategies.

Hence, based on the results and limitations, the present study could be extended in multiple directions in the future. For instance, conducting research on the following topics may yield further valuable insights on the green skepticism, sustainable fashion knowledge, environmental concerns, and transparency strategies:

1. Expanding demographic scope: ss it seems that age was not a strong factor in differentiating trust and willingness to buy between Millennials and Gen Z, future research should aim to expand the demographic scope to include older age groups. This would help explore whether similar patterns of consumer behavior are observed across different generations.

2. Longitudinal studies on knowledge exposure: investigating whether consistent exposure to educational content on sustainable fashion over time influences consumer willingness to buy and trust could provide valuable insights.
3. Creating and testing transparency campaigns with existing brands: future research could collaborate with existing sustainable fashion brands to design and test transparency campaigns aimed at increasing conversion rates by building consumer trust and willingness to buy.

In conclusion, this study has shed light on the complex dynamics of consumer trust, willingness to buy, and their relationship with green skepticism, sustainable fashion knowledge, environmental concerns, and demographic factors. The findings underscore the critical role of tailored transparency strategies in building consumer trust and willingness to buy. As environmental concern continues to grow alongside increasing skepticism, it is essential for brands to become more transparent about their actions to prove to environmentally conscious customers that they are genuinely committed to sustainability and worthy of their investment. By fostering authenticity and openly communicating their efforts, brands can build lasting relationships with these increasingly discerning consumers.

# 6. THIRD STUDY: SUSTAINABILITY IS NOT A DESTINATION – IT'S A NEVER-ENDING JOURNEY: INSIGHTS FROM EUROPEAN SUSTAINABLE FASHION BRANDS ON ADDRESSING CONSUMER CHALLENGES, THE IMPACT OF REGULATIONS, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

## 6.1. Introduction

As the fashion industry works to embrace sustainable development, understanding the dynamics of consumer behavior becomes increasingly crucial. The sustainable fashion market has witnessed significant growth in recent years, reflecting the industry's evolving commitment to sustainability. According to data from Kings Research, the global sustainable fashion market was valued at USD 7.07 billion in 2023 and is projected to reach USD 13.51 billion by 2031. These figures underscore a global shift in consumer behavior and market dynamics, driven by increasing environmental awareness and a growing demand for apparel with minimal ecological impact. Regionally, Europe stands out as a leader in sustainable fashion consumption, accounting for 36.09% of the global market share in 2023, valued at USD 2.55 billion (Kings Research, 2023). This is largely attributed to European consumers' prioritization of eco-friendly products, reflecting a commitment to sustainable practices in the region.

Despite these advancements, the concept of "sustainable fashion" remains ambiguous. At present, there is no universal checklist or definition to determine what qualifies as a sustainable fashion brand in Europe (The Sustainable Fashion Forum, 2021). This lack of standardization allows any brand to self-identify as sustainable, leading to consumer confusion and contributing to both green fatigue and green skepticism—a growing frustration and distrust toward sustainability claims. This gap not only affects consumer trust but also highlights the necessity for greater clarity and accountability in the fashion industry's sustainability communication.

In an effort to address these issues, the EU Green Claims Directive is under development, aiming to bring greater transparency and accountability to sustainability claims. Though not yet implemented, the directive proposes stricter regulations to ensure that brands substantiate their sustainability claims with credible evidence. This initiative, while promising, has significant implications for European sustainable fashion brands, particularly smaller ones, as it introduces higher expectations for transparency and compliance, which could increase operational pressures.

Existing research has primarily focused on consumer perspectives regarding sustainable fashion, often exploring their motivations, barriers, and attitudes. In contrast, less attention has been given to the brands themselves, who have daily interactions with consumers and are on the front lines of tackling the rising issues of green fatigue and green skepticism. Furthermore, at the time of writing, the EU Green Claims Directive has not yet been implemented, leaving a gap in the academic literature on how sustainable fashion brands plan to address these regulatory changes. This study seeks to fill these gaps by exploring brand perspectives and their strategies for navigating these evolving challenges. Given the significance of these developments, this study aims to understand the perspectives of European sustainable fashion brands regarding this directive. Interviews were conducted with seven sustainable fashion brands rated as “Good” or “Great” by Good On You, a trusted sustainability rating platform, as they serve as strong examples within the industry. The research explores whether these brands see value in the directive while investigating whether sustainability is a primary driver for their consumers or if it serves more as a supporting factor. Additionally, with green skepticism and environmental concern on the rise, as well as varying levels of consumer knowledge, this study examines how sustainable fashion brands address these challenges to build loyalty, foster trust, and ultimately encourage purchases. Lastly, it delves into the next steps these brands are actively pursuing to advance sustainability, providing insights into the strategies shaping the direction of this rapidly evolving sector.

The fashion industry is responsible for significant environmental and social impacts, including high carbon emissions, water consumption, and labor exploitation (UNEP,2022). The growth of sustainable fashion hinges on the establishment of clear standards and the implementation of effective brand-consumer communication to tackle these critical challenges and foster meaningful progress.

### 6.1.1. Consumer drivers in purchasing sustainable fashion

While sustainability is often regarded as a significant driver of sustainable fashion consumption, research remains inconclusive on whether it is the primary motivator or merely a supporting factor alongside other influences on consumer behavior. A growing body of literature highlights a variety of motivations, spanning ethical, practical, and egoistic dimensions, which shape consumer decisions when it comes to sustainable fashion purchase.

Ethical considerations are frequently cited as key influences on sustainable fashion consumption. For instance, Niinimäki (2010) identifies a rise in ethical awareness among consumers, while Dickson (2001) found that social consequences—such as violations of human rights in factories—play a critical role in purchasing decisions. Sweatshop labor, in particular, remains a significant ethical concern, shaping many clothing choices (Tomolillo and Shaw, 2004; Freestone and McGoldrick, 2008).

However, it is important to critically assess the nature of the samples used in these studies, as they often include individuals who may not have made an active decision to purchase sustainable fashion. For example, studies by Shen et al. (2012) and Chan and Wong (2012) explore motivations to buy sustainable fashion but sample consumers shopping in mainstream stores. Similarly, Goworek et al. (2012) focused on low-awareness consumers, limiting insights into the behaviors of those more actively engaged in sustainable fashion.

Beyond ethical concerns, practical factors like durability, quality, and timeless design emerge as pivotal drivers of sustainable fashion consumption. Lundblad and Davies (2016) challenge the notion that sustainability alone drives consumer behavior, showing that many consumers prioritize the functional benefits of their purchases. These include garments that last longer, offer value for money, and stay fashionable across seasons. Such practical attributes enable consumers to view sustainable fashion as a smart investment rather than a sacrifice. Comfort and health benefits also play a role, particularly through the use of natural materials that reduce exposure to harmful chemicals. These attributes appeal to consumers seeking both physical and emotional reassurance from their fashion choices.

Egoistic motivations—such as individuality, self-esteem, and comfort—are highlighted by Lundblad and Davies (2016) as equally, if not more, significant than altruistic or biospheric values. Unlike traditional fashion consumption, where self-esteem often stems from social acceptance, sustainable fashion consumers derive validation internally. This includes pride in their choices and the ability to express their individuality. The study demonstrates that self-oriented goals often take precedence over broader ethical or environmental considerations, offering a new perspective on sustainable consumption. Consumers, particularly younger generations, want sustainable fashion to be stylish. While sustainability is an important consideration, the desire for unique, fashionable, and stylish clothing remains a significant driver in their purchasing decisions. This highlights how sustainable fashion must align with both ethical values and personal style preferences to resonate with this target audience (Reiley and DeLong, 2011).

Additionally, transparency has emerged as a key factor influencing consumer behavior in sustainable fashion. Blas, Codina, and Sádaba, (2023) demonstrate that consumers increasingly demand transparency in business practices as a response to skepticism surrounding corporate sustainability claims, often referred to as “greenwashing.” Clear and accessible information about production processes, materials, and ethical standards fosters trust and influences purchasing behavior.

Cultural context further complicates these findings. The McKinsey Survey: Consumer Sentiment on Sustainability in Fashion (2020), for example, surveyed over 2,000 UK and German consumers, regions characterized by high environmental awareness. The narrow cultural scope of such studies risks overgeneralizing pro-sustainability attitudes that may not reflect consumer behavior in other regions. This highlights the importance of addressing cultural biases and diversifying sampling methods to capture a more accurate picture of global sustainable fashion consumption.

The literature suggests that sustainable fashion consumption is driven by several drivers. While sustainability remains an important factor, it might not necessarily be the primary driver. Practical considerations like durability and quality, alongside egoistic motivations such as personal style and desire for uniqueness, often take precedence. Additionally, transparency has become a critical factor in fostering trust and combating skepticism in the marketplace.

### 6.1.2. Cutting through green noise

Recent campaigns have used provocative anti-fast fashion messaging to highlight the environmental impact of overconsumption. While these efforts have sparked conversations, they have also faced criticism for being performative or hypocritical. Critics argue that many campaigns appear to prioritize projecting an ethical image over driving meaningful change. This sentiment was explored in The Business of Fashion article, “Why Some Consumers Find Sustainable Marketing So Annoying” (Business of Fashion, 2024), which points out that such campaigns often feel overly didactic or morally prescriptive, leaving consumers feeling judged rather than inspired. Scandals involving greenwashing and unethical workplace practices have only deepened consumer distrust.

This rising skepticism has fueled what researchers term “green fatigue,” a reaction to the overwhelming volume of environmental messaging consumers encounter daily. Strother and Fazal (2011) describe it as the result of excessive and often contradictory information, also known as “green noise,” which leaves individuals confused and disengaged. Green fatigue introduces an additional layer of complexity to the already significant challenges of skepticism, disparities in sustainable fashion knowledge, and varying levels of environmental concern (issues explored in detail in the second study). These barriers make it harder for brands to connect meaningfully with their audiences, underscoring the need for strategies that foster trust, clarity, and deeper engagement.

Research suggests that instead of blame or guilt, sustainable fashion communication should focus on positive engagement. A 2017 study by Han et al. found that guilt is ineffective for changing attitudes. Brands are more successful when they inspire action by offering solutions and emphasizing the benefits of sustainable choices. Similarly, Marlon et al. (2019) demonstrated that messaging grounded in hope, rather than fear, significantly enhances individuals' willingness to take action. Arthur (2023) further emphasizes that framing sustainability as aspirational and stylish, rather than as a moral obligation or act of self-sacrifice, broadens its appeal and fosters greater consumer engagement. This idea is supported by Protection Motivation Theory, which highlights that helping people feel confident in their ability to act (self-efficacy) and showing them how their actions can make a difference (response efficacy) are key to encouraging positive behaviors (Kothe et al., 2019; Klöckner, 2015). By empowering consumers to feel capable and effective, sustainable fashion communication can inspire meaningful engagement without relying on guilt or judgment.

However, such efforts can fail without clear and accessible communication strategies. Simplified messaging, therefore, becomes critical in cutting through the “green noise” of sustainability claims. Abbati (2019) argue that reducing complexity in sustainability communication ensures that concepts are easily understood and resonate with the general public. In sustainable fashion, where supply chains and production processes are often complex, this approach is particularly important. Markkula and Moisander (2012) describe such challenges as “discursive confusion,” where conflicting and excessive information creates barriers to understanding and action. By breaking down complex topics into clear, relatable messages, brands can help consumers navigate the overwhelming landscape of sustainability information.

Radical transparency further addresses the trust gap and aligns with growing consumer demand for ethical practices. According to McKinsey (2019), 42% of millennials seek detailed information about product origins and manufacturing processes before making purchases. Richards (2021) suggests that radical transparency defined as openly sharing information about supply chains, production processes, and pricing allows brands to counter supply chain ambiguity. Additionally, openly discussing challenges can be a powerful tool for building credibility. For instance, Patagonia has demonstrated that acknowledging imperfections or areas needing improvement fosters trust. Instead of perceiving these admissions as failures, consumers see them as signs of authenticity and a willingness to improve (Kim, Kim, and Rothenberg, 2020). By openly sharing both successes and challenges, brands can foster credibility and rebuild trust.

Finally, educational content is crucial for addressing knowledge gaps in sustainable fashion and reducing green skepticism. Many consumers remain unaware of the environmental impacts associated with clothing production and disposal, leading to low engagement with sustainable options (Harris, Roby, and Dibb, 2016). By implementing initiatives that inform consumers about these impacts, brands can empower their audiences to make more responsible choices.

### 6.1.3. The future of sustainable fashion

As green fatigue and consumer skepticism challenge the current landscape of sustainable fashion, upcoming regulatory measures, such as the new EU Green Claims Directive, offer a glimpse into the future of the industry by aiming to bring accountability and transparency to environmental claims, putting an end to the "Wild West" of sustainability marketing (Vogue Business, 2023).

In 2020, the European Commission revealed that 53% of environmental claims in the EU were vague, misleading, or unfounded, with 40% lacking substantiation due to the absence of specific regulatory guidelines (European Commission, 2022). Additionally, half of all green labels in the EU lack proper verification, creating widespread confusion and diminishing consumer trust, as the region uses 230 sustainability labels and 100 green energy labels that vary significantly in transparency and credibility (European Commission, n.d.).

To address these issues, the European Commission proposed the Green Claims Directive on 22 March 2023. This directive prohibits vague or unfounded environmental claims, such as “eco-friendly” or “sustainable,” unless backed by scientific evidence and a comprehensive assessment of the product's environmental impact (European Commission, 2023). Similarly, the EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles, launched in March 2022 as part of the Circular Economy Action Plan, aims to make textiles more sustainable by 2030 (European Commission, n.d.). The strategy envisions a future where all textile products in the EU are durable, repairable, and recyclable, with profitable reuse and repair services widely available.

Achieving such a circular and sustainable future, however, may require collaboration among fashion brands to address systemic challenges in the supply chain and foster industry-wide change. Outerknown’s bold decision to release its Sustainability Roadmap as an open-source guide is a compelling example of how collaboration can drive progress. Shelly Gottschamer, the brand’s Chief Sustainability Officer, described the move as a step toward collective action, noting, “A rising tide lifts all ships.” By openly sharing proprietary knowledge, Outerknown encouraged other brands to adopt sustainable practices, demonstrating that transparency and partnership are essential for tackling complex issues in sustainable fashion industry (FashionRevolution, 2017).

### 6.1.4. Research Questions

This study is unique in that it focuses on the perspective of sustainable fashion brands in Europe, using interviews to explore how these brands navigate key challenges in the industry. While much of the existing literature examines consumer behavior, this study shifts attention to the role of brands in addressing critical gaps in the sustainable fashion industry. One such gap lies in the unclear role of sustainability as a driving factor in consumer purchasing decisions. While sustainability is frequently discussed as a driver of consumer behavior, there is no clear consensus on whether it is the primary motivator for purchasing sustainable fashion. Ethical concerns such as human rights violations in production (Dickson, 2001; Tomolillo and Shaw, 2004) and environmental awareness (Freestone and McGoldrick, 2008) are influential, but practical factors like durability and quality (Lundblad and Davies, 2016) often take precedence.

A second key gap in the literature relates to the challenges faced by sustainable fashion brands in effectively engaging consumers. Green fatigue as reaction to excessive and contradictory sustainability claims is a significant barrier to consumer trust and engagement. However, there is limited understanding of how brands systematically address the interconnected challenges of green skepticism, knowledge gaps, and environmental concerns.

Lastly, the introduction of regulatory frameworks, such as the EU Green Claims Directive, highlights the need to examine the evolving landscape of sustainable fashion. However, little is known about how brands perceive the value of these measures or how they plan to adapt. Collaborative initiatives, such as Outerknown's open-source Sustainability Roadmap, suggest that brands may increasingly need to work together to align with regulatory demands and consumer expectations.

Given these gaps, this study aims to address the following research questions:

- RQ1: Is sustainability a driving factor in purchase decisions for consumers of sustainable fashion brands?
- RQ2: How do sustainable fashion brands address customer challenges such as green skepticism, sustainability knowledge gaps, and environmental concerns?
- RQ3: Do sustainable fashion brands see the value of the EU Green Claims Directive in the sustainable fashion market, and what are the next steps for sustainable fashion brands in Europe?

## 6.2. Methodology

### 6.2.1. Data Collection

In this study, a qualitative analysis was conducted using semi-structured interviews with professionals from the fashion industry. This method was chosen as it is well-suited for exploring complex topics, combining structured guidance with the flexibility to adapt to participants' responses. It is especially effective for obtaining detailed insights from individuals with daily, hands-on experience. In this case, the participants, professionals working for sustainable fashion brands, were uniquely positioned to discuss the challenges of managing such businesses and to share their perspectives on future developments. These insights align closely with the research questions, ensuring relevance and depth in the findings.

The data collection took place online in November 2024. To identify potential participants, approximately 100 sustainable fashion brands across Europe were contacted through email and social media platforms. These brands were selected from the platform Good on You, focusing specifically on those rated as "Good" or "Great." The use of Good on You provided an independent and standardized evaluation of brands' sustainability efforts, ensuring a credible and objective selection process. This approach minimized the risk of including companies that engage in misleading tactics, such as greenwashing, and ensured that insights were drawn from leading sustainable brands in Europe. From this process, seven participants were recruited, each representing a different sustainable fashion brand. It was important to include brands from different countries and with varying target audiences to capture diverse perspectives and ensure a broader understanding of the challenges and strategies within the sustainable fashion industry. The target population included marketing experts, founders, or team members responsible for their brands' sustainability initiatives. While the sample size is small, expanding the scope was deemed unnecessary, as additional participants were unlikely to provide significantly new or different information.

The list of brands, along with basic information including their location, a brief description taken from their Instagram bio, year of establishment, target audience, and the type of clothing they offer, is provided in Table #. The Instagram bio was used for the short description of each brand as it provides a concise representation of the brand's identity and values. As these bios are crafted by the brands themselves to engage and inform their target audience, they offer an authentic and accessible summary of the brand's focus and messaging. This approach ensures consistency across descriptions while reflecting how the brands choose to present themselves publicly.

**Table 10: RQ1: Brand information**

| Brand Name | Location | Type of clothing | Target market | Founded (Year) | Description |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Honest Basics | Germany | Casual wear, essentials | Women, men | 2018 | Sustainable basics for friendly prices. |
| ISTO | Portugal | Casual wear, essentials | Men | 2017 | Luxury everyday essentials that fit our everyday needs. |
| Dedicated | Sweden | Casual wear | Women, men | 2006 | We are a clothing brand from Sweden. Dedicated to changing the industry norm. |
| Zerobarracento | Italy | Casual wear | Unisex | 2020 | 100% made in Italy timeless, genderless, ageless outerwear brand. |
| Infantium Victoria | Germany | Children's wear | Children | 2014 | Your destination for beautiful ethical cruelty-free fashion. |
| Iron Roots | Netherlands | Activewear | Women, men | 2018 | The road to plastic free training gear. |
| Mila.Vert | Slovenia | Women's wear | Women | 2016 | Responsibly made to deliver confidence and style. |

With prior informed consent, the interviews were conducted via Google Meet and recorded for analysis. Each session lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. The recordings were transcribed using Google Meet's transcription feature, and the transcriptions were double-checked for accuracy. Although participants consented to having their names included in the study, only the names of their respective brands are listed. Participants are referred to as representatives of their brands to protect their individual identities.

### 6.2.2. Interview structure

Since the study aims to address three research questions, the interview guide was divided into three main parts, each corresponding to one of the research questions. Some of the interview questions were based on findings from the first and second studies. This shows how the studies are connected and how each one builds on the others, ultimately ensuring that the main research question of the PhD dissertation is thoroughly addressed, drawing on insights from both consumers and brands. The complete list of interview questions can be found in the Appendix.

- **Part 1: sustainability mission and unique selling proposition:** This section addressed RQ1: Is sustainability a driving factor in purchase decisions for consumers of sustainable fashion brands? Participants were asked about their brand's sustainability mission, how it has evolved, and whether sustainability is a major factor influencing their sales. This was chosen as the first section as it provided a natural starting point by introducing the brand and its core values, rather than immediately delving into challenges. Understanding the brand's identity created a foundation for the discussion, enabling a smoother transition into later topics such as communication strategies, challenges, and regulatory impacts.
- **Part 2: communication strategies and consumer challenges:** This section addressed RQ2: How do sustainable fashion brands address customer challenges such as green skepticism, sustainability knowledge gaps, and environmental concerns? It was important to understand how brands handle the complex topic of sustainability, given the varying levels of consumer knowledge on the subject and the growing green skepticism. Additionally, with an increasing number of consumers finding sustainability-led messaging annoying or performative, this section explored how brands combat such perceptions while maintaining authenticity and building trust with their audience.
- **Part 3: EU Regulations and future directions:** This section addressed RQ3: Do sustainable fashion brands see the value of the EU Green Claims Directive in the sustainable fashion market, and what are the next steps for sustainable fashion brands in Europe? It explored participants' feelings about the directive and whether they believe it will contribute to a better and more transparent sustainable fashion sector. Additionally, the section investigated future plans for their brands and how they envision advancing sustainability within the industry.

### 6.2.3. Data analysis and coding

To uncover the answers to the research questions, NVivo was used as a tool to analyze and interpret the interview data. The use of NVivo facilitated the coding of interviews, making it easier to systematically analyze the data and address the research questions. NVivo is a professional qualitative research software designed to assist researchers in collecting, organizing, analyzing, visualizing, and managing unstructured and semi-structured data such as interviews. By enabling a more comprehensive and in-depth analysis, NVivo aids researchers in drawing accurate and scientifically sound conclusions (Mortelmans, 2019). For this study, NVivo version 14 was utilized. The following section explains how the interviews were coded, a crucial process for answering the research questions and uncovering insights from sustainable fashion brands. To ensure accuracy, each code was carefully defined and systematically applied to the data. An additional co-coder then reviewed the coding to validate its consistency, logic, and objectivity, ensuring the reliability of the analysis.

To analyze why consumers purchase from sustainable fashion brands (RQ1), the interview data were categorized into key themes representing factors influencing consumer decisions. Seven main categories were identified. The following table presents these categories along with illustrative quotes from the interviews and definition.

**Table 11: RQ2: Categorization of consumer purchase drivers**

| Category | Definition | Example from Interviews |
|---|---|---|
| Sustainability | Customers prioritize sustainability aspects like environmental impact, or ethical practices. | Infantium Victoria: *Many people are drawn to our sustainability story and genuinely want to support us because they think what we do is amazing.* |
| Transparency | Customers value clear, honest, and transparent communication | ISTO: *I think one of our most unique selling points is our transparency.* |
| Quality | Customers choose the brand for durability, craftsmanship, or high quality. | Mila.Vert*: the quality of the clothing is key—it should last as long as possible before recycling is necessary.* |
| Price | Customers are influenced by the cost of the product. | Honest Basics: *So, our main defining feature is our core focus on competitive pricing.* |
| Design and style | Customers are drawn to the brand's unique aesthetic, creativity, or fashionable appeal. | Dedicated: *The majority come for the design; they see our clothes through ads and like the graphics.* |
| Brand value | Customers align with the brand's mission, story, or values. | Mila.Vert: *We quickly realized customers come for design, perceived quality, and brand connection.* |
| Health | Customers are concerned about the health impacts of materials used in fashion. | Iron Roots*: People with sensitive skin, for example, cannot use any synthetic sportswear so they come to us as an alternative.* |

When it comes to the sustainability code, it is important to justify the reasons for the coding approach. For instance, when brands mentioned environmental motivations, such as the use of eco-friendly materials, these responses were included under the sustainability code. Similarly, ethical motivations, like fair labor practices or worker welfare, were also coded as sustainability. This decision was made because RQ1 seeks to determine whether sustainability is a key motivation for why consumers purchase their products, both holistically and in terms of its specific components, such as environmental or social factors. Additionally, it is common in qualitative research for a single statement to belong to multiple codes, as responses often reflect overlapping themes. For instance, the quote, *"We quickly realized customers come for design, perceived quality, and brand connection,"* was coded under quality, design and style, and brand value category.

To answer the second research question, which focused on how sustainable fashion brands address customer challenges, eight categories were created. The following table provides definitions, examples, and identifies which specific challenges each strategy addresses.

**Table 12: List of strategies addressing customer challenges**

| Code | Definition | Excerpt | Customer challenges addressed |
|---|---|---|---|
| Radical transparency | Sharing detailed, verifiable information about production processes, pricing, and sourcing to build trust and combat skepticism. | ISTO: *We have full transparency, where customers can see how much it costs to produce something.* | Green skepticism, knowledge gaps |
| Openly discuss challenges | Acknowledging and communicating imperfections or limitations in the brand's sustainability practices. | ISTO: *For example, if a product didn't meet our quality standards, we admit it, explain how we fixed it, and move forward.* | Green skepticism, environmental concerns |
| Certification | Using third-party certifications (e.g., GOTS, Fair Trade) to validate sustainability claims and build credibility with consumers. | Dedicated: *For example, we've been labeling garments as GOTS-certified and Fair Trade since the brand's inception.* | Green skepticism, knowledge gaps |
| Simplified message | Communicating sustainability efforts using accessible, jargon-free language to make concepts clear and simple for consumers. | Mila.Vert: *We don't overwhelm customers with details.* | Knowledge gaps, environmental concerns |
| Non-confrontational communication | Using positive and inclusive messaging to avoid guilt-tripping or alienating consumers, encouraging engagement without judgment. | Infantium Victoria: *I've changed to a kinder approach, inviting people to join us in doing good rather than putting labels in their faces.* | Green skepticism, knowledge gaps |
| Personalized customer service | Offering tailored, one-on-one support to address individual customer questions, doubts, or concerns | Honest Basics: *But even then, when we get questions from customers, I do always try and go out of my way* | Green skepticism, knowledge gaps |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | about sustainability practices. | *to give them more information than they might necessarily ask for.* | |
| Community engagement | Involving customers in sustainability initiatives. | ISTO: *Sometimes we even invite customers to visit our factories to see how things are made. We call it "factourism" – a mix of factory and tourism.* | Green skepticism, environmental concerns |
| Educational content | Creating and sharing materials, campaigns, or events (e.g., social media posts, blog articles, workshops) to teach consumers about sustainability. | ZEROBARRACENTO: *We organize educational events and collaborate with universities and schools to spread awareness about sustainable fashion.* | Knowledge gaps, environmental concerns |

Lastly, to address the third research question, the analysis was divided into two parts. The first part focused on sentiment analysis to explore feelings surrounding the EU Green Claims Directive, identifying which aspects were positively received and which were negatively perceived. Finally, the second part of the analysis aimed to map the next steps for sustainable fashion brands, with the aim of also determining the most common actions prioritized by these brands. This involved identifying several new categories that highlighted potential future strategies.

**Table 13: RQ3: Sentiment analysis and aspects of the EU Green Claims Directive and table of future strategies**

| Category | Definition | Excerpt |
|---|---|---|
| Accountability | How the EU Green Claims Directive promotes accountability and transparency among brands. | ZEROBARRACENTO: *These regulations are fundamental for creating accountability.* |
| Compliance | How brands are aligning or preparing to meet the directive's requirements. | Iron Roots: *I foresee that (...) big brands and fast fashion companies will just circumvent all the rules.* |
| Impact on market competition | How the directive influences fairness and competition between brands, including smaller vs. larger. | Dedicated: *This will hopefully give us a competitive advantage.* |
| Sentiment (Positive) | Optimistic or favorable attitudes toward the directive. | Dedicated: *The directive will raise expectations for reporting and due diligence, which is a positive step.* |
| Sentiment (Negative) | Concerns or criticisms about the directive's effectiveness. | Infantium Victoria: *Unfortunately, it won't change much for big companies because they'll find ways around it.* |
| Next steps: Circular economy initiatives | Efforts to promote reuse, repair, recycling, or other methods that minimize waste and extend the lifecycle of products. | ISTO: *We're also launching a repair program in 2025 to fix damaged garments.* |
| Next steps: Collaboration | Building partnerships with other brands, suppliers, or organizations to amplify sustainability efforts. | Honest Basics: *We see the idea of potentially having like a collective take back scheme with smaller brands as a potential option.* |
| Next steps: Communication | Refining communication strategies to ensure clarity, honesty, and alignment with emerging regulations. | Dedicated: *Improving communication is a big focus for us.* |
| Next steps: Customer education | Creating content or initiatives to inform consumers about sustainability topics, empowering them to make more informed choices. | ISTO: *We (...) plan to include stickers with washing instructions in every first purchase.* |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Next steps: Material improvement | Investing in new technologies, processes or sourcing new suppliers to use more sustainable, durable, or innovative materials in production. | Mila.Vert: *We're exploring ways to make our production even more sustainable, like upgrading machinery for seamless knitwear.* |
| Next steps: Pre-order model | Implementing systems that allow customers to order products in advance to reduce overproduction and minimize waste. | Infantium Victoria: *I also want to implement a preorder model to ensure we produce only what's needed.* |
| Next steps: Transparency | Expanding efforts to openly share information about sourcing, production, and supply chains to build trust and accountability. | ZEROBARRACENTO: *We plan to improve and expand our Digital Product Passports as regulations are finalized. This will help us stay ahead in terms of transparency and compliance.* |

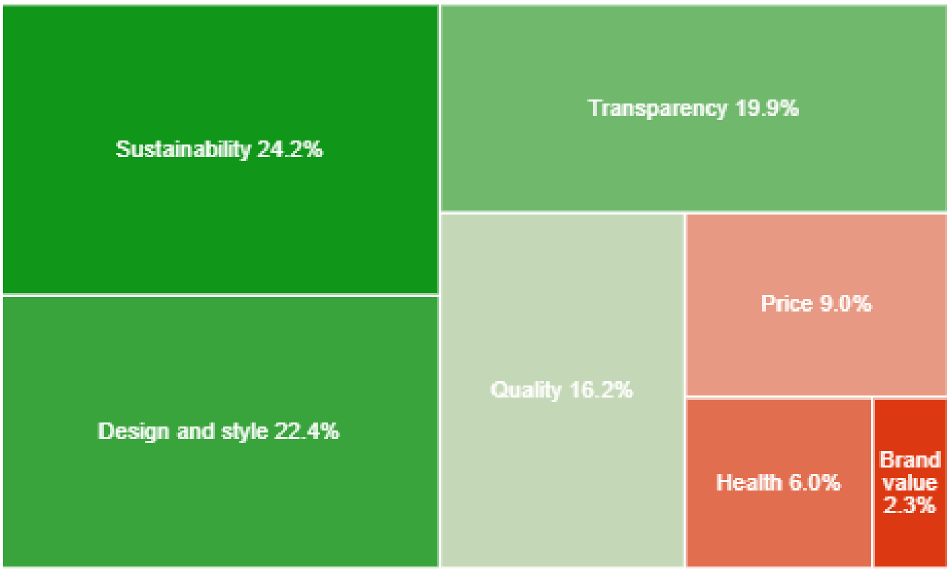
### 6.3. Results

This section presents the findings of the study, structured around the three research questions. The results are supported by illustrative quotes from participants, and are accompanied by tables summarizing the identified categories, strategies, and perspectives.

#### 6.3.1. RQ1: Driving factor in purchase decisions for consumers of sustainable fashion brands

After coding the different drivers, a total of 85 references to consumer reasons for purchasing from sustainable fashion brands were identified. These references were grouped into categories, and the percentage of word volume for each category was calculated. This method was chosen as counting the number of mentions might not fully capture the significance of each driver. Instead, analyzing word volume allows for the assessment of the depth of discussion within each category. This approach assumes that topics discussed more extensively are stronger drivers.

**Figure 7: Consumer purchase drivers and word volume percentages**




According to the figure, sustainability was the most frequently discussed driver (24.2%), followed by design and style (22.4%) and transparency (19.9%). While these percentages suggest that sustainability is a key factor, relying solely on the numbers could be misleading when determining if sustainability is the main driver for consumer purchases. Although sustainability was mentioned the most, the context of these mentions reveals a more nuanced narrative.

For example, several brands emphasized that sustainability is not necessarily the primary driver but more of a supporting factor.

> Mila.Verte: *We've done research over the years and found sustainability is a complementary feature. At first, we thought it would be a primary driver, but we quickly realized customers come for design, perceived quality, and brand connection.*
>
> Dedicated: *The majority come for the design; they see our clothes through ads and like the graphics. So, I think most people come because they like the clothes. This is true for most brands because, ultimately, we're selling clothes—they need to appeal to customers. Sustainability is more of an add-on.*

The interviews also uncovered an additional challenge specific to children's brand. This brand must appeal to both children, ensuring the clothes are "cool" enough for them to wear, and to the decision-makers, such as parents or grandparents, who prioritize aligning with the brand's values. This dual-target audience adds complexity to how sustainability is positioned as a driver for purchasing decisions in this segment. Moreover, brands emphasized that their consumer base is diverse, making it difficult to generalize drivers of purchasing behavior. For example, some customers discover these brands through sustainable fashion platforms, such as Avocado Store, where sustainability serves as the essential starting point. However, even in these cases, the final decision often hinges on the design and style of the clothing. In other words, while sustainability might attract the consumer initially, it is the aesthetic appeal and price that drives the purchase.

> Mila.Verte: *Some customers specifically search for sustainable products on platforms like Germany's Avocado Store. However, their decisions are still influenced by style and price.*

Additionally, a new trend is emerging where some brands are moving away from explicitly using "sustainability" as part of their messaging altogether.

> ISTO: *Every product created in the world has an impact, either being social, economic, or environmental. So everything has an impact and saying that it's sustainable means that it doesn't have an impact (...) So saying it's sustainable, maybe it's not the best word. We want to call ourselves responsible.*
>
> *Iron Roots: And in some sense, we try to steer clear of just saying sustainability, even though it's a word that triggers people. It also doesn't really mean anything in and of itself, right?*
>
> ZEROBARRACENTO*: Instead of speaking generically about sustainability, we focus on communicating the tangible impact of our design and production methods. we focus and communicate about our zero-waste DNA, not generically about sustainability.*

Lastly, a recurring observation from the interviews was that sustainability is often portrayed as an ongoing journey rather than a fixed or absolute value. Many participants emphasized that their brands are "doing their best" and are committed to continuous improvement in their sustainability efforts.

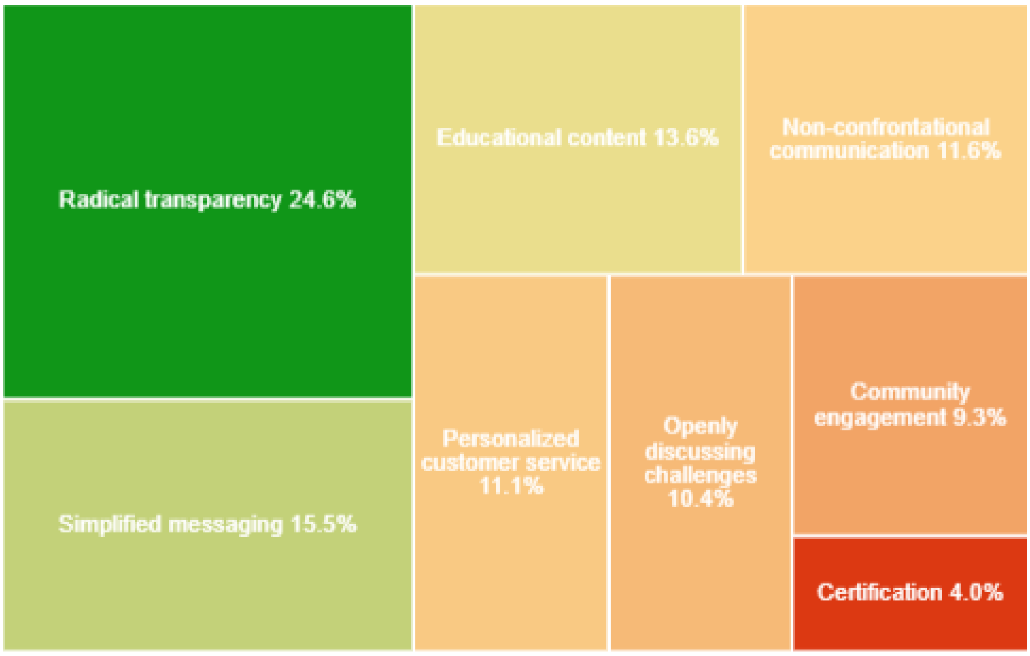
> Mila.Verte: *Many brands over-communicate and risk alienating customers by making them feel guilty about their choices. Instead, we focus on saying, "We're not perfect, but we're trying."*
>
> Honest Basics: *As we've grown, we've had slightly more resources to dedicate to our sustainability mission. The general mission is to do as much as possible within our scope. We also like to call ourselves sustainability nerds; it's really interesting to see what is possible and to push ourselves.*

#### 6.3.2. RQ2: Addressing customer challenges such as green skepticism, sustainability knowledge gaps, and environmental concerns.

The interviews also uncovered an additional challenge specific to kids' brands. These brands must appeal to both children, ensuring the clothes are 'cool' enough for them to wear, and to the decision-makers, such as parents or grandparents, who prioritize aligning with the brand's values. This dual-target audience adds complexity to how sustainability is positioned as a driver for purchasing decisions in this segment.

After coding the different strategies, a total of 155 references to how sustainable fashion brands address customer challenges were identified. These references were grouped into categories, and the percentage of word volume for each category was calculated.

**Figure 8: Categorized strategies for addressing customer challenges**




The most dominant strategy, accounting for 24.6% of coded content, is radical transparency, where brands share detailed information about their practices. This approach directly addresses green skepticism by providing evidence for claims and simultaneously educates customers on sustainability practices.

> Infantium Victoria: *We are pretty much the only brand that is as open in terms of traceability as we can get. In fact, there are very few brands that are open about the production chain. On our website, you will find not only the suppliers of the fabric but also the names of the factories. So we are trying manually to trace as much as we can of our production chain and share that information with our customers.*

> ISTO: *We start with transparency, put everything out there, and let the customers decide. If you go for a company that says, "We are 100% sustainable," maybe those people should do a little bit more research.*

Simplified messaging (15.5%) and educational content (13.6%) were also significant strategies, highlighting the need for accessible and engaging communication to bridge knowledge gaps. Simplified messages refine complex sustainability concepts into relatable terms, while educational content, often delivered through social media or blogs, focuses on specific facts to inform and empower consumers. Notably, two brands mentioned that their copywriters do not necessarily come from a sustainability background, emphasizing that this approach ensures the message resonates with audiences who have varied levels of sustainability knowledge.

> Dedicated: *Instead of making broad claims, we focus on specific product attributes and explain them. On Instagram, we use short educational posts highlighting one fact at a time. (...) Our copywriter, who comes from a journalism background, ensures the information is clear and* efficient.

> Infantium Victoria: *Recently, we started writing books for kids. (...) One talks about vegan fashion, one explains how a t-shirt is made, another focuses on sustainability, and the last one is about donut economics, explained for kids. (...) It's not just about getting them to shop, but contributing to their education in a nice way.*

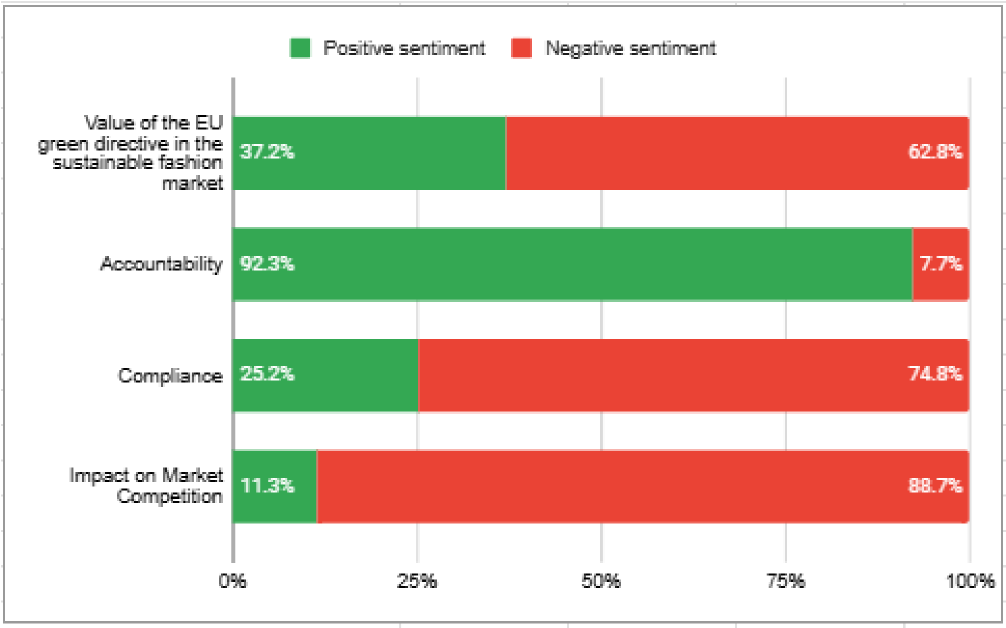
Although not among the top three strategies, non-confrontational communication was highlighted by several brands as a gentle way to encourage consumers to consider purchasing from sustainable fashion brands without inducing guilt.

> Infantium Victoria: *I think people don't like being called out for their choices. People can be very defensive. When I started the brand, I used to loudly label us as a vegan brand. At trade shows, people would say, "I'm not vegan, so I can't buy it." I'd explain, "I'm not excluding you by saying what I am." Now, I've changed to a kinder approach, inviting people to join us in doing good rather than putting labels in their faces.*

#### 6.3.3. RQ3: The value of the EU Green Claims Directive in the sustainable fashion market, and what are the next steps for sustainable fashion brands

The chart illustrates the distribution of positive and negative sentiment expressed by sustainable fashion brands regarding the EU Green Claims Directive, broken down into four key areas: the overall value of the directive, accountability, compliance, and its impact on market competition.

**Figure 9: Sentiment analysis of sustainable fashion brands on the EU Green Claims Directive**




The results indicate varied sentiment among sustainable fashion brands regarding the EU Green Claims Directive. Accountability garnered overwhelmingly positive sentiment (92.3%), highlighting it as the most favorably viewed area. In contrast, compliance and impact on market competition were associated with predominantly negative sentiment, at 74.8% and 88.7% respectively. The overall value of the directive showed a mixed response, with 62.8% negative sentiment compared to 37.2% positive.

As the following quotes demonstrate, brands believe it is a step in the right direction when it comes to accountability, but there is a fear that big brands will escape penalties, which would adversely impact market competition. This discussion also brought attention to the issue of certification, as certifications are often expensive, and proving sustainability claims requires them, which could create additional challenges for smaller brands.

> Iron Roots: *There is a lot of issues, and I foresee that obviously the big brands and fast fashion companies will just circumvent all the rules or find a new way to express what they're doing or insinuating that they're doing something good. Saying something like, clothes for tomorrow. I think it's difficult to ban words because that's what they are—words.*

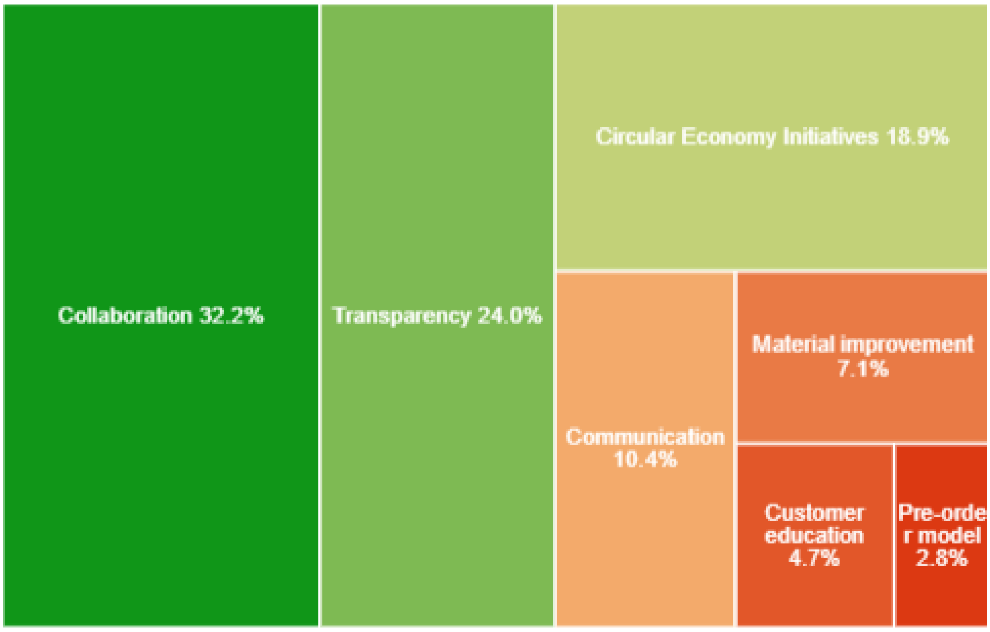
> Dedicated: *The directive will raise expectations for reporting and due diligence, which is a positive step. However, there's a risk that larger brands with more resources may dominate compliance, while smaller brands struggle to keep up.*

*We'll have to see how it unfolds, but we're optimistic it will benefit genuinely sustainable brands.*

Infantium Victoria: *I think, unfortunately, it won't change much for big companies because they'll find ways around it. But it might make life harder for smaller brands. Certifications are expensive, and while some small brands complain about the cost, I feel it's fair to pay if you're benefiting from the certification.*

The graph illustrates the proportion of focus sustainable fashion brands place on various future strategies as they navigate the evolving landscape of sustainability.

**Figure 10: Future strategies of sustainable fashion brands**




Collaboration (32.2%) is the most significant focus area, suggesting that brands recognize the value of working together with other brands, suppliers, and stakeholders to share resources, overcome industry challenges, and amplify their sustainability efforts. Transparency (24.0%) ranks second, reinforcing its central role in building trust with consumers and stakeholders. Circular economy initiatives (18.9%) emerge as a critical strategy, focusing on waste reduction, product longevity, and closed-loop systems. This marks a shift as brands are now actively considering how to improve the life of garments after they leave their shops. This represents a significant evolution in sustainable fashion, moving beyond just responsible production to addressing the entire lifecycle of products.

ISTO: *We provide care guides and plan to include stickers with washing instructions in every first purchase. We're also launching a repair program in 2025 to fix damaged garments.*

Honest Basics: *I think take back schemes for small companies to organize is way too much effort. But we see the idea of potentially having like a collective take back scheme with smaller brands as a potential option.*

Infantium Victoria: *Additionally, I'm working towards a farm-to-garment solution, where we trace the entire production chain from the cotton farm to the final product. It's a challenging goal, but I believe it's crucial for full traceability.*

### 6.4. Discussion

The results of this study provide valuable insights into the practices and perceptions of sustainable fashion brands in addressing the three research questions. The findings highlight the complexity of sustainability as a driver for consumer purchasing decisions in the context of sustainable fashion brands. While sustainability was the most frequently discussed factor (24.2%), its role appears to be more complex and context-dependent than a simple quantitative ranking might suggest. The interviews indicate that sustainability, while integral to brand identity, often operates as a complementary feature rather than the primary motivator. Mila.Verte, for example, describes sustainability as a "supporting factor," echoing findings by Lundblad and Davies (2016), who argue that functional benefits such as quality and timeless design often outweigh ethical or environmental motivations. Similarly, brands like Dedicated emphasize that consumers are initially attracted to aesthetics, such as graphics and design, with sustainability serving as an added value. This aligns with literature suggesting that practical and egoistic factors, such as individuality and style, frequently take precedence (Lundblad and Davies, 2016).

The diversity of consumer behavior adds another layer of complexity to understanding sustainability's role as a driver. As highlighted by the example of Avocado Store, some consumers actively seek out sustainable brands, with sustainability acting as a fundamental requirement in their purchasing decisions. These consumers prioritize finding brands that align with their values and turn to platforms dedicated to sustainable fashion. However, even within these niche contexts, sustainability alone is insufficient to drive purchases; design, style, and price often become deciding factors. A unique challenge highlighted in the interviews pertains to children's brands, which must cater to dual audiences: children, who value "cool" and trendy clothing, and decision-makers like parents or grandparents, who prioritize alignment with personal or ethical values. This dual-target audience complicates the positioning of sustainability as a purchasing driver, requiring brands to balance aesthetics with ethical messaging. This underscores the argument by Reiley and DeLong (2011) that sustainable fashion must align with both ethical values and personal style preferences to resonate with target audiences.

A more interesting observation from the interviews is the noticeable shift away from the term “sustainability” in branding and communication. This could signal a move away from the traditional concept of sustainable brands as we know them, with transparency taking center stage. This supports findings by Blas, Codina, and Sádaba (2023), who highlight transparency as essential for fostering trust and combating skepticism surrounding sustainability claims. Iron Roots brand explained that “sustainability” is often ambiguous term, open to interpretation and difficult to measure. In contrast, transparency is seen as actionable and measurable; when a brand is transparent, it acknowledges its shortcomings and demonstrates how it plans to improve. This aligns with the recurring theme that sustainability is viewed as a journey rather than a final destination, given the near impossibility of achieving 100% sustainability.

This shift also reflects the growing influence of regulations, such as EU Green Claim Directive requiring proof for sustainability claims. Transparency offers a pathway for brands to align with these tighter regulations, which aim to address the widespread issue of greenwashing in the fashion industry. By focusing on transparency, brands not only enhance their credibility but also position themselves to meet consumer expectations and regulatory demands in a rapidly evolving landscape. While sustainability remains a critical consideration in the sustainable fashion market, this study reaffirms its role as part of a broader matrix of drivers that include design, transparency, and quality.

The findings of this study provide insights into how sustainable fashion brands address consumer challenges, including green skepticism, sustainability knowledge gaps, and environmental concerns. The dominant strategy identified was radical transparency, accounting for 24.6% of the coded content. This approach directly confronts consumer skepticism by sharing detailed, verifiable information about supply chains, production processes, and other practices. These findings align with Richards (2021) who argue that radical transparency effectively counters supply chain ambiguity. This approach also reflects principles of Protection Motivation Theory (Kothe et al., 2019; Klöckner, 2015), which emphasize the importance of empowering individuals to act by building self-efficacy (confidence in their ability to make informed decisions) and response efficacy (belief that their actions have a tangible impact). By openly sharing detailed supply chain and production information, radical transparency equips consumers with the knowledge they need to make ethical choices and reassures them that these choices contribute meaningfully to environmental and social goals.

Simplified messaging, accounting for 15.5% of content, emerged as another key strategy to address knowledge gaps and overcome the challenge of "green noise." By distilling complex sustainability concepts into relatable and concise messages, brands aim to make sustainability accessible to a broader audience. For example, Dedicated uses short, clear Instagram posts to explain specific product attributes, ensuring that information resonates with consumers who have varied levels of sustainability knowledge. This approach aligns with Abbati (2019) and Markkula and Moisander (2012), who emphasize the importance of reducing discursive confusion in sustainability communication to foster understanding and action.

Educational content, representing 13.6% of strategies, plays a vital role in addressing sustainability knowledge gaps. Brands are increasingly focusing on creative methods to inform and empower consumers. Infantium Victoria, for instance, publishes educational books for children, covering topics such as vegan fashion, sustainable t-shirt production, and donut economics. Such initiatives not only engage younger audiences but also contribute to a broader cultural shift toward sustainability awareness. This approach aligns with Harris, Roby, and Dibb (2016), who highlight the low awareness of environmental impacts among many consumers. By providing accessible and engaging educational content, brands can enhance consumer understanding of sustainability and encourage responsible choices

Although not among the top three strategies, non-confrontational communication was highlighted by several brands as a gentle way to encourage consumers to consider purchasing from sustainable fashion brands without inducing guilt. This aligns with findings in the literature that suggest non-confrontational communication can be more effective than radical messaging that points fingers at consumers. By avoiding blame or guilt, brands can engage consumers positively, as demonstrated by Han et al. (2017) and Marlon et al. (2019), who found that aspirational and solution-focused messaging is far more effective in driving engagement than fear-based approaches.

The third research question revealed interesting findings regarding sustainable fashion brands' perceptions of the EU Green Claims Directive. The third research question revealed interesting findings regarding sustainable fashion brands' perceptions of the EU Green Claims Directive. The overwhelmingly positive sentiment (92.3%) toward accountability highlights the industry’s recognition of the need for stricter regulations to address the widespread misuse of environmental claims. This aligns with the European Commission’s (2022) finding that 53% of green claims in the EU are vague or misleading, underscoring the importance of initiatives like the Green Claims Directive in fostering trust and ensuring that environmental claims are substantiated and reliable. By prohibiting terms like “eco-friendly” unless supported by scientific evidence (European Commission, 2023), the directive seeks to establish consistency and comparability in sustainability claims, creating a more transparent marketplace.

In contrast, compliance and the directive’s impact on market competition were viewed predominantly negatively, at 74.8% and 88.7%, respectively. This aligns with findings from Phase 2, which suggest that skepticism is not limited to greenwashing but also extends to green regulations.

This skepticism is concerning because it undermines the potential effectiveness of green regulations like the EU Green Claims Directive. Many brands could perceive these regulations as overly complex and biased, which could create barriers for smaller, emerging brands to enter the market. Such challenges risk slowing progress toward a more transparent and sustainable fashion industry by discouraging innovation, reducing competition, and limiting consumer access to diverse sustainable options. As highlighted in the interviews, this could result in an uneven playing field where only larger, well-established brands are able to thrive. The European Union’s efforts to combat greenwashing include stricter regulations on environmental claims, such as prohibiting sustainability labels that are not based on approved certification schemes or established by public authorities. These measures aim to ensure that claims are reliable, verifiable, and comparable, ultimately fostering consumer trust and promoting market transparency. However, while these steps are commendable, several brands expressed concerns about the financial strain these requirements may impose on smaller businesses.

Lastly, when we look at the future strategies of sustainable fashion brands, several key focus areas emerge that highlight how the industry is evolving to address sustainability challenges and opportunities.

Collaboration (32.2%) emerged as the most significant focus area, highlighting the growing recognition among brands of the value of working together with other brands, suppliers, and stakeholders. By working together, brands can share resources, develop best practices, and amplify their collective impact, as demonstrated by Outerknown's open-source Sustainability Roadmap (FashionRevolution, 2017). Increased transparency (24.0%) ranks as the second most prioritized strategy, further cementing its role as a cornerstone for building trust with consumers and stakeholders. Transparency reinforces accountability but also provides brands with a means to differentiate themselves in an increasingly skeptical market.

Circular economy initiatives (18.9%) also stand out as a critical strategy, with brands focusing on repair program. This marks a significant shift, as brands are now actively addressing the life cycle of garments, including what happens after they leave the shop. Such initiatives reflect a broader evolution in sustainable fashion, moving beyond responsible production to a holistic approach that considers the entire lifecycle of products. This aligns with the EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles, which envisions a future where all textile products are durable, repairable, and recyclable by 2030 (European Commission, n.d.).

### 6.4.1. Recommendations for businesses

Transparency has emerged as a critical strategy for addressing green skepticism and meeting the expectations set by the EU Green Claims Directive. Transparency fosters credibility and positions sustainability as a continuous journey, where brands openly acknowledge challenges and demonstrate their commitment to improvement.

However, effectively communicating this transparency to a broader audience requires clear and accessible messaging. One strategy to achieve this is having sustainability messages reviewed by individuals who are not deeply familiar with sustainability concepts. This approach, as highlighted by brands like Dedicated, ensures that communication avoids jargon and resonates with consumers of varying knowledge levels. By simplifying complex ideas into relatable terms, brands can cut through "green noise," fostering better understanding and engagement while building trust with their audience.

Beyond simplifying messages, brands should also engage in initiatives that bridge knowledge gaps and foster long-term sustainability awareness. For instance, creative educational resources, like Infantium Victoria's children's books on vegan fashion and sustainability, engage audiences in meaningful ways while building trust. Similarly, leveraging social media platforms such as Instagram, blogs, and videos allows brands to educate consumers about specific sustainability practices or broader environmental issues in an engaging and accessible format.

Lastly, as the EU Green Claims Directive comes into force, brands should think about exploring collaboration opportunities to address systemic challenges and foster collective progress. Working together with other brands, suppliers, and organizations can help implement repair programs, rental services, and take-back schemes, extending the lifecycle of garments and supporting the transition to a circular economy. Collaboration can also involve creating educational content that informs and empowers consumers, as joint efforts to educate audiences contribute to building a more engaged and informed market for sustainable fashion.

### 6.4.2. Limitations and future studies

Lastly, it is essential to acknowledge certain limitations inherent in this study. The sample population consisted of only seven European sustainable fashion brands, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. However, despite the small sample size, the study uncovered significant patterns and insights regarding consumer trust, green skepticism, and the effectiveness of various transparency strategies. Based on the results and these limitations, future research could explore several avenues to expand on the findings.

However, despite this limitation, the study provided valuable insights into how brands address consumer challenges, including building trust, overcoming green skepticism, and bridging sustainability knowledge gaps. It also shed light on the motivations driving consumer purchases of sustainable fashion, such as transparency, design, and perceived quality, as well as the next steps brands are taking to promote sustainability, including collaboration and circular economy initiatives. Additionally, the findings highlight mixed sentiments toward the EU Green Claims Directive, with brands valuing its focus on accountability while expressing concerns about compliance burdens and its impact on market competition.

The following areas represent promising directions for future research based on the findings and of this study

1. Personalized customer support: while not extensively discussed in the interviews, personalized consumer support could be a valuable tool for addressing challenges like environmental knowledge gaps and skepticism. This approach has not been widely explored in the literature and could represent a novel avenue for understanding how tailored guidance influences consumer behavior in sustainable fashion.
2. Longitudinal Studies: this study provides a snapshot of the current state of the sustainable fashion industry. It could explore the directive's long-term impact on sustainable fashion practices, market dynamics, and consumer trust. Additionally, a longitudinal study could examine how strategies for attracting consumers to buy sustainable fashion evolve over time.

## 7. FINAL REMARKS AND CONCLUSION OF THE PHD DISSERTATION

The findings across the three studies provide critical insights into the shifting landscape of sustainable fashion, emphasizing the increasing importance of transparency as a driver of consumer trust in comparison to traditional sustainability claims. While sustainability remains an integral part of brand identity, the studies consistently highlight its nuanced and context-dependent role. Transparency has emerged as a pivotal strategy for building trust and addressing consumer skepticism, offering brands a concrete and measurable approach to communicating their commitments. This stands in contrast to generic or ambiguous sustainability claims, which are increasingly viewed with skepticism due to concerns about greenwashing.

**Study 1** revealed that a significant number of brands (23 out of 60) have adopted a balanced approach by addressing both social and environmental aspects in their mission statements. This shift suggests that brands recognize the evolving landscape of sustainable fashion and the need for a more holistic approach to sustainability. Traditionally, sustainable fashion communications focused heavily on environmental aspects; however, this study highlights a shift toward incorporating both people-centric and planet-focused values in brand messaging.

This aligns with insights from the second research question, as it is evident that sustainable fashion brands are distancing themselves from using generic green terms in their mission statements. This shift could be influenced by the approaching EU Green Claims Directive, which demands substantiation for environmental claims, or by an industry-wide effort to distinguish themselves as sustainability becomes a buzzword.

However, the most striking finding from this study relates to transparency. In examining 60 brands, it was revealed that 33 brands refrained from disclosing their sustainability challenges. This critical gap in transparency underscores a missed opportunity for brands to build trust and authenticity, particularly in an industry where green skepticism continues to rise.

**Study 2** demonstrated that green skepticism, sustainable fashion knowledge, environmental concerns, and demographic factors all play intricate roles in shaping consumer reactions to transparency strategies. While sustainable fashion knowledge and green skepticism significantly influence consumer trust, their impact on willingness to buy remains limited, highlighting that trust-building alone does not always convert into purchasing behavior. The study's most noteworthy finding is that environmental concerns can drive both trust and willingness to buy, with consumer responses to transparency strategies varying based on the type of concern—whether biospheric, altruistic, or egoistic. As brands face growing consumer skepticism and regulatory pressures, this insight underscores the importance of transparency strategies that resonate with different types of environmental concerns. It bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, helping brands not only build trust but also convert it into sales.Additionally, demographic factors such as gender, education, and regional context were found to moderate these relationships, reinforcing the importance of targeted communication strategies. For example, knowledge-based communication may resonate more with men, while emphasizing social or environmental impacts could appeal to women. Similarly, tailoring strategies to different regions can help address skepticism or build trust based on cultural and regulatory contexts.

**Study 3** underscores the central role of transparency in the sustainable fashion industry, particularly in light of the EU Green Claims Directive. While sustainability remains integral to brand identity, it increasingly functions as part of a broader matrix of drivers, with transparency emerging as a critical strategy for building consumer trust and combating skepticism. Transparency goes beyond traditional sustainability claims by offering measurable, verifiable insights into supply chains, production methods, and environmental impacts. This shift is evident in brands that openly acknowledge their shortcomings and emphasize improvement, reinforcing their credibility and accountability. The study also highlights the challenges posed by the EU Green Claims Directive. While the directive's focus on accountability is positively received, concerns about compliance costs and market competition raise questions about its impact on smaller brands. Nonetheless, transparency provides a pathway for brands to align with these stricter regulations while addressing greenwashing concerns.

In addition to transparency, collaboration and circular economy initiatives emerged as key strategies for the future. Collaboration, such as resource-sharing and collective educational campaigns, can help brands navigate systemic challenges and create a more engaged consumer base. Similarly, circular economy efforts, including repair programs and take-back schemes, demonstrate a shift toward holistic sustainability practices that address the entire lifecycle of garments.

**Answering the main research question:** Transparency is undoubtedly emerging as a key driver of consumer trust, overtaking traditional sustainability claims in its ability to address green skepticism and regulatory demands. Unlike ambiguous claims, transparency provides consumers with concrete and verifiable information, empowering them to make more confident and informed choices. Furthermore, it positions brands as authentic and accountable, especially when they openly acknowledge their limitations and engage in collaborative efforts to address industry challenges. In conclusion, transparency underscores the idea that sustainability is not a destination but a continuous journey—one that, with hope, will inspire more consumers to join and contribute to building a better fashion industry.

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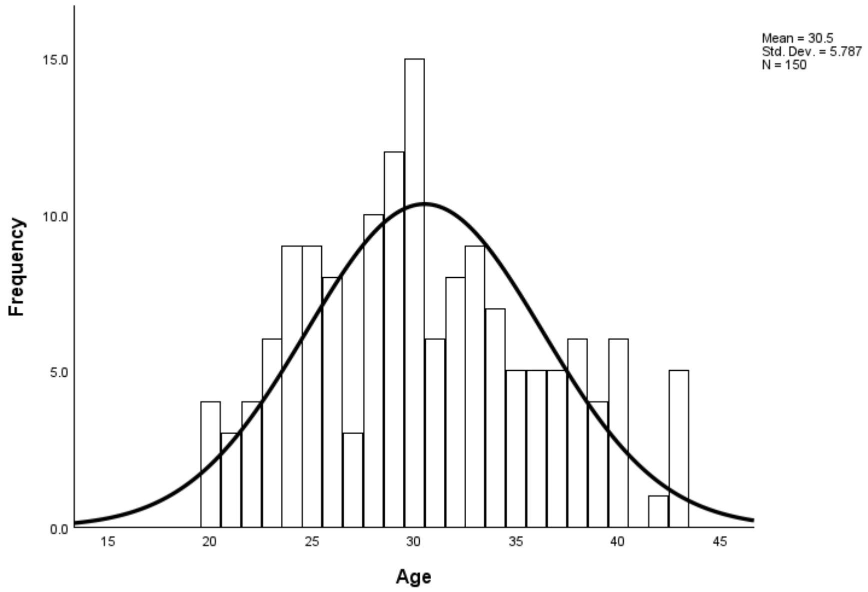
## 9. APPENDIX

### 9.1 First Study

**The complete list of analyzed brands in the first study:** Anekdot, Armedangels, Asket, Avani, Baukjen, Beaumont Organic, BEEN, Birdsong, CARPASUS, Colorful Standard, COSSAC, Culthread, Dedicated, Dressarte, Ecoalf, Elvis & Kresse, Fanfare, Good Guys, Honest Basics, ID.EIGHT, Infantium Victoria, ISTO, JYOTI, Kampos, Know The Origin, L'Envers, LangerChen, LANIUS, Mila.Vert, Mini Rodini, Mother of Pearl, MUD Jeans, MYMARINI, NAE, Näz, NIKIN, Nina Rein, NOAH, Noumenon, O My Bag, Opera Campi, Organic Basics, pinqponq, Plant Faced Clothing, Pop My Way, Saint Basics, Saye, Swedish Stockings, The Ethical Silk Company, Tripulse, Underprotection, Unrecorded, Wires, Womsh, Woron, Yes Friends, ZEROBARRACENTO.

## 9.2 Second study

Figure: Age distribution histogram in the second study




Survey questions

**Start of Block: Introduction**

**Welcome to the Sustainability and Transparency in Fashion Survey!** This quick survey looks at how your views on eco-fashion and environmental concerns affect your opinions about how transparent fashion brands are. Your thoughts will help us see key trends and attitudes that influence eco-friendly shopping habits. **Estimated Time: Less than 10 minutes** Privacy: Your responses are completely anonymous; no personally identifying information will be collected, and demographic data will only be used to analyze trends.**To continue with this survey, click the button.**

---

**Start of Block: Block 1**

Q1 What is your age?

Q2 Which of the following best describes your gender identity?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary/Third gender
- Other
- Prefer not to say

Q3 What is your highest level of education?

- No formal education
- Primary education
- High school diploma
- Bachelor’s degree
- Master’s degree
- Doctorate degree
- Other

Q4 What is your current employment status?

- Employed
- Self-employed/Freelance
- Part-time
- Interning
- Unemployed – Looking for work
- Unemployed – Not looking for work
- Retired
- Other

Q5 Which country do you currently live in?

Q6 What is your citizenship? If you have multiple citizenships, please list all.

Q7 In the following section, please assess your knowledge of different issues within the fashion industry. Please rate your knowledge on each of the following statements using a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 indicates 'very limited knowledge' and 5 represents 'extensive knowledge.'

- I understand the environmental impacts of producing raw materials for garments, like cotton.
- I know that fashion industry is a significant contributor to water pollution due to the release of toxic chemicals from textile dyeing and finishing processes.
- The production of fabrics like rayon and viscose often involves deforestation to make way for plantations, contributing to habitat loss and biodiversity decline.

- Fashion production, transportation, and waste management generate substantial greenhouse gas emissions.
- The fashion industry produces large volumes of textile waste, including offcuts, unsold inventory, and discarded clothing, contributing to landfill pollution.
- I am aware of the violation of animal rights caused from production of an animal-material garment.
- I'm familiar with a problem in the clothing industry concerning intellectual property rights. Things like copying designs or brands without permission.
- Garment factories often lack proper safety measures, leading to accidents, injuries, and even fatalities.
- I am familiar with the #WhoMadeMyClothes campaign launched by the Fashion Revolution to promote transparency in the fashion industry.
- I am well-informed about the issue that many brands in the fast fashion industry do not pay their workers a living wage, forcing them to live in poverty and struggle to meet their basic needs.
- I know about what sustainable clothing brands are out there
- I am aware of where to buy sustainable clothes/brands.
- I know where to get information about sustainable clothes
- I know how to wash clothes in an eco-friendly manner.
- I'm skilled in repairing and altering clothing using a sewing machine or by utilizing services provided by a tailor or clothing alteration shop.
- I know how to dispose of clothes properly.
- I know how to keep clothes to prevent their damage.

Q8 Please rate how concerned you are about the following statements, on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 indicates 'not at all concerned' and 5 indicates 'extremely concerned'

- I am concerned about environmental problems because of the consequences for my health.
- I am concerned about environmental problems because of the consequences for my future.
- I am concerned about environmental problems because of the consequences for my lifestyle.
- I am concerned about environmental problems because of the consequences for me.
- I am concerned about environmental problems because of the consequences for children.

- I am concerned about environmental problems because of the consequences for people in my country.
- I am concerned about environmental problems because of the consequences for all people.
- I am concerned about environmental problems because of the consequences for my children.
- I am concerned about environmental problems because of the consequences for marine life.
- I am concerned about environmental problems because of the consequences for birds.
- I am concerned about environmental problems because of the consequences for animals.
- I am concerned about environmental problems because of the consequences for plants.

Q9 Please rate how much you agree with the following statements using the scale provided, where 1 means 'Strongly disagree' and 5 means 'Strongly agree'.

- Most environmental claims made by fashion brands about their products are true.
- Because environmental claims by fashion brands are often exaggerated, consumers would be better off if such claims were eliminated.
- Most environmental claims made by fashion brands are intended to mislead rather than to inform consumers.
- I do not believe most of the environmental claims made by fashion brands about their products.
- With a lot of work, a fashion brand can be 100% sustainable
- We don't have the tools to measure sustainability claims correctly.

Q10 The European Union is introducing new rules to stop companies from tricking consumers with false claims about how eco-friendly their products are. These rules aim to make it clearer for shoppers to know how durable and sustainable products really are. Here are the main points of the new law: Companies won't be allowed to make vague claims about being environmentally friendly if they're not true. They can't advertise products as long-lasting if they're designed to wear out quickly. Only labels that meet certain standards will be allowed to show that a product is sustainable. Information about product guarantees will be easier to find, and a new label will show if a guarantee can be extended. Please rate how much you agree with the following statements using the scale provided, where 1 means 'Strongly disagree' and 5 means 'Strongly agree'.

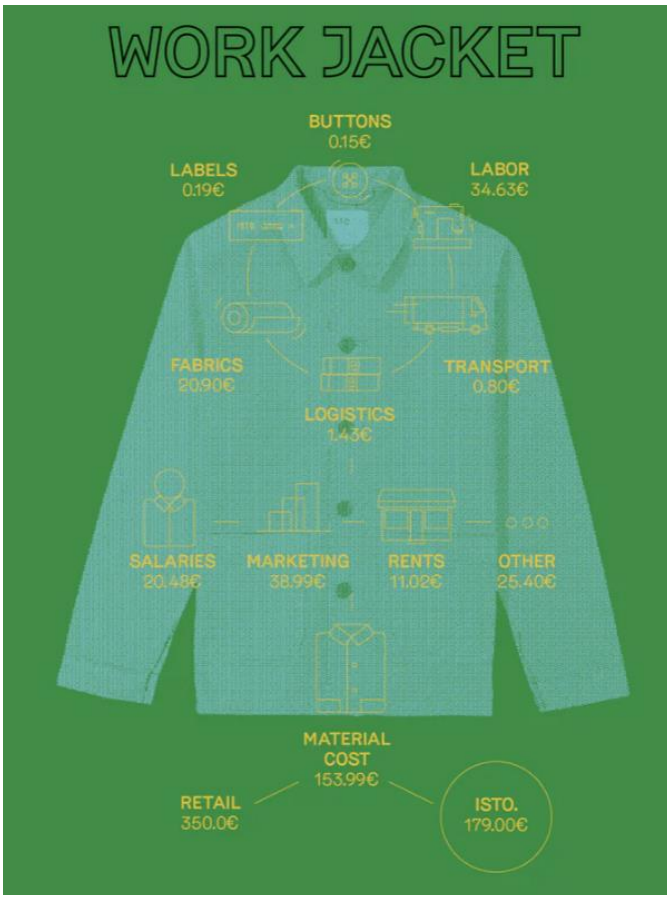
- The new EU law will influence consumer behavior towards choosing more sustainable products.

- I think that prohibiting generic environmental claims without proven performance will lead to more honest communications in the fashion industry.
- I doubt that the enforcement of these new regulations will be thorough and consistent enough to make a real difference.

Q11 The following section presents various scenarios describing different approaches taken by a brand regarding their environmental and sustainability efforts. After each scenario, please rate on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is 'very unlikely' and 5 is 'very likely,' how likely you are to purchase products from this brand. Additionally, please rate on the same scale how likely are you to trust this brand based on the scenario described.

Example 1: Back in 2019, when we became a certified B-Corp, we set a goal aligned with the B Corp Climate Collective, and decided to aim for net-zero by 2025. We now realize this is not feasible. We're a fast-growing startup, and because we plan to continue growing and expanding our product offering – whether it's in sizes, colors or categories – we realized that our net zero commitment is completely unrealistic.

- How likely you are to purchase products from this brand?
- How likely are you to trust this brand based on the scenario described?

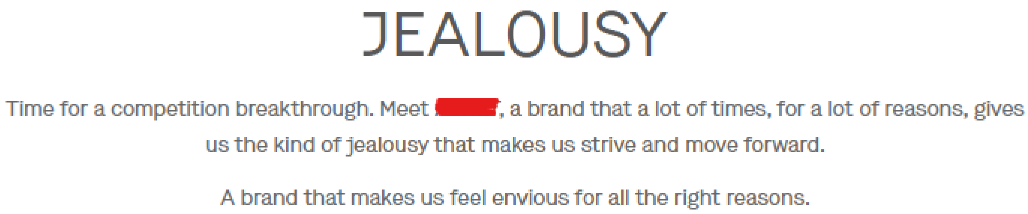


Example 2: The brand has decided to provide a detailed price breakdown for each of their garments, revealing exactly how much is spent on materials, labor, marketing, and what percentage is their profit.

- How likely you are to purchase products from this brand?
- How likely are you to trust this brand based on the scenario described?

Example 3: We don't design for seasons, we create timeless pieces that elevate your personal style forever. When something isn't perfect, we refine it until it meets our exacting standards. If an item shows wear, we offer repair services to extend its life, ensuring you always look your best. Our vision of progress involves cultivating a select wardrobe that reflects superior taste and enduring appeal.

- How likely you are to purchase products from this brand?
- How likely are you to trust this brand based on the scenario described?




Example 4: The brand advertised another sustainable brand, praising their work and highlighting their achievements. It demonstrates its commitment to the sustainable community by actively promoting another eco-friendly brand.

- How likely you are to purchase products from this brand?
- How likely are you to trust this brand based on the scenario described?

Example 5: When we choose the dyeing processes for our products, we prioritize quality and durability over solely using natural methods. While natural dyes are eco-friendly, they often result in colors that can fade quickly, leading many consumers to perceive their clothes as outdated or worn out sooner. By selecting more stable dyeing methods, we ensure that our products maintain their vibrant color and structure for a longer period.

- How likely you are to purchase products from this brand?
- How likely are you to trust this brand based on the scenario described?

Example 6: To be completely honest, there are no sustainable products. Every newly manufactured product leaves an ecological footprint, no matter how consciously and resource-efficiently it was produced, it harms the planet more than it benefits. Therefore, we stopped making misleading and vague claims, calling our products “100% eco” and cleared out all our communication to become radically honest. In doing so, we are avoiding misunderstandings and possible greenwashing accusations. But don’t worry, we are changing our tonality, not our mission. We are still the same. We produce (always did and always will) all our products with high responsible standards for people and planet.

- How likely you are to purchase products from this brand?
- How likely are you to trust this brand based on the scenario described?

## 9.3 Third study

**Interview guide**

1. **Core Mission and Communication**

- Can you briefly describe your brand?
- Can you outline your brand's overall sustainability mission? How has this mission evolved over time?
- How does your brand differentiate itself from generic environmental claims often seen in the industry?
- Would you describe sustainability as a core element driving your brand's identity and sales or more as a complementary feature?

2. **Communication Strategies and Challenges**

- How do you decide what sustainability messages to share on your website versus on social media? What kind of content do you reserve for each platform?
- What specific challenges and limitations in your sustainability journey do you openly share, and what has been the impact of such transparency on your brand perception?
- Sustainability is a complex topic, and the amount of available information can be overwhelming. How do you ensure your communication is clear and engaging for consumers?
- With sustainability becoming a popular topic, greenwashing has been on the rise. How does your brand address consumer concerns or skepticism regarding greenwashing and vague claims?
- A recent article in the Business of Fashion highlighted that many consumers perceive sustainability-led messaging as performative, hypocritical, or even annoying. Why do you think this perception exists, and how does your brand ensure that its sustainability messaging resonates authentically with consumers?

3. **Consumer Education and EU law**

- Research shows that consumers are increasingly interested in sustainable fashion, but my findings revealed that sustainable fashion knowledge among Millennials and Gen Z in Europe remains moderate. Do you take steps to educate your consumers on sustainable fashion? If so, what type of information do you share, and do you believe this is a responsibility of sustainable fashion brands?
- With new regulations aimed at limiting generic environmental claims, do you believe such laws are important for the fashion industry? Why do you think there is skepticism around the effectiveness of these regulations?

4. **Collaboration and Long-Term Strategy**

- Do you see value in collaborating with other brands (e.g., sharing best practices) to promote sustainability industry-wide?

- Looking ahead, how does your brand plan to adapt its sustainability strategy to meet evolving consumer expectations and regulatory requirements?

**Interview – Dedicated Brand**

**Interviewer**: As I mentioned in the email, my name is Aleksandra, and we're conducting research about the state of fashion communication.
Actually, this is the final part of our research on this topic.
Before this, we conducted content analysis mainly because we anticipated the Green Claims Directive coming, and we wanted to assess the current state of how brands communicate about sustainability.
The idea is to see if we repeat this study in a few years, whether there are changes based on these actions.
We also did a survey with consumers to understand how they react to transparency strategies.
Now, the final part is to gather opinions directly from brands.

So, the first question I would ask is: How would you briefly describe the brand?

**Interviewee**: We're a Scandinavian brand that started in 2006. In 2012, we became Dedicated.
Since then, we've worked exclusively with organic and fair trade cotton from the beginning.
Sustainability has always been a core goal, providing an alternative to conventional fashion.
Our style is very colorful, fun, and creative, and we aim to bring this to the market without compromising creativity or sustainability.

**Interviewer**: That's very interesting.
You've been in the business for a long time, which isn't something we see often.
Usually, we encounter newer, smaller brands.
How did you decide back in 2012 to focus on organic cotton? That was more than 10 years ago.
What inspired this direction so early?

**Interviewee**: Our founder, Joan, was already working in the fashion industry and had visited India, where he met suppliers and learned about the challenges of conventional cotton farming.
He saw how it negatively affected farmers financially and the impacts of climate change on their work.
He realized there was a better alternative—organic farming—and even better with fair trade requirements.

So, from the beginning, we started with organic cotton and fair trade. While we've expanded since, this stemmed from our founder's personal interest and beliefs.

**Interviewer**: Oh, that's very interesting. And this was before the Rana Plaza incident?

**Interviewee**: Yes, it was.

**Interviewer**: How would you outline your brand's sustainability mission, and how has it evolved over time?

**Interviewee**: Since the start, our mission was to offer a more trendy, fashionable alternative to sustainable brands, which often weren't very stylish. Conversely, fashionable brands weren't talking about sustainability at all. So, the initial idea was to bring creativity and flavor to sustainable fashion. Now, with many more sustainable and creative brands in the market, our mission has shifted to being an alternative to conventional fashion while maintaining creativity. We still collaborate with illustrators and license holders to bring unique designs. At the same time, we keep our styles timeless—those that frequently return to trends—while adding our own colors and prints.

**Interviewer**: So, as you know, the sustainable fashion field is growing. How would you say your brand differs from others on the market?

**Interviewee**: We work exclusively with more sustainable fibers. That's a key difference because many brands still compromise on fiber selection. For example, the worst composition we use is for our swimwear, which is 83% recycled polyester and 17% elastane. But beyond that, all our garments are made with organic, natural, or recycled fibers. Additionally, we collaborate with illustrators, artists, and photographers, incorporating their work into our designs. I think that also sets us apart.

**Interviewer**: OK. Would you describe sustainability as a core element of the business, or more of an add-on?
From a consumer perspective, why do you think people choose your brand? Is it for the sustainability aspect, or is sustainability more complementary?

**Interviewee**: I think it really depends on the customer. The majority come for the design; they see our clothes through ads and like the graphics. So, I think most people come because they like the clothes. This is true for most brands because, ultimately, we're selling clothes—they need to appeal to customers. Sustainability is more of an add-on. But we definitely have customers who specifically seek out sustainable options, even if they come for the designs first. Our prices are higher than fast fashion because we produce in smaller quantities.

Customers who prioritize sustainability are willing to pay more, but it's not everyone. Sustainability remains important for a segment of our audience, though.

**Interviewer**: OK. Have you noticed an increase in sustainability-focused customers recently, or has it stayed steady?

**Interviewee**: It's hard to say. Surveys show an increasing interest in sustainable fashion. But over the last year and a half, there's been a decline in actual purchases due to higher costs.
The only brands growing right now are very cheap ones. Sustainability is a priority only if people can afford it.
There's also a misconception about the price of clothing.
So, while interest has increased, it doesn't always translate into action.

**Interviewer**: Mhm.
So, there's intention but not necessarily follow-through.

**Interviewee**: Yes.

**Interviewer**: OK.
I'm also interested in transparency. Do you communicate specific challenges and limitations in your sustainability journey?
Do you think transparency has an impact on your brand?

**Interviewee**: Transparency does have an impact because it shows we are genuinely working toward sustainable production.
We mostly communicate challenges in our CSR report, where we cover negative impacts, challenges, and positive impacts.
On social media, we focus on positivity, showing the best sides of things while being as specific as possible to avoid greenwashing.
Transparency helps us connect with customers who care deeply about these topics.

**Interviewer**: Do you know if consumers are actually reading your CSR reports?

**Interviewee**: We can track who opens the reports, and there is interest.
Last year, we launched a quick social media summary and a reel on Instagram and TikTok to reach younger audiences.
It got a few thousand views.
How extensively people read the reports is another question, but they are engaging with the content.

**Interviewer**: OK.
Sustainability is complex, and the amount of information can be overwhelming for customers.
How do you ensure your communication is clear?

**Interviewee**: We recently reshaped our communication.
Now, instead of saying we work with sustainable fibers—a term that can be misleading—we say we work with organic, natural, and recycled fibers.

This aligns with new EU regulations and ensures specificity.
Instead of making broad claims, we focus on specific product attributes and explain them.
On Instagram, we use short educational posts highlighting one fact at a time.
For example, if you want to know about cotton, you can quickly find a post dedicated to that topic.
We also publish longer articles on our website to explain topics more comprehensively, almost like an FAQ.
Our copywriter, who comes from a journalism background, ensures the information is clear and efficient.
Having someone outside the sustainable fashion industry helps bring an external perspective to our communication.

**Interviewer**: Yes, that makes sense.
So, as sustainability has become a popular topic, there's also been a rise in greenwashing.
Have you had cases where customers approached you with concerns about your claims or were unsure about what to trust?

**Interviewee**: Yes, we've had a few cases—maybe around 10 a year.
These range from direct messages asking why a garment labeled "organic cotton" doesn't have certification displayed on the website.
Usually, this is for administrative reasons, but we can provide certificates privately if needed.
We also get comments on social media, either disagreeing with or questioning our claims.
No one has directly expressed feeling overwhelmed or stressed, but it's clear from some messages that people are confused.
If someone doesn't know the brand or our history, they might think we're just riding the sustainability wave without real substance.
However, we notice that however, we notice that criticism often misses the root problem, which is fast fashion. People lose focus on overproduction and instead scrutinize sustainable brands because we're more vocal about our efforts. This reflects a general lack of trust in brands, even those genuinely committed to sustainability.

**Interviewer**: Recently, an article in Business of Fashion discussed how sustainability messages can feel performative and even annoying to consumers.
Why do you think this happens?

**Interviewee**: I read that article—it was very interesting.
While the messages can be criticized as annoying, the article also mentioned that brands accused of "over-communicating" saw increased visibility.
So, it's a double-edged sword.
Personally, I can understand why customers might feel fatigued. It's not just about clothes; there's a constant stream of information about what's good or bad for your health, the planet, and other people.
This constant lesson-giving can feel overwhelming.
When I started at Dedicated five years ago, we focused more on comparing what we did to the problems in the industry.

We emphasized issues like the struggles of farmers and supply chain workers. While these are important messages, they can also contribute to fatigue and guilt, which isn't what people want when they shop. Highlighting fast fashion's problems can also feel like pointing fingers at consumers, which makes things tricky.

**Interviewer**: Yeah, very good point. You mentioned earlier that you use articles and social media to explain your sustainability efforts. Do you use any other methods to educate consumers?

**Interviewee**: Research shows people are interested in sustainability, but their knowledge about it remains moderate to low. Do you think it's the responsibility of sustainable fashion brands to educate their consumers? Absolutely. Sustainable brands need to emphasize the alternatives they offer and the importance of changing consumption patterns. However, the lack of knowledge stems from the absence of regulations, which has allowed greenwashing and unsupported claims to flourish. Unlike food or cosmetics, where regulations directly address consumer health, clothing impacts people and the planet indirectly, which creates less urgency. This disconnect means fewer people engage deeply with the issue. To address this, we've recently launched a campaign with the Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS) and promoted it on social media. This collaboration adds legitimacy to our communication. Next year, we plan to do the same with Fair Trade. Campaigns like these help highlight long-standing, proven standards with positive impacts. Still, there's a need for broader education about overconsumption and its effects, which goes beyond what individual brands can do. The paradox is that, as a brand, we need to promote and sell products, which makes it challenging to criticize overconsumption. So, instead, we focus on overproduction as the main issue.

**Interviewer**: OK, that makes sense. Here's another question: As far as I know, there isn't a standardized checklist for what qualifies as a sustainable fashion brand. Is that the same in Sweden?

**Interviewee**: Yes, it's the same. There's no regulation that says, "You can't call yourself a sustainable fashion brand if you don't meet certain criteria." However, the new EU directive will ban terms like "sustainable," "responsible," and "conscious" from being used in fashion communication. This solves part of the problem by eliminating broad, unverified claims. Brands will need to be more specific, which is the right approach.

Instead of saying we're a sustainable brand, we'll need to focus on explaining exactly what we're doing better and why it matters.
For example, raw material choice is key, but there are many ways to improve beyond that.
A checklist would be too reductive because sustainability involves so many complex issues.

**Interviewer**: OK. Let's discuss the EU Green Claims Directive.
What's your opinion on this upcoming regulation, and how is your brand preparing for it?

**Interviewee**: We're very supportive of it because it sets rules for using buzzwords like "eco-friendly" or "low environmental impact."
These terms will require certification recognized by the EU to validate their claims, which we already have.
For example, we've been labeling garments as GOTS-certified and Fair Trade since the brand's inception.
This will hopefully give us a competitive advantage.
We're also mindful of using impactful terms that resonate with customers while staying compliant.
The directive will raise expectations for reporting and due diligence, which is a positive step.
However, there's a risk that larger brands with more resources may dominate compliance, while smaller brands struggle to keep up.
We'll have to see how it unfolds, but we're optimistic it will benefit genuinely sustainable brands.

**Interviewer**: Thank you. That's a perspective I've heard from other brands too. They believe the directive will create opportunities for smaller sustainable brands but are skeptical about how big brands will navigate it.

**Interviewee**: Yes, big brands will likely find loopholes, which is the concern.
But if the directive relies on credible certifications, it could work. Some certifications, like Better Cotton Initiative, have low requirements but are now trying to align with the law so their clients can use them for claims.

**Interviewer**: OK, interesting. In the EU, there are over 100 different certifications for sustainability.
It's fascinating to see some of them adapting to become more competitive and usable for claims.
Because your brand has been around for many years, do you see value in collaborating with other sustainable brands to promote sustainability industry-wide?

**Interviewee**: Yes, but we usually collaborate with brands that don't directly compete with us.
For example, we've worked with shoe brands for photoshoots, highlighting both our products and theirs.

However, these collaborations have been rare. Privately, I've connected with other brands to discuss certifications and compliance challenges.
As sustainability managers, we're less focused on competition and more on doing the best work and creating the most positive impact. Navigating all the rules and requirements can be difficult, so sharing knowledge is helpful.
There are external initiatives that foster collaboration. For example, I've done presentations for traceability platforms where other brands were also present. Whenever we share something publicly, it's an opportunity to help others, like our CSR reports or LinkedIn posts. Recently, we shared a post about working with Fair Trade for 10 years and invited others to reach out if they had questions. Most of our collaboration happens privately rather than publicly, which is where I think the impact is greater. Collaboration in supply chains could also be impactful, especially if multiple brands use the same suppliers. Joining forces here could make a big difference, even if it doesn't create the best story for customers.

**Interviewer**: Do you think a platform for best practices among sustainable fashion brands would be helpful?

**Interviewee**: It's a good idea, but many platforms and memberships already exist, like Fair Wear Foundation and Textile Exchange. These organizations are large and sometimes feel impersonal, which can make engagement difficult. Attending in-person conferences, like those hosted by Textile Exchange, can spark great conversations and collaborations. However, for smaller brands, the costs and logistics can be challenging. Many of us are already part of so many platforms that it doesn't always feel impactful. That's my perspective, at least.

**Interviewer**: OK, that's an interesting perspective. My last question: Beyond adapting your sustainability claims for the new law, do you have other plans or projects in the pipeline?

**Interviewee**: Improving communication is a big focus for us. We have limitations in reducing supply chain impacts due to production volumes. To access less impactful methods or factories, we'd need to produce more, but we don't want to overproduce. Growing the brand through better communication is key to reaching these goals. We're also launching a repair program next year.

**Interviewer**: That's very interesting. Other brands I've spoken to have mentioned similar initiatives.

**Interviewee**: Yes, repair programs are becoming more important with the push for circularity.
Our approach will incentivize customers to repair their clothes by offering vouchers for our brand when they do. It's a win-win because it promotes repair while also bringing customers back to us. We can't handle repairs directly, but we aim to educate customers about why and how to repair their clothes. Another focus next year is improving traceability at the farm level for raw materials like cotton.
We want to ensure consistency in sourcing and secure long-term relationships with suppliers.

**Interviewer**:Earlier, you mentioned admiring some brands. What are practices from other brands that you like—or dislike?

**Interviewee**: One practice I dislike is brands claiming how much their products "save" in terms of $CO_2$, energy, or water.
These claims are misleading unless they clearly compare against conventional production methods.
Phrasing like "this product saves X liters of water" makes it sound like the brand is giving back water, which isn't the case.
Instead, some brands now state the carbon footprint of their products and compare them to industry averages. This approach is more honest.
Misleading claims create false impressions for customers.

**Interviewer**: On the positive side, what are some practices you admire?

**Interviewee**: I admire brands working with Fair Wear Foundation and implementing living wage programs, like Nudie Jeans.
These initiatives require a lot of effort but have a significant impact.
I also appreciate brands using their profits to support charitable projects, like building schools or cleaning oceans.
For now, our focus is on improving communication and staying viable long-term. But those are inspiring goals to work toward.

**Interviewer**: OK, that's very interesting. Thank you for sharing those insights.
Do you have anything else to add on this topic?

**Interviewee**: No, I think that's it. If you don't have any more questions, I'm good.

**Interviewer**: OK, thank you so much. This was a very useful conversation. I'll share the results with you when they're ready.

**Interview – Honest Basics**

**Interviewer**: To ensure anonymity, the interviewee will be referred to as "the representative of the brand" to protect their identity.We will only use the brand name to provide some background. This is part of a doctoral thesis. This is the final stage of the thesis. Initially, content analysis on different brands was conducted. Following that, a survey was conducted. Insights were gathered from millennials and Gen Z, and we are interested in hearing your reflections on some of the findings.The focus is mostly on communication and how your brand communicates sustainability. Do you have any questions for me before we start?

**Interviewee**: No, I don't think so. I know you've mentioned this, but just to remind me, what exactly is the field focused on? Communication strategies?

**Interviewer**: Yes. The program is specifically on social communications.

**Interviewee**: Yes. Thank you for reminding me.

**Interviewer**: No problem.Let's start with the first question: Can you briefly describe the brand? What is the first thing that comes to your mind?

**Interviewee**: I think the name of the brand was aptly chosen based on the basics. The focus of the brand is to be a sustainable and affordable clothing option.We chose to work with basic items because they can be produced affordably.Or at least at a price point where customers can afford them, compared to most sustainability brands.And the focus is on producing sustainably in a holistic manner, both environmentally and socially. We are still a relatively small company based in Berlin.Our main market is Germany, but we ship worldwide and are steadily growing.

**Interviewer**: That's perfect. Can you outline your overall sustainability mission, and has this mission changed over time?

**Interviewee**: Yes, the brand is now six years old. Initially, the focus was heavily on environmental sustainability.We used organic cotton, avoided polyester in our clothing, and focused on sustainable shipping, reusing packaging, and limiting the packaging we use.

As we've grown, we've had slightly more resources to dedicate to our sustainability mission.

The general mission is to do as much as possible within our scope.We also like to call ourselves sustainability nerds; it's really interesting to see what is possible and to push ourselves. The main changes over the years have been incorporating more direct work with our factories, both in their environmental and social programs. We assess the day-to-day operations and see where we can improve. Because we don't produce in Europe but in China, across thousands of kilometers.Our main focus is on using direct communication, honesty, and transparency with customers, colleagues, and production

partners.
And to be as holistic as we can be.

**Interviewer**: Okay.That's very clear. Now, since the space of sustainable fashion brands is growing, what do you think sets you apart from other brands in the sector?

**Interviewee**: I think the main thing is our price point. A few years ago, I did research into sustainable fashion brands for my bachelor's studies. One main thing I found, which is still prevalent, is that sustainable brands focus on storytelling and authenticity. They bring exotic products to the market and make them sustainable as a way to create a connection with the makers, which is an awesome strategy. It's just not the strategy that we as a brand have chosen. Our strategy is more focused on competitive pricing, setting us apart in that way.
But it is also aligned with our sustainability mission, as many people associate sustainability with high costs. We're proud that we still have T-shirts for just €15. This means we're not only competitive with other sustainable brands but also within the broader market, like H&M, which also sells €15 T-shirts, but our quality and production processes are better. So, our main defining feature is our core focus on competitive pricing. That's also part of our brand identity.

**Interviewer**: How do you manage these lower prices, especially since sustainable fashion brands are typically more expensive? That's something that makes people think sustainability is something they cannot afford. How do you manage these competitive prices?

**Interviewee**: The main way to do it is to focus on basics. We sometimes switch colors and styles seasonally but overall, we try to produce clothing that can be bought throughout the year and across seasons. This allows us to produce larger quantities because it's cheaper to produce in volume. And having larger quantities allows us to work with a wider range of factories because many large factories have minimum order quantities that small brands can't meet. But we are at that level where we can. Because of that, we also have the option of working with more affordable factories. So that's a really big part of it. Another part is that we focus less on marketing and authentic storytelling. We focus more on being literally at the forefront if people sort by price from low to high. So that's the main part. And then, as we grow and try different styles, we always have some products that don't sell as well. For the first time, we have a sweater which is really nice and the most expensive product we've ever sold, and it's doing well. So it's great to see that we can reach that price point. But when compared to similar quality sweaters from other brands, we're still way below their offerings.
The main thing is order quantities with the factories and keeping it simple. We make sure that our margin is still okay.

**Interviewer**: My next question is something you already touched on. What do you think is the core element driving your sales? Do you think sustainability is a core element, or is it more of a complementary feature? I assume probably the price, but from your side, I would like to know what you think are the main sales drivers for your brand?

**Interviewee**: Yeah, sustainability is still the main feature. The affordability is an add-on. People see, "Oh, this is sustainable, and oh, it's affordable." So they might order two shirts instead of one, for example. I'm responsible for sustainability as well as customer service within the brand because it's small, as I mentioned. One of our biggest marketplaces that we sell on is Avocado Store, which is a big sustainable marketplace in Germany. So, people go there explicitly to buy sustainable goods.Then I would say another thing, but that's more specifically product-category based like in fall, we are always the busiest. That's because, specifically when it comes to sweaters and cardigans and hoodies, that price point becomes really important because we are comparatively much cheaper than other sustainable brands that offer sweaters. When it comes to T-shirts and similar items, there's not that big of a difference anymore. Three years ago, Honest Basics was by far the cheapest. But now other brands have also used different strategies and ways of producing cheaply. But still, when it comes to sweaters, I think our style is nice, of course, but I would say it's sort of a tier thing from sustainability and then affordability/style because we are also seen as one of the sustainable alternatives to Uniqlo, which is, of course, a really popular brand as well.

**Interviewer**:So it's in a way if they could find new co but with the sustainability mission.And I had a chance to check also a bit your social media and website and I think also social media is really fun. And interesting. So how do you decide what sustainability messages you share on social media versus on the website?

**Interviewee**: The sustainability pages on the website are very much focused almost. I mean, I think it's even said somewhere in the text that it's just an oversharing of information. It's really if people want to check our receipts in a way, you know? It's really for that small amount of customers or people like you who want to know the nitty-gritty of it all. With the focus on transparency, it's really all there. We need to update it a bit quicker, but overall, it's really comprehensive. And then that's also if people ask us questions about certificates and all those things.

On the social media side, like you said, it's good to hear that it looks fun because that's the focus on it. We try to connect more and engage more there. So less of the dry stuff and more things like factory visits where we also show that we have a really good relationship with our factory and the managers there. We try to visit at least once a year. We're really proud of the work they do as well and we're proud of having created such a nice relationship.

So part of it is us being able to really show our customers and our audience like, "Hey, look at how great we're doing it," not in an arrogant way, but just in a way that we're happy to share. Also, what we see is that if you go too much into the nitty-gritty, you actually get customers who only understand half the message. And it's not because they're dumb or anything; they're really not, but it's because it becomes too detailed. And then they might hear, for example, what happens a lot is they might hear we're producing in China and then ask a lot of questions like, "That must be wrong." Of course, there are definite setbacks about producing in China, but there are also parts of producing in China that are the same as producing anywhere. And if you have a new factory where you can guarantee that people get good wages and good working hours and all those things, it's essentially fine. So we try to not focus too much on the details when it comes to social media stuff, but instead focus more on the human side of it and the factories. But also us, like the fact that we at some point introduced ourselves to really say like, "Hey, we're humans behind this, we're doing our best."

**Interviewer**: Mhm, that's very interesting. And what I also want to ask, do you also share specific challenges and limitations you have in your sustainability journey with your audience?

**Interviewee**: Sometimes we do. I'm trying to think of a specific example. I think we've shared for sure that we sometimes have low stock of things because we only order a certain amount of items and when it's out of stock, it's really out of stock. And for example, highlighting how that is really different from larger brands who literally have product categories that are never out of stock. Where we say, well, we can't do that because if we did that, we would have to price everything higher just to be able to afford having that. And it's also less sustainable because you're always planning to have waste, which of course, is not a good thing. So something like that.

And we also, when it comes to new collections, that's not really a challenge, but we try to ask customers like, "Hey, come up with new names for the colors we have in the collection." So overall, we share that and we had one or two months ago, we had a big delivery issue which wasn't again necessarily a sustainability challenge, but it was a challenge of just running a business. You try to really proactively communicate that as well. Kind of, yeah, just being open.

**Interviewer**: Yeah, exactly. So, yeah, we already discussed a bit how sustainability can really be a complex topic. And sometimes the amount of information can be overwhelming. So how do you ensure your communication is clear to customers?

**Interviewee**: I think the main thing is that what's a really good combination is that I tend to do most of the sustainability content, especially the detail-oriented stuff. And then quite simply my boss goes through it and because he's obviously very aware of sustainability and he's the one that founded the company, so he knows a lot about it, but he's less into the details as I am. So if he's like, "I don't understand this," it's just kind of that thing of having a sort of layman there as well to check it out. But in general, we try and have everyone in the company, even people that focus more on marketing and less on sustainability or design, we always have input. So we always go through the team like, "Hey, does this make sense?" Is this clear? Yeah, and again, just kind of a practical direct approach to think, I think makes the most sense to most customers, at least in our market.

**Interviewer**: Mhm. Okay. This is something we also briefly talked about, as you know, now the greenwashing of fortunes is on the rise. As sustainability has become a very popular topic, do you have customers approaching you because they are concerned about something they read or are skeptical about it? Like you mentioned, the factories in China, which I assume people are not aware that could also be still good practice just because it's in Asia. There is probably a lot of misconception about that. So how do you handle this? And do you have these sort of cases when they approach you?

**Interviewee**: Yes, we do have sometimes people just asking specific questions about what material we use. So not necessarily that there's a skeptical tone, but it's just sort of verifying like, "Hey, is it true that you work with organic cotton, for example?" What I said as well, like we've had, I think the most negative feedback we've ever gotten has been people who received their clothes and on the label it says made in China and then they're like, "How dare you, we thought you were sustainable." OK, the way we always try to meet them is to say like, "Hey, we get your concerns and that's a good thing that you're concerned." And yes, there can be issues with producing in China, for example. But please know that we check and we truly think that what we are doing and how we're producing is a good way to do it.

So we kind of, we don't want to moralize our customers and tell them what is right, but we do say from our perspective, it is and it's up to you to make that decision. Then so not, not really educate but educate in kind of an open way where, yeah. And also, like I said before, with business strategies, there's so many different, luckily there are so many different types of sustainable brands now and there's so I also think that we are very aware that our way of working and just in general having this business running this business is one way to do it and we are really proud of it. But we also know there's other ways and those can be complementary, right? Like it doesn't, I think that's also a part of in a way the sustainable market where it's a good thing that that market is growing because it supports all of us.

So in that sense, also, we don't want to be like, "Oh yeah, we don't have this one particular standard because it's bad." It's like, no, it's not bad. We've just chosen our resources somewhere else and that is still a good standard that another brand might have. So if a customer is like adamant that we use a certain type of fabric or a certain type of dye or whatever, well, go to another brand, but at least know that we're also doing a good thing. And also we try to explain to people because the feedback we sometimes also get is customers that know about greenwashing. For example, I feel that sometimes the communication about greenwashing, the general communication is it's obviously very much focused on the larger companies. And then sometimes customers try to put that logic of the larger companies on small businesses. And I've also heard my colleagues in the field say that that's a completely different story because we're so small, we could never reach the level of greenwashing that a Zalando or like an H&M could.

**Interviewer**: So then do you have a concrete example for this when they use the same logic for the big companies as for the small one?

**Interviewee**: The need to be scope certified for like sustainable certifications. Sometimes people ask us for that like is your entire supply chain certified and then we explain what our factories are so up until this, but we simply don't have thousands of euros a year to also be scope certified. And we are also very open about the fact that we don't have the resources right now to check like our yarn supplier is certified and we can be in contact with them, but we don't have the resources to really get to the farm level. So something like that as well. I think it's mainly like the resources thing that we then reply to customers and feedback when we say, well, we just don't know and we want to know but we just can't right now.

**Interviewer:** Another question is, I don’t know if you saw there was an article in Business of Fashion showing that many consumers perceive sustainability-led messages as performative and annoying.

**Interviewee:** Well, I think because on the one hand, so many brands, whether or not they're small or big, have realized that this is a good marketing strategy. So it's just a lot, and getting the same message all the time is just really annoying, and you can't really see the forest through the trees, right? But I think it's also because so many customers are intelligent, and they know that there's greenwashing going on, and then it requires quite a lot of effort from them to then still do their own research because they know they can't take all the messages at face value, and it's annoying when you just want to shop, you know, do some retail therapy, but first, you have to read the about section of a brand.

**Interviewer:** But we've created a market where being a consumer should be an easy thing. That's kind of the stereotype about consuming, it's risky. But now because the world is changing and so much knowledge is out there about sustainability, as a consumer, you are required to do a lot more, and it's almost a more democratic process, and of course, that's annoying because you don't always want to have to overthink everything.

**Interviewee:** So I think that has to do with it. And that's also again, like why our logic for social media is a bit different than from our website communication because we don’t want to over-shout as well.

**Interviewer:** Mhm mhm Yeah, that makes sense. Also, the research shows that there is increased knowledge in sustainability as you mentioned. But our research showed that when it comes to Gen Z and millennials, what we surveyed in Europe, the knowledge is still low to moderate. And do you take any steps to educate your consumers in sustainability fashion? I know you mentioned briefly about that. And do you think that's the role of a sustainable fashion brand?

**Interviewee:** Yeah. So we do in a way. Also, again, if we had more resources and more money, frankly, we would like to do more of that. We've actually talked about that this year because we were looking into potential projects to take on, and there's a project that you can also get funding for in the state of Berlin Bundaberg focused on educating young people. And they are explicitly asking businesses to do that. So we were talking about that, but then, sadly, came to the conclusion that we just don’t have the hours for that right now. But even then, when we get questions from customers, I do always try and go out of my way to give them more information than they might necessarily ask for. But to really explain like this week, we had someone asking, do you have a certain ecotech standard? And then I explained, no, we don’t, but this is what that standard means. And we have another certificate that is all the same. So to try and educate that customer a little bit about, there’s so much going on sort of, and to try and push a little bit and say, "Hey, it’s really good that you know about this standard, but there’s more out there." So try to educate.

**Interviewer:** And I think, yeah, I think especially to try and engage with your customers through education, that is kind of a must for sustainable fashion brands because that’s how the market gets created.

**Interviewee:** And just in general, not even just on the sustainability topic, but I think also as just a small business in general, having engagement with your customers, making it feel local and making it feel personal is really important. And yeah, the add-on of educating them or at least talking to them about sustainability is really important.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, it's very important that you mention, it's maybe something that is a value of a small brand that they can make it feel personal. And also like what other things?

**Interviewee:** Yeah, and one other thing to that is not just educating them I think is important but also to genuinely be open to feedback. So one of the things is, you know, because as a small brand, we don’t have the resources to always check every fit, for example. So in some ways if you give us the feedback, hey, the shirt is a little bit too tight for all sizes, of course, that's really valuable. It's genuinely valuable for us. It's not just annoying, but also when people say, hey, I don’t like that, I don’t know, you don’t have a certain fabric or you don’t like linen clothing, for example, whatever we do, always try and take a note of that and be like, oh, hey, is that potentially something we could try and produce? So it's also a genuine way of growing and I think it's a good sort of check-in with, oh, what do customers actually want?

**Interviewer:** Mhm. Mhm. Yeah, very interesting. Definitely brought up some things that were not mentioned in the previous interviews. So I assume you aware, you are aware of the new EU Green Directive that is gonna come into force, well, probably in 2026 that basically penalizes the generic environmental claims without any proof of that. So why do you think, do you think such law is important for the fashion industry? And why do you think there is also skepticism about the effectiveness of this law?

**Interviewee:** Well, yeah, I think it is important, especially as we already talked about when it comes to the greenwashing of larger brands. I think as with the CS RDD, there should always be a skepticism around these laws. I think it's kind of again part of this democratic process, right? Where we can acknowledge that it's a really good step. But also because it takes so long to, to create these directives and, and laws while it's in the process of being made, we can actually already figure out, oh, hey, wait, something about that could be changed and improved and all those things. So I think, the fact that there's skepticism is really good, but I also think it shouldn’t be skepticism that leads to nothing, right? Like you shouldn’t beat it to death, the idea you should like foster it and be like, oh, but we, this can be part of a growing process, I think for, it's really good when it comes to making sure that larger brands lie less. So to say, I do think what we talked about with educating customers and customers having moderate to low knowledge about sustainability. What I’ve already encountered is that as a smaller brand, it could lead to customers thinking we’re greenwashing because these directives, they’re all about like most of them start from penalizing companies that make more than €45 million a year. Nowhere near that. But for a customer, they don't know that. So they think every company needs to have this.

**Interviewer:** And of course, when it comes to, for example, paying for a certification, the directive and the European commission, they know that you can't make a small company do that because that just doesn't work but it doesn't and to then have to go into this quite detailed story of, hey, it just, it all has to do with like gross profit and things like that. That's a bit difficult. So I do also see a bit of fun, potentially critical point for just the smaller businesses in the market, not just for us personally. With that, that it should lead to a moderate to good level of knowledge about sustainability for the general consumer. But hopefully again, that's all part of this growth process.

**Interviewer:** Mhm mhm Last two questions. I see. So do you see value in collaborating with other brands? Did you ever do some collaboration with the brand in the field of sustainable fashion? Yeah, do you have any experience with that?

**Interviewee:** We don't really other than just well, one thing about, for example, being in Berlin, there's other small, small sustainable brands out there. Sometimes these conferences or expo or whatever. So, in that sense, like especially my boss having, you know, now been in that field for six years, he knows people obviously, but it is on a personal level than a professional level, I think, especially when it comes to competing with the larger brands in the next few years with all of these laws and directives being rolled out. There's real potential in creating infrastructure together, a few smaller brands together to then be able to match up with the big brands that can just do that on their own. Right now for us, I think that's still a resource thing where we just don't have the reason to explore that. But I very much just on a personal level, I really like this theory about the zebra economy where you don't want unicorns because like apple is a unicorn, Amazon unicorn, write such a special big brand. But the idea of like, well, we actually need a lot of smaller companies because that's just really healthy for the economy. We don't want monopolies. So in that sense, also, when I learned of that theory and was looking into it up myself, I was like, well, just the fact that we are there and that we wish each other good kind of a really good thing. So, in that sense, I also think it's important to like foster collaboration. We don't have any specific projects on that right now.

**Interviewer:** And looking ahead so how does your brand plan to adapt its sustainability strategies to match the evolving consumer expectation? But in general, is there any future steps you want to take in the sustainability journey? Because what I got from this interview that you are very much about doing as best as you can at the moment. So do you have any long term plans?

**Interviewee:** Yeah. So it's always all about evaluating. Can we do this now? But we have like a list of things that we're looking into and potentially like if the money and the people are there to do it or can be created to do it. We want to one big thing is we want to look into expanding our material use. So, right now, our main materials are organic cotton, recycled cotton, and some recycled pcos and polyester. We try to stay away from synthetic fibers, but still sometimes you need that. But like what I said, linen is one thing that we're looking into. We're also really excited about the idea of regenerative cotton. But that's quite a difficult material to source at the moment. So that's definitely something that because it's at a higher price point and because you need a whole different network for it, that's something we're looking at.

Expanding our product range is one thing. Also with the idea of like company responsibility even after the purchase of an item when it comes to wear. So like take back schemes, especially what you just said about collaborating with smaller brands. I think take back schemes for small companies to organize is way too much effort. But we see the idea of potentially having like a collective take back scheme with smaller brands as a potential option. But those are all kind of future things. And what I mentioned a big one is for us as well to get even more in depth and more get more knowledge about our supply chains. Like we know where our cotton comes from and we have the certificates but to actually be able to say no, we can call someone there or we can email them and actually know who that person is. Is a big part of it as well.

So in a way also even where we can't buy the certificate or because we don't have to research to at least be able to say yeah, but we've still done the traceability like we still know what's going on. At least on our own accord. So all those things are yeah, I would say just expanding material, expanding our own knowledge of our production chain. And yeah, creating more value that way and more sustainability.

**Interviewer:** Mhm Great. And the last question I have for you, do you have some brands that you really admire in terms of the sector of sustainability fashion? And why and do you have some examples, some negative examples what you dislike in this field of sustainable fashion?

**Interviewee:** Good question. I think a brand that I really admire in Germany specifically is Armed Angels. Just because they've really been able to grow so much and they actually, I think do a lot of good stuff when it comes to education especially their campaign around the unprocessed cotton jeans, for example, I think literally taught a lot of people that cotton isn't white on its own. It's like a more color. So things like that are really cool. I personally also, I really like the brand Lucy and Yak. They're UK based. And they, I think almost everything they have is Gots certified and they actually are, I'm literally wearing, wait, I can show you one of their Oh yeah, yeah, I see. They use like really bright patterns, which I think is quite an interesting thing in a sustainable field because they're often very muted tone and the fact that they're successful with that is really cool. And I think they also specifically appealed to the younger market, which is also more difficult. So I don't really know how they were able to do that, but it's a cool example.

And then I think like more higher segments brands, one that I know because I actually at some point interviewed the owner for my own research at the time, Zazie Vintage made, these really expensive and really gorgeous coats from upcycled or like redesigned blankets that are made in Pakistan and Kazakhstan for when they were eight or have their first child. So they do this really incredible way of authentic storytelling, I think.

Negative examples. I mean, I think a really simple one is, but that's obviously like a quite obvious one but it's like the H and M 30% organic cotton things and Primark the same thing and just they're very much, it's not exactly greenwashing, I think because there is genuinely an attribute there where they do use a more sustainable method, but it is still annoying proportion. And I think even though I don't know that much about the brand, so I might be totally wrong, but there's this Spanish brand called Ecoalf and I think a lot of what they do is really good but their storytelling about specifically using ocean plastic. I think it's kind of going against a type of education that I would want to do. Makes it seem like all plastic is the same. And I know that when it comes to recycling and when it comes to creating synthetic fibers, there's a huge issue in our industries right now where not all plastic is the same. And recyclers are really facing this issue of most clothing that has polyester in it can't be recycled because it's so unclear where actually come from and most ocean plastic gets collected, which is a good thing, but actually can't be made into fibers.

I think of course, the origin of that brand and what they're doing on the one hand is really good, but I think they've almost made too simple of a story. Where sometimes I think, well, actually your customers will understand this. Please try and make it a more complex story so that we can get a bit more knowledge of that out there. I think at some of those conferences in Berlin have spoken to people that are working on recycling and it's quite clear that it's especially for them really frustrating that there's no knowledge about this specific field. I think recycling was in this couple of years became like a solution. You know, we can recycle everything. It sort of became, yeah, it sort of became the best greenwashing strategy. It's, it's fine, we can recycle but that's not really what is happening in practice with the H&M having this, we will recycle program. And then they end up, like, recycling less than 10 percent. I think there is not really a lot of knowledge that it's not so easy to recycle an item.

And I think especially, I mean, that even again, for me as a consumer, I've also encountered this, that there's this kind of logic when something's recycled, that we think it should be cheaper because it's waste, right? But recycling is actually a more intensive process than just getting something new. So even though a lot of brands or companies that work in recycling, put more resources in, than if you were to just make plastic new, for example, or polyester. They don't get rewarded for that. They actually get told, oh, we wanna buy this for less. And I think that has to do with some sort of economic logic that needs to be changed. And I still also don't really feel that logic, you know, I know it, but I don't feel it when I want to buy something and I think it's a really important thing because we need to recycle more. That's quite clear. I think a lot of consumers in the market and me included just don't know the complexities of that and that can be quite a stumbling block.

Recycling is presented in a, as you mentioned in a very light, easy way, in logical light that you can make something new out of it. But, yeah, I don't think it's very communicated how complex it is. So, definitely more education is needed on the, even for us who are very much nested in the topic. I think there is always new knowledge coming up, every week even so, you know, even for us who are in the topic, it's hard to follow up for a person who, as you mentioned, it's, you know, becomes overwhelming when you just want to buy a T-shirt.

**Interviewer:** Okay. It was really great conversation. Really interesting point. You raised something that other brands didn't. So I'm really, really happy we had this conversation and I will keep you in touch and share the results of the study.

**Interviewee:** Yeah, totally. Do you know, because you said you're in the last stages of the process, like how long, I mean, you, is it, are you now needing to start writing or are you writing already?

**Interviewer:** Like, most of it is done. So it's only the last part that is missing with the interview. So I think around December is going to be done. And then I know a lot of the brands also want to see the results, but I would most likely summarize, everything inside it because otherwise it's 100 plus pages and I don't think people, you know, people will give up if I send the whole dissertation. So I would just, and I think there is some interesting knowledge there. So I would just try to summarize it and then send it to, to brands.

**Interviewee**: We'd for sure be interested as well.

**Interview – ISTO**

**Interviewer:** Thank you so much for your time for this study. Just to inform you, I will be recording this call just for the transcription. And also, if you would like to be anonymous, let me know or if you would like me to use your name.

**Interviewee:** Yeah, you can record and use my name for the report for sure.

**Interviewer:** Ok, perfect. Can you just briefly introduce yourself?

**Interviewee:** Sure. I work for Isto for about two years now. I'm in the marketing department. Although we are a small team, so everyone does a little bit of everything. And yeah, I'll try to help you with your questions as best as I can. Yeah, I don't know if you need any other.

**Interviewer:** No, that's more than enough. So just to tell you more about myself, my name is Alexandra, and I'm doing this doctoral research on the topic of sustainable fashion, but specifically focusing on the communication. So before this study, we did a couple of other studies that led us to this one and we want to share some of the insights we got and ask you about them. And I'm really, really happy that you accepted this interview because I think your brand has a very unique communication style. So I would love to hear more about it. So to start, my first question is how would you describe the brand as briefly as possible?

**Interviewee:** Ok. So I think Isto is a brand for people that want to have a staple wardrobe. So something that will last a long time, not just in quality but also in style and that it's always available. And that has something that doesn't have a lot of impact either socially or environmentally. So I think this is the way that people, our clients choose Isto is that they want something stable and responsible.

**Interviewer:** Ok. And can you outline your brand's sustainability mission? And because you said you're here for two years, did it evolve during the time that you joined the company?

**Interviewee:** Yes. So we don't really like the word sustainable. I think the brands that talk about sustainability usually are trying to hide something. Every product created in the world has an impact, either being social, economic, or environmental. So everything has an impact and saying that it's sustainable means that it doesn't have an impact. And I don't know anyone that is doing something that does not have an impact. So saying it's sustainable, maybe it's not the best word. We want to call ourselves responsible. So we are trying to improve, we try to do things the best possible. From the beginning of the design phase, we look for the least impactful factory, the least impactful process, and so on. But it's still going to have an impact, you know, in the end. We can offset it. But we prefer to call it responsible. It's a way we're trying to take responsibility for the impact we have. And yeah, we've been doing that since the beginning. Of course, we've now been growing and we're looking for ways of pushing the boundaries in terms of textiles and so on. It's like, ok, so let's look at what we can do in terms of producing the textiles, dyeing them, and so on. So we keep this constant contact with our suppliers to see what they're doing in this sustainable movement. And then we try them and if it fits. Of course, we don't want to cut corners, so we don't want to make something that perhaps is more sustainable but has less quality because for us, quality is the most important because it will last longer. And in the end, it will be more sustainable. So we need to first make sure that this sustainable process is actually going to have a good quality. Yeah, we keep doing this every time we make a new product. And even old products, we try to see if there's new ways of doing it. So yeah, over the years, we've been finding ways of cutting something here, something there in terms of sustainability, which I think is more what your study is about.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. Well, mine is about how you communicate in general being in this field. So whatever you feel like it, that's the right answer. And you mentioned in the beginning a very interesting thing that you said, you don't like to use the word sustainable. Now there are more and more sustainable fashion brands. So how do you differentiate yourself from the other brands that are in the same field?

**Interviewee:** We don't really communicate the sustainability part that much. We simply call it good design. Good design is well done, it's good quality, and in order to be good design, it needs to be environmentally responsible. It's just a normal thing for us.

**Interviewer:** It's the foundation of your business?

**Interviewee:** It's a foundation. So we try to reduce the impact and we have our environmental reports, and we try to let the customers know how much CO2 emissions, water liters used per item. You can find these in all our products on our website. In terms of communication, we don't try to focus too much on these because there's this new trend of greenwashing things. We don't think it's a nice way of doing it. Let's just focus on making things really well done. And the people that really know, they'll understand. We don't try to persuade customers or the new generation of customers that are focused on climate to buy our products. We don't want to force people to buy our things. We start with transparency, put everything out there, and let the customers decide. If you go for a company that says, "We are 100% sustainable," maybe those people should do a little bit more research.

**Interviewer:** Ok. So I'm interested. Would you describe being responsible as a core element in your brand's identity, or do you think it's more of a complementary feature? What I'm really interested in is why you think your customers come to your brand? What is the unique selling proposition?

**Interviewee:** I think one of our most unique selling points is our transparency. We have full transparency, where customers can see how much it costs to produce something. We say where it was produced—where the cotton was grown, processed into thread, and made into fabric. We show all the processes, including energy usage, and so on. Sometimes we even invite customers to visit our factories to see how things are made. We call it "factories" – a mix of factory and tourism. Clients go and see how the clothes are made, meet the workers, and understand the process. Transparency is the foundation. If a company is transparent, it naturally aligns with good practices, because anything shady or morally questionable would be exposed. If you're forced to show everything, you have to improve. That's how we hold ourselves accountable.

**Interviewer:** And this resonates with your customers?

**Interviewee:** Yes, our customers appreciate this transparency. We even provide a price breakdown, and that's something I don't see in many other brands.

**Interviewer:** How did you decide to be so openly transparent?

**Interviewee:** This came from a campaign by Everlane—a fashion brand—about 7 to 10 years ago. They produced a jacket and showed the cost breakdown. One of our founders saw it and thought, "This is really cool. Why not build a brand that does this for every product?" So we focused on timeless, classic designs that don't go out of fashion, and built transparency into the brand from the start.

**Interviewer:** And correct me if I'm wrong, but you primarily focus on men's clothing?

**Interviewee:** Yes, we had a women's collection for two years but decided to stop it. The women's market is more varied, with consumers wanting to try different styles. Men, on the other hand, value consistency. Once they trust us, they tend to stick with us—returning for shirts, trousers, and so on. Our approach fits better with men's shopping habits.

**Interviewer:** Our research shows that men respond well to factual, data-driven communication. Do you think your transparency strategy resonates particularly well with men?

**Interviewee:** Yes, it definitely feels that way. I don't know the study you mentioned, but it aligns with our experience. Men seem to trust our communication and appreciate the transparency.

**Interviewer:** As a fully transparent brand, is there anything you don't openly share with customers?

**Interviewee:** We try to share everything, though not every small detail is on display. For example, we don't live-stream our office—though that might make for an interesting campaign! Instead, we focus on what's meaningful to our customers, like factory visits where they can see production firsthand. Some logistical details, like minor supply chain adjustments, aren't publicly shared.

**Interviewer:** We also do an annual "Transparent Week" campaign.

**Interviewee:** Yes, I saw that. Could you tell me more about it?

**Interviewee:** It's a week where we highlight transparency and even talk about our mistakes. Everyone makes mistakes, and companies are no exception. For example, if a product didn't meet our quality standards, we admit it, explain how we fixed it, and move forward. Rather than hiding problems, we believe in improving and communicating transparently.

**Interviewer:** Do you see an increase in engagement or sales during campaigns like Transparent Week?

**Interviewee:** Yes, we see more website traffic and community engagement, though not necessarily a big spike in sales. We focus on building trust and a steady, loyal customer base, not fast sales.

**Interviewer:** Sustainability is a complex topic. How do you ensure your communication is clear and engaging?

**Interviewee:** It's challenging. We aim to simplify complex topics, like explaining how clothing starts with agriculture. We educate customers about organic and regenerative agriculture, certifications like GOTS, and the environmental impacts of production. It's hard to condense this into bite-sized content for social media, but we try to make all the information available on our website.

**Interviewer:** How do you decide what goes on the website versus social media?

**Interviewee:** Everything goes everywhere, just in different formats. We don't chase trends or aim for virality; we adapt our content to fit the platform. Isto means independent, super quality, transparency, and organic—it reflects our independent approach.

**Interviewer:** With rising greenwashing, have you encountered skeptical customers?

**Interviewee:** Yes, though not often. Some customers come to us because they don't trust other brands. Occasionally, we get very detailed questions—like whether the thread is GOTS certified. We're transparent and provide proof when possible, which helps build trust. Transparency builds trust and sets us apart.

**Interviewer:** What do you think of the upcoming EU regulations requiring proof for green claims?

**Interviewee:** It's a positive step. Companies will need to substantiate claims, reducing greenwashing. As a transparent brand, we welcome these changes.

**Interviewer:** Do you take steps to educate customers on garment care to prolong product life?

**Interviewee:** Yes, we provide care guides and plan to include stickers with washing instructions in every first purchase. We're also launching a repair program in 2025 to fix damaged garments.

**Interviewer:** Do you collaborate with other brands in the sustainability sector?

**Interviewee:** Not often, though we recently discussed a potential partnership with a shoe brand. We tend to collaborate with businesses outside fashion, like restaurants and farms, because of shared values and processes.

**Interviewer:** Thank you so much for your time. This has been incredibly insightful. Do you have any questions or final thoughts?

**Interviewee:** How's the research going?

**Interviewer:** It's progressing well. My research shows that brands rarely acknowledge challenges in their sustainability efforts. Consumers with higher environmental concerns respond best to transparency strategies. I'll share my study findings with you once it's complete.

**Interview – Infantium Victoria**

**Interviewer:** My name is Aleksandra, and we are doing this research on sustainable fashion. It's part of the doctoral thesis. So this is actually the final part of the thesis. Before that, we did some content analysis of sustainable brands. And then we did a survey with Gen Z and Millennials about sustainable fashion. And now we would like to discuss with founders and marketers about their views on sustainability and share some of the insights we have. So the first question I have for you, can you describe your brand as briefly as possible?

**Interviewee:** Infantium Victoria, my brand, was started in 2014. So we celebrated 10 years this year. Well, we are offering vegan sustainable fashion for kids, which is anything but boring.

**Interviewer:** OK. That's, that's very interesting. And can you outline your brand's overall sustainability mission? And since you said you have a brand for 10 years, did it evolve over time?

**Interviewee:** Yes, as well as like I started the brand together with my friend, and she was way more advanced in the field of sustainability. In fact, she was running a company that was producing sustainable workwear. So I came in completely with my idea of sustainability just being that the fabric should be organic. And as far as I developed, I really took a lot of input from my partner. Later on, it became evident for me how crucially important the ethical production aspect is. So it's not just about the quality of fabrics but also how and where the clothes are made and ensuring they are durable. The quality of them is extremely important—not just because you want to sell a good product but because you're concerned about circularity.

**Interviewer:** Mhm. Especially in kids' wear. OK. And how would you say your brand differentiates itself from other sustainable brands in the market, especially in the kids' wear market?

**Interviewee:** We are pretty much the only brand that is as open in terms of traceability as we can get. In fact, there are very few brands that are open about the production chain. On our website, you will find not only the suppliers of the fabric but also the names of the factories. So we are trying manually to trace as much as we can of our production chain and share that information with our customers. That really sets us apart a lot. And then, of course, the design aspect—we design clothes that stand out. In kids' wear, it's very easy to do soft, shapeless things for kids to move in. But we specifically design fashionable looks. Things that can be combined, where kids can learn about fashion and express themselves—not just wearing a print and running around saying, "I'm a dinosaur." There's a story behind it as well. And the third part that sets us apart is that all our collections have a very strong sustainability message. One collection talks about the benefits of organic cotton and its connection to biodiversity, with a message like "Save the bees." It's simple for kids to grasp, and it has a huge impact because they carry this message with them for life. Another collection talked about industrial animal farming, which we called "The Asteroids." We compared humanity's urge to consume animal products to the asteroid that killed the dinosaurs. We combined dinosaurs and farm animals to show that a chicken is just as cool as a dinosaur. It makes kids think about what humans are doing with industrial farming. The amount of slaughtered animals is so depressing when you see the numbers. But we bring this message in a nice way. So I think this really sets us apart from other kids' brands because we talk about serious things in a kid-friendly way.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. OK. That's very interesting. And would you say that sustainability is a core element that drives your brand identity and sales, or do you think it's a complementary feature?

**Interviewee:** It really depends on the type of customers. For many of our B2B customers, they appreciate our product and design, but they openly tell me they don't care about sustainability. At first, it hurt me, but now I think, OK, it's fine as long as they're paying the premium for organic quality and ethical production. That's fine, even if they're not aligned with my values. For B2C customers, the story is different. Many people are drawn to our sustainability story and genuinely want to support us because they think what we do is amazing. Our motto is "Making the world a better place, one garment at a time."

**Interviewer:** That's very interesting. So you mentioned that what sets you apart is your transparency. What specific challenges and limitations do you share with your customers? And have you seen the impact of being transparent on your brand?

**Interviewee:** I would say I've always been very open about challenges on my website. But honestly, most people online don't read that part. For my peace of mind, I keep that information available for those who want it. Over the years, it's gotten a bit better. For instance, we purchase almost exclusively GOTS-certified fabrics. These come with a transaction certificate that traces the whole production chain up to the source. Unfortunately, I don't have access to all the details. I can ask my supplier to disclose their wholesaler, but most of the time, they won't because they treat it as a commercial secret. This drives me nuts because I'm not in business to steal their contacts—I just want to ensure transparency. Very few people working in sustainability have an open-source mindset, which I think is a huge limitation. As a sustainable company, we believe open-source is the way to go.

**Interviewer:** That's very interesting. And you briefly mentioned how sustainability can be a complex topic. How do you ensure that your communication is clear to your consumers, especially since you deal with kids' clothing?

**Interviewee:** The thing is, most of the time, kids don't make the purchasing decisions—it's made for them. So I have a tricky goal. On one side, I have to make a child believe the clothes are cool enough for them to wear because at a certain age, kids refuse to wear certain things. Then the decision-makers, the parents or grandparents, need to align with our values. My communication to parents and mothers often focuses on how buying our clothes is a good investment for their child because it's safe. I talk a lot about safety because organic cotton is safe. I also talk about how our products educate kids, send a good message, and help them express themselves. These three messages are central to my communication through Instagram and social media. I also talk about our company's values and why we do things differently so people understand what sets us apart. But when it comes to talking to kids, you need to tell them a story. For example, I mentioned the story about the chicken and dinosaur—why they're together. We started using prints on t-shirts a few years ago to make concepts easier for children to grasp. Before that, we didn't have any prints. Now, we introduce t-shirts with a concept behind them, and kids can build outfits around these t-shirts. They understand the message and feel like they're part of something cool. In fact, we've converted a few kids to vegetarianism. They stopped eating meat after learning about our concepts. That's great because it shows they're thinking about the message. The parents didn't blame us, thankfully. But anyway, that's what we try to do. Recently, we started writing books for kids. With every collection, we release a kids' book. So far, we have four books. One talks about vegan fashion, one explains how a t-shirt is made, another focuses on sustainability, and the last one is about donut economics, explained for kids. These books are our way of delivering messages directly to kids. It's not just about getting them to shop, but contributing to their education in a nice way. I feel like I'm helping parents by taking on a bit of the responsibility to educate their kids through fashion and books.

**Interviewer:** How can people access these books? Do they get them with their orders?

**Interviewee:** They're sold on our website. I want to add them as an upsell in the shopping cart—so if someone orders, they get a prompt asking if they'd like to add a book.

**Interviewer:** That sounds really good.

**Interviewee:** Oh, there's something else! Wait, I almost forgot. We've also written small booklets for kids based on the six Rs of sustainability—like recycle, reuse, etc. These are tiny booklets they can collect. Whenever we attend events or pop-ups, we give the first booklet away as a giveaway. If they sign up for our newsletter, they can get the remaining five booklets.

**Interviewer:** That's a really cool idea. It's like spreading the message in a fun, creative way.

**Interviewee:** Yeah, I'm really proud of that project.

**Interviewer:** Also, probably you know there's been a rise in greenwashing, and with that, green skepticism. Have you ever had customers approach you out of concern about greenwashing or to ask for more information?

**Interviewee:** When we attend trade shows and pop-ups, I see a lot of greenwashing from other brands. Sometimes I want to call them out. In the beginning, I used to. For example, they'd put a GOTS label on their product even though the company wasn't GOTS-certified. Or they'd use "organic" in their brand name without selling any organic products. But because we're so transparent and open about what we do, we don't get questioned much. Nobody asks me if we're for real because I make all our certificates available and accessible. I think our openness has prevented us from having to explain ourselves too much.

**Interviewer:** And there was this article in Business of Fashion recently about how some consumers find sustainability messaging performative or even annoying. Why do you think this reaction exists?

**Interviewee:** I think people don't like being called out for their choices. People can be very defensive. When I started the brand, I used to loudly label us as a vegan brand. At trade shows, people would say, "I'm not vegan, so I can't buy it." I'd explain, "I'm not excluding you by saying what I am." Now, I've changed to a kinder approach, inviting people to join us in doing good rather than putting labels in their faces. I don't say, "We're amazing, we're the holy grail of brands." Instead, I say, "Join me, and we can do good together." You can't tell parents they're bad for buying their kid a cheap t-shirt. I lead with solutions rather than guilt—showing how small changes can make a big difference. I think that's a more effective way of messaging.

**Interviewer:** I completely agree with your approach—it's kinder and solution-oriented. Shaming people doesn't work, especially when they already feel overwhelmed by their choices.

**Interviewee:** Exactly. It's like shaming people for flying on airplanes—it's counterproductive.

**Interviewer:** Speaking of solutions, there's a new EU regulation coming into effect soon regarding green claims. Essentially, brands won't be allowed to use generic green terms unless they can provide evidence. What's your opinion on this initiative? Do you think it'll make a difference in the industry?

**Interviewee:** I think, unfortunately, it won't change much for big companies because they'll find ways around it. But it might make life harder for smaller brands. Certifications are expensive, and while some small brands complain about the cost, I feel it's fair to pay if you're benefiting from the certification. If you're using GOTS-certified fabrics, for example, the entire supply chain has already paid for certification—you should contribute too. So I'm mixed about this regulation. I don't think it'll significantly impact larger brands like H&M because creating a fully certified supply chain doesn't align with their business model.

**Interviewer:** Do you see value in collaborating with other sustainable brands? Have you done any collaborations in the past, and do you think they've been beneficial?

**Interviewee:** Absolutely, we've done some cross-industry collaborations. For example, we partnered with a company that makes hand-crocheted toys, and they developed a toy that complemented our collection. We've also explored potential collaborations with shoe companies, although nothing concrete has come from that yet. I'd love to collaborate on a kids' underwear line because we're not experts in that area. We approached a company, but we couldn't agree on using organic cotton, so it didn't move forward. Collaborations offer more exposure and allow us to create products we're not equipped to produce on our own.

**Interviewer:** Looking ahead, what are your plans for the brand? How do you see it evolving in the future?

**Interviewee:** Initially, we were a B2C company, but when we wanted to scale production, we had to move into B2B. After the pandemic, I grew tired of the B2B market—it's exhausting and often leads to overproduction. I'm stuck with extra inventory because I needed to meet minimum order requirements for B2B clients. Moving forward, I want to step away from the seasonal collection cycle—it's a hamster wheel. Instead, I'm looking at a drops model, where we release a few collections a year at times that work for our production team. I also want to implement a preorder model to ensure we produce only what's needed. For example, if we sell 150 t-shirts, we'll produce 150, not 500. This approach ensures liquidity and reduces waste. Another goal is to create fully compostable collections. We want garments that fit into the natural cradle-to-cradle cycle with no plastic components. Additionally, I'm working towards a farm-to-garment solution, where we trace the entire production chain from the cotton farm to the final product. It's a challenging goal, but I believe it's crucial for full traceability.

**Interviewer:** That sounds like an exciting and ambitious plan. Last question—what are some practices you admire in the industry, and what do you dislike?

**Interviewee:** I admire brands that are fully transparent. For example, there's a Belgian brand I know that's been open about their supply chain since 2000. I also admire initiatives that support farmers transitioning to organic cotton. At a festival in Holland, I saw t-shirts sourced from farmers in India who were part of a cooperative helping with this transition. That kind of inspiration drives our own goals for farm-to-garment solutions. What I dislike is blatant greenwashing. For example, brands that call themselves "organic" but sell nothing organic—it's infuriating. I've seen brands at trade shows with polyester garments labeled as sustainable, and it's shocking. In kids' fashion, we're lagging behind adult fashion in sustainability trends. Adults are more willing to invest in sustainable clothing, while kids' fashion is treated as disposable. People assume kids' clothes aren't worth investing in because kids grow quickly, but that's not true. We offer high-quality garments that can last through multiple children. Five years ago, we started selling secondhand pieces from our own collections. Our first collection included a jacket that's now been worn by at least four kids and still looks great. Seeing this circularity inspired us to launch a pre-loved marketplace, where customers can resell our garments to each other. A startup in Berlin helped us create this marketplace, and it's been amazing.

**Interviewer:** Do you have anything else to add?

**Interviewee:** No, I think we've covered everything—motivations, strategies, good and bad practices. That's it from me.

**Interviewer:** Thank you so much for your time. It was great to hear your story and get a kids' brand perspective—it's a unique angle on sustainability.

**Interview – Mila.Vert**

**Interviewer:** I’ve started recording, just so you know—it makes transcription much easier. I hope you’re fine with that.

**Interviewee:** I’m fine.

**Interviewer: A**s I mentioned in my message, I’m doing research on sustainability. It’s part of my doctoral thesis. Before this, we conducted studies, starting with a content analysis of sustainable fashion brands. Then we researched consumer reactions to transparency strategies. Now, we want to hear directly from brand owners or marketing experts about sustainable fashion communication. Do you have any questions for me before we start?

**Interviewee:** No, I look forward to your questions and will help where I can.

**Interviewer:** Great. Can you describe your brand as briefly as possible?

**Interviewee:** Mhm. Yes, it’s a sustainable fashion brand. We emphasize quality, timeless design, and local production. Everything is produced locally here in Slovenia, where the brand originates. We produce everything made-to-order, so there’s no overproduction. We focus on organic cotton. Additionally, we work with a local knitting studio with a long tradition of producing high-quality knitwear. That’s the shortest way I can explain it, but if you have more questions, I can go into details.

**Interviewer:** How long have you had this brand?

**Interviewee:** I started full-time in 2016, but I’d been working on the idea for almost 10 years before that.

**Interviewer:** Ok. You already outlined your sustainability mission, but has it changed over time?

**Interviewee:** Slightly. The mission itself hasn’t changed significantly. At the beginning, we aimed to offer more affordable clothing. Later, we realized that with such small production, our prices were set too low to be sustainable. We couldn’t compete even with other ethical brands producing in larger quantities. So, we had to raise prices, which was a challenge. We risked losing a customer segment, but we had no choice as raw material costs increased after COVID, along with electricity and other expenses. We also reduced the variety of clothing we offered. Our bestsellers were knitwear, which had fewer returns—only 10%, which is very low for the garment industry. Focusing on knitwear made more sense environmentally and economically. So, we narrowed our focus instead of widening it.

**Interviewer:** How do you think your brand stands out in the sustainable fashion sector?

**Interviewee:** Our made-to-order system is unique. While some brands use this model, it’s more common in the footwear segment than in clothing. Customers who are conscious about sustainability recognize overproduction as a major issue, and we offer an alternative. Overproduction is one of the biggest problems in fashion. Research shows that 40% of clothing is never worn. We try to offer a better alternative, so we're not part of this problem. We're also thinking more about circular economy practices, especially with the upcoming EU law in 2026 requiring brands to handle recycling. We're in talks with potential partners to address this. However, the quality of the clothing is key—it should last as long as possible before recycling is necessary. Producing durable, timeless designs is critical to reducing waste.

**Interviewer:** Regarding selling your products, do you think sustainability is a core element or a complementary feature? Why do you think consumers choose your brand?

**Interviewee:** We've done research over the years and found sustainability is a complementary feature. At first, we thought it would be a primary driver, but we quickly realized customers come for design, perceived quality, and brand connection. Sustainability is an added value—it influences decisions when two comparable products are available. Some customers specifically search for sustainable products on platforms like Germany's Avocado Store. However, their decisions are still influenced by style and price.

**Interviewer:** That's very interesting. Other brands I've spoken to share similar insights about sustainability being complementary. Let's talk about transparency. Do you communicate your challenges or limitations to your audience?

**Interviewee:** Yes, it's part of our concept. We've had significant issues in the past. For instance, we once bought recycled polyester for accessories from a Spanish supplier, but later discovered it wasn't recycled. We'd already sold the products at an international fair, so we contacted all customers and shops to inform them. We offered refunds but explained the products were still durable and well-made. Most customers chose to keep them. This experience showed the importance of clear and transparent communication. We also avoid making claims we can't back up, like saying we're GOTS-certified when only our yarn is certified. Transparency is essential, even if customers don't always check. It's about fairness and trust.

**Interviewer:** Do you think transparency is crucial for customers?

**Interviewee:** Not all customers check, but it's still important to be transparent. Otherwise, you're misleading them. While some customers care deeply, others are less concerned and prioritize design. However, it's our responsibility to provide answers when asked.

**Interviewer:** Research shows increasing skepticism about green claims. Have customers approached you with concerns about greenwashing?

**Interviewee:** Rarely. I thought we'd get more questions, but it's uncommon. Either they trust us, or they're not concerned.

**Interviewer:** Sustainability can be a complex topic. How do you ensure clear communication?

**Interviewee:** We focus on explaining where and how we produce, often using videos to show behind-the-scenes processes. We don't overwhelm customers with details, but provide information when asked. It's about finding the right balance.

**Interviewer:** A recent Business of Fashion article said customers find green marketing performative and annoying. Why do you think that is?

**Interviewee:** Many brands over-communicate and risk alienating customers by making them feel guilty about their choices. Instead, we focus on saying, "We're not perfect, but we're trying." This approach resonates better without pointing fingers at fast fashion or customers.

**Interviewer:** Do you educate your customers on sustainability?

**Interviewee:** Yes, it's our responsibility, but it's not just on brands. Governments and consumers also play a role. We also share tips on garment care to extend their lifespan. It's about considering the full lifecycle of a product.

**Interviewer:** What do you think of the new EU law on green claims?

**Interviewee:** I support it if it genuinely moves the needle on sustainability. However, it shouldn't become an administrative burden that only disadvantages EU brands.

**Interviewer:** Do you collaborate with other sustainable brands?

**Interviewee:** Yes, we've done collaborations and plan to do more. The ecosystem is tough because sustainable production is expensive, and prices are a differentiator. Lower margins also limit resources for marketing and competition.

**Interviewer:** Looking ahead, what are your sustainability plans?

**Interviewee:** We're exploring ways to make our production even more sustainable, like upgrading machinery for seamless knitwear.

**Interviewer:** Any practices from other brands you admire or dislike?

**Interviewee:** I dislike misleading claims like "this product saves water," which can confuse customers. I admire brands that reinvest profits into impactful projects, like living wage programs or environmental initiatives.

**Interviewer:** Do you have anything to add?

**Interviewee:** No, I think we covered everything.

**Interviewer:** Very interesting discussion—thank you for your time!

**Interviewee:** Thank you as well, and good luck with your PhD!

**Interview – ZEROBARRACENTO**

**Interviewer**: If you had to describe your brand in three words, what would they be?

**Interviewee**: Zero-waste, Italian, minimal.

**Interviewer**: Could you outline your brand's overall sustainability mission? How has this mission evolved over time?

**Interviewee**: Sustainability has been at the core of our brand since the beginning, rooted in our design mission. Over time, we've expanded our focus to include a traced supply chain, careful selection of sustainable materials, and eco-packaging. As a small brand, we maintain the highest level of control over our suppliers.

Every collection incorporates zero-waste pattern-making, a technique that ensures the fabric is used in its entirety, eliminating the typical 15% waste in garment production. This innovation is combined with sustainable materials, selvedge design details, and minimal use of accessories—no buttons, zippers, or hooks, and only a few seams.

Our challenge has always been to marry zero-waste pattern-making with the aesthetics and wearability of luxury items. It's about achieving exceptional quality without compromising sustainability.

We also minimize environmental impact by choosing factories close to our raw materials, reducing transportation needs. For example, we source organic and recycled wools from Biella and Prato districts in Italy, renowned for their expertise in sustainable textiles.

Recently, we've partnered with Xylene to integrate Digital Product Passports (DPPs). This technology enhances traceability, providing customers with a transparent history of each garment—from raw material sourcing to final production. Currently, 62% of our supply chain is part of this digital map, showcasing the ethical and sustainable practices of our partners like Brunello Spa, Lanificio Zignone, and others.

**Interviewer**: How does your brand differentiate itself from the generic environmental claims often seen in the industry?

**Interviewee**: Our differentiation lies in our zero-waste DNA. Instead of speaking generically about sustainability, we focus on communicating the tangible impact of our design and production methods. we focus and communicate about our zero-waste dna, not generically about sustainability.

**Interviewer**: Would you say sustainability is a core driver of your brand's identity and sales, or is it more of a complementary feature?

**Interviewee**: Sustainability is at the heart of our brand identity. ZEROBARRACENTO isn't about revolutionizing the industry but about restructuring its values. Our designs are seasonless, genderless, and ageless, offering garments that prioritize longevity and connection.

The name "ZEROBARRACENTO" reflects our values:

- ZERO: Zero waste, zero pollution, zero gender, zero age barriers.

- CENTO: 100% quality, Italian craftsmanship, sustainable materials, and transparency.

**Interviewer**: How do you decide what sustainability messages to share on your website versus on social media?

**Interviewee**: The messages are consistent across platforms, but the format and tone of voice are tailored to each medium.

**Interviewer**: What specific challenges or limitations in your sustainability journey do you openly share? How has this transparency affected your brand perception?

**Interviewee**: Zero-waste pattern-making is particularly challenging, especially at an industrial scale. It's not easy, but we believe our coherence and commitment pay off in the end. Transparency has strengthened trust in our brand and reinforced our dedication to authenticity.

**Interviewer**: Sustainability can be a complex topic. How do you ensure your communication is clear and engaging for consumers?

**Interviewee**: We prioritize clear and transparent information. Recently, we introduced Digital Product Passports for our autumn-winter products, giving customers detailed insights into the lifecycle of each garment.

**Interviewer**: With sustainability becoming a popular topic, greenwashing has been on the rise. How does your brand address consumer concerns about greenwashing?

**Interviewee**: Our Digital Product Passports provide verifiable data, ensuring customers can trust our claims.

**Interviewer**: A recent article in the *Business of Fashion* noted that many consumers find sustainability messaging performative or even annoying. Why do you think this perception exists?

**Interviewee**: This happens when brands don't curate their communication properly. Messages can feel disingenuous or overwhelming if they're not backed by concrete actions or clear transparency.

**Interviewer**: Research shows that while consumers are increasingly interested in sustainable fashion, knowledge levels among Millennials and Gen Z in Europe remain moderate. How do you educate your consumers, and do you think it's the responsibility of sustainable fashion brands to do so?

**Interviewee**: Absolutely, it's part of our responsibility. We actively communicate through our channels, organize educational events, and collaborate with universities and schools to spread awareness about sustainable fashion.

**Interviewer**: With new regulations aiming to limit generic environmental claims, do you believe such laws are necessary? Why is there skepticism about their effectiveness?

**Interviewee**: These regulations are fundamental for creating accountability. However, they need to be proportionate to the size of the company. Otherwise, they risk harming small businesses that already face significant challenges.

**Interviewer**: Do you see value in collaborating with other brands to promote sustainability across the industry?

**Interviewee**: Absolutely. We frequently collaborate with other small brands to share best practices and amplify sustainability efforts collectively.

**Interviewer**: How does your brand plan to adapt its sustainability strategy to meet evolving consumer expectations and regulatory requirements?

**Interviewee**: We plan to improve and expand our Digital Product Passports as regulations are finalized. This will help us stay ahead in terms of transparency and compliance.

**Interview – Iron Roots**

**Interviewer**: Thank you so much for giving me the time for this interview. I already started recording, if that's not a problem for you, just for the sake of transcribing afterward. Let me know if you would like to be anonymous for this study.

**Interviewee:** No, no need to be anonymous is fine.

**Interviewer**: Ok. So the first question I have is if you had to describe your brand in three words, what would they be?
**Interviewee**: I'd say innovative, health, and sustainability.

**Interviewer**: OK. Can you maybe outline your brand's sustainability mission? And did this mission evolve over time?
**Interviewee**: No, not really. I think from the beginning, we have already established that we wanted to create an alternative to synthetic sports fabrics—that was the mission that we set out to achieve. And I think there are still lots of opportunities there. So it's not really changed, obviously from different perspectives, but the core of creating more sustainable and healthy sportswear remains as a company.

**Interviewer**: OK. And how would you say your brand makes itself different from generic environmental claims that are very much seen in the industry?
**Interviewee**: I think one thing is to make things simple for customers. So using certification, for example—I mean, everyone can call their product sustainable, but if you don't have anything to back it up, then that doesn't mean anything.

So I think for us, it's important to stick to the facts. Certain certifications that we use or that our partner factories use, we can actually show what change we're doing. And in some sense, we try to steer clear of just saying "sustainability," even though it's a word that triggers people. It also doesn't really mean anything in and of itself, right?

So I think by showing what it means in our sense or what we think it means and being clear about that, is how we differentiate, I think, from the rest.

**Interviewer**: OK. It was a very interesting thing that you mentioned. As you know, sustainability can be really a broad concept, and I was really trying to Google—is there such a law in Europe that sort of creates a checklist of what you have to have in order to call yourself a sustainable fashion brand? Or really, there isn't a law on this?

**Interviewee**: No, I think they are clamping down on generic terms. So they do want to avoid greenwashing. So, where like "eco-friendly" or "sustainable" or "green," they are trying to clamp down on that as far as I know, which is obviously a good thing.

There have been some brands that got caught in that, from what I know. But the main thing is it's mostly marketing-oriented. So if a brand makes a claim, an advertisement, or something, then the authorities get after it.

But it's more of a marketing misleading type of thing instead of it being like a regulatory oversight in a broader sense or technical perspective. It's more of a—you cannot mislead the customers and say that something is green without specifying what that means, or saying something is recycled when the recycled content is only 10%, right?

So there have been some cases, as far as I know, in that direction. But probably not enough, I think, to justify all the talking about it because it's been going on for quite a while that they want to tackle greenwashing. And it's difficult, obviously.

But yeah, there are plenty of options to further elaborate on making sure that companies cannot be dishonest, I think.

**Interviewer**: Yeah, so we are referring here to this EU Green Claims Law that is going to ban generic environmental terms. Do you think that will make any difference in the sustainable fashion sector?

**Interviewee**: Obviously, it will mean that there have to be more precise terminologies, examples, or types of proof. So brands can actually show what they're doing—that will change.

I think also an issue is you're going to make words viable, right? So there can also be a very, very gray area for companies truly. And we have defined what sustainable means in the scope of fashion, and they're not allowed to use that word anymore or use it. But then, for example, new technologies come around, so it's not really the most sustainable option anymore. Then how do you cope with that?

There's a lot of issues, and I foresee that obviously, the big brands and fast fashion companies will just circumvent all the rules or find a new way to express what they're doing or insinuating that they're doing something good, right? Saying something like, "Clothes for tomorrow," or something, right?

That will probably be more and more insinuated instead of just saying sustainable. But then, yeah, if you can interpret it in different ways, it becomes a very grayish area, I think, where it’s difficult to ban words because that's what they are—words.

**Interviewer**: Well, we’ll see. I’m not optimistic that it will work flawlessly, but I mean, something has to be done. Coming back to your brand—do you think that sustainability is a core element driving the sales in your brand, or is it more a complementary feature?

**Interviewee**: I’d say a bit of both. I think we’re also focusing more and more on health. So what we also see is that people with sensitive skin, for example, who cannot use any synthetic sportswear, come to us as an alternative.

And also, as more and more knowledge about all the chemicals used in sportswear comes to light, people get scared of that and want to focus more on a healthy alternative. So I think right now, I’d say more than half probably come to us for just the sustainability story, but health is probably going to play a bigger role in the coming years.

In the end, we also have to focus more on creating really good designs, building the brand around it. sustainability will move a bit more to the background.

**Interviewer**: So, you think sustainability will move to the background for your brand, or do you think that's going to happen in general for the sector? Because I think a lot of claims brands make don't make any sense.

**Interviewee**: And a lot of backlash is what makes people skeptical, right? Look at Patagonia, for example, with other issues in the labor part of their business. The skepticism will only be further exaggerated as more and more brands will try to greenwash their way out of things.

And so, for the general public, it will probably not be the main buying point. Maybe for specific customers, it still will be, but I'm not optimistic that the general public will buy for that reason.

So our approach is, let's just make everything as sustainable as we can and then focus on the other things that do drive purchasing behavior. And then, in the end, the end goal is the same. It's just you're putting it on top of everything else.

I think a lot of brands make the mistake of solely focusing on sustainability. In the end, it's not strong enough, I think, to just use that as a point of interest for people.

**Interviewer**: Yeah, OK. Those are really good insights. I wanted to ask you—do you share the specific challenges or limitations in your sustainability journey? And what do you share, and what's the reason for it?

**Interviewee**: Interesting points. I think this is something that we are going to do a bit more of in the near future. We’ve found it works best when writing blogs, for example, where we outline the limitations of materials we use or the challenges we face with choosing certain types of materials or product development.

Yeah, so we've done it a little bit and probably will do that more. I think that people are really interested in that. So, yeah, that's a good point where we can introduce them more and more.

**Interviewer**: OK. Yes, because in one of our research studies with consumers, we discovered that they actually react positively when brands share challenges because they seem more honest and transparent. And as you said, sustainability became such a buzzword, and there is a lot of skepticism around it.

You mentioned blogs. So, I'm also interested in how you decide what information goes on social media versus your website?

**Interviewee**: Good point. I think they're kind of interconnected in some sense. But on social, what we've found is that if you put very dry information there, people don't really care. It's not social. So we always have to look for the social component.

And if you just talk about water saved or something in the supply chain, it's very, very dry. It doesn't really work too well for your organic traffic, as we've found. Also, because you're kind of beating a dead horse—every brand that's doing something in this space has already talked about it.

For people who are interested in sustainability, the information is really easy to find. So there's nothing new if you're portraying certain kinds of information. That's where blogs are more of a complementary or extra layer of information for people that are interested in certain subjects.

But we don't put that on social too much. Whereas the story of struggles and challenges might be more suitable for social, if you like.

**Interviewer**: Mhm. And as we've already said, sustainability can be such a complex topic, and people can get overwhelmed with the amount of information. How do you make sure that your communication is clear and engaging to your consumers?

**Interviewee**: I think making it easy—so not trying to tell too many things at the same time. In the end, if we want to focus on health, we have to just be very clear on what aspects we're talking about. Or if we're talking about certain materials, we have to be very clear on what kind of materials and what the advantages are, but not take too much of people's attention.

Just finding out the most important points and making those as clear as possible works better than providing the most information that you can. And it can be done in multiple ways, right?

You could have a little subheader on a topic, and then people can click through to a bigger plan or do a small introduction on social and then link to where they can learn more about it.

But again, it's only a very small percentage of people who are really interested in diving deep into certain topics. In the end, all you can do is just provide clear information.

**Interviewer**: OK. And as we already talked about, there is a huge skepticism around greenwashing. Have you ever had an experience where a consumer approached you with concerns or asked for more information about your sustainability practices?

**Interviewee**: Yeah, obviously people ask questions, like about the types of dyes we're using, for example. Or if all products get made in a certain location. So people do inquire—not necessarily skeptically, but they are asking questions, which I think is a good thing.

For example, they ask about the end-of-life of the products or what we do with seconds or defective items. I think it's good that people inquire a lot.

In the end, there are brands putting more effort into sustainability than we are in some regards. But it's fine that people inquire because there's always going to be a group of people for whom it's never good enough, right? They'll say, "You should use more of this" or "You should do that."

Sustainability isn't about that—it's more of a slow process, slow incremental changes towards a better future. It's difficult to measure, obviously. But if you can already show that you're doing your best and that there are some limitations, I think most people are fine with it.

**Interviewer**: That's very interesting. I don't know if you saw a recent article in *Business of Fashion* that says consumers find sustainability messaging annoying. What do you think is the reason for that?

**Interviewee**: It's too much of the same stuff. If you talk about labor practices, it's just—you're repeating the same stories. It's the same outcomes.

"Oh look, we're doing this better than the others." It becomes kind of boring in some sense. If you're interested, you'll learn about it and dive into the rabbit hole. But the issues stay the same. If you read an article for the fifth time and it all mentions the same issues, it doesn't trigger the right response for people anymore.

There's a big marketing challenge there as well—to make it a bit more fun again. But it should be an inherent pillar of the business. It shouldn't form a complete identity around it.

**Interviewer**: Yeah, I understand. It should be like a foundation that people don't necessarily see, right?

**Interviewee**: Exactly. At the core of every fashion brand should be some form of sustainable practices—whether it's on the social side or using certain materials or avoiding certain chemicals. But it should not be the only thing that drives the brand. People, it's still fashion. People still want to buy stuff that looks good, that's been thoughtfully designed. And just having sustainability—you've seen a lot of sustainable brands that are on the verge of going bankrupt or already gone bankrupt because that's just what they focused on.

And it’s not as strong of an emotional or binding thing to a brand as other things, such as perception of quality, design, or community around the mission that you have.

It’s... yeah, it’s never been that strong of an argument, I feel like. Only a few years back, it might have been a really good argument, but now it’s more of a… yeah, not a good argument.

**Interviewer**: If you like, do you think sustainability doesn’t attract people as it used to?

**Interviewee**: Mhm.

**Interviewer**: OK. And also, when we did some consumer surveys, we tested knowledge around sustainable fashion. Even though the research shows that people are interested, our results show that their knowledge is really moderate.

So, I’m interested—does your brand take any steps to educate consumers? And do you think that’s also a responsibility of a sustainable fashion brand?

**Interviewee**: Yeah, I mean, you have to be transparent about everything. So, people who want to learn more about what we do can find it. But I don’t want to push it in people’s faces, if that makes sense, right?

There are certain aspects I think are important, such as what chemicals are put into your clothing, what kinds of materials you’re using, and what the effects of certain materials in sportswear are.

But I’m not going to put all those things in people’s faces like, "Oh, this is a certain way of producing stuff that is slightly more or slightly less energy-intensive," or, "This is why using solar panels in a factory is a better option."

I think it’s good that people can find that information. But yeah, that’s part of educating. For us, it’s not so much about educating as it is about providing a nice alternative.

If people want to dive into the world and learn more about the technical side, they can find all the information. But it doesn’t have to be at the forefront of everything we do. We just try to be a brand first, rather than only telling the story of how supply chains work, right?

**Interviewer**: OK. Yeah, that’s great. I only have two more questions. We covered a lot of stuff—I didn’t even need to ask many questions because you already covered them in your answers.

But I’m also curious—do you see value in collaborating with other brands, like sharing best practices or promoting sustainability industry-wide?

**Interviewee**: Yeah, I think so. We don’t do it that much. There are a few designers we talk with or a few brands we’re in close contact with, and we exchange knowledge with them.

There are some crossover opportunities from the network we have around us. But in the end, a big part of the business right now is that we have to focus on just growing ourselves, like creating a solid, well-run business.

So I think later—maybe in a few years—there's going to be more of that sharing of industry knowledge or working together. But it's not a main focus for us right now.

We do it occasionally, like with grants, and there's obviously a big advantage there. But there's a time and place for everything. Right now, the focus is more on ourselves and establishing the brand.

**Interviewer**: And the last question is—you already started talking about it—looking ahead, what are your plans for the brand? And do you think your sustainability message will evolve?

**Interviewee**: OK, yeah. So, we're actually going to change our brand name in a few weeks. That's quite a major change.

The plans are kind of the same, but with a broader perspective. Specifically with sustainability—we've said we don't want to use anything synthetic in our sportswear. But for some products, there's just no other option.

So instead of saying, "plastic-free sportswear" in sustainability terms, we're going to say "the road to plastic-free sportswear." It's more of a journey we're taking.

I think that's also a stronger way of letting people join us on the mission. Showing people what can be done and what new technology needs to be implemented.

Obviously, the end goal is 100% synthetic-free sportswear throughout the whole collection. But it's not viable right now.

So, yeah, those are the long-term goals. To get there, we need a lot of new product development, growth in a variety of areas, and we need to keep looking for innovations in the market that we can use.

So yeah, those are the bigger-picture goals for the brand in the coming years.

**Interviewer**: OK, that's perfect. That's all the questions I had. Thank you so much. Do you have any questions for me?

**Interviewee**: Maybe… no, I think most things we've covered. If you'd be so kind as to share the findings after your research, that would be really nice.

I always like to have a little more insight, especially on an industry-wide level. That would be really interesting to learn more about. If you have any initial research, that would be really nice.

Other than that, if anything else pops up, feel free to send me an email, and I'll see if I can help out.

**Interviewer**: Great. Thank you so much. It was great meeting you, and good luck with your rebrand.