



Communicating green fashion across different cultures and geographical regions

Corinna Dickenbrok¹ · Luis F. Martinez¹

Received: 21 June 2017 / Accepted: 11 February 2018 / Published online: 19 February 2018

© Springer-Verlag GmbH Germany, part of Springer Nature 2018

Abstract This paper studies the communication of eco-fashion start-ups across different cultures and geographical regions. The focus lies on market potential of the niche market in sustainable fashion, previous communication of former eco-fashion brands, the cultural diversity and desired brand-awareness to identify recommendations in communicating sustainable fashion. By applying a grounded theory qualitative approach – relying on in-depth interviews with a sample of five (co-) founders of green start-ups from three different continents –, this paper suggests effective practices for communicating transparently, for including influencers in the process, and for addressing local needs successfully. Communicating green fashion labels and, at the same time, protecting the identity, coherence and appeal of the brands remains a key challenge. Findings also suggest that sustainability is demanded worldwide, yet with different communication purposes – distinctiveness in the Western world and group cohesion in Latin America and Middle East. Consequently, this paper lays a foundation for understanding the creation of desire in sustainable fashion. Overall, this paper seeks to contribute to a better comprehension of the specific communication patterns involved in green fashion.

Keywords Eco-fashion · Sustainability · Cross-cultural issues · Communication · Brand awareness

1 Introduction

It's simply fashion. Innovative, desirable and responsibly produced.

(Koehler and Schaffrin 2016: 7)

✉ Luis F. Martinez
luis.martinez@novasbe.pt

¹ Nova School of Business and Economics, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Campus de Campolide, 1099-032 Lisbon, Portugal

Fashion is often considered a mirror of society and typically involves continuous change. Recently, an increasing number of eco-friendly fashion brands all around the globe has started to design modern, elegant and trendy clothing. Pioneer entrepreneurs suggest how to dress in the future, with responsibly made clothing that respects both people and environment. Also, consumers start to assess priorities and to value sustainability and authenticity as more important than in the past (Paço and Raposo 2008). Hence, consumers ask for sustainable fashion, although their purchasing behavior could not reflect this desire. This paradox is called attitude-behavior gap and has its root in cost considerations, interest and (lack of) knowledge (Butler and Francis 1997). Moreover, sustainable clothing could now be perceived as old fashioned (Koehler and Schaffrin 2016).

Designers are now producing trendy clothing at affordable prices while considering minimalistic designs as fashion themes in their collections. This paper, in particular, recognized communication as the source of the attitude-behavior gap. Whereas prior studies focused on stating the urgency of sustainable fashion due to the impacts that market players have on environment and society, this paper considers new ways of customized communication, while paying attention to the distinctive characteristic of responsible production. The uniqueness of this paper is to learn from an under-researched – yet vocal and active – group of pioneers around the globe who are working in eco-fashion start-ups. In this process, companies from emerging countries which have been out of scope of previous work – due to, among other aspects, the high price level of sustainable fashion –, are also considered. The main purpose of the paper is to generate some communication advice for sustainable conscious brands. Additionally, the potential of sustainable fashion around the globe is assessed to further motivate other fashion brands to produce responsibly in the future. Thus, we seek to address the following research question: how could eco-friendly fashion start-ups effectively communicate across different cultures and geographical regions?

This paper is organized as follows: first, we provide a brief literature review about the urgency of sustainable fashion, the communication trends across different cultures, particularly regarding the potential impact of communication of sustainable fashion for green brands. Next, we outline the methodology of grounded theory and its main assumptions as well as limitations. By applying the specified methodology, the main findings of the interviewees' data are presented. Subsequently, the findings are discussed on how the theoretical framework is connected to the empirical methodology. The final section wraps up with a summary of the main findings, the limitations and suggestions for future research, which include insights for future quantitative research in sustainable fashion communication.

2 Literature review

2.1 Urgency of sustainable fashion in the marketplace

The current fast-fashion business model is to steadily copy the new designs of the luxury brands (Caro and Martinez-de-Albeniz 2015). Brands such as Zara and H&M are inspired by luxury fashion shows and build prototypes and adapt them to their price range. Their benefit to their customers is offering fashionable clothes at an affordable

price. However, the secret of success of these brands is their quick response to the market demand. For example, Zara supply chain takes around four months in comparison to traditional ones which need 18 months (Wells and Danskin 2013). Therefore, the brand responds to nascent demand trends and produces as needed. This model is unsustainable by nature since the shorter and shorter design, production and distribution, leaves little leeway for environmental and ethical considerations. The key success factors for smaller brands are to create a strong identity, to develop a specific know-how and to explore specific local perceptions. The middle market is shrinking due to its huge stock, yet it is missing the differentiating factor that justifies slower production or premium on tag price (Corbellini and Saviolo 2009).

Luxury fashion brands might have an even greater responsibility than fast-fashion brands since, “nearly everything that luxury brands do is copied by fast-fashion brands, so transparency and sustainability initiatives must come from the top of the fashion chain” emphasizes Jordan Philips, author of *The Lure of Luxe* (Keinan and Crener 2015: 30). Many customers might argue that luxury itself is characterized by high quality art pieces and the opposite of the throwaway society. However, the luxury sector is still criticized because of the use of animal products such as furs and leathers, which is a threat to endangered species (Kapferer 2010). Due to globalization and the rise of middle class, luxury is no longer the privilege of the happy few. Hence, traditional attributes such as exclusivity and exceptional craftsmanship have become less relevant.

The fashion industry has a big environmental footprint by using tons of water, producing excessive carbon dioxide and polluting the environment with harmful chemicals. As an example of its extent, in India cotton makes up 4% of its agricultural land but accounts for 40% of all pesticides (Nordic Fashion Association 2014). The fashion industry is not only one of the most resource intensive industries, but is also one of the most labor intensive ones (Siegle 2016). Brands outsourced most of their production to developing countries with lower labor costs and social regulations. Thus, conditions are often unsafe and the poverty drives labor to take poor compensation for granted. Also, 75% of the garment workers are women and this releases questions about equal gender opportunities (Siegle 2016). These issues have started attracting public attention and thus political engagement. The coinciding movements of role model brands as Patagonia, an apparel brand for outdoor sports, of Stella McCartney and of advocacy groups, are all promoting sustainable development and efforts to eliminate extreme poverty (Summers 1970). Stella McCartney is one of the pioneer luxury founders in eco-friendly fashion. She expresses her philosophy in all stages of her life, by working with Chloé or Gucci Group. After founding her own business, her most valuable contribution may have been her partnership and cooperation with Kering and Adidas in which she held steadfast to her values (Keinan and Crener 2015). Thus, she accomplished change outside of her own business. Designers such as Vivienne Westwood and Jean-Paul Gautier exemplify their creativity in sustainable fashion (Westwood and Kelly 2014). These efforts are creating awareness among consumers, suppliers and citizens on a global basis.

The term *sustainable fashion* first internationally appeared on the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 (Seyfang 2011). Sustainability consists in meeting a current generations needs without compromising those of future generations (Fletcher 2008). Thus, sustainable fashion is produced by neither damaging the environment nor the people and ideally, it

will even serve them. The lexicon suggests several terms including “green”, “ethical”, “ecological” and “organic” as substitutes to sustainable fashion. These terms are often used interchangeably, thereby challenging researchers and consumers alike (Bly et al. 2015; Thomas 2008). Hence, in this context, eco-friendly brands are ecologically and socially responsible. These brands are reducing their environmental impact either aiming to use only renewable resources throughout the supply chain or finding innovative ways to avoid toxic substances. Moreover, they are respecting human rights and the continuous support of sustainable development in labor. For example, paying fair wages or respecting intellectual property (Green showroom 2016). Later, research expanded the basic concept to include anti – or reduced – consumption in sustainable fashion (McDonough and Braungart 2002). Due to the complexity of terminology, this paper focuses solely on the more conscious purchasing behavior rather than on buying less – meaning the rise of eco-friendly labels. In 2009, the Nordic Fashion Association and the Danish Fashion Institute started the Copenhagen Fashion Summit, a global gathering to discover the evolution of the fashion industry and to tackle its environmental footprint. The event is growing in size and importance and reflects a new movement for the entire industry. In 2016, there were 1200 ambitious entrepreneurs from 51 countries all over the globe contributing to the vision of accelerating social responsibility and new innovative business models (Green showroom 2016).

2.2 Communication of green fashion

The upcoming trend in sustainable fashion is rather perceived as an opportunity than just a burden for future economic growth in fashion, meaning the fashion industry might have the potential to innovate but also the responsibility to work proactively to address critical environmental, social and ethical challenges, emphasizes Harvard Professor of Law Jeannie Suk (Westwood and Kelly 2014). Fashion reflects society and its trends. What we wear is an expression of self-worth, and status. For example, Marc Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, wears casual clothing and represents a vision of freedom. Hence, not wearing suits is a movement of an entire generation of Millennials. Recent tendency is sharing mutual social understanding of enriching lives and preserving earth's natural resources. Consumers are reassessing priorities and increasingly questioning values like sustainability and transparency, which some researchers label as “new consumerism” (e.g., Hoang 2016). Fashion helps defining a personal identity that fits within the bonds of social norms (Thompson and Haytko 1997). Indeed, consumers are increasingly asking for sustainable fashion, although their purchasing behavior may be inconsistent with their claims. This is called attitude-behavior gap and has its roots in cost considerations, interest and (lack of) knowledge (Butler and Francis 1997). Furthermore, most designers do not appreciate to use the terms sustainable fashion, green fashion or slow fashion, as these concepts are too often associated with old-fashioned goods (e.g., shapeless clothing made of hemp; typical ecological products from the 1970s and 1980s). This particular approach focused merely on the distinctive characteristic to be sustainably produced (Koehler and Schaffrin 2016).

Communicating green fashion and, at the same time, protecting the identity, coherence and appeal of the brand is the challenge in conversation with customers (McNeill and Moore 2015). Prior research shows that the perception of green fashion communications has a crucial influence on consumers' green consciousness and indirect impact

on consumers' behavior (Lee et al. 2012). To become trendy, sustainable fashion needs to be accepted by the masses. Figure 1 depicts the curve line of new fashion trends: firstly, fashion innovators, bloggers and designers determine the trend, followed by opinion leaders. This is a small group of consumers who look for differentiation. Next, we account for mass adoption, and then late adopters and laggards will follow.

Prior studies underlined co-creators' social media potential for unknown labels (Corbellini and Saviolo 2009). By posting a dress on Facebook, Instagram or Snapchat, co-creators suggest new aesthetics in fashion. Specifically, Chiara Ferragni, one of the most influential bloggers nowadays, mixes the codes of luxury brands as Chanel bags with fast-fashion brands as Zara clothing. She said, "her followers always liked this because they could see how cool a cheap sweater can look when you wear it well" (Keinan et al. 2015: 2). The need for imitation in humans is natural. Moreover, new social media platforms boost the communication through the easiness of use of hash tags and links to the worn brands. Followers can click on the link leading to the brands website. Hence, an online-offline shopping experience and multichannel consumer behavior is suggested. This is beneficial for unknown green labels that cannot afford a shop. It was about sharing (her) life with followers and awaiting their response. She receives daily feedback based on likes and comments, and from these she was inspired. The consumer is the driver of trends. Hence, with her growing community, nowadays 7.3 million followers on Instagram, Chiara Ferragni became influential as a fashion innovator. "I am learning and growing up with you and your lovely suggestions", posted Chiara Ferragni (Keinan et al. 2015). The opportunity, in particular for eco-friendly start-ups, to co-create with followers is the key advantage of bloggers. Co-creating means to create a value jointly (Ramaswamy and Gouillart 2010). In this case, the followers' likes and comments reveal their needs of a sustainable fashion piece. Trends arise through consumer acceptance (Kapferer and Bastien 2012).

Earlier in 1995, Stella McCartney was recruiting supermodels and famous friends as Naomi Campbell and Kate Moss to model for her. The communication was a success attracting the attention of prestigious retailers such as *Bergdorf Goodman* (Keinan and Crener 2015). Fashion media provides a bridge between sustainable fashion and its consumers. It writes about the latest fashion trends and spread pictures of brand ambassadors that shape their buying behavior. More and more brands are seeking for content marketing by publishing informative articles in magazines to hide advertising purposes (Ramaswamy 2008). For example, Nike paid *Vogue*, one of the most influential fashion

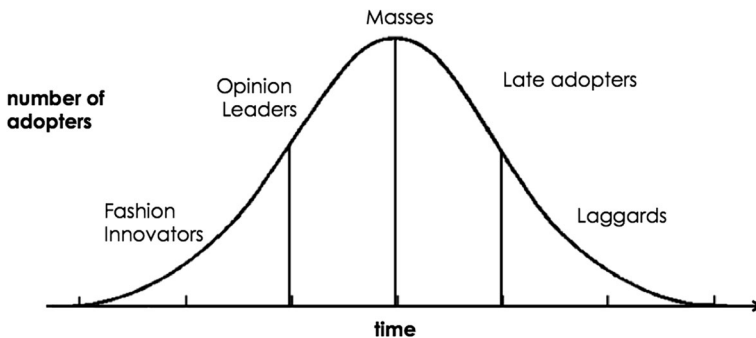


Fig. 1 The curve line of fashion trends (Corbellini and Saviolo 2009)

magazines around the globe, to write about the innovative fabrics of its fitness tights. Could media – largely funded by advertisements – cover critical coverage for advancing sustainability and for giving sustainable fashion an attractive perception without pay?

To share suppliers and communication ideas, aspiring newcomers join each season for *Ethical Fashion* shows. Recently (in Summer 2016) in Berlin, key organic fashion brands were showing their contemporary street and casual wear summer collections on catwalk (Green showroom 2016). Sustainable fashion is new and thus, its communication needs to inform and attract consumers first to gain market share. Most of the brands still have a low marketing budget (Euromonitor International 2016). Hence, besides the established labels, the spotlight in Berlin is also on new labels that relish the opportunity of being given international exposure via the Green showroom that completes the broad scope of organic fashion from all over the globe.

The new campaign “*Chanel goes Eco*” was part of the Fashion Show in Paris in Spring 2016. Karl Lagerfeld indicated wood shavings into the Chanel Haute Couture decoration to show an entire conscious brand vision (Blanks 2016). In fact, fashion brands answer on consumers’ demands in sustainable fashion, yet with questionable sincerity. For example, Zara promotes its new collection that is partly made with materials such as organic cotton, recycled wool and Tencel, which reduce the environment impact. “These collections embrace these women who look into a more sustainable future”, promotes Zara (The Good Trade 2016). Their organic cotton is farmed using natural fertilizers. However, the price of the sustainably produced collection is not significantly higher than others. Many fashion brands are jumping on the ethical conscious bandwagon with questionable traceability in sustainability. This awakes doubt, not only because of their greatly quick answer to supplying green clothing. Experts warn about *Green washing*. This is an expression used when more money is spent on the green campaign than is actually spent on environmentally practices, which as a result, misleadingly promotes social responsibility. These labels have often only achieved the most easily marketable issues (e.g., organic cotton cultivation).

2.3 Trends in different geographic regions

Sustainable thinking is trendy and a social marker across different early adopters and opinion leaders. It addresses the distinctive personal advantage of being green. Consumers in developed countries are looking for distinctiveness and underlining their individualism. Hence, niche green brands and new upcoming eco-friendly start-up culture are more prevalent in developed countries than in emerging countries with an egalitarian seeking culture (Cervellon and Shammas 2013). However, sustainable fashion in emerging countries is starting to flourish. Brands who differentiate themselves by reflecting concerns and aspirations for a better and sustainable world are not only more desired by developed countries, but also amongst the affluent middle classes of emerging countries such as Latin America and Eastern Europe. Thomas Chauvet, head of European luxury goods, observed a similar conscious trend in Asia: “Most Japanese and Chinese consumers ask for the transparency of the supply chain” (Keinan and Crener 2015: 36). A report from Nielsen in 2013 analyzed that emerging countries are more sensitive to sustainable clothing than developed countries (Mauer 2014). One reason for this increased concern may be due to the direct and higher impacts that unsustainably managed companies have on the former countries’ societies.

This arouses a low profile statement in developed countries from the new Swedish attitude LAGOM, known as Minimalism. It is the highest form of luxury with low-profile status. The Journal of Corporate Citizenship conducted a study in 2012 in France that revealed consumers doubt on the legitimacy of corporate claims when they perceive a brand is overusing its logo (Cervellon and Shammam 2013). This aspect might be accounted for by counterfeits. Further, minimalism avoids consistently illustrating the social gap. Many fashion designers are introducing other minimalist trends as owning less is more and choosing quality over quantity. They have the desire to simplify life. Indeed, choosing a simplified uniform in the morning saves time in a busy schedule. Moreover, Karl Lagerfeld mentioned “wearing fashion risks increasing the chance of having outfit regret anywhere from ten minutes to four hours after putting it on, and leads to lack of confidence. Confidence is one piece that we must wear every single day” (Blanks 2016). This trend led the way for unknown brands, in particular, for eco-friendly start-ups, whose designers regard the simple designs in their new collections. Hence, sustainable fashion is perceived in parts of Europe and Latin America, as a luxury (The Good Trade 2016). The price ranges from an affordable to a high-end value.

Whereas earlier research has viewed sustainable consumption being driven by environmentally and socially concerns, more recent studies revealed self-interested facets (Black and Cherrier 2010). Sustainable consumption is linked to the formation of self, distinction, uniqueness and group cohesion. Furthermore, sustainable clothing gives a sense of empowerment through the avoidance of status goods and competitive social hierarchies (Connolly and Prothero 2008). A few years ago, consumers wanted to be sportier and daring, and were looking for brands helping them achieving that. Therefore, Nike designed fancy clothing and organized running events or NTC training boot camps that helped consumers achieve these desires. These days, consumers developed a more comprehensive understanding of sustainability and transparency. Hence, consumers ask brands to communicate their social and ecological impact beyond the new collection. Nike is starting to make a huge effort to turn its innovation force into sustainability initiatives as a response to past sweatshop scandals (Ramaswamy 2008).

3 Methodology

3.1 Sample and procedure

For this research, both a judgmental and snowball sampling was used for data collection. Five founders or co-founders of eco-friendly fashion start-ups – male and female –, participated in the study. They were selected by ethical brand vision and by cultural heritage as diversity provides for more varied outcomes for acculturation. The average age across of all interviewees was 31 years with individual ages ranging from 27 to 37. The sample included academic backgrounds in social responsibility, management, fashion design and law. Most participants were awarded with a Master’s degree. Interviewees have their start-up seats in rather different geographical regions: Santiago (Chile), Washington DC (USA), Bordeaux (France), Munich (Germany), and Beirut (Lebanon).

To find an effective communication strategy of eco-friendly start-ups in different cultures and geographical regions, an inductive approach was used following the

elements and rules of grounded theory. Grounded theory originated from the pioneering work of Glaser and Strauss (1967). Semi-structured interviews with open-ended format and projective techniques were applied for the data collection technique. Data analysis was dynamic, proceeding in successive iterations of the data collection and analysis as predicted by the approach. Introduced by the purpose of the study and its declaration of consent, the in-depth interview addressed the following topics: (1) opportunities in the marketplace; (2) own brand communications; (3) cultural differences on ethical fashion; and (4) the awareness of sustainable conscious competitors. Thus, interviewees shared underlying thinking beyond their own brand. The five interviews were conducted by phone, via Skype or in person. Each interview took around 45 min and was recorded and transcribed verbatim for subsequent in-depth analysis. The final number of five resulted from the growing difficulty to extract new communication patterns, meaning that a state of category/theoretical saturation was attained (O'Reilly and Parker 2012). Accordingly, no significantly new categories were obtained from the final interview.

3.2 Data analysis

The interviews were analyzed by the development of a direct interpretation of their responses to set up higher levels of generalization and abstraction, in a nonlinear and iterative manner, following the principles of grounded theory. This methodology enables different process designs as data collection, data analysis and the development of theoretical sensitivity in a continuous interplay among one another (Glaser and Strauss 1967). As recommended in literature, the study progressed in three steps: (1) grouping direct quotes into first-succinct descriptive concepts; (2) interpreting concepts into major second-order themes; and (3) defining themes into a wide dimension explaining existing relationships. These theoretical categories, conceptually broader and more abstract, are often formulated as hypotheses for future quantitative research. The methodology of grounded theory encourages systematic and detailed analysis of the data, yet its main limitation is the dependence on the researchers creativity to rise above the detail (Myers 2013).

4 Results

In this section, the findings will be presented according to the principles of grounded theory. The final aggregate dimensions emerging from the interviews will also be revealed, providing an overall summary of the data. Firstly, we identified and analyzed quotes and coded them into succinct codes. Secondly, we classified those along eight second-order themes. Thirdly, we defined four aggregated dimensions: 1) Transparency; 2) Influencers; 3) Acculturation; and 4) Self-esteem.

Figure 2 shows a detailed description of this model. Next, the main findings are presented by explaining underlying synergies.

4.1 Transparency

The interviewees indicated that the fashion industry lacks drive for sustainability and is one of the most environmentally damaging industries. “We should save resources, we owe that to our children”, mentioned Jason Grullon, founder of Virtú. He emphasized

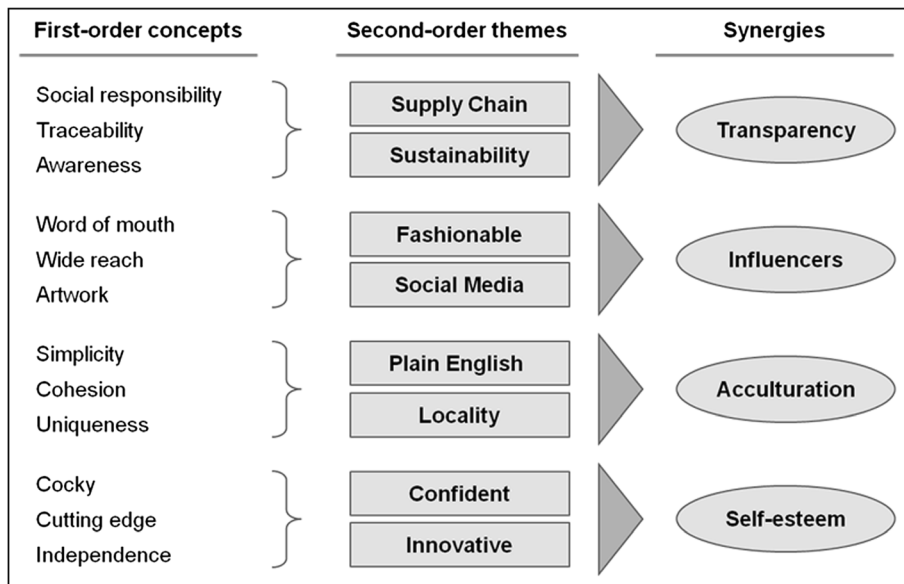


Fig. 2 Stages of *grounded theory* (Researcher-induced illustration based on Myers 2013, 108–110)

that he wants to raise more awareness. The green fashion market can change the expectations from the customers to more traceability in the supply chain. The founders have a vision and see opportunities in sales growth, such as in the rapidly growing *bio-food* industry. Furthermore, Maximilian Koehler, founder of Quantum Courage, observed that customers get more conscious about “what they wear on their skin”. Considering interviewees’ quotes, descriptive codes are in the first stage: social responsibility, traceability and awareness. These again were organized in second-order themes: supply chain and sustainability.

The supply chain involves all steps from the production location to the end consumers. By seeing the environmental impact the fashion industry has and “how it exploits people”, interviewees decided to drive change and to respond to the emerging market opportunity. They built businesses from scratch to solicited consumers’ social responsibility. “Craftsmanship, innovative fabrics and informative communications” tend to boost sustainable thinking. Yet, customers underestimate “the cost of workmanship and the eco-conscious business model behind it” due to abundance of other apparently green collections, mentioned Johannes Heilberger, founder of *ourownbrand*. Transparent communication helps to emphasize the unique selling proposition of eco-conscious start-ups. Thus, the first synergy of the second-order themes is transparency.

4.2 Influencers

The way of communication of eco-friendly start-ups is crucial to change the perception of odd green fashion. Interviewees value word-of-mouth advertising, also because it is a cheap alternative to mainstream marketing. It “affirms its artwork” by friends, highlighted Rebecca Ballard, founder of *Maven Women*. Green fashion has to be “appealing and trendy”, mentioned Ayesha Siddequa. Descriptive first-order codes of

the interviewees are: word-of-mouth, wide reach and artwork. When organizing these codes into second-order themes, the following concepts result: fashionable and social media.

To raise more awareness for sustainable clothing, Virtú tagged another “Chilean eco-friendly watch brand Ttanti” in a picture on Facebook. The owner, Jason Grullon, likes to co-operate. Competition is expanding the knowledge. As the entire market, “we can change the perception of sustainable clothing to a trendy one”, underlines Jason Grullon. Small brands need some kind of accelerator. Hence, known photographers or models with many followers create the desired buzz. Social media is an “essential kind of the way to be social active”, declares Johannes Heilberger. It shows the esprit of the brand. “We can’t think about content marketing with a full page in *Vogue*”, but nowadays bloggers and opinion leaders are trendsetters. Overall, combining the second-order themes to a theoretical category, influencers are considered the second synergy.

4.3 Acculturation

The biggest distinction between different cultures might be how far the trend of ethical oriented fashion has progressed. In Europe, consumers buy eco-friendly clothing to make a difference. With transparent communication, the founder of Virtú targets consumers “that have no time for volunteering in Western Africa but support ethical entrepreneurs” with their buying behavior. In contrast, Lebanese people still “do not get the concept” emphasizes Ayesha Siddequa. It requires local language; “we promote rather hand-made clothing than slow-fashion”, since it is more comprehensible. First-order concepts are simplicity, cohesion and uniqueness. Those are organized in second-order themes: *plain English* and locality.

As in Lebanon, also in Chile *plain English* is crucial. Chileans see how garment workers are exploited. By promoting local help, middle class people feel they have a direct impact “on their community by buying Virtú shirts”. Americans are “interested in the storytelling” of the eco-conscious brand, since they are seeking the distinctive advantage of being green, highlights Rebecca Ballard; “we adapt our communications”. Customers want to underline their individualism; hence “we ask them which design they prefer”. Interviewees agreed that eco-friendly start-ups have the opportunity to address local needs and desires and thus, challenge global brands. Coming up with a theoretical category, acculturation presents another synergy.

4.4 Self-esteem

The desired brand awareness of eco-friendly start-ups is completely consistent across interviewees: cutting-edge, cocky and independent. These characteristics build the descriptive first-order succinct codes. Accordingly, the organized second-order themes are: confident and innovative. “Sustainable fashion is for yourself”, underlines Johannes Heilberger. Fashion is still for impressing others, yet green brands recognize the scarce marketing potential of sustainable fashion, since consumers “do not talk about it that much”. However, brands strive for the inner feeling of having a positive impact. Interviewees were asked to project their thoughts onto one thriving eco brand. Patagonia is outstanding in offering “innovative sustainable fabrics, and at the same

time attractive designs” and the clothing lets customers feel like they have a positive impact and at the same time, to be trendy, says Rebecca Ballard. If (my) brand would be a persona, the persona is “unisex, straightforward and cocky”, says Jason Grullon. Eco-friendly start-ups make a huge effort to “turn their innovation force into sustainable initiatives” and letting the customer be part of it. Therefore, the final third-order synergy is self-esteem.

5 Discussion

Transparency is the first synergy, and is an important pillar in the self-understanding of the founder, as transparency typically evokes trust. Those players who communicate in a transparent way cannot and do not want to hide anything. Ayesha Siddequa emphasizes, that once “fooling the customers, the brand will have difficulties to come back”. Further, as the literature review states, transparency is essential in order “to be a role model for other brands” (Koehler and Schaffrin 2016). Interviewees’ start-ups are interested in gradually expanding the footprint of sustainable fashion to create awareness and thus, consumers demand. Liya Kebede, model, actress and World Health Organization ambassador, mentioned that she wants to show that it is possible to produce fashion of very high quality in Ethiopia. Therefore, she is supporting labor in Africa and cares about the current working conditions (Koehler and Schaffrin 2016). Through transparency in the supply chain, customers feel like they are involved and even may have an impact. Prior studies revealed three attributions of the attitude-behavior gap, (lack of) knowledge and cost considerations and interest (Butler and Francis 1997); these might be dissolved by transparency. Johannes Heilberger emphasized customers’ underestimation of the cost of workmanship of a sustainable business model. This perception may change through traceable communication. Secondly, by educating consumers about green washing from other brands meaning jumping on the bandwagon of sustainability without justification may diminish the communications of such brands. Thirdly, interviewees recognized the opportunity to awake interest and build a close relationship with consumers by sharing its supply chain partners and their positive impacts on society and environment. Jason Grullon is pleased of his marketing success by posting “Facebook live” chats from its Chilean production place. Its customer response was affirmative. Transparent communication of sustainable fashion is the answer to the development of new consumerism that “describes consumers’ reassessing of priorities and increasingly questioning of values” (Hoang 2016). In this way, eco-friendly brands could be seen as pioneers. They recognized their market opportunities at an early stage and challenge the entire fashion market. Whereas prior studies mainly analyzed the consumers of developed countries, this paper values the potential of consumers in emerging countries. Green fashion might be more fitting in developed countries due the fact that it is costlier and addresses rather the individualism than is a face-saving item in emerging communities (Cervellon and Shammas 2013).

Influencers are the second synergy, and whose roots are in the initiative to make “sustainable fashion sexy”, emphasizes Ayesha Siddequa. Prior studies underlined the perception of sustainable clothing as odd (Koehler and Schaffrin 2016). Hence, influencers are helpful to awake a fancy perception in sustainable fashion,

be it bloggers, designers, models or well-known photographers who co-create trends. The theoretical curve line of trends indicates first the adoption of fashion innovators and opinion leaders. Only then, the masses adopt sustainable fashion (Corbellini and Saviolo 2009). Influencers build up a “personal relationship with their followers” with daily posts and snapshots. By recommending sustainable clothing, followers take it “as a hint from a friend” and adapt. Word-of-mouth helps unknown brands since consumers trust and value them. Stella McCartney is a good example from experience. The brand included supermodels Naomi Campbell and Kate Moss, in marketing campaigns and Cameron Diaz or Liv Tyler posting photos wearing her designed dresses (Keinan and Crener 2015). Jason Grullon recognizes an important influential factor, which is to co-operate with other eco-friendly labels, as he did with Ttani in Chile on Facebook. These cross communications is influencing consumers. As a fashion innovator, Jason Grullon spreads sustainable thinking and seeks to let green fashion labels become the new normal over time. Influencers are an “affordable communication tool” emphasizes Johannes Heilberger. “I cannot pay for an article in *Vogue*”, but an influencer is “likely effectively; it is a kind of accelerator”, that unknown labels need. The sample underlines their low budget and their social active target group, which is the generation Y. Influencers, present in the communications of all interviewees, is an effective communication tool in sustainable fashion, apparently across interviewees’ countries of origin.

Acculturation is the third synergy, in which interviewees see a chance for the eco-friendly start-up culture. Ayesha Siddequa emphasizes that plain English is crucial to communicate to Lebanese, since “they do not get the concept of sustainable fashion”. Promoting hand-made designs is easily comprehensive in this context. By speaking their language, the brand creates trust and a close relationship to its consumers. In Chile, the upper middle class has the feeling of helping local garment workers. Local language is essential to awake “cultural different desires and fulfilling objectives of self-completion” (Jackson 2005, 19–36). In the US, Rebecca Ballard mentioned, “consumers are seeking for the distinctive advantage” of being green. This is a “social marker in developed countries” (Cervellon and Shammass 2013). The majority of the fashion brands are globally communicating across cultures to create a brand identity. In particular, small brands have the opportunity to adjust its communications on different geographical regions and challenge market players. Green labels might take market share, especially from the middle market, since it is missing its differentiating factor that justifies premium on tag price (Corbellini and Saviolo 2009). Eco-friendly brands have a strong identity in sustainability and answer on specific local perceptions. Thus, acculturation is a unique selling proposition in communications.

The final synergy is self-esteem. Fashion was and still is “used to be to impress others”, however sustainable fashion; “it’s for yourself”, underlines Johannes Heilberger. That is “one of the breaking points” why consumers do not talk about sustainable fashion that much. It is a huge difference to contemporarily fashion, and “decreases communications potential”. Recent studies affirm that sustainable consumption has been linked to the formation of the self (Connolly and Prothero 2008). Consumers are seeking to be part of the sustainable movement and to have a positive social and environmental impact. All this raises consumers’ self-esteem. Hence, eco-fashion brands’ consumers typically engage in buying behavior based on the purpose of

the brands, and not on their particular need of the product. This could create a different pattern in communication. Those inspiring brands that seek to communicate the reasons for producing sustainable fashion will eventually motivate the consumers around them. Interviewees would appreciate consumer brand awareness, which is cocky, cutting-edge and independent. Consumers are seeking to those same personality characteristics by purchasing a certain eco-friendly brand (Ramaswamy 2008). This applies for consumers from developed and emerging countries alike – whereas the former appreciate the distinctiveness, the latter focuses on local group cohesion (Connolly and Prothero 2008).

5.1 Limitations, boundary conditions and future studies

As with any study, this research has limitations. First, the inherent subjectivity – which is the nature of qualitative data – may pose several challenges in analyzing the data in a reliable manner. However, qualitative research is essential in social and cultural contexts so as to explore new inexperienced business fields. Secondly, the apparent small size of the sample may also prevent generalization of the findings. Yet, we managed to interview co-founders of green fashion recent start-ups across the globe – a very difficult sample to find. Moreover, we reached a saturation point for the data collected, which yielded pertinent insights. Finally, the applied methodology of grounded theory calls for subsequent quantitative follow-up studies and requires researchers' creativity to rise above the initial detail (Myers 2013). Qualitative research is necessary to understand people's motivation and inner beliefs, whereas subsequently quantitative analyses are also needed in order to test further developed hypotheses (Myers 2013).

Accordingly, our findings encourage further research addressing additional questions. First, future studies could seek to assess if transparent communications could help a green fashion brand to justify a higher price, as long as its supply chain respects social and ecological aspects. Secondly, could green brands be perceived by consumers as being trendier when embedding influencers in the communication process? Thirdly, it could be tested if an eco-friendly brand perception, which increases consumers' self-esteem, also increases consumer satisfaction. Fourth, the role of acculturation processes in green brands' communication strategies could also be further explored. Future contributions are definitely needed in the ever-changing consumer values, especially as sustainable fashion is becoming more and more relevant nowadays.

6 Conclusion

This study sought to exemplify effective communications for green fashion start-ups across different cultures and geographical regions. Accordingly, designers and co-creators now have a clear vision of courageous and edgy new business models, where best practices in sustainable fashion gradually arise. Communicating transparent and inspiring stories may act as the fuel needed for a smooth transition to sustainable consumption. Therefore, creating desire and trendiness is as important as informing about production conditions.

All interviewees suggest the following synergies for communication: transparency, influencers, acculturation, and self-esteem. By communicating transparently, an eco-

fashion brand awakes interest in the positive impacts on society and the environment, which those consumers feel like being part of. This enhances their desired self-esteem. Moreover, sustainable fashion is a new concept. Hence, as the curve line of fashion trends states, fashion innovators and opinion leaders are crucial in communication. The so-called influencers are active on social media and reach plenty of followers, which imitate their style. Another synergy is acculturation, as this unique selling point challenges global brands, which in turn communicate across cultures to build a brand image. However, sustainable fashion is a local desire, and often to help garment workers in own communities. Sustainability is demanded around the globe, yet with different communication purposes, distinctiveness rather in the Western world and group cohesion in Latin America and Middle East. In the future, these synergies will balance the paradox of consumers' attitude-behavior gap in sustainable fashion.

Funding This work was funded by National Funds through FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia under the project Ref. UID/ECO/00124/2013 and by POR Lisboa under the project LISBOA-01-0145-FEDER-007722.

References

- Black, I. R., & Cherrier, H. (2010). Anti-consumption as part of living a sustainable lifestyle: Daily practices, contextual motivations and subjective values. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 9, 437–453.
- Blanks, Tim. (2016). “Chanel goes Eco”. *Business of Fashion*. 18 Aug 2016. <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/fashion-show-review/chanel-goes-eco>.
- Bly, S., Gwozdz, W., & Reisch, L. A. (2015). Exit from the high street: An exploratory study of sustainable fashion consumption pioneers. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 39, 125–135.
- Butler, S. M., & Francis, S. (1997). The effects of environmental attitudes on apparel purchasing behavior. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 15, 76–85.
- Caro, F., & Martínez-de-Albéniz, V. (2015). Fast fashion: Business model overview and research opportunities. In N. Agrawal & S. A. Smith (Eds.), *Retail supply chain management: Quantitative models and empirical studies* (2nd ed., pp. 237–264). New York: Springer.
- Cervellon, M.-C., & Shamma, L. (2013). The value of sustainable luxury in mature markets. *Journal of Corporate Citizenship*, 52, 90–101.
- Connolly, J., & Prothero, A. (2008). Green consumption life-politics, risk and contradictions. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 8, 117–145.
- Corbellini, E., & Saviolo, S. (2009). *Managing fashion and luxury companies*. Milan: Rizzoli ETAS.
- Euromonitor International (2016). “Top 10 global consumer trends for 2016.” Retrieved from Passport database http://go.euromonitor.com/rs/805-KOK-719/images/WP_Top-10-GCT-2016_1.3-0116.pdf.
- Fletcher, K. (2008). *Sustainable Fashion & Textiles: Design journeys*. Oxford: Earthscan.
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. New York: Routledge.
- Green showroom (2016). “Ethical Fashion Week Summer 2016.” <http://www.greenshowroom.com/en/>. Accessed 21 Aug 2016.
- Hoang, Limei. (2016). “The 10 commandments of new consumerism.” *Business of Fashion*, 2 Aug 2016. <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/intelligence/the-10-commandments-of-new-consumerism>.
- Jackson, T. (2005). Live better by consuming less? Is there a ‘double dividend’ in sustainable consumption? *Journal of Industrial Ecology*, 9, 19–36.
- Kapferer, J.-N. (2010). All that glitters is not green: The challenge of sustainable luxury. *European Business Review*, 40–45. Retrieved from http://www.theluxurystrategy.com/site/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/EBR_JNK_NovDec2010_All-that-Glitters-is-not-Green.SustainableLuxury.pdf. Accessed 7 Mar 2017
- Kapferer, J.-N., & Bastien, V. (2012). *The luxury strategy: Break the rules of marketing to build luxury brands*. London: Kogan Page.
- Keinan, A., & Crener S. (2015). Stella McCartney. *Harvard Business School Case* 515–075. Boston: HBS Press.
- Keinan, A., Maslouskaite K., Crener S., & Dessain V. (2015). The blonde salad. *Harvard Business School Case* 515–074. Boston: HBS Press.

- Koehler, E., & Schaffrin, M. (2016). *Fashion made fair*. Munich: Prestel.
- Lee, N., Choi, Y. J., Youn, C., & Lee, Y. (2012). Does green fashion retailing make consumers more eco-friendly? The influence of green fashion products and campaigns on green consciousness and behavior. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 30, 67–82.
- Mauer, Esther. (2014). “Is green the new black?” Master thesis Haute Ecole de Gestion de Genève.
- McDonough, W., & Braungart, M. (2002). *Cradle to cradle: Remaking the way we make things*. New York: North Point Press.
- McNeill, L., & Moore, R. (2015). Sustainable fashion consumption and the fast fashion conundrum: Fashionable consumers and attitudes to sustainability in clothing choice. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 39, 212–222.
- Myers, M. D. (2013). *Qualitative research in Business & Management*. London: Sage.
- Nordic Fashion Association (2014) “Program of the 2014 Copenhagen fashion summit.” *Copenhagen Fashion Summit*, 24 Apr 2014. <http://copenhagenfashionsummit.com/program/>.
- O'Reilly, M., & Parker, N. (2012). Unsatisfactory saturation: A critical exploration of the notion of saturated sample sizes in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 13(2), 190–197.
- Paço, A. M. F., & Raposo, M. L. B. (2008). Determining the characteristics to profile the “green” consumer: An exploratory approach. *International Review on Public and Nonprofit Marketing*, 5(2), 129–140.
- Ramaswamy, V. (2008). Co-creating value through customers’ experiences: The Nike case. *Strategy and Leadership*, 36(5), 21–29.
- Ramaswamy, Venkat and Francis Gouillart. (2010). “Building the co-creative enterprise.” Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2010/10/building-the-co-creative-enterprise>. Accessed 4 Aug 2016.
- Seyfang, G. (2011). *The new economics of sustainable consumption: Seeds of change*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Siegle, Lucy. (2016). “Sustainable or superficial.” *Business of Fashion*, 4 Sept 2016. <https://www.businessoffashion.com/community/voices/discussions/can-fashion-industry-become-sustainable/op-ed-sustainable-or-superficial>.
- Summers, J. O. (1970). The identity of women’s clothing fashion opinion leaders. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 7, 178–185.
- The Good Trade. (2016). “35 Fair Trade & Ethical Clothing Brands Betting Against Fast Fashion.” <http://www.thegoodtrade.com/features/fair-trade-clothing>. Accessed 4 Aug 2016.
- Thomas, S. (2008). From green blur to eco fashion: Fashioning an eco-lexicon. *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture*, 12, 525–540.
- Thompson, C. J., & Haytko, D. L. (1997). Speaking of fashion: Consumers’ uses of fashion discourses and the appropriation of countervailing cultural meanings. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 24, 15–42.
- Wells, J. R. & Danskin, G. (2013). Inditex: 2012. *Harvard Business School Case* 713–539. Boston: HBS Press.
- Westwood, V., & Kelly, I. (2014). *Vivienne Westwood*. London: Picador.