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CREATING DESIRE FOR SUSTAINABLE FASHION: HOW COULD ECO-FRIENDLY  
FASHION START-UPS EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATE ACROSS DIFFERENT  
CULTURES AND GEOGRAPHICAL REGIONS?

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## **Abstract**

This paper studies effective communication of eco-fashion start-ups across different cultures and geographical regions. The focus lies on market potential of the niche market sustainable fashion, previous communication of former eco-fashion brands, the cultural diversity and desired brand-awareness to identify trends in sustainability. Using in-depth interviews with a sample of five (co-) founders of green start-ups from three different continents, this paper suggests, by applying grounded theory, a qualitative analysis, to communicate transparently, to include influencers, and to address local desires and self-esteem across cultures. Thereby communicating green fashion and at the same time, protecting the identity, coherence and appeal of the brand is the challenge in conversation with consumers. 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 the understanding of creating desire in sustainable fashion. Additionally, the potential of sustainable fashion is assessed to further motivate other fashion brands to produce responsibly in the future. Thus, this paper contributes to a more sustainable fashion industry.

Keywords: Eco-fashion; sustainability; cross-cultural issues; communication; brand awareness

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## 1. Introduction

*“It’s simply fashion. Innovative, desirable and responsibly produced.”*

(Koehler and Schaffrin 2016, 7)

Hereby, fashion designer, Bruno Pieters, describes what fashion should be like nowadays. Fashion is often considered a mirror of society and is about change. Recently, an increasing number of eco-friendly fashion brands all around the globe has started to design modern, elegant and trendy clothing. These pioneer entrepreneurs suggest how to dress in the future, with responsibly made clothing that respects both people and environment. Consumers start to assess priorities and to value sustainability and authenticity as more important than in the past. Hence, consumers ask for sustainable fashion, but their purchasing behavior does 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 is perceived as old fashioned (Koehler and Schaffrin 2016, 7).

Designers are now producing trendy clothing at affordable prices while considering minimalistic designs as fashion themes in their collections. This paper, in particular, recognized communications, 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 communications and pays 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 that working in eco-fashion start-ups also considering consumers and 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. The purpose of the paper is to give arising sustainable conscious brands communication advice. Additionally, the potential of sustainable fashion around the globe is assessed to further motivate other fashion

brands to produce responsibly in the future. Thus, the research question is the following: how could eco-friendly fashion start-ups effectively communicate across different cultures and geographical regions?

This paper is organized as follows: first, a brief literature review about the urgency of sustainable fashion, the communication as well as trends across different cultures is provided, particularly regarding the potential impact of communication of sustainable fashion for green brands. It is a critical analysis of what researchers have said on sustainable fashion. The third chapter outlines the methodology of *grounded* theory and its main assumption as well as limitations. By applying the 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 sixth chapter wraps up with a summary of the main findings, its limitations and suggestions for future research. Thereby, hypotheses are developed for future quantitative research in sustainable fashion communication.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Urgency of sustainable fashion in the marketplace**

Today's latest fashion designs are swiftly overtaking yesterday's. Latters have already assigned for the trash bin (Caro and Martinez de Albeniz 2014). The fast-fashion business model is to steadily copy the new designs of the luxury brands. Brands like 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 though. E.g. Zara supply chain takes around 4-months in comparison to traditional ones which need 18 months (Wells and Danskin 2013) Thereby, 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 its huge stock, yet it is missing the differentiating factor that justifies slower production or premium on tag price (Corbellini and Saviola 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, 40-45). 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 2016). The fashion industry is not just one of the most resource intensive industries, but is also one of the most labors intensive ones (Jones 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. 75% of the garment workers are women and this releases questions about equal gender opportunities (Jones 2016). These issues have started attracting public attention and thus political engagement, with the recent factory collapse in

Bangladesh being an influencing factor (Siegle 2016). The coinciding movements of role model brands as Patagonia, an apparel brand for outdoor sports, of Stella McCartney and of advocacy groups are 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, be it 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, 7). 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). As per definition, sustainability is 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 many terms including “green, ethical, ecological and organic” as a substitute to sustainable fashion. These terms are often used interchangeably, thereby challenging researchers and consumers alike (Thomas, 2008). Hence, in this context, eco-friendly brands are “ecologically and socially responsible”. They 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”; e.g. 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 than 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 (Jones 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. “Clothes matter”, wrote Financial Times journalist Jo Ellison (Financial Times 2014). What we wear is an expression of self-worth, and status; e.g. 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 millennial. Recent tendency is sharing mutual social understanding of enriching lives and preserving earths natural resources. Consumers are reassessing priorities and increasingly questioning values like sustainability and transparency, it is called new consumerism (Hoang 2016). This develops through fashion being a personal identity that fits within the bonds of social norms (Thompson and Haytko 1997, 15-42). Indeed, consumers are increasingly asking for sustainable fashion yet their purchasing behavior is different. This is called attitude-behavior gap and has its roots in cost considerations, interest and (lack of) knowledge (Butler and Francis, 1997). Further, most designers neither intend nor appreciate

the terms sustainable fashion, green fashion or slow fashion. Because too often, this is associated with something old-fashioned - the ecological fashion from the 1970s and 1980s, shapeless clothing made of hemp, not least because the previous communication focuses solely on the distinctive characteristic to be sustainably produced (Koehler and Schaffrin 2016, 7).

Communicating green fashion and at the same time, protecting the identity, coherence and appeal of the brand is the challenge in conversation with customers. 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, Choi, Youn, Lee 2012). To become trendy, sustainable fashion needs to be accepted by the masses. This indicates the curve line of new fashion trends: firstly, fashion innovators, bloggers and designers, co-create the trend as well as then, opinion leaders. This is a small group of consumers who look for differentiation. Then the masses, late adopters and laggards follow. Refer to Appendix 1 for a detailed description of this model. Prior studies underlined co-creators' social media potential for unknown labels (Corbellini and Saviola 2009). By posting a dress on Facebook, Instagram or Snapchat, co-creators suggest new aesthetics in fashion. E.g. Chiara Ferragni, one of the most influential bloggers, 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, Maslauskaitė, Crener, Dessain 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, Maslauskaitė, Crener, Dessain 2015). The opportunity, in particular for eco-friendly start-ups, to co-create with followers is the key advantage of bloggers. 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 magazines around the globe, to write about the innovative fabrics of its fitness tights. Can 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*. In Berlin in summer 2016, 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; e.g. 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. Niche green brands and new upcoming eco-friendly start-up culture are, hence, more likely in developed countries, than in emerging countries with an egalitarian seeking culture (Cervellon and Shammass 2013). How about sustainable fashion in emerging countries? 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 recent report from Nielsen in 2013 analyzed that emerging countries are more sensitive to sustainable clothing than developed countries (Mauer 2012). Could it be that they are more involved because of the direct and higher impacts that unsustainably managed companies have on their society?

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, “when a brand is perceived as overusing the logo, consumers doubt on the legitimacy of its claims” (Cervellon and Shammass 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 said “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 range is from an affordable price to high-end.

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, 437-453). Sustainable consumption is linked to the formation of self, distinction, uniqueness and group cohesion. Further, sustainable clothing gives a sense of empowerment through the avoidance of status goods and competitive social hierarchies (Connolly and Prothero 2008, 117-145). 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). Thereby consumers gain a responsible self.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Sample and Procedure**

For this work project, both a judgmental and snowball sampling was used for data collection with 5 founders or co-founders of eco-friendly fashion start-ups, male and female, participating 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. These were mostly achieved with a Master's degree. Interviewees have their start-up seats in different geographical regions from Chile, Washington, France and Germany to 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. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended format and projective techniques were applied for the data collection technique. Data analysis is 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: Opportunities in the marketplace, own brand communications, cultural differences on ethical fashion and 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 took around 45 minutes 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, Paper, Marx 2012); no significantly new category 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 (Myers 2013, 104). As recommended in literature, the study progressed in three steps: grouping direct quotes into first-succinct descriptive concepts, interpreting concepts into major second-order themes, and finally 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, 108).

#### **4. Results**

The following chapter details the applied grounded theory. It also reveals the final aggregate dimensions emerging from the interviews and thus, provides a reasonable and abstract summary of the data. Firstly, the author identified quotes to succinct codes, secondly, classified those along eight second-order themes, and, thirdly, defined four aggregated dimensions: 1) Transparency, 2) Influencers, 3) Acculturation and 4) Self-esteem. Refer to Appendix 2 for a detailed description of this model. In the following, 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”, thereby Jason Grullon, founder of Virtú emphasized 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 our own brand. 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, says 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. Organizing them in second-order themes, there are: 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 cooperate. 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”, says

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. Thinking conceptually broad, combining the second-order themes to a theoretical category, influencers are 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 Virtù 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, says 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. 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 small marketing potential of sustainable fashion, since consumers “do not talk about it that much”. It is more about 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. 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, since transparency 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 said 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 are pioneers. They recognized their market opportunities at an early stage and challenge the entire fashion market. Whereby 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 Shamma 2013). However, the middle class of Latin America and Eastern Europe are asking also for transparency in the supply chain, which one contributor being the confrontation with the labor conditions on their communities (Sandersen 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 Saviola 2009). Refer to Appendix 1 for a detailed description of this model. 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 Center 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. 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. It 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 contemporary fashion, and “decreases communications potential.” Recent studies affirm that sustainable consumption has been linked to the formation of the self (Connolly and Prothero 2008, 117-145). 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. 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 117-145).

## **6. Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to exemplify effective communications for green fashion start-ups across different cultures and geographical regions. With the descriptive words in the introducing quote “its simply fashion. Innovative, desirable and responsibly produced,” the aforementioned designer has the vision of a courageous and edgy new business model, where best practices in sustainable fashion gradually expand their reach. Possibly communicating transparent and inspiring stories is the fuel that we need to transition to sustainable consumption. Therefore, creating desire and trendiness is as important as educational advertising.

Interviewees suggest the following synergies across origins: 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 new. Hence, as the curve line of fashion trends states, fashion innovators and opinion leaders are crucial in communication. So-called influencers are active on social media and reach plenty of followers, which imitate their style. Another synergy is acculturation since this unique selling point challenges global brands, which 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. These synergies will balance the paradox of consumers' attitude-behavior gap in sustainable fashion, in future.

### *6.1. Limitations, boundary conditions and future studies*

The findings have limitations in the ambit. Subjectivity is in the nature of qualitative data that leads to challenges in establishing reliable data. Secondly, there are researcher-induced bias and missing of few practical experiences in interview techniques that might loose validity in suggested approaches. Thirdly, it is challenging to present the data in an effective manner for the real world due to its qualitative nature. Further, as mentioned above, the applied methodology of *grounded theory* requires researchers creativity to rise above the detail (Myers 2013, 108).

The literature states that, firstly qualitative research is to understand people's motivation and inner beliefs whereby subsequently quantitative analyses test developed hypotheses by statistical and numerical methods (Myers 2013). Qualitative research is necessary, though, in social and cultural context and new inexperienced business fields.

Thus, this paper encourages further quantitative research by testing the following suggested hypotheses whose content arouse from the sample: First, transparent communications helps a green brand to justify a higher price as long as its supply chain respects social and ecological aspects. Secondly, by embedding influencers in the communication, the green brand gets a trendier consumer perception. Thirdly, this eco-friendly brand perception, which increases consumers' self-esteem, has more satisfied consumers. Fourth, acculturation in communication increases green brands' sales. Additionally, this paper suggests studies thinking outside of the box in comparing critical success factors from the *bio food* industry with sustainable fashion. Lastly, the paper

encourages studies in ever-changing consumer values, not least because sustainable fashion is apparently the way to dress in the future.

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