

COMMUNICATION OF SUSTAINABILITY AT EUROPEAN FASHION ONLINE SHOPS

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the communication of sustainability of fashion retailers via their websites with a focus on the involvement of the consumer and the varying communication processes, based on the sender-receiver model. For the empirical study, 10 fashion retailers were analyzed in terms of their communication of sustainability via their websites, with a focus on the consumer involvement. The results of empirical study were applied to the theoretical communication process model and illustrate the varying communication processes among the ten fashion retailers. The communication of sustainability via the fashion retailers' websites varied strongly. Only one fashion retailer communicated environmental- and social as well as all consumer-related aspects. As a result, the loop of the communication process has only been closed for one fashion retailer. Accordingly, these findings confirm that there is a need for fashion retailers to inform consumers in a holistic way about sustainability, especially in terms of sustainable fashion consumption when communicating sustainability via websites.

Keywords: Sustainability, Communication, Fashion Retailers, Consumer's Knowledge, Greenwashing, E-Commerce, Transparency

INTRODUCTION

Linking sustainable practices to fashion is not an easy task. Cheap fabrics, low wages and the exploitation of labor keep being the products as well as the downsides of the fashion business (Clark, 2008). However, working conditions in the fashion supply chain have faced severe criticism, especially after tragic occurrences such as the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh in 2013 (Kozlowski, Searcy, & Bardecki, 2015). Beside the social concerns, the fashion industry encounters major environmental effects resulting e.g. from the use of hazardous chemicals, high water consumption and huge waste volumes due to the fast fashion system (Allwood, University of Cambridge, & Institute for Manufacturing, 2006).

However, it seems like the fashion industry is not only becoming aware of the situation, but also of its responsibility to society (Beard, 2008). Consequently, sustainability is turning into an increasingly important topic for the fashion industry (Guercini & Ranfagni, 2013) and it is obvious that the fashion industry can no longer act this way (Kozlowski et al., 2015). Therefore, the fashion industry has started to consider green fashion more than just another trend that is about to pass by. Accordingly, many fashion companies make use of several tools and concepts. Also, more and more fashion companies provide CSR reports in order to illustrate their individual actions taken (Kozlowski, Bardecki, & Searcy, 2012).

This paper aims to contribute to the research of the communication of sustainability in the context of the fashion industry. Accordingly, this paper aims to have a closer look at the content that is communicated, with a focus on the involvement of the consumer. Therefore, the research question that will guide this paper is:

“To what extent do fashion retailers communicate sustainability?”

‘Extent’ in this context has two different, yet connected meanings. First, ‘extent’ means that this paper will analyze whether fashion retailers communicate sustainability e.g. merely about their supply chain or go beyond and inform and involve the consumer. Second, with the empirical findings regarding the consumer involvement in mind, ‘extent’ means that this paper will illustrate to what extent there is a closing of the loop within a adapted communication process model, that is based on the communication process model by (Kotler, Keller, Brady, Goodman, & Hansen, 2012). Important background literature was provided by a study conducted by (Turker & Altuntas, 2014), who analyzed the sustainability reports of fast fashion retailers in the context of sustainable supply chain management and a study conducted by (Kozlowski et al., 2015), which aimed to provide a general overview of all aspects that are communicated via the websites of those fashion retailers that are members in the Sustainable Apparel Coalition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Environmental Problems in Fashion Production

The production and processing part of a garment are prevailing contributors to negative effects on the environment, such as eutrophication, agricultural land appropriation, natural land alteration (Beton et al., 2014), serious human health issues, water contamination, air pollution, decreasing soil fertility and biodiversity and resistance concerning weed resulting from the use of pesticide (Grose, 2009). These symptoms are primarily linked to the cultivation of natural fibers, as they need fertilizers and land for growing (Beton et al., 2014). As already mentioned, the negative impacts of the clothing industry are also linked to the processing part (Beton et al., 2014), which requires huge amounts of water, particularly for the dyeing and finishing process (Ozturk, Yetis, Dilek, & Demirer, 2009). However, the water needed for these processes comprises not only a great amount of water as a resource, but is also contaminated by several different pollutants, such as acids, dyes or heavy metals after using it (Visa, Pricop, & Duta, 2011). Plus, the textile industry and in this context the dyeing factories, face problems due to incorrect practices of notorious dyeing factories in India and China, where local water sources are exhausted and where wastewater is often discharged into local rivers (Kaye, 2013). Beside these environmental issues resulting from the fashion industry, it is also the social issues (Strähle, Bin, & Köksal, 2015) that have faced severe criticism: For instance, in April 2013, after the collapse of the clothing factory Rana Plaza, located close to Bangladesh's capital Dhaka, the debate about working conditions in the fashion industry was elevated to a new level of discussion (M. Taplin, 2014). Therefore, it is important to mention not only the environmental aspects the fashion industry struggles with, but also severe social issues such as child labor, refusal of workers right to associate, payment below minimum living wages, precarious employment and delayed payment (Allwood et al., 2006).

Consumer-Related Problems in the Context of the Fashion Industry

Consumers buy in order to still an emotional need, they buy latest-trend articles to assimilate, to satisfy basic needs and to impress their fellow men (Cao et al., 2014). Consequently, fashion consumers demand for a continuous change and new items need to be available regularly (Bruce & Daly, 2006). Yet, consumers seldom need a specific item but rather buy clothing because it is a pleasure and purchase on impulse (Black & Eckert, 2012). As a result, another undeniable correlation has been discovered between the rise of the fast fashion retailers and excessive consumption from the consumer side (Cao et al., 2014; Gabrielli, Baghi, & Codeluppi, 2013). After a fashion item has been bought, the usage phase continues the environmental impacts. The usage phase in this context means the washing, tumble drying and ironing of a

clothing by a consumer. The detergent and energy needed for washing clothing have been discovered to be catalysts for a high share of effects on the environment (Beton et al., 2014). Yet, the environmental impact stretches even further once an item has been worn out: A common consumer attitude is to throw away fashion items rather than repair them (Fletcher, 2014). Therefore, growing volumes of textile waste are disposed of in landfills, which has a major impact on the environment and the correlation between fast fashion and the growing amount of textile waste is undeniable (Allwood et al., 2006). In a study on young fashion consumer's disposal habits, (Morgan & Birtwistle, 2009) found out that consumers retain high-price garments or donate them to charity shops, but simply throw away cheap items of clothing as they are no longer wearable. Furthermore, the study revealed that there is a huge lack of knowledge among young fashion consumers, and the participants agreed that in general, consumers are simply not aware of how and where the items are discarded or how the items have been made and what environmental consequences the production process entails. Applied in a wider context, this lack of knowledge has also been extensively investigated in a study conducted by (Shen, Richards, & Liu, 2013), who focused on consumers' awareness of sustainable fashion. Their study revealed that there is a lack of knowledge in terms of sustainable fashion and that there is a need to inform consumers. Additionally, from a broader perspective, a study conducted by (Hill & Lee, 2012) discovered that beside the lack of knowledge about the negative consequences of the fashion industry, there is also little knowledge about the holistic concept of sustainability itself among young fashion consumers. Yet, it is important to mention that knowledge about certain environmental and social issues does not necessarily lead to a change in behavior: While consumers become increasingly aware of issues regarding the environment and while more and more green products are available on the retail shelves, the demand for these products and services is not as high as expected (Gleim, Smith, Andrews, & Cronin, 2013). Many studies refer to this phenomenon as the 'attitude-behavior-gap' (Antonetti & Maklan, 2015), meaning that there is "*[...] a significant difference between what consumers say about the importance of consumption-related ethical issues and their actual behavior [...]*"(d' Astous & Legendre, 2009).

Greenwashing as a Counterpart to Actions Taken Regarding Sustainability

As already mentioned in the introduction part, many fashion companies have taken measures to integrate sustainability practices into their business (Kozlowski et al., 2012). Yet, in this context, greenwashing needs to be considered as well. Greenwashing has become an international, negatively associated expression to illustrate actions of companies who position themselves as 'green' and use 'green claims', even though there is no sufficient evidence for sustainable

sourcing or even though there is an entire absence of credible certification (Mowbray, 2012). Moreover, consumer's spendings are diverted towards products that have a non-existent or only a tiny positive impact on the environment and accordingly, greenwashing gets even more successful, even though the focus should lie on the innovation of real sustainable products (Bodger & Monks, 2010).

Communicating Sustainability to the Consumer

Many times, the direct communication of practices regarding sustainability is not effective, and as a result, consumers remain with sparse knowledge about the effects of the sustainability practices (Hill & Lee, 2012). In the context of the development of a 'consumer-centric approach to sustainability', (Sheth, Sethia, & Srinivas, 2011) indicate that companies pay different level of attention to their stakeholders and especially the consumer as a stakeholder is not addressed in an appropriate way. Also, according to Shet et al., (2011) the lacking focus on the consumer limits the efficiency as well as the effectiveness of actions taken regarding sustainability.

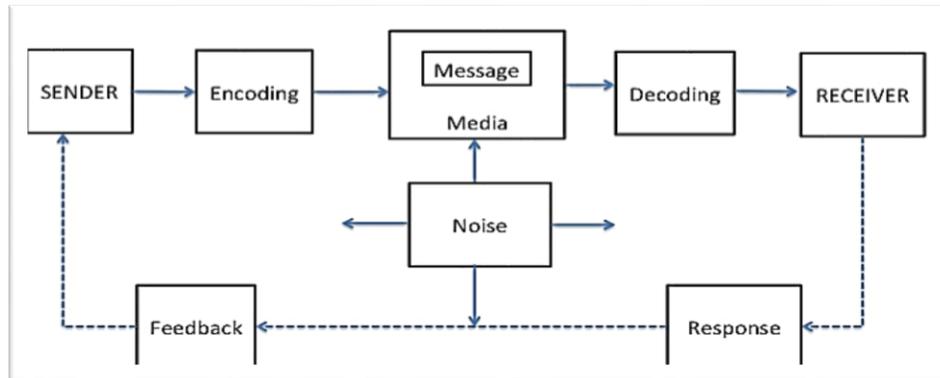
Apart from this, according to Shet et al., (2011), if the consumer is not involved, 'mindful consumption' cannot be achieved. Mindful consumption does not intend to reduce consumption overall, but to turn overconsumption into a proportion that is ideal for the consumer (Sheth et al., 2011).

However, beside the lack of consumer involvement from the companies' side, the consumer's lack of knowledge plays a major role, too: Several studies indicated that there is a need for educating consumers about e.g. the negative environmental consequences that are linked to different fibers, finishes and production processes (Connell, 2010), the clothing usage phase (Hill & Lee, 2012), sustainable fashion (Shen et al., 2013), sustainable consumption and clothing disposal habits (Morgan & Birtwistle, 2009). There is a good reason for these recommendations, as research has shown that knowledge does have an effect on environmental friendly consumer behavior (Tanner & Kast, 2003), (Fraj-Andrés & Martínez-Salinas, 2007). Moreover, (D'Souza, Taghian, & Lamb, 2006) indicate that if a consumer has knowledge about issues related to the environment, then, the consumer's awareness rises, which in turn would probably foster a positive attitude towards sustainable products.

The Communication Process: The Sender Receiver Model

The general communication process (Shannon, 1949) has received widespread recognition. An often used systematic by Kotler et al., (2012) is illustrated below and contains nine elements:

Figure 1: Elements in the communication process



Source: Adapted from Kotler et al., (2012)

The *sender* and the *receiver* are the essential parties, the *media* and the *message* represent the essential communication tools in the communication process. *Encoding*, *decoding*, *response* and *feedback* stand for the major communication functions. Lastly, there is the element of *noise*, meaning random and rival messages, which could impair the communication. The senders need to *encode* their messages, so the receiver is able to *decode* them. Then, *senders* need to send the *message* via *media* that reaches the intended audience and establish *feedback* channels to supervise the responses (Kotler et al., 2012).

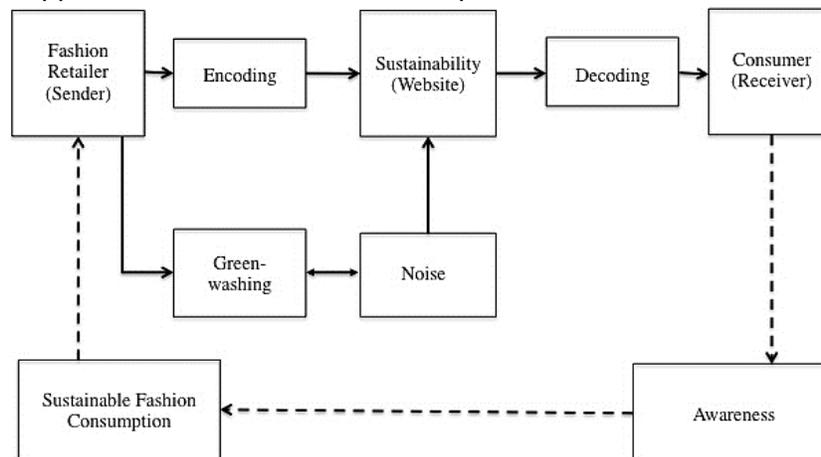
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Application of the Theoretical Model

Figure 2 illustrates the approach and the application of the theoretical model: The *sender* will be the fashion retailer, who *encodes* his *message* (information) about sustainability. This information is communicated via the website as a *medium* and a consumer will *decode* the message. If the fashion retailer involves the consumer in his communication of sustainability, the consumer will create awareness for sustainability as a *response*. This assumption is based on the assumption of (D'Souza et al., 2006) that knowledge leads to awareness. This awareness will lead to a *feedback* in the form of sustainable fashion consumption. This assumption requires further explanation: As Shet et al., (2011) have pointed out, there is currently a lack of consumer focus in companies' sustainability practices and as a result, the efficiency and the effectiveness of these practices are limited. Applying this need for consumer involvement in the context of communication of sustainability of fashion retailers, it is assumed that the mere provision of information about actions that have been taken regarding environmental- and social issues in the fashion industry will not lead to consumer awareness. Instead, the consumer needs to be informed about consumer-related aspects. Furthermore, in

the context of the awareness leading to sustainable fashion consumption, a definition for sustainable fashion consumption is needed: *“Sustainable fashion consumption is the use of clothing for purposes beyond utilitarian needs [...] Fashion consumption encompasses a complex range of interactions between individuals and the fashion system (consumption and production)”* (Nordic Initiative, Clean and Ethical, 2012). In the context of the proposed model, it is assumed that this definition goes hand in hand with the definition of mindful consumption by (Sheth et al., 2011), due to the fact that it suggests that mindful consumption does not intend to reduce consumption overall, but to turn overconsumption into a proportion that is ideal for the consumer. With these definitions in mind, the model assumes that sustainable fashion consumption can be achieved if the fashion retailer involves the consumer regarding the following aspects: A responsible usage phase, the importance of recycling clothing and/or offering options to bring back old clothing (garment collecting opportunities) and incentives to revise the own fashion consumption behavior. Regarding the consumer’s lack of knowledge of the negative impacts of the production part of the fashion industry, it is assumed that fashion retailer’s provision of information about environmental- and social issues in the context of the production part will counteract this lack of knowledge. Lastly, the loop of the communication process model will be closed and ‘end’ in the fashion retailer, assuming that the consumer now consumes fashion in a sustainable manner and might buy fashion items at a distinctive retailer, that involves the consumer in the communicates sustainability. Within the framework of the theoretical model, *noise* will be considered greenwashing, as greenwashing actions may influence consumer’s belief in the credibility of sustainable actions taken by fashion retailers. Yet, as greenwashing is not directly visible for the consumer, it is considered an omnipresent factor with a constant level of influence in the model.

Figure 2: Application of the communication process based on Kotler et al., (2012)



Source: Authors' illustration

Hypotheses Development

In the context of consumer involvement of fashion retailers' websites, prior research indicated that fashion retailers mainly focus on the provision of garment recycling programs, while there was little focus on information about a responsible usage phase (Kozlowski et al., 2015). Yet, as these fashion retailers were member is the SAC, these findings are not necessarily applicable to the sample of this empirical study. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are set up:

H1: Fashion retailers do not involve consumers in their communication of sustainability.

H2: Fashion retailers do not provide information about how to make the usage phase more sustainable.

H3: Fashion retailers do not take measures in order to facilitate consumers a more sustainable fashion consumption.

Just like in recent studies (see e.g. (Kozlowski et al., 2015), the medium of communication will be the fashion retailer's website: The website itself will be primarily analyzed in terms of information about sustainability, with a focus on the consumer involvement. If the fashion retailer provides a separate sustainability report in English, this report will be part of the analysis, too.

Sample

For the empirical study, the corporate websites of the following fashion retailers have been chosen: Primark, C&A, Gina Tricot, H&M, American Apparel, Marc O'Polo, Hugo Boss, Filippa K, Acne Studios and Stella McCartney. While other studies included special criteria for the choice of fashion retailers, such as 'members in the SAC' (Kozlowski et al., 2015) or 'adherence to the guidelines of the GRI' (Turker & Altuntas, 2014), the sample of this study was mainly chosen to show variety, meaning the inclusion of fashion retailers from the low price, mid-price and high-end segment, thus targeting different consumer groups. Also, no memberships in certain organizations or country-specific aspects were taken into consideration. Only C&A and H&M were chosen intentionally, as these two fashion retailers belong to the most successful fashion retailers in Germany (Erlinger, 2014). Accordingly, this choice of fashion retailers aims to represent a sample that covers various business models in fashion retailing. The empirical study has been conducted from 1st of May until 18th of May 2015

Criteria

Though various indicators for other fashion retailer's websites have been investigated (Kozłowski et al., 2015), the empirical study will not adhere to a strict list of indicators. The aim of the empirical study is to give a rough overview of the share in content communicated for each fashion retailer regarding social- and environmental aspects and especially the consumer-related aspects. Social aspects in this context refer to the fashion retailer's information about people involved in the production, especially the garment workers. Environmental aspects refer to the fashion retailer's information about environmental issues in the production. Lastly, the consumer-related aspects refer to the aspects defined before, meaning information about a responsible usage phase, the importance of recycling clothing and/or offering options to bring back old clothing (garment collecting opportunities) and incentives to revise the own fashion consumption behavior.

ANALYSIS AND EMPIRICAL RESULTS

The findings are presented in Table 1 below and are in accordance with studies conducted by (Kozłowski et al., 2015) and (Turker & Altuntas, 2014) which found out that most indicators dealt with the supply chain and that fashion retailers emphasize on sustainable supply chain management.

Table 1: Fashion retailer's coverage of the different aspects

Fashion Retailer	Criteria		
	Social Aspects	Environmental Aspects	Consumer Involvement
Primark	++	++	-
C&A	+++	+++	-
Gina Tricot	++	+++	++
H&M	++	++	+
American Apparel	++	++	-
Marc O'Polo	+	++	+
Hugo Boss	++	++	-
Filippa K.	++	+++	+++
Acne Studios	+++	++	+
Stella McCartney	+	+++	+++
<u>Explanation:</u>			
+++	extensive information available	++	additional information available
+	basic information available	-	no information available

Table 2 shows only the fashion retailers that involve the consumer in the communication of sustainability and illustrates the varying level of consumer involvement.

Table 2: Fashion retailers that meet the sub-criteria for consumer involvement

Fashion Retailer	Sub-criteria for Consumer Involvement		
	Usage Phase	Recycling	Consumption
Gina Tricot	++	++	-
H&M	+	++	-
Marc O'Polo	-	+	-
Filippa K.	+++	+++	+
Stella McCartney	++	+	-
Acne Studios	+	-	-
<u>Explanation:</u>			
+++ extensive information/options available		++ additional information/options available	
+ basic information/options available		- no information/options available	

Based on the empirical results, three categories of fashion retailers can be defined as follows:

- (1) Fashion Retailers That Do Not Involve The Consumer
- (2) Fashion Retailers That Partly Involve The Consumer
- (3) Fashion Retailers That Completely Involve The Consumer

For the first group, including the fashion retailers Primark, C&A, American Apparel and Hugo Boss, the model can be set up the following way: Fashion retailers as the senders encode their message about sustainability via their website as a medium. Hence, the consumer decodes this information as a receiver. Yet, as the communication process does not involve nor directly address the consumer in any way, the process is interrupted and ends at this stage. For this reason, the consumer does not have the possibility to create awareness. As a result, the consumer remains entirely unaware of what he himself could contribute to make his fashion consumption a more sustainable practice.

For the second group, including Gina Tricot, H&M, Marc O'Polo, Stella McCartney and Acne Studios, the consumer involvement of leads to a continuation of the communication process, meaning that the communication goes beyond the consumer and gives him the possibility to create awareness. However, there is an interruption of the process again, this time after the awareness. As defined before, the loop of the communication process can only be closed if information is provided regarding the environmental-, social as well as all consumer-related aspects. As Gina Tricot, H&M, Marc O'Polo and Stella McCartney communicate only part of the consumer-related aspects, the prerequisite for sustainable fashion consumption is not given. However, even though none of the fashion retailers just mentioned informed about the aspect of fashion consumption, it is an interesting result that especially the fast fashion

retailers Gina Tricot and H&M provide information about the usage phase *and* offer garment collecting opportunities. An 'official' explanation from H&M's and Gina Tricot's side for these actions taken becomes apparent when having a look at their websites again. Here, both H&M state that the introduction of the garment collecting opportunity and the information about a responsible usage phase is provided because they care about the environment. Accordingly, a consumer reading this information might get the impression that consuming H&M's and Gina Tricot's fashion items is ok, because there is an opportunity to dispose of them in a sustainable way. The same situation can be observed when having a look at the communication regarding a responsible usage phase. Also, the consumer might get the impression that consuming H&M's and Gina Tricot's fashion items is ok, as long as the consumer washes, dries and irons the fashion items in a responsible manner. Therefore, it is assumed that providing information about a responsible usage phase and offering garment collecting opportunities allows H&M and Gina Tricot to communicate sustainability on the one hand, and sustain consumer's consumption level on the other hand. This maintenance of consumption is also in particular visible when it comes to the in-store garment collecting opportunity by H&M: As the consumer receives a voucher, which intends to stimulate the consumer's consumption of even more clothes for his next purchase, the core intention of the garment collecting opportunity, that is a responsible handling of textiles as a resource, is neutralized (Siegle, 2013). The same can be said for the provision of content regarding both H&M's and Gina Tricot's extended fashion lines that include recycled materials and/or organic cotton. While the adaption of innovative and organic materials in general is a commendable approach, producing and consuming millions of 'ethical' products is basically a contradiction in itself (Siegle, 2012). Accordingly, this 'green' consumption, meaning the consumption of products that have fewer impacts on the environment, offsets these positive effects due to an increase in consumption (Sheth et al., 2011).

For the third group, represented only by Filippa K, the following picture can be drawn: Filippa K communicates sustainability, including relevant aspects regarding social- and environmental issues via their website to the consumer. Plus, Filippa K communicates their core belief, that is producing long-lasting products, and provides further information about their motivation, meaning the link to the nine planetary boundaries. As a result, Filippa K manages to create awareness for the topicality and importance of sustainability. However, in contrast to the other fashion retailers, Filippa K even goes a step further and accordingly accomplishes to close the loop in the communication process. This is not only done by emphasizing their curated wardrobe system right from the beginning, but also by informing about e.g. sustainable materials and actively pointing out opportunities on the website for the consumer to make his fashion consumption more sustainable. Also, the consumer is provided with the information

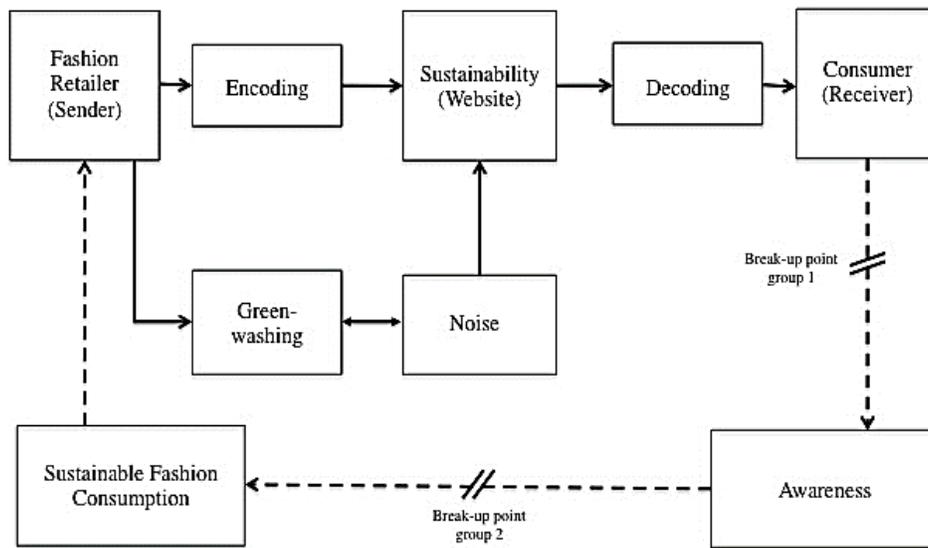
about *feedback channels* and as result, the last stage in the process, meaning the connection between sustainable fashion consumption and the fashion retailer is considered closed as well. Yet, the point of the matter is the consumer's opportunity to rent clothes within the 'Filippa K Lease' system, as Filippa K emphasizes on the website that this system is a means to sustainable fashion consumption and encourages consumers to re-think their fashion consumption behavior. Especially by offering this option, Filippa K gives the impression that they are serious about not only the importance of sustainability, but also truly want to contribute to a solution of the current fields of tension.

DISCUSSION

To sum up, the following statements can be made: Hypothesis one can be considered disproved, as the majority of the fashion retailers provided content that informed beyond the production part, though the consumer involvement varied strongly. Hypothesis two can only be partly approved, as out of ten fashion retailers, five informed the consumer about the environmental impact of the clothing's usage phase. Lastly, hypothesis three needs to be considered in the context of the definition of sustainable fashion consumption and the aspects that have been defined to necessarily be included, meaning information about a responsible usage phase, the importance of recycling clothing and/or offering options to bring back old clothing (garment collecting opportunities) and incentives to revise the own fashion consumption behavior. Without these aspects in mind, one might say that fashion retailers do facilitate sustainable fashion consumption, as almost all of the ten fashion retailers, that have been analyzed, mentioned that they offer fashion products that are made of organic cotton in addition to their regular collection and/or offer in-store collecting opportunities for old clothing. Yet, the point of the matter is that these measures do not give incentives for sustainable fashion consumption. As a result, sustainable fashion consumption in the context of the definition of this paper can not be achieved. Thus, out of ten selected fashion retailers, only Filippa K actively looked into the subject of sustainable fashion consumption and this hypothesis is considered approved. Figure 3 illustrates the communication model including the break-up points of the three groups.

The most obvious reason for fashion retailer's lack of informing about negative aspects of fashion consumption is probably their interest in avoiding consumers to re-think their consumption and need for fashion. Accordingly, it appears to be impossible to expect a voluntary reaction from the fashion retailer's side to do something about this problem, as it contradicts their intention to sell their products.

Figure 3: Revised communication process based on Kotler et al., (2012)



Source: Authors' illustration

CONCLUSION

The empirical study of this paper has shown that the communication of sustainability in fashion retailing varies strongly among the ten different fashion retailers. While some fashion retailers focus only on the information about clothing's production part, others involved the consumer, yet to different degrees.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER STUDIES

Both the empirical study and the application of the communication process model have certain limitations. For the empirical study it is important to mention that even though C&A as well as H&M belong to most successful fashion retailers in Germany (Erlinger, 2014), the sample of the empirical study only represents a certain part of fashion retail and the results can not be associated with the entire fashion industry (Kozlowski et al., 2015). Regarding the application of the communication process model in the context of the communication of sustainability in fashion retailing, these limitations need to be considered: First, the model illustrates a theoretical approach, meaning that it has not been tested whether consumers really act in the proposed manner. Second, the attitude-behavior-gap has not directly been taken into consideration, as the model assumed that the loop of the communication process could be closed if information regarding all relevant is provided. Accordingly, the communication process model assumed that the attitude-behavior-gap could be neglected if the consumer is informed

about the different negative impacts of the fashion industry and is involved in all the consumer-related aspects.

As the empirical study of this thesis solely focused on websites, further research could also investigate the visual aspects and the content provided in fashion retailer's communication of sustainability in magazine advertisements or television spots. Finally, research should test whether the applied communication process model, which served as a base for the illustration of the varying communication processes, provides equivalent results when tested with consumers. In this context, if a closing of the loop cannot be achieved, further research could focus on what exact content needs to be communicated by the fashion retailers regarding sustainability in order to close the loop of the communication process model.

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