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Communicating about sustainability in fashion: A construal level theory approach

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Abstract

Purpose: Communication about sustainability in fashion is complex. Whilst fashion businesses have increasingly sought to manage their sustainability practices, their understanding of how to communicate about sustainability persuasively remains limited. We argue a key problem with a firm's efforts in communicating about sustainability is that it is a psychologically distant issue for both businesses and stakeholders. We apply construal level theory to explore managers' construal level in shaping communication about sustainability.

Design: The paper used a two-phase qualitative methodology. Phase one undertakes interviews with ten managers in fashion firms addressing communications and sustainability in the UK. In phase two, 16 consumers interpret and reflect on the persuasiveness of communications about sustainability encompassing both concrete and abstract forms of messaging.

Findings: We identify the factors driving different approaches to communication (concrete and abstract) depending on the construal levels of managers, the managers' perceptions of the construal level of target stakeholders, and the perceived authenticity of the sustainability claim. The paper highlights the conditions under which the (mis)match with the brands' sustainable practices work in crafting communication. We also highlight three main communication strategies in responding to the complexity of the sustainability in fashion ecosystems: amplification, quiet activist and populist coupling.

Research limitations/implications: As an in-depth qualitative study, we seek to expose an under-researched phenomenon, yet generalisations both within the fashion industry and beyond are limited by this focus.

Practical implications: Fashion managers need to be flexible and evaluate how their communications about sustainability affect stakeholders' evaluations of their brands. As sustainability in fashion brands grows, concrete and specific sustainability messaging may be necessary to improve sustainable behaviours.

Originality/value: Prevailing literature encourages symbiosis between sustainability practices and communications, such relationships are rare, and studies outside the consumer perspective are rare. This exploratory study is the first to understand how managers' construal level influences decisions around communications about sustainability in fashion and how these messages are perceived by consumers.

Keywords: marketing communications, sustainability communication, ethical fashion, construal level theory, psychological distance

Communicating about sustainability in fashion: A construal level theory approach

Introduction

The fashion market is estimated to be worth \$1.53tn (Statista, 2023) and is fast-growing with global reach. Whilst only representing ~2% of global GDP (Statista, 2023), fashion is responsible for approximately 10% of global carbon emissions and 20% of global wastewater (UNece, 2018), as well as several other ills including a child, forced and low paid labour, pollution, animal cruelty and the fostering of overconsumption (Lundblad and Davies, 2016). The spotlight has therefore fallen on the fashion industry to expose the ethical and environmental ills of this vast industry and to investigate how to address these through the advancement of sustainability in fashion (Mukendi *et al.*, 2020).

Sustainability in fashion has been a rapidly growing area of practice (Henninger *et al.*, 2016) and scholarly research (Mukendi *et al.*, 2020) since its foundations in ethical fashion in the mid-2000s (Joergens, 2006). Incorporating “the variety of means by which a fashion item or behaviour could be perceived to be more sustainable, including (but not limited to) environmental, social, slow fashion, reuse, recycling, cruelty-free and anti-consumption and production practices” (Mukendi *et al.*, 2020: p:2878), sustainable fashion is a broad umbrella term to capture multiple perceived forms of sustainability (Lundblad and Davies, 2016), rather than encompassing sustainability as defined by the Brundtland report (1987). Many organisations have emerged or adapted to address sustainability, with disparate, and often conflicting views on what sustainability in fashion is. The key term in the definition from a brand’s perspective is being “perceived” to have sustainability credentials, which can play an important role in contributing to a fashion brand’s positioning (Joy *et al.*, 2012).

Communicating about sustainability is challenging (Davies and Doherty, 2019; Tölkes, 2018), especially in fashion partly due to its abstract nature and the loss of consumer

trust (Henninger *et al.*, 2015; Striet and Davies, 2017). Consumers increasingly expect brands not only to improve their sustainability practices but also to communicate sustainability messages. However, managers may be reluctant to risk alienating customers who are style-conscious and fear accusations of greenwashing (Henninger *et al.*, 2015). The risks of polarised responses have led many managers to conclude that their brands should be cautious in communicating their sustainability credentials (Janssen *et al.*, 2017).

Research on communicating about sustainability mostly focuses on consumers' perception and attitudes towards specific sustainability product attributes (Tölkes, 2018), emphasising hedonic benefits (Visser *et al.*, 2015), and comparing personal benefits to social benefits (McGowan *et al.*, 2020; Pinto *et al.*, 2020; Wehrli *et al.*, 2017) in order to increase awareness and sustainable behaviours. However, there is very little research exploring the manager's perspective in fashion, apart from da Giau *et al.* (2016) which shows a lack of case examples of companies highly committed to sustainability and able to effectively communicate it. Hence the current literature does not provide a clear picture of what motivates these managers and their mindsets about sustainability and how it can shape their decisions and actions (Steinbach *et al.*, 2019), a key question to be answered for fashion brands considering taking sustainability seriously.

Using construal level theory (CLT), this exploratory study aims to understand how managers in fashion firms think about sustainability and stakeholder perceptions of it; how this influences the communications strategy used, and consumer responses to these communications. CLT suggests that a psychologically distant (close) object is construed in a more abstract (concrete) manner (Trope *et al.*, 2007; Trope and Liberman, 2010). Organisational scholars have begun to leverage CLT to draw attention to how individuals' mental representations can differ across contexts (Wiesenfeld *et al.*, 2017), which this research will build on.

Utilising qualitative interviews with ten managers in fashion brands promoting sustainability and 16 consumers, this research identifies the key tensions that marketers have in relation to communicating about sustainability and exposes how managers' construal level impacts on the chosen communications strategy. However, we identify that the managers' construal level is only one of three main issues dictating the communication strategy taken. Firstly, (unlike consumers) managers must take into account the perceived construal level of the target stakeholder, as they need to try and match communication strategies to the target audience's level of construal for it to be effective. Secondly, both of these are also influenced by the confidence the manager has in the perceived authenticity of its claims with current sustainable practices. Based on these findings, we develop a new theoretical framework illustrating three strategic communications approaches to the complexity of sustainability in the fashion ecosystems. The findings and theoretical framework provide a novel contribution into brand managers' perspectives on communications about sustainability. Our study also responds to Tölkes' (2018) call for research into communications about sustainability using CLT to "enhance our knowledge of how to respond to an individual's mental representations, variations in perception, and anchor points in sustainability information" (p.19); and provides an extension of Streit and Davies (2017) explorations of how fashion brands manage their communication and sustainability practices.

Literature review

The fundamental issue for marketers in communicating about sustainability in fashion is that most consumers do not consider sustainability when shopping for clothing (Harris *et al.*, 2016; Joy *et al.*, 2012). This has even been found with consumers in sustainable clothing retailers, where values such as self-expression and self-esteem can outweigh values of social justice and environmental protection (Bly *et al.*, 2015; Lundblad and Davies, 2016). This can

be partly understood from consumers' perceptions that sustainable products are of inferior quality (Jung *et al.*, 2016; Kong and Ko, 2017), unattractive (Joergens, 2006) and less fashionable (Carey and Cervellon, 2014; Lai *et al.*, 2017). Interestingly, Wagner *et al.* (2018) found that the less fashionable the clothing, the more sustainable consumers perceived it to be. Even recycled components, in the form of sustainable fibres in branded shirts, have been found to negatively affect consumer perceptions (Achabou and Dekhili, 2013), and the use of the term organic has been highlighted as problematic (Goworek *et al.*, 2012; Streit and Davies, 2017). This is exacerbated when consumers are relatively uninformed of the sustainability record of fashion brands (Moore, 2019) and feel they lack the time or desire to understand the credentials of their fashion choices (Perry and Chung, 2016). Yet some studies have identified that consumers perceive fashion with sustainability credentials to represent a premium product category (Henninger *et al.*, 2016; Harris *et al.*, 2016; McLaren and Goworek, 2017) and that some consumers (although not many [Ritch and Schröder, 2012]) are willing to pay a premium price for it (Ciasullo *et al.*, 2017). However, this does not overcome the overarching perspective that sustainability is mostly viewed as an additional benefit for fashion items rather than an integral component of the product (Magnuson *et al.*, 2017).

Nevertheless, brand communications have been identified as shaping consumer perceptions of sustainability (Dabija, 2018; Kim and Hall, 2015). The literature offers a number of anecdotal suggestions for brand managers in developing their communications about sustainability, including making it 'trendy' (Blanchet, 2018), positioning sustainability as a social norm (Kim *et al.*, 2012), promoting personal style over fashion trends (Bly *et al.*, 2015; Lundblad and Davies, 2016), focusing on hedonic benefits (Visser *et al.*, 2015) and a luxury experience (Karaosman *et al.*, 2017; Amatulli *et al.*, 2017), or creating a rich narrative around the brand (Blanchet, 2018; Jang *et al.*, 2012). Yet the complexity of the value

consumers seek means that different segments need different forms of messaging around sustainability and fashion (Dabija, 2018; Kim *et al.*, 2013).

Da Giau *et al.* (2016) have made the first step in understanding the different forms this segmentation may take with a theoretical analysis of web-based communication in Italian fashion brands. By focusing on the organisational commitment to sustainability, compared to the levels of sustainability disclosure, Da Giau *et al.* (2016) identified a range of potential communication strategies, from high disclosure but low commitment to low disclosure but high commitment. As managers are important actors in shaping communications strategy, we contribute towards extending our understanding the reasoning behind the approach they take to communicating about sustainability, by drawing on construal level theory to understand managers' motivations and mindsets towards sustainability.

Construal level theory (CLT)

Construal level theory (CLT) explains the connections between mental abstraction (the construal level) and psychological distance that influence evaluation, predictions and behaviours (Trope *et al.*, 2007). Psychological distance is defined as a subjective mental formation of how close an object or an event is perceived to be. The distance can be temporal (an event in the near or distant future), spatial (an event nearby or far away) and social distance (a close friend or a stranger) (Trope and Liberman, 2010). When an event becomes psychologically closer, people generally use low-level construal to represent objects, and they are likely to consider the feasibility of the claim in terms of concrete and detailed features (Trope and Liberman, 2010). However, when considering a psychologically distant event, people are more likely to use higher levels of construal to represent an object, and they are more likely to consider the desirability of the claim in terms of abstract features. This is because desirability involves evaluating value, which is a high-level and abstract feature,

whereas feasibility emphasizes the means and methods used to complete the action, which is a low-level and concrete feature (Trope and Liberman, 2010).

Previous research has shown the explanatory power of CLT in understanding the persuasiveness of communications about sustainability (e.g. Chang *et al.*, 2015; Ramirez *et al.*, 2015; Reczek *et al.*, 2018; Trope and Liberman, 2010) but predominantly in the tourism and hospitality domain and from the consumers' perspective. For instance, Grazzini *et al.* (2018) find that hotel guests are more likely to engage in recycling behaviour when a concrete message is paired with a loss-framing message; and Chen *et al.* (2020), find that concrete, localised, person-relevant cognition can improve people's concern and engagement with climate change in ski tourism, and that a low-level construal is more effective in predicting concrete, near behaviours. Similarly, Jeong *et al.* (2016) use temporal distance to identify a persuasive communication strategy in healthy menu promotions in restaurants.

Exploration of the implications of CLT for the persuasiveness of fashion advertisements has received some limited exploration from a luxury brand print advertising perspective, such as Massara *et al.*'s (2020) finding that lifestyle branding is related to high language abstractness and product-based branding is related to language concreteness; and Ma *et al.*'s (2021) finding that matching construal levels between functional advertisements and the purchase decision-making stage increases the likelihood of making a purchase. However, there is little consideration in any of these fields regarding the managers' construal level, and the implications this may have for the form of communications created.

CLT researchers would suggest using more abstract messages for a heterogeneous audience, whilst more concrete messages are appropriate for a more homogeneous audience (Joshi and Wakslak, 2014). Additionally, individuals should communicate less abstractly with near rather than distant others (Joshi *et al.*, 2016), which is consistent with Amit *et al.*'s (2013) finding, that high-level abstraction is used when communicating externally with distal

others, and the reverse is the case when communicating internally to a more proximal target group. Hence, external communication tends to be more abstract in comparison to internal communication because they take a more distal perspective, is directed towards more heterogeneous audiences, and portrays an organisation in a more positive light (Herhausen *et al.*, 2020). However, CLT has relevance beyond a consumer perspective, as shown by Sharples *et al.* (2022) and has clear relevance to communication in the fashion sector, as has been previously discussed. Therefore, in this paper, we extend CLT into communications about sustainability in the fashion sector, by exploring the implications of managers' construal levels on decisions about their communications strategy, and the consumer interpretations of the resulting communications. This results in two separate exploratory research questions:

RQ1: How do managers' construal levels shape their communications strategies about sustainability in the fashion industry?

RQ2: How do consumers respond to the resulting different levels of concrete and abstract communications about sustainability in the fashion industry?

Methodology

Despite the predominantly experimental nature of CLT work (Chang *et al.*, 2015; Chen *et al.* 2020; Jeong *et al.* 2016), the exploratory nature of our novel extension of CLT into managerial decision-making leads us to utilise a qualitative approach to explore how managers make decisions regarding communications about sustainability in the fashion industry, and how customers interpret these communications. A qualitative interview approach is considered appropriate because this provides an account of participants' thoughts and perceptions of sustainability as they make sense of their situation (Spiggle, 1994). This approach also permits a deeper reflection of meaning regarding 'why' communication

decisions are made, and how these messages are interpreted (Gillham, 2000). We undertook this through two phases of research; one with managers and one with consumers.

Phase 1: Managers' interviews

In Phase 1, we situate our sampling procedure in the UK fashion industry and carry out ten semi-structured, in-depth, face-to-face interviews with managers of fashion brands making explicit claims about their brand's sustainability. The ten interviews were based in ten different fashion companies making sustainability claims in their communications and operating in both national and multinational markets. The companies vary in size, age and sustainability commitment. More importantly, the informants are all key decision-makers in determining the communication strategy. These criteria were not intended to achieve statistical representativeness of the entire industry, but rather to collect differentiated voices and perspectives from the field. We relied on informal contacts and network attendance at Pure London in 2018, a sustainability-focused fashion trade show that provides a global platform for womenswear, accessories, footwear brands and designers to meet with buyers within the industry (Pure London, 2022).

Phase 1: Data collection

The interview protocol was designed to probe how different sustainability practices played out in the firms and the extent to which they choose to embed sustainability positioning in their brand communications. The interview themes consisted of: (1) What sustainability in fashion means to the manager? (2) How they approach the sustainability challenge? (3) What the primary motivation is to engage in sustainability practices? (4) How sustainability commitments interface with brand communications? (5) What marketing mechanisms are used to convey sustainability messages? (6) How stakeholders (customers, suppliers etc)

respond to these communications? The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Table 1 shows a summary profile of the respondents.

<Add Table 1 here>

Phase 1: Data analysis

The data analysis followed the coding principles set out by Spiggle (1994) and Grodal et al., (2021). Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that inductive data analysis allows theory to emerge from data that is contextual and not bound by a-priori generalisations. In this research, we explore complex phenomena within a sector where we anticipate differences in the forms of sustainability communications and the degree of commitment to sustainability practices, which is not adequately explained in the extant literature. An inductive approach to the analysis held the promise of developing concepts and theories that are not present in the extant literature (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

In the first instance, we analysed the interviews by labelling and categorising similar themes across the interviews. Initially, labels were derived from the transcripts and themes observed in the data, so phenomena such as ‘durability’, ‘transparency’, ‘authenticity’, ‘practices’, ‘communications’ and so on were developed as categories, into which sub-properties and dimensions were added. As the analysis proceeded, some categories were redefined such as managers’ low-level construal that were concrete in nature, and managers’ high-level construal that were abstract in nature. The labels and categories were refined through an iterative interplay between data and codes across the interviews as we identified tentative themes and patterns. The form of interplay extended to the authors, who independently analysed the managers’ interviews and then compared their findings, writing

interpretive themes and cross-checking each other's analysis. This process involved a cyclical interplay between initial analysis, the raw data, revising and refining the initial open and axial codes as themes as we moved from descriptive to analytical levels of analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Over several iterations, propositional concepts around sustainability practices and types of communication strategies became more prominent and these were refined by returning to the data to explore for consistency. In the later stages, propositions coalesced around the principal narratives and were compared with the extant literature on communications and practices. Table 2 demonstrates the overarching themes and the sub-themes that emerged from the interview data.

<Add Table 2 here>

Phase 2: Consumer interviews

In phase 2 the qualitative methodology is applied to explore consumers' thoughts, depth of knowledge and opinions about the meaning of sustainability in fashion, sustainable fashion consumption habits, decision-making, preferred communication styles and finally the persuasiveness of concrete vs abstract communications (O'Keefe, 2015). We interviewed 16 female consumers through purposive sampling covering a range of consumers from actively sustainable fashion consumers to those with little active interest. They are all between the age of 35 and 46 because this has been identified as the core market for sustainable fashion brands (Laroche *et al.*, 2001; Mukendi *et al.*, 2020). In the final stage of the interviews, inspired by Phase 1's findings, we used eight artefacts (Appendix A) showing various degrees of communication style based on CLT literary interpretations of concrete and abstract messaging. This offered a loose framework from which informants could interpret which styles of communication they prefer and why. The aim of this structure is to capture the individual's beliefs, values and attitudes towards sustainability in fashion and their preferred

communication styles. All interviews are conducted online, recorded and transcribed, averaging 40 minutes in length. Analysis was then conducted in the same way as in the manager interviews.

Ensuring data quality

Several approaches to evaluating the quality of qualitative research were consulted (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 1992; Patton, 2002) such as checking for descriptive validity, interpretive validity, theoretical validity and generalisability (Maxwell, 1992). First, we checked the accuracy of the interview transcripts against the actual audio recordings to minimise threats to descriptive validity. Two researchers also independently analysed and coded the interviews, which allows for triangulation to be achieved. Second, threats to interpretive validity were minimised by shielding the key theoretical framework underpinning the interview protocol to reduce self-reporting bias (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Third, the theoretical validity of the emergent theory was enhanced by reducing the bias from the first two criteria. Fourth, purposeful and selective sampling helped to strengthen the theoretical generalisability.

Findings

Our study reveals that managers use different approaches when communicating about their sustainability practices, but the approach they use (concrete vs. abstract messaging) is influenced by three main factors: (1) the managers' own construal level, (2) the perceived authenticity of the sustainability claim, and (3) the managers' perception of the target stakeholders' construal level. We then investigate the consumers' response to these different approaches.

The Managers' construal level

In this section we explore how the managers' construal level influences 'what' they communicate about sustainability in fashion. Whilst some managers feel confident about publicly communicating their sustainable practices in a concrete way, others use abstract communications based on their construal level.

Managers with low-level construal

Our research shows that some managers adopt a low-level construal and hence prefer to use concrete messaging to address, or anticipate specific issues or concerns related to their stockists, staff or consumers. The sustainability messaging was typically detailed, transparent and focused on specific wordings to persuade customers and other stakeholders to buy their products. For example, Manager 2 explains how "from a brand point of view it's about continuing to organically share what we do, having conversations with our customers and those people that champion us. So that means everyone has a deeper understanding of what it is we do." The manager continues to explain that the aim was to provide customers with specific details about where their products came from, and hence to meet their expectations. In addition, another manager highlighted the importance of generating awareness through details in their sustainability reports, "[the report] will just become available, it will be there on our website. Then a series of good PR stories to tell, that will help push us out more in the public eye and support our efforts" (Manager 1).

By using a low-level construal, these managers tend to focus on the 'how' sustainability claims are manifested in the products, services and organisational structure of the business in their messaging. These managers focus on explaining these claims and generating positive attitudes toward sustainability in fashion. For example, Manager 6 states that they "send out very concise well-written press pitch offering them a story, with some

pictures and address [the press] by name ... Thanks to a positive brand image, I then go deeper to describe my products and values on all the channels and social media posts for example” (Manager 6).

The motivation to improve sustainability practices was not merely found to succumb to external pressure from consumers, the media and NGOs, it was also about connecting to, and representing the managers’ personal beliefs. Manager 7 explains that "it's not just about the new trends on the runway, but the key is if you can do the new trends but rework it and make things more sustainably". Here, the manager was very conscious about his beliefs and identity and that motivated him to “do the right things”; he stated that commitments to sustainability should be matched by concrete communications. Specifically, he urged other firms to pay attention to innovation such as the “innovation in the methodology and developing efficiencies to scale, adaption to industry-specific needs and the reality of differences in sourcing and supply-chain models across our group" (Manager, 7). This innovation strategy of sustainable development is describing when new products, services and processes are developing in response to a specific environmental or social sustainability issue (Halme and Laurila’s, 2009). There is a shared understanding that this is the right way to do business and that such a holistic view sets these firms apart from others. The managers were more emphatic about their workers and the working conditions in the factory, Manager 9 mentioned that they “know all the ladies that work in the factory. They’re paid the living wage as well. I source all the fabrics from India and go out there and test it out myself”. This sense of familiarity with the supply chain is rare in other case firms but provides confidence in the manager to make explicit and concrete sustainability claims.

Relatedly, we found that managers’ construal level depends on their motivation for and positive attitudes towards engaging in sustainability communication in the first place. For larger firms with an established network, concrete messaging is expected to enhance their

competitive advantage and signal accountability. For example, “So for us, it’s about a live conversation, not just a strapline...In some ways, digital marketing and social media don’t empower us because it comes as a meme of this brand is ‘ethical’ but you don’t really know what that means. So, the most important thing is to stop and think and be able to explain. If you go into our store, any of our staff will be able to explain how our bags are made in detail” (Manager 2). On the other hand, in the newer firms, concrete messaging is vital to generate awareness as they are beginning to build their networks and connections, for example, Manager 5 explained “this 30-year sweatshirt idea is simple. If anything happens to it over that time, we will replace or repair it. We have had huge amounts of support from the press over here – it didn’t happen organically, we contacted them each individually with a direct pitch. The key point here however is that the 30-year sweatshirt is something I can explain and sum up in a few sentences, and also its topical. It also is transparently good”.

Managers with high-level construal

Conversely, managers with a high level of construal focus on generic and nonspecific information that relate to the distant future and generate a sense of pride. For example, Manager 10 expresses their passion for building an ethical and sustainable brand, highlighting their communication aims to encourage customers to invest in timeless pieces that they can feel proud to wear for their quality of design and positive contribution: “Our aim is to encourage customers to invest in timeless pieces they can feel proud to wear, not only for their quality of design, but for their positive contribution.” However, they acknowledge that being too abstract and decontextualised in communications may not be effective in generating sales revenue, despite great exposure through PR.

Similarly, Manager 6 believes that investing in abstract or generic visuals for buyers, websites and social media is more important than providing specific details, by using a

“philosophy” section on their websites to communicate their values: “I feel visuals are important and I’ve invested a lot into visuals for buyers, for the website, for social media.... I communicate to the press... So, I attract people by the designs and then after communicating the values. So on my website, I have a ‘philosophy’ section” (Manager 6). Additionally, Manager 4 also supports the use of abstract or generic visuals, especially on social media, to build a relationship with her wider networks when she states “Instagram has helped us a lot, through a focus on imagery”. These strategies are consistent with the findings of McGowan et al. (2020) on the effectiveness of abstract messaging on websites.

Perceived authenticity of the sustainability claim

As well as the managers’ construal level, their confidence in the perceived authenticity of their sustainability claims also influences the form of sustainability communication. Firms with strong, tangible sustainable practices (e.g., adopting life cycle assessments to control CO₂ emissions along all steps of the products’ lifecycles, more transparent and easier to control supply chains, higher wages, extended health assistance, scholarships for children etc.) were more likely to use more transparent and detailed content when describing sustainable practices and thus favoured concrete messaging. Brands that were members of credible, external sustainability accreditations (e.g. Control Union Association Global Standards) were more confident in their messaging. Product labels such as this are popular for these firms as the third-party endorsement provides legitimacy to their sustainability efforts and consumers have been found to trust the sustainable information on labels (Leire and Thidell, 2005). As many consumers are less aware of sustainability jargon, firms including any form of certification or endorsement in their sustainable communications have the advantage of strengthening their competitive positioning. This suggests that concrete

messages are more likely where sustainability practices are high and supported by available data or certifications to back them up (although these were not universally utilized).

Discussions around transparency and perceptions of having authentic sustainability claims appear closely related in the respondents' mindsets. Manager 1 argues that if the company wanted to launch a new sustainability plan, then its practices, including transparency in the sourcing of materials and fair working conditions, among others, needed to match their communications. One manager claimed that they were confident that "99% of the ingredients in our product we know where they come from" (Manager 1). Some firms pay a lot of attention to getting their sustainability practice "right", in terms of both social and environmental sustainability issues. For example, a high level of traceability of raw materials was something that many firms were proud of, and the managers saw their sustainability practices and communications as intertwined operations (Halme and Laurila's, 2009); something they wished to communicate clearly. However, as Manager 8 explains: "as a start-up it's particularly difficult to engage in the processes that you want to, because of cost issues, even though it's extremely important". This dilemma is common across other brands. In some cases, firms were frustrated by other stakeholders in the supply chain over which they had little control. Whilst the managers might have had the intention to be more sustainable (e.g., to replace plastic with an alternative), this can increase the costs, which cost-conscious wholesale customers are not keen to do. Unfortunately, many firms with more limited resources appear to move their production from the UK to India, as it is cheaper, which results in a less transparent and visible supply chain. This influences the managers' mindset as they are less able to draw on concrete messaging because the sustainability element is difficult to support.

Organisations with these less-tangible claims towards sustainability were more likely to therefore favour abstract messaging. Manager 3 explains that "Yes, I know for instance

there is a Belgium brand. It's more like an online find boutique and they work with high class middle luxury brands and they're very transparent about the costing. So you have a website and see where it's made, it's a whole breakdown on how they calculate the price. You see the whole mark-up it's amazing. For me though, that's going too far. You need to stay secret to your collection a little, but the address of your factory is a bit too much for me." The concerns around over-exposure leads to less confidence in being able to communicate concretely about sustainability.

Firms with these less-tangible sustainability claims may lack the initiative to engage in communications about wider sustainability issues such as transforming the value chain or establishing more sustainable standards. We found that some firms were engaged in quite limited sustainability efforts, such as creating a durable sweatshirt or providing lifelong repair guarantees, without any further investment in changing the supply chains or encouraging more sustainable consumption. This small sustainability initiative helps to prolong the product lifecycle and natural resource usage (Tarunen and Halme, 2021), and can appeal to consumers who want to shop more sustainably but may have been put off by barriers such as cost or being perceived as less modern. As Manager 5 explains the main message they are trying to communicate favours concrete messaging: "...meticulously handcrafted out of Italian cotton, wool, and cashmere but will also save you money in cost per wear. The bonus is that you'll be helping protect our planet's natural resources by choosing truly durable clothing" (Manager, 5). As a result, firms are seen as capitalising on the sustainability movement by doing just enough to permit them to make reasonably vague sustainable claims but are less likely to provide specific details. However, a less genuine motive carries high stakes for these firms as they risk appearing insincere and even deceptive. Over the long term, we suggest this may generate negative PR and impact negatively on the firm, as they

may be perceived as greenwashing and misleading their consumers. Additionally, it may lead to a misalignment between a firm's values and its sustainable practices.

The managers further highlight tensions when attempting to achieve a high level of reach regarding the authenticity of sustainable messages. Many firms focus on transparency around 'traceability', such as the supply chain (Gardner *et al.*, 2019) and the sourcing of materials (Cheah *et al.*, 2016), reducing their 'carbon footprint', reducing waste and water management, and the environmental impact of production, distribution and promotional sales, along with addressing social sustainable barriers such as employees welfare (e.g. the working environment, the length of the working day, the allocation of sufficient breaks, holiday and sick pay entitlement). These firms are concerned about the authenticity of their concrete communication. For example, whilst PR is valuable in gaining reach, increasing awareness and driving these conversations, the terminology used and potentially inaccurate information reported by the press can be harmful due to the potential repercussions and negative impact this could cause. As such, less transparent, authentic and traceable claims of sustainability tend to drive more abstract messaging.

Perceptions of stakeholders' construal level

As well as the managers' construal level and perceived authenticity of sustainability claims, the data analysis also suggests the managers' perception of the target stakeholders' construal level also influences the form of communication. We identify concrete communications are more likely to be used with stakeholders who have a closer reach, such as their industrial customers (stockists and retailers) and investors, than with more distant consumers. Managers used different mediums such as sustainability reports, webpages, and standard certification, and followed guidelines from external bodies to address these proximal audiences. Manager 1 strategically used "the marketing team to put together what we're going to publish and try to

be more outward than inward, it's all very well ticking all your boxes, but if no one knows this then it's all a wasted exercise". This firm has carefully ensured that heavy investment in external communication matches its strong sustainability efforts.

In contrast, many managers prefer to communicate their sustainable practices in an abstract manner with less detail and more general content for more distal and diverse audiences. These managers perceive these audiences to have higher construal levels towards sustainability, and so they create more informal dialogues with these stakeholders. Rather than creating standardised sustainability communications, these managers were drawn to customisation via storytelling. Manager 2 stated that "we just don't talk about it [specific sustainability terminology] ...the more people talk about it, the more suspicious I am". One firm explained that an abundance of information is required to communicate anything properly including claims of producing sustainably, ethically, durably or high-quality products, being part of the slow fashion movement or an intention to create a circular cycle of positive business. These messages were seen as "just too much...and don't cut through" (Manager 10) for consumers to understand. Instead, Manager 10 focuses on the style of the product and storytelling to engage the brand's audiences. For other brands, it was a case of choosing relevant channels and engaging with specific audiences via selective narratives (Kim *et al.*, 2012). Manager 6, a smaller brand, expressed how this enabled them to "go deeper to describe my products and values on all the channels and social media posts". Simply increasing the sustainability effort is not enough, firms need to reflect on the relevance of the channel of communication.

Manager 2 further explains that "people latch onto certain words that work for a short period but don't mean anything...I'm very anti using it [sustainability] as a marketing vehicle; I think that's what is dangerous. I think it's not fair and it's misleading to consumers." Sustainability framing is not mentioned in any of this firm's consumer-focused marketing

communication perhaps due to the level of confidence in their work and the repercussions that this may create. As such, they erred on the side of caution to prevent any potential need for crisis management or damage limitation.

The heterogeneous nature of their different target markets was also raised as a driver of the communication approach. Manager 7 highlights that global fashion firms have different market segments with different needs, expectations, and foci. The younger segment is driven by exclusive desires with their focus being on “wear it once”, compared to the older aged segments, who are more concerned about durability, with their focus being on quality and the traditional value of craftsmanship. This shows a disconnect between sustainability and priorities with the faster-moving and more classical elements of fashion. Managers need to think beyond the new trends on the runway, and at the same time balance this with their business strategy to make it more sustainable, for example, “how we make things, how things are sourced, measuring the differences...this is not because the consumer will get it today, because they just don’t at the moment” (Manager 7). This manager further highlighted: “[sustainability] is not a good word. It says everything and nothing... it gets narrower, says you are minimising your environmental impact, or you are going to make sure people are treated fairly... that can define your brand sustainability message”. But later they cautioned that it is difficult to be specific and “better to be there, but not overly shout about it because there are so many different groups” supporting a cautious use of concrete sustainability messaging by using a more abstract driven messaging.

The lack of universal sustainability codes or guidelines was also found to complicate the situation. Managers felt the need to reframe their communication in a “live conversation, not just a strapline” (Manager 2). These forms of dialogue with stakeholders such as customers and the media illustrate the fluid nature of communicating sustainability. These firms were discreetly fuelling consumer discussions about their sustainability efforts. They

use word-of-mouth to filter through networks and micro-influencers to generate trusted communication: "From a brand point of view it's about continuing to organically share what we do, having conversations with our customers and those people that champion us. So that means everyone has a deeper understanding of what it is we do" (Manager, 2). This dichotomy concerning the heterogeneity of stakeholders and in particular the level of focus respondents gave to framing messages based on the perceived construal level of customers, led us to explore the implications of concrete vs. abstract messaging on the core stakeholder group: customers.

Consumer responses

The brand managers' concerns regarding the heterogeneous nature of the target stakeholder audience are mirrored in the consumers' perceptions of sustainability in fashion. Column 3 of Table 3 highlights the consumers differing interpretations of what sustainability in fashion means, and although there are some commonalities, there are also some stark differences. Common themes emerge around durability/quality, recycled materials, and recyclability across most definitions. Consumers who either identified themselves as knowledgeable about sustainability issues in fashion, or demonstrated a deep understanding in the interviews and so were interpreted by the research team to be relatively knowledgeable; and those actively trying to consume more sustainably, enhance these themes further with considerations of closed ecosystems, fair trade and organisational ethics. We therefore see a stark difference between more savvy consumers focusing on more holistic organisational sustainability (ethos and identity), as opposed to less active consumers who focus on attributes of the garment. This creates the potential for sustainability communication issues for brands as different consumers value different traits.

<Add Table 3 here>

Column 4 takes this divergence further as we explore what type of messaging consumers believe will be most influential in encouraging sustainable purchases (this question was posed before the participants were exposed to the artefacts). For the more active and sustainability-oriented consumers and those with good knowledge of the sector, words like tangible, facts, transparency, and outputs of sustainable actions proliferate are highlighted as key claims that brands should make to demonstrate their sustainability credentials, but largely from an organisational perspective rather than from the product. They want to know specific, concrete information about the brand's claims for sustainability, and what the implications of this are for people, animals, and the planet. For the less-active-in-sustainability consumers, the proposed messaging isn't quite as clear. Quality stands out as a common phrasing, although for some like Sam and Kelly, it equally poses the importance of guidance on what makes fashion more sustainable and what makes this product a better alternative. Like the definitions, we see differences between a focus on specific claims for sustainability on a product compared to organisational claims for being more holistically sustainable. Although in all cases, except Amanda, the preferred communication is concrete in nature.

However, when we exposed the participants to the eight artefacts to get their impression of real communications about sustainability, an interesting pattern emerges. Setting aside artefact A1 which was disliked by all and described as being "creepy", "freakish" and "a joke", the abstract advertising produced a love-hate reaction. For those that loved it:

“Ethical is the new black [A6], that's quite strong it's kind of interesting, it's simple. You can see the fabric in the background, it's just a clear message, not trying to be cute, it's not trying to be too clever.” (Amanda)

[referring to A8] “That did draw my eye ... yeah I do like it. I know what they're trying to do... I like the simplicity, I like the colours.” (Jasmine)

This response was common in the non-active consumers such as Kelly and Aelis, but also among a subset of the active consumers (Jasmin and Michelle), that had earlier suggested wanting concrete information, rather than abstract images and messages. Generally, the majority of active and knowledgeable respondents disliked abstract messaging due to the lack of specificity:

“I have no idea what these ‘small adjustments’ [A3] are and how that links into what I’m buying. So I would bypass it, I need to know what those adjustments are.” (Abi)

“Ethical is the new black [A6], it's just a tagline, it doesn't tell me what they're selling or saying. Just not deep enough as a sustainability message for me.” (Collette)

“It doesn't tell me much [A8]. It smokes like greenwashing.” (Cleo)

Conversely, the concrete messages with tangible and specific sustainability claims (artefacts 2, 4, 5 and 7) receive varied responses dependent on the claim being made. All respondents liked the 30-year-old trench coat advert [A2], with all of the active and sustainably-active consumers rating this as their favourite message. However, other concrete messages receive a variable response from across the group. For instance, many respondents questioned whether a message about organics was really about sustainability:

“I mean that doesn't necessarily give you the definition. Organic more tells me that that's one of the measures that they're using.” (Katy)

“I hadn't really thought about cotton not being ethical or sustainable” (Andrea)

The advert with the mixed messaging around both organics and water management [A5] got varied responses based on people's knowledge about the water intensity of cotton farming:

"It's just good information isn't it. it's not offensive and it's not something that would cause confusion." (Michelle)

"I would still want to find out more. Yes, and they're mentioning cotton is organic. And there's the issue of water in it so there's a bit more information...So it's hitting something in me because I've done this research. If I haven't done, I don't think I would be aware." (Cleo)

In comparison consumers who self-identify as having lower knowledge levels of sustainability in fashion dismiss it as a non-issue:

"I don't like this... Many people buying clothes are conscious of saving water in their own houses. How many people relate that to Organic Cotton? I wouldn't." (Sam)

Whereas the "I made your clothes" [A7] message got almost an inverse relationship to the abstract messages, with the more knowledgeable shoppers being quite sceptical:

"With the people in it, I just don't trust anyone nowadays, so like, I don't know if they're actors." (Carrie)

"I would be questioning whether they look happy and smiling or they're forced to." (Katy)

It resonated with many consumers who were non-active in sustainability as they can see faces and hence connect emotionally.

In summary, a brand's choice to focus on either abstract or concrete messaging needs to be addressed based on who they are trying to speak to. The data suggests that abstract messages appeal to less knowledgeable, and non-active sustainable consumers, but have less traction with active and knowledgeable consumers. Whereas concrete messaging is highly context-dependent. More knowledgeable consumers (and many non-consumers) suggest they

prefer the concrete messaging, but only where the message is consistent with their perceptions of what authentic sustainability in fashion should be, or the extent to which their knowledge of the issue extends. This echoes many of the managers' concerns about communicating sustainability when the perceived authenticity of the claim may be questionable.

Integrated theoretical framework and communication strategies

Research on communicating about sustainability in fashion has largely focused on consumers' perceptions of it (Mukendi *et al.*, 2020) with little consideration of the managers and business owners decision-making in relation to what to communicate about sustainability (Henninger *et al.*, 2016; Mukendi *et al.*, 2020). Mohr and Nevin (1990) outlined the different facets of a communications strategy as encompassing the frequency (amount and duration of communication), direction (vertical and horizontal movement of communication), modality (method of transmission) and content (message being transmitted). We focus exclusively on what influences the managers' choice in the level of abstractness vs. concreteness in the "content" element of Mohr and Nevin's (1990) model. We identify that construal level is a concept weaving its way through many of the managers' content decisions. This includes both the construal levels of the manager, as well as their perception of stakeholder construal levels, but these are also then influenced by the managers' perception of the authenticity of the sustainability claims. Figure 1 provides a summary of the main findings, then uses this to propose communication content strategies which emerge from this complex interplay.

<Insert Figure 1 about here>

As per Spence et al. (2012), we identify those managers with a close psychological distance, and thus low construal level, do favour concrete and specific sustainability messaging. However, the relationship between this preference and communication content is more complex than previously thought. Consistent with Herhausen *et al* (2020), some managers adopt both low-level and high-level construal in their communications strategy to match contextual goals (termed construal level ambidexterity, Wiesenfeld *et al.*, 2017). For example, a firm can use sustainability reports to communicate detailed activities to readers with sustainability knowledge (Tarunen and Halme, 2021) and with less psychological distance to the brand's activities (as per Amit *et al.*, 2013 and Joshi *et al.*, 2016). At the same time, they may use abstract messaging to engage less knowledgeable stakeholders, (in keeping with Joshi and Waksalak, 2014), who are perceived to be more psychologically distant from the implications of the brand's activities. As concrete sustainability messages can be confusing (Caniato *et al.*, 2012) and context-dependent (Egels-Zanden and Hansson, 2016), construal level ambidexterity is crucial in sustainability communications. Therefore, managers tailor their communication strategy to best fit both the sustainability knowledge and psychological distance of their audience.

Similarly, the need for construal level ambidexterity is accentuated by the perceived authenticity of sustainability claims made by brands. Regardless of a manager's construal level, if they perceive their brand's sustainability claims to be weak or difficult to support with concrete information, they may naturally prefer abstract communications. Interestingly, managers with a low construal level may identify potential problems in the authenticity of sustainability claims based on their in-depth knowledge of the complexity of fashion supply chains, as shown in the authenticity findings section. The definition of sustainability claims in the fashion sector is open to interpretation (Lundblad and Davies, 2015), and no fashion brands are truly sustainable based on the Brundtland definition (Mukendi et al., 2020).

Therefore, the more knowledgeable a person is, the more likely they are to question the authenticity of claims (be they the manager, customer, or another stakeholder). This link between perceived construal level of different actors and authenticity of claims is new to the literature and demonstrates the complexity of the link between manager construal level and choice of concrete vs. abstract messaging approach.

The interplay between the managers' construal level, the perceptions of stakeholder construal level and the perceived authenticity of sustainability claims highlights the complexity of communication strategies used by brands. We propose three types of communication strategies that emerge from this complexity. Unlike previous studies (Da Giau *et al.* 2016; Mukendi *et al.*, 2020), we identify an *Amplification* strategy employed by fashion firms highly committed to sustainability – both environmentally and socially- and desiring concrete communications about their initiatives. This strategy is used when managers have a low construal level, authenticity claims are strong and stakeholders share a low construal level with the manager. Amplification reinforces industry standards and guidelines, explicitly communicates specific benefits of the brand's offering, and appeals to consumers' that desire evidence of an organisation-wide sustainability ethos and prefer concrete communications. However, knowledgeable consumers may still question certain sustainability efforts if they do not align with their interpretation of sustainability, leading to increased scepticism towards the firm's intention, known as the self-promoter paradox (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990). The scarcity of examples of this strategy in the literature may be attributed to this phenomenon.

In contrast, when a manager's construal level is low, and either the perception of the authenticity of sustainability claims is questionable or the perception of stakeholder construal level and psychological distance are high, they tend to use a *Quiet Activist* strategy. This communication strategy advocates for social and environmental sustainability without

explicit evidence of product-based sustainability impact, using abstract messages and imagery and focusing on less detailed information. While this approach may lack specific details on products and processes, it may still be perceived as authentic by many consumers. It provides the opportunity to engage with a wider sphere of customers with abstract and live conversations around sustainability issues rather than the specific solutions potentially embodied in the brand's products. Interestingly we find that younger, more ambitious, and agile fashion firms tended to adopt *Quiet Activist* strategies in our study, driven by the strong values of their managers but perhaps lacking the resources to invest in the traceability and supply-chain management practices needed to justify concrete claims of sustainability-related impact. Our consumer research shows that a quiet activist approach may appeal to consumers who value engaging in broader conversations around sustainability issues rather than focusing solely on specific solutions embodied in the brand's products. Managers with either a low or high construal, may also employ a communication approach called *Populist Coupling*. This approach emphasises popular sustainability practices among a specific stakeholder group, even if the brand's overall authenticity of sustainability claims is questionable. This strategy can turn sustainability practices into branding exercises, which would appeal to less knowledgeable audiences. This echoes the findings of Da Giau *et al.* (2016), who found that Italian fashion houses make significant noise about sustainability, despite limited organisational commitment. However, as figure 1 suggests, managers may choose different strategies in different circumstances, regardless of their own construal level. To date the literature would indicate that people with a low construal level would be driven towards concrete messaging (Spence *et al.*, 2012; Robinson & Eilert, 2018) typified by our *Amplification* strategy. Yet there are other influences, such as the perceived construal level of the target stakeholder and the perceived confidence in the authenticity of the claim that can

also affect manager's decisions. Therefore, any of the three strategies could emerge based on the balance of these influential factors.

Discussion

The propositions in the previous section of the differing role of CLT in managers versus consumers leads to three theoretical contributions and three managerial contributions for this study.

Theoretical contributions

First, we contribute to the literature on communicating about sustainability in fashion by showing how construal level can shape different communications strategies. We extend prior research on sustainability communications in the fashion context beyond the consumer perspective (Da Giau *et al.*, 2016; Hwang *et al.*, 2015; Mukendi *et al.*, 2020), by providing exploratory insight into the influence of managers' construal level in communicating about sustainability. Managers' construal level influences the choice of sustainability communication approach, but it is heavily influenced by both the managers' perceived construal level of the target stakeholder and the perceived authenticity of the claim (Figure 1).

More specifically, we question whether concrete communications reinforce sustainability behaviour in target audiences, as suggested by prior research (Thomas, 2008; Hwang *et al.*, 2015; Janssen *et al.*, 2017). Kim *et al.* (2012) suggest that marketing claims need to be more specific about the sustainability of the product, yet our findings suggest that this may be counterproductive when it is perceived as inauthentic, or not aligned with the stakeholders self-interpreted definition of sustainability. This is consistent with the findings of Jaeger and Weber (2020) and Spence *et al.*, (2012) but is in contrast to the resonance of

high-construal communications in engendering sustainable consumption (e.g. Carter *et al.*, 2021; Pinto *et al.*, 2020; White *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, knowledgeable consumers identify a preference for an organisation-wide sustainability ethos, rather than purely product-based attributes in contrast to the extant CLT literature (Hwang *et al.*, 2015; Janssen *et al.*, 2017). Yet managers are not restricted to following only one sustainability-communication strategy. They can, and often do, engage in different strategies that are salient to the context and situational influences providing empirical support for Wiesenfeld *et al.* (2017) concept of construal level ambidexterity.

Second, this research contributes new insight into the dynamic relationship between sustainability practices and brand communication. Previous research indicates that successful firms have a tight integration and alignment between their sustainability practices and communication, as this helps to reinforce consistency (Sipilä *et al.*, 2021). But we suggest that a misalignment can in fact be helpful. A misalignment can prompt deeper information processing. Phipps *et al.* (2013) highlight that providing consumers with sustainable information and knowledge can provoke cognitive responses. The current research adds that being abstract, can (at times) create an authentic belief about a firm's sustainability commitment (Janssen *et al.*, 2017), especially where consumers are less knowledgeable. In our research, misalignment is evident in both *Populist Coupling* and *Quiet Activism*. Given the diverse communication needs, including different stakeholders, consumer groups and business functions, firms may choose to adopt misaligned communications about sustainability to ensure their message is noticed.

Third, the CLT literature largely supports the premise that abstract communications are more effective for sustainable consumption (Pinto *et al.*, 2020; Reczek *et al.*, 2018). This is contrary to our interpretation, which shows that consumers' communication preference is linked to their sustainable knowledge. We identify that more knowledgeable sustainable

consumers suggest a preference for concrete messages about the firm's sustainable practices thus alleviating any potential vagueness and scepticism that are linked to abstract messages. They find concrete messages to be more transparent, believable and hence more persuasive. This is different to Carter *et al.*'s (2021) finding that consumers with an abstract mindset were more likely to pay attention to sustainability aspects (van Doorn and Verhoef 2011). This difference within the sustainability communications remit may be due to the low-construal, concrete messages representing personal benefits (e.g. well-being) to the consumers, which are psychologically proximal to them (Jaeger and Weber, 2020). This proximity may enable them to use their sustainability knowledge to highlight how events in the present are inextricably linked to events in the future, which motivates them to engage with an immediate and act now focus. Although the less-sustainably-knowledgeable consumers largely suggested that they prefer concrete messages, so to inform and educate them about why the product was sustainable, this was not supported when presented with examples. Concrete messages were found to have a mixed appeal among them, which was dependent on whether the message resonated with their pre-conceptions of sustainability.

Managerial implications

The findings of this study have three practical implications for managers navigating communication about sustainability in fashion. The overarching takeaway is that no one size fits all. Effective communication about sustainability has the potential to influence sustainable behaviour but such effect is not guaranteed or immediate as it depends on managers' construal level about sustainability as well as the authenticity of the claim. Firms with a steadfast commitment to sustainability practices and ability to communicate concretely have the most to gain but managers should be flexible in their approach. Specifically, managers can extend their sustainability claims to include different stages of the product

lifecycle. They can adopt smaller and more achievable sustainable initiatives within their production, such as incorporating new sustainable designs, materials, dyes, and fasteners (e.g. button, snap, and buckle). The firm will thus have something genuine to communicate to its corporate audience (e.g. shareholders/investors, journalists, partners) using media such as company reports and press releases. These more factual and concrete sustainable claims should be detailed. This will help to evolve the firm from its existing general focus on durability and slow fashion, which will provide them with a differentiated positioning that is more ownable.

Second, our study provides insights into how managers can be more confident about communicating about sustainability in fashion. Given that consumers are becoming more knowledgeable about sustainability issues (Blazquez *et al.*, 2020) along with the emergence of the anti-greenwashing laws in different countries (Bonanni, 2022), it is crucial that managers use more direct media where they can control their authentic narrative. It can consist of using more concrete messages that are factual and an accurate representation of their sustainable practices. This needs to be featured on more direct and indirect consumer-facing media, such as on their website, blogs, training guidance for their employees and stockists, and in-store/online promotional material.

Third, brands can communicate about sustainable practices that have the added advantage of reducing costs within their current operations (e.g. reducing waste, water usage and production), which remains a common challenge in the sector. Managers can also communicate about the craftsmanship or ethical working conditions involved in making their products, as this results in superior quality and gives products a long-lasting nature, which is sustainable due to not needing to be replenished. It also fits with the more knowledgeable customers' focus on holistic organisational ethics and sustainability, rather than specific product-related sustainability claims. Finally, they can also look externally by

creating lines in collaboration with ethical or sustainable charities, causes or organisations that can help to leverage their brand, their messaging and their sustainable product range.

Limitations and future research directions

This research is subject to some limitations. Firstly, it focuses on fashion firms. It would be useful to understand if the communication strategies found in this study exist in other industries. Another limitation is the qualitative design used. This was appropriate for the chosen scope given that there is very little understanding of the influences of managers' construal level. However, it does not allow for the specific identification of which strategies are more effective than the other, which is beyond the scope of this research. Future research however could consider an experimental design that manipulates and captures the different dynamics between concrete and abstract messaging in fashion, as has been frequently done in tourism and food studies. Additionally, future research can consider testing the validity of the conceptual model. One point to note here though is that we identified quite varied self-definitions of what is considered "sustainable" in fashion stakeholders, and controlling for that in experimentation could present a significant barrier to future research.

In addition, the firms were found to adopt different levels of ethical and sustainable practices, all the brands viewed sustainability favourably and planned to increase their efforts. However, the fashion market is heterogeneous. It would be useful to collect data from fashion firms who resist change, to understand their reasons for this and how they manage communications about sustainability. Finally, the current samples comprise UK firms and customers. Societal norms vary markedly in the fashion sector by culture, gender, country and level of economic development. Broader studies can also be used to explore the role CLT can play in communications about sustainability across a broader range of cultures.

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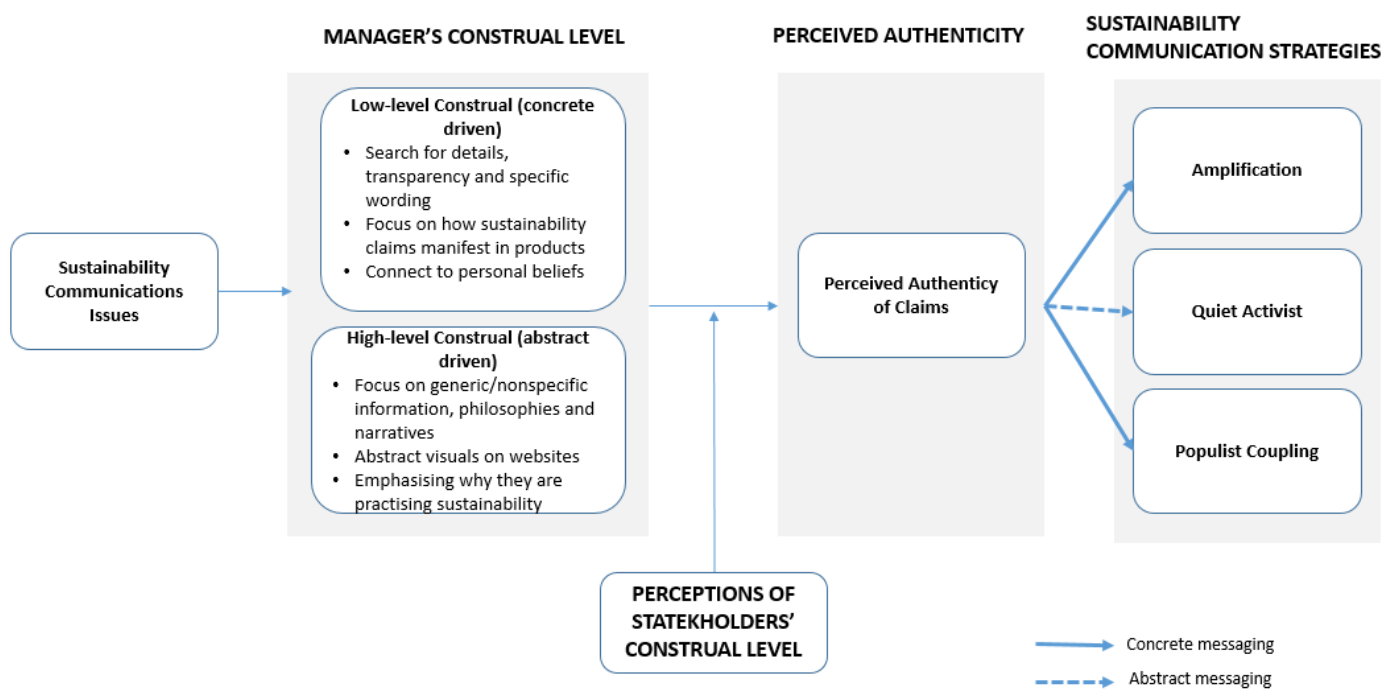
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Figure

Figure 1: A model of how managers’ construal level shape communication strategies



Tables

Table 1: Profile of managers (key decision makers in sustainability communication strategies)

No	Interview participants	Characteristics of company	Number of employees	Revenues (approx.)	Size category
1	Manager	Accessories, leather, established in 1971	1,400	\$210 Million	Large
2	Manager	Accessories, Leather, established in 2015	25	\$4million	Medium
3	Manager/Designer	Womenswear, based in Belgium, established 2012	5	\$969,000	Small
4	Manager	Luxury holiday wear, established 2016	1	£528,456	Start up
5	Manager	Eco-friendly, menswear, established 2014	25	£4m	Medium
6	Manager/Designer	Womenswear, organic cotton, upcycled materials, established 2016	1	£65,000	Start up
7	Director	Global luxury group, portfolio of brands, established 1963	38,000	€13.1 billion	Large
8	Manager/Designer	Luxury holiday wear, linen, silks, established 2015	1	£68,000	Start up
9	Manager/Creative director	Luxury, vintage, bohemian, womenswear, established 2018	1	\$198,000	Start up
10	Manager	Textiles, work wear for women, established 2017	7	£1million	Small

Table 2: Themes and coding at managers' construal level

Descriptive codes	Interpretive codes	Overarching themes
Use details, transparency and specific wording Focus on how sustainability claims manifest in products Connect to personal beliefs/or lack of information of recipients Focus on generic/nonspecific information Using philosophies and narratives with distant future Abstract visuals on websites Emphasising on why they are practicing sustainability	Low-level Construal (Concrete driven) High-level construal (Abstract driven)	Managers' Construal Level
The connection between tangible sustainable practices with concrete messaging approach such as certification Matching communications with transparent practices Differences in communications about wider sustainability issues Tensions in achieving high level of reach	Perceived Authenticity of the Sustainability Claims	Perceived Authenticity
Heterogeneity of stakeholders Favouring concrete communication with stakeholders with close reach Ensuring less detail and general context for more distal and diverse audiences Lack of universal sustainability codes or guidelines	Emphasising target stakeholders' construal level Shifting and reframing communications	Perceptions of Stakeholders' Construal Level

Table 3: Consumers' profile and responses for sustainability in fashion communications

Participant (pseudo names)	Age	Location	Commitment to sustainable fashion (SF)	Self-definition of SF	Expectations of SF communications
Amanda	45	Bristol	Not a SF consumer	"Better ways of reducing. Clothes that don't have as much impact on the environment and that's kind of what I would hope, it would be, and maybe kind of reutilizing materials."	"Thinking about visuals, it would be something that looks quite natural. I'm not going to want to see a catwalk model with her makeup looking amazing. I just think you always want the image, the fashion, to feel at one with nature, because you're trying to protect nature."
Collette	41	Bristol	Sustainable consumer but not on Fashion	"Behavioural changes, not just identifying a brand that was sustainable. That might mean ethical, because of labour or non-animal based,	"Seeing the outputs of what they mean by 'more sustainable'. To be quite explicit; it's quite easy to lie... If it was really in my face like planting trees. If somebody says

				but it also means behavioural choices that I should make such as buying an item that would naturally last quite a long time. I think it means a product that has had the lowest impact on the environment to make."	to me choosing this thing and we plant X number of trees, or we offset carbon in this way, then that that seems to me like it's something tangible to me, I understand what this person means."
Carrie	42	Bristol	Active SF consumer	"I don't think that fashion is particularly sustainable at the moment. I appreciate there are some brands that are trying to be sustainable. So we're looking at things that can keep going. And no running out of resources, being less detrimental to the planet. Sustainable brands, I would hope would be ethical as well, so treat their staff members well, have fair pay and conditions."	"I think it'd be the transparency of the whole journey of that product. So I'd want to know where is that thing made. I want to see a case study of that person that's working in that factory, is not being exploited, that they are using these practices."
Jasmine	42	Bristol	Active SF consumer	"I automatically think of sustainable fashion as kind of buying something that's ethically produced in terms of the fabrics and the ethos of the company in terms of its workers... I think, also an element of that is buying things that will last in terms of the environment."	"I quite like it if I see an advert for example, and I get given proper facts and then, if any of the adverts sort of go to a little bit about the background of how stuff is made, how much money goes to charity those sorts of messages. To influence me I'd like to have a bit more information."
Moir	45	Bristol	Not a SF consumer	"To me, it means that the production of the clothes are more sustainable."	"Maybe focus on the quality, high quality, so it's not the adverts themselves, it's more really good quality for the price."
Kelly	43	Bristol	Not a SF consumer	"It means that if I buy something it's come from, I guess, a reputable source which doesn't damage the environment, and it can be recycled."	"Just saying sustainable doesn't mean anything, but if you know that you're helping a particular group, or replace a worse product, that might make you have stronger feelings towards it."
Paula	44	Bristol	Fashionista, but not SF	"It's about fashion that comes under the Fair Trade type rules. It's something that is environmentally friendly, that probably also is ethical in the way that it's made and the types of materials. It's both things, it's about being environmentally friendly and about how we treat people."	"I think the facts, building on the claim, write the words that they have chosen something because it's ethical or because it sustainably sourced, making those claims in writing that's probably more important to me, rather than just a picture that might look like a nice."
Debbie	44	Yorkshire	Active SF consumer	"So it's all about creating a closed ecosystem, where everything is reused within the ecosystem, you're reusing water in a sustainable way, and all that sort of stuff."	"I think it's just clear statements and transparent. Statements around their practices. I just think if you're going to start making claims about this stuff, it has to be really clear and really transparent."

Abi	39	London	Sustainable consumer but not on Fashion	"I would think of reusing clothes, getting charity shops or hand-me-downs or the way that they are being made. Has it been done through sustainable materials or the methods in which they may care, and using clean energy."	"It really would have to be done in a way that I knew the story or that I could see the story, because I guess when you're going to buy clothes, I get a lot of information, from people who I trust in, and I feel like I'm on the same wavelength as."
Cleo	42	London	Highly sceptical but very knowledgeable.	"It has to be a garment that's made consciously with the least damage to the environment as possible. It's the production of the yarns and the finishing of the garment and the fabrics, and the transport. The word sustainable means that we can keep making the same garment in the future, for as long without causing damage for future generations...And we have to bear in mind recycling fabrics and taking care of the garments we make."	"Think it's got to be believable...I try to read more, for example, I don't usually go by, let's say, a retailer. The retailer can tell you about things, they go into great depth, and then I investigate on it as well. And I double check on others and see if the information corresponds."
Alexa	38	Birmingham	Knowledge but not active on sustainability	"Things like made from recycled materials or stuff like heirloom products where you know they can last multiple generations."	"I want to see its functional and it looks good, and yeah it washes well."
Sam	33	Birmingham	Not a SF consumer	"I would say that sustainable fashion to me is making clothes out of materials that would be longer lasting. A lot of today's fashion, is based on low price and short use. Sustainable fashion, I would consider probably would be more expensive using better quality materials, with a view to not being disposed of."	"I think there are a lot of people who know as little as me or less. I think a bit of guidance is a good starting point. Its getting clear messages, a bit of guidance that's quite straightforward."
Michelle	32	Birmingham	Active SF consumer	"Like reusing and quality, to be fair, so you can reuse. I would probably say like staple pieces that probably wouldn't go out of fashion."	"I would love information underneath the product. I think the way that the world is people don't have time, they're just they used to social media and then look at a picture and they get their information visually, I'd say just be very obvious as if how it would be represented."
Aelis	33	Birmingham	Not a SF consumer	"For me, it would be things that last longer and don't get wasted. I guess clothing that can be recycled."	"For me it's all down to cost."
Andrea	43	London	Knowledgeable but not active	"I'm guessing it's a drive to waste less material, recycle material, if possible."	"It needs to be tangible, whether it's fabrics that has been repurposed to make a new garment or whether it's that they've only used sustainable material."
Katy	35	Birmingham	Not an active SF consumer	"Sustainable to me would be like long wearing and recycled material."	"It's got to be tangible, or word of mouth."

Appendix A

Eight artefacts on various types of sustainable fashion communications (A1, A3, A6 and A8 = abstract focus; A2, A4, A5 and A7 = concrete focus)

