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CONSTRUCTING THE MEANING OF CULTURAL KEYWORDS THROUGH ARGUMENTATION: THE CASE OF 'SUSTAINABLE' IN FASHION

ABSTRACT

This paper adopts an argumentative perspective to examine how the meaning of the cultural keyword 'sustainable' is constructed in the public controversy surrounding sustainable fashion. Following Greco and De Cock (2021), I consider that the different players involved in the controversy present *misalignments* in their common ground which are related to their divergent understandings of the meaning of sustainable fashion. Therefore, I propose to analyze the definitional arguments advanced by different players in order to reconstruct the implicit definitions of 'sustainable' they adopt. To this end, I collect a multi-genre corpus which contains documents published by three players involved in the controversy: social media posts by participants to Fashion Revolution Week, sustainability reports by major fashion brands and communications by the EU Commission. Drawing on an analytical framework combining pragma-dialectics (van Eemeren, 2018) with the Argumentum Model of Topics (Rigotti & Greco, 2019), the analysis shows that each player advances a series of definitional arguments that contain the properties defining the meaning of the keyword 'sustainable'. As a corollary, the findings reveal that the same *endoxon*, that is, the same shared cultural premise, is evoked consistently even when the keyword acquires different meanings. At the theoretical level, this paper shows the importance of integrating the analysis of definitional arguments in argumentative studies about cultural keywords. Methodologically, it proposes an innovative method rooted in argumentation for the study of cultural keywords in a polylogical corpus.

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Constructing the meaning of cultural keywords through argumentation: The case of 'sustainable' in fashion

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1. Introduction

This paper aims to discover how the cultural keyword 'sustainable' is defined in the public controversy surrounding sustainable fashion, through an approach based on argumentation studies (Rigotti & Greco, 2019; van Eemeren, 2018). Thus, this contribution does not present a corpus linguistics approach, as it is part of a larger Special Issue offering different methodological approaches to keywords. According to Greco and De Cock (2021), in recent years the fashion industry has become increasingly criticized in the public sphere for its lack of sustainability, both on the environmental and on the social side; moreover, while the different players involved in the fashion industry seem to agree on the need of improving its sustainability, the reality does not reflect this apparent consensus. In fact, on the environmental side the fashion industry remains responsible for an enormous amount of damaging greenhouse gas emissions (Fletcher, 2010; Niinimäki et al., 2020), with production and consumption of garments continuously increasing (Niinimäki et al., 2020); at the same time, on the social side this industry is to blame for the exploitation of garment workers in developing countries (Henninger et al., 2016). This discrepancy between the apparent consensus on the importance of sustainability and factual evidence gives rise to an ongoing public controversy in which it remains unclear what 'being sustainable' really means and, consequently, which kind of fashion businesses can be attributed the 'sustainable' label. For example, global fashion brands claim to be taking all necessary actions to lead the industry change, while small businesses propose themselves as the only true sustainable alternative to the status quo (Greco et al., 2023).

The public controversy around what constitutes fashion and which players can legitimately claim to be sustainable, according to Greco and De Cock (2021), can be seen as an instance of argumentative polylogue, that is, an argumentative discussion which involves multiple players, positions and places (Aakhus & Lewiński, 2017). Participants in the polylogue include activists, small businesses, global fashion brands and public institutions, all of them holding their own interests and goals in the controversy. These individual views also encompass the individual players' understanding of sustainability, which 'is context dependent and situational and has different meanings for different people' (Henninger et al., 2016, p. 5); for example, some aspects of sustainability are considered more urgent by certain players than by others. Due to the importance of 'sustainable' and 'sustainability' as central concepts in the controversy, in this paper I take these two terms to be cultural keywords, in the sense given by Wierzbicka (1997), that is, 'as fo-

cal points around which entire cultural domains are organized (p. 16), even though, at the same time, their meaning remains ‘fuzzy and vague’ (Niinimäki, 2015, p. 1). Therefore, the status of ‘sustainable’ as a cultural keyword constitutes an *a priori* assumption of this paper.

According to Greco and De Cock (2021), one of the reasons why the controversy is persisting over time is the presence of *misalignments*, that is, divergences in the common ground (Clark, 1996) of the different players, which concern the understanding of sustainable fashion held by each player. Greco and De Cock (2021) notice that the definitions of sustainable fashion may be expressed both in an explicit form, as in ‘sustainable fashion does x’, or implicitly, by advancing arguments from definition, as in the example ‘[t]his product/service is sustainable, because it is/does x’. This specific argument from definition relies on an unstated premise, containing an implicit definition, which may be expressed as ‘sustainable fashion means x’ (Greco & De Cock, 2021, p. 58). Drawing on this consideration, Greco and De Cock (2021) explain that the misalignments about the definition of sustainable fashion are found in these unstated premises, which they call *endoxa*, that is, commonly held opinions that are part of the common ground shared among the players in the discussion and that are relied upon as premises in the construction of arguments (Rigotti & Greco, 2019). However, these misalignments are not explicit in discourse and as a consequence the controversy remains partially hidden. In this respect, it appears that recovering the implicit definitions of sustainable fashion held by different players may help to gather a better understanding of the controversy. Therefore, in this paper I am interested in reconstructing what the meaning of sustainable fashion is according to each concrete player participating in the controversy, rather than in analyzing the meaning of sustainable fashion in general. Moreover, beyond examining the different ‘hidden’ definitions of the keyword ‘sustainable’ constructed by each player, my analysis will explore which type of business can be attributed this label, since this is one of the crucial issues in the controversy, as mentioned above.

To achieve these aims, in the paper I adopt an analytical approach based on argumentation theories. Following the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation (van Eemeren, 2018), I consider argumentation as a discussion process in which arguments are exchanged between two or more interlocutors with the end goal of resolving a difference of opinion. Thanks to the analytical tools afforded by argumentation studies, specifically pragma-dialectics and the Argumentum Model of Topics (AMT) developed by Rigotti and Greco (2019), it is possible to reconstruct the standpoint advanced in a text, that is, the proposition argued about in the discussion (van Eemeren, 2018), as well as its supporting arguments, which are the reasons advanced by the arguer, and also the inferential link connecting standpoint and argument. Drawing on this argumentative perspective, the main research question of this paper is formulated below:

- RQ1. How is the meaning of the cultural keyword ‘sustainable/being sustainable’ constructed, from an argumentative perspective, in the public controversy surrounding sustainable fashion?

As a corollary, I also address a second research question:

- RQ2. What is the relationship between the keyword ‘sustainable’ and the *endoxon/endoxa* it evokes, in the polylogical controversy examined?

To answer these questions, I develop a qualitative analytical framework which integrates argumentative approaches to cultural keywords with the study of definitional arguments. Thus, in this paper I focus on cultural keywords from the point of view of their function in discourse, in particular on their argumentative function. The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, I review argumentative approaches to cultural keywords and contributions about definitional arguments. Then, I present the criteria for corpus compilation and the method of analysis (Section 3). In Section 4, I present my findings and discuss them in Section 5, before outlining conclusions and directions for future research (Section 6).

2. Literature review

The literature review consists of two parts. In the first sub-section, I discuss the value of adopting an argumentative approach to the study of cultural keywords and highlight the role played by cultural keywords for the retrieval of implicit *endoxa*. Then, in the second sub-section, I illustrate the main characteristics of arguments from definition, focusing on the classification criteria which compose the meaning of definitions. While it has not yet been proposed to reconstruct the implicit meaning of cultural keywords through the analysis of definitional arguments, I argue that this is crucial in this public controversy, since misalignments occur in implicit *endoxa* about the definition of sustainable fashion.

2.1. Argumentative approaches to keywords

In this paper I focus on cultural keywords, which differ from the statistical understanding of keywords usually adopted in corpus linguistics studies (see the Introduction to this Special Issue); therefore, I begin the sub-section by clarifying what is meant by the term. Then, I present the added value of employing argumentation for the analysis of cultural keywords and specifically for retrieving the *endoxa* associated to these cultural keywords.

The literature about keywords is rich and multidisciplinary, with the noun *keyword* being used in a variety of different senses, only loosely connected to one another (Stubbs, 2010). In general, according to Rocci and Monteiro (2009), keywords ‘are in some sense *representative* of a body of knowledge to which they are associated, and thus can be used to provide some sort of *access* to this body of knowledge’ (p. 68). Among the senses in which keywords may be used, it is possible to distinguish between *statistical* keywords, that is, terms that possess a certain keyness depending on their relative frequency in one corpus compared to another (see the Introduction to this Special Issue), and *cultural* keywords, which are related with ‘obtaining relevant insights into cultures through the study of keywords’ (Bigi, 2006, p. 160). In this paper, I focus on keywords in this second sense. Two of the most prominent works in cultural keywords research are Williams (1976) and Wierzbicka (1997). Williams (1976) characterizes keywords as ‘significant, binding words in certain activities and their interpretation’ and as ‘significant, indicative words in cer-

tain forms of thought' (p. 15), while Wierzbicka (1997) argues that 'some words can be studied as focal points around which entire cultural domains are organized' (p. 16). However, in both works a method for determining which words may be considered keywords is absent, as noticed by later contributions (Bigi, 2006; Rocci & Monteiro, 2009; Stubbs, 2010).

A procedure for identifying cultural keywords aimed at filling this gap comes from argumentation studies. According to Rigotti and Rocci (2002), combining the study of cultural keywords with argumentation can be fruitful for both research streams: while argumentation theory can assist in the identification of cultural keywords by providing 'a significant testbed' (p. 903), the semantic analysis of keywords can help to better understand the functioning of implicit premises in argumentation. The method elaborated by Rigotti and Rocci (2002) considers the role played by words in argumentative texts both from a logical and a communicative point of view. From a logical perspective, words are considered potential cultural keywords if 'they play the role of a *terminus medius* in an enthymematic argument' (Rigotti & Rocci, 2002, p. 905), that is, if they function as the middle term in a syllogism (i.e., a form of logical reasoning containing two premises from which a conclusion is drawn), thus appearing in both the major and the minor premise, but not in the conclusion (see Rocci & Monteiro, 2009). From a communicative perspective, words can be considered keywords if they work 'as pointers to an *endoxon* or constellation of *endoxa* that are used directly or indirectly to supply an unstated major premise' (Rigotti & Rocci, 2002, p. 905). By the term *endoxon*, the scholars refer to an Aristotelian concept used to indicate opinions that are shared within a certain community (see also Rocci & Monteiro, 2009). Words that fulfil this double function, according to Rigotti and Rocci (2002), may be viewed as cultural keywords. An example can help to clarify the method. The statement *He's a traitor. Therefore he deserves to be put to death*, can be reconstructed argumentatively as:

Major premise: *Traitors* deserve to be put to death (unstated)

Minor premise: He is a *traitor*

Conclusion: He deserves to be put to death. (Rigotti & Rocci, 2002, p. 904)

As noticed by Rigotti and Rocci, from the logical point of view, the word *traitor* plays the role of *terminus medius*; at the same time, from the communicative point of view, the word *traitor* helps to retrieve the unexpressed major premise (i.e., the *endoxon*), since it evokes 'a number of culturally shared beliefs and values that confirm the plausibility' of the unexpressed premise. Thus, in their work Rigotti and Rocci (2002) first identify the important relationship existing between cultural keywords and argumentative *endoxa*. Following Rigotti and Rocci (2002), the reflection on the relationship between keywords and *endoxa* has then been advanced in other contributions (e.g., Bigi & Greco Morasso, 2012; Monteiro, 2014; Rocci & Monteiro, 2009), which have highlighted the meaningful role of cultural keywords for retrieving *endoxa*. In addition, Rocci and Monteiro (2009) and Monteiro (2014) have argued that cultural keywords not only support the reconstruction of the *endoxa*, which are often left implicit, but also help to justify this reconstruction starting from the common ground of the culture under study.

Overall, studies combining argumentation theory with cultural keywords emphasize the relationship between keywords and shared cultural premises, that is, the *endoxa*. This point is particularly important for my research, since the implicit misalignments present in the controversy under study occur in the *endoxa* related to the cultural keyword ‘sustainable’ (see Section 1). However, these contributions focus only to a limited extent on how the meaning of a specific cultural keywords may be reconstructed (e.g., Monteiro, 2014; Rocci & Monteiro, 2009). Therefore, with this paper I contribute to filling this gap by analyzing how the meaning of the cultural keyword ‘sustainable’ in this controversy is constructed through arguments from definition.

2.2. Arguments from definition

In this second sub-section, since the implicit misalignments in the public controversy surrounding sustainable fashion often occur in arguments from definition (see Section 1), I discuss the main characteristics of this type of argument, as proposed in the argumentation literature: the presence of classification criteria and the *endoxical* nature of definitions.

According to Aristotle, definition is ‘a statement expressing the meaning of a term’ (as cited in Walton & Macagno, 2010, p. 58). The argument from definition is one of the argument schemes, or *loci*, that is, the ‘culturally shared rules of inference’ (Rigotti & Rocci, 2002, p. 903) employed in argumentation studies to describe the relationship between a standpoint and its supporting argument. In the example reported in Section 1, ‘[t]his product/service is sustainable, because it is/does x’ (Greco & De Cock, 2021, p. 58), the standpoint ‘this product/service is sustainable’ is connected to its supporting argument ‘because it is/does x’ through an argument from definition, which means that the standpoint is justified in force of the definition advanced.

Argumentation scholars (Hastings, 1962; Walton & Macagno, 2009, 2010) have claimed that arguments from definition can be described as part of a broader category of arguments from classification. In the argument scheme from classification, according to Hastings (1962), ‘[t]he purpose [...] is to classify or categorize a situation; to prove that a certain label, classification, or verbal description may properly be attached to an aspect of reality’ (p. 36), for example when describing a scientific problem as ‘difficult’. This description is justified if the object under consideration provides sufficient evidence of fulfilling the criteria, that is, the characteristics which ‘comprise the definition of that classification’ (Hastings, 1962, p. 36) and coincide with its ‘symbolic meaning’ (Hastings, 1962, p. 40). These criteria, Hastings (1962) continues, are often left implicit by the arguer; therefore, it is the audience who has the task of retrieving them. Then, moving from the more general argument from classification to the argument from definition, Walton and Macagno (2009) add that these implicit criteria are contained in the major premise (i.e., the *endoxon*) of the argument, which in the case of ‘[t]his product/service is sustainable, because it is/does x’ (Greco & De Cock, 2021, p. 58), corresponds to ‘sustainable fashion means x’.

The importance of classification criteria in respect to arguments from definition is also acknowledged by argumentation scholars working in the framework of the AMT (Rigotti & Greco, 2019; Schär, 2017). In the AMT, Rigotti and Greco (2019) develop a broader category of definitional *loci* that includes, among others, arguments from *description*. The *locus* from description refers to the cases in which the definition is determined on the basis of property or accident (Schär, 2017). According to Aristotle, reported by Schär (2017, p. 179), the property describes the core of the entity and is exclusive, that is, *proper* of that precise entity, as in the example, '[t]his animal is a giraffe because it has a long neck', while *accident* refers to a predicate that may belong or not to the entity depending on the moment in time, as in 'Linda has red hair' (Rigotti & Greco, 2019, p. 12). As per the classification criteria discussed by Hastings (1962), the Aristotelian properties which constitute the definition of the entity are stated in the *endoxon*. Thus, in the example made by Schär (2017), the implicit *endoxon* is that '[a] property that characterizes the species "giraffe" is having a long neck' (p. 185).

Following the contributions gathered in this section, in this paper I also adopt a view of arguments from definition that puts at its centre the concepts of criteria and properties, in order to establish how different players construct the meaning of the keyword 'sustainable' in the fashion domain and to discover to which types of businesses they attribute this label.

3. Methodology

3.1. Corpus compilation

To answer the two research questions, I compiled a corpus of texts which belong to the debate about sustainable fashion and which reflect its polylogical characteristics, namely the presence of multiple players, positions and places (Aakhus & Lewiński, 2017). The corpus was compiled in accordance with the criteria proposed by previous contributions (Greco, 2023; Greco & De Cock, 2021) for the empirical analysis of this polylogical controversy, which are (i) the selection of texts published by players holding competing views and positions in respect to sustainable fashion and (ii) the presence of multiple data sources for these texts, since different players express their positions in different places. Following these criteria, I collected texts issued by three groups of players that hold competing positions and interests in respect to sustainable fashion: social media posts published by participants to Fashion Revolution Week, reports produced by major fashion brands and communications by EU Commission. As per the time span, I selected texts published between 2020 and 2022; the reason for this decision is that the Covid-19 outbreak greatly impacted the sustainability progress of the fashion industry (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2020). The corpus composition is presented in Table 1.

Fashion Revolution Week (FRW) is a campaign organized annually in April by the activist organisation Fashion Revolution since 2013.

Player	Type of texts	Number of texts	Words
Participants to Fashion Revolution Week	Social media posts	400	21,892
	Instagram posts	200	
	Tweets	200	
Major fashion brands		5	15,590
H&M	Sustainability Performance Report		
Inditex	Annual Report		
Gap Inc.	Global Sustainability Report		
Fast Retailing	Sustainability Report		
Levi Strauss & Co.	Sustainability Report		
EU Commission	Communications	2	15,940
	A New Circular Economy Action Plan for a Cleaner and more Competitive Europe		
	EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles		
Overall		407	50,496

Table 1. Titles, authors and number of words of the texts included in the corpus

FRW is one of the most popular digital campaigns about sustainable fashion; it promotes the radical transformation of the fashion industry and invites all members of the public to participate online by posting content containing #fashionrevolution. Thus, participants to FRW are relatively heterogeneous, including activists, small fashion businesses, and media (see Greco et al., 2023). For this group of players, I collected 200 Instagram posts and 200 tweets, all containing #fashionrevolution, which were published during FRW 2020 (04-20 to 04-26). Both Instagram posts and tweets were obtained through a hashtag-based extraction, performed by the provider Picodash (n.d.) for Instagram and by the Centre de Traitement Automatique du Langage of UCLouvain for Twitter (see Naets, 2018 for the description of how tweets were collected).

Then, the second group of players consist in the five largest high street fashion brands per annual revenue, according to the classification by the Business of Fashion (Kent, 2021), which are: H&M, Inditex, Gap. Inc, Fast Retailing and Levi Strauss & Co. Big high street brands constitute one of the main players in the debate around sustainable fashion, as they are the main producers of garments globally (Kent, 2021).

For these players, I included in the corpus the introductory sections of their sustainability or annual¹ reports released in 2020–2021, which are publicly available online. I decided to focus on the introductory sections because this is where brands provide an overview of their approach to sustainability, while the remaining parts of the reports go into detail about the information that is given in the beginning. Finally, the third player I selected is the EU Commission, which holds competing views and interests about sustainable fashion in respect to participants to FRW and to big brands (see Greco & De Cock, 2021). For the Commission, I collected two communications, published in 2020 and in 2022, which are also available online (EU Commission, n.d.).

3.2. Method of analysis

To understand how different players construct the meaning of ‘sustainable’ in the public controversy surrounding fashion sustainability, I followed a qualitative methodology rooted in an argumentative framework, which integrates insights from pragma-dialectics (van Eemeren, 2018) and the AMT (Rigotti & Greco, 2019). The method is based on two main analytical concepts: *characterization frames* and *argumentative patterns*, which we combined in a previous study (Mercuri, 2023). Characterization frames refer to the descriptions that players in a controversy make of themselves and of others and are activated in discourse through frame-activating expressions mentioning a *persona*, *stable behaviour* or *state/condition* (Mercuri, 2023). On the other hand, the concept of argumentative patterns describes, within a given communicative activity type, ‘a particular constellation of argumentative moves in which, in dealing with a particular kind of difference of opinion, in defence of a particular type of standpoint a particular argument scheme or combination of argument schemes is used in a particular kind of argumentation structure’ (van Eemeren, 2018, p. 150). In this previous study, I (Mercuri, 2023) showed that the different characterization frames associated to each group of players contributed to the construction of specific *endoxa* recurrent in the controversy, so the combination of these two concepts seems suitable for retrieving the implicit definitions of sustainable fashion employed by different players.

The method of analysis consists of three steps. First, I performed a manual annotation of the whole corpus for characterization frame-activating expressions related to the sustainability domain, leaving aside other characterizations. In the annotation, I focused on characterization frames referring to fashion businesses and companies, which I divided in ‘small businesses’ and ‘big brands’ (see Mercuri, 2023), since the research aim focuses on discovering to which type of business the characterizing properties composing the definition of ‘sustainable’ can be attributed, according to the different players involved in the controversy. The annotation scheme is reported in Figure 1 for ‘small businesses’ and in

1 As of 2020, there was no mandatory standard for sustainability reporting, which meant that each brand published sustainability information in the type of disclosure they preferred. For this reason, Inditex gave information about its sustainability practices in an annual report, while the other brands issued a sustainability report.

Figure 2 for ‘big brands’. This annotation was performed on UAM Corpus Tool (O’Donnell, 2008), a freely available software for the manual annotation of linguistic data.

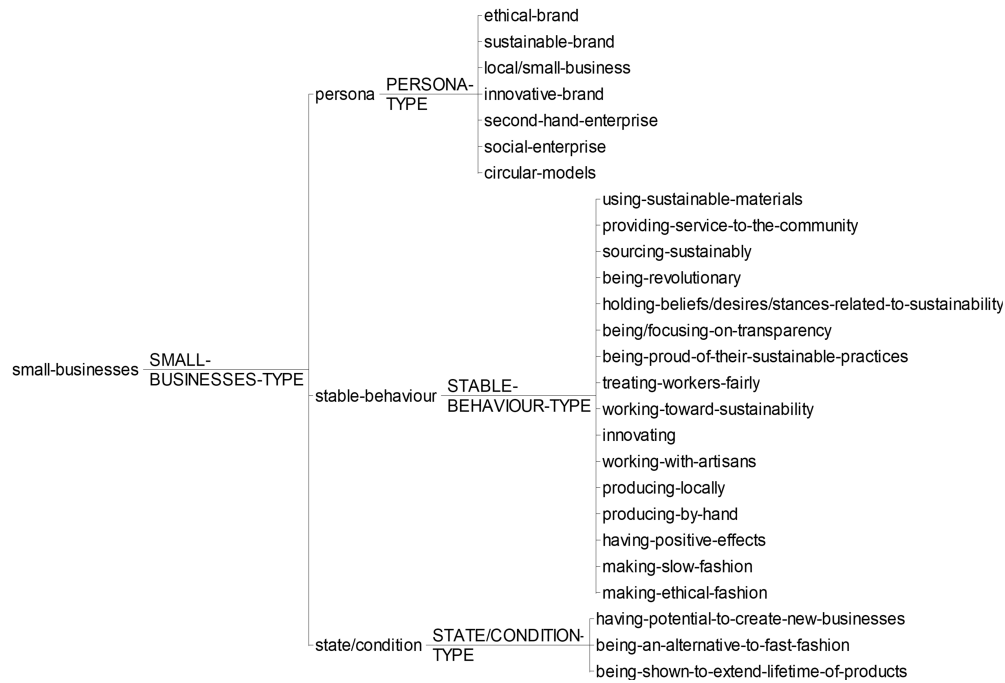


Figure 1: Annotation scheme elaborated on UAM Corpus Tool for the analysis of characterization frames related to ‘small businesses’



Figure 2: Annotation scheme elaborated on UAM Corpus Tool for the analysis of characterization frames related to ‘big brands’

In the second step, I performed an argumentative analysis to retrieve the argumentative patterns (van Eemeren, 2018) associated to the characterization frames shown in Figures 1 and 2, following the procedure explained in Mercuri (2023), that is, I determined the argument schemes, or *loci*, and the types of standpoints that occurred with these characterization frames. Since I aim at reconstructing the implicit definitions of ‘sustainable’ according to different players, I only focused on argumentative patterns that were related to sustainability. In the analysis, I expected to find patterns presenting *loci* from definition because previous works in the controversy surrounding fashion sustainability had also found presence of definitional arguments (see Greco, 2023; Greco & De Cock, 2021). Let us consider, for example, the following Instagram post (Excerpt 1):

- (1) **Sustainable Fashion brands** with a Los Angeles heart to shop with confidence. 🍀 🌱
 🌱 From low-impact dyes, to eco-friendly fabrics and zero-waste model, **these are some of the brands that make us (and the planet) feel good** and deserve to be in our closet. ✨ ✨ ✨ ✨ #fashionrevolution (Instagram, 2020-04-25)

In Excerpt 1, I put in bold the characterization frame-activating expressions associated to ‘small businesses’ that I identified, which were annotated respectively as belonging to the categories ‘sustainable brands’ and ‘having positive effects’ (see Figure 1). Then, I reconstructed argumentatively the post following the pragma-dialectical representation (van Eemeren, 2018), which indicates with 1 the standpoint identified in the text and with 1.1, 1.1.1, etc., the chain of supporting arguments. The reconstruction below shows that Excerpt 1 contains a series of arguments from definition (i.e., 1.1.1.1, 1.1.1.2 and 1.1.1.3), in support of the argument 1.1.1 ‘they are sustainable fashion brands’. Therefore, this post constitutes an example of an argumentative pattern relevant for this paper.

- 1 These brands deserve to be in our closet
 - 1.1 They make us (and the planet) feel good
 - 1.1.1 They are sustainable fashion brands
 - 1.1.1.1 They employ low-impact dyes
 - 1.1.1.2 They employ eco-friendly fabrics
 - 1.1.1.3 They have a zero-waste model

At this stage, I also looked at the relationship between the keyword ‘sustainable’ and the *endoxon/endoxa* it evokes, in order to address RQ2. From the argumentative structure just presented, the unstated major premise, that is the *endoxon*, can be reconstructed as follows, drawing on the *traitor* example discussed in Section 2.1:

- Major premise: *Sustainable fashion brands* make us (and the planet) feel good (unstated)
- Minor premise: They are *sustainable fashion brands*
- Conclusion: They make us (and the planet) feel good.

Then, in the last step of the method, for all the arguments presenting a definitional *locus* I reconstructed the inferential configuration according to the AMT (Rigotti & Greco, 2019), which allows to perform a fine-grained reconstruction of the connection between an argument and the standpoint, or *final conclusion*, it supports. In fact, the AMT makes

explicit, on the one hand, the procedural-inferential premises of the argument, that are *locus* (see Section 2.2) and *maxim*, which is the logical inferential principle of support (Rigotti & Greco, 2019). On the other hand, the AMT helps to clarify the material-contextual premises, that are *endoxon* (see Section 2.1) and *datum*, which represents the factual premise (Rigotti & Greco, 2019) and in many cases coincides with what is explicitly said in the text. This last step made it possible to discover which definition of sustainable fashion was implicitly conveyed in the *endoxon* by each group of players (RQ1). As an illustration, in Figure 3 I propose the inferential configuration of the argument 1.1.1.1 from the argumentative reconstruction above, from which it emerges that the implicit definition of sustainable fashion according to the author of Excerpt 1 concerns, among other factors, the employment of low-impact dyes.

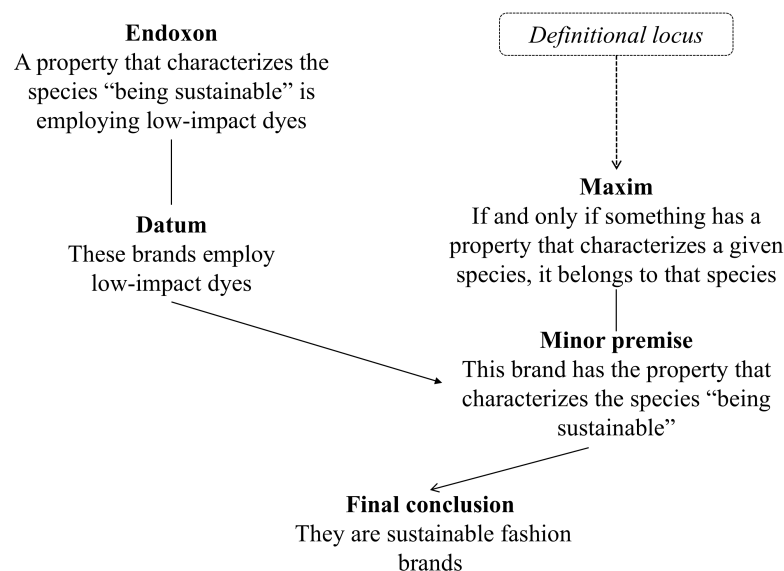


Figure 3: Reconstruction of the inferential configuration according to the Argumentum Model of Topics (Rigotti & Greco, 2019) of the definitional argument 1.1.1.1 ‘these brands employ low-impact dyes’

4. Findings

From the analysis, two main argumentative patterns related to the cultural keyword ‘sustainable/being sustainable’ were found (see Table 2); these two patterns are recurrent between the different players, with some variations. The two patterns could also be considered together as one macro-pattern, since they are connected in an argumentative chain in which the argument ‘it is sustainable’ is in turn justified by a series of definitional arguments. This general (abstract) macro-pattern can be reconstructed as follows:

Player	Argumentative patterns			
	Standpoint	Type of standpoint	Argument	Locus
Participants to FRW	Buy from this brand	Prescriptive	It is sustainable	From final cause
	This brand is sustainable	Evaluative / descriptive	It makes slow fashion	Definitional
			It makes ethical fashion	
			It has positive effects	
			It works with artisans	
			It uses sustainable materials	
			It provides service to the community	
			It sources sustainably	
			It is revolutionary	
			It treats workers fairly	
Big brands	Buy from this brand	Prescriptive	It is sustainable	From final cause
	This brand is sustainable	Evaluative / descriptive	It has made progress in terms of sustainability	Definitional
			It takes responsibility	
			It donates profits/garments	
			It changed the company/industry for the better	
			It is working toward circularity	
			It is setting new goals	
			It is meeting sustainability-related targets/criteria	
EU Commission	We need to support circular business models	Prescriptive	They are sustainable	From final cause
	Circular business models are sustainable	Evaluative / descriptive	They have been shown to extend the lifetime of textile products	Definitional
			They have the potential to create new businesses and jobs	
			They are an alternative to fast fashion	

Table 2. Argumentative patterns related to 'sustainable/being sustainable' found in the corpus

- 1 Buy/support this brand
 - 1.1 It is sustainable
 - 1.1.1 It has properties *a*, *b*, *c*...

In presenting the findings, I prefer to distinguish the two patterns, as reported in Table 2, to make explicit the individual characteristics of each pattern. Table 2 shows that the first argumentative pattern, found both in social media posts and in reports by major brands, includes a prescriptive standpoint (van Eemeren, 2018) inviting the reader to purchase from a certain brand or business. This standpoint is supported by an argument from final cause (see Rigotti & Greco, 2019), that is, ‘it is sustainable’. In the case of documents published by the EU Commission, a variation of this pattern was found, in which a prescriptive standpoint calls for support of specific brands, that is, those with circular business models. This standpoint is again justified through a *locus* from final cause.

The second argumentative pattern, as shown in Table 2, is also present both in social media posts and in brands reports and contains an evaluative/descriptive standpoint (van Eemeren, 2018) stating ‘it (this brand) is sustainable’. This standpoint is supported by a series of definitional arguments which describe the properties that make these brands sustainable. Thus, the specific content of the properties *a*, *b*, *c*, etc. changes according to each player and coincide with the implicit meaning of the definitions of sustainable fashion advanced by each player. More precisely, these implicit definitions are included in the *endoxon* of each definitional argument, as will be explained below (see Sections 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3). As in the previous case, this pattern is slightly different in the EU Commission communications, in which the evaluative/descriptive standpoint claims that ‘circular business models are sustainable’ and is supported by a definitional *locus*. A possible reason for the difference in these argumentative patterns may be that the Commission plays a different role in the controversy from the other players analyzed, as the Commission is not a garment producer and is not meant to support individual brands. About the definitional arguments included in Table 2, it can be noticed that they correspond in part to the characterization frames included in the annotation scheme; in fact, characterization frames are usually present in arguments, as we argued in Mercuri (2023).

In the next sections, for each player I discuss in depth one excerpt taken from the corpus to illustrate the two argumentative patterns. For each excerpt, I explain both the role played by ‘sustainable’ in the argumentation structure and the implicit definitions of ‘sustainable’ that emerge in performing inferential configurations of individual arguments.

4.1. *Participants to Fashion Revolution Week*

Let us consider the following Instagram post (Excerpt 2), as an example of the two intertwined patterns reported in Table 2. All excerpts are reported verbatim, including spelling errors, as they were originally written by their authors.

(2) From Peru to you...meet @bareknitwear 🧡

Bare Knitwear combines heritage artisan ship, slow fashion philosophy, modern design, high quality and empowering 150 at-risk female artisans in Peru.

- Andean atelier is located in Huamanga region where women often struggle to find consistent work
 - Bare Knitwear has partnered with a social enterprise committed to removing employment barriers
 - at the facility, the women have access to free built in daycare for their children and therapy, a nutritionist who teaches them about meal planning and proper diet and help with financial planning
 - the workshop has Fairtrade certification
 - Bare Knitwear is committed to sourcing 100% of their materials from Peruvian distributors supporting the local alpaca industry and developing sustainable practises in alpaca farming
 - they create alpaca blends that feel good on a bare skin and have the tenacity to withstand everyday wear
 - each Bare Knitwear garment is handmade and takes 5-13 hours to produce...
- #fashionrevolution (Instagram, 2020-04-26)

This post introduces the Bare Knitwear brand by focusing on its characteristics: it is an artisanal business, hand-made in Peru, that empowers women. The standpoint inviting the reader to support, or to buy from the brand, is left implicit, as it is often the case for posts published during FRW (see Greco et al., 2023); still, it is possible to justify it thanks to the knowledge of the context. Moreover, the argument ‘This brand is sustainable’ in support of the standpoint does not appear in the main text of the post but needs to be made explicit from the hashtag #sustainablefashion. The definitional arguments found in Excerpt 2, that is, the list of properties of the Bare Knitwear brand, are reported in the argumentative reconstruction below:

1 Buy/support the Bare Knitwear brand

1.1 It is sustainable

1.1.1 It makes ethical fashion

1.1.1.1 It treats workers fairly

1.1.1.2 It provides service to the community

1.1.2 It makes slow fashion

1.1.2.1 It is produced by hand

1.1.3 It works with artisans

1.1.4 It sources sustainably

This reconstruction is justified on the basis of the *argumentative potential* activated by the term ‘sustainable’, that is, the ‘implicit argumentative meaning that may be communicated by a certain discourse or parts of it’ (Mohammed, 2023, p. 628) in a public context. Due to its *argumentative potential* in the public controversy surrounding fashion sustain-

ability, mentioning ‘sustainable’ anywhere in the text is sufficient to evoke an implicit inference that activates the prescriptive standpoint in support of the brand. Therefore, drawing on Mohammed (2023), #sustainable is recognisable by the public familiar with the context as part of a premise-conclusion pair in which ‘it is sustainable’ works as the premise that activates the prescriptive standpoint ‘buy/support this brand’. From the perspective of argumentative approaches to keywords, it can be noticed here that the argument ‘it is sustainable’ helps to retrieve the unexpressed major premise (i.e., the positive *endoxon*), that is, ‘being sustainable is good’.

Then, moving to consider this example as representative of the second argumentative pattern, I focus on the relationship between 1.1 (It is sustainable) and the supporting definitional argument 1.1.3 (It works with artisans). In Figure 4, I perform the inferential configuration of the argument according to the AMT (Rigotti & Greco, 2019), in order to gain a fine-grained perspective of the internal functioning of the argument.

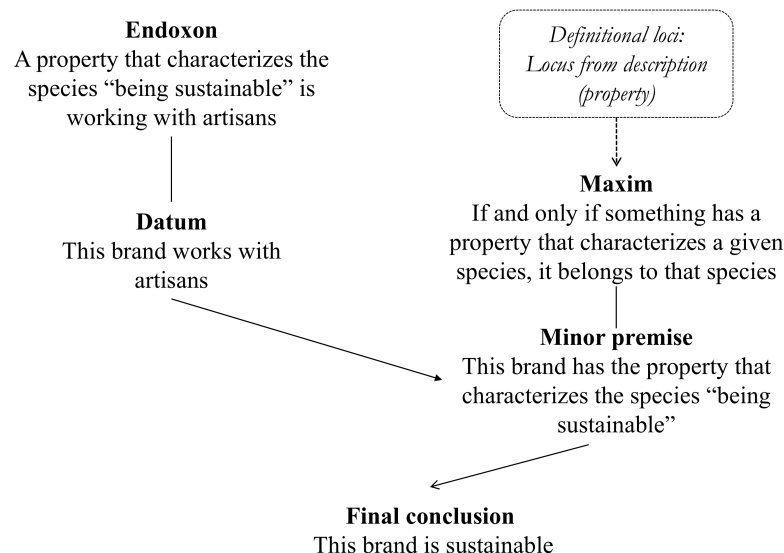


Figure 4: Reconstruction of the inferential configuration (Rigotti & Greco, 2019) of the definitional argument ‘this brand works with artisans’ employed by Fashion Revolution Week participants

I consider the argument represented in Figure 4 as an instance of the *locus* from description, since it is based on the attribution of characterizing properties (see Section 2.2); the maxim is taken from Schär (2017, p. 185). From the inferential configuration, it emerges that the implicit definition of the species ‘being sustainable’ is included in the *endoxon*, which states that one of the properties that a brand needs to possess in order to be defined sustainable is ‘working with artisans’. A similar inferential configuration can be performed for the other definitional arguments found in the reconstruction of the post, in which only the material-contextual component would need to be modified. For example, Bare Knitwear can be labelled ‘sustainable’ also because it makes ethical and slow

fashion (1.1.1 and 1.1.2), in which case the *endoxon* would be that ‘a property which characterizes the species “being sustainable” is making ethical and slow fashion’. This finding is in line with the fact that both ethical and slow fashion have been established as subtypes of sustainable fashion in the literature (see Orminski et al., 2020). Taken all together, these definitional arguments detail the list of properties that make Bare Knitwear ‘sustainable’ according to the author of the post. Moreover, since this post is a representative example of the second argumentative pattern, this reasoning can be extended to all the properties listed in Table 2, which in the different posts included in the corpus work as definitional arguments: each property, expressed as a definitional argument, contributes to construct the meaning of the cultural keyword according to this group of players.

4.2. Major fashion brands

The following text (Excerpt 3), taken from the Inditex report, provides an example of the patterns described at the beginning of Section 4 for the major five fashion brands (described in Section 3.1).

- (3) Sustainability, is a core component of the Company's long-term vision, and 2020 was a year in which we met some of our key targets ahead of schedule.
- For example, we beat our goal for renewable energy consumption across the organisation, which we had set at 65%, delivering a level of 81%. The percentage of garments distinguished for more sustainable processes or materials by our Join Life label accounted for more than 35% of all items, compared to a targeted 25%. And we delivered on our promise to complete the rollout of our eco-efficient store programme and used-clothing collection scheme worldwide. (Inditex, 2020, p. 8)

In this excerpt, Inditex characterizes itself as having accomplished important sustainable goals and makes precise examples of these achievements. Similarly to Excerpt 2, again the prescriptive standpoint calling for support of the brand is left implicit and needs to be inferred from the knowledge of the context. The argument 1.1 ‘we (Inditex) are sustainable’ can be reconstructed from the first sentence of Excerpt 3 and, more in general, from the whole report. In fact, these reports are primarily aimed at demonstrating the legitimacy of the brands’ sustainability claims, since these companies are under continuous scrutiny for their practices (see Henninger et al., 2016). Also in this case, the predicate ‘sustainable’ inserted in argument 1.1 justifies a call for action and is related to the *endoxon* ‘being sustainable is good’. The argumentative reconstruction of Excerpt 3 is reported below.

- 1 Buy/support us (Inditex)
 - 1.1 We are sustainable
 - 1.1.1 We met some of our key targets ahead of schedule
 - 1.1.1.1 We beat our goal for renewable energy consumption across the organisation

1.1.1.2 We beat our goal for the percentage of garments distinguished for more sustainable processes or materials

1.1.2 We have an eco-efficient store programme and a used-clothing collection scheme worldwide

Now, focusing on the relationship between 1.1 (we are sustainable) and its supporting definitional argument 1.1.1 (we met some of our key targets ahead of schedule), I propose the inferential configuration for this argument in Figure 5.

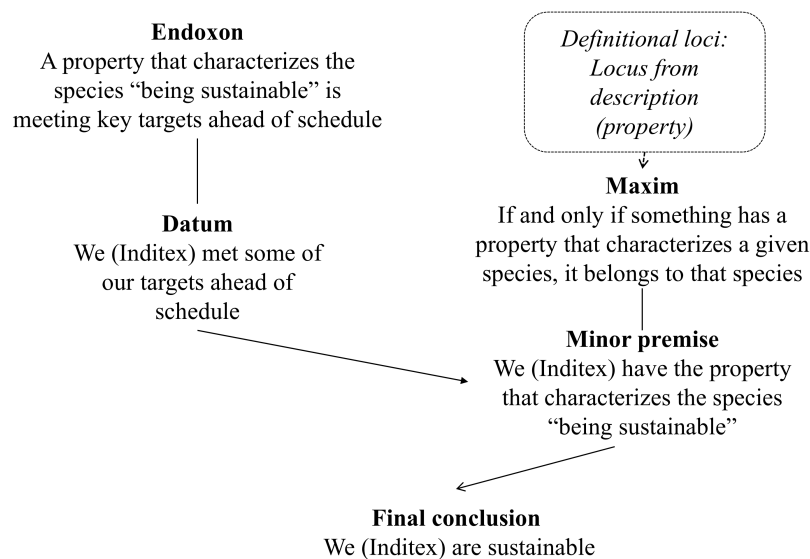


Figure 5. Reconstruction of the inferential configuration (Rigotti & Greco, 2019) of the definitional argument 'we (Inditex) met some of our targets ahead of schedule' employed by big brands

While this argument is also based on a *locus* from description, the implicit definition of the species 'being sustainable' that is constructed in the *endoxon* is different from the one provided by participants to FRW. The definition in Figure 5 states that to be defined sustainable, a brand needs to meet key targets related to sustainability ahead of schedule. The other properties that concur to make a brand sustainable, according to major fashion brands, are listed in Table 2.

4.3. EU Commission

In this sub-section, I analyze in depth one example from the communication published by the EU Commission (Excerpt 4).

- (4) Re-shaping the purchasing habits of consumers is difficult unless companies provide for new circular business models, such as product-as-service models, take-back services, secondhand collections and repair services. Although these new models still represent a niche market, they have been shown to extend the lifetime of textile products, and are a

cost effective and affordable alternative to fast fashion. As fast fashion is linked to the growing use of fossil-fuel based synthetic fibres, shifting to more sustainable business models will reduce both the dependency of clothing producers on fossil fuels and their impacts on climate change and microplastic pollution. (EU Commission, 2022, p. 8)

In Excerpt 4, the EU Commission advocates for companies to shift toward circular business models, which can be an alternative to fast fashion. In line with the argumentative patterns presented at the beginning of Section 4, the standpoint is a call for supporting these new circular business models; the Commission does so indirectly, by describing the introduction of these models as a necessary condition for changing the current situation. These new circular business models are then said to be ‘more sustainable business models’, an equation that is justified by definitional arguments such as ‘they have been shown to extend the lifetime of textile products’. As in the previous cases, the predicate ‘sustainable’ justifies a prescriptive standpoint; again, it is possible to retrieve an *endoxon* stating that ‘being sustainable is good’. The argumentative reconstruction of Excerpt 4 is reported below.

1 We need to support circular business models

1.1 Circular business models are sustainable

1.1.1 They have been shown to extend the lifetime of textile products

1.1.2 They are a cost-effective and affordable alternative to fast fashion

In Figure 6, I produce the inferential configuration for argument 1.1.1.

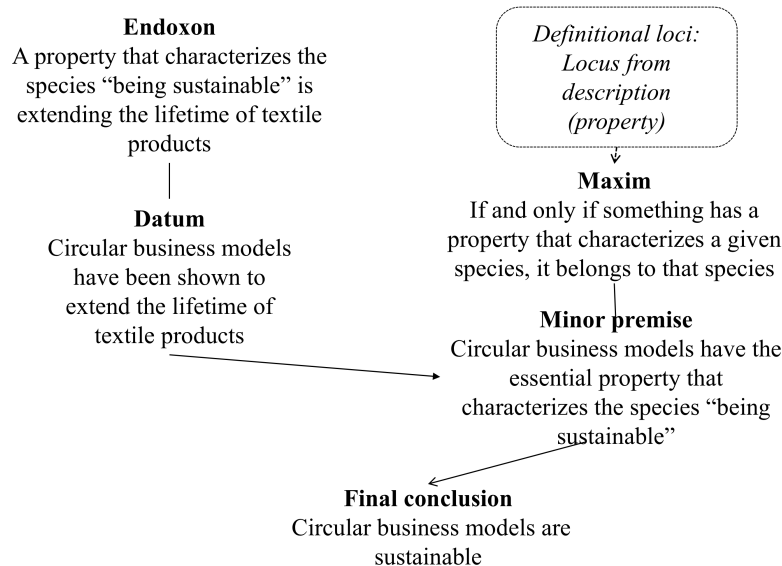


Figure 6: Reconstruction of the inferential configuration (Rigotti & Greco, 2019) of the definitional argument ‘circular business models have been shown to extend the lifetime of textile products’ employed by the EU Commission

In this argument from description, the implicit definition contained in the *endoxon* shows as characterizing property of the species 'being sustainable' the capability of extending the lifetime of textile products, thus providing yet another different definition of 'sustainable' in fashion. The other properties that, according to the EU Commission, make circular businesses sustainable are listed in Table 2.

Overall, the argumentative analysis performed following pragma-dialectics allows to identify standpoints and arguments in a text, which often are left unexpressed in discourse. Moreover, the AMT allows to uncover the implicit definitions of 'being sustainable/sustainable' which are not explicitly stated in the discussion, by reconstructing the entire inferential link connecting standpoint and argument, including the *endoxa*. This added depth helps to discover the misalignments underlying the apparent consensus about sustainable fashion, thus explaining what makes the resulting controversy persist over time.

5. Discussion

In this section, I answer the two research questions formulated in Section 1. RQ1 asks, *how is the meaning of the keyword 'sustainable' constructed, from an argumentative perspective, in the public controversy surrounding fashion sustainability?* From the findings presented in Section 4, it emerges that the different players considered all construct different implicit definitions of 'sustainable', by means of definitional arguments attributing different characterizing properties to the species 'being sustainable'. These definitions reflect the different interests and goals of the players proposing them and can be placed on an imaginary continuum. According to participants to FRW, for a business to be 'sustainable', in summary, it means being artisanal and local, while at the same time supporting workers, thus proposing a kind of business that is incompatible with the model perpetuated by the major fashion companies and by fast fashion especially. At the opposite end of the continuum, big brands hold a view of sustainability which mainly concerns the accomplishment of quantifiable targets aimed at reducing resources consumption, all other things being equal, which however do not change their core business model and therefore do not propose any systemic change (see Fletcher, 2010). About these two players, it can be noticed that their proposed definitions go in the direction of self-characterization, since both small businesses participating to Fashion Revolution and major fashion brands aim to show that they indeed possess these properties, in order to justify their standpoint requesting support. In other words, participants to FRW and major fashion brands propose definitions that are favourable to them. Between the two poles is located the definition of a sustainable business according to the EU Commission, that, while sharing with big brands the idea that sustainability is related to reducing resources consumption, at the same time views sustainable fashion as connected to the implementation of circular business models which foster job creation and the extension of textile use. Thus, 'sustainable' in the fashion domain for the Commission means neither a radical transformation of the industry, nor an approved checklist. Therefore, in the public controversy surrounding

fashion sustainability the term ‘sustainable’ is subjected to a process of ongoing re-semanticisation (see Introduction to this Special Issue), as each player constructs their own definition of the term. Moreover, these different definitions are advanced implicitly and enter the discussion as *endoxa*, that is, as argumentative cultural premises (Rigotti & Greco, 2019), thus generating the misalignments in the controversy identified by Greco and De Cock (2021).

Then, RQ2 asks, *what is the relationship between the keyword ‘sustainable’ and the endoxa it evokes, in the polylogical controversy examined?* From the examples in Section 4 it has emerged that, for all the different players considered, the syllogism containing the term ‘sustainable’ can be formulated as follows:

Major premise: *Being sustainable is good* (unstated)

Minor premise: This brand is *sustainable*

Conclusion: You should support this brand.

Therefore, the predicate ‘sustainable’ evokes consistently the *endoxon* ‘being sustainable is good’ across the corpus, both in the discourse of participants to the FRW, of major fashion brands and of the EU Commission. In line with previous argumentative studies about keywords (See Section 2.1), every time the keyword is used it immediately activates an *endoxon* containing a positive evaluation and, in turn, calling for the support of the brand which is defined ‘sustainable’. However, in the polylogical controversy under examination, since the definition of ‘sustainable’ is different according to the various players, this means that the call for support is simultaneously directed in favour of brands which are very different among them, such as Bare Knitwear (small business) and Inditex (big fashion brand). The power of this keyword to always activate the same *endoxon*, even when it acquires different meanings, is a clear indication of its persuasive potential (see Bigi, 2007; Filimon, 2009), which appears even more relevant in the controversial context under study.

Following the discussion until this point, the keyword ‘sustainable’ can be said to be polysemic and, without the analysis of the definitional arguments, would remain vague (see Section 1). These characteristics, which are common to cultural keywords, according to Rocci and Monteiro (2009) lead keywords to often being exploited in discourse through the use of rhetorical strategies such as *persuasive definitions*. According to Stevenson (1938), ‘[a] “persuasive” definition is one which gives a new conceptual meaning to a familiar word without substantially changing its emotive meaning, and which is used with the conscious or unconscious purpose of changing, by this means, the direction of people’s interests’. I argue that this is indeed the way the keyword ‘sustainable’ is employed in the public controversy surrounding fashion sustainability: each player undertakes the process of re-semanticization explained above, and then uses the word in discourse according to their own definition, which is often left implicit to the audience, in order to sway the public opinion in their favour. In fact, by labelling certain businesses as sustainable, an implicit invitation to view such businesses positively is immediately created, even though this kind of argument, as noticed by Zarefsky (2006), ‘is never actually advanced’ and it is ‘simply “smuggled in”’ (p. 403) by using that very label.

6. Conclusions

In this paper I have adopted an argumentative approach to the study of the cultural keyword 'sustainable' in the public controversy surrounding sustainable fashion. Starting from the consideration that implicit misalignments exist about the definitions of sustainable fashion held by different players (Greco & De Cock, 2021), I have reconstructed the implicit meaning of this cultural keyword according to three different groups of players involved in the controversy, thus revealing what these players see as sustainable fashion and to which type of businesses they attribute this label.

From a theoretical perspective, this paper makes a step forward in the argumentative research about cultural keywords, by integrating these approaches with an in-depth analysis of the arguments defining the implicit meaning of cultural keywords, which are often vague terms, as in the case of 'sustainable' in fashion. While previous contributions about cultural keywords did not explicitly draw the connection to the in-depth analysis of definitional arguments, focusing only limitedly on the analysis of arguments from definition (e.g., Monteiro, 2014), the present study shows the important role played by definitional arguments for retrieving the implicit meaning of cultural keywords. In the analysis of definitional arguments, one crucial aspect is making explicit the *endoxa*, which contain the characterizing properties of the species 'being sustainable'. From a methodological perspective, this paper contributes to argumentative studies about cultural keywords by proposing a method for reconstructing the meaning of cultural keywords in a polylogical corpus, thus bringing forward empirical research about argumentative polylogues.

As per future research, it could be explored whether there are different sub-keywords related to sustainable fashion which should be distinguished in order to account for their specific features; this could be investigated, for instance, by examining more in detail the characterizing properties contained in the definition of the keyword 'sustainable'. Moreover, the methodology proposed in this paper for reconstructing the meaning of 'sustainable' could be complemented with other kinds of analysis, for example by performing semantic analyses of specific cultural keywords, as done by previous studies (e.g., Rocci & Monteiro, 2009).

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Competing interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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