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**Communicating corporate sustainability
in the fashion industry:
an investigation into the leading role
of digital media through the analysis
of Everlane best practice**

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INTRODUCTION

Hundreds of billions of garments are produced every year within the fashion industry, one of the most profitable but also polluting at global level. The model underlying production, distribution and fruition of clothing has turned faster, resulting in a significant impact from a social, environmental, and economic standpoint.

The quest for a more sustainable approach to the fashion world has now become a matter of urgency, increasingly drawing the attention of both consumers and economic players. Among the latter, some leverage social and environmental responsibility just for marketing purposes, implementing greenwashing practices in order to give an appearance of sustainability which is not to be found in their actual activities; others, conversely, present a real and authentic commitment.

This study starts providing a view of the state of affairs in the fashion industry: on one hand, it presents the Fast Fashion phenomenon in its historical evolution, together with current and future overall implications. On the other, it focuses on the emergence of Slow Fashion and ethical consumption patterns. Although a universally endorsed definition of sustainable fashion has not yet been provided, the literature on the subject is reported.

Later on, the Triple Bottom Line approach is defined and proposed, together with its limitations, as a possible framework to assess sustainability from the social, economic and environmental standpoint within the fashion industry.

In an increasingly interconnected world, whereby distances are removed by telecommunications and information can be found everywhere, such little transparency regarding the processes underlying production, distribution, pricing and disposal of fashion products could seem paradoxical.

Consumers must be guided in their choice and involved in the initiatives oriented towards sustainability, which in turn should be communicated and also exploited for marketing purposes: in the end, companies should primarily strive for economic sustainability.

Starting from this assumption, a matrix is presented with the aim of categorizing companies based upon their approach to communication in the field of social and economic responsibility.

Finally, an example of best practice is portrayed in the analysis of the communication strategy implemented by Everlane, an online fashion retailer which leverages digital media to deliver, through the prevalent use of visual imagery, its brand values and propositions oriented to transparency. Through an authentic and committed communication, the brand informs and enables customers to participate in its business choices and activities, while raising awareness on contemporary environmental and social issues.

Ultimately, that of Everlane represents a meaningful example of how companies can successfully implement and communicate policies oriented to sustainability and transparency, and therefore be chosen - and re-elected over time - for their commitment

1 FROM FAST TO SLOW FASHION: A QUEST FOR DECELERATION

1.1 Fast fashion: definition, evolution and general implications

Textiles and clothing play an important role into anyone's everyday life and represent a valuable sector within the global economy. In the last fifteen years, production has almost doubled, due both to the growing expansion of middle-classes and to the increased level of sales per capita concerning developed economies, which can be largely attributable to the fast fashion business model (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017).

Providing a single and generally endorsed definition of fast fashion is anything but simple, to the extent that the phenomenon has to be investigated from different perspectives. Moreover, following the growing popularity of fast-fashion retailers, the term has become ubiquitous and it is now used indiscriminately to identify any clothing retailer on a medium-low price range.

Overall, you might say that fast fashion systems are mainly constituted by four key components:

1. Quick response policy intended to reduce lead times to better match consumers' volatile demand and retailers' supply;
2. Ever changing assortment with newer products being released at ever shorter intervals;
3. Items' ever shorter life span;
4. Enhanced product design capable to fit market needs and fashion trends at once.

Contrary to what one may believe, the concept of fast fashion originated in the 19th century (Idacavage, 2016). The cycle of fashion started to become "fast" during the

Industrial Revolution, with the first introduction of factories equipped with new textile machines and the idea of ready-made garments, manufactured in bulk in different sizes and colors rather than custom-made to order. The biggest hero of that period was the sewing machine, first patented in 1886 (Idacavage, 2016), which heavily contributed to the fall in clothing price along with the growth in the scale of production. At the time, localized dressmaking businesses provided clothes for middle class women, while the less wealthy ones continued to make their own garments at home. Notwithstanding the prevalence of localized establishments, some processes were still outsourced to sweatshops or very low-cost home-workers.

At the beginning of the 20th century too, clothing production was mainly taking place in houses or in small workshops, but things were about to change: as Idacavage reports,

“The fabric restrictions and more functional styles that were made necessary by World War II led to an increase in standardized production for all clothing. After becoming accustomed to such standardization, middle-class consumers became more receptive to the value of purchasing mass-produced clothing after the war.”

Idacavage (2016), Fashion History Lesson: The Origins of Fast Fashion. Available at: www.fashionista.com/2016/06/what-is-fast-fashion

In 1960s, the fast fashion business model as we know it slowly took shape: young consumers started to prefer cheaply-made, trendy apparel rather than the classic, outdated sartorial tradition of their parents. We already know the story from here on out: in order to deal with an ever-growing demand for affordable clothing, the American and European fashion houses outsourced the textile production to huge establishments in the developing world.

It is not simple to identify the very first fast fashion retailer among today's big players, as H&M, Zara, Topshop and Primark all started as little stores in Europe around the half of the 20th century, to eventually enter the US market between 1990s and 2000s.

However, H&M seems to be the longest-living among fast fashion retailers, having started its journey as Hennes in Sweden at the end of 1940s (1947), to arrive in London three decades later (1976) and finally reach the United States in 2000 (Idacavage, 2016).

Amancio Ortega, founder of Zara, opened the first shop in Spain in 1975. His declared strategy, built on speed as the main driving force of the business, led the New York Times, when Zara first showed up in US, to describe the store's mission as "fast fashion", as it would take only two weeks for a garment to shift from the designer's mind to stores' racks (Schiro, 1989).

Between 1990s and 2000s, the fast fashion phenomenon had almost completely normalized. Being dressed in cheap clothes became not only acceptable but also desirable. Quoting The New York Times again, it was "chic to pay less." (La Ferla, 2000).

In recent years fast fashion firms have received a sort of high-profile recognition, when women in leading positions as Kate Middleton and Michelle Obama have worn H&M and Zara dresses on formal occasions. This is part of the idea of fashion democratization: the low-cost mass production allows more people to express themselves through the way they dress, no matter the social and financial background (Idacavage, 2016).

Particularly in the last two decades, the global retail industry has experienced dramatic changes, due to a multitude of socio-economic and environmental factors: the availability of newer and faster distribution channels, an increasingly worrying scarcity of resources that seemed inexhaustible, global warming and climate changes owed to it, demographic shifts, but also new technologies and economic downturns which overall

reduced the spending capacity of customers. In this context, the fast fashion business model has escalated up to become dominant. Fashion retailing has rapidly shifted from designer-generated to customer-set trends: accordingly, apparel firms increasingly compete against each other in forecasting trends, in order to be the first to fulfill consumers' demand.

The most popular production methods among big fast fashion houses are Just-In-Time (JIT) delivery and Quick Response (QR), through which they are enabled to provide consumers with the right product at the right moment without having to bear the inventory costs.

The philosophy of Just-In-Time is, simplifying, that of delivering raw materials and producing goods only when needed. Ultimately, it means having the right items in the right place at the right time. The whole point is to minimise feedstocks, work in process and stocks of finished products, improving product quality and efficiency of production with a view to remove all kind of waste from the whole supply chain.

Indeed, through the implementation of Just-In-Time, companies can lower costs, better meet customer's demand, keep up with competitors and minimise slack resources (Cobb, 1933). The approach was first formalised in the early 1970s by the Japanese engineer - and executive vice president of Toyota - Taiichi Ohno, and by the end of the decade it became widespread in other companies throughout Japan. Right after, at the beginning of the eighties, it already was a popular innovation in Asian and Western Countries.

With JIT introduction, the "old school" production method centered on stockpiling has been reversed on behalf of a pull supply chain strategy, in which goods are produced when already sold or, at least, when likely saleable within the foreseeable future.

Quick response is another way to look at Just-In-Time (Biggart, Gargeya, 2002): a management approach intended to shorten the lead time between the receipt of an order and the effective delivery of products, minimize unsold stocks, increase cash flow. It has been developed in the context of US textile manufacturing in an effort to survive the global competition with low-cost foreign companies (Imaoka, 2012).

From a management and economics perspective, fast fashion is the accomplishment of a kind of “lean retailing” (Choi, 2014).

The origins of Lean can be traced – again - in Toyota during the first half of the 20th century. In 1929 Kiichiro Toyoda landed to USA with the purpose of looking over the local automotive industry. He was mesmerized with the Ford manufacturing system, which in 1913 introduced the serial production of its iconic T model (Dekier, 2012), and after coming back home he decided to partially emulate the paradigm he had witnessed in USA. The then Japan was still away from mass production, as opposed to European and American companies. Therefore, not to succumb in a such hard competition, the Toyota Motor Company had to distinguish itself through changing the production methods. It was necessary to implement a fast and flexible process which would have led to high-quality but fairly affordable outputs. The first step in building up this system was the introduction of Just-In-Time. A few years later, in the 50s, Eiji Toyota and Taiichi Ohno were able to conceive a new scheme by mixing the cornerstones of the Toyota production system (namely automation and JIT) with the Ford assembly line.

Rigth after, Ohno made a further advancement implementing the concept of “pull-flow”, intended to minimise overproduction through producing only the right amount of input that had to be employed in the subsequent stages (Dekier, 2012).

Lean Manufacturing was first mentioned in 1991 by Womack, Jones and Roos from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in their book *The Machine that Changed the*

World. Ten years later, Womack and Jones defined in detail the mainstays of the Lean Philosophy in their publication *Lean Thinking: Banish Waste and Create Wealth in Your Corporation*.

The Lean Manufacturing is considered some sort of successor of the Toyota Production System, as it incorporates the pillars of the Japanese car maker's way of producing. According to Dekier (*The Origins and Evolution of Lean Management System*, 2012), the approach comprehends five principles:

1. Determining the product's value according to clients' perception;
5. Identifying and clarifying the value stream for the product, which means detecting the processes included from the very beginning of the production stage up to the delivery to the client; at the same time, a value is also assigned to specific steps of product's development;
6. Providing the fastest and undisturbed value stream, i.e. removing the variables that hinder the manufacturing process and lengthen client's waiting time for the finished product, also defined as waste;
7. Allowing clients to elicit the value from the producer, as meaning that the firm should begin to generate to the product on the client's demand;
8. Striving for excellence through an ongoing improvement of the value stream.

Through the systematic shortening of lead times, fast fashion industries are able to provide fashionable items to consumers as the trend arises or even just before. However, one cannot ignore the other side of the coin: as more and more retailers seek to abbreviate the production cycle, it is likely that labor and material resources will not be able to keep pace with customers' demand.

What dramatically changed through the years has also been the way in which consumers rely to their garments: one of the major consequences of the spread of fast fashion is that people now consider their clothes as something disposable. They can

afford to buy more on a smaller budget than in the past, as in the last fifteen years the average prices for clothing have decreased (Choi, 2014). As a consequence, the low price inevitably makes the decision to buy a lot easier and immediate for both the wealthy and, paradoxically, the non-wealthy as well (Hansen, 2012).

Overconsumption is the direct result of this drop in prices, which has been complemented by a constant consumers' – social – media exposure to emerging trends, that nowadays most likely originate from popular culture - driven by actors, musicians, web stars, but also micro-influencers on the streets - rather than catwalks.

In addition, fast fashion garments, which, in accordance with the business model, are manufactured and supplied within a significantly shorter period of time, are inferior quality products that get easily ruined. People wardrobes are filled with clothes which are only worn ten times or less on average (Morgan, Birwistle, 2009).

It is undeniable that considering clothes as disposable commodities leads to a greater propensity to get rid of them, resulting in environmental issues that will be further explored later. Moreover, low prices and ever-changing trends encourage impulse buying. It is a long way from the traditional Spring-Summer and Fall-Winter fashion seasons: retailers like H&M and Zara release new items and new styles every two weeks (Byun & Sternquist, 2008). Twice a month, stores completely change the assortment and this induces a sort of urgency to buy, as consumers feel uncertain about being able to find the same product later on.

Customers are constantly prompted into action. On one hand, the short seasonality of trends makes fashion perishable: like food in supermarkets, clothes have an expiry date. Retailers intentionally reduce a product life by weekly bringing into store ever-changing varieties of the same items (new colors, shapes, textiles): an effective way to preserve inventory freshness which does not take much effort.

Similarly, retailers also limit product quantity per style in order to enhance perceived scarcity and, at the same time, reduce costs related to stock management (Byun & Sternquist, 2011): a further call to an immediate purchase in a “now or never” impetus. A significant example is the one of Zara and its policy of removing unsold stock from the sales floor within two or three weeks: this would be an unsustainable strategy for any traditional retailer, but in the case of Zara this not only has become possible, but also efficient: unsold merchandise constitutes only the 10% of stock, with an industry average of 17-20% (Choi, 2014).

In classic fashion retails time runs more slowly and merchandise is not subject to any expiration date other than the one established by the two seasons of the year. In such circumstances it is likely that consumers rely less on impulse buying resulting in more thoughtful purchases, which are usually hostile to overconsumption.

The Fast Fashion model allows retailers to improve trend accuracy and being able to keep up with trends implies a significantly lower need for markdowns. As Sull and Turconi (2008) report in *Fast Fashion Lessons*, fast fashion retailers sell only 15% of their merchandise on sale, compared to an average of 50% of traditional apparel retailers.

Zara is considered to have the shortest lead times because of its ability to produce and supply trendy items in no more than two weeks, and this sort of primacy could not be possible without a highly flexible supply chain.

As regards the ethical issue, although in many cases consumers claim they are attentive to socially responsible practices and their brand perceptions are affected by bad press related to labor and environmental infringements (Perry, 2012), fast fashion seems to benefit from a sort of derogation. Consumers may be mindful about the environmental problem, attempting to play their part in the majority of everyday life aspects, from waste sorting to energy saving, but when it comes to fashion apparel, it is not uncommon to

hear about the lesser evil. Fast fashion is still perceived, quite justifiably, as a provider of trendy items, at odds with organic and ethical production; the feeling of the street still largely associates the latter to uncomfortable jute clothes and rope sandals.

Even though in its full manifestation it is relatively recent, the fast fashion model is already getting into a mature phase. Its low-cost template will likely be unsustainable in the long term not only from an environmental and social perspective, but also, and above all, economically speaking. Just to provide a couple of examples: raw material costs have risen accordingly to their ever-growing demand, as it has risen the standard of living in China, which has undisputedly been the major hub of textile production since the first stages of the model. When entering in diverse Zara points of sale, in the same town or in different countries equally, it can easily be noticed that the assortment is never the same and, moreover, that there are very few items of each style - three or four on average, as Choi (2014) reports. This is because of a specific choice of the Inditex Group, intended to reduce the leftover stock and the related costs.

Fast fashion firms can immediately address consumers' needs and preferences also thanks to their marked feedback orientation: the sales staff is used to encourage customers to give an opinion on both merchandise and shopping experience; then, store managers report the feedback on a daily basis to corporate offices, which in their turn provide the information to the internal design team (Lorynn R. Divita, Jeong-Ju Yoo, 2014): this is the way in which feedbacks are turned into new designs and styles.

Market demand for fashion goods is highly unpredictable. In the traditional model, there are indicatively only two selling seasons and the inventory of the former cannot be dragged into the latter. In these circumstances the costs of end-of-season sales or unsatisfied demand due to shortages of merchandise can be very significant.

In this respect, one of the cornerstones and distinguishing marks of Fast Fashion is the systematic use of demand projections in order to establish a proper stock level, together with the postponement of the procurement order; making accurate predictions and placing orders just before the beginning of the selling season are the key to minimise the financial loss resulting from under- or overstocking, in that they reduce the risk of dangerous estimation errors.

Through reducing production and distribution lead times the firm is empowered to flexibly adjust not only the pace of production, but also its very essence: shortening times allows big fast fashion houses to always keep up with emerging trends, which, in such a volatile market, represents an essential competitive advantage.

What enables retailers like H&M and Zara to be always that much on point is their commitment in a specific strategy: working at garment level - which includes all its possible variations of size and color - rather than at collection's.

Their full control on the point of sale, due to the absence of a wholesale channel requiring entire collections, allows them to avoid batching a lot of items together: specifically, it is no longer needed to jointly design products with quick and slow supplier lead times. Quoting H&M:

"The time from an order being placed until the items are in the store may be anything from a few weeks up to six months. The best lead time will vary. For high-volume fashion basics and children's wear it is advantageous to place orders further in advance. In contrast, trendier garments in smaller volumes have to be in the stores much quicker."

H&M, 2007

Working at the garment level implies the freedom to introduce new merchandise on a continuous basis, rather than twice a year. Accordingly, the utilisation of resources -

designers, production facilities, logistics - can be better balanced throughout the year, avoiding unnecessary overloading during the two seasonal peaks, which would result in extra-costs and response times elongation.

For a long time, the fashion industry has gravitated towards the concept of collections. The assortments were updated twice a year, and this pattern was reinforced by design, communication and marketing, which all followed a bi-annual pace: catwalks, fashion weeks, store mock-ups, catalogues are still two-season based. That is why the assortment planning of – traditional – fashion firms can be considered as static. Conversely, fast-fashion players can afford to be less reliant on collection advertising and wholesale channels, and this enables them to produce and distribute new items at any time of the year, indifferently at the beginning or in the middle of the season.

Although the biggest fast fashion retailers are on a similar price bracket and anyway within a certain threshold of affordability, there are many differences in their pricing strategy, in particular in how they use - or do not - mid-season promotions and markdowns: H&M makes extensive use of unseasonable sales, while Zara tends to avoid significant price changes out of traditional clearances. However, no matter the in-season policies, *“fast-fashion retailers usually have well-announced clearance sales at the end of the regular season in which markdowns are introduced to liquidate stock and free up space for the new season”* (Caro, Martínez-de-Albéniz, 2014, p. 18).

The decision on where to produce a garment, as stated by Caro (2014), usually involves three elements:

1. Requested technical capabilities, as in the case of tannery, which calls for expertise and large volumes of water;
9. Lead time necessities, although air transportation enables to speed up processes;

10. Cost competitiveness, in the form of raw material and energy costs, transport charges and wages.

For these reasons, it is not immediate to establish the right sourcing strategy, especially given that most of the factors to be considered change through time: for example, since wages in China have risen over recent years, fast-fashion production, in order to keep costs down, has shifted towards other Asian countries as Vietnam, Cambodia and Bangladesh (Roland Berger, 2011).

It is a fact that delocalising to make savings at the expense of workers' wages - and lives, sometimes - raises an ethical issue: in most cases working conditions are far below acceptable standards. The notorious Rana Plaza collapse, which occurred on 24 April 2013 in Bangladesh, resulted in the first wake-up call on the consequences of the fast-fashion business model: the eyes of the world were on that tragedy, which killed more than a thousand garment workers (Yardley, 2013). Perhaps, the company which payed the highest price in terms of image, not because directly involved with the fact but as the major exporter of clothing from Bangladesh, was H&M (Kerppola et al. 2014). As a consequence of the fuss, fast-fashion retailers are – still - developing Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) policies, but it remains hard to be in control of their implementation, especially because of the reduced visibility on offshored and subcontracted work.

In her review of Lucy Siegle's Book *To Die For: Is Fashion Wearing Out the World?*, Anderson (2011) states that "*our bulimic passion for fashion is symptomatic of a broader malaise. Disposability, instant gratification, the idea that impulses are there be indulged, regardless of impact – these sentiments permeate our lives*" (Anderson, 2001. Available at: www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jun/12/to-die-for-lucy-siegle-review).

1.2 Fast fashion: economic, social and environmental implications

Currently, the system for producing, distributing, and using clothing items follows a linear path: large quantities of non-renewable resources are employed to produce garments which are often worn few times before ending up in the environment, incineration or landfills: some estimations report that more than half of fast fashion production is thrown away in less than a year (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). Such a linear system, marked by unrestrained resources exploitation, results in a loss of potential economic opportunities. Although the latter are difficult to quantify, the Pulse of the fashion industry report (2017) estimates that the worldwide economy could benefit from almost EUR 160 billion by 2030 if the fashion industry as a whole moved towards a more sustainable and recycling-oriented model (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017).

Fashion items are ever more under-utilised: over the last twenty years, clothing utilisation – namely, the average number of times a garment is worn before being disposed of – has dropped by around 36%. The Ellen Mc Arthur foundation Report (2017) states that, by throwing away items they could continue to wear, consumers are potentially losing more than EUR 400 billions of value each year.

The current linear system entails that, across the entire fashion industry, less than 1% of the material employed in clothing manufacturing is then recycled for the production of other garments, resulting in a loss of almost EUR 90 billion worth of materials each year. Such a low propensity to reintroduce discarded materials into new clothing production processes leads to relevant value losses as well as high costs related to their storage and disposal. Moreover, even when large amounts of clothing items are collected for re-use - Germany, for example, collects the 75% of textiles -, the latter are then exported to countries which are not provided with the infrastructure necessary for their

redistribution to the people, ending up in landfills (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). According to Drew and Reichart (2019), “[...] one garbage truck of clothes is burned or sent to landfills every second [...] discarded clothing made of non-biodegradable fabrics can sit in landfills for up to 200 years”.

The fashion industry largely depends on non-renewable resources and substances such as oil, fertilisers and chemicals, which in many cases contaminate the environment and cause health diseases to factory workers, farmers and local residents: for example, 20% of industrial water pollution worldwide is due to textiles processing and dyeing. (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). In addition, clothing production - and cotton-growing as well - employs on average 93 billion cubic metres of water per year, which exacerbates problems related to water scarcity in those regions already affected by the issue. The industry also bears a large share of the responsibility for micro-plastic pollution: according to some estimations, approximately half a million tonnes of plastic micro-fibres end up in the ocean every year after washing garments made of polyester, nylon or acrylic. If present trend continues, the amount of such polluting particles entering the ocean could reach up to 22 million tonnes by 2050 (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017).

Employing over 300 million people worldwide along its value chain, the USD 1.3 trillion fashion industry represents for many emerging markets a route out of poverty, but the payoff can be huge. Beyond the health risks due to the use of toxic and pollutant substances, workers along the supply chain incur relevant costs and time pressures: poor working conditions, low wages and unpaid overtime, with evidence, in some cases, of modern slavery and child labour (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017): according to Drew and Reichart (2019), a 2018 US Department of Labor report found proof of forced and child labor exploitation within the textile industry in countries like Argentina, Bangladesh, Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Philippines, Turkey and Vietnam.

1.3 Slow Fashion: a different approach to fashion production and consumption

As outlined above, the apparel industry is still dominated by fast-fashion and Just-In-Time manufacturing, but there is room for radical improvement. According to Fletcher (2007), “[...] time is just one factor of production, along with labour, capital and natural resources that get juggled and squeezed in the pursuit of maximum profits. But fast is not free. Short lead times and cheap clothes are only made possible by exploitation of labour and natural resources”. The fast fashion model has brought throwaway culture into the clothing business, with items so cheap to become single-use purchases. Overall, the entire textile and clothing industry, through throwaway garments, is affecting climate change more than the aeronautical and shipping industries combined: if such trend does not modify, the industry could lead to account for a quarter of global carbon budget by 2050 (Butler, 2018). Currently, some fashion experts agree that the time is ripe for a complete rethinking of the system in order to give up such approach to clothing consumption, as it was for takeaway coffee cups, plastic packaging and meat (Butler, 2018).

According to Pookungara and Shepard (2013), the current fashion world is still filled with contradictions. While it is true that sustainability has increasingly drawn the attention of consumers, the latter continue pursuing low cost clothing (Johansson, 2010), but not as much as in the past: as reported by Butler (2018), last year a third of consumers bought fashion items once a month, while almost 50% of these say they prefer to purchase clothing from companies which have invested in making production environmentally sustainable; this percentage raise to 60% among the under-24s. Even if the so-called “ethical consumerism” movement has taken hold, with an ever-increasing portion of

customers calling for environmentally and ethically sustainable products, it is undisputable that fast fashion has been and still remains a big concern in the field of sustainable development.

The incentive for retailers to implement strategies aimed at high ethical and ecological standards has been pretty small since, on average, customers are still more concerned of clothing price and style rather than where and how it has been manufactured, but change is coming (Butler, 2018). Additionally, there is no way to pursue sustainability while maintaining low prices and such a great emphasis on trends: in other words, being fast necessarily means being unsustainable.

The rising “Slow Fashion” movement rests precisely on this assumption. It draws its inspiration from the widely known “Slow Food” movement, born in Italy in the mid-1980s for the purpose of tackling the fast - and junk - food culture, calling for deceleration.

Having a slow approach to fashion is about taking care of all the stakeholders’ needs, from designers to buyers, retailers and consumers, and, above all, being conscious of the huge impact that fashion production has on workers as well as eco-systems (Fletcher, 2008). According to Nakano (2009, p. 39), slow apparel is *“fashion that is not time based, but is about producing, designing and consuming better”*.

Decelerating within the framework of fashion industry implies the idea of high quality garments, research into materials, clean designs, small lines, local production, fair working conditions, waste and pollution reduction, supply chain transparency.

Whether they liked it or not, big retailers have started to accept that today it would be self-defeating to ignore consumers’ demand for green and ethical manufacturing. The commitment to social responsibility – true or not – is therefore affecting their strategy,

operations, communication and connection to customers and communities in general (Siegel et al., 2012).

The slow fashion movement has not developed cohesively as the slow food one did. Since the concept is relatively new in the textile industry, researchers and scholars have striven to identify an over-arching definition of the term that would have differentiate it from the relating notions – amongst other sustainability and social responsibility – from which it has originated. For decades the fashion universe has been dominated by speed in any means, and reversing this model is not an easy task. Among scholars, by the way, it is widespread the belief that the slow fashion proposition is not that of literally slowing down the textile supply chain, but rather to suggest a different approach to design planning, production sourcing and customer’s education (Clark, 2008; Fletcher, 2010). Clark himself defines the three constituents of the slow fashion model, namely: valuing local resources and economies, creating high quality and non-disposable goods – with the purpose of elongating their life -, and achieving a transparent and traceable production system. Contemporary academics give some not obvious hints on how to observe the nascent phenomenon from different angles. As Pookulangara and Shephard (2013) report,

Contemporary researchers vary in their definitions of slow fashion. Flower describes slow fashion as the “farmer’s market approach” to clothing (Johansson, 2010, p. 28). Each garment has a story and consumers have more appreciation and personal connection with their clothing (Johansson, 2010). An article in WWD discussed one industry member’s interpretation of slow fashion which was to create more classic silhouettes in more neutral colours by well-paid, skilled labourers (Tran, 2008). Holt defines slow fashion by suggesting that the concept of slow fashion is the direct opposite to fast fashion (Holt, 2009b). Slow fashion, however, is not intended to literally be “slow” (Clark, 2008; Fletcher, 2010). This is not to say that slow fashion does

not incorporate some of the above ideas; however, slow fashion has different goals and priorities and is less “materially growth- focused” (Fletcher, 2010).

Pookulangara, Shephard (2013), Slow fashion movement: Understanding consumer perceptions - An exploratory study

According to Fletcher, one of the greatest experts in this area, the slow fashion movement translates a necessity of put a period at the vision enshrined in today’s apparel sector. In order to implement these changes, it is mandatory to revolutionize the whole infrastructure. It is not just about producing plain white organic cotton t-shirts by hand or getting back to the old-school model of two collections per year (Fletcher, 2010).

It is undoubted that social responsibility has been instrumental to the affirmation of the slow fashion movement. As claimed by Dickson and Eckman (2006), the concept of social responsibility involves different aspects – depending on the context -: environment, labour conditions, human rights and fundamental freedoms. It expresses the view that a business should make profits while bringing about benefits to society at large, or, at least, avoiding harming it. Besides the legal consequences in case of non-compliance with the imposed standards, the most fearsome auditor for companies’ accountability is the customer; on the other hand, this type of control is only possible by means of a sufficient knowing and understanding of the processes underlying goods production and distribution, a condition that does not occur very frequently. The most important challenge of the slow fashion movement is therefore that of providing consumers with the instruments necessary to make conscious purchases.

1.4 Recent changes in apparel industry and consumers’ awareness

During the last few years, an increasing number of designers, retailers and consumers has approached to slow fashion (Tran, 2008).

It is now more likely that, if properly informed, at the moment of buying people seek to invest not only in a garment which will not lose its value in a short while, but also whose production has followed a "slow path". The word "invest" has not been used by chance: the price of an ethically and ecologically made t-shirt could be even prohibitive. On the other hand, the idea that every purchase should be carefully pondered is properly one of the foundations of the sustainable way of living: thinking about what we are spending our money on is a disincentive to impulse buying and overconsumption, which in turn are the main concepts underpinning the fast fashion business model. A highly related tendency which is starting to spread, especially online, is that of minimalism. You could call it a counter-reaction to waste and overbuying: being a minimalist implies "simply" refusing to base life on things. It does not represent – at least in its watered-down versions – a total rejection to buy, which in the modern world would be anachronistic, but rather a propensity towards recycling, second-hand purchasing, making the most out of what you already have. The minimalist fashion has a precise aesthetic made of black, white, and neutral tones which can be easily combined together, and the designs are clean and timeless in order to be not subject to the passing of trends year after year. In a sense, ethical and sustainable fashion needs to be paired to a minimalist lifestyle, as for the average consumer it is hard to overconsume slowly-made clothing. It would be unrealistic to hope that models like those adopted by Zara and H&M will disappear in the near future as a result of the increasing awareness of consumers with regard to sustainability. It is a fact, however, that such big retailers (as Zara) have been encountered some CSR challenges due to negative publicity related to untold working conditions in their sweatshops, which have made it necessary to introduce some adjustments to their fast-fashion model (Perry, 2012). According to Pookulangara and Shephard (2013, p. 203), "[...] the slow fashion process encourages rapport building with labor groups, however, which supports better planning and long-term relationships as opposed to the

uncertainty derived from a continual emphasis on reducing labor and production costs (Fletcher, 2007)“.

As stated above, it is well-acknowledged that approaching the slow fashion realm implies for consumers a certain propensity to spend a larger part of their income on apparel which is not universally recognised as trendy. Indeed, in the opinion of Carrigan and Attalla (2001), consumers are more likely to ethically purchasing when the cost or quality of garments does not significantly differ from what they are used to. In this sense, it is preferable for retailers to adopt specific strategies aimed at minimising the price effect on the decision to buy. As in the case of minimalism, following a slow approach to clothing means not only choosing sustainable brands, but also taking part in the process of reusing, recycling, re-handling existing items, leaning on those “workers of the past” like tailors and cobblers.

Overall, we can say that slow fashion is at its initial phase, even if the increasing awareness of people about ethical behaviour and its related impact is definitely something to take into consideration. On the other hand, it could not be otherwise; asking consumers to “slow down” implies making them question deeply-rooted visions and practices, but also purchasing habits: at the moment, it is not common to find ethically made clothes in the high street.

Implementing a process of this scale is not immediate: consumers require - a lot of - time for changing their routines, companies - even more - for reconsidering their business models.

2 SUSTAINABILITY, ETHICS AND VALUES IN THE INDUSTRIAL CONTEXT: APPROACHES, PERSPECTIVE, INSTRUMENTS

2.1 The Triple Bottom Line: a framework to assess sustainability

Being one of the broadest globally, the clothing industry relies on long, multi-level supply chains together with complex consumption and disposal patterns, which in turn cause negative externalities affecting workers, local communities, natural environment, and overall economy.

Sustainability assessment in the fashion field requires a multifaceted approach giving equal weighting to social, economic and environmental impacts: accordingly, the Triple Bottom Line is proposed below.

The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) is (more than) an accounting framework conceived by John Elkington, a world authority on issues related to sustainable development and corporate responsibility, in 1994. The TBL management concept, which this year has its 25th birthday and according to the author should be actually rethought (Harvard Business Review, 2018), has not the merit of having been the first to raise the matter of finding a measure for sustainability, but has certainly the one of having become the most comprehensive and acknowledged system addressing the problem.

The approach integrates three dimensions of performance, namely social, environmental and economic (the 3 Ps: People, Planet, Profits), overcoming the typical measures of profit, which represents the traditional bottom line of finances within corporations.

As defined by Savitz, the Triple Bottom Line “[...] captures the essence of sustainability by measuring the impact of an organization’s activities on the world [...] including both

its profitability and shareholder values and its social, human and environmental capital.” (Savitz, 2006, Indiana Business Review. Available at: www.ibrc.indiana.edu/ibr/2011/spring/article2.html).

It is important to consider that the three Ps do not have a common yardstick, and it could not be otherwise. What has been tempted over years was to find a way to make the three elements easier to compare.

A first solution might be that of putting an economic value on all three of the variables, but according to Slaper and Hall (2017), there have been many reservations on monetizing something like species threatened with extinction or natural disasters; these events undoubtedly represent a considerable cost to society, but it is not all clear how to financially determine it and, most of all, the financial charge would definitely not be the only imposed fee.

An alternative path might be that of considering the TBL as an index. In such a manner, the issues related to different metrics would be removed, while a comparison between countries, cities, companies or projects would be made possible.

Anyway, the index solution is not without criticalities. Some subjectivity would persist, especially since the TBL is composed by three variables that could potentially be weighted in very disparate ways, and there would not be an absolute right or wrong. As an example, some entities might consider their population’s ethical standards of living more crucial compared to the environmental situation of their territory and therefore assign a greater role to the social component, which would complicate any comparison with another reality having different priorities, and, accordingly, a different accounting method.

One more option, according to Slaper and Hall (2017), would be that of giving up the idea of pursuing a comprehensive metric for sustainability:

“If the users of the TBL had the stomach for it, each sustainability measure would stand alone. “Acres of wetlands” would be a measure, for example, and progress would be gauged based on wetland creation, destruction or status quo over time.”

Slaper, Hall (2017), The Triple Bottom Line: What Is It and How Does It Work?, p. 4

Foreseeably, the drawback of this approach is the unrestrained multiplication of measuring systems. For the time being, there is not a universally accepted scheme for determining the TBL. To some extent, this might be seen as a strong point, since it allows the TBL framework to be adapted to the exigencies of different organisms, projects, or geographical areas. Consequently, the final accounting method will be established by stakeholders and experts, always with regard to the capability of collecting the requisite data, so that it is tailored to the specifics of each project or entity.

Notwithstanding this fact, there are still some traditional sustainability dimensions, as reported by Slaper and Hall (2017).

For what concerns the economic aspect, they are measures that consider income or expenditures, taxation, occupancy rate, business diversity factors. Specifically, some examples involve personal income, cost of underemployment, establishment churn, namely the rate at which innovative companies supplant outdated establishments, establishment sizes, which can provide useful hints on the economic structure of a region, job growth, employment distribution by sector, percentage of firms in each sector and revenue by sector contributing to gross state product.

The environmental measures, in accordance with Slaper and Hall (2017), involve natural resources accounting, capturing the possible influences on their viability. In this

sense, the most used measurements are related to water and air quality, energy-using, solid and toxic waste and land use. Namely: sulphur dioxide and nitrogen oxides concentration, electricity consumption, fossil fuel consumption, solid waste management, change in land cover, pollutants.

Lastly, the social measures. Slaper and Hall (2017) state that they shall contain measurements of education, equity, access to social resources, health and well-being, quality of life and social capital. To name but a few: unemployment rate, female labor force participation rate, median household income, relative poverty, level of education (percentage of population having a post-secondary degree), average commute time, violent crimes per capita, health-adjusted life expectancy.

At national as well as local community level, the data necessary to calculate most of these sub-components are collected anyway for purposes other than the TBL determination, thus facilitating the process. In these cases, the toughest part consists, as mentioned above, in finding the right balance among the 3 Ps, according to the nature of the business, entity or organization to which the framework shall be applied. In the attempt to do so, it is compulsory to foster the maximum involvement in decision-making on the part of all the stakeholders, which should be enabled to express their optimum ranking between components in line with the community's prerogatives they represent.

According to Slaper and Hall (2017), the TBL and its essential value of sustainability have become an imperative in the current corporate world, as a result of the increasing awareness of the long-term profitability arising from a sustainable management, production and distribution. A trivial example is that of plastic-free packages, which reduce costs as well as waste. However, the TBL framework is not a prerogative of profit-oriented companies: there are a lot of non-profit organizations relying on it, sometimes in partnership with private firms to better deal with the biggest sustainability topics. Also,

governments at local, regional and national level make use of TBL or comparable sustainability evaluation systems to assist policymaking. As reported by Slaper and Hall (2017), states such as Maryland, Minnesota and Vermont are only a few examples.

The sustainability assessment frameworks are used by policy makers to make decisions on which measures and activities are needed to improve sustainability at society level.

“The State of Maryland, for example, uses a blended GPI-TBL framework to compare initiatives – for example, investing in clean energy – against the baseline of “doing nothing” or against other policy options.”

Slaper, Hall (2017), The Triple Bottom Line: What Is It and How Does It Work?, p. 12

With regard to the European Union, the integrated assessment is employed in the attempt to determine the potential effects of planned political actions, in order to support the development of better-informed judgements about the propositions. In the regional context, the concept of Triple Bottom Line can be applied to stimulate the economic growth on a sustainable basis. To do this, it is essential to promote the cooperation between businesses, not-for-profit organizations, administrations and private individuals.

The Triple Bottom Line concept has profoundly changed the way companies, organizations and governments assess the level of sustainability of their projects and policies. According to Slaper and Hall (2017), the biggest strength of the model is its capacity for adaptation, which allows the users to apply the scheme to specific situations and necessities.

Anyway, as it rarely happens with management concepts, twenty-five years after its first definition, the author John Elkington is now claiming that the TBL should be reconsidered (Elkington, 2018). In the words of Elkington, since 1990s the field of

sustainability has grown and expanded its borders. At the same time, market research theorizes that future markets for sustainable products and services could be very broad in scope, while The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals – conservatively - foresee to create over \$12 trillion a-year in market opportunities within the next decade.

Nevertheless, the success (or failure) of a sustainable policy cannot be evaluated only by way of profit (or loss). Other parameters must be taken into consideration, including the wellbeing of people and the health of the environment.

“While there (in the economic field, author’s note) have been successes, our climate, water resources, oceans, forests, soils and biodiversity are all increasingly threatened. It is time to either step up – or to get out of the way. ”

Elkington (2018), 25 Years Ago I Coined the Phrase “Triple Bottom Line”. Here’s Why It’s Time to Rethink It, p. 2

Ten years ago, The Economist reported (Elkington, 2018) that the term Triple Bottom Line was part of the business lexicon, as an approach aimed to assess the financial, social and environmental performance of a company over time. In mild opposition with the definition of TBL provided by the magazine, Elkington clarifies (2018) that his original vision was to support companies in measuring their economic - not only financial, social and environmental value added (or value destroyed). Furthermore, the Triple Bottom Line has not been devised to be solely an accounting method, but also an instrument able to induce a reconsideration of capitalism and its horizons.

The TBL concept was designed exactly 500 years after the publication of the treatise on double-entry bookkeeping by Luca Paccioli, which is the milestone for single bottom line accounting. The introduction of the TBL has created a sort of rift in this way of thinking and it has been followed by Double and Quadruple Bottom Lines as well as Social Return on Investment (SROI), multiple capital models, Blended and Shared Value,

Integrated Reporting, Impact Investment but also more ideological conceptions like Sharing and Circular Economy and Biomimicry (Elkington, 2018).

Such an abundance and proliferation of indexes and options - together with the absence of benchmarks for measuring progress across them on the basis of their performance in real world - whilst crucial to foster continuous improvement, can provide companies with an excuse to do nothing.

Elkington claims that, along with its successive variations, the TBL concept has been increasingly modified by accountants and consultants. As a result, tons of different reports are drafted every year, but it remains unclear how the collected data should be clustered and evaluated in order to support decision-and-policy- makers. In the words of Elkington (2018):

“Fundamentally, we have a hard-wired cultural problem in business, finance and markets. Whereas CEOs, CFOs, and other corporate leaders move heaven and earth to ensure that they hit their profit targets, the same is very rarely true of their people and planet targets. Clearly, the Triple Bottom Line has failed to bury the single bottom line paradigm. “

Elkington (2018) 25 Years Ago I Coined the Phrase “Triple Bottom Line”. Here’s Why It’s Time to Rethink It, p. 4

As the author further specifies, the TBL framework was originally conceived to become a kind of “genetic code” (Elkington, 2018) in charge of causing radical change in the way we think about and approach to the idea of economic growth.

It is recognized that some businesses are actually moving towards this conception, among them Novo Nordisk (Danish multinational corporation operating in the pharmaceutical sector), Unilever (Anglo-Dutch consumer goods company) and Covestro (German manufacturer of high-tech plastics). In particular, Covestro’s former CEO, Patrick

Thomas, has insisted that the appropriate use of the TBL should implicate, at least, advancements on two of the three dimensions. According to Elkington (2018), visions like this ought to be the norm and not only a prerogative of a few enlightened corporations.

However, although some adjustments have now become necessary, it can be said that the latter shall involve less the very idea of TBL, but rather its implementation and adaptation to the practical situation. It may not have been completely fulfilled the expectation of its creator, but the Triple Bottom Line is still a very powerful concept that allows to simplify the approaching to sustainability and the subsequent evaluation of the efforts made to achieve it.

That is why it is worth to introduce the framework in the matter of fashion industry.

2.2 The TBL approach in the context of fashion industry

According to Connell and Kozar (2017), the textile and clothing industry in 2017 accounted approximately for \$2 trillion in global revenue. Nevertheless, the industry's tendency towards natural resources deployment, greenhouse gases production and water, air and land pollution, imposes a great cost to environment.

In addition, fundamental human rights are often denied within textile manufacturing, which in certain areas of the world implies forced and child labor, low wages, excessive working hours with unpaid overtime, danger to health, ignored or inexistent safety standards, absence of trade unions and associations charged with representing working people in the negotiations with the management. All these conditions give rise to crucial social and economic sustainability challenges and the industry is responding with a growing engagement in sustainable action (Connell and Kozar, 2017).

“So, while the environmental, social, and economic consequences associated with the clothing and textiles supply chain are serious, there are promising signs that a

significant paradigm shift towards sustainability and a focus on the triple bottom line is gaining momentum.”

Connell and Kozar (2017), Introduction to Special Issue on Sustainability and Triple Bottom Line Within the Global Clothing and Textiles Industry. Fashion and Textiles Editorial

The Triple Bottom Line concept is of primary importance as, through it, sustainable businesses are capable of encouraging larger societal value (Connell, Kozar, 2017). In this respect, the TBL business model shall be capable of generating a higher stakeholder value in comparison to the traditional single bottom line. With consideration of the length of the supply chain, starting from the manufacturing of raw materials up to the disposal of finished clothing products, addressing the sustainability issue calls for a many-sided approach.

Notions like “environmentally friendly fashion products” and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) are increasingly taking part to researches and studies in the fashion apparel sector, thus mirroring an “emerging megatrend” (Lubin, Etsy, 2010, p. 44) of fashion industry nowadays. Nevertheless, the actual research in the field of sustainability applied to the fashion world is decelerated and hampered by two significant obstacles.

First, there is a lack of consensus on what is meant by sustainable fashion houses or companies and on how the same sustainability that is perceived by consumers can be intended and measured by scholars or insiders. According to Park and Kim (2016), this impasse provokes a methodological issue in the research field, as, in the absence of a precise definition of a concept a discrepancy could be generated between the significance attributed by study participants on the one hand and researchers on the other.

Second, it is not clear how to interpret the common gaps between consumers' perception of a brand's sustainability and their behaviour towards the latter.

This divergence can be partially explained by the fact that, as already mentioned, the fast fashion, a business model which by its definition promotes disposability and overconsumption, is keeping profiting. That is why researchers are starting to argue that the predictive role of the sustainability of a firm in leading the formation of positive judgements and brand relationships, may not be applicable to fast fashion companies. In order to deal with this question, the TBL model is applied in evaluating consumers' perception of fashion brands sustainability (Park, Kim, 2016).

"[...] while concerned about the environmental and social impact of their non-fashion purchasing decisions, [consumers] did not apply such principles to their consumption of fashion. They talked in general terms of saving the environment, were committed to recycling, and expressed dedication to organic food... Yet, these very same consumers routinely availed themselves of trend-led fashionable clothing that was cheap: i.e., low cost to them, but high cost in environmental and societal terms."

Joy et al. (2012), Fast Fashion, Sustainability and the Ethical Appeal of Luxury Brands, p. 280

According to Joy et al. (2012), we cannot assume that consumers' attention to environmental and social issues provides a deterrent to fast fashion consumption. As stated by Park and Kim (2016), literature suggests some possible interpretations for this apparent contradiction.

First and foremost, purchasers may evaluate the advantages offered by fast fashion houses (low prices, cool design, quick response) as balancing the negative outcomes in terms of, as an example, scarce quality waste of resources (McNeill, Moore 2015). This is called the "Fast Fashion Paradox" (Park, Kim, 2016, p. 2).

Secondarily, it is not easy for consumers to become fully aware of the complex implications of unsustainable manufacturing and consumption originated by fast fashion goods (Park, Kim, 2016).

That being so, as pointed out by Park and Kim (2016), it is useful to change the point of view from the inside out when thinking about sustainability.

2.3 Looking at TBL and sustainability from a different standpoint: the CCS approach

The Customer-Centric Sustainability (CCS) arises from the stakeholder perspective, wherein the expectations of the latter are incorporated into a firm's business actions. In such a way, companies are enabled to address sustainability issues and outcomes from different viewpoints (Kozlowski et al., 2012).

A customer-centric perspective on sustainability has the advantage of bringing purchasers into focus, while the traditional firm-centric vision has been often blamed for lacking a long-term attitude and a genuine endeavour towards the achieving of societal and environmental goals and values (Molthan-Hill, 2014).

2.3.1 The Economic Dimension

Conventionally, the economic aspect of sustainability – the P for Profit in the Triple Bottom Line -, is exclusively regarded as the indicator of financial profitability (Slaper, Hall, 2011). On the contrary, the Customer Centric Sustainability tries to broaden up the perspective by including the enhancements in economic well-being and standards of living (Donaldson, Preston, 1995).

Researchers also agree that by increasing consumers' well-being it is still possible to achieve financial advantages and reduce hidden costs while increasing market share:

consumers tend to reward companies making efforts for these kinds of efforts (Cronin et al., 2010).

In order to ease sustainable consumption, it is crucial for businesses to offer and provide quality goods. That is because, while it is true that the general idea of sustainability is not clearly and universally defined by researchers, in consumers' minds it has instead a very precise significance related to perceived quality. Indeed, it is not uncommon to think of a quality good as also sustainable (Gruber et al., 2014). In this respect, when fashion houses provide quality garments, not only they are assisting purchasers in sustainable consuming, but also are conveying their large-scale commitment to the sustainability of a biggest share of the economic system instead of concentrating solely on their own financial health (Fulton, Lee, 2013).

Fast fashion firms are frequently criticized for using low-quality materials then assembled in low-quality finished garments, but despite that consumers are still interested in buying them. Why? According to Cline (2012), this is because the apparel quality has lost its importance in the era of fast-fashion: due to the intrinsic disposability of this business model, craftsmanship and durability have succumbed to low-prices and fresh designs, which are almost the only factors affecting the decision to purchase (Cline, 2012). Consumers still buy fast fashion goods although they are perfectly aware of their poor quality. Hence, it is crucial, when analysing the economic variable of the Customer Centric Sustainability of fast fashion firms, to take into account the negative influence that the fast fashion system has had on purchaser's view of quality product (Park, Kim, 2016).

2.3.2 The Environmental Dimension

From the point of view of CCS, environmental sustainability is about undertaking a business so as not to harm ecological environment or at least to control the unavoidable

damages. According to Plieth and al. (2012), it is difficult to track down a company that has totally committed to this way of doing business, but on the other hand there has been a growth in the initiative, among fast fashion houses, to engage in using environmentally friendly raw materials – as organic cotton – and in carrying out a life cycle analysis of the employed components (Curwen et al., 2012). It would be naive to think that these kinds of actions are solely dictated by ecologist principles, but that is not the point in this instance. The point is that companies, also the biggest ones belonging to a system which for decades has pursued unsustainable practices and consumption, are now acting towards sustainability. This, whether is it greenwashing or serious commitment to the cause, anyhow creates good precedents catalyses the attention of both consumers and competitors, and in doing so, of the whole consumer society.

To name just one of the initiatives: Hennes & Mauritz (H&M), the Swedish fast-fashion giant, from 2011 onwards every year proposes its Conscious Collection - a mid-priced clothing line employing mostly organic cotton and recycled synthetic fibres - advertising the importance of being sustainable and recycling clothing with the help of empowering statements on a green background.

As reported by Park and Kim (2016), according to researchers the sustainability approach taken by fast fashion companies is radically different from the one of the true sustainable firms operating with a TBL framework. Specifically, fast fashion brands make their efforts for sustainability in the simple attempt to meet the needs of that portion of customers they identify as environmentally conscious, through marketing their few sustainable activities often provided in limited edition or quantity. As a reactive response, the approach of fast fashion businesses is in open contrast with that of sustainable firms, which rather take action in a proactive way (Park, Kim, 2016).

2.3.3 The Social Dimension

The social dimension of sustainability is based upon participation and attention to others, fostering a sense of community which is the cornerstone in the well-being of people in society (Edwards, 2005). At a lower level, social sustainability deals with the impact that goods and their production have on the lives of communities. At a higher, it analyses the effect of businesses on society in its entirety, including aspects like human health and culture (Waage et al. 2005). In the fashion industry, the social facet of Consumers Centric Sustainability is often associated with Fair Trade and other ethical sourcing methods inherent to the production steps, as child labour and inhuman working conditions are issues to which it is difficult to remain indifferent to (Fulton, Lee, 2013).

Indeed, since flexibility is more and more requested to suppliers in order to keep up with the ever-changing rhythm of production, working conditions in textile factories are destined to get worse in absence of a radical change (Gardetti, Torres 2012). Following the fast fashion business model, retailers call for smaller and frequent orders at the lowest possible cost. This is the reason why so many manufacturers in the developing countries are making increasing use of sub-contracting – namely, the outsourcing of temporary workers - which causes instability in employment and contracting and increments workers' overtime (Gardetti, Torres 2012).

Leaving aside for the moment the fast fashion paradox, which is a particular case that should be treated separately, there is literature evidence on the fact that perceived attention to sustainability has a positive impact on the behaviour towards a fashion brand (Park, Kim, 2016). Even in the 1990s, research demonstrated that apparel purchasers were concerned with and tended to show off their sustainable and responsible consumption (Dickson, Littrell, 1996; Kim, Damhorst, 1998). Consumers are favourably disposed towards those firms that commit in transparency and this has positive

consequences on brand trust and loyalty. Therefore, researchers claim that, by making sustainability the core part of a business strategy, companies are not only able to generate a good brand image, but also to increase their products' credibility, which means to being able of creating a durable relationship with consumers (Molthan-Hill 2014; Schmitt, Renken 2012). Ultimately, noted that fast fashion and sustainable fashion brands approach very differently to sustainability and responsibility (reactive/proactive attitude) it makes sense to assert that consumers' perceptions of brand sustainability are more directly linked to positive brand relationships for sustainable firms than for fast fashion brands (Park, Kim, 2016).

2.4 How to deal with Ethics and Values in the Industrial Context

Sustainability, as mentioned several times before, is a concept whose edges is difficult to define. The conversation on what it has to be "sustained" is always open: resources? Lifestyle? (Niinimäki, 2015). In addition, how integrated should be the approach towards its definition and comprehension is still under debate (Scherer, 2003). Though, the reason why many struggles are experienced when dealing with the idea of sustainability is that it has to do with the notion of value: what it has to be considered to be valuable or not? Who and what has a moral value? (Niinimäki, 2015).

Even though a lot of studies have been ultimately provided in the sustainable fashion area, the outcomes, according to Niinimäki (2015) are rarely grounded on ethics and value discussion, or at least not for what concerns the large-scale industry. Indeed, there are plenty of researches relating to sustainability in small design-driven fashion niches, about its meaning and relationship with consumers' needs (Fletcher 2008; Fletcher, Grose, 2012).

Values and ethics are essential elements in sustainable design (Niinimäki, 2015).

Viktor Papanek, pioneer of social and sustainable design, claims that “to think dispassionately about what we design and why, and what the eventual consequences of our design intervention may be, is the basis of ethical thinking” (1995, p.70). By its very nature, design is always imbued with values (Niinimäki, 2015). Accordingly, it is important to explore how value is embedded in sustainable fashion and, consequently, to evaluate the impacts that industrial production processes generate in the sustainable development scenario.

In order to encompass the ethical perspective in the debate on sustainability, it is crucial to define what it is intended for value. According to Gibbins and Reimar (1999), values concerns the conviction of what is right and what wrong, of what is good and what is not and, foremost, they are the foundation of individuals moral behaviour.

As regards to the environmentalism, for example, the core values should be the preservation of biodiversity, the attention to the negative consequences of rash actions (in businesses, or not) on human health and on the depletion of resources (Paehike, 2000).

The ethical and value discussion is multifaceted and difficult to articulate in the industrial sector. Niinimäki (2015) defines as “realistic thinking” the actual condition of the fashion apparel industry, in which the perception that producers have limited possibilities to move towards ethical choices and just do what they can is dominant. In the words of Niinimäki (2015), this sort of “realistic” attitude to sustainable fashion is now prevailing in the business: designers and firms embrace the best environmental and social solution that exists, without breakthroughs (Niinimäki, 2013). Actually, small-and medium-sized companies are the most limited in their choices, which are determined by availability of resources and existing knowledge basis. As an example, it can be rather difficult for a small enterprise to source a very little amount of environmentally-friendly

materials. Accordingly, the bigger the fashion business, the more ascendancy on sustainable practices in the field.

As reported by Niinimäki (2015), the traditional fashion industry model consists of the following elements: fast production cycles, ever-changing trends and planned obsolescence of products. Since clothing price is low, producers have to maintain profitability through leveraging on the total items sold. This unavoidably leads to increasing the quantity of fashion items circulating in the market, and consequently to its saturation (Niinimäki 2011; 2013).

The present necessity is finding a way to conceive a win-win solution for all the stakeholders aimed to sustainable development, by approaching to sustainable practices as an opportunity rather than an obstacle to business. Vezzoli (2007) claims that, in order to change the configuration of the actual fashion industry, new radical design and innovations are requested. Eco-innovations, for example, comprise processes, products and services providing value not only for producers and consumers but also for the environment, by lightening the environmental impact.

The more general concept of sustainable innovation is a broader approach whereby the sustainability discourse is embedded in all the aspects of the business, namely products, technologies, services, business models, organisational set-ups, relationships with stakeholders (Niinimäki, 2013).

According to Tischner and Charter (2001), sustainable design can be approached in four ways: through repairing, refining, redesigning and rethinking; the fourth and last solution is the most ground-breaking as it necessitates strategic innovations aimed at creating new business models. It is acknowledged that market competition is driven by product meanings: as Verganti (2009) says, consumers buy and then use products pushed by utilitarian but also psychological and sociocultural reasons; in the attempt of fostering

successful sustainable innovations it is crucial to take this assumption into consideration. Innovations for sustainable business in the textile industry can be encouraged by technological improvements and innovations - digital technology -, economic changes or new laws and regulations, which will be further explored. By the way, any successful sustainable action or innovation calls for experimental and creative thinking. In that respect, creating or participating to a network constituted by sustainability-oriented businesses might make a huge difference, allowing the debate over the most suitable solutions not only for the company itself but also for the entire system (Niinimäki, 2015).

Establishing different kinds of relationships with customers enables to set up new forms of value in the business. Specifically, deeper relationships facilitate longer-term conversations with consumers, promoting more business opportunities through a more profound comprehension of their desires and necessities; once these are understood, it becomes easier to act on purchasing behaviour.

Hence, customer satisfaction and value should be the milestone of company's sustainable practices (Niinimäki, 2015). The satisfaction approach allows value creation for consumers, companies and environment, as satisfied customers use products longer: this is such an opportunity to reduce waste and decelerate consumption. On the other hand, satisfaction means also loyalty and propensity to repeat a shopping behaviour: a big value opportunity for sustainable companies (Niinimäki, 2014).

The fashion industry is provided with a very disjointed and globalised distribution system. In this state of being, a widespread lack of awareness and understanding about the chain's weakest links causes, at least, an important reputational risk, as the relatively recent disasters in Bangladesh's textile factories demonstrated.

In order to better pursue sustainability in the supply chain, the entrepreneur should make the most informed choice of the subcontractors, insisting with them on the

observance of good practices. The code of conduct principles is conceived to support enterprises in this process, while standards as SA 8000, ISO 14001 and Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS) help in the assessment of environmental and social aspects in design and manufacture. Moreover, the UN has drawn up a list of ten guidelines defined the 'Global Compact' to set standards in the matter of subcontracting; the principles regard questions as human rights, labour issues, environment actions and fight against corruption. As reported by Niinimäki (2015), some firms like Nike and Puma have voluntarily accepted these rules, incorporating them in their own subcontracting deals.

2.4.1 The Ethical Consumption

One of the most critical factors concerning the environmental impact during the use phase is clothing's lifetime, which determined not only by product quality and resistance to wear, but also by the unstoppable succession of trends. Accordingly, "extending the life span of garments is one of the most critical issues for sustainable development" (Niinimäki, 2015, p. 8). In this respect, sustainable fashion firms already providing for services designed to stretch the usage time of items are also producing value for the entire sustainable development context (Niinimäki, 2014); for the others, the challenge is how to find the way to accompany products with services aimed at fostering a more environmentally responsible behaviour on the part of consumers.

Since the post-war years, consumption and consumerism permeate Western societies, and in their own way they give a good guarantee on the health of societies and economic systems. After all, when consumption freezes, there must be something wrong. On the other hand, actual consumption patterns are strongly associated a traditional unsustainable industrial system, and therefore to the economic systems and values related to the latter. Taking into consideration the theories on consumption claimed by Verganti (2009), and according to Niinimäki (2015), in order to move consumption

towards more sustainable models it is important to implement systems proposing emotional and psychological experiences other than the hedonistic satisfaction resulting from purchasing new garments. "This could happen for example through strategically sustainable design that includes services" (Niinimäki, 2011).

Sustainable fashion needs a multifaceted approach: there is scope to considerably improve the present situation, but not in a single solution and without different attempts.

In the words of Niinimäki (2015):

"Values and ethics are fundamental grounds also for sustainable fashion, and they might help to widen the discussion and seeing problem areas more holistically and further to include the ethical dimension more tightly to discussion. Ethics is the ground for making choices in the sustainable design and manufacturing and even while considering the business models and profit-making options. Even though ethical consideration might be a complicated and hard task to do for companies, it can open new business possibilities, while consumers are more than ever interested on environmental values. Products have to offer those values that are important to consumers. If the value offering of the new product is an answer to a consumer's value seeking, there is a business opportunity."

Niinimäki (2016), Ethical Foundations in Sustainable Fashion, p. 10

3 COMMUNICATING CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY: A CASE STUDY

3.1 A first approach to corporate sustainability communication

Although it may appear contradictory, there is a non-negligible relationship between sustainability and marketing.

The apparent conflict between the two concepts, as Baldassarre and Campo (2016) report, lies in the fact that sustainability is considered to be feasible only by reducing consumption, while the purpose of marketing is precisely that of increasing it. However, treating the latter as antithetical approaches is unrealistic and overmuch simplistic: while marketing does not always encourage mindless consumption for its own sake, in the same way reduced, more conscious consumption is not necessarily an evil for businesses.

Currently, leveraging marketing to communicate social and environmental commitment is a normal practice and sustainability has become a fully-fledged marketing tool for companies across many sectors.

According to Baldassarre and Campo (2016), there is no universal way to communicate sustainability: businesses convey values and actions to consumers in different ways and with different purposes.

If companies are responsible, do they choose to communicate their commitment, or do they prefer to be more discreet? Do companies regard their sustainable behavior as part of a more general marketing strategy or purely as an ethical issue? Can they take a risk (i.e., greenwashing) or completely ignore the need to be sustainable?

Baldassarre, Campo (2016), Sustainability as a Marketing Tool: To Be or To Appear To Be?, in Business Horizons (2016), 59, p. 422

3.2 Being sustainable and appearing sustainable: an evaluating matrix

At first conceived as a management and self-assessment tool for entrepreneurs and business leaders, the matrix proposed by Baldassarre and Campo (2016) is here a valuable support to examine different approaches to sustainability communication. In the model, a “geological metaphor” (Baldassarre, Campo, 2016, p. 422), namely the ability of minerals to reflect light, is employed to clarify the concept of transparency in communication of sustainable operational activities. In this analogy, light stands for the information on sustainable actions undertaken (or not) by companies as provided to customers and other relevant stakeholders via various media.

		Translucent companies	Transparent companies
Being sustainable	High commitment	<p>Sustainability is <i>de facto</i> realized, but is not exploited as a marketing opportunity. Sensitivity toward sustainable issues is demonstrated by definite actions, but the company is not completely aware of the strategic importance of communication. There is a gap between the sustainable performance and the perception of customers.</p> <p><i>“We should communicate better what we are. We are doing the hard work—why not celebrate it?”</i></p>	<p>Sustainability is an important topic of the overall corporate strategy. Consequently, the marketing and communication approach to sustainable initiatives is consistent with what the company actually does. ‘Sustainable value’ is made up of definite activities, well-communicated to stakeholders, and the reputation of the company is supported by facts and figures. Sustainability is a competitive advantage.</p> <p><i>“We communicate what we are”</i></p>
	Low commitment	<p style="text-align: center;">Dark companies</p> <p>Companies are not at all aware of the relevance of sustainability as a strategic topic. There is no company website on sustainability and no possibility for stakeholders to know anything about the organization’s mission, values, etc. Sustainability is not a concern.</p> <p><i>“What are you talking about?”</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Opaque companies</p> <p>Sustainability is used as opportunistic leverage. Management overpromises and underdelivers on sustainability, and this could put the company’s reputation at risk. ‘To appear’ is more important than ‘to be’: the marketing and communication strategy regarding sustainable initiatives is emphasized, but is inconsistent with what the company actually does.</p> <p><i>“We are (we pretend to be) what we communicate”</i></p>
		Low-profile communication	High-profile communication
Appearing sustainable			

Figure 3.1 - Evaluation Matrix, Baldassarre and Campo (2016)

The matrix is structured as follows: the vertical axis (Y) stands for companies' effective commitment to sustainability (Being Sustainable), while the horizontal (X) represents the extent to which companies communicate it (Appearing Sustainable). Accordingly, four clusters are identified, which present different levels of consistency between commitment and communication: Opaque, Translucent, Transparent and Dark companies.

As stated by Baldassarre and Campo (2016), the degree of transparency is something more than an invariable characteristic of communication and marketing strategy. On the contrary, even within the same business environment, it may change according to several variables such as geographical contexts, involved stakeholders, marketing channels, national regulations, culture of sustainability at corporate level, financial means and cost of certifications. For this reason, the authors suggest that the four quadrants should be intended as adjoining rooms: it is rather difficult to encounter a solely opaque, transparent or translucent company, and "[...] a commensurate approach to communication is apt to include elements of all three features" (Baldassarre, Campo, 2016, p. 422).

3.2.1 Opaque Companies

The Opaque companies share the lowest level of consistency between real commitment and communication, leveraging on sustainability just in terms of appearance. They prove to be rather conscious of all the benefits brought by sustainability communication on marketing strategy, but their effort just stops there. The firms placed in this quadrant engage in a seeming high profile conversation with their relevant stakeholders, paying careful attention to every touchpoint, without a real implementation of sustainable practices. "[...] these firms represent the actualization of greenwashing: the tendency of a company to beautify its image through communication

that emphasizes positive achievements and conceals negative conduct.” (Baldassarre, Campo, 2016, p. 423).

Opaque means also misleading: companies in this quadrant are not afraid of manipulating information and data on their behalf, often motivated by market external reasons as competitive pressure and consumers/investors demand, but also pushed by non-market external drivers as activists, media pressure, NGOs (Baldassarre, Campo, 2016). In a world becoming increasingly sensitive to environmental and social impact of unsustainable ways of doing business, sustainability and transparency turn out to be powerful marketing tools: the question with opaque companies is that communication efforts are not backed up by actions. This kind of approach is often hazardous, in particular when stakeholders are conscious of sustainability issues. The benefits of greenwashing are not supposed to last forever: once the truth comes out and corporate credibility is damaged, it is not simple to rebuild a positive image.

Opaque companies do not consider sustainability more than something to leverage for their marketing strategy. Therefore, the efforts concerning areas such as Research and development (R&D), innovation and investment in new technologies are driven by criteria other than environmental and social responsibility: communication is the only pillar of their pretended sustainable marketing (Baldassarre, Campo, 2016). In the longer term, the viability of such businesses cannot be taken for granted.

Indeed, unless they do not make an effort in order to shift to another quadrant, issues related to bad reputation, the relationship with increasingly conscious stakeholders, as well as the progressive extension of a legislative system intended to regulate sustainability, will be impossible to overcome.

3.2.2 Translucent Companies

Translucent companies are sincerely committed to sustainability without considering the latter as a marketing opportunity. For the kind of businesses placed in this second quadrant, corporate responsibility is nothing more than a moral obligation and communication is not deemed to be part of the game; sustainability is fully integrated into decision making, but any effort or commitment towards it is hidden from public knowledge.

Firms may adopt this kind of approach for two main reasons:

1. Marketing and sustainability are deliberately treated as diverse entities and kept separated from each other as the latter is considered to be more pertaining to the moral sphere;
2. Basing the whole reputation on environmental and social responsibility is regarded as too risky, particularly in fear of being accused of greenwashing (Baldassarre and Campo, 2016; Tixier, 2003).

According to Baldassarre and Campo (2016), it is likely for translucent companies to be exposed to the following threats and vulnerabilities due to the lack of sustainability communication:

- Even the most committed company does not exist in the eyes of consumers if it is not able to demonstrate its responsible behaviour. In this sense, communicating the attention to certain issues can result in a competitive advantage;
- The absence of information makes it difficult to pursue relationships with industrial customers and to foster investments;
- Translucent companies may actually seem less committed compared to opaque ones: given their focus on communication, these latter can be regarded as more sustainable and therefore attract more consumers and purchases;

- A refusal to disclose the efforts towards sustainability involves irrecoverable costs due to missed economic opportunities;
- Ultimately, the fear of being charged with practicing greenwashing and the subsequent abstention from any communication may severely threaten a firm's development and long-term viability.

3.2.3 Transparent Companies

Transparent companies can boast the highest level of consistency between what they are and what they appear to be. They consider their commitment to sustainability as a powerful marketing opportunity and competitive advantage to exploit rather than a cost to amortize, without neglecting the latter's inherent moral and ethical nature. Communication is simple and straightforward: since their behaviours tally with their core principles, transparent businesses only illustrate what they actually do, for better or worse, by making use of the most relevant tools (reports, website, product packaging). In doing this, detailed information and numerical evidences are leveraged to trace both efforts and real accomplishments.

According to Porter and van der Linde (1995), those firms refusing to pursue and apply green principles sustain latent costs associated with their bad environmental and social conduct - as those of pollution - which are subsequently inflicted to consumers. On the other hand, green companies can benefit from a mitigation of the costs related to waste management as well as take advantage of the ever-increasing demand for ethically made products (Frenkel, Scott, 2002). In this sense, transparent companies regard sustainability as a big opportunity to both reduce costs and convey a better image to consumers, but never giving in to the temptation of exaggerate positive achievements and emphasizing data while concealing missteps.

The businesses “sustainable value” (Baldassarre and Campo, 2016, p. 423) is embedded into the overall corporate strategy and is considered a goal to be attained through multiple activities involving all the internal departments and accurately communicated to the relevant stakeholders. While keeping the favourable impact on reputation, Miles and Covin (2000) also report that a positive correlation between environmental and financial performance has been underlined by most of the scientific literature.

For transparent companies, communication is not an end but a means of providing value both internally and externally: the active engagement and empowerment of all the stakeholders, including employees, makes sustainability a shared goal and a key consideration when it comes to decision making.

3.2.4 Dark Companies

Dark companies occupy the lower left quadrant of the matrix. Characterized by low – or non-existent - sustainability performance and rather lacking communication, they are fully unconscious of the issue of sustainability and even more of its potential benefits from a strategical and marketing standpoint. For these businesses, environmental and social subjects are not a concern at all, and their touchpoints and communication channels reflect this direction: no “sustainability section” on the website, no reports to be consulted.

“Just as darkness represents the absence of light, dark companies’ ideas about sustainability are completely obscured, and consequently they cannot strategically conceive of it. In this context, dark companies risk being invisible in the market, or at least not easily noticed; thus, they can play only a marginal role”

Baldassarre and Campo (2016), Sustainability as a Marketing Tool: To Be or To Appear To Be?, p. 427

In those economic and market contexts where stakeholders are rather aware of the importance of sustainability – and therefore inclined to reward firms demonstrating commitment towards it – and the legal system guarantees its regulation, being a dark company is likely to result in a loss of competitive advantage.

Dark companies do not have the features of what Nonaka defines “a knowledge-creating company” (Nonaka, 1991): one that recognizes knowledge to be a determinant of viability in an ever-changing and competitive market largely dominated by new technologies.

Due to their lack of knowledge or interest about the sustainability debate, companies belonging to this quadrant bear a high risk in terms of competitiveness: poor knowledge leads to poor innovation (Baldassarre and Campo, 2016), and poor innovation translates into low capacity for adaptation to market changes. Moreover, it is easy for consumers to remain confused and skeptical towards a total absence of information in a world where any kind of knowledge is made available everywhere and to everyone at any time.

According to Baldassarre and Campo (2016) this kind of unconscious approach to responsibility is likely to be more common among smallest and immature businesses; it is improbable for bigger enterprises to be really unaware of sustainability.

3.2.5 Is leveraging corporate sustainability an immoral way of selling products?

Even the most transparent companies, when leveraging on sustainability in marketing their products, face some criticism. In particular, they tend to be accused of unethical conduct resulting from the “exploitation” of their commitment to sustainability in order to generate more profits (Baldassarre and Campo, 2016).

As members of society, businesses owe duties and obligations towards it: hence, sincere efforts to reduce their impact in both environmental and human terms should be top of the list.

“The business objective cannot solely be to gain profit, but also to achieve it ethically. Ethics and economics must go hand-in-hand within a modern company that is aware of its role in society. However, is it sufficient to achieve sustainability without disclosing the good things done?”

Baldassarre, Campo (2016), Sustainability as a Marketing Tool: To Be or To Appear To Be?, p. 422

The question put by the authors draws the attention to an evergreen issue: as a moral duty, should acting in a sustainable manner be an end in itself? Is communicating sustainability for marketing purposes a questionable way to make profit? And furthermore, can we affirm that doing business the right way for a purpose other than social and environmental responsibility is worse than not doing it at all?

In this respect, it is important to remember that the objective of an enterprise has to be, first of all, to guide its action towards economic viability, making an effort to find the most appropriate combination of quantitative (i.e., revenues) and qualitative outcomes (i.e., reduction of their environmental impact).

The existing difference between translucent and transparent companies can be further explained on these grounds: while the latter are capable to achieve both qualitative and quantitative results by means of good communication, the former, although certainly committed to social responsibility, lose many business opportunities since their sustainable performance remains unknown to stakeholders.

For these reasons, communication of sustainability needs to be treated as a substantial part of business: it definitely represents the driving force behind the acquisition of new

customers and investors. Accordingly, engaging stakeholders in a conversation about social and sustainability issues through communication cannot be considered unethical: conversely, it enables consumers to make better and more informed choices while contributing to spread the culture of sustainability throughout the market. *“To justify the choice of communicating, it is sufficient to believe that being responsible is a duty toward the society to which a company belongs. It is not charity, it is good action; but it is not generosity”* (Baldassarre and Campo, 2016, p. 428).

3.2.6 How different approaches to transparency in communication impact on the achievement of qualitative and quantitative goals

At this stage, by following the pattern delineated by Baldassarre and Campo (2016), it can be interesting to delineate how the various approaches to communication and transparency taken by the four typologies of business set out in the matrix affect the extent to which quantitative and qualitative goals are achieved.

- Opaque Companies mistakenly think that their role in society is confined to business; therefore, all of their efforts converge on a quantitative outcome, while the qualitative aim is treated as a mere matter of appearance and no one strives to achieve it. In the long run, such unreal commitment is very likely to expose those firms to the risk of undermining their ability to generate profit.
- Translucent Companies, placed at the opposite corner of the matrix, look instead at the qualitative outcome, overlooking the power of disclosed sustainability in quantitative, therefore profit, terms.
- Transparent Companies, as stated above, are aware that disclosing their efforts towards sustainability places them in a favorable position in terms of competitiveness. Being responsible towards stakeholders and society at large gives rise to multiple business opportunities, including the chance to increase financial performance

indicators. Therefore, transparent companies, with their conduct, are able to achieve both qualitative and quantitative goals.

- Dark Companies share a lack of consistent strategic vision, and this makes it rather difficult to reach quantitative outcomes. On the other hand, qualitative objectives are completely disregarded, therefore no tendency towards their achievement is detected.

According to Baldassarre and Campo (2016), communication – both internal and external - has a key role in any sustainability strategy. If a firm fails to communicate to its internal stakeholders – the employees -, it will not, therefore, have the ability to implement the adjustments required to make the whole business more sustainable. Employees, in all likelihood, belong to the most environmentally and socially conscious public, the one keen to take part in, support and promote the company's sustainability efforts: it would be a strategic error not to invite them into the conversation.

On the other hand, if companies overlook the importance of communication towards, say, customers, partners, and the public at large, great business opportunities may be missed. First of all, in terms of sales: the number of consumers caring about social and environmental issues is, in fact, rising all the time. In addition, even possible major contracts for supplying global enterprises could be at risk if firms avoid to properly disclose to potential trading partners their policies for sustainability.

It often remains unclear the reason why some companies still do not include communication in their effort to sustainable conduct. While many may fear to be charged with greenwashing, others suffer from a "culture of green-muting" (Baldassarre, Campo, 2016, p. 428): in other words, they consider inappropriate to boast about their green policy. Another adverse scenario envisages that a completely transparent communication about sustainability goals and achievements could provide competitors with too much

information or – paradoxically – make companies excessively exposed to media attacks and less equipped to keep control over their image.

When properly embedded into the overall corporate strategy, sustainability shall thus be considered a communication tool for companies. For the latter, disclosing their commitment with stakeholders is crucial: customers, as well as investors, have to be aware of the true sustainability performances of the company in order to make informed purchasing decisions and exercise their right to choose those businesses whom they share values with, while penalising the others.

3.3 Corporate sustainability and web-based communication: a framework of key success factors

Sustainability is a complex and articulated subject, requiring equally advanced and multifaceted communication strategies: digital platforms can best address the need for personal involvement and instant, direct information exchange compared to more traditional media (TV, radio, printed press, outdoor ads).

Accordingly, amongst the possible touchpoint a business can leverage for delivering its core values to consumers and other stakeholders, corporate webpages and social media have a leading role, especially in the case of *e-tailers* which cannot obviously rely on in-store marketing.

Over the past fifteen years or so, the realm of marketing, and marketing communication in particular, has faced the most dynamic and ground-breaking changes in its history (Belch and Belch, 2014). Due to technological development, a variety of interactive digital media has emerged together with a new form of bi-directional communication, whereby users are considered to be part of a conversation rather than simple listeners.

In 2004, for the first time the term Web 2.0 appeared. This second phase of the internet revolution is focused on some core principles, bound to dramatically change not only companies' way of doing business, but also human interaction as a whole: mass collaboration, participation, dialogue and user-generated content. The social facet of the web, which is now overriding, embeds a variety of platform and tools enabling users to share thoughts, perspectives, information, media contents, but also social causes. Among the others, podcasting, social polling, social bookmarking and of course liking, sharing, tagging and blogging are the most common activities in the social environment.

Such new media allow companies as well to carry out a number of activities: inter alia, exchanging corporate information and multimedia contents like images and videos, creating surveys, addressing concerns and misgivings, but also better mapping their results in terms of sales and brand awareness through a highly increased availability of data and, of course, marketing products and services. In this sense, the rapid establishment and evolution of an internet-based environment has sometimes even overturned the way in which firms do business and communicate with their stakeholders. One of the most significant factors of this so-called revolution (Belch and Belch, 2014), is the possibility for users to access these new media from their smartphones and other portable devices, which has created a lot of brand-new opportunities for marketers to reach and connect with prospects and customers. In particular, mobile marketing is extremely interesting for businesses as it enables advertisers to deliver messages in the right place, at the right moment, according to a determined location or consumption situation.

The internet as a whole is a rather multifaceted marketing and communication tool, as it embeds an array of different channels – the digital marketing mix. On one hand, the former represents an advertising medium – paid –, whereby a budget is allocated in order

to place ads on social networks (i.e., Facebook and Instagram Ads), websites (i.e., display ads) and to optimise positioning on search engines (i.e., Google or Bing Ads). On the other, it is a way for businesses to get free publicity – both positive and negative – through the spontaneous engagement of users, leveraging on a modern “word-of-mouth marketing” (Newman, 2014): likes, comments, reposts and reviews are only a few examples of what it is meant by earned media. As the last – but not least – element of the mix we find the owned media, which comprehend all the channels and contents created and managed by the business itself: websites, blogposts, apps, social media accounts. From a communication strategy standpoint, it is important for companies to take into consideration that the three components of the mix present very different scope for monitoring and managing of the spread of ideas and contents: while paid and owned media are relatively easy to control, this cannot be said for earned channels, which require special attention together with a different approach, in some cases more geared to damage limitation. In this respect, given that these present a greater degree of manoeuvrability, it is crucial for companies to pay special attention to owned media, and corporate websites in particular, in order to deliver to consumers their effort towards sustainability in the most effective way (Dach, Allmendinger, 2013). In fact, since the internet is perceived to be more transparent than other more traditional means of communication and advertising, and since transparency is, as stated above, the most essential aspect when it comes to corporate sustainability communications, the web-environment should be the most natural vehicle for transmitting companies’ core values (Dach, Allmendinger, 2013).

Dach and Allmendinger (2013), by bringing together studies and researches conducted over the last ten years, propose a framework designed to list the key crucial

factors for a proper sustainability communication on the internet, especially in case of company-generated contents on websites (see figure 3.2):

- **Accessibility:** immediate and easy accessibility of contents contributes to foster credibility. Clearly labelled content indexes and a prominent positioning of the link to the page dedicated to corporate sustainability – if any –, together with an overall reduced number of clicks and passages necessary to access information are good ways to increase accessibility.
- **Usability and website design:** usability plays an important part in the performance of a website. Good usability helps to provide a smooth navigating experience for users, enhancing the effectiveness of any communication. It is one of the main factors distinguishing a professionally designed website from those which are not. Usability should be pursued by means of a proper website structure, divided into sections – often header, navigation bar, main content, side bar and footer - and made out of design and functional elements like corporate logo, menu, buttons, tabs, links, headlines and catchy texts and multimedia content.
- **General website content:** good content is the main differentiating and - therefore - success factor for a website, also from a SEO standpoint. It should be understandable, consistent, attractive and consumer-oriented. Images and videos help making information more engaging and improve webpage stickiness.
- **Industry-specific sustainability issues as content:** it would be an error to provide perfunctory information addressing sustainability while disregarding the fashion industry related criticalities. More specifically, here is what it should not be left out: environmental and social issues, transparency, philanthropy, product-related sustainability, ethical consumption.
- **Sustainability commitment:** a high perceived practical commitment towards sustainability improve the overall perceived credibility. Accordingly, the proper communication and demonstration of matters such as sustainability vision and strategy,

together with planned and implemented actions and challenges, should receive particular attention.

- Sustainable development agenda: sustainability should not be perceived as a theoretical and impromptu commitment. Therefore, accurate information concerning the sustainable agenda such as partnerships, local and global sustainability developments should be provided.
- Contact, feedback, dialogue: the website should include FAQ and contacts sections, in order to enable users and stakeholders to feel engaged and possibly ask for further information concerning corporate responsibility.
- Sustainability reports: in order to demonstrate that communicated efforts are objectively evaluated by another party, sustainability reports should be made accessible to anyone, since they also provide official proof of company achievements.

Key critical success factor	Short description and sub-categories for evaluation (website and interviews)
Accessibility	A quick and easy accessibility contributes to perceived credibility. It can be achieved with a prominent location of the link and a low number of necessary clicks to get to the web-based corporate sustainability communications. 1. A link is available and associated with sustainability; 2. Link is in a prominent location on the web-based corporate sustainability communications; 3. Link is noticeable; 4. Only one click to access the web-based corporate sustainability communications; 5. <u>web-based</u> corporate sustainability communications allocated under 'About us' or 'Investor Relations'; 6. <u>Clearly labelled content indexes</u>
Usability and website design	Possibility to quickly get an overview and understanding of the presented topic by using a clear structure. The latter is established through design elements such as headlines, highlighting and visualisation. 1. Clear structure; 2. Visualisation of content; 3. Teaser text is used; 4. Further information available; 5. Association to sustainability (design, images); 6. Easy navigation
General website content	Content has to be easily understood, interesting and consumer-oriented. Hence, it should not be too <u>complex</u>, no theoretical jargon should be used. Multimedia features enable involvement, which is necessary for visitors to stay at the website and further engage. It is recommended that the general website content also is related to and associated with the sustainability topic. 1. Website appears engaging through use of multimedia features; 2. Communicate through third parties; 3. Topics are visualized and explained; 4. Use of key words and images associated with sustainability; 5. Current commitment - last-updated indicator; 6. Consumer-oriented content and text
Industry-specific sustainability issues as content	Divided into social and environmental issues, including transparency, philanthropic, sustainable fashion and ethical / sustainable consumption issues since these are the most relevant issues of the fashion industry. 1. Environmental issues; 2. Social issues; 3. Necessary transparency; 4. Philanthropic Issues; 5. Sustainable Fashion (product-related); 6. Ethical / sustainable consumption
Sustainability Commitment	Expressed by e.g. a sustainability vision or mission statement, demonstrated actions, values and codes and top management commitment. A high perceived sustainability commitment should lead to a high-perceived credibility of the web-based corporate sustainability communications. 1. Sustainability Vision or / and mission statement; 2. Sustainability Strategy; 3. Actions are demonstrated; 4. Values, codes or list of commitments; 5. Top Management Commitment; 6. Most important sustainability challenges mentioned
Sustainable Development Agenda	Communicating the longer-term development agenda of corporate sustainability in terms of partnerships, local and global sustainability developments, objectives for a sustainable development and memberships in sustainability initiatives. 1. Interaction; 2. Partnerships; 3. Local sustainability developments; 4. Global sustainability developments; 5. Objectives for a sustainable development 6. Membership(s) in sustainability initiatives
Contact, feedback dialogue	Features for a two-way and thus interactive communication with consumers including e.g. FAQ, contact details and a newsletter. 1. Responsible person for sustainability can be contacted; 2. Email or contact form for sustainability concerns; 3. Sustainability newsletter; 4. FAQ; 5. Frequent questionnaires / polls / surveys; 6. Online forum / online community
Sustainability reports	Provide sustainability reports as an objective means of showing that the communicated actions are evaluated / controlled by another party. 1. Annual sustainability report; 2. Shorter version of sustainability report (consumer-oriented easier reading, only highlights presented)

Figure 3.2 - Key success factors of effective web-based corporate sustainability communication, Dach,

Allmendinger (2014)

These guidelines will later prove useful in analysing and evaluating the communicating performance of a determinate fashion retailer on its corporate website.

3.4 The role of social media in corporate brand communication

The present competitive business environment, shaped over the years by the ongoing digital revolution, provides to the corporate brand, together with its identity, image and therefore reputation, a central role in terms of the establishment of valuable relationships between the firm and all its stakeholders (Vernuccio, 2014).

As Vernuccio (2014) reports, many scholars (Ind & Riondino, 2001; Vernuccio, Barbarossa, Giraldi, & Ceccotti, 2012) claims that, when it comes to the online as opposed to the offline environment, it is not necessary to develop a different theory about brand and its attributes. Nevertheless, the emergence of a new “open source” vision of branding (Fournier & Avery, 2011, p. 194) is mentioned (Vernuccio, 2014), which calls for the active engagement of stakeholders in the process of both brand building and enforcement by means of a properly designed communication strategy.

Currently, the “social media ecosystem” (Vernuccio, 2014, p. 212) is confirmed to be the most suitable tool to reach and involve stakeholders, enabling them to become co-creators of the values lying behind the brand. On the other hand, according to Vernuccio (2014) research demonstrates that brand owners are increasingly exposed to the risk of losing control of their online-distributed content.

There are three main approaches to leverage the power of social-media marketing and communication for brand-building related objectives (Vernuccio, 2014), namely:

1. Using social media in public relations programs in order to engage opinion leaders - bloggers, instagrammers, podcasters - and make them aware about products and services, corporate values and innovations.

2. Using social media with a more passive attitude, listening to the conversations of consumers and other stakeholders about that somehow can affect the business.
3. Implementing interactive platforms aimed at creating, maintaining and enforcing brand's connections, image and reputation through the direct involvement of managers and workers.

A practical implementation of these approaches, together with other digital communication strategies related to sustainability and corporate responsibility, will be further explored below.

3.5 Everlane and corporate sustainability communication: a best practice

In late 2010, at the age of 25, Michael Preysman founded Everlane, the (former) online-only clothing label committed to, and capitalising on, "radical transparency".

As a computer science graduate of Carnegie Mellon University, Preysman, present CEO of the company, actually had no educational or cultural background on fashion industry: he had been working for three years in private equity before deciding to launch an apparel company (Bloomberg, 2019). "Perhaps reflecting his computer science background, Preysman was as much interested in function, systems and data as in the design of Everlane's clothes." (Carlson, 2018). Its founder's positive attitude towards digital media and information technology permeates Everlane's communication and marketing strategy since its first appearance on the market.

According to Tice Studeman (2014), the company was never meant to be the average clothing brand, starting from the choice of the first headquarter. Preysman's decision to move from New York for establishing its business into a small office located in San Francisco - aka the "heart of techland" (Tice Studeman, 2014) - has contributed to shape the firm's way of marketing both its products and values. Beyond its commitment to

transparency, which will be further investigated below, what really led Everlane to success was - and still is – a well-performing combination of social media mastery and powerful digital strategy. Via Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, together with an effective corporate website, Preysman and its team convey to consumers a rather fresh vision of fashion: basic, durable, well-made pieces, ethically manufactured and distributed, sold at fair prices.

"[...] I think the reason we are in San Francisco is the idea of just being outside of the fashion craze in NYC. It allows us to think: What is going to make a really great online experience? When you are in NYC, you think mostly about what is going to make a really great store experience. A lot of the e-comm stores are opening up [brick-and-mortar] stores. But for us, it's about making the online experience better than off-line. It changes the dynamic of the company long-term."

Michael Preysman, as reported by Tice Studeman in How Everlane Succeeded in Fashion By Acting Like a Tech-Company, Vogue, Part of Style.com's Fashion x Tech Week, 2014

When Preysman decided to develop a retail experience different from any other, brick and mortar stores were not taken into consideration: he wanted to offer high-quality pieces at lower prices by operating online only. After having accessed funds for \$1.1 million from Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers and other investors, Everlane has managed to establish itself as a "Silicon Valley rebuke to traditional retailers": no physical retail shops, no collections, no traditional sale periods (Berfield, 2015). Things actually have changed quite a bit since then: two physical retails were recently opened both in New York and San Francisco, whereby technology is used to merge online and offline in order to provide customers with a hybrid, optimised, purchasing experience.

Having – initially, at least – been one of the first fashion brands to limit its presence to the online environment, Everlane has paved the way to an array of other companies which

are now trying to emulate its model. What its founder considers to be the key factor of its success has the shape of a unique mix of design and technology, a “marriage of West Coast and East Coast” (Preysman, 2014). Technology is harnessed to the service of fashion retailing with a view to simplification and convenience: easier returns and ever faster deliveries represent only trivial examples.

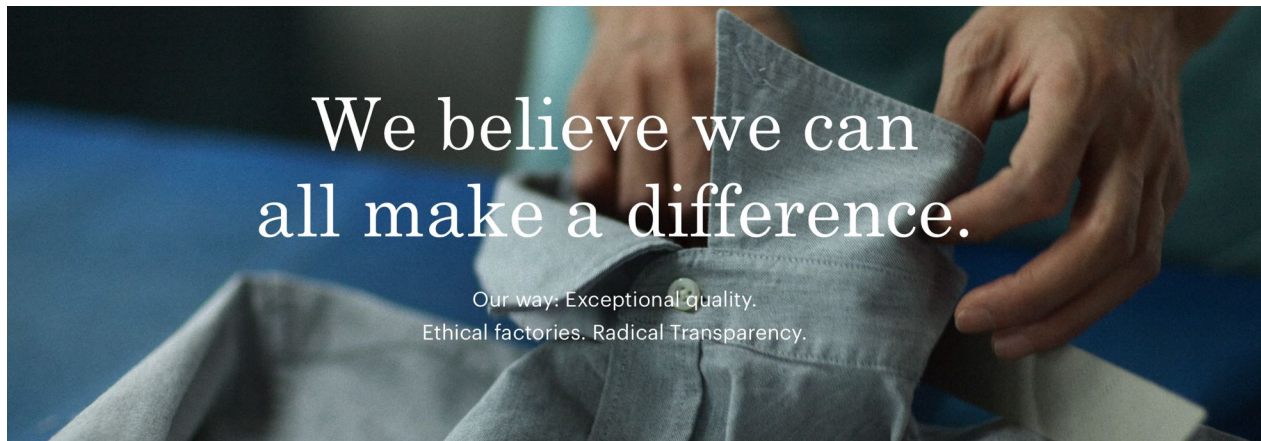


Figure 3.3 – Everlane’s Catchphrase, Source: <https://www.everlane.com/about>

Everlane’s vocation is well synthesized in the catchphrase displayed in the about section of company’s website: “We believe we can all make a difference” (see figure 3.3). According to Berfield (2015), what Preysman has based his company’s reputation on is that customers “[...] can feel good about what they purchase from Everlane, because they can see, on the website, the factories, workers, production costs, and Everlane’s mark-ups” (Berfield, 2015).

What generally contributes to make a company great, across all the industries, is the capability to intercept unsatisfied customer needs and convert them into a mission to accomplish: Everlane has been able to do this, committing to transparency and sustainability in a sector ruled by a business model – the fast fashion one - marked by vagueness and uncertainty. Since the very beginning, Everlane has made commitment to “Radical Transparency” the main driver of its business. The company’s mission results in

a two-word concentrate of effective communication. The concept is brief, straightforward and comprehensible - therefore memorable and easy to share - and means disclosing the production process and revealing the markup.

When in November 2011 the online store went live, a 150 characters post on the company's Facebook page showed up featuring some numerical data (see figure 3.4).

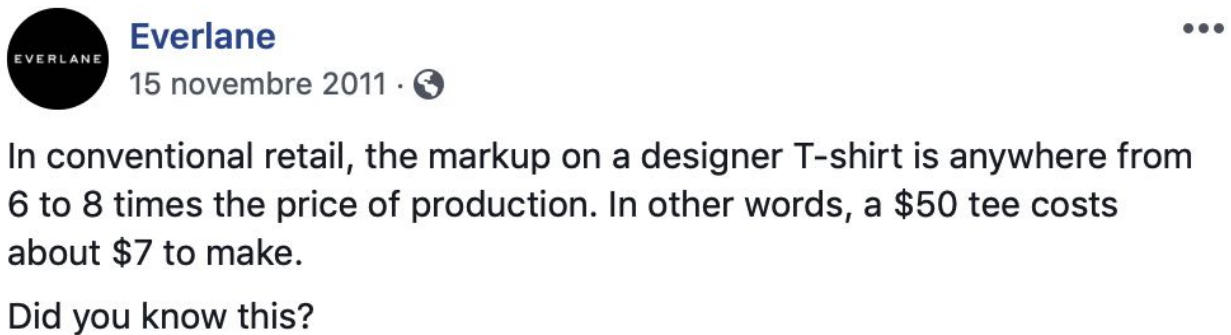


Figure 3.4 – Everlane's Facebook Post, Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/Everlane/posts/273513466019683>

Clothing firms generally choose not to disclose this kind of information: by including customers in the conversation on what some retailers consider a trade secret, Everlane was able to gain further following and funding (Berfield, 2015). Then, right after the infamous Rana Plaza collapse which in 2013 took the lives of more than a thousand Bengali workers, Preysman saw the need for increased transparency: in order to tell the whole story behind each garment, Everlane had to disclose information on its supply partners. Accordingly, a dedicated Factories section was added to the website, which will be further explored below. Eventually, the cost breakdown for every item has been disclosed too: Everlane was not the first company pursuing transparency in its supply chain, "but it remains one of the few fashion brands to do so" (Berfield, 2015).

In order to survive in a competitive environment run by fast fashion giants such as H&M and Zara, Everlane had necessarily to find a way for leveraging on its different, inspiring, idea of fashion:

“At Everlane, we want the right choice to be as easy as putting on a great T-shirt. That’s why we partner with the best, ethical factories around the world. Source only the finest materials. And share those stories with you—down to the true cost of every product we make. It’s a new way of doing things. We call it Radical Transparency.”

Everlane (2019), Source: <https://www.everlane.com/about>

The aforementioned four line-sentence appearing on the about section of the website highlights company’s present core principles:

- Ethical approach to manufacturing processes;
- Timeless, durable, high quality products;
- Transparent communication on costs and ways of production.

Since its first entry on the market in 2011, the company has continued to enlarge its scope and effort towards ethical and environmental responsibility. Starting from the iconic white basic t-shirts, today Everlane has extended its production to knitwear, leather accessories, classic denim and more, launching six new items a month on average (Segran, 2018). A strong and powerful message, together with a well-defined brand identity and aesthetic, “has turned customers into emissaries—and inspired a slew of upstart fashion brands” (Segran, 2018).

A fundamental element driving the success of the company is its focus on brand. For e-retailers like Everlane, competition is no more than a click away: a recognizable brand helps companies to be memorable to prospects and customers. Everlane brand shares the same features of its products: clean, simple, detail-oriented; such an attention to detail flows through every element used to convey the very essence of the brand, from

visual imagery to product descriptions, in order to provide a consistent image throughout the whole array of communication channels leveraged by the firm. Unlike other start-ups – especially venture-backed ones –, which often tend to expand too quickly in order to show bigger returns to investors, Everlane has been capable to resist the temptation to enlarge its scope prematurely. On the contrary, for more than a year after its foundation, the company has kept its focus on its main differentiating factor – transparency in both production and communication – by only selling basic tee shirts. Concentrating its effort towards the production of a single, basic item, the firm has had the chance to keep complexity low – as well as costs – while consolidating in the meantime its value proposition, aesthetic and supply chain arrangement (Spera, 2018).

3.5.1 Leveraging digital media to communicate sustainability: Everlane's approach to selected channels

3.5.1.1 The role of corporate website in increasing credibility

Everlane's website, being the most institutional digital communication channel for the company, perfectly captures the essence of the brand: clear structure, clean aesthetics, detailed content. According to some of the guidelines featured in the framework proposed by Dach and Allmendinger (2013) and reported above, the website will be explored in the attempt to highlight the key factors contributing to its effectiveness in terms of sustainability communication.

Accessibility of Information

When browsing the homepage, something immediately stands out concerning the accessibility of company responsibility information: the choice to reserve one of the six hyperlinks in the header for the Factories page (see figure 3.5).

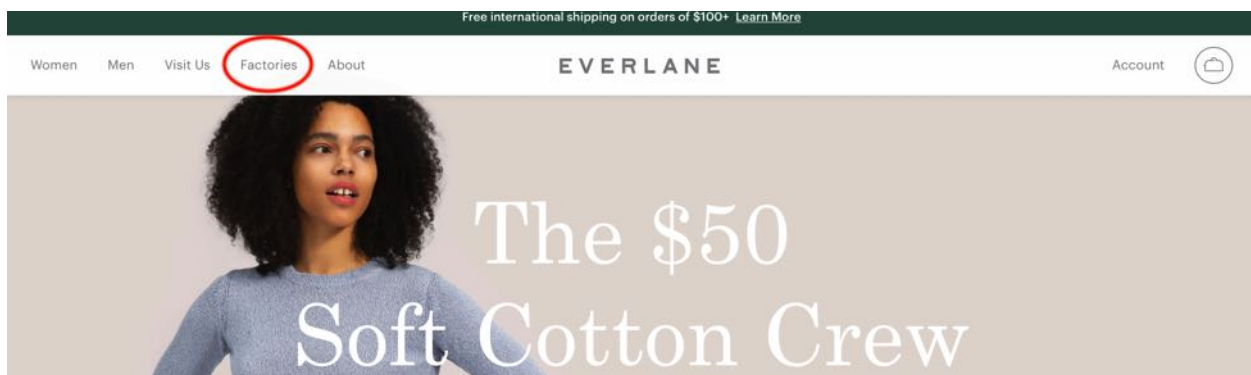


Figure 3.5 – Everlane’s Header Menu, Source: <https://www.everlane.com>

This enables users to have straightforward access to sustainability related contents without the need to scroll down the homepage up to the footer.

Readily available information contributes both to emphasize firm’s commitment and improve credibility in the eyes of customers and other stakeholders: a win-win in terms of communication.

Taking H&M corporate website as a reference in its US version, you might notice that this does not represent a common practice for fast fashion firms, even those committed to sustainability.

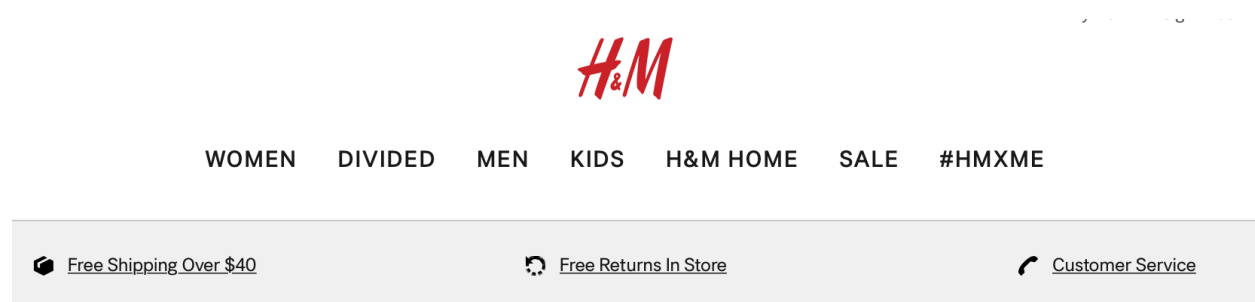


Figure 3.6 – hm.com’s Header Menu, Source: https://www2.hm.com/en_us/index.html

The header menu (see figure 3.6) only comprehends what are considered to be the most profitable contents from a customer acquisition standpoint – the ones related to

products and collections - while the link to the Sustainability section is in the footer as part of the Corporate Info, which makes it hardly visible (see figure 3.7).

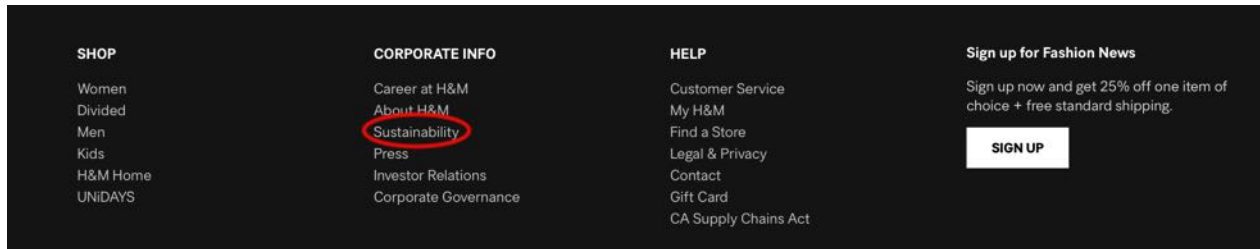


Figure 3.7 – hm.com’s Footer, Source: https://www2.hm.com/en_us/index.html

Once landed on the Factories section, the visitor is brought to an interactive map pinpointing each part of the whole Everlane’s supply chain. Just below, an index-like factories list is organised in a three-column grid layout. This configuration allows users to have a clear overview of all the content regarding supplying partners before accessing each detail page, whereby images – taken in situ by the staff - and basic data on each production site – location, number of employees, owner, and more - are provided, leveraging on storytelling (see figure 3.8).

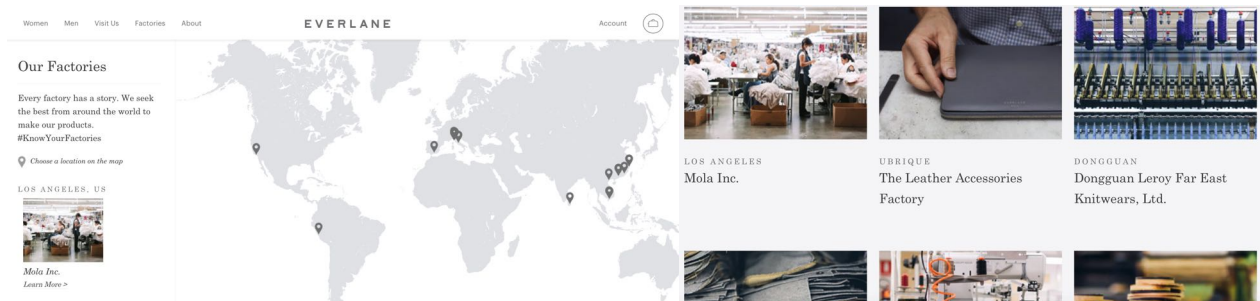


Figure 3.8 – Everlane.com’s Factory Section, Source: <https://www.everlane.com/factories>

Usability and Website Design

Everlane.com is clearly structured and easily navigable. Textual and multimedia contents are displayed in an aesthetically pleasing, orderly fashion, while the colour palette reflects the aesthetics of the brand: white is king.



OUR FACTORIES

Our ethical approach.

We spend months finding the best factories around the world—the same ones that produce your favorite designer labels. We visit them often and build strong personal relationships with the owners. Each factory is given a compliance audit to evaluate factors like fair wages, reasonable hours, and environment. Our goal? A score of 90 or above for every factory.

[Learn more](#)

Figure 3.9 – Everlane's Website Design, Source: <https://www.everlane.com/factories>

The overall text formatting is consistent and reader-friendly: headings, sub-headings, paragraphs and Learn More buttons are used in order to improve the flow of the text and avoid wall-texts. Moreover, the contrasting colour scheme between background and overlying contents helps bringing them out and makes them more enjoyable and easier to read, reducing potential eye strain.

With regard to the structure, both pages and menu items are limited and clutter-free. Despite the absence of a search feature, contents are still easy to find and explore, while a well-performing internal linking simplifies the shift from one section to another.

The Content

When browsing Everlane's website it is common to run into powerful slogans and taglines. These brief, meaningful sentences deliver brand's core value propositions to prospective customers while including them in the conversation.

Our Factories

Every factory has a story. We seek the best from around the world to make our products. #KnowYourFactories

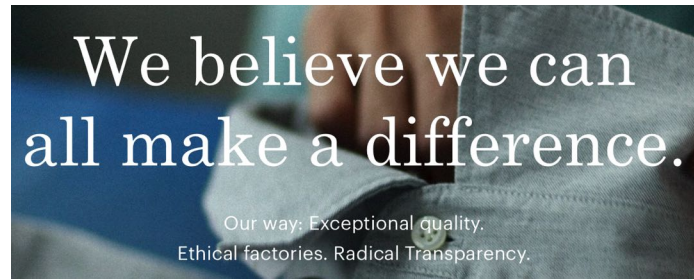


Figure 3.10 – Everlane.com’s Textual Content, Source: <https://www.everlane.com/factories>;

<https://www.everlane.com/about>

Call-to-actions are inspiring but not mandatory or intrusive, while the language is simple and straightforward, but still captivating. The “we” pronoun is intentionally repeated both to stress the willingness of the company to identify itself with its customers and to move away from the traditional top-down approach typical of fashion retailers. By means of verbs like “can” and “believe”, particularly suited to social issues and collective commitment, an inspirational and motivational dialogue is set up, calling for active cooperation. The tone of voice is inclusive, assertive and involved. Hashtags are properly used in order to foster cross-channel communication through website and social media, as will be further deepened later.

The overall textual content featured on Everlane.com, in particular that related to sustainability and social responsibility, illustrates the company’s full understanding of the value of storytelling. The chosen words are accurate, but warm and meaningful. Every information, detail or numerical example is provided within a narrative, evocative framework. The brand’s tagline “every factory has story” is very significant in this respect: in the factories section of the website, the story of each supply partner is told, in accordance to the principle of “radical transparency”.

Especially these days, a powerful content does not always come in the form of text. As the increasing success of social networks like Instagram demonstrates too, images and

videos are right now the most effective means to deliver messages without asking users for special attention: website visitors want to obtain the information they are in search of with no effort.

Everlane makes extensive use of multimedia content in its website: images and videos, but also illustrations, infographics and diagrams are leveraged for telling stories and providing information, especially those related to sustainability (see figure 3.11).



Figure 3.11 – Everlane.com's Multimedia Contents, Source: <https://www.everlane.com/factories/rain-boot>; <https://www.everlane.com/about>

It is important to notice that all the visual content featured on the website is original and custom: Everlane brand as a whole, together with its marketing message, is embedded into the photographs shared on its website and social communication channels. Seeking for a professional and recognisable visual imagery, the company demonstrates once again its attention towards detail: this contributes both to increase

credibility and perceived transparency in the eyes of the visitors, while enabling the brand to set up a personal connection with the latter.

3.5.1.2 Leveraging Social Media to build meaningful relationships: a focus on Everlane's approach to Instagram

Since the most effective way to migrate contents from the website in order to further distribute and promote them is through social media, the company's overall approach to these communication channels – with a particular focus on Instagram - will be briefly outlined.

As a retailer born and grown online, from the beginning Everlane has focused its communication strategy on social media platforms, in order to build and nurture a meaningful relationship with its community. The social environment is the most suitable for the company to convey its brand image and values to customers and prospects, especially given its commitment to sustainability and transparency. Rather than sales, it is all a matter of participation and engagement: through Instagram - and Facebook - in particular, the company is enabled to empower its customers with direct, personally delivered information while receiving instant and straightforward feedback on business decisions – product releases or design matters – and sustainability actions. Dealing with a social fan base – and a staff, as well - comprised between 20 and 30 years old (Spera, 2018), to keep up with its audience Everlane has always had to catch up with, and sometimes anticipate, digital communication trends: as reported by Spera (2014), the company was one of the earliest adopters of Facebook Advertising and for a short time leveraged on Facebook Messenger in order to improve its customer service.

Boasting approximately 665.000 followers - as compared to 300.000 on Facebook and 30.000 on Twitter - Instagram is the most popular - and profitable - social communication

channel for Everlane. As for the website, what at first glance stands out when looking at the profile is a consistent visual identity.

Contents on the feed (see figure 3.12) are perfectly aligned with the image of both the brand and its products. Neutral tones palette, white clean lighting, essential lines and clutter-free compositions remind users what are the core principles at the heart of the company: transparency and simplicity.

The Instagram platform is the most suitable way to leverage visual storytelling: Everlane tells stories and fosters values through perfectly designed shots, videos and illustrations conceived as part of a big, continuous, two-way-flow narration.

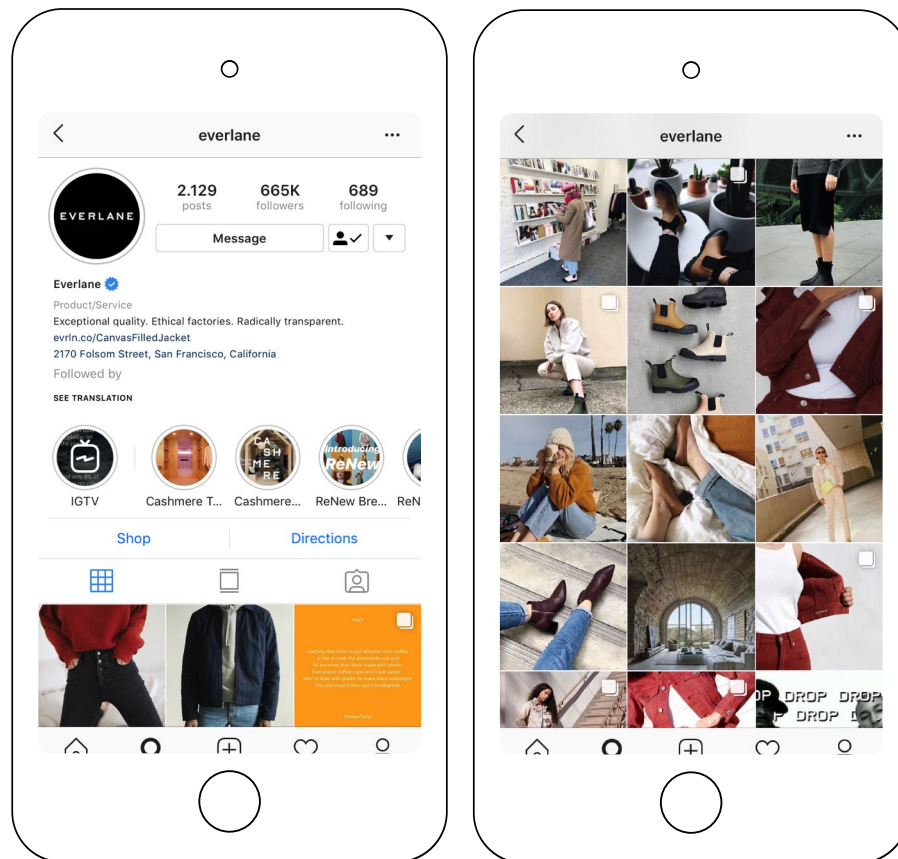


Figure 3.12 – Everlane’s Instagram Feed, Source: <https://www.instagram.com/everlane/>

The essential, basic bio section provides in a few words the very essence of the brand by quoting its three milestones: “Exceptional quality. Ethical factories. Radically Transparent” (Everlane, 2019), while the feed is not just about pushing the launch of new products or providing raw data on sustainability efforts and campaign. Clean, simple, still-life product imagery is alternated with:

- lifestyle shots portraying both customers and influencers wearing their Everlane clothing in authentic use situations;
- inspiring landscape, travel and modern architecture pictures;
- powerful taglines on colored backgrounds;
- short, catchy, relevant tips or facts featuring hints and information on ethical and environmental issues, generally posted to promote the launch of a new product line or campaign, as those in the example below (see figure 3.13)

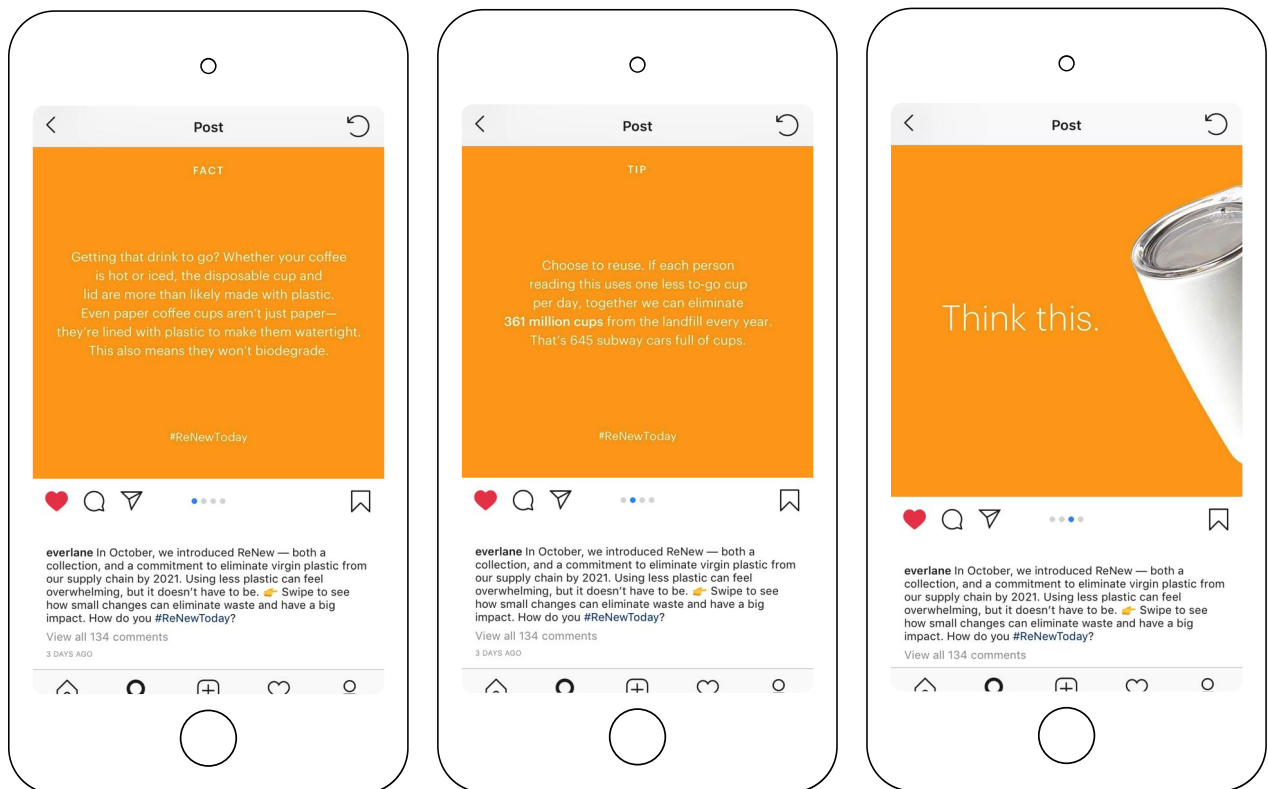


Figure 3.13 – Everlane’s Instagram Post, Source: <https://www.instagram.com/everlane/>

The informative and marketing content, as for the overall communication approach of the company, seems neither institutional nor detached. Even more compared to that featured on the website, the language used in the captions is sharp and chatty, inspirational, sometimes even provocative, but always inclusive. Extensive use of short sentences and evocative taglines is made both to report company's efforts and invite customers to take action themselves, while hashtags are not abused and always relevant.

Long before the first appearance of Instagram Stories and Instagram TV, Everlane was still leveraging similar platforms like Snapchat to provide short, straightforward, behind-the-scenes content to users. This kind of disappearing, instant, less filtered approach to communication enables the company to reinforce, 24 hours at a time, its transparency as perceived by customers, and therefore its brand. Accordingly, via Ig Stories a genuine, detailed and entertaining narration on sustainability related issues as well as everyday office life is shared: this enables followers to get more than a glimpse into both production and design processes, while having the chance to give Everlane the faces of its social media team.

On this respect, "Transparency Tuesday" can be taken as the perfect example of how to effectively convey and consolidate brand values – transparency, in fact - while providing informative content to customers, engaging them in a meaningful question-and-answer kind of conversation. Each week, a post is shared via Instagram Stories (see figure 3.14) inviting the community to ask any kind of question about the company, ranging from product development and production processes to employment opportunities and working atmosphere: members of the Everlane social media team – as well as employees from other departments - then provide funny and engaging responses. In doing this, Everlane achieved to open up its work to the public, fulfilling its promise for openness and thus enhancing its credibility.

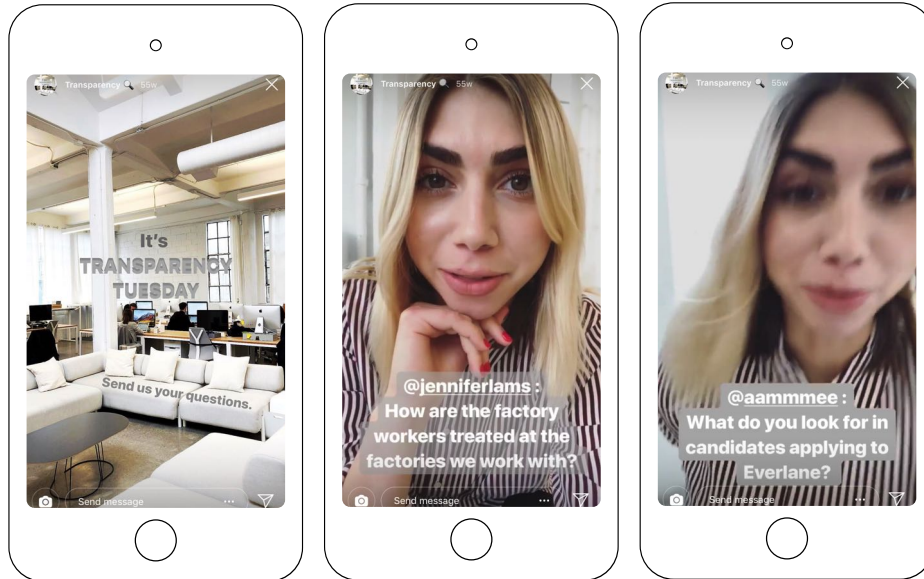


Figure 3.14 – Transparency Tuesday, Source: <https://www.instagram.com/everlane/>

From a product marketing standpoint, Stories are used as a sort of a constantly evolving look-book, by means of which new offerings and product lines are pre-released and promoted, as in the example below (see figure 3.15).

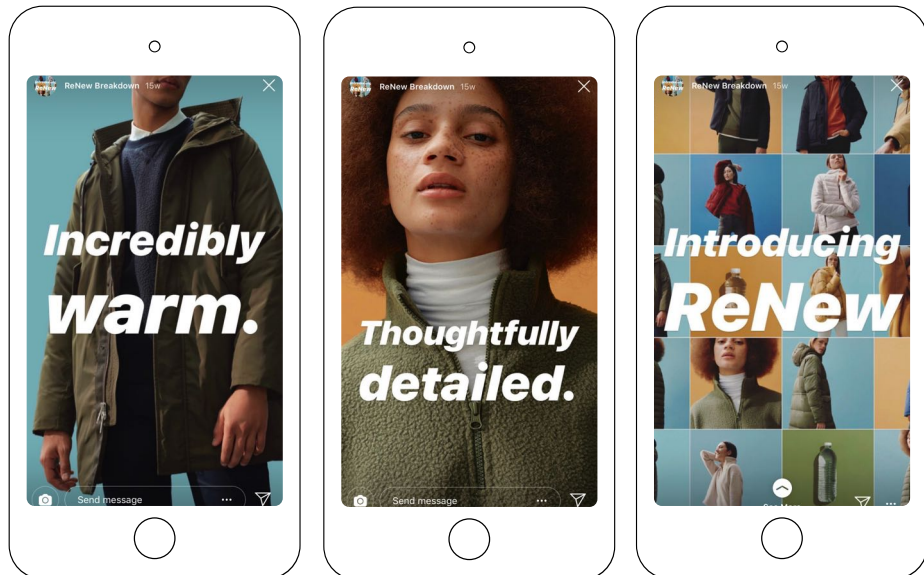


Figure 3.15 – ReNew's Release, Source: <https://www.instagram.com/everlane/>

3.5.1.3 Beyond traditional marketing: some examples of how Everlane differentiates itself leveraging on powerful campaigns

A different kind of seasonal sale: the Choose What You Pay model

Being item – rather than collection – based, Everlane approaches inventory decisions from a different perspective: waiting lists obtained through emails, real time data and customer feedbacks collected via social media are all leveraged to establish optimal quantities of stock. In cases of doubt, the company chooses to stock less, as quick restocks are feasible due to the close relationship with its supplying partners all over the world (Segran, 2018); nonetheless, sometimes demand prediction fails and overstock happens - and must be dealt with. Unlike traditional retailers, Everlane does not make use of aggressive discounts during season change in order to clean out storage lockers. In full accordance with its commitment to transparency and sustainability, the company has instead devised the Choose What You Pay model for overstocks.

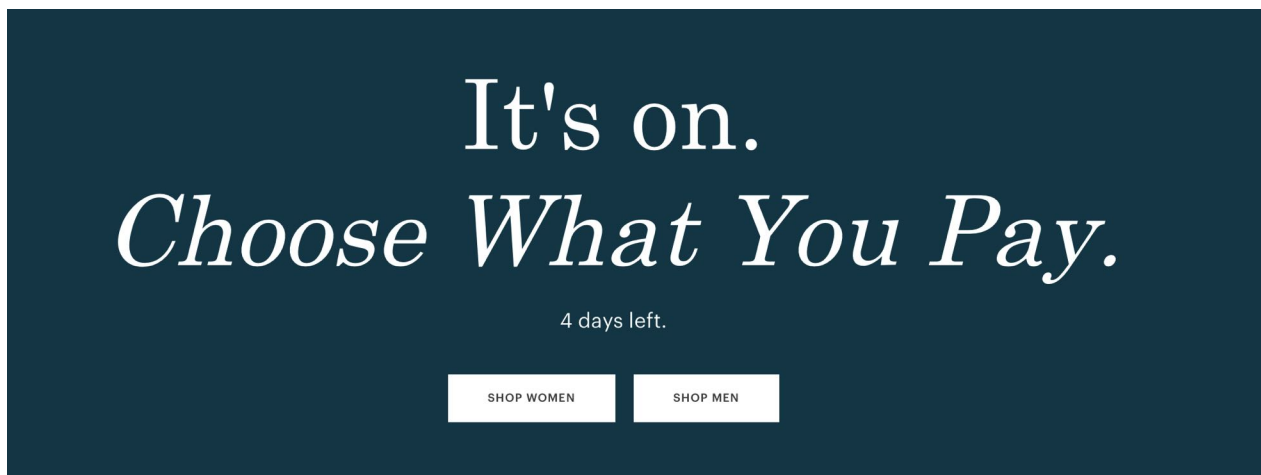


Figure 3.16 – Choose What You Pay, Source: <https://www.everlane.com>

During the two annual Choose What You Pay events, customers can literally decide the price they want to pay for a selection of items choosing from three presented price options.

A first, and lowest, only covering “the basic cost to develop, produce and fulfill a product” (see figure 3.17);

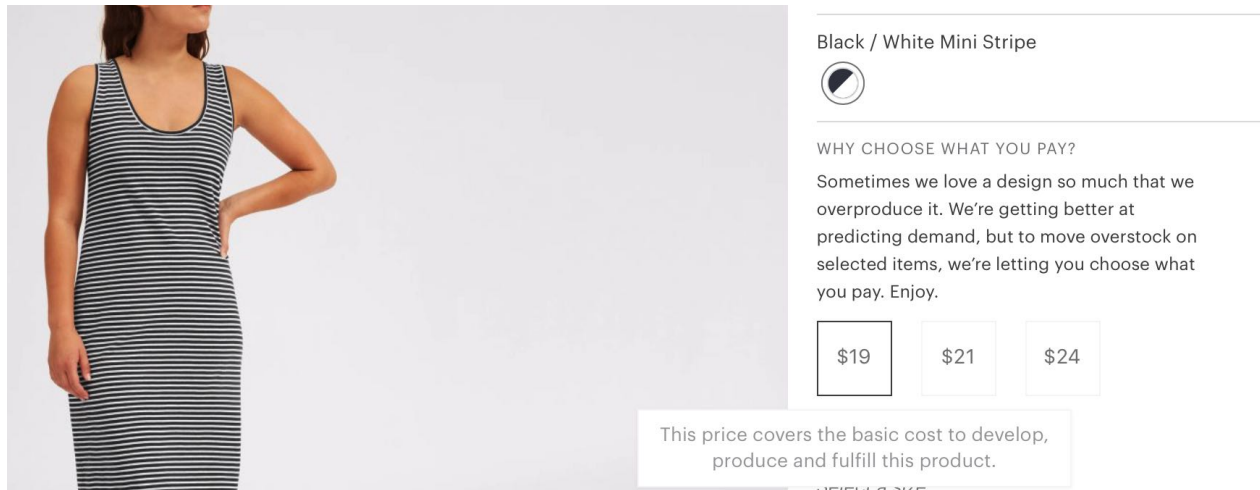


Figure 3.17 – Choose What You Pay (2), Source: <https://www.everlane.com>

a second, to tackle “the basic costs of development, production and fulfillment, with the additional \$2 going towards office overhead” (see figure 3.18);

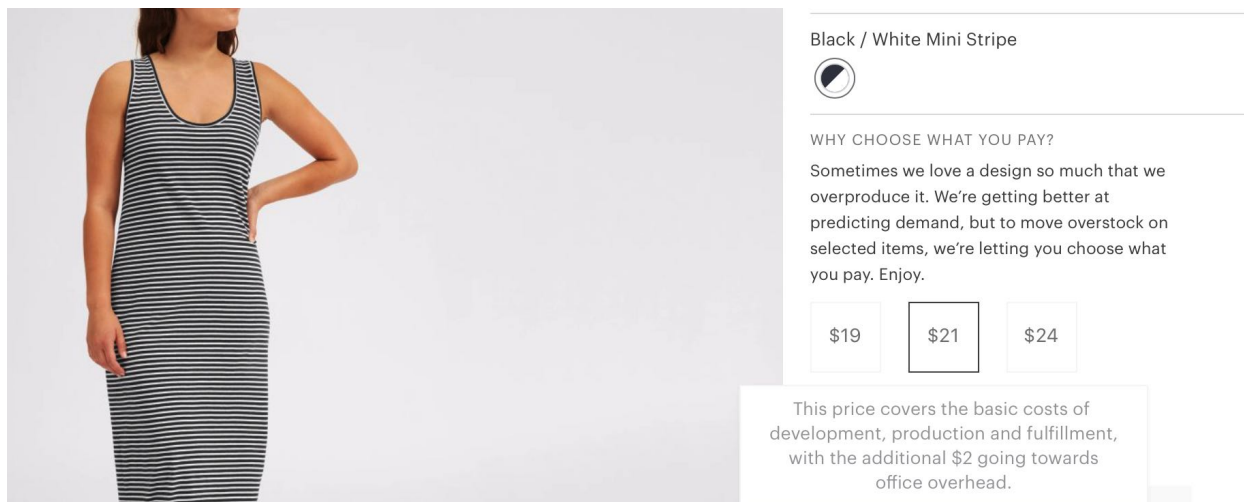


Figure 3.18 – Choose What You Pay (3), Source: <https://www.everlane.com>

a third, and highest, covering “the basic costs of development, production and fulfillment, with the additional \$5 going toward office overhead and future product development” (see figure 3.19).

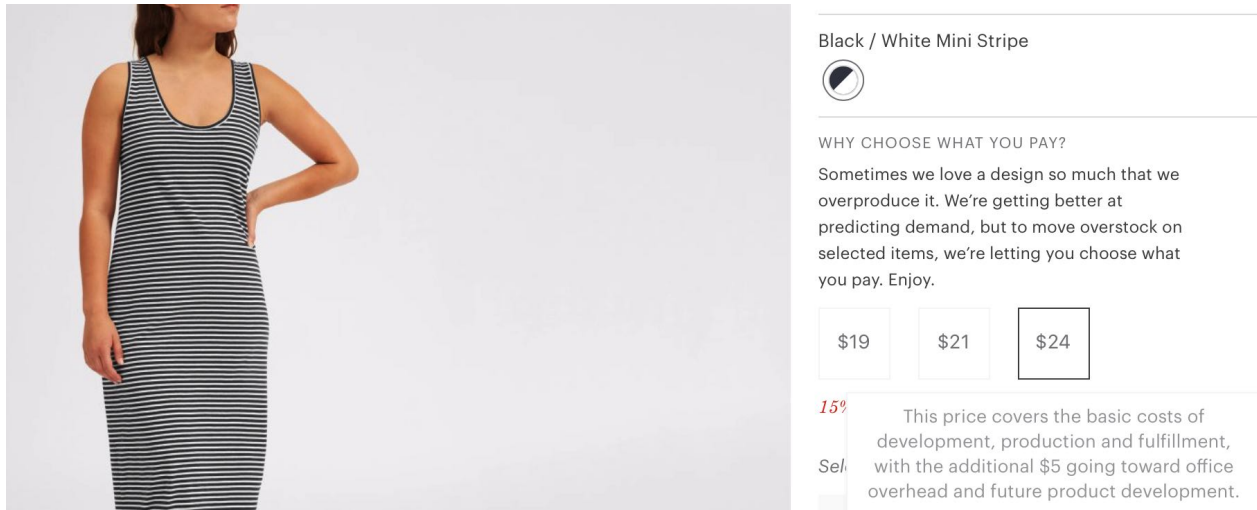


Figure 3.19 – Choose What You Pay (4), Source: <https://www.everlane.com>

This model represents the quintessence of both price transparency and customer engagement: being aware of what lies behind price, customers can make informed purchase decisions while feeling part of company’s sustainability efforts (see figure 3.20). According to Segran (2018), 12% of customers decide to pay more for supporting the brand and its future product development.

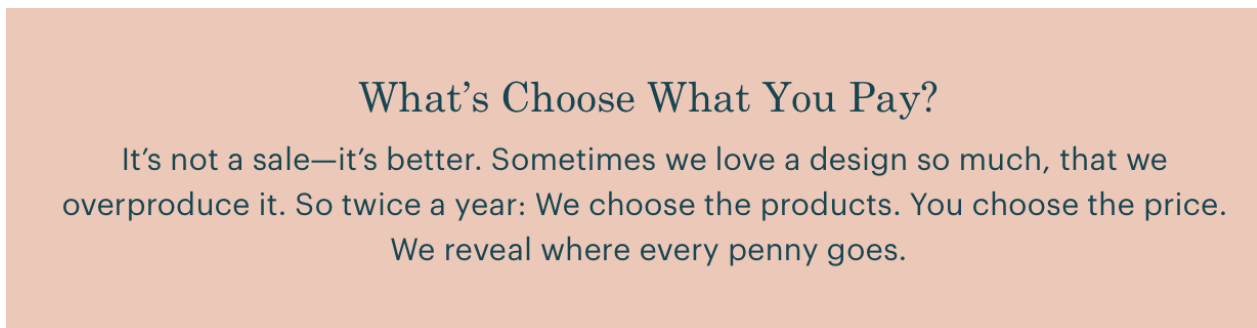


Figure 3.20 – Choose What You Pay (5), Source: <https://www.everlane.com>

Can environmental responsibility be fashionable? Introducing ReNew

According to Yotka (2018), there are more than eight billion tons of plastic on Earth right now, which means more than one per capita. Having to deal with - and find ways to dispose of - such a huge amount of non-biodegradable material, calls loudly for taking some action, incorporating the concept of sustainable development in both government policies and private level within businesses and organisations. At the end of last year, ReNew Collection was released - a line of parkas, puffers and sweatshirts made from recycled plastic - right after the announcement of Everlane's commitment to completely exclude virgin plastic from its production processes, offices, brick and mortar stores and overall supply chain by 2021.

The example below features the original scan of the recycled-paper leaflet coming inside the package, which perfectly testifies the achieved consistency between product, packaging and brand identity.



Figure 3.21 – ReNew's Flyer, Source: <https://www.everlane.com>

Here again, transparency and customer engagement are fulfilled promises: the planned initiatives are simply - but in detail - outlined, while customers are rewarded – with a friendly “High Five” - for their contribute to the effort of the company (see figure 3.21).



Figure 3.22 – ReNew’s Flyer (2), Source: <https://www.everlane.com>

The latter’s proposition is presented to be simple (see figure 3.22):

- Eliminate single use plastics – like food packaging - from offices and stores, which demonstrates personal involvement with the issue.
- Replace synthetic fabrics with renewed materials, by partnering with vendors in order to develop new trims and other components completely free of virgin plastic.
- Replace all virgin plastic packaging, seeking for recycled alternatives to plastic poly bags.

Beyond the commendable effort, from a marketing communication perspective this represents a tie-breaker. It bears witness to the capability of the company to always keep pace with the current, public discussion on social and environmental matters in order to provide its personal, effectively-communicated, fashionable solution in the form of a product.

The final objective of the company is certainly to sell its clothes, but, a higher-level, also to encourage customers to call into question both the origins and the overall impact of their apparel purchases (Yotka, 2018).

Moreover, the “residual effect” of such a high-standard mission results in a huge digital media buzz and word-of-mouth around the overall business itself, which benefits both the latter and the society at large, encouraging other firms to take similar actions.

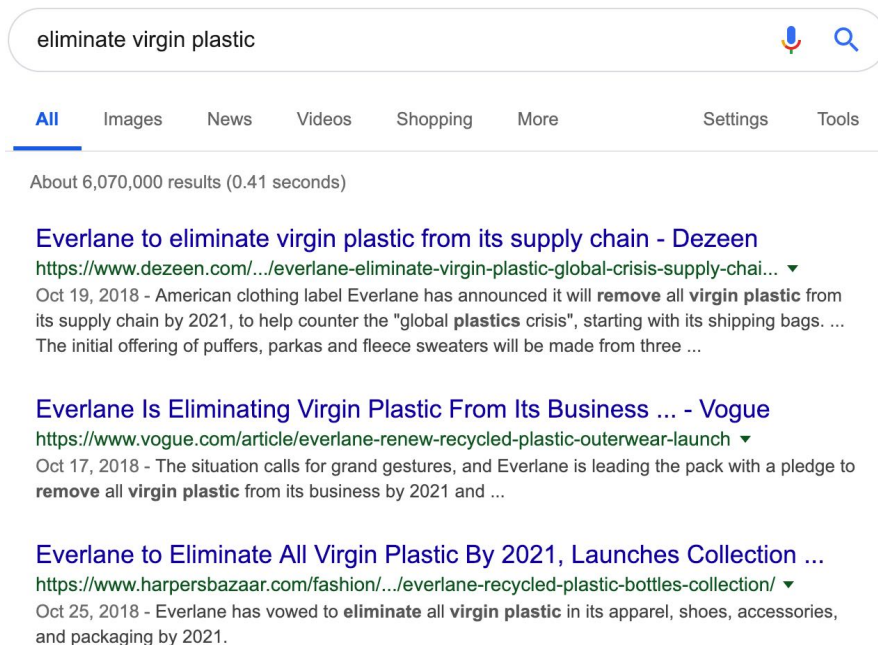


Figure 3.23 – “Eliminate Virgin Plastic” Google Search Term, Source: <https://www.google.com>

For instance, googling keywords like “eliminate virgin plastic” and “no virgin plastic”, even months after the collection release, press articles referring Everlane and its commitment still show up among the top three search results, which is a signal that search engines associate these kinds of subjects to the company (see figure 3.23).

The communication strategy devised for the ReNew Collection – implemented on both the website and social media - deserves particular attention as it places a great emphasis on the company’s “personal” commitment to the issue. On some level, the ReNew campaign shifts the focus away from the product, taking the form of an awareness raising campaign on the problem of plastic, appealing to everyone’s responsibility (see figure 3.24).



1,076,215 plastic bottles made since you landed on this page.

Figure 3.24 – ReNew Page, Source: <https://www.everlane.com/renew>

On the website, the ReNew page is very impactful both in terms of information and emotional investment: the production process turning plastic bottles into outerwear pieces is illustrated through pictures in all its passages (see figure 3.25), while a letter signed by the founder in person, Michael Preysman, is featured in the attempt to engage in a personal dialogue with customers without the intermediation of the Brand (see figure 3.26).

THE PROCESS

From discarded plastic bottles—
to beautiful, lasting products.

STEP 1: SORT & WASH



Plastic bottles come to our recycling facility in 926-pound compressed cubes called bales. The bottles are sorted by machine and by hand, then thoroughly washed to remove their labels.

STEP 2: SHRED & MELT



The grinding room is best described as “very loud.” Imagine a paper shredder, but cutting 926 pounds of plastic bottles into 1 cm flakes. Those flakes are then melted down into molten plastic.

STEP 3: FORM & CUT



In a process reminiscent of a pasta maker, the molten plastic is then pressed through perforated dies, forming long strands that pass through water baths to cool. They are then diced into small crystals then sent to the spinning facility.

STEP 4: SPIN & WEAVE



The crystals are melted down and extruded again into finer, more precise thread, which is then spun into yarn and woven (or knit) into sheets of polyester fleece, fabric, or insulation.

Figure 3.25 – ReNew Page (2), Source: <https://www.everlane.com/renew>

Read the letter from our founder.

^

The hard truth: Once plastic is made, it stays on the planet forever.

In just 60 years, we've created eight billion tons of it. Plastic is poisoning our oceans, clogging landfills, and destroying the environment. The worst part? Companies are making more than ever. And we just keep buying it.

There's only one solution: Stop creating virgin plastic—and instead, renew what's already here. We believe businesses have to lead the way, so we're starting today.

Introducing ReNew, a collection of outerwear made entirely from discarded plastic bottles. About three million of them.

ReNew also marks our commitment: to eliminate all virgin plastic from our supply chain by 2021.

That includes our products. Our warehouses. Even our offices and stores.

We know we're only a small piece of the global puzzle. But together, we can make a big impact.

So let's ditch the plastic where we can, and renew what's already here. It won't be easy. But things worth doing rarely are.




Figure 3.26 – ReNew Page (3), Source: <https://www.everlane.com/renew>

CONCLUSION

As the Everlane's case study attempts to prove, the social, ethical and environmental commitment of a company can be its main competitive advantage, and should therefore be incorporated within its marketing and communication strategy.

The focus on digital media, especially on those featuring a strong visual connotation as is the case for Instagram, is intended to highlight the effectiveness of these channels in delivering brand values and propositions: when properly disclosed and shared, social and environmental commitment can be leveraged as a marketing tool to increase sales and reinforce both brand values and reputation.

What Everlane puts in place is a pretty personal kind of communication. Via branded social media, its community is enabled to get a glimpse into the typical day at the office: while observing processes, users and customers can engage in a conversation with employees and participate into design and overall business decisions or be brought through the world into the factories producing the same clothes they wear.

Everlane has the ability to authentically speak to its stakeholders and does so through its brand. As evidenced by the ReNew campaign, the company has been capable to enter - and leverage for marketing purposes - the discussion regarding one of the most pressing issues in these times, namely plastic waste. As part of its personal commitment to eliminate virgin plastic across its whole supply chain by 2021, Everlane has released a collection made entirely from discarded bottles; by acting as a spokesperson for the compelling necessity to limit the consumption of non-biodegradable materials in both production processes and everyday life, the company has gone even beyond its role of fashion retailer.

Entailing the unusual combination of product promotion and social and environmental commitment, such a model represents the desirable future scenario against a background of increasingly aware customers, eager to have a voice in business choices concerning sustainable development.

Other future horizons could envision the emergence of new digital communication tools for reciprocal exchange and direct conversation between customers and companies, with an increased involvement of those who should be considered the true representatives of brand values, i.e. employees: from factory workers across the supply chain to office clerks and managers. Everlane already acts in this regard, as its founder, Michael Preysman, often speaks in first person about sustainability issues and company's responsibility.

In any case, an effective sustainability communication cannot be separated from the creation of high-quality content. Everlane deserves great attention to content creation, always seeking aesthetic consistency: colours, lines, typefaces, overall compositions - everything is part of a high-level design. Also, textual contents are very accurate: storytelling is fluent but significant, information is verified and often accompanied by numerical data, and tone of voice is inspirational and never paternalistic, even when customers are called to direct action.

The example of Everlane shows that, within an industry largely dominated by giants, even for a relatively small reality it is possible to take up space and gain a competitive advantage by acting transparently. In order to do this, effective communication, especially in the online environment, is essential: an ever-larger share of consumers currently wants to be aware of the real cost of its purchases, and, above all, is eager to be called into question.

Everlane is able to fulfill this requirement and, most importantly, inspires other companies to do the same. Its model represents one of the rosier horizons that can be imagined: not geared to the least worst option, but rather to the active creation of values concerning both the brand and the society as a whole.

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