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Final Thesis

Managing the Paradox: Circular Economy Practices and Sustainability Communication in Fashion

A Comparative Case Study of Prada Group

and Ermenegildo Zegna Group (2022-2025)

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Abstract

This thesis examines how circular economy practices are integrated into luxury fashion brand identity and sustainability communication. Focusing on Prada Group and Ermenegildo Zegna Group between 2022 and 2025, it investigates how two Italian luxury houses translate circular innovation into strategic narratives during a period of increasing regulatory pressure, including the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive, the Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation, and the emerging Digital Product Passport framework.

The study adopts a qualitative comparative case study design, combining thematic analysis of eight sustainability reports with multimodal semiotic analysis of campaign materials, corporate websites, and visual communication. The analysis is structured around three themes: circular economy practices, transparency and data-driven accountability, and brand narrative and luxury identity.

The findings show that circular economy practices influence luxury brand identity in different ways depending on how deeply they are embedded in the brand's core narrative. Prada's strategy combines the Re-Nylon programme, a technical-loop approach based on material substitution, with institutional amplification through partnerships with actors such as National Geographic and UNESCO-IOC. Zegna's approach is rooted in biological-loop stewardship, territorial heritage, and long-term supply chain relationships, making sustainability appear constitutive of the brand rather than supplementary to it.

The thesis argues that both brands operate within a Luxury Circularity Paradox: the premium raw materials that create luxury value are also the main source of environmental impact, especially in upstream supply-chain emissions. Neither brand resolves this tension fully. Instead, both manage it through structured credibility management, combining verified operational progress with carefully constructed narrative strategies. The study contributes to luxury sustainability research by showing that, as sustainability disclosure becomes increasingly standardised, narrative differentiation becomes a key source of competitive distinction.

Keywords: circular economy; luxury fashion; sustainability communication; brand identity; Prada; Zegna; Digital Product Passport; legitimacy.

Chapter 1: Introduction — Sustainability, Circularity, and the Luxury Dilemma

1.1 Background and Motivation

The fashion industry is in the middle of a difficult transition (Buchel et al., 2022). Environmental concerns have intensified, EU regulations are becoming stricter, and expectations around corporate transparency have risen sharply. Many brands have begun adopting circular economy practices such as reuse, repair, recycling, material innovation which not only transform the production process of garments but also influence how brands explain their purpose and position themselves in the market (Gwa et al., 2025; Daukantienė, 2023).

These pressures land with force in luxury fashion, where sustainability is at once a strategic opportunity and a structural problem. The circular economy has emerged as a viable alternative to the linear take-make-dispose model that has long defined mass production (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2013). Yet luxury cannot align with circular logic without friction. The premium raw materials that constitute luxury value — the very thing that justifies the premium price (Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau, 2017) — are also the primary contributors to each brand's environmental footprint, as the Scope 3 analysis in Chapter 4 demonstrates. This tension, which the thesis develops as the Luxury Circularity Paradox drawing on Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau (2017) and Akrout and Guercini (2022), is the central analytical problem the study sets out to examine.

The regulatory ground is shifting at the same time. The European Union's Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation and the forthcoming Digital Product Passport are standardising sustainability disclosure at the level of the individual product, narrowing the space for vague or aspirational claims (European Union, 2024; Carvalho et al., 2025). As disclosure data becomes more uniform, the question of how sustainability is communicated and circular practices are integrated into brand identity becomes more consequential. This development constitutes the study's second motivation.

1.2 Research Aims and Questions

This thesis examines the integration of circular economy practices into brand identity and sustainability communication within the luxury fashion sector. It focuses on two leading Italian luxury houses, Prada Group and Ermenegildo Zegna Group, during the period from 2022 to 2025, a period characterized by intensified regulatory measures and increased public scrutiny of corporate sustainability claims.

Two research questions guide the study:

RQ1: How do circular and sustainability-driven practices influence brand identity and brand value in the fashion industry?

RQ2: How do fashion brands translate circular innovation into branding narratives and strategic positioning?

These research questions address a gap in the literature. Although circular economy practices and sustainability communication have been studied extensively, they are frequently examined as separate domains (Dissanayake and Weerasinghe, 2022; Ki et al., 2020). What remains limited is integrated analysis connecting three domains that existing research examines in isolation: circular economy practice, luxury brand identity, and the regulatory standardisation reshaping how sustainability claims are made and evaluated. This thesis addresses that gap through a qualitative comparative case study combining thematic analysis of sustainability reports with multimodal semiotic analysis of visual campaign materials.

The study offers three contributions. Theoretically, it integrates three distinct literatures that are typically examined in isolation and investigates their interaction at the level of the individual brand. Methodologically, it combines thematic analysis of written disclosure alongside multimodal semiotic analysis of visual communication, enabling a comparison between each brand's verbal claims about sustainability and its visual representation. Practically, the findings show how brand differentiation is likely to work once regulatory standardisation narrows the space for selective disclosure — a shift already underway through the Digital Product Passport and the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive. In doing so, the thesis introduces the concept of structured credibility management — the combination of independently verified operational progress with deliberate narrative amplification — to describe how both brands navigate structural limits they cannot fully overcome.

1.3 Case Selection and Rationale

The selection of Prada Group and Ermenegildo Zegna Group was guided by three primary criteria.

The first criterion is a shared context. Both companies are long-established Italian luxury houses operating in the same institutional environment. Each report, according to Global Reporting Initiative Standards, has submitted targets to the Science Based Targets initiative, and is subject to the same EU regulatory regime. This common ground allows differences in sustainability strategy to be interpreted as intentional decisions rather than as outcomes of differing national or industrial conditions. It should be noted that both brands are large, well-resourced luxury houses with established sustainability infrastructure. The findings may therefore not transfer directly to smaller luxury brands or those without comparable vertical integration.

The second criterion is contrast. Prada's strategy — particularly its Re-Nylon programme, which converts ocean plastics and fishing nets into regenerated nylon fibre — emphasises technological innovation and the recycling of synthetic materials. Zegna's approach is anchored in the Oasi Zegna nature reserve, the Filiera (a vertically integrated supply chain platform spanning eight Italian manufacturing companies), the stewardship of natural materials, and long-term supplier relationships.

The third is documented commitment. Both brands have made substantial, publicly reported, and independently verified sustainability commitments across the study period. It makes them analytically rich cases for examining how circular practice becomes brand identity. The 2022–2025 window was chosen to analyse the unprecedented legislative tightening in European sustainability governance, including the implementation of the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive and the introduction of the Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation.

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on circular economy applications, traceability, and regulation in fashion, sustainability, and luxury branding. Chapter 3 presents a methodology that combines Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) thematic analysis with multimodal semiotic analysis using Rose's (2016) and Barthes' (1972) approaches, along with a qualitative comparative case study design, data collection, and analytical methods. Chapter 4 identifies brand profiles and presents findings on keyword frequency, visual communication, circular economy applications, transparency, and accountability. Throughout, the focus is on each brand's public-facing communication rather than on operational sustainability performance in itself — a scope that is deliberate and discussed fully in Chapter 3. Finally, the findings gathered in Chapter 5 are discussed in relation to the research questions and theoretical framework, and the study's conclusions, limitations, and directions for future research are presented.

Chapter 2: From Circular Economy to Luxury Legitimacy — A Theoretical Framework

This chapter establishes the conceptual and the theoretical ground for the analysis that follows. Section 2.1 defines sustainability and the circular economy and situates both within the fashion industry. Section 2.2 defines luxury and luxury brand identity, the value logic against which circular commitments must later be reconciled. Section 2.3 turns to sustainability as a symbolic resource in luxury branding, where authenticity and greenwashing risk become central. Section 2.4 examines how traceability and regulation are reshaping the conditions under which sustainability claims are made and judged. Section 2.5 sets out the theoretical framework, and Section 2.6 identifies the gap this study addresses.

2.1 Circular Economy and Sustainability in the Fashion Industry

This section establishes the conceptual foundations of the study. It first defines sustainability (2.1.1) and the circular economy (2.1.2) as they have developed in general terms, then examines how both are applied within the fashion industry specifically (2.1.3).

2.1.1 Defining Sustainability

Sustainability is a harder word to pin down than it first appears. It carries hundreds of competing definitions, and even its root is layered: the term descends from the Latin sustinere — to hold up, to maintain, to endure (Shaker, 2015). In its broadest sense, sustainability describes the capacity of a system to keep going indefinitely, a state of equilibrium between human activity and the ecological systems that support it.

The modern concept took shape gradually, and against a backdrop of growing alarm. In 1972, the Club of Rome's report The Limits to Growth used a computer simulation to model what would happen if exponential economic and population growth continued against a finite supply of resources; its conclusion — that the planet would hit hard ecological ceilings within a few generations — pushed resource scarcity onto the international agenda for the first time (Meadows et al., 1972). The vocabulary followed the alarm. The International Union for Conservation of Nature introduced the term sustainable development in its 1980 World Conservation Strategy, and the United Nations World Charter for Nature set out five conservation principles two years later (IUCN, 1980).

The idea reached the mainstream with the 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, chaired by the Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland. Our Common Future, as the report was titled, gave sustainable development the definition that is still quoted more than any other: development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987). The phrasing was deliberately open — broad enough to hold together countries with very different economic priorities — but it fixed two ideas at the centre of the debate that have stayed there ever since: that the present cannot consume in ways that foreclose the future, and that environmental limits belong inside economic decisions rather than outside them (Purvis et al., 2019). For luxury fashion, this framing has an immediate implication: the sector's dependence on finite natural resources — rare fibres, animal skins, water-intensive dyeing — places it squarely within the scope of intergenerational environmental obligation.

What Brundtland left unresolved was structure. The definition set a direction without saying how sustainability should be measured or organised, and the following decade filled that gap. The most durable contribution came from Elkington's triple bottom line, which arranged sustainability around three equally weighted dimensions — environmental, economic, and social — and insisted that an organisation could only call itself sustainable if it performed across all three at once (Elkington, 2013; Purvis et al., 2019). For the fashion industry this framing has a direct consequence: sustainability cannot be reduced to greener materials or lower emissions alone. Labour conditions across global supply chains, economic viability for the people who make the clothes, and environmental stewardship are co-equal obligations rather than competing ones (Daukantienė, 2023). Both Prada and Zegna organise their sustainability reporting around exactly this three-part logic, structuring commitments under environmental, social, and governance pillars.

From the 1990s onward, these principles were progressively converted into governance. The 1992 Rio Earth Summit produced the Rio Declaration's twenty-seven principles and Agenda 21, a practical action plan that linked social and economic development to environmental protection (WCED, 1987; Purvis et al., 2019). Later summits in 2002 and 2012 reaffirmed the three-pillar model, and in 2015 two landmark agreements were adopted within months of each other: the Paris Agreement, signed by 195 countries and committing them to hold global warming well below 2°C, and the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015).

The 2030 Agenda matters most here. At its core sit seventeen Sustainable Development Goals and 169 associated targets, several of which speak directly to fashion and textiles: SDG 12 on responsible consumption and production addresses overproduction and waste; SDG 13 on climate action requires measurable emissions cuts; SDG 6 on clean water bears on the water intensity of dyeing and finishing; and SDG 8 on decent work sets conditions for labour standards in global supply chains (United Nations, 2015; Daukantienė, 2023). Their importance is less in the list itself than in what it enabled: by supplying a shared reference system, the SDGs made it possible to measure corporate sustainability claims against external benchmarks rather than each brand's own account of itself, which made comparison and scrutiny far more workable than under voluntary frameworks alone (Ki et al., 2020). For luxury brands, the SDGs provided the first shared external reference system against which their sustainability claims could be publicly measured — shifting the basis of credibility from self-reported narrative to independently benchmarked performance.

Taken together, this is the story of an idea moving from a broad political ideal to an institutionalised system of expectations, measurement, and, increasingly, legal obligation. Sustainability today is less a philosophical commitment than an operational domain with reporting standards, independently verified targets, and mandatory disclosure rules in major markets (Iazzi et al., 2025). For an industry the literature consistently ranks among the most polluting in the world — the textile sector alone accounted for roughly 1.2 billion tonnes of CO_2-equivalent emissions in 2015, while under one percent of used clothing is recycled into new garments — this shift raises the stakes considerably (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). Brands are no longer judged only against their own past; they are judged against a global standard that keeps tightening, and against instruments examined in Section 2.4 that increasingly demand verified data rather than a good story. For luxury fashion specifically, this shift is structurally significant: an industry built on heritage, craft, and controlled disclosure now operates within a framework designed for measurable, comparable and mandatory accountability.

2.1.2 Defining the Circular Economy

If sustainability sets the goal, the circular economy is one of the main routes proposed for reaching it. And like sustainability, it is older than it looks. Its intellectual roots run through industrial ecology and systems thinking, and through Walter Stahel's work in the 1970s on extending product life and selling performance rather than goods (McDonough and Braungart, 2002). These strands came together most influentially in McDonough and Braungart's Cradle to Cradle, which made a radical proposal: design industrial systems so that waste simply does not exist, with every output from one process becoming a useful input — a nutrient — for another (McDonough and Braungart, 2002).

For most of industrial history, production had run the other way. The linear model follows a take–make–use–dispose logic: raw materials are extracted, turned into products, used briefly, and thrown away (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2013). It treats resources as effectively limitless and waste as an unavoidable by-product. It is an assumption that becomes untenable once the environmental costs are counted. Nearly eighty percent of the materials that enter this system are discarded after a single use (Ki et al., 2020). The circular economy rejects that endpoint. Instead of accepting disposal as the natural conclusion of a product's life, it reorganises production so that materials hold their value and stay in use for as long as possible, through reuse, repair, remanufacturing, and recovery (Dissanayake and Weerasinghe, 2022).

The framework that brought this thinking into corporate and policy mainstream was the Ellen MacArthur Foundation's 2013 report Towards the Circular Economy, which defined the circular economy as an industrial system that is restorative or regenerative by intention and design, one that replaces the end-of-life concept with restoration (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2013). What made the definition land was less its originality than its framing: the Foundation presented circularity as a business opportunity as much as an environmental necessity, and that reframing drew in companies who had previously left the conversation to policymakers and academics (Ki et al., 2020). The ambition remains far from realised: the global economy was only 6.9% circular in 2025 — down from 9.1% in 2018 — a figure that captures the distance between commitment and practice (Circle Economy and Deloitte, 2025).

Underneath the headline definition sits a precise operational grammar built upon the triad of slowing, narrowing, and closing resource loops (Dissanayake and Weerasinghe, 2022). The first vector, slowing loops means extending the life of products and materials through durable design, repair, and reuse. In tandem, the concept of narrowing loops means using fewer resources per product in the first place. Closing loops means recovering materials at the end of use and feeding them back into production rather than sending them to landfill (Dissanayake and Weerasinghe, 2022; Daukantienė, 2023). The Foundation organises these moves within its well-known butterfly diagram, which separates two distinct kinds of material flow. The technical cycle covers synthetic and inorganic materials that cannot safely return to nature and so must be kept circulating through industrial recovery; the biological cycle covers natural materials that can re-enter ecological systems through composting or regenerative practices (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2013). The logic governing each differs sharply — recovery rates and industrial efficiency on one side, ecosystem health and regenerative stewardship on the other (McDonough and Braungart, 2002).

One principle in the framework that matters for this study is hierarchy. Not all circular strategies are equal. Interventions that keep a material in its original form — maintenance, reuse, repair, remanufacturing — are preferred over those that break it down and rebuild it, because they preserve more of the value and energy already locked into the product (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2013; Ki et al., 2020). Although recycling is the most visible circular strategy commercial practice and the most frequently advocated in corporate marketing, it resides on the outer edge of this hierarchy rather than its centre. (Daukantienė, 2023). As the literature shows, the structural complexity of blended fibers often reduces their recycling to an energy-intensive last resort (Daukantienė, 2023). This situation is shifting academic attention toward higher-leverage models such as design-for-disassembly and upcycling (Colombi and D'Itria, 2023; Daukantienė, 2023). This difference is not merely a theoretical detail. When a brand highlights material recycling as proof of its circular commitment, this framework forces us to look closer. The critical question shifts from whether recycling occurs to a much deeper concern: at what level of the waste hierarchy is the brand operating? That question runs directly into the analysis of Prada's Re-Nylon programme in Chapter 4, while Section 2.1.3 turns to how these principles have played out and met resistance across the wider fashion industry.

2.1.3 Sustainability and Circular Economy in the Fashion Industry

Having defined sustainability and the circular economy in general terms, this section turns to how both concepts apply to the fashion industry. Fashion is inherently a sector where the divide between sustainable principles and industrial practice remains exceptionally wide. This gap is driven by several structural features: chronic overproduction, compressed product lifecycles, the technical difficulty of recycling blended fibres, globally fragmented labour conditions, and weak end-of-life infrastructure (Dissanayake and Weerasinghe, 2022; Colucci and Vecchi, 2024).

The entire fashion system relies on highly resource-intensive production that triggers severe environmental impacts across global value chains. In fact, empirical research flags the sector as one of the most environmentally damaging industries in the world, driving a massive share of global water consumption (Gwa et al., 2025; Daukantienė, 2023). Fast-fashion dynamics directly intensify these impacts, compressing production cycles and driving material consumption to levels that overwhelm natural ecosystems (Dissanayake and Weerasinghe, 2022). Fashion's sustainability challenges stem directly from deep structural flaws within dominant manufacturing and consumer habits, rather than isolated ecological mishapes.

At the centre of these challenges lies the linear take-make-disposal model, built on the continuous extraction of virgin resources and large-scale waste generation. This model is increasingly incompatible with long-term industrial viability, particularly given the material and energy intensity of textile manufacturing (Colucci and Vecchi, 2024). The problem is most acute in segments characterised by short product lifecycles and high material losses, where recycling alone cannot offset the environmental pressures created by overproduction (Gwa et al., 2025).

The circular economy has emerged as the principal framework for reorganising industrial production systems to preserve material value and reduce waste. Rather than treating waste as an unavoidable outcome, it promotes closed-loop systems in which materials remain in use for longer periods through reuse, repair, and recovery strategies (Dissanayake and Weerasinghe, 2022), shifting attention away from production volume toward material longevity and reducing dependence on virgin resource extraction (Colucci and Vecchi, 2024). In practice, circular approaches in fashion emphasise a hierarchy that prioritises waste prevention over end-of-life treatment: reducing resource use during production, extending product lifecycles through repair and reuse, and recovering materials before disposal becomes necessary (Colombi and D'Itria, 2023). Compared with recycling, these inner-loop strategies are generally more effective at preserving the economic and functional value embedded in garments — but they demand significant changes in design, sourcing, and production that are difficult to achieve within existing industrial structures.

The adoption of circular principles depends heavily on decisions taken at the design and production stages. Research highlights the importance of design-for-disassembly, zero-waste pattern construction, and mono-material compositions in enabling reuse and recycling (Daukantienė, 2023; Colucci and Vecchi, 2024). Such approaches improve environmental performance across a garment's lifecycle by allowing more efficient material recovery, while parallel improvements in production — reduced chemical use, more efficient finishing — lower the overall footprint of manufacturing (Daukantienė, 2023).

Despite these opportunities, large-scale implementation remains constrained by technological and organisational barriers. Recycling blended and synthetic fibres continues to pose significant technical challenges, since existing sorting and recovery technologies struggle to process complex material compositions efficiently (Daukantienė, 2023). Fragmented global supply chains and the absence of standardised recycling infrastructures further limit the scalability of circular solutions across markets (Colucci and Vecchi, 2024). From an organisational perspective, firms frequently face tensions between sustainability objectives and established efficiency-oriented production models, which slow the integration of circular practices into core operations (Colombi and D'Itria, 2023).

Overall, the literature suggests that while the circular economy offers a coherent framework for addressing fashion's sustainability challenges, its effective implementation requires more than incremental technological improvement. Meaningful progress depends on coordinated change across design, production, and supply-chain structures, and on firms' capacity to overcome the systemic constraints that limit material recovery and reuse (Gwa et al., 2025; Colucci and Vecchi, 2024). These structural conditions provide the backdrop against which the luxury segment — examined next — must reconcile its distinctive value logic with circular demands.

2.2 Defining Luxury and Luxury Brand Identity

Before sustainability and circularity can be examined inside luxury fashion, the category itself needs defining because what makes a brand luxury is exactly what its sustainability commitments later must be reconciled with. Luxury is not simply expensive fashion. It rests on a distinct logic of value that runs in a different direction from the mass market, and that difference is what makes the circular economy such an awkward fit.

At its simplest, luxury is built on exclusivity. The equity of a luxury house comes from eminent designers giving each collection a recognisable signature, from materials of the highest quality, and from production carried out with exceptional care — often bespoke, frequently handmade (Bieńkowska, 2023). The defining attribute, the one that overrides everything else, is the sense that owning the object sets the owner apart (Dana, 2008, cited in Bieńkowska, 2023). Where mass-market brands derive value from scale, and accessibility, luxury derives it from scarcity and restraint. Value in luxury comes from how few people can have the thing, not how many.

That value is also bound up with time in ways that ordinary fashion cannot replicate. A luxury brand's worth draws on heritage, on founders' histories, on a sense of continuity — what one analysis calls the DNA of the brand, its roots (Bieńkowska, 2023). This temporal depth does real work: luxury products are understood to hold both their material and aesthetic value over long periods, which is why they retain their worth on the vintage and resale markets in a way fast fashion never does (Bieńkowska, 2023). Heritage, in this sense, is not decorative. It is structural to how luxury value is produced and defended.

Brand identity is what holds exclusivity and heritage together. A brand is more than a name and a logo; it is a coded promise to the consumer, encompassing benefits that are emotional and symbolic as much as functional (Bieńkowska, 2023). Consumers identify with a luxury brand when its meanings align with their own sense of self: their social standing, their values, their way of expressing who they are. The strength of that identification is what brand equity measures. In the luxury context, a coherent and stable brand identity not as a marketing nicety but as a precondition for competing at all, particularly in Western markets where prestige must now be reconciled with rising expectations around responsibility (Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau, 2017; Kaur et al., 2024).

Authenticity is where it becomes decisive. In luxury, authenticity is anchored in heritage, craftsmanship, and continuity — and these same associations are what make sustainability claims read as credible rather than opportunistic (Bernardi et al., 2022). A sustainability initiative that grows from an established identity is far more convincing than one that arrives as a reactive add-on (Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau, 2017). Heritage functions as a kind of stabiliser: it lets a new commitment settle inside the existing story rather than float beside it as a slogan. This dynamic sits at the centre of the present study: it is precisely why Zegna’s century-old environmental acts can be folded so naturally into its sustainability identity, while Prada must build credibility through other means.

But the very logic that makes luxury valuable also makes circularity difficult. The conditions that create luxury value — scarcity, premium raw materials, the constant encouragement of desire for the new — pull against the circular economy's core demands of reduced throughput and material longevity (Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau, 2017; Akrout and Guercini, 2022). The friction shows up in concrete behaviour. Luxury houses have historically destroyed unsold stock rather than discount it, on the reasoning that a luxury good cannot be allowed to become a second-hand or bargain item. Perhaps the most notorious case — rather than a universal practice — was Burberry’s incineration of £28.6 million of finished goods, reported in 2017–2018, which drew a public backlash under the #burnberry campaign before the company reversed course. Multiple wear of the same garment and reduced purchase frequency all sit uneasily with a model that depends on continuous desire for the new (Bieńkowska, 2023).

Yet luxury also holds advantages that the mass market does not. Because luxury is premised on quality, durability, and uniqueness rather than disposability, it is in some respects better positioned for circularity than fast fashion (Bieńkowska, 2023; Akrout and Guercini, 2022). High-quality goods last, retain value, and lend themselves to repair and resale; the same appetite for distinction that drives luxury consumption can be redirected toward rare, innovative, or low-impact materials, since exclusivity is already part of the brand promise (Bieńkowska, 2023). Luxury’s relationship with the circular economy is therefore genuinely double-edged — structurally resistant in some respects, unusually well-suited in others. It is this paradox, rather than a simple opposition, that the thesis develops as the Luxury Circularity Paradox, examined through the contrasting strategies of Prada and Zegna in Chapters 4 and 5.

2.3 Sustainability, Authenticity and Branding in Fashion and Luxury

Sustainability has evolved from a predominantly operational concern into a meaningful symbolic resource within luxury fashion branding. Rather than functioning solely as a response to production-related environmental challenges, sustainability is progressively integrated into brand narratives as a source of differentiation and identity formation (Kaur et al., 2024). In contemporary Western markets, a strong and coherent brand identity is widely regarded as a prerequisite for competitiveness, particularly as luxury brands seek to reconcile traditional notions of prestige with growing expectations around social and environmental responsibility. In this context, sustainability contributes to brand value not through its technical implementation alone, but through its capacity to resonate with consumers' values and worldviews. However, for such symbolic claims to be accepted, they must be perceived as authentic. Symbolic sustainability communication is not inherently superficial: what matters analytically is whether it is supported by operational evidence. This thesis examines precisely that relationship — when symbolic narrative is anchored in verified practice, and when it risks overclaiming.

Authenticity emerges as a central condition for credibility in sustainable luxury branding. The literature highlights that authenticity in the luxury sector is closely associated with heritage, craftsmanship, and continuity over time, which together support perceptions of legitimacy and trust (Bernardi et al.,2022). Sustainability initiatives are therefore more likely to be regarded as credible when they are consistent with established identity markers rather than introduced as isolated or reactive strategies. Cultural orientation further shapes how sustainability claims are interpreted; while some consumers emphasise collective social benefits, others relate environmental commitment to personal value expression and identity affirmation (Kaur et al., 2024). In this sense, heritage functions as a stabilising reference point, enabling sustainability to be embedded within existing brand narratives rather than positioned as a superficial marketing tool.

These dynamics have important implications for how brand value is constructed in the luxury fashion industry. Recent studies suggest a gradual shift away from consumption driven primarily by outward status signalling towards forms of consumption that emphasise self-congruence, ethical awareness, and personal meaning (Kaur et al.,2024). Within this evolving landscape, luxury brands increasingly derive value from their ability to align symbolic brand meanings with consumers' moral and social aspirations. Brand value thus becomes relational and symbolic, shaped by trust, shared values, and perceived responsibility, rather than solely by exclusivity or material scarcity. At the same time, the growing symbolic importance of sustainability introduces heightened reputational risks. When sustainability claims are perceived as vague, exaggerated, or inconsistent with brand practices, they can undermine credibility and erode consumer trust (Akrout and Guercini, 2022). Prior research highlights that communication strategies lacking coherence or clarity may expose luxury brands to accusations of greenwashing, particularly in digital environments where scrutiny is intensified (Bernardi et al., 2022). This tension underscores the fragile nature of authenticity in sustainability-oriented branding and suggests that sustainability functions not only as a potential source of brand value but also as a domain of strategic vulnerability. As sustainability claims become more central to brand identity, the conditions under which they are evaluated and contested gain increasing relevance, setting the stage for the discussion of traceability and regulation that follows.

2.4 Traceability, Regulation, and Strategic Communication in Fashion

Luxury fashion faces a credibility problem rooted in information asymmetry. Consumers rarely have access to reliable, comparable data on a brand's environmental and social performance, and that scarcity breeds scepticism toward corporate sustainability claims (Rinaldi et al., 2022). As sustainability moves closer to the core of brand identity, the distance between what is claimed and what is documented becomes a reputational liability — and the more visible the brand, the greater the exposure.

Traceability has gained prominence as an institutional answer to this opacity rather than as a technological fix. By enabling product-level information to be gathered and shared across fragmented value chains, traceability systems narrow the space in which sustainability communication can rely on unverifiable assertion. The Digital Product Passport (DPP), introduced under the European Union's Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation (EU 2024/1781), sits at the centre of this shift: a standardised digital record of material composition, production processes, and lifecycle attributes (Carvalho et al., 2025). Embedding such information in shared infrastructure changes how claims are judged, moving the basis of credibility from narrative toward verifiable data. Legardeur and Ospital (2024) show that for textiles specifically, the DPP marks a move away from voluntary disclosure and toward mandatory, product-level transparency.

The spread of digital traceability has consequences for how authenticity itself is constructed. Traceability does not replace symbolic brand narratives; it introduces external reference points that constrain a firm's control over what its sustainability claims can mean (Rinaldi et al., 2022). Authenticity becomes institutionalised — claims are now expected to align with auditable information rather than curated storytelling. This pressure lands hardest in luxury, where heritage and craft narratives have long operated with little demand for empirical proof.

Regulation reinforces the trend. Within the EU, the Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation and related frameworks formalise disclosure obligations, requiring firms to provide consistent and verifiable product information (Carvalho et al., 2025). These instruments do not dictate sustainability outcomes. They set the conditions under which claims can be monitored and contested, and by closing off vague or selective disclosure, regulation acts as a disciplining force on communication. The Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive extends these obligations into governance, requiring firms to disclose how sustainability risk is managed at board level. Its application is phased rather than uniform: the first wave — large public-interest entities already reporting under the Non-Financial Reporting Directive — reported on the 2024 financial year, while subsequent waves were postponed by two years and their scope narrowed under the EU's 2025 Omnibus ('Stop-the-Clock') package (European Union, 2025).

These shifts have a clear strategic consequence. Merkl-Davies and Brennan (2007) argue that corporate sustainability reports are not neutral disclosures but strategic communications, written with an audience in mind. Mandatory and standardised reporting limits how far a brand can frame its data selectively, but it does not remove that freedom entirely. Instead, it changes where competition happens. When every brand must report the same categories of data, the difference between brands no longer lies in what they report, but in how they give meaning to it. This is the central argument the thesis develops: as regulation makes the content of disclosure more uniform, the way brands give meaning to that data is likely to become an increasingly important site of differentiation — a tendency this thesis observes across the 2022 — 2025 period and expects to intensify as the Digital Product Passport advances toward full implementation.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

The analysis draws on four bodies of theory. The Ellen MacArthur Foundation's circular economy framework structures the assessment of practice; Suchman's legitimacy theory frames how credibility is built; Barthes' concept of myth explains how that credibility is naturalised, and Rose's visual methodology guides the reading of campaign imagery. Each addresses a distinct analytical layer: the EMF framework evaluates what is being done operationally; Suchman explains how credibility is built institutionally; Barthes shows how that credibility is naturalised discursively; and Rose enables the reading of visual registers. The frameworks are complementary rather than overlapping, and each is set out below and applied in Chapters 4 and 5.

2.5.1 The Ellen MacArthur Foundation's Circular Economy Framework

Introduced in general terms in Section 2.1.2, the Ellen MacArthur Foundation's (2013) framework is taken up here as the analytical instrument for this study's comparison. Its starting move is a break with the linear take-make-dispose model: materials are not inputs to be consumed and discarded but resources to be held in use for as long as possible. That reorientation from throughput to longevity is the principle against which both brands' circular commitments are measured here.

At the framework's core is a hierarchy of strategies, set out in the Foundation's butterfly diagram, that ranks interventions by how closely they preserve a material's original form and value. The inner circles maintenance, repair, reuse, refurbishment, remanufacturing sit at the top because they retain the most embedded value for the least additional input. Recycling occupies the outer circle, treated as a last resort rather than a first principle, since breaking materials down and reconstituting them is both energy-intensive and value-depleting (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2013). The ranking matters for this study. When Prada presents Re-Nylon as a circular achievement, the Foundation's own hierarchy classifies it as an outer-loop strategy, and that classification opens a question about the depth of the brand's circular commitment that Chapter 4 takes up directly.

The framework also separates two kinds of material flow. The technical loop covers synthetic and inorganic materials that cannot safely re-enter natural systems and must be kept circulating through industrial recovery. The biological loop covers natural materials wool, cashmere, cotton, linen that can return to and replenish ecological systems if they are managed well. The governing logic differs in each case: industrial efficiency and recovery rates on one side, ecological stewardship and regenerative land management on the other (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2013). The distinction maps cleanly onto the two cases. Prada's strategy runs through the technical loop, recycling synthetic nylon into regenerated fibre. Zegna's runs through the biological loop, built on certified farming relationships, long-standing supplier partnerships, and territorial conservation.

The Foundation's (2017) report on textiles extends the framework to fashion specifically, documenting how the sector's linear model with under one percent of clothing recycled into new garments is both ecologically and economically wasteful. For luxury brands, applying the framework exposes the structural tension this study calls the Luxury Circularity Paradox: the premium materials that create luxury value are the same materials that dominate each brand's footprint. Outer-loop recycling cannot resolve this. Doing so would require the inner circles of the hierarchy — repair, longevity, stewardship — which sit more comfortably inside Zegna's biological orientation than inside Prada's substitution model. Chapters 4 and 5 examine that asymmetry in detail.

2.5.2 Suchman's Organisational Legitimacy Framework

Suchman's (1995) theory of organisational legitimacy is the lens through which this study reads how Prada and Zegna build and hold credibility. Suchman defines legitimacy as a generalised perception that an entity's actions are desirable or appropriate within a socially constructed system of norms and values. The definition locates legitimacy in perception rather than in objective performance in how an organisation is seen, not only in what it has measurably done. For luxury brands working in the gap between sustainability claims and structural limits, that distinction does real analytical work.

Suchman identifies three types of legitimacy, each built differently. Pragmatic legitimacy is the most transactional. It rests on performance stakeholders can verify certified supply chains, audited emissions data, science-based targets, and sustainability-linked finance that imposes a real cost for missing commitments. It is a credibility claim backed by evidence and it is precisely the form that frameworks like the CSRD and the DPP are built to standardise. Both brands have invested heavily here, through third-party assurance, SBTi verification, CDP participation, and ESG-linked financing.

Moral legitimacy works differently. The question is no longer whether benchmarks have been met but whether the organisation is seen to be doing the right thing whether its commitments align with stakeholders' normative expectations. Suchman (1995) locates this across consequential, procedural, and structural dimensions: what an organisation achieves, how it achieves it, and the governance it builds around the process. In luxury sustainability, moral legitimacy is often borrowed rather than generated — assembled through partnerships with scientific bodies, endorsements from cultural figures, and membership of industry coalitions. This is Prada's primary mechanism. The National Geographic partnership, the UNESCO-IOC collaboration, and the casting of actor-activists all function as moral endorsements drawn from authorities whose standing the brand cannot manufacture on its own. It should be noted that the analysis infers communicative strategy from publicly observable partnership and casting choices. It does not assess how stakeholders perceive or respond to these associations, which would require audience-level research beyond the scope of this study.

Cognitive legitimacy is the deepest of the three, and the most durable. Where pragmatic legitimacy must be continually demonstrated and moral legitimacy continually endorsed, cognitive legitimacy works through taken-for-grantedness: behaviour becomes so familiar, so embedded in what stakeholders simply assume, that it stops being evaluated at all (Suchman, 1995). It is not earned through performance or association but accumulated over time, through the consistent performance of an identity people eventually stop questioning. This is what Zegna's century-long founding narrative has been building. The Oasi reserve, the Filiera, the family stewardship across generations none of it is framed as a sustainability achievement. It is framed as what the brand already is. The identity is performed so consistently, across so many registers, that it no longer asks to be assessed. It asks to be accepted.

The gap between the two brands' legitimacy positions is one of this study's central findings. Prada is constructing legitimacy — building credibility through new associations, verified data, and sustained communication investment. Zegna is maintaining it, reinforcing a cognitive legitimacy decade in the making. Suchman (1995) treats these as distinct strategic positions with distinct weak points: constructed legitimacy is vulnerable to a gap between claim and performance, while maintained legitimacy is vulnerable to a break between present conduct and founding myth. Both vulnerabilities surface in the findings, and Chapters 4 and 5 trace them.

2.5.3 Barthes and the Concept of Myth

Roland Barthes' (1972) concept of myth explains how luxury brands make their sustainability identities feel natural, how a strategically motivated choice comes to seem timeless and self-evident. For Barthes, myth is not a lie. It is a second-order semiological system: existing signs are recruited into a new register that empties them of their history and refills them with a naturalised meaning. A brand that roots its environmental commitment in a founding act from 1910 is not fabricating anything. It is performing myth. One man's decision to plant trees on a hillside becomes, through repetition across many registers, something that reads as inevitable as the landscape itself.

Two levels of signification make the mechanism legible. At the level of denotation, a sign carries its literal meaning — a photograph of sheep on a hillside shows sheep, grass, slope. At the level of connotation, that same image gathers a wider cultural meaning: stewardship, heritage, authenticity. Myth lives at the connotative level, but its force comes from presenting connotation as though it were denotation — as though the authenticity were simply present in the image rather than built through deliberate choices of composition, colour, and context (Barthes, 1972). This is what Barthes means by the turning of history into nature: the brand's commitment is offered not as a strategic response to market pressure but as something it has always, obviously been.

In luxury, this naturalisation has always been part of the work. Luxury value rests on the idea that an object is worth its price for reasons that resist calculation — heritage, quality, meaning. A successfully mythologised sustainability narrative extends that logic into the ecological register, so that environmental commitment becomes as unchallengeable as design authority or craft. Barthes' framework makes the operation visible, giving the analysis a way to locate where and how naturalisation is being performed.

The two brands mythologise through different materials. Two distinct modes of mythologisation emerge from the analysis. Genealogical myth naturalises sustainability by rooting it in founding acts and inherited identity, where commitment appears not adopted but ancestral. Institutional myth, by contrast, naturalises sustainability through association with external authorities whose credibility is transferred to the brand. These categories are used as analytical lenses throughout the subsequent case analysis. Zegna's myth is genealogical, presenting sustainability as inherited rather than adopted, anchored in an act that predates modern environmentalism by decades. Repeated across reports, chairman's letters, campaigns, and product storytelling, the narrative produces exactly the taken-for-grantedness Barthes describes — the point at which an identity stops being assessed and starts being assumed. Prada's myth is institutional. Its commitment is naturalised through association rather than ancestry: National Geographic, UNESCO-IOC, and a cast of actor-activists whose own credibility transfers to the brand. The mechanism differs, but the effect is the same — strategic choice rendered as apparent inevitability.

Barthes is applied here through the visual analysis in Chapter 4 and the theoretical discussion in Chapter 5. In the visual reading, the framework gives a vocabulary for how compositional and chromatic choices naturalise identity — how the rust and cream of a Re-Nylon image or the earthy palette of Oasi Cashmere function as semiological operations rather than mere aesthetics. In the discussion, it grounds the distinction between institutional amplification and temporal anchoring as two modes of myth-making.

2.5.4 Rose's Framework for Visual Communication

Gillian Rose's (2016) Visual Methodologies provides the methodological base for the study's multimodal semiotic analysis. Rose reads images not only for what they show — their denotative content — but for the meanings produced through composition, colour, symbolic code, and the relationship between image and text. She identifies three sites of meaning: the site of production (how and why an image was made), the site of the image itself (how meaning is generated through formal properties), and the site of the audience (how images are interpreted by those who encounter them). This study works mainly at the site of the image, with contextual attention to the site of production where the accompanying reports and captions supply relevant information. The audience site falls outside the study's scope, since no consumer research was conducted. This focus is deliberate: it is at the site of the image itself that each brand's strategic visual choices are most directly readable, and it is here that the relationship between visual communication and sustainability identity is most analytically productive.

Within the site of the image, Rose (2016) attends to compositional modality — the degree to which an image presents itself as realistic, natural, or credible and to the organisation of visual salience, which determines which elements draw the eye and in what order. These tools are directly applicable to the campaign materials examined in this study. The placement of a luxury product against unprocessed industrial waste, as in Prada's Re-Nylon imagery, is a compositional choice that disrupts the conventional visual hierarchy of luxury advertising and makes an argument about provenance. The absence of any human figure in Zegna's Oasi nature-reserve photographs is equally deliberate: compositional restraint communicates that the landscape needs no mediation. Where human figures do appear as in the Oasi Cashmere campaign they are placed in the middle ground rather than the foreground, emerging from the landscape rather than standing apart from it. The visual argument is consistent across both registers: whether the frame contains a model or not, the landscape remains sovereign. Rose's framework makes these choices analytically legible rather than merely impressionistic, providing a vocabulary for identifying how each brand's sustainability identity is not just described in words but built into the structure of its images. Applied alongside Barthes' (1972) concept of myth, it allows the analysis to move between what an image formally does and what it culturally means between the compositional operation and the naturalising effect.

These four frameworks operate together rather than in sequence. The Ellen MacArthur Foundation framework grounds the reading of circular practice; Suchman supplies the vocabulary of credibility; Barthes shows how that credibility is naturalised; and Rose enables the systematic reading of the visual field. They are not assigned to separate compartments of the analysis but brought into dialogue across Chapters 4 and 5, producing an integrated account of how Prada and Zegna construct sustainable luxury identities. That integration is operationalised in the methodology set out in the next chapter, which translates these frameworks into specific analytical procedures.

2.6 Literature Gap and Research Questions

The literature is rich but compartmentalised. It examines sustainability challenges in fashion and the circular economy's response to linear production. It explores sustainability in luxury branding, with a focus on identity, value, and authenticity. And it increasingly attends to transparency, traceability, and regulatory developments like the DPP, mostly from a disclosure-and-governance angle.

These bodies of work rarely meet. Research on circular economy practice concentrates on operations and supply chains, with little attention to how those practices are communicated at the brand level (Dissanayake and Weerasinghe, 2022; Bilancia et al., 2025). Research on sustainability communication and luxury branding tends to stay with symbolic narratives of responsibility and authenticity, without tying them to specific circular practices or to regulatory pressure (Kaur et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2023). And work on traceability and regulation centres on compliance and disclosure rather than on how those requirements reshape branding narratives (Carvalho et al., 2025; Rinaldi et al., 2022).

The result is a thin understanding of how circular practice, sustainability communication, and traceability interact at the level of the individual brand, particularly in luxury. Qualitative accounts of how brands turn circular initiatives into coherent narratives under regulatory and transparency pressure are especially scarce. The structural tension between luxury value creation and circular economy logic a tension this thesis refers to as the Luxury Circularity Paradox, drawing on Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau (2017) and Akrout and Guercini (2022) has not been examined through a sustained, multi-year study of how particular brands navigate and communicate it in practice.

This thesis addresses that gap through a qualitative, brand-level comparison of Prada Group and Ermenegildo Zegna Group across 2022–2025. Combining thematic analysis of sustainability reports with multimodal semiotic analysis of campaign materials, it asks how each brand translates circular practice into identity and narrative strategy, and what that reveals about the structural conditions and strategic choices shaping luxury sustainability communication. These concerns are formalised in the two research questions established in Chapter 1 and operationalised through the methodology in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Studying Sustainability Communication — Methodology and Design

This chapter sets out how I conducted the study. It explains the research design, the reasoning behind selecting Prada Group and Ermenegildo Zegna Group as comparative cases, the way data were collected, and the analytical procedures I applied. It closes with the question of credibility — triangulation, validity, and the limits of what a document-based study can claim.

The study addresses the two research questions established in Chapter 1: how circular practices influence brand identity (RQ1), and how brands translate circular innovation into branding narratives (RQ2). Both questions concern meaning — how organisations construct sustainability identities through language, narrative, and image. That is not a phenomenon that reduces to numerical indicators, and it calls for a qualitative approach.

3.1 Research Design

I adopted a qualitative comparative case study design. The research questions turn on meaning-making and identity construction rather than measurement, and qualitative inquiry is built for exactly that kind of question. As Creswell and Poth (2018) note, qualitative methods suit phenomena whose complexity resists reduction to numerical data. The sustainability practices of luxury brands, in this study, are treated as socially constructed narratives carrying strategic and symbolic weight — something quantitative content coding alone could not reach.

The comparative case study is the right form within that tradition. Yin (2018) identifies it as especially valuable when the aim is to understand differences across two bounded units inside a shared institutional context. By examining Prada and Zegna within the same industry and the same regulatory environment, the design produces analytical contrast: the differences between the two brands are not incidental, they are the primary source of insight.

The study sits within an interpretivist paradigm. Interpretivism holds that social reality is constructed through meaning-making, and that the researcher's task is to interpret those processes rather than measure them from the outside (Bryman, 2016). My aim throughout is to analyse how each brand constructs and communicates a sustainability identity, not to judge whether its practices are objectively sufficient. Where I identify coherence or tension between a brand's words and its images, that is an interpretive reading of strategic framing — not a verdict on the brand's authenticity. More precisely, the study assesses the coherence and credibility of each brand's public sustainability narratives — not the objective truth of the performance those narratives describe.

3.1.1 Researcher Reflexivity

Interpretivist work demands that the researcher be transparent about the lens being applied (Braun and Clarke, 2019). My analysis is organised around the technical loop versus biological loop distinction from the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2013), and it draws on Barthes' (1972) concept of myth and Rose's (2016) approach to visual communication. I defined the themes before detailed coding began, guided the coding by explicit criteria, and grounded every interpretive claim in textual or visual evidence from the corpus. I make no claim to full objectivity. What I maintain instead is transparency about the position from which I read.

3.2 Why Prada and Zegna: The Logic of Comparative Case Selection

I selected Prada Group and Ermenegildo Zegna Group deliberately. Case selection in qualitative research is not about statistical representativeness but about maximising the analytical yield of the comparison (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Three considerations guided the choice.

The first is shared context. Both are long-established Italian luxury houses — Prada founded in Milan in 1913, Zegna in Trivero, in the Biella Alps, in 1910 — operating across several sub-brands with supply chains rooted in Italian manufacturing. That shared setting holds constant a set of background variables: the EU regulatory environment, the cultural-heritage framework, a comparable base of investors and consumers. When the two brands diverge, the divergence can be read as a strategic choice rather than an artefact of different national or industrial conditions. One structural link sharpens the comparison further: both hold minority stakes in Luigi Fedeli e Figlio S.r.l., an Italian knitwear company — two brands sharing an upstream supplier yet narrating their sustainability through entirely different registers.

The second consideration is theoretical contrast. The literature suggested that luxury brands tend to align circularity with one of two poles — technological innovation or natural-heritage stewardship — and a preliminary reading of both brands' reports confirmed that split in the primary data. Prada has built its circular identity on the industrial recycling of synthetic materials through Re-Nylon, a technical-loop approach in the Ellen MacArthur Foundation's (2013) terms. Zegna has anchored its identity in the stewardship of natural materials and territorial heritage, through the Oasi Zegna reserve and its associated collections — a biological-loop approach. This is a theory-driven design, built to capture two divergent responses to a single shared constraint: the tension between luxury value creation and circular economy logic. This opposition is analytical rather than absolute. Both brands also employ hybrid tools —digital traceability, third-party certification, sustainability-linked finance — that do not fit neatly into either loop. The technical-biological distinction structures the comparison without implying that either brand operates in a pure form.

The third consideration is regulatory relevance. Both brands are directly exposed to the transitions this study examines — the Digital Product Passport, the Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation, and the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive. Both brands have submitted targets and received validation by the SBTi, aligned with a 1.5°C pathway and both report to the Carbon Disclosure Project. Their regulatory positioning makes them rich cases for examining how luxury brands prepare for, and help shape, the institutional landscape of sustainable fashion. Taken together, these three considerations set both the analytical logic and the boundary conditions of the comparison.

Two cases are enough for what this study sets out to do. Yin (2018) argues that two are sufficient when each occupies a clearly differentiated position in the theoretical space, and Flyvbjerg (2006) notes that a well-chosen case yields more interpretive insight than a large, undifferentiated sample. Technological circularity on one side, biological stewardship on the other, inside a shared institutional frame — that is the configuration this study's aims require. I make no claim to statistical generalisability. The goal is theoretical transferability: patterns and logics that may be recognisable in other luxury brands facing the same constraints.

3.3 What Was Examined: Sources, Corpus, and Triangulation

This section describes the three layers of the data: the primary sustainability reports, the secondary campaign materials, and the independent benchmarks used for triangulation. I collected all data from publicly available sources, through the official websites and investor-relations platforms of both groups. I conducted no fieldwork, interviews, or surveys. That was a deliberate choice. The object of analysis is each brand's public-facing communication, and published documents are the most direct evidence of how an organisation constructs and presents a sustainability identity to the outside (Merkl-Davies and Brennan, 2007). As a result, the thesis cannot assess internal intentions behind specific communication choices, the operational realities behind disclosed figures, or how consumers receive and interpret these narratives.

3.3.1 The Primary Corpus: Eight Sustainability Reports, 2022–2025

The primary sources are the complete Prada Group and Ermenegildo Zegna Group Sustainability Reports for 2022, 2023, 2024, and 2025 — eight reports across four consecutive cycles. Working across four years rather than a single snapshot lets the study track how each brand's circular strategy and brand narrative shifted through a period of intensifying regulation, from the early implementation of the Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation in 2022 to the pre-implementation phase of the Digital Product Passport in 2025.

I selected these documents because they are the fullest public articulation of each brand's sustainability strategy, covering performance data, target trajectories, governance disclosures, and narrative framing across environmental, social, and governance dimensions. Both groups report against the Global Reporting Initiative Standards. Zegna's reports are independently assured by Deloitte & Touche S.p.A. across all four cycles. Prada's situation is not uniform: the 2022 report predates the introduction of independent third-party assurance, while the reports from 2023 onward were assured — by Deloitte & Touche S.p.A. for 2023 and 2024, and by KPMG S.p.A. for 2025. I therefore treat the quantitative disclosures in Prada's 2022 report with more caution than those in later cycles.

3.3.2 Secondary Sources: Campaign Materials and Corporate Websites

I drew supplementary data from corporate websites — collection pages, brand-history sections, press-release archives — and from campaign materials, which supplied the primary visual data for the multimodal analysis. For Prada, I reviewed all publicly available material connected to the Re-Nylon programme and the SEA BEYOND initiative published between 2022 and 2025. For Zegna, the equivalent corpus covered the Oasi Zegna initiative and its three collections — Oasi Cashmere, Oasi Lino, Vellus Aureum — over the same span. I did not pre-select materials by content; I treated each as a deliberate act of brand communication, subject to the same scrutiny as the written texts.

3.3.3 Triangulation Sources: Independent Verification Benchmarks

To offset the risk of relying only on brand-produced documents, I integrated three independent verification sources as triangulation anchors. Each provides an externally constructed benchmark against which self-reported data can be tested, and each brand's relationship to these frameworks is itself revealing.

The Fashion Transparency Index, published by Fashion Revolution, scores brands on policy and commitments, governance, traceability, and disclosure quality, producing a composite from 0 to 100%. Zegna participates, scoring 37% in 2022 and 33% in 2023 — in both years above the participating-brand average on the traceability sub-dimension. Prada does not participate in any year of the study period. Prada's non-participation means its traceability claims cannot be benchmarked externally in the same way as Zegna's. Whether this reflects a deliberate transparency philosophy or other organisational priorities cannot be confirmed from public data alone; it is treated here as an absence of comparable external benchmarking that is itself analytically significant.

The Science Based Targets initiative — a collaboration between the Carbon Disclosure Project, the UN Global Compact, the World Resources Institute, and the World Wide Fund for Nature — verifies whether corporate emissions targets align with limiting warming to 1.5°C. Both brands have submitted targets and received verification, Zegna's confirmed in May 2023. These records are public and provide an independent scientific check on each brand's climate commitments.

The Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP) is a global environmental disclosure system where companies report environmental data to institutional investors. Both brands participate, adding an investor-facing layer of verification that is independent from each brand's own sustainability narrative.

3.4 How the Analysis Was Conducted: Thematic and Multimodal Methods

I analysed the data through two complementary methods: thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019), and multimodal semiotic analysis drawing on Rose (2016). Thematic analysis identifies patterns of meaning in text; multimodal semiotics reaches the visual and symbolic dimensions of brand communication that text analysis alone cannot. Used together, they let me move between what each brand says about sustainability and how it shows it — and to test whether the two are telling the same story.

The synthesis in Chapter 5 draws additionally on Suchman's (1995) framework of organisational legitimacy, which distinguishes pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy. I did not apply this as a coding instrument. It surfaced as an interpretive lens during the analytical writing, which is consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive approach and its allowance for theory to enter at any stage. The impression-management taxonomy of Iazzi et al. (2025) — assertive, performance-oriented, and defensive tactics — enters Chapter 5 as a complementary vocabulary at the level of communicative practice.

3.4.1 Thematic Analysis: Coding, Themes, and Keyword Frequency

Thematic analysis identifies and interprets patterns of meaning within qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). My analysis was theoretically informed rather than purely inductive: I developed the three themes before detailed coding, each grounded in a theoretical tradition tied to the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019).

Theme 1 — Circular Economy Practices — comes out of the Ellen MacArthur Foundation's (2013) technical-loop and biological-loop distinction. The framework gives me the vocabulary to compare Prada's recycling-based approach with Zegna's stewardship-based one, and to weigh how far each brand's circular claims are operationally substantiated. This theme addresses RQ1.

Theme 2 — Transparency and Data-Driven Accountability — comes out of the literature on corporate sustainability reporting and the EU regulatory context, the Digital Product

Passport and the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive in particular. It examines how each brand makes its supply chain legible — through structural ownership or digital verification — and how the external benchmarks relate to what the brands report themselves. This theme speaks to both research questions.

Theme 3 — Brand Narrative and Luxury Identity — comes out of Barthes (1972) and Rose (2016), which together give me the tools to read how contingent choices are presented as natural and how visual and verbal registers combine to produce brand meaning. It examines how each brand folds sustainability into its broader luxury identity, and what kind of brand value that produces. This theme addresses RQ2.

I coded through close, iterative reading and manual annotation of all eight reports, with no qualitative software. I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases throughout the process.

Phase 1 — Familiarisation: I read all eight sustainability reports in full alongside the supplementary campaign materials, making notes on each brand's sustainability framing, keyword usage, and narrative structure across the four reporting years.

Phase 2 — Initial coding: I identified relevant passages, phrases, and data points through iterative reading and annotated them with descriptive codes aligned with the three themes.

Phase 3 — Searching for themes: I grouped codes into clusters of related meaning and assessed provisional thematic categories for coherence with the research questions.

Phase 4 — Reviewing themes: I reviewed the provisional themes against the coded extracts and the full documents to ensure they were coherent, distinct, and well-supported by the evidence.

Phase 5 — Defining and naming themes: I finalised the three themes, establishing the scope of each and its relationship to one or both research questions.

Phase 6 — Writing up: I wrote the analytical findings as interpretive arguments, integrating evidence from the primary data with the relevant theoretical frameworks.

To illustrate how the coding process moved from raw text to interpretive theme, Table 3.1 presents representative extracts from the 2023 Sustainability Reports of both brands. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases, each extract was first assigned a descriptive initial code, then situated within one of the three analytical themes, and finally connected to the relevant theoretical framework during the writing-up phase. The example demonstrates that the analysis proceeded through close interpretive reading: the keyword frequency observations reported in Chapter 4 served to confirm patterns already identified through this process, not to generate them.

Table 3.1 — Illustrative Coding (Prada Group and Ermenegildo Zegna Group, 2023 Sustainability Reports)

Brand	Raw Extract	Initial Code	Theme	Theoretical Link	Interpretive Note
Zegna	"Oasi Zegna is a 100 km² natural preserve in the Biellese Alps, Piedmont, conceived by Ermenegildo Zegna at the beginning of the previous century, as a unique model of social and environmental awareness."	Territorial stewardship as origin	Theme 1: Circular Practice	EMF (2013) — biological loop	Natural landscape framed as founding act rather than strategic response. Stewardship predates modern environmentalism — biological loop logic embedded in heritage narrative.
Zegna	"The Ermenegildo Zegna Group is dedicated to enhancing the traceability of top-priority raw materials and improving the circularity of our operations."	Traceability commitment — self-reported	Theme 2: Transparency	Suchman (1995) — pragmatic legitimacy	Commitment stated but not yet verified in this extract. Cross-referenced with FTI scores and Deloitte assurance records to assess credibility.
Zegna	"Fabric represents our culture of beauty; the Group remains a master of fabric, with an unrivalled	Craft heritage as sustainability anchor	Theme 3: Brand Narrative	Barthes (1972) — myth	Sustainability positioned as natural extension of existing craft mastery — not

Brand	Raw Extract	Initial Code	Theme	Theoretical Link	Interpretive Note
	manufacturing legacy, forward-looking creativity, technical proficiency, and an innovative approach to sustainability."				adopted in response to external pressure but presented as inherent to what the brand already is.
Prada	"The Prada Re-Nylon Collection is crafted entirely from regenerated nylon created through the recycling and purification of plastic collected from oceans – like fishing nets – and landfills, as well as textile waste."	Outer-loop recycling as circular identity	Theme 1: Circular Practice	EMF (2013) — technical loop	Recycling framed as circular achievement; EMF hierarchy classifies this as an outer-loop strategy — raises questions about the depth of commitment examined in Chapter 4.
Prada	"The Group relies on certifications to mitigate potential negative impacts associated with cotton sourcing, with 54% of its cotton purchases having at least one of the following certifications."	Certification as risk management	Theme 2: Transparency	Suchman (1995) — pragmatic legitimacy	Specific, verifiable figure — pragmatic legitimacy in operation. Note: 54% implies 46% remains uncertified, a gap the analysis examines directly.
Prada	"The Group's commitment to culture and water conservation continued over the period, with increased funding to support the SEA BEYOND education program, which has been expanded to include	Institutional mission as sustainability	Theme 3: Brand Narrative	Barthes (1972) — myth; Suchman (1995) — moral legitimacy	Sustainability naturalised through cultural and scientific association rather than operational practice — institutional amplification

Brand	Raw Extract	Initial Code	Theme	Theoretical Link	Interpretive Note
	scientific research and humanitarian projects."				strategy examined in Chapter 4.

Keyword Frequency as Confirmatory Evidence

I want to be precise about what the keyword frequency observations are and are not, because the distinction matters for how the study should be read. They are not a content analysis. Content analysis treats frequency as a primary finding and draws conclusions directly from the counts. Here the counts do something narrower and more disciplined: they confirm patterns I had already identified through close reading, and they let me state those patterns with more precision than impressionistic reading alone would allow. The reading comes first. The numbers follow, as corroboration.

This use is consistent with Braun and Clarke (2006), who note that the keyness of a theme does not depend on quantifiable measures but on whether a pattern captures something significant in relation to the research question. Frequency, in their account, is one form of evidence among several — useful when it supports an interpretive claim, never a substitute for one.

In practice, I conducted the observations manually, using the document search function across the full text of each report. I used no software or automated tools. I took the 2023 reports as the primary reference point, since they represent the most comparable year in disclosure scope across both brands, and I verified that the patterns held across the full 2022–2025 period. I selected terms for their direct relevance to the three themes: for Theme 1, recycle, repair, innovation, and circularity; for Theme 2, traceability, audit, and disclosure; for Theme 3, culture, education, and partnership. I chose culture and education to capture Prada's institutional-mission framing through SEA BEYOND and its Culture pillar, and partnership to quantify the external-association strategy that the visual analysis had already brought into view.

I read the resulting counts as indicative signals of discursive emphasis, not as precise measurements. When partnership appears 46 times in Prada's 2023 report and 7 times in

Zegna’s, the gap tells me something meaningful about how each brand frames its sustainability identity — without my needing to claim statistical precision for the figure. The counts serve the interpretation. They do not replace it, and the analysis remains thematic and interpretive from start to finish.

3.4.2 Reading Images: Multimodal Semiotic Analysis

Multimodal semiotic analysis extends classical semiotics — the study of how signs make meaning — to settings where meaning is produced across several modes at once: image, colour, composition, and the interplay between image and text. Classical semiotics tends to focus on language or a single channel of signification; multimodal approaches recognise that visual communication works through the coordination of several registers simultaneously. Rose’s (2016) Visual Methodologies is the framework I applied. It reads an image not only for what it depicts — its denotative content — but for the meaning produced through composition, colour, symbolic code, and the relationship between image and accompanying text.

Rose (2016) identifies three sites of meaning: the site of production (how and why an image was made), the site of the image itself (how it produces meaning through its formal properties), and the site of the audience (how viewers interpret it). I focused on the site of the image, with contextual attention to production where the accompanying text made that information available. The audience site lay outside the study’s scope, since I conducted no consumer research.

I selected images to represent the range of visual registers in each brand’s sustainability communication. For Prada, I chose four: raw-material sourcing (the Re-Nylon bag against fishing nets), ecological protection (the coral-reef imagery), product–celebrity association (the actor-activist campaigns), and institutional action (the SEA BEYOND coral restoration). For Zegna, I chose three: territorial heritage (the Oasi Zegna nature reserve), chromatic identity between garment and landscape (the Oasi Cashmere campaign), and supply-chain geography (the Authentico®-certified Merino wool sourcing). The number of images followed the range of distinct registers I could identify in each brand’s corpus rather than a fixed quota — Prada's corpus held four clearly differentiated registers, Zegna’s three.

The visual corpus comprised Re-Nylon and SEA BEYOND materials for Prada. For Zegna, it covered the Oasi Zegna reserve and the Oasi Cashmere collection — the two visual pillars of the brand's sustainability communication across the study period. I discuss Oasi Lino and Vellus Aureum in the textual analysis but did not include their campaign materials in the visual corpus, since they follow the same chromatic and compositional logic as Oasi Cashmere. The analysis examined how each brand uses imagery to reinforce or extend the narratives identified thematically, and how the visual and verbal registers relate to one another. This corresponds directly to Theme 3.

3.5 Credibility, Constraints, and the Limits of Document-Based Research

This section addresses three dimensions of methodological credibility: the triangulation strategies that mitigate the risk of relying on brand-produced documents, the analytical validity of the thematic approach, and the scope constraints that bound the study's conclusions.

3.5.1 Triangulation and Data Reliability

The central risk in any study built on brand-produced documents is that those documents are susceptible to selective disclosure and strategic framing — what Merkl-Davies and Brennan (2007) describe as impression management in corporate narratives. Three features of the design reduce that risk without removing it.

The longitudinal structure is the first. Working across four reporting years makes inconsistency visible in a way a single-year study could not (Yin, 2018). A brand that frames a metric favourably in one year and then reverses it quietly two years later leaves a trace — as Prada does, with recycled-nylon content falling from 58% in 2023 to 52% in 2024 without explanation.

The second is assurance. Both brands' reports are third-party assured against the Global Reporting Initiative Standards, with the single exception of Prada's 2022 report, which predates that verification. Because the standards require disclosure on specified indicators regardless of whether the news is good, they raise the reliability of the quantitative data. The narrative framing remains strategic, and so throughout the analysis I separate verified quantitative disclosures, which I treat as relatively reliable, from narrative claims, which I treat as strategic communication requiring critical reading.

The third is the set of independent benchmarks from Section 3.3.3 — the Fashion Transparency Index, the SBTi records, and the CDP disclosures. Where these confirm a brand's own claims, my interpretive confidence rises. Where they diverge — most visibly in Zegna's participation in the Fashion Transparency Index against Prada's absence from it — I treat the divergence as analytically significant in its own right.

3.5.2 Analytical Validity

Thematic analysis depends on the researcher's judgement, and another researcher working the same data might arrive at different themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). To limit the effect of that, I defined the three themes in advance, on the basis of the research questions and the theoretical framework and coded against explicit criteria. I do not claim these themes are the only valid reading of the documents; a different framing would yield different but equally legitimate insights. The keyword frequency observations, as set out above, function as indicative signals rather than precise measurements, and I present them on those terms.

3.5.3 Scope and Limitations

This is a two-case study, and its conclusions are specific to Prada and Zegna within the 2022–2025 regulatory context. The framework may carry across the luxury sector more broadly, but I make no claim to statistical generalisability, in keeping with the aims of qualitative case study design (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

The analysis is also confined to what both brands choose to make public. Without internal documents, supplier contracts, or interviews with sustainability managers, I cannot assess the intentions behind particular communication choices or the operational reality behind the disclosed figures. That is a limit built into the design rather than a failure of execution.

Finally, the study stays on the supply side of sustainability communication. It examines how brands construct and communicates their identities, not how consumers receive or interpret them. Future research using primary fieldwork — interviews with sustainability directors or supply-chain managers — would be well placed to extend and test what I develop here.

Chapter 4: Managing the Paradox: How Prada and Zegna Construct Sustainable Luxury Identities

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of a qualitative comparative case study examining how Prada Group and Ermenegildo Zegna Group integrate circular economy practices into their brand identities and sustainability communication between 2022 and 2025. It addresses the two research questions introduced in Chapter 1 and operationalised through the three analytical themes described in Chapter 3. They are restated here to anchor the findings that follow directly to the study's research aims.

RQ1: How do circular and sustainability-driven practices influence brand identity and brand value in the fashion industry?

RQ2: How do fashion brands translate circular innovation into branding narratives and strategic positioning?

The findings are organised around the three themes developed through the thematic analysis described in Chapter 3. Theme 3— Brand Narrative and Luxury Identity — is addressed first, in Section 4.3, through the visual analysis: visual communication is the most direct expression of how each brand translates its sustainability commitments into a legible identity. Theme 1 — Circular Economy Practices — follows in Section 4.4, moving from how sustainability is communicated to what is operationally being done. Theme 2 — Transparency and Data-Driven Accountability — is addressed in Section 4.5, examining how each brand constructs and validates its sustainability claims through independent benchmarks. This sequencing is deliberate: it moves from the surface of communication inward to operational practice and verification.

4.2 Introducing the Brands: Who They Are and What They Claim

Before analysing how Prada and Zegna communicate sustainability, it is important to understand who these brands are and what sustainability claims they make. Brand identity shapes how sustainability is communicated — and how it is received. This section introduces both brands and sets out their key sustainability commitments as they appear across the 2022–2025 reporting period.

Both are Italian luxury houses with long histories and strong brand identities, and both have made substantial public sustainability commitments. Their approaches to the relationship between luxury and sustainability differ substantially, which is part of why they were selected as comparative cases.

4.2.1 Prada Group

Prada was founded in Milan in 1913 by Mario Prada as a leather goods and luggage company. Over the following century, it grew into one of the world's most recognisable luxury fashion houses. Its identity is built around intellectual rigour, a deliberate rejection of obvious branding, and an ability to make practicality feel aspirational. Today, Prada Group operates several brands — including Prada, Miu Miu, Church's, and Marchesi 1824 — and is listed on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange (Prada Group, 2025).[1]

Prada's sustainability strategy is structured under the IMPACT framework, organised around three pillars: Planet, People, and Culture. The Planet pillar covers environmental commitments. The People pillar covers supply chain labour conditions and employee welfare. The Culture pillar — perhaps the most distinctive — includes the SEA BEYOND educational programme, a partnership with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (UNESCO-IOC), through which Prada funds ocean literacy education globally. By 2024, SEA BEYOND had reached over 35,000 students across 56 countries, and Prada co-hosted UNESCO-IOC's first Ocean Literacy World Conference in Venice. This positioning is deliberate: Prada presents itself not only as a luxury brand but as a cultural institution that uses its platform to address ecological concerns beyond its own supply chain.

Prada's central circular economy claim is the Re-Nylon programme, launched in 2019. Re-Nylon converts discarded fishing nets, ocean plastics, and industrial nylon waste into regenerated nylon fibre through a chemical process developed by Aquafil under the ECONYL brand name. Prada completed the transition from virgin to regenerated nylon across its main collections by 2021 — before the study period begins — making Re-Nylon a starting point rather than a 2022–2025 achievement. From 2023, Prada extended

[1] Unless otherwise stated, all factual and statistical information in this section is drawn from Prada Group Sustainability Reports (2022-2025). The Group's non-financial disclosures were independently assured by Deloitte & Touche S.p.A. for the 2023-2024 reporting cycles, with KPMG S.p.A. assuming the assurance mandate for the 2025 reporting cycle. The 2022 report was published prior to the introduction of independent third-party assurance. All reports are available at: pradagroup.com [Accessed: May 2026].

this logic further, committing to source 80% of all nylon and polyester from recycled or bio-based sources by 2026. In 2023, 98% of textile fibre waste at Italian production sites was recycled, and 70% of total industrial waste was diverted from disposal.

On emissions, Prada set a Science Based Targets initiative (SBTi) commitment to reduce Scope 1 and 2 emissions by 29.4% from a 2019 baseline by 2026. By 2025, the brand had achieved a 76% reduction — far exceeding the target three years ahead of schedule. Prada has maintained Carbon Neutrality for its Scope 1 and 2 emissions since 2021, supported by certified renewable energy procurement and carbon offsetting.

Prada's approach to transparency is built around technology. As a co-founder of the Aura Blockchain Consortium — established in 2021 alongside LVMH and Cartier — Prada has been registering selected products with Radio-Frequency Identification (RFID) tags on a shared blockchain since April 2022, giving consumers access to a digital certificate of provenance. Prada does not participate in the Fashion Transparency Index (FTI) — a choice that, as discussed later, reflects a preference for managing transparency through instruments the brand co-designs rather than external evaluation frameworks. In 2023, 90% of Prada's leather was sourced from Leather Working Group-certified or audited tanneries, and the brand committed to 95% by 2026. The Re-Nylon campaign explicitly frames circularity as an ideology rather than a product feature — a deliberate rhetorical choice that positions the brand as committed to systemic change, not just material substitution. [2] It is worth noting that leather sourcing, while less prominent in Prada's sustainability narrative than Re-Nylon, is structurally significant: as a natural animal-derived material processed through complex tanning operations, it sits within Scope 3 emissions and represents a substantial portion of the brand's upstream environmental foot

4.2.2 Ermenegildo Zegna Group

Ermenegildo Zegna was founded in 1910 in Trivero, a small town in the Biella Alps of northern Italy, and has remained a family-owned business across four generations. From the beginning, the brand combined textile manufacturing with a commitment to its local community and landscape that was unusual for its time. From 1929, founder Ermenegildo Zegna planted over 500,000 trees on the hillsides surrounding the mill, and in the 1930s built a 26-kilometre public road connecting Trivero to the surrounding region. These acts

[2] See footnote 1 for data sources.

— carried out before environmental responsibility was a corporate concept — are the origin point of Zegna's sustainability identity. Today, Zegna Group operates the ZEGNA brand, Thom Browne, and Tom Ford Fashion (acquired in 2023), and is listed on the New York Stock Exchange.[3]

The nature reserve that emerged from these interventions — Oasi Zegna — covers 100 square kilometres and received Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification in 2022, making it one of only ten entities in Italy to hold this status at the time. The reserve delivers five distinct ecosystem services: biodiversity conservation, carbon sequestration, water regulation, soil conservation, and recreational use. By 2022, it supported employment for over 350 people across 63 local enterprises, grounding the brand's sustainability identity in a tangible, living place rather than a corporate commitment document.

Zegna's circular economy approach is centred on the biological loop — the stewardship of natural materials and deepening of long-term supply chain relationships. The operational backbone of this approach is the Filiera: a vertically integrated textile platform encompassing eight specialist manufacturing companies across northern Italy, including Lanificio Ermenegildo Zegna for wool processing, Filati Biagioli Modesto for cashmere yarn, Dondi for knitwear, and Bonotto for experimental fabrics. This structure gives Zegna direct visibility into a significant portion of its supply chain in a way that most luxury brands do not have. The Filiera is not simply a manufacturing asset — it is, as the 2023 Sustainability Report frames it, an epistemological foundation: the reason Zegna knows where its materials come from.

Zegna expresses its circular economy commitments through three collections. Oasi Cashmere, launched in 2022, sources cashmere from Mongolian and Inner Mongolian herder communities certified by the Sustainable Fiber Alliance (SFA) — a certification covering animal welfare, herder livelihoods, and land management practices that prevent desertification. By 2025, 42% of the brand's top-priority raw materials were sourced from traceable, lower-impact origins, up from 16% in 2021. Certified wool reached 67% of total wool purchases by 2025, rising from 39% in 2022. Oasi Lino, launched in 2023,

[3] Unless otherwise stated, all factual and statistical information in this section is drawn from Ermenegildo Zegna Group Sustainability Reports (2022–2025), independently assured by Deloitte across all four reporting cycles. Available at: zegnagroup.com [Accessed: May 2026].

applies the same provenance logic to linen from European flax farms certified under European Flax and Masters of Linen standards. Vellus Aureum, launched in 2024, focuses on superfine Merino wool from long-standing Australian supplier relationships and includes a blockchain-linked digital passport committing to full fibre traceability by 2025. [4]

On transparency, Zegna participates in the Fashion Transparency Index — scoring 37% in 2022 and 33% in 2023, both above the participating brand average on the traceability sub-dimension (Fashion Revolution, 2022; Fashion Revolution, 2023). On emissions, Zegna's SBTi net-zero targets — near-term by 2032, long-term by 2050 — were independently verified in May 2023 (Science Based Targets initiative, 2023). By 2025, the Group achieved 100% renewable electricity across all operations, three years ahead of the 2027 target. Zegna has also completed Zero Discharge of Hazardous Chemicals compliance across all Group production sites. Unlike Prada, Zegna does not frame circularity through the language of technical innovation.

4.2.3 Keyword Frequency Analysis

This analysis began with a close reading of all eight sustainability reports — four from each brand, covering 2022 to 2025. As themes emerged from this reading, keyword frequency observations were used as a supporting tool to verify whether the patterns identified matched the language each brand used — consistent with the coding approach described in Chapter 3 (see Table 3.1). All searches were conducted manually using the document search function, no software or automated tools were used. The 2023 reports were selected as the primary reference point as they represent the midpoint of the study period. Terms were selected based on their direct relevance to the three analytical themes established in Chapter 3: for Theme 1, terms related to circular economy practices; for Theme 2, terms related to transparency and disclosure; and for Theme 3, terms related to brand narrative and identity.

Table 4.1: Selected Keyword Frequency Observations — 2023 Sustainability Reports (Representative Year, 2022–2025 Study Period)

Term	Theme	Prada 2023	Zegna 2023	What This Suggests

[4] See footnote 3 for data sources.

Recycle	Theme 1	51	29	Prada’s substitution model centres on material recovery; recycling is the primary circular strategy
Repair	Theme 1	11	3	Both brands underweight the inner circle of the circular economy hierarchy
Innovation	Theme 1	6	16	Zegna applies innovation to supply chain relationships; Prada to material technology
Circularity	Theme 1	9	13	Zegna uses the term in a stewardship context rather than a recycling one
Traceability	Theme 2	16	33	Zegna foregrounds traceability as a structural identity; Prada delegates it to blockchain
Audit	Theme 2	15	11	Both brands use third-party auditing; Prada's emphasis reflects LWG leather certification
Disclosure	Theme 2	15	47	Zegna’s higher frequency reflects FTI participation and GRI-aligned supply chain reporting
Culture	Theme 3	36	8	Prada’s Culture pillar frames sustainability as a civilisational mission

Education	Theme 3	32	10	SEA BEYOND programme positions Prada as an institutional actor beyond fashion
Partnership	Theme 3	46	7	Prada builds legitimacy through external associations; Zegna generates it internally

The circular economy vocabulary reveals a meaningful asymmetry. Prada's dominance in 'recycle' (51 vs 29) reflects its substitution-based model, where material recovery is the primary circular strategy. Both brands, however, underweight 'repair' — Prada with 11 occurrences, Zegna with just 3 — suggesting that neither has fully engaged with the inner circles of the Ellen MacArthur Foundation's circular economy hierarchy, where extending product life takes priority over material recovery. Notably, 'innovation' appears more frequently in Zegna's report (16 vs 6), but contextual reading reveals different uses: where Prada associates innovation with material technology, Zegna applies it to supply chain relationships and fibre certification development.

The transparency vocabulary reveals a further contrast between the two brands. 'Traceability' appears more than twice as often in Zegna's report (33 vs 16), reflecting its position as a structural identity concept rather than a compliance term. 'Disclosure' shows the most dramatic gap: Zegna's 47 occurrences against Prada's 15 is consistent with Zegna's Fashion Transparency Index participation and its GRI-aligned supply chain reporting architecture. 'Audit' is more balanced (15 vs 11), reflecting both brands' use of third-party verification — though Prada's slightly higher frequency is consistent with its Leather Working Group certification emphasis.

The brand narrative vocabulary produces the clearest finding. 'Partnership' appears 46 times in Prada's report and only 7 times in Zegna's — a gap that quantifies the strategic difference identified in the visual analysis: Prada builds narrative legitimacy through external institutional associations (National Geographic, UNESCO-IOC, Aquafil, Aura Blockchain Consortium), while Zegna generates it internally through supply chain ownership and founding heritage. 'Culture' (36 vs 8) and 'education' (32 vs 10) further confirm Prada's positioning of sustainability as a civilisational mission rather than an operational practice.

These observations inform the analysis in Sections 4.3, 4.4, and 4.5 respectively, and are discussed in the context of each theme as the chapter progresses.

The Scope 3 data examined in Section 4.5 provides empirical confirmation of the Luxury Circularity Paradox introduced in Chapter 2. Across the study period, between 94% and 98% of each brand's total carbon footprint is concentrated in Scope 3 — in the purchased raw materials that constitute their luxury value (Prada Group, 2022–2025; Ermenegildo Zegna Group, 2022–2025). For Prada, Scope 3 accounted for 94.4% of total emissions in 2022, rising to 97.6% by 2025 — a trend driven not by increasing absolute emissions but by the accelerating reduction of Scope 1 and 2 through renewable energy procurement. For Zegna, the figure was 96.7% in 2022 and 97.8% by 2025, remaining structurally stable despite a 27% reduction in absolute Scope 3 emissions over the same period. The convergence is striking: two brands with fundamentally different circular strategies, one built on synthetic material recovery, the other on natural material stewardship, arrive at virtually identical Scope 3 exposure. Neither brand has resolved this tension. This concentration in Scope 3 does not render circularity impossible; it indicates that the hardest environmental impacts are structurally embedded in upstream materials and supply chains — precisely where luxury value is created. The chapters that follow examine how each manages it.

4.3 Visual Analysis: How Each Brand Communicates Sustainability

This section addresses Theme 3 — Brand Narrative and Luxury Identity — through a multimodal analysis of each brand's campaign materials, examining how Prada and Zegna translate their sustainability claims into visual and narrative communication. In luxury fashion, visual campaigns carry as much strategic weight as policy documents — they determine how commitments are experienced, interpreted, and remembered. Analysing this communication is central to RQ2, which asks how brands translate circular innovation into branding narratives and strategic positioning.

The analysis draws on Rose's (2016) approach to visual communication, which looks not just at what an image shows but at the meanings produced through composition, colour, and the relationship between image and text. It also draws on Barthes' (1972) concept of myth — the way historically contingent choices can be made to appear timeless and natural.

The images were selected to represent the full range of visual registers present in each brand's sustainability communication across the study period: raw material sourcing, ecological imagery, product presentation, and institutional action. Selection was based on availability in publicly accessible sustainability reports and campaign materials, and on analytical relevance to the themes identified in the thematic analysis. The visual corpus consists of Re-Nylon campaign series and SEA BEYOND communications for Prada, and Oasi Zegna nature reserve imagery, Oasi Cashmere campaign materials, and sustainability report visuals documenting raw material sourcing for Zegna. All materials were drawn from publicly accessible sources published between 2022 and 2025.

4.3.1 Prada: Sustainability as Cultural Mission

Prada's sustainability visuals are produced in collaboration with National Geographic Creative Works — and this partnership is itself the first and most important visual choice. National Geographic is not a fashion media partner. It is associated with scientific authority, ecological urgency, and expert documentation. By producing its campaign within this visual register, Prada signals from the outset that it wants to be judged against ecological rather than aesthetic standards. The brand borrows the credibility of an institution whose authority it could not generate internally. The argument, built into the choice of partner before a single image is shown, is clear: this ecological commitment is serious because a serious ecological institution has aligned itself with it.

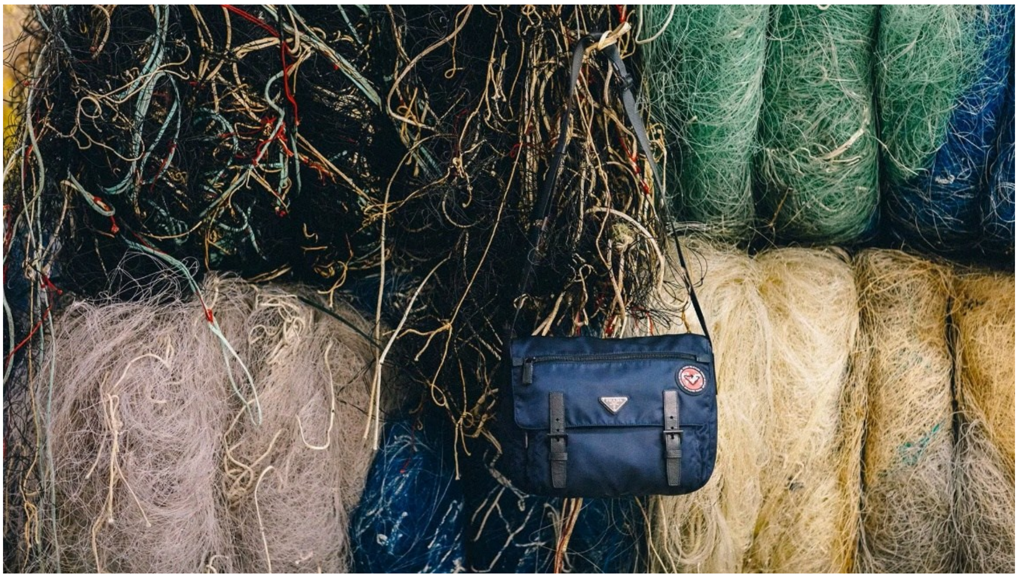

Figure 4.1: Prada Group Re-Nylon Campaign — Product Placed Against Recovered Fishing Nets

Source: Prada Group (2023) Re-Nylon Campaign Materials. Available at: pradagroup.com [Accessed: May 2026]

In this Re-Nylon campaign image, the product and its raw material source appear in the same frame: the Re-Nylon bag hangs directly against bundled fishing nets — the ocean waste from which it was made. Rather than concealing the material origin behind a polished surface, Prada collapses the distance between a luxury object and ocean waste. The product is present, but its provenance is inseparable from it. In Rose's (2016) compositional terms, the image places the luxury object and its raw material origin at equal visual weight — neither dominates the frame. The colour palette — rust, cream, and dark green — is carefully composed, as is characteristic of professional campaign photography. Yet the choice of these tones departs from the controlled neutrals typical of luxury product advertising, suggesting that the composition serves to foreground the industrial origin of the material rather than to conceal it.

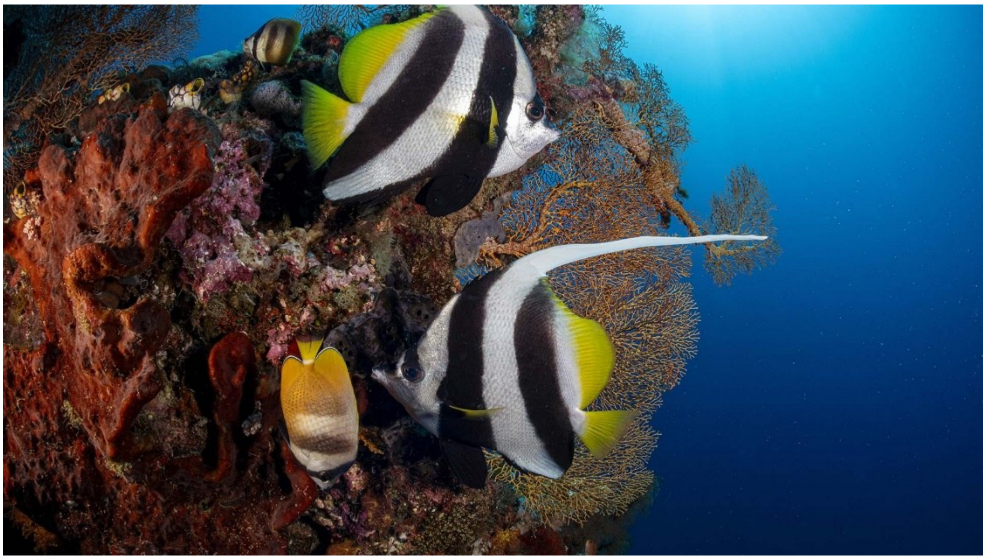

Figure 4.2: Prada Re-Nylon Campaign — Ecological Imagery

Source: Prada Group (2024) Re-Nylon x National Geographic Creative Works Campaign, Second Edition. Available at: pradagroup.com [Accessed: May 2026]

The coral reef and underwater ecosystem images go a step further: the product disappears entirely. The frame contains only the ecosystem being protected — vivid marine life, living coral, deep water. What is being communicated is not a product attribute but a moral commitment. The question asked by conventional luxury advertising — 'what does this product say about you?' — is displaced by a different question: 'what is worth protecting?' By removing the product from the visual centre, Prada argues that the brand's legitimacy comes not from what it makes but from what it cares about. This is a significant rhetorical move, and a risky one: a brand whose campaign says 'look at the reef, not the bag' sets a standard that its supply chain will eventually need to meet. Following Rose's (2016) framework, the compositional salience of the image is entirely ecological: the coral and marine life occupy the visual centre, drawing the eye inward and downward into the reef. There is no product anchor to redirect attention. The image-text relationship — where Re-Nylon campaign branding appears only in caption, not within the frame — reinforces this displacement: the brand exists outside the image, not within it.

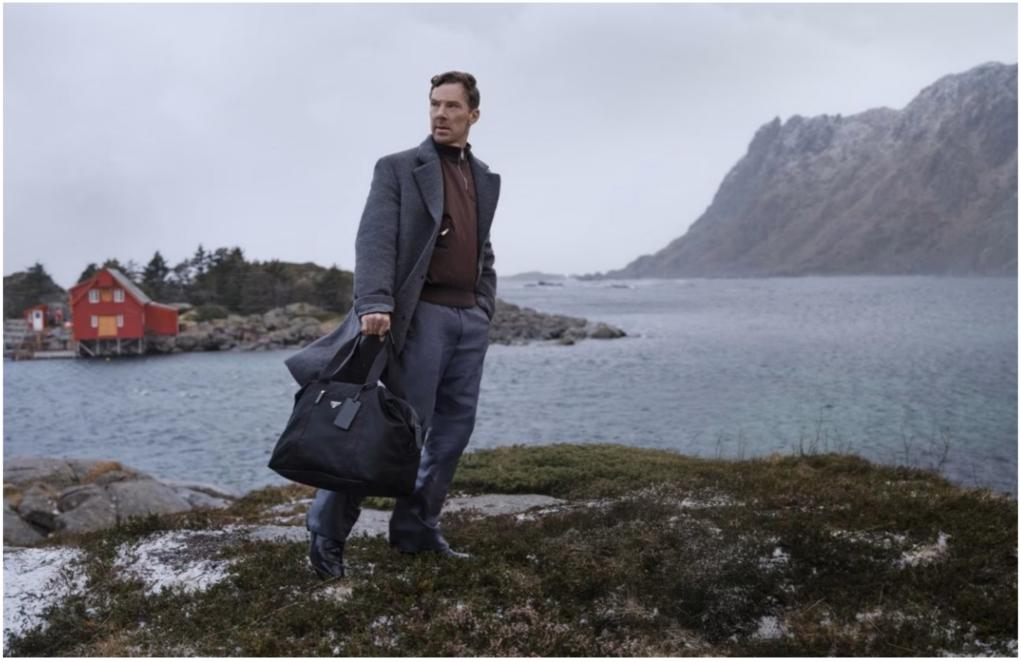

Figure 4.3: Prada Group Re-Nylon Campaign: Actor Benedict Cumberbatch

Source: Prada Group (2025) Re-Nylon Campaign. Available at: pradagroup.com [Accessed: May 2026]

The third type brings product and ecological narrative together through casting. Rather than using conventional fashion models, Prada has consistently selected globally recognised actors who are also publicly identified as activists: Benedict Cumberbatch, who has appeared across the 2024, 2025, and 2026 campaigns, is known for intellectually complex roles and environmental advocacy; Emma Watson, who appeared in the 2024 campaign, is widely recognised for her feminist activism and sustainability commitments; and Sadie Sink, who appeared in the 2025 campaign, is publicly associated with animal rights and environmental causes. None of these figures is a conventional fashion ambassador. Their selection signals that Prada's target audience for the Re-Nylon communication is not the status-seeking luxury consumer but a values-oriented one — an audience for whom ecological commitment functions as a form of cultural identity. In this sense, the casting decisions extend Prada's institutional amplification strategy: beyond borrowing the authority of scientific institutions such as National Geographic and UNESCO-IOC, the brand draws on the symbolic credibility of cultural figures whose public identities are already associated with ecological and social values (Prada Group, 2024; Prada Group, 2025).

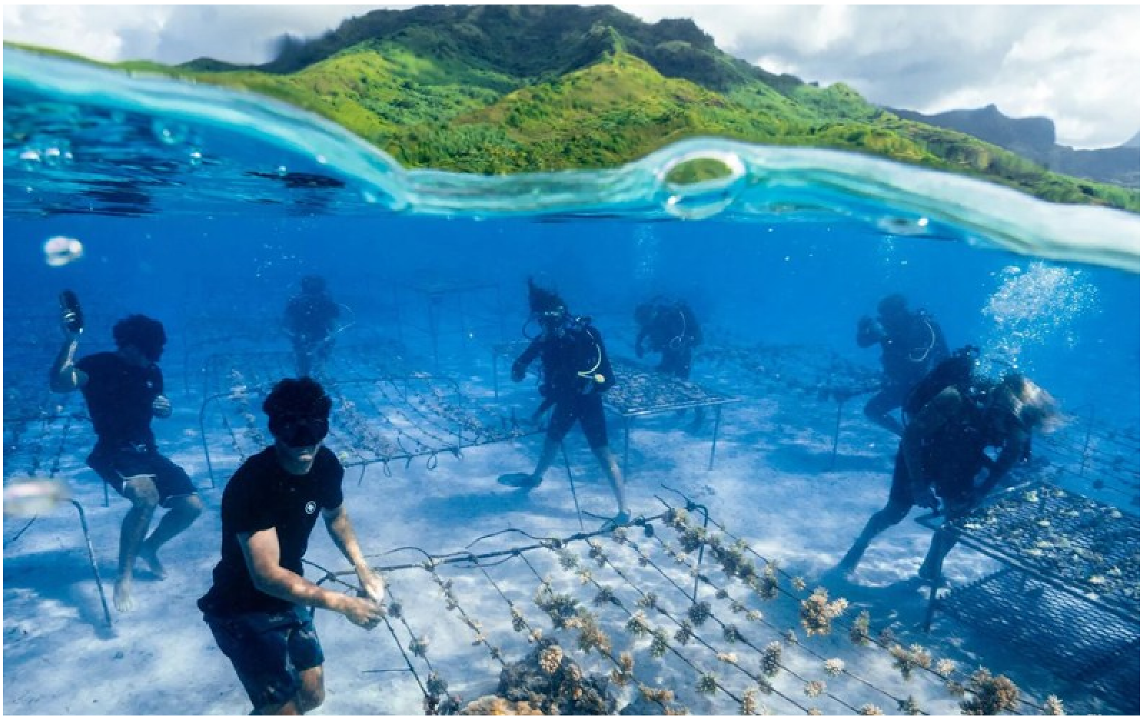

Figure 4.4: SEA BEYOND x Coral Gardeners —Active Reef Restoration, French Polynesia

Source: Prada Group (2025) SEA BEYOND Programme. Available at: pradagroup.com [Accessed: May 2026

The fourth image marks a shift in register. This is not a campaign image or a product photograph — it is documentation of active ecological intervention. Divers from the Coral Gardeners organisation plant coral fragments onto metal restoration structures on the ocean floor in French Polynesia, supported by SEA BEYOND, Prada's ocean education partnership with UNESCO-IOC. In Rose's (2016) terms, the split-frame composition operates as a visual metaphor: the water line divides aspiration (the green hills above) from labour (the restoration works below), positioning ecological commitment as something that happens beneath the surface of visible brand communication. The product has entirely disappeared from the visual frame, as has any conventional brand communication. What remains is institutional action. By 2025, SEA BEYOND had reached over 35,000 students across 56 countries and was funding the planting of 50,000 new corals through this collaboration. Taken together, the four images form a coherent visual argument: from raw material to ecosystem protection to active restoration, Prada constructs a brand identity in which ecological commitment is not a product feature but an institutional mission.

The images selected for this analysis represent the four distinct visual registers identifiable in Prada's Re-Nylon corpus across the study period: raw material sourcing (Figure 4.1), ecological protection (Figure 4.2), product-celebrity association (Figure 4.3), and institutional action (Figure 4.4). Selection was based on analytical relevance to Theme 3 and availability in publicly accessible campaign materials published between 2022 and 2025.

4.3.2 Zegna: Sustainability as Founding Identity

Zegna's visual communication works through a different logic. Zegna looks to a specific place, a specific founding act, and a specific family. The visual language is territorial: mountains, forests, natural light, and the communities connected to them.

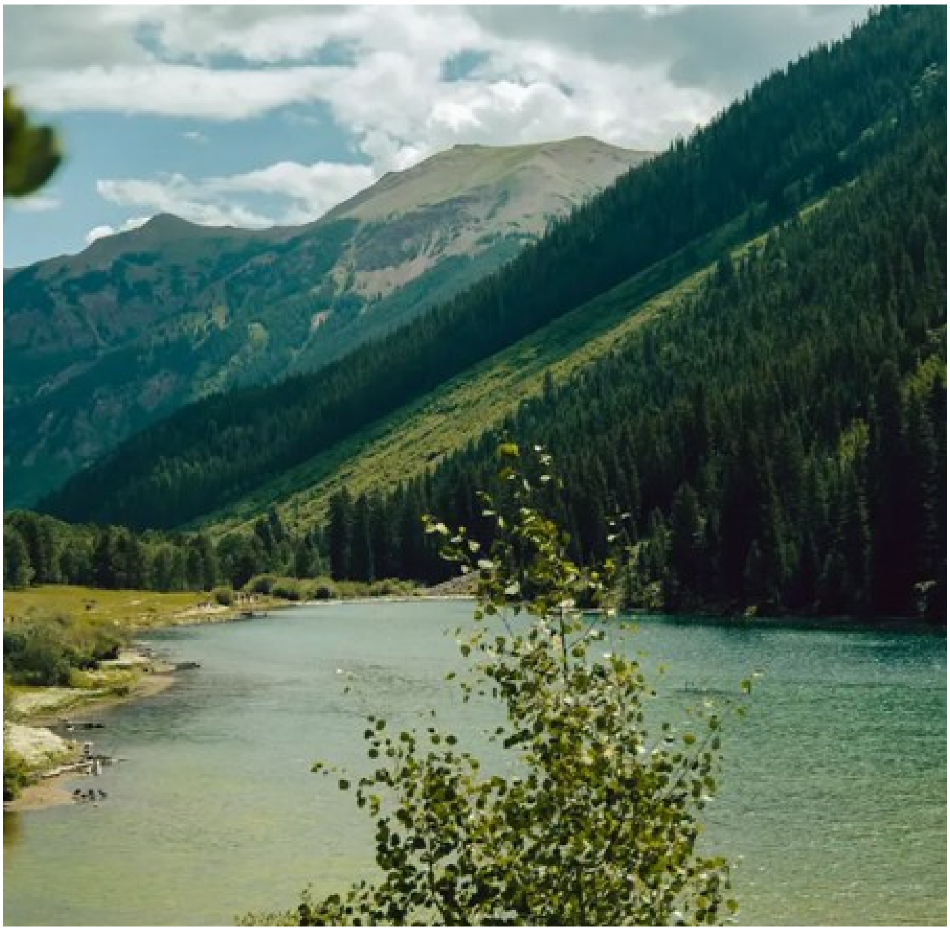

Figure 4.5: Oasi Zegna Nature Reserve, Trivero, Biella Alps

Source: Ermenegildo Zegna Group (2022) Sustainability Report. Trivero: Ermenegildo Zegna Group.

Images of Oasi Zegna — the 100 square kilometre FSC-certified nature reserve in the Biella Alps — appear across all four years of the study period. These images show the reserve in its ecological specificity: mixed Alpine woodland, mountain streams, morning light through the canopy. The reserve is not depicted as managed land or a corporate asset. It is shown as living nature, barely distinguishable from wilderness. This visual choice communicates that Zegna's environmental relationship is not constructed for brand purposes — it precedes and exceeds them. In Rose's (2016) compositional terms, the images are structured around what might be called an aesthetics of restraint: there are no human figures, no products, no captions within the frame. The reserve is shown as self-sufficient, requiring no mediation. This compositional choice is itself an argument: nature here is not a backdrop for brand communication — it is the subject. The founding act of 1929, when Ermenegildo Zegna planted the first trees on these hillsides, is presented in every annual report and campaign as the origin of everything the brand stands for.

What this narrative achieves, in Barthes' (1972) terms, is myth: the transformation of a historically specific set of choices into something that appears timeless and natural. Zegna's sustainability orientation is not presented as a strategic response to regulation or market pressure. It is presented as simply what the brand is — as inevitably and obviously as the landscape from which it comes. When Zegna discloses its Science Based Targets initiative verification, its Zero Discharge of Hazardous Chemicals compliance, or its Global Reporting Initiative alignment, these are framed not as regulatory achievements but as the contemporary vocabulary for values that have existed since the 1930s. Compliance becomes heritage confirmation. There is, however, a risk embedded in this strategy: myth can naturalise responsibility, but it can also insulate a brand from scrutiny by making its sustainability identity appear so self- evident that it is no longer subject to evaluation, thereby limiting alternative interpretations of corporate responsibility.

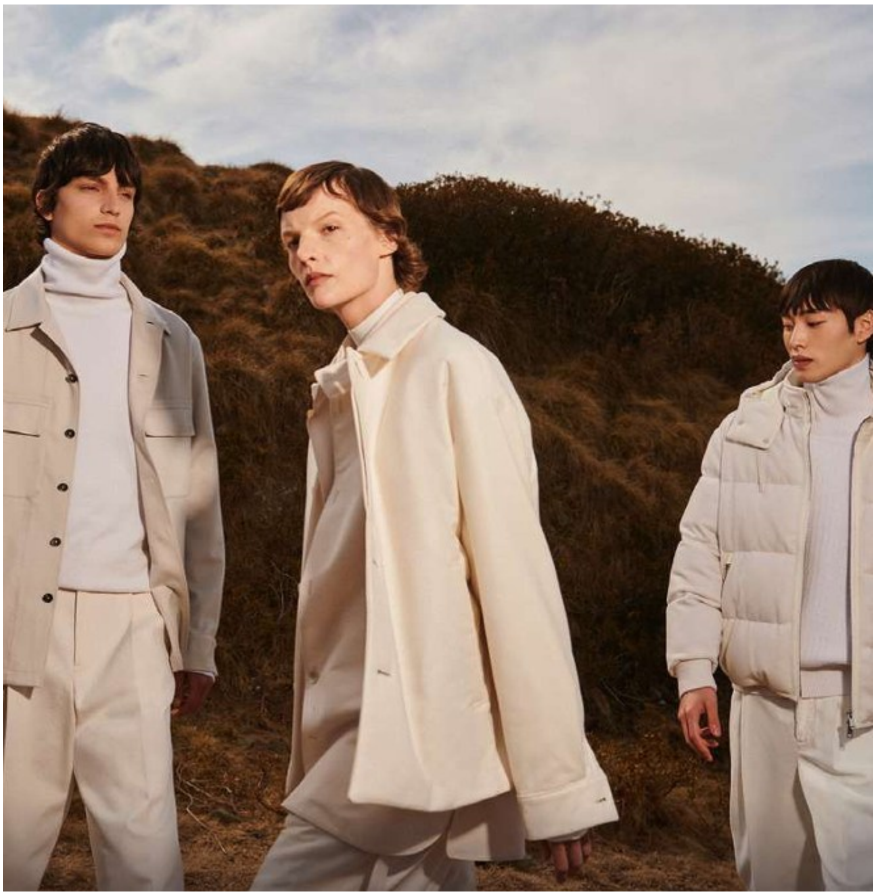

Figure 4.6: Ermenegildo Zegna Group: Models Wearing Oasi Cashmere Collection

Source: Ermenegildo Zegna Group (2022) Sustainability Report, p. 96

The Oasi Cashmere campaign images are visually distinctive. Models are placed in open natural landscapes — rough grassland, low cloud, mountain skylines — wearing garments in cream, warm ochre, pale sage, and tobacco. The 2022 Sustainability Report describes this palette explicitly as reflecting 'the warm and earthy autumn foliage of Oasi Zegna.' The colours of the clothing and the colours of the landscape are the same. This chromatic correspondence is not decorative — it is the visual argument that the garment is an extension of the territory from which its materials and values originate. In Rose's (2016) terms, this is connotative meaning-making: the boundary between the manufactured object and the natural world is deliberately softened, so that wearing the garment feels like carrying the landscape.

In compositional terms, the models occupy the middle ground of the frame rather than the foreground — they do not dominate the image but emerge from it. This placement reinforces the chromatic argument: the human figure is not presented as the subject of the image but as an element within a landscape that precedes and surrounds it. The garment, the body, and the territory form a single visual unit. What the image refuses, in this sense, is the conventional luxury advertisement's hierarchy — where the product is foregrounded and the setting is subordinate. Here the setting is sovereign.

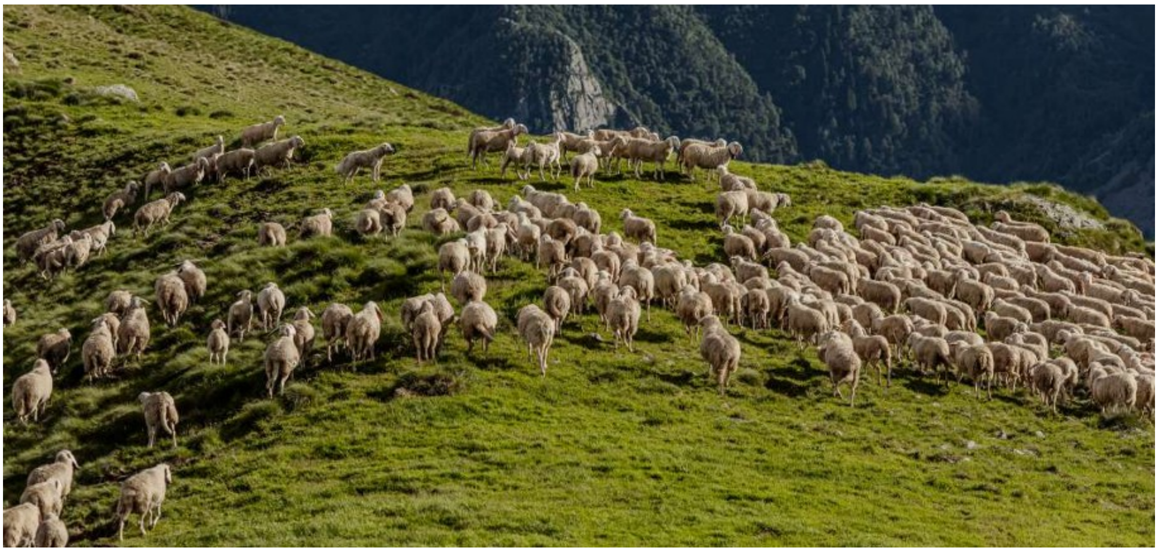

Figure 4.7 — Zegna Authentico®- Certified Merino Wool Sourcing

Source: Ermenegildo Zegna Group (2025) Sustainability Report, p. 85

The image of Authentico®-certified Merino sheep grazing on open green pastures performs a different function from the campaign imagery examined above. In Rose's (2016) compositional terms, the image is structured around scale and specificity: the flock is vast, filling the frame from edge to edge, yet the individual animals remain visible and distinct. The landscape is expansive and unhurried — open green pastures stretching across the frame, with forested mountain slopes visible in the distance. This is not a dramatic or hostile terrain; it is one that communicates conditions under which the wool is produced are presented not as a challenge to be overcome but as a partnership between the flock and the land.

This compositional choice inverts the conventional logic of luxury visual communication. Where luxury advertising typically distances its products from the realities of raw material sourcing — presenting a polished finished object with its origins rendered invisible — Zegna's visual corpus moves in the opposite direction: toward the named place, toward the visible flock, toward the relationship between the brand and the landscapes that sustain its materials. The image does not ask the viewer to desire the product. It asks the viewer to understand where the product begins.

In this sense, the image functions as what might be called supply chain transparency made visual: a form of accountability communicated not through certification logos or disclosure tables but through the aesthetic choice to show, in full, the terrain and the animals that make the garment possible. This is consistent with the traceability philosophy identified in Section 4.5.1: for Zegna, transparency is not a compliance mechanism but a dimension of brand identity — and that identity is communicated as much through images as through words.

The chairman's letters reinforce this throughout the study period. Gildo Zegna (named after the company's founder, his grandfather) signed every sustainability communication from 2022 through 2024, naming his grandfather explicitly as the origin of the brand's values. In 2025, the transition to his sons Edoardo and Angelo as co-chief executive officers is narrated as a generational inheritance rather than a corporate succession: 'carrying our legacy forward with the same passion and courage that have always guided us.' The founding myth does not end — it deepens. The visual and textual registers are entirely coherent with each other: both say, in different registers, that nothing essential has changed since 1929.

The consistency across visual and verbal registers — the landscape images, the colour palette, the chairman's voice, the founding date repeated in every report — produces what Barthes (1972) would recognise as a fully realised myth: a brand identity so consistently performed across so many registers that it no longer reads as strategy but as nature.

The main limitation of Zegna's visual strategy is the tension between territorial specificity and global scale. The narrative's credibility depends on Oasi Zegna being a real, specific, historically anchored place — this valley, this family, this century. As Zegna opens boutiques in Singapore and Aspen, and as the Green Mind initiative attempts to replicate the Oasi model through urban reforestation projects globally, the question arises whether an origin narrative rooted in a particular Italian alpine landscape can travel without losing the authenticity that makes it compelling. This tension cannot be fully resolved within the scope of the 2025 evidence presented in this study and therefore remains open to further investigation. Future research could explore how the Green Mind initiative is received and interpreted in non- European markets, particularly in relation to the portability of place-based sustainability narratives.

The images selected for Zegna's visual analysis represent three distinct registers present across the study period: territorial heritage (Figure 4.5), chromatic identity between garment and landscape (Figure 4.6), and supply chain geography (Figure 4.7). Selection followed the same criteria applied to Prada: analytical relevance to Theme 3 and public availability in sustainability reports and campaign materials published between 2022 and 2025.

4.3.3 What the Visual Comparison Reveals

Comparing the two visual strategies produces one of the clearest findings of this chapter. Prada and Zegna are not just communicating sustainability differently. They are also constructing different kinds of brand identity through their visual choices, and these differences map directly onto the two research questions.

For RQ2 — how brands translate circular innovation into branding narratives — the contrast is instructive. Prada translates circular innovation through institutional amplification: it borrows the authority of National Geographic and UNESCO to make Re-Nylon legible as a genuine ecological commitment. The innovation (regenerated nylon) is real, but the narrative work is done by external institutions rather than the brand's own history. Zegna translates circular innovation through temporal anchoring:

each certified fibre, each traceability improvement, each supply chain relationship is embedded in a century-long founding story that makes the current commitment feel inevitable rather than adopted. The innovation is different (not synthetic substitution but natural stewardship), but the narrative work is done by the brand's own genealogy.

For RQ1 — how circular practices influence brand identity — the comparison also reveals something important. For Prada, the circular practice (Re-Nylon) sits alongside the brand's existing identity without restructuring it. Prada's identity rests on Milanese intellectual heritage and conceptual fashion; Re-Nylon adds a sustainability dimension without altering those foundations. For Zegna, sustainability is not an addition to the identity — it is the foundation of it. The Oasi Cashmere collection, the Filiera, the certified herder relationships: these are not presented as sustainability initiatives. They are presented as what the brand has always been. The circular practice, in Zegna's case, is constitutive of brand identity rather than supplementary to it.

In Barthes' (1972) terms, both brands are engaged in myth-making — but through different raw materials. Prada's myth is institutional: ecological commitment becomes natural and obvious because authoritative institutions have endorsed it. Zegna's myth is genealogical: sustainability becomes natural and obvious because it has always been there, embedded in the founding act.

4.4 Circular Economy in Practice: Two Different Approaches

This section addresses Theme 1 — Circular Economy Practices — by examining the operational approaches through which each brand enacts circularity and what these mean for brand identity in practice. It builds on Section 4.2, moving from how sustainability is communicated to what is operationally being done.

Two terms from the Ellen MacArthur Foundation's (2013) circular economy framework structure the analysis in this section: the technical loop and the biological loop. The technical loop covers the recovery and recycling of synthetic materials — nylon, polyester, plastic — through industrial processes. The biological loop covers the management of natural materials — wool, cashmere, cotton — in ways that support healthy ecosystems and allow natural cycles to continue. This distinction is analytically significant because it moves beyond the general category of 'circular economy' to identify qualitatively different approaches to circularity — one centred on industrial material recovery, the other on the stewardship of natural systems. As the keyword frequency analysis in Section 4.2.3 suggested, Prada and Zegna each orient toward one of these loops. For Prada, the technical loop adds a sustainability dimension to an existing brand identity — circularity is something the brand does. For Zegna, the biological loop is inseparable from the brand's founding narrative — circularity is something the brand is. The sections below examine what this difference means in operational terms.

4.4.1 Prada's Technical Loop: Substitution and Its Limits

Prada's circular economy model is built on substitution: replacing a non-circular material (virgin nylon) with a circular equivalent (regenerated nylon derived from waste). Re-Nylon is a programme that directly serves this purpose. As of 2023, 58% of Prada's nylon and polyester comes from recycled or bio-based sources, which represents a significant improvement compared to the 37% baseline in 2022. Business-to-consumer packaging reached 88% recycled content by 2025, exceeding the Fashion Pact target two years ahead of schedule (Fashion Pact, 2023). In Italy-based production facilities, 98% of textile fibre waste was recycled in 2023.[5]

However, when it comes to the Re-Nylon programme, it is important to point out that while it changes what goes into the product, it does not reduce how many products are produced. The process that Re-Nylon relies on can be considered part of the outer loop. The Ellen MacArthur Foundation's framework establishes a hierarchy of circular strategies: the inner circles — repair, reuse, refurbishment, remanufacturing — retain product value longest and require least resource input. The outer circle — recycling — though valuable, demands more energy and produces lower material recovery rates (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2013). The keyword frequency observations conducted as part of the thematic analysis support this reading: the term "repair" appears 11 times in Prada's 2023 report compared to 51 mentions of "recycle" — suggesting that the brand prioritises new sustainable production rather than extending the life of existing products. Although Prada operates a network of repair laboratories across seven countries, the sustainability narrative clearly places stronger emphasis on Re-Nylon.

The 2024 data also raise a transparency issue. The share of recycled and bio-based nylon and polyester decreased from 58% in 2023 to 52% in 2024, while certified cotton dropped from 54% to 45% over the same period. These declines are not addressed in the 2024

[5] All percentage figures cited in this section are drawn from Prada Group Sustainability Reports (2022–2025), independently assured by KPMG. Available at: pradagroup.com [Accessed: May 2026].

report. In a model whose credibility depends on consistent and measurable progress against specific targets, an unexplained setback is difficult to reconcile with the brand's broader narrative of an ideological commitment to circularity.

From the perspective of RQ1, Prada's technical loop approach adds a sustainability dimension to its brand identity, but it does not fundamentally restructure it. While the circular practices are real and verifiable, they exist alongside the brand's existing identity rather than being fully embedded within it. As a result, this approach generates genuine reputational benefits without altering the core claim the brand makes about who it is.

4.4.2 Zegna's Biological Loop: Stewardship and Its Depth

Zegna's circular economy approach is not based on substituting a synthetic input, but rather on deepening its relationship with natural material sourcing. It invests in fibre certification, the development of supplier relationships, and the responsible management of the landscapes where these fibres are produced. What Zegna refers to as 'Our Filiera', its vertically integrated supply chain model, which spans from raw material to final product and is built on long-term partnerships and significant control, forms the operational foundation of this approach. Zegna either owns or maintains long-term relationships with the companies that process its key fibres, giving the brand a level of supply chain visibility that most luxury brands do not have. It should be noted that the biological loop framing does not eliminate environmental burdens: wool and cashmere production carry significant land use, water, and methane impacts. What Zegna's stewardship approach seeks to do is reduce and responsibly manage these impacts — not eliminate them.

Looking at the results over the study period, certified wool increased from 39% in 2022 to 67% in 2025. This 28 percentage-point growth is the result of working closely with farmers, expanding certification schemes such as the Responsible Wool Standard and the Authentico Integrity Scheme, and maintaining supplier relationships across multiple seasons. Sustainable Fiber Alliance-certified cashmere also increased from 17% to around 35% over the same period. More broadly, traceable top-priority raw materials rose from 25% in 2022 to 42% in 2025. These improvements were made possible through Zegna's continuous and relationship-based investments.

In 2024, Zegna launched the Vellus Aureum collection, introducing a blockchain-linked digital passport for wool provenance and committing to full traceability by 2025. In this way, the biological loop narrative is supported by a digital verification mechanism. While these two approaches are different in nature, they show signs of converging, as both begin to draw on each other's technical tools in response to the same regulatory pressures — particularly the upcoming Digital Product Passport framework.

From the perspective of RQ1, this distinction is analytically significant: when circular practices are embedded in a brand's founding narrative rather than added to it, circularity becomes constitutive of brand value rather than supplementary to it — a qualitatively different relationship between operational practice and brand identity.

4.5 Transparency and Accountability

This section addresses Theme 2 — Transparency and Data-Driven Accountability — by examining each brand's transparency architecture and drawing on independent verification sources. Both brands face the same challenge: how can sustainability claims be made credible when the primary data source is their own reporting?

4.5.1 Two Different Philosophies of Transparency

Across the four reporting cycles examined in this study, 'traceability' appears consistently more than twice as often in Zegna's sustainability reports as in Prada's equivalent document. In 2023 — the most fully comparable year in terms of both brands' disclosure scope — the term appears 16 times in Prada's report and 33 times in Zegna's. This pattern is consistent across the study period and is not a trivial difference.

Prada's approach to transparency is built around digital technology. As a co-founder of the Aura Blockchain Consortium, the brand has been registering selected products on a shared blockchain since April 2022. The authority of Prada's traceability claim does not reside primarily within its supply chain relationships — it is delegated to a distributed ledger operated by a consortium of luxury companies. The supply chain is made legible through a digital overlay rather than through structural ownership. Traceability, for Prada, is a technical property to be embedded in products through digital certification, not a narrative identity to be repeatedly performed in prose. This explains the relatively modest frequency of the term in the report: if the blockchain certificate does the work, textual repetition is redundant. It should be noted that blockchain records what is entered into the system; it cannot independently verify the accuracy of upstream data unless that data is itself independently audited at source.

Zegna's approach starts from the inside out. The Filiera's vertical integration means that Zegna does not need a blockchain to know where its cashmere comes from — it owns or has decades-long relationships with the companies that process it. The 2023 Sustainability Report frames this explicitly: 'Through our long-term relationships with our suppliers, we enjoy favoured access in the procurement of the finest fibres and fabrics, and enhanced traceability and quality control of raw materials.' Traceability here is not a product feature to be verified by a third party — it is a structural property of the organisation itself. The 33 occurrences of 'traceability' in Zegna's report are therefore not repetition for its own sake: they reflect the fact that the concept is genuinely distributed across the brand's governance, product narratives, supply chain discussions, and strategic frameworks — it is a master concept that organises the brand's entire sustainability identity.

4.5.2 What Independent Sources Show

To go beyond self-reported data, this analysis relies on three independent verification sources.

The Fashion Transparency Index (FTI), published annually by Fashion Revolution[6], evaluates major fashion brands across areas such as policy and commitments, governance, traceability, disclosure quality, and key issues, producing a composite score from 0 to 100%. Zegna participates in this index and scored 37% in 2022 and 33% in 2023. In both years, it performed above the average of participating brands in the traceability sub-category. Prada, on the other hand, did not participate in the index during the study period. Prada's decision not to participate may reflect a preference to manage transparency through instruments it co-develops, such as the Aura Blockchain Consortium, although this cannot be confirmed in the absence of an explicit statement from the company. In the analysis, the non-participation is therefore treated as an absence of comparable external benchmarking rather than evidence of a deliberate strategic positioning. This does not necessarily suggest weaker transparency, but it does mean that Prada's traceability claims cannot be independently compared in the same way as Zegna's.

SBTi — a collaboration between the Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP), the United Nations Global Compact, the World Resources Institute, and the World Wide Fund for

[6] Fashion Revolution is a global non-profit movement that campaigns for systemic reform of the fashion industry, with a focus on the need for greater transparency in the fashion supply chain.

Nature — independently checks whether companies' emissions reduction targets are aligned with limiting global warming to 1.5°C. Both brands have submitted targets and received validation. Zegna's net-zero targets were approved in May 2023. Prada's short-term target was a 29.4% reduction in Scope 1 and 2 emissions by 2026, compared to a 2019 baseline. By 2025, Prada had already achieved a 76% reduction, significantly exceeding its target three years early.

The Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP) is a global environmental disclosure system where companies report environmental data to institutional investors. Both brands participate in this system; Zegna received a C score in its first year of participation in 2022. CDP participation adds an investor-facing layer of verification that is independent from each brand's own sustainability narrative.

4.5.3 Key Observations from the Data

The data across the four years tells a consistent but uneven story.

Governance commitments move faster than supply chain ones. Board-level sustainability commitments —SBTi submissions, linking executive pay to sustainability performance, and formalising oversight — were implemented quickly by both brands. Supply chain commitments — traceable materials, certified fibre percentages, Scope 3 reduction — moved more slowly. This is predictable: governance changes are internal decisions, while supply chain transformation requires coordinating with independent actors across multiple countries. The gap between governance progress and supply chain progress is a feature of the category, not a failure of either brand. For RQ1, this suggests that circular practices have a faster and more visible effect on brand positioning than on underlying environmental impact.

Regulation is standardising what gets reported. In 2022, the two brands' disclosure formats were notably different. By 2025, both had converged toward broadly comparable reporting architectures, aligned with Global Reporting Initiative standards and SBTi frameworks. This convergence has been driven by regulatory pressure — particularly the Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation (2022), the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (phased in from the 2024 financial year, with later waves delayed under the EU's 2025 Omnibus package), and the incoming Digital Product Passport framework.

Both brands now disclose similar information but give it very different meanings — a finding directly relevant to RQ2. For brands, this creates an important strategic space: as the data layer converges under regulatory pressure, the narrative layer becomes the primary site of differentiation. Both Prada and Zegna appear to understand this — their communications increasingly acknowledge regulatory requirements while simultaneously embedding those disclosures within distinctive brand stories.

Prada's Carbon Neutrality claim covers only Scope 1 and 2, which represented 5.6% of its total carbon footprint in 2022 and had fallen to 2.4% by 2025. Scope 3 — concentrated in purchased raw materials — is the dimension where the Luxury Circularity Paradox is most directly visible: the leather, regenerated nylon, and other premium inputs that constitute Prada's luxury value are simultaneously the primary source of its environmental impact. Across the study period, Scope 3 accounted for 94.4% of total emissions in 2022, rising to 97.6% by 2025 (Prada Group, 2022–2025). In absolute terms, Scope 3 emissions fell from 310,275 tCO_2e in 2022 to 280,439 tCO_2e in 2025 — a reduction of approximately 10%. But as Scope 1 and 2 fell faster through renewable energy procurement and carbon offsetting, Scope 3's proportional share of the total footprint increased. The headline carbon neutrality achievement and the underlying Scope 3 reality are not contradictory; they describe different things. One measures what can be controlled through operational decisions. The other measures what cannot yet be resolved — the raw materials that define the product.

Zegna's progress is slower but more structurally embedded. Certified wool from 39% to 67%, traceable raw materials from 25% to 42%, and 100% renewable electricity three years ahead of target: these improvements required sustained coordination with farmers, certifiers, and suppliers over multiple years. They are harder to achieve than switching an energy supplier, and harder for a competitor to replicate without comparable vertical integration. Zegna's Scope 3 data tell a similar structural story. Scope 3 accounted for 96.7% of total emissions in 2022, falling marginally to 96.0% in 2024 before rising again to 97.8% in 2025 — despite a 27% reduction in absolute Scope 3 emissions over the period, driven primarily by strategic purchasing decisions in the Purchased Goods and Services category. The pattern confirms what the biological loop strategy would predict: sourcing more responsibly reduces absolute impact but does not alter the fundamental relationship between raw material dependency and environmental footprint. The paradox is not resolved. It is managed.

4.6 Commitments, Regulatory Readiness, and Limitations

What emerges is a pattern this thesis terms structured credibility management: a combination of genuine operational progress — verifiable, independently audited, financially disciplined —with carefully designed narrative amplification, deployed to sustain stakeholder confidence within structural limits that neither brand has the capacity to fully overcome. This is analytically distinct from greenwashing, which implies the absence of underlying practice. Both brands have practice. What they also have is a structural ceiling — the Luxury Circularity Paradox — that their practice cannot breach. The communication strategies examined in this chapter are best understood not as deception but as the management of an irresolvable tension.

4.6.1 Financial Commitments

One dimension of both brands' sustainability architecture that is easy to overlook in an analysis focused on communication is the financial commitment they have made to their sustainability targets.

In July 2022, Zegna signed sustainability-linked financing agreements totalling 190 million euros (Ermenegildo Zegna Group, 2022) — revolving credit lines for seven years — with pricing conditions tied to two independently verified targets: at least 50% of top-priority raw materials traced to their geographic origin and from lower-impact sources by 2026, and 100% of electricity from renewable sources in Europe and the United States by 2024 (Ermenegildo Zegna Group, 2022). The renewable electricity target was met in 2024; the traceable materials figure stood at 42% as of 2025.

Prada's sustainability-linked financing goes back to 2019. The first loan was signed with Crédit Agricole and subsequently extended with Intesa Sanpaolo and UniCredit. Pricing conditions are tied to Re-Nylon adoption as a share of collection output, the number of Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design-certified or equivalent stores opened globally, and annual employee training hours (Prada Group, 2022).

These instruments matter for three reasons. First, they introduce a mechanism of financial discipline that operates independently of reputational incentives — missed targets increase borrowing costs regardless of whether consumers or journalists notice. Second, they create what Flammer (2021) calls 'credible commitment' — the brand signals to capital markets that its sustainability claims are not merely rhetorical by accepting a quantified financial consequence for non-performance. Third, the specific conditions tied to each instrument reveal which sustainability claims each brand considers central enough to stake its cost of capital on.

Zegna's loan conditions are tied to traceable raw materials — the operational dimension of its origin narrative. Prada's are tied to the Re-Nylon and certified retail infrastructure — the visible outputs of its substitution model. Each brand has, in effect, staked its cost of capital on the sustainability claim that defines it.

4.6.2 Digital Product Passport Readiness

The EU's Digital Product Passport (DPP), introduced under the Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation (EU 2024/1781), will require all garments to carry a machine-readable record of material composition, environmental footprint, and end-of-life options (European Union, 2024; Carvalho et al., 2025; Rinaldi et al., 2022). The specific implementation timeline for textile products is still being determined by delegated acts under the regulation, but both brands examined in this study are already preparing for compliance.

Both brands are preparing, and their preparations again reflect different underlying approaches. Prada's Radio-Frequency Identification-tagged product authentication system, operational for selected products since April 2022 through the Aura Blockchain Consortium, already approximates what the Digital Product Passport will require: a tamper-proof, machine-readable product record. In technical terms, Prada is reasonably well-positioned for compliance.

Zegna's preparation starts from the data side. Its Filiera structure means that the material provenance information the Digital Product Passport will need already exists in some form - the brand has traceable relationships with its fibre suppliers. The Vellus Aureum blockchain-linked digital passport, introduced in 2024, can be seen as a first prototype of the digital vehicle needed to carry that data.

When the Digital Product Passport becomes mandatory, both the format and the content of product-level sustainability disclosure will be standardised. This will likely further narrow the differences in what the two brands report. What it is less likely to affect is how they frame and communicate that data — whether it is presented as evidence of verified technological accountability (as Prada tends to do) or as the digital expression of long-standing custodial relationships with materials and places (as Zegna tends to do). The data layer may converge; the identity layer is likely to remain differentiated.

4.6.3 Limitations of the Analysis

Before closing, it is important to acknowledge some limitations in the analysis presented in this chapter. The primary data sources — sustainability reports produced by Prada and Zegna — are strategic documents. Both brands have an interest in presenting their progress favourably, and the qualitative narrative sections of these reports are authored with communication goals in mind, not just disclosure obligations. While the use of independent verification sources (the Fashion Transparency Index, Science Based Targets initiative records, and Carbon Disclosure Project data) helps cross-check the quantitative claims, it does not fully resolve this limitation. It should also be noted that Prada's 2022 sustainability report was not independently assured; quantitative disclosures from this year are therefore treated with slightly more caution than data from subsequent reporting cycles, which were independently assured by Deloitte & Touche S.p.A. (2023–2024) and KPMG S.p.A. (2025). The narrative framing of each brand's sustainability identity has been interpreted as strategically intentional, which is a reasonable assumption - but without access to internal documents, interview data, or consumer research, the analysis cannot assess the intentions behind specific communication choices or how audiences receive them.

The two-brand scope is a further limitation. The patterns identified here — the governance — supply chain asymmetry, the data layer convergence, the different approaches to credibility construction — may well apply beyond Prada and Zegna, but this cannot be confirmed from two cases alone. Future research extending the comparison to other luxury brands or incorporating primary fieldwork such as interviews with sustainability managers or supply chain actors, would be well-placed to test and develop the observations made here.

4.6.4 Conclusion

The picture that emerges from this chapter is neither straightforwardly celebratory nor dismissive. Both brands demonstrate tangible, independently verified progress across key sustainability dimensions, yet both remain bound by a structural constraint — the Luxury Circularity Paradox — that resists full resolution within the current luxury business model.

What distinguishes the two brands is not the presence of this constraint, but their specific strategic modalities of response: Prada through institutional amplification — using partnerships with scientific and cultural institutions to present its circular economy commitment as a broader ecological mission — and Zegna through temporal anchoring — embedding current sustainability practices in a century-long founding narrative that makes them appear inevitable rather than adopted. Both strategies are credible. Neither resolves the underlying tension.

This analysis suggests that sustainability in luxury fashion is best understood not as a binary choice between authenticity and performance, but as a complex process of managing institutional credibility within systemic limits. The financial instruments, regulatory preparations, and narrative architectures examined in this chapter are all, in different ways, responses to the same irresolvable tension. The broader significance of these findings for luxury sustainability theory is addressed in Chapter 5, which presents the discussion and conclusion of this thesis.

Chapter 5: Conclusion: Narrative Strategies and the Limits of Circular Luxury

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings presented in Chapter 4 in relation to the study's two research questions and the theoretical framework established in the methodology. The analysis reveals that circular economy practices do not impact luxury brand identities in a uniform way. Instead, the outcome depends on two key factors: first how deeply sustainability is woven into the brand's core narrative, and second, how effectively the brand translates these operational shifts into credible messaging for its stakeholders. Rather than repeating the empirical evidence, it draws on the patterns identified across the four analytical sections to address what those patterns mean — for the brands examined, for the luxury sustainability field, and for the theoretical frameworks applied. The chapter is structured as follows: Section 5.2 addresses the two research questions directly; Section 5.3 discusses the theoretical implications of the findings; Section 5.4 considers practical implications; Section 5.5 acknowledges the study's limitations and suggests that directions for the future research; and section 5.6 presents the conclusion.

5.2 From Findings to Interpretation: Circular Economy, Brand Identity, and Narrative Strategy

RQ1: "How do circular and sustainability-driven practices influence brand identity and brand value?"

The findings presented in Chapter 4 suggest that circular and sustainability-driven practices influence brand identity in qualitatively different ways, depending on how deeply embedded they are in each brand's founding narrative.

For Prada, circular economy practices function as an addition to an existing brand identity. The Re-Nylon programme, the SEA BEYOND initiative, and the sustainability-linked financial instruments all represent genuine commitments — but they sit alongside Prada's core identity of Milanese intellectual rigour and conceptual fashion rather than constituting it. Circularity, in this case, expands the brand's value proposition without restructuring it.

For Zegna, circular economy practices are constitutive of brand identity rather than supplementary to it. The Oasi Zegna reserve, the Filiera, the certified herder relationships, and the multigenerational family narrative are not presented as sustainability initiatives added to an existing identity — they are presented as what the brand has always been. Circularity here is not something the brand does; it is something the brand is.

The data also reveals a consistent asymmetry between governance progress and supply chain progress. Both brands implemented board-level sustainability commitments — SBTi submissions, executive pay linked to sustainability targets, formalised oversight structures — relatively quickly. Supply chain transformation, by contrast, moved more slowly: certified fibre percentages, traceable raw materials, and Scope 3 emissions all improved at a slower pace. This asymmetry suggests that circular practices have a faster and more visible effect on brand positioning than on underlying environmental impact — a finding with implications for how brand value and environmental value are understood in relation to sustainability commitments.

The second research question shifts attention from the influence of circular practices on brand identity to the communicative strategies through which those practices are translated into brand narratives.

RQ2: "How do fashion brands translate circular innovation into branding narrative and strategic positioning?"

Prada translates circular innovation through institutional amplification — drawing on the authority of external scientific and cultural institutions to make its circular commitments legible as genuine ecological engagement. The National Geographic partnership, the UNESCO-IOC collaboration, and the casting of globally recognised actor-activists such as Benedict Cumberbatch and Emma Watson all function as credibility transfer: the brand borrows authority it cannot generate internally. In Suchman's (1995) terms, this is primarily a moral legitimacy strategy — building the perception that the brand is doing the right thing through institutional endorsement.

Zegna's approach works differently. Rather than borrowing external authority, the brand draws on its own history: each certified fibre, each traceability figure, each supply chain relationship is presented as part of a story that began in 1910. In Barthes' (1972) terms, this is myth-making — the way a historically specific set of decisions comes to feel like it was always inevitable. When Zegna reports on regulatory compliance, it does not read as an achievement. It reads as confirmation of what the brand already was. One finding stands out in relation to RQ2. As the EU regulatory framework increasingly determines what brands must disclosure — GRI standards, SBTi targets, CDP scores — the categories of information reported by Prada and Zegna have begun to converge. By 2025, both brands publish broadly similar data: emission trajectories, certified material percentages, supply chain traceability metrics. But the same data tells very different stories depending on the brand that frames it. For Prada, a 76% Scope 1 and 2 reduction is evidence of technological progress. For Zegna, a 67% certified wool figure is confirmation of a custodial relationship that predates modern sustainability reporting by decades. This suggests that as disclosure becomes standardised, the narrative layer — how information is contextualised and given meaning — becomes the primary site of competitive differentiation. [7]

5.3 Theoretical Implications: Legitimacy, Myth, and the Limitations of Circular Transformation

The findings in Chapter 4 point toward three interconnected theoretical questions. The first is about legitimacy: how do two brands operating in the same regulatory environment construct such a different relationship with their stakeholders. The second concerns structural limits: what does circular transformation look like when the business model itself creates the environmental problem? The third is about visual communication: what do images do beyond illustrate a brand's sustainability strategy? Together, these questions open onto a theoretical landscape in which the tools available to luxury brands — narrative, finance, imagery, verification — are genuinely sophisticated but ultimately bounded by the structural condition this thesis calls the Luxury Circularity Paradox.

5.3.1 Legitimacy Construction: Applying Suchman's Framework

The findings of this study can be understood through Suchman's (1995) framework of organisational legitimacy, which distinguishes between three types: pragmatic, moral and cognitive legitimacy. Applied to the two cases examined here, the framework maps directly onto the legitimacy positions the findings reveal.

Pragmatic legitimacy is perhaps the most straightforward of the three. It is built though things that can be verified: certified supply chains, independently audited emissions data, SBTi-aligned targets, and sustainability-linked loans that carry real financial

[7] Unless otherwise stated, all quantitative figures cited in this chapter are drawn from Prada Group Sustainability Reports (2022–2025) and Ermenegildo Zegna Group Sustainability Reports (2022–2025), as detailed in Chapter 4.

consequences for non-performance. Both brands have invested significantly here — Prada through Deloitte and KPMG assurance, Zegna through CDP participation and verified SBTi targets. Neither brand is simply making claims. Both are providing evidence that can be checked.

Moral legitimacy is built through the perception that the organization is doing the right thing. Here the two brands diverge significantly. Prada constructs moral legitimacy through institutional association — the National Geographic partnership, the UNESCO-IOC collaboration, and the casting of actor-activists signal that the brand's ecological commitment is endorsed by actors whose moral authority it could not generate internally. Zegna constructs moral legitimacy through heritage narrative — the founding act of 1929, the Oasi, and the multigenerational family commitment present ecological stewardship as an inherited obligation rather than a strategic choice.

Cognitive legitimacy — the deepest form, where an organisation's behaviour becomes so consistently familiar that audiences simply take it for granted as appropriate — is asymmetrically distributed between the two brands. Zegna has a structural advantage here: the Oasi narrative, reinforced across decades of brand communication, creates a degree of taken-for-grantedness (Suchman, 1995) that Prada's more recently constructed sustainability identity cannot yet match. Prada is building toward cognitive legitimacy, while Zegna's communication is better positioned to claim it; however, in the absence of audience research, the extent to which stakeholders actually take Zegna's sustainability identity for granted cannot be confirmed.

This legitimacy analysis can be refined at the level of communicative practice through the impression management taxonomy proposed by Iazzi et al. (2025), who distinguish three strategic orientations: assertive tactics, which proactively construct a favourable image through positive framing; performance-oriented tactics, which deploy verified metrics and benchmarks to portray the firm favourably; and defensive tactics, which seek to repair legitimacy following reputational damage.

Applied to the present study, the taxonomy maps onto both brands — but with an important modification that the luxury context demands. Zegna's temporal anchoring is nominally performance-oriented — certified fibre percentages, traceable supply chains, Oasi stewardship data — but these metrics are not deployed as performance claims. They are presented as confirmations of what the brand has always been. In Barthes' (1972) terms, performance data is absorbed into myth: it no longer asks to be evaluated but to be accepted. This finding suggests that in the luxury context, Iazzi et al.'s performance-oriented category requires theoretical extension: when verified data is embedded within a mythological founding narrative, it ceases to function as performance communication and becomes identity communication. The brand deploys verified data — certified fibre percentages, traceable supply chains, Oasi stewardship figures — in a way that does not function as performance evidence. Instead, these figures are presented as confirmation of an identity that predates modern sustainability reporting. The data does not ask to be evaluated; it asks to be accepted. This finding is offered as one of the study's explicit theoretical contributions: in the luxury context, verified performance data can cease to function primarily as evidence of performance and instead become a form of identity communication when embedded within a mythological founding narrative. This transformation suggests a limitation in existing impression management literature, which does not fully account for how audited metrics may be recontextualised as narrative confirmations of pre-existing brand identity rather than as independently evaluable performance indicators.

What is notable is that neither brand shows signs of defensive communication — the reactive kind that appears when legitimacy needs repairing after criticism or scandal. Iazzi et al. (2025) associate this mode with damage control rather than credibility building. Its absence here is telling. Prada is actively constructing a sustainability identity through new partnerships and verified data; Zegna is sustaining a legitimacy that its territorial narrative has built over decades. The difference matters: one brand is earning credibility, the other is drawing on a reserve it has accumulated across generations. In Suchman's (1995) terms, neither is engaged in legitimacy repair — a pattern that reflect the structural confidence of brands whose sustainability commitments are financially disciplined, independently verified, and narratively coherent.

5.3.2 The Luxury Circularity Paradox: Structural Limits of Circular Transition

A second theoretical contribution of this study concerns what has been termed the Luxury Circularity Paradox — the structural incompatibility between the premium raw materials that constitute luxury value and the circular economy's emphasis on reducing material throughput.

The existing literature has long noted a tension between luxury and sustainability (Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau, 2017; Akrout and Guercini, 2022). What this study adds is a more specific version of that tension, tied to circular economy logic. The data makes it concrete: across the study period, between 94% and 98% of each brand's total carbon footprint sits in Scope 3 — 94.4% for Prada in 2022, rising to 97.6% by 2025; 96.7% for Zegna in 2022, reaching 97.8% by 2025. Cashmere, merino wool, regenerated nylon: these are not incidental inputs. They are the reason the products command the prices they do. And they are also where the environmental problem is concentrated. This is not a failure of ambition. It is a structural condition.

Corvellec et al. (2022) argue that the circular economy, as currently conceptualised, tends to assume that material flows can be optimised without challenging the underlying logic of production and consumption. The findings of this study support this critique in the luxury context: both brands make genuine progress on Scope 1 and 2 emissions and material certifications, but neither has been able to substantially reduce Scope 3 — the dimension most directly tied to the business model itself. Full circularity, in this sense, would require not just material substitution or supply chain certification, but a fundamental rethinking of what luxury value is and where it comes from. Neither brand — arguably, the luxury sector as a whole — is yet positioned to make that move.

Corvellec et al. (2022, p.424) make a relevant observation here: brands that have had most success with circular business models tend to be premium or luxury players — not because they are more virtuous, but because their positioning makes slowing resource flows commercially viable. This study's findings fit that pattern. Prada and Zegna can credibly commit to circularity precisely because their model is built on quality and scarcity rather than volume. But that same positioning is what makes full circular transformation structurally improbable. The conditions that make the commitment credible are the same conditions that make the paradox irresolvable.

What both brands have developed, in different ways, is a capacity to manage this tension rather than resolve it. This thesis calls that capacity structured credibility management. It is not greenwashing — both brands produce independently verified data and have accepted real financial consequences for sustainability performance. But it is not full circular transformation either, which would require rethinking the business model itself. It sits somewhere in between: genuine progress, carefully communicated, within limits that neither brand has yet found a way to transcend. It is analytically distinct from greenwashing as defined by Adamkiewicz et al. (2022, p.2): "the practise of falsely promoting an organization's environmental efforts or spending more resources to promote the organization as green that are spent to actually engage in environmentally sound practices." Both Prada and Zegna produce independently verified progress reports and have tied borrowing costs to specific sustainability targets. This places them outside a straightforward greenwashing definition — though greenwashing is a contested concept, and the thesis does not claim that the cases are entirely free of selective framing. But it does not place them inside full circular transformation either — that would require resolving the underlying structural incompatibility rather than managing it. The concept of "helpful hypocrisy", discussed in Adamkiewicz et al. (2022), captures something adjacent but not identical. That idea suggests that ambiguity between commitments and performance can sometimes generate productive critical engagement. Structured credibility management is not ambiguous in that way — both brands are relatively transparent about what they have achieved and what they have not. The gap they operate within is not one of deception, but of structural constraint. Critical stakeholders may well recognise it; the brands themselves do not appear to deny it.

5.3.3 Visual Communication as Brand Identity: Rose and Barthes

The visual analysis presented in Chapter 4 draws on two theoretical frameworks — Rose's (2016) approach to visual communication and Barthes' (1972) concept of myth — and the findings of that analysis carry implications that extend beyond the specific images examined.

Rose's framework directs attention to how images produce meaning through composition, colour, and the relationship between image and text. The comparative visual analysis reveals that both brands use these elements strategically, but toward different ends. Prada's visual grammar — the product placed against fishing nets, the coral reef without a product, the actor-activist in place of a fashion model — consistently works to displace conventional luxury aesthetics with an ecological register. The composition does not hide that this is a constructed image; it uses that construction to make an argument. Zegna's visual grammar works differently: the restraint of the Oasi images, the chromatic correspondence between garment and landscape, the absence of human figures in the nature reserve photographs — all operate to suggest that the brand's relationship with its environment is not constructed at all, but simply visible. Rose's framework makes this difference analytically legible: both brands are producing meaning through composition, but one foregrounds the argument while the other naturalises it.

This is where Barthes' (1972) concept of myth becomes essential. Myth, for Barthes (1972), is the process by which historically contingent choices are naturalised as timeless givens. Applied to the visual analysis, the distinction becomes clear: Prada's visuals are closer to rhetoric — they make an argument that the viewer is invited to evaluate. Zegna's visuals are closer to myth — they present a situation that the viewer is invited to accept. The Re-Nylon campaign says, 'look at what we are doing.' The Oasi campaign says 'look at what we are.' This difference is not merely aesthetic. It has direct implications for the durability of each brand's sustainability identity: rhetorical legitimacy must be continuously renewed through new arguments and new institutional associations, while mythological legitimacy — if successfully established — becomes self-sustaining.

Together, Rose and Barthes illuminate a dimension of the findings that quantitative data alone cannot capture: the way in which visual communication does not simply illustrate a brand's sustainability strategy but constitutes it. For both Prada and Zegna, the image is not evidence of the commitment — it is the commitment, made visible and legible to the audiences that matter most.

5.4 Practical Implications

The findings of this study carry several implications for practitioners in the luxury sector.

First, one practical implication cuts across all the other. As regulatory requirements standardise what brands must disclose, the data layer of sustainability communication becomes increasingly uniform. By 2025, most large luxury brands are reporting against the same frameworks. What remains differentiated is how that data is framed. As the EU's Digital Product Passport framework and Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive standardise what brands must report, the strategic value of sustainability communication will shift decisively toward how that information is framed and what narrative it is embedded within. What Kaur et al. (2024) make clear is that sustainability only works as a differentiator when it runs through the entire value chain — not when it sits on top of existing practices as a layer of communication. This matters more as EU disclosure requirements tighten. When the data is mandated and publicly available, what separates brands is not what they report but whether their sustainability story holds up against what they do.

The Prada–Zegna comparison also raises a practical question for luxury brands more broadly: which path is available to you? Not every brand has a century-old nature reserve or a founding story rooted in land stewardship. For brands in that position — where the founding identity is not ecologically grounded — the Prada model is probably the more realistic template. Build credibility through partnerships, verified data, and the careful selection of public figures whose values align with where the brand wants to go. For brands that do have deep craft or territorial heritage, Kaur et al. (2024) suggest the advantage is structural: longevity, quality, and place-based identity already mirror circular economy logic. The challenge is making that connection explicit rather than leaving it implicit.

Consumer expectations are also part of this picture, and they are moving in a direction that makes things harder, not easier. Kaur et al. (2024) describe a gradual shift among luxury consumers — less driven by status signalling alone, more shaped by what they call 'conscientious value': the sense that a purchase should reflect ethical awareness as well as taste. In practice, this means audiences are getting better at spotting what Adamkiewicz et al. (2022) call 'sustainability decoys' — initiatives that look like accountability but function more like cover. Prada's independently assured data and Zegna's traceable supply chains are both attempts to sit on the right side of that line. But having verified data is only half the challenge. The other half is making sure the story built around it is consistent with what the data shows — because an incoherent narrative around otherwise robust data risk undermining perceived credibility, although the precise reputational consequences of such inconsistency would require consumer perception or longitudinal reputational data to be empirically established.

Fourth, the sustainability linked financial instruments examined in this study — Zegna's €190 million ESG credit facility and Prada's loans tied to Re-Nylon adoption and certified store targets — suggests that credible commitment, in Flammer's (2021) sense, requires not just narrative but financial consequence. Brands seeking to strengthen the credibility of their sustainability claims may find that linking borrowing costs to specific, independently verified targets is among the most effective tools available — precisely because it creates accountability that operates independently of reputational incentives.

5.5 Limitations and Future Research

This study examined two cases — Prada and Zegna — and makes no claim that its findings extend automatically to the luxury sector. The patterns identified across the study period — governance commitments outpacing supply chain transformation, narrative differentiation persisting under regulatory convergence, and circular transformation encountering structural limits — may well be recognisable in other luxury contexts. But two theoretically motivated cases cannot confirm this. Prada and Zegna were selected because they represent a meaningful analytical contrast, not because they are statistically representative of the sector. The findings are therefore offered as transferable insights that future research might test, extend, or challenge — not as conclusions that generalise without further examination.

A second limitation concerns the study's exclusive reliance on brand-produced documents and publicly available campaign materials. Sustainability reports are strategic communications as much as they are disclosure documents (Merkl-Davies and Brennan, 2007): both brands have an interest in presenting their progress favourably, and the qualitative narrative sections of these reports are authored with communication goals in mind. While the use of independent verification sources — the Fashion Transparency Index, SBTi records, and Carbon Disclosure Project data — helps cross-check quantitative claims, it cannot resolve the fundamental interpretive challenge of working with self-reported data.

Third, the study does not examine how consumers receive or interpret the sustainability narratives analysed here. The analysis is entirely supply-side: it examines how brands construct and communicate their sustainability identities, not whether those constructions are effective, believed or acted upon by audiences they address. As Holmqvist et al. (2025) demonstrate, consumer engagement with circular luxury is dynamic and evolves over time — a dimension that the present study cannot capture.

These limitations point toward productive directions for future research. A comparative study extending the analysis to other luxury houses would allow the patterns identified here to be tested and refined. Hermès is a theoretically distinct case because its circular strategy centres on repair and extreme product longevity — an inner-loop approach that prioritises repair and product longevity more explicitly than either Re-Nylon or Zegna's certification-based strategy. Gucci, operating within Kering's group-level sustainability infrastructure, represents a different model again: one in which brand-level sustainability narratives are shaped by a parent company's overarching governance framework, raising questions about how sustainability legitimacy is constructed when authority resides at the group rather than brand level.

Interviews with sustainability directors and supply chain managers would reach the intentions and internal realities that documents alone cannot access. Such primary fieldwork would be a natural next step for research building on this study's findings.

Longitudinal research tracking both brands' responses to the Digital Product Passport implementation would provide a natural test case for the thesis's central claim that narrative differentiation will persist even as data disclosure converges. As product-level disclosure becomes increasingly standardised through emerging regulatory frameworks, future research will be able to examine whether brands continue to differentiate themselves primarily through narrative and symbolic strategies.

5.6 Conclusion

Luxury fashion's relationship with circular economy logic is, this study has argued, irreducibly paradoxical. The materials that constitute luxury value are simultaneously the primary source of each brand's environmental footprint — and these structural conditions cannot be resolved by the tools currently available to either brand. What the study has shown is not that both brands are failing, but that both are managing a genuine structural constraint with sophistication, credibility, and — within the limits of that constraint — real operational progress. The comparative analysis of Prada and Zegna across 2022–2025 has produced findings that speak to both research questions, while also surfacing the structural conditions that shape what circular transformation in this sector can realistically achieve. This paradox is developed here as an interpretive concept, grounded in the close reading of two cases rather than established as a general theory proven across the luxury sector. The Luxury Circularity Paradox describes a pattern observed in Prada and Zegna's sustainability communication between 2022 and 2025; whether it holds as a structural feature of luxury more broadly is a question this study raises but cannot answer.

In response to RQ1, the evidence suggests that circular practices do not influence brand identity in a uniform way: their effect depends critically on the degree to which circularity is embedded in a brand's founding narrative. For Prada, circular initiatives function as an expansion of an existing identity defined by Milanese intellectual rigour and conceptual fashion. For Zegna, circularity is constitutive of brand identity: the Oasi reserve, the Filiera, and the multigenerational family narrative present ecological stewardship not as a sustainability strategy but as an inheritance. This distinction — between circularity as supplement and circularity as constitution — has implications for the durability of sustainability identity under regulatory convergence. As the EU disclosure framework standardises the categories of data that brands must report, the narrative layer becomes the primary site of differentiation. Brands whose sustainability identity is constitutive rather than supplementary appear to possess a structural advantage in this environment; however, this remains an interpretive proposition that would require consumer or market-level evidence to be empirically confirmed. This represents a future empirical test rather than a confirmed outcome: the thesis cannot predict how brands will adapt, but it suggests that the pressure to differentiate through narrative is likely to intensify under conditions of increasing data standardisation.

Whether institutional amplification or temporal anchoring proves more durable under full data transparency is a question this study cannot answer — but it is, perhaps, the most consequential one the luxury sustainability field now faces.

Two distinct translational strategies have been identified in response to RQ2: institutional amplification, in Prada's case, and temporal anchoring, in Zegna's. These are not simply different communication styles. They reflect different legitimacy positions, different brand histories, and fundamentally different relationships between sustainability and brand identity. For Prada, sustainability is something the brand does. For Zegna, it is something the brand is. The analysis further reveals that as regulatory standardisation converges the data layer of sustainability communication, the narrative layer will become increasingly important as a site of strategic differentiation. The same categories of information — emission trajectories, certified material percentages, supply chain traceability — carry entirely different meanings depending on the narrative architecture within which they are embedded.

Both findings are shaped by the same structural condition — what this thesis calls the Luxury Circularity Paradox. Corvellec et al. (2022) have argued that circular economy frameworks tend to avoid confronting the underlying logic of production. This study shows what that avoidance looks like in practice: 94–98% of each brand's total carbon footprint is concentrated in Scope 3, in the raw materials that constitute their value proposition. The problem is not at the margins. It is at the centre. Both brands manage this paradox through structured credibility management — a combination of genuine operational progress and carefully framed strategic communication — which is analytically distinguishable from greenwashing as defined by Adamkiewicz et al. (2022) precisely because it involves independently verified progress, but which equally falls short of the systemic transformation that full circularity would require.

The study's contribution is therefore threefold. Conceptually — offered as an interpretive proposition derived from two cases rather than a generalised theory — it maps the narrative strategies through which luxury brands manage the Luxury Circularity Paradox under conditions of regulatory convergence — showing that as data disclosure standardises, the narrative architecture through which brands give meaning to that data becomes the primary site of differentiation. Two such strategies are identified and empirically grounded: institutional amplification, in Prada's case, and temporal anchoring, in Zegna's. Theoretically, the study extends Suchman's (1995) legitimacy framework to the context of circular transition, showing that pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy are not equally accessible to all brands — they depend on heritage position and the degree to which sustainability is structurally embedded rather than strategically appended. The IM taxonomy of Iazzi et al. (2025) adds a further layer, showing how different communicative tactics map onto these legitimacy positions in ways that the luxury context requires us to rethink. Empirically, the four-year comparison across 2022-2025 captures both brands navigating a period of significant regulatory intensification — and what that period reveals is consistent across both cases: governance-level commitments moved faster than supply chain transformation, and the gap between the two widened as regulatory pressure increased.

These contributions are offered as transferable insights rather than universal findings. The patterns identified — narrative differentiation under regulatory convergence, the structural limits of circular transformation, the asymmetry between governance and supply chain progress — may well apply across the luxury sector, but two cases cannot confirm this. Future work might extend the comparison to other luxury houses, incorporate interviews with those responsible for sustainability decisions, or track both brands through Digital Product Passport implementation — a moment that will test whether narrative differentiation persists under the standardisation of data disclosure. The

Digital Product Passport represents the most direct institutional test of this thesis's central claim. When product-level data becomes mandatory and standardised, the question is whether brands will compete primarily through the narratives they construct around the data, or whether increased transparency will reduce the space for such differentiation. This remains an empirical question that the present study cannot answer.

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Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools

The undersigned, Aslı SAKRUCA, student ID number 901065, enrolled at Ca' Foscari in the Master's Degree Programme in Global Development & Entrepreneurship, author of the degree thesis titled "Managing the Paradox: Circular Economy Practices and Sustainability Communication in Fashion: A Comparative Case Study of Prada Group and Ermenegildo Zegna Group (2022–2025)", under the supervision of Prof. Annalisa COLOMBINO, aware of the penalties provided for in Article 76 of the Consolidated Act set out in Presidential Decree no. 445 of 28 December 2000, and of the loss of benefits provided for in Article 75 of the same Consolidated Act in the event of false or misleading statements, under her own responsibility pursuant to Articles 46 and 47 of Presidential Decree no. 445 of 28 December 2000,

DECLARES

☐ that she has NOT used generative artificial intelligence technologies to support various aspects of the research and writing of the degree thesis;

☑ that she HAS used generative artificial intelligence technologies to support various aspects of the research and writing of her degree thesis, in particular:

The tools used were ChatGPT, GPT-5.5 Thinking, accessed in June 2026, and Claude, accessed in June 2026 through the version available via its web interface.

The tools were used for revision and optimisation of texts to improve clarity, coherence, grammar, academic tone, and structural flow; for support in drafting and reformulating selected sentences; for proofreading; for checking consistency across sections; for assistance with the abstract; and for support in preparing the wording of this AI declaration. The tools were not used to generate empirical data, conduct independent analysis, create charts or diagrams, produce illustrative images, or replace the author's own academic interpretation.

The sections concerned were Chapters 1–5 of the thesis, the abstract, and the final formatting and language review. AI assistance was used only as a support tool for linguistic refinement, clarity, coherence, and presentation. The research design, theoretical framework, case selection, source selection, data interpretation, findings, arguments, and conclusions remain the author's own work.

The accuracy, quality, and reliability of any AI-assisted text were verified by the author through careful review, comparison with the thesis sources and cited literature, cross-checking against the data presented in the sustainability reports and independent benchmarks, and manual revision of all suggested wording. All AI-assisted outputs were critically evaluated, edited, and reworked before being included in the final thesis.

DECLARES FURTHER

that all material generated or supported by AI has been carefully checked, reviewed and reworked by the author, who assumes full responsibility for the quality, accuracy and scientific integrity of the work.