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What is sustainable fashion?

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine what the term sustainable fashion means from the perspective of micro-organisations, experts, and consumers.

Design/methodology/approach – This research is qualitative in nature, utilising a multi-methods case study approach (semi-structured interviews, semiotics, questionnaires). Grounded analysis was applied to analyse the data.

Findings – Findings indicate that interpretation of sustainable fashion is context and person dependent. A matrix of key criteria provides the opportunity to find common elements.

Research limitations/implications – Due to the nature of this research the sample size is limited and may not be generalised. Data were collected in the UK and are limited to a geographical region.

Practical implications – An important implication is that defining sustainable fashion is vital in order to avoid challenges, such as greenwashing, which were faced in other industries that have a longer history in sustainable practices. Micro-organisations should take advantage of identifying key sustainable fashion criteria, which will enable them to promote their fashion collections more effectively.

Social implications – The criteria identified provide assurance for consumers that sustainable fashion is produced with social aspects in mind (fair wages, good working conditions).

Originality/value – The paper proposes a matrix that allows micro-organisations to clearly identify their collections as sustainable.

Keywords UK, Sustainability, Fashion, Sustainable fashion, Micro-organisation, Sustainable fashion criteria

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The second anniversary of the Rana Plaza factory incident marks an increased interest in sustainable fashion and ethical practices in the industry (Westervelt, 2015). With sustainability emerging as a "megatrend" (Mittelstaedt *et al.*, 2014) the fashion landscape changes dramatically, whereby sustainable fashion becomes increasingly mainstream (Watson and Yan, 2013; Mora *et al.*, 2014). Extant research predominantly focussed on sustainable fashion consumption (e.g. Joy *et al.*, 2012; Cao *et al.*, 2014) rather than on establishing an academic understanding towards sustainable fashion, which is part of the slow fashion movement (Jung and Jin, 2014). This paper utilises a social constructionist approach to address this gap.

Sustainable fashion is part of the slow fashion movement, developed over the past decades, and used interchangeably with eco-, green-, and ethical-fashion (Carey and Cervellon, 2014). Sustainable fashion first emerged in the 1960s, when consumers became aware of the impact clothing manufacturing had on the environment and demanded the industry change its practices (Jung and Jin, 2014). Although eco-fashion was negatively perceived at first this changed with anti-fur campaigns emerging in the 1980s/1990s, followed by an interest in ethical clothing in the late 1990s. Ethical fashion is associated with fair working conditions, a sustainable business model (Joergens, 2006), organic and environmentally friendly materials (Johnston, 2012), certifications, and traceability (Henninger, 2015).

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Sustainable fashion as part of the slow fashion movement is often misleadingly described as the opposite of fast fashion. Slow fashion is based on a philosophical ideal that centres on sustainability values, such as good working conditions and reducing environmental destruction (e.g. Bourland, 2011; Pookulangara and Shephard, 2013). It challenges the fast fashion paradigm by breaking down existing boundaries between the organisation and its stakeholders, slowing the production process to a more manageable timeframe, moving away from the self-concept, and focussing on empowering workers by offering a choice that enables change (Clark, 2008). According to *The True Cost* movie (2015) sustainable fashion is more than a simple fad, but rather considers the social, natural, and economic "price" paid in fashion production. Yet uncertainty remains around what the term "sustainable fashion" entails and what might be the guidelines for producing sustainable garments (Watson and Yan, 2013; The True Cost, 2015).

The slow fashion movement and sustainable fashion are increasing in importance (Battaglia *et al.*, 2014), yet consumer awareness remains low (Gonzalez, 2015). Past research on sustainable fashion focussed on consumers' perceptions and attitudes (Goworek *et al.*, 2013; Shen *et al.*, 2013; McNeill and Moore, 2015), and its impact on consumer purchasing behaviour (Shen *et al.*, 2013). Although research has investigated aspects of sustainable fashion, current studies lack an academic understanding of what sustainable fashion is from a holistic perspective. This paper contributes to literature by investigating two research questions from a social constructionist point of view:

RQ1. What are the underlying principles of sustainable fashion from the point of view of micro-organisations, experts, and consumers?

RQ2. How is the concept of sustainable fashion related to aspects of social constructionism?

Understanding underlying principles of sustainable fashion is vital, in order to avoid negative connotations such as greenwashing (e.g. Rahman *et al.*, 2015). Theoretical contributions focus on establishing an understanding of sustainable fashion as discussed and practiced by slow fashion companies. Future research could extend these preliminary results and test their applicability on a wider scale.

2. Literature review

2.1 Slow fashion movement and sustainable fashion

The slow fashion movement emerged as a response to fast fashion cycles and "unsustainable" business growth. It promotes ethical conduct, reduced fashion production, and purchasing quality over quantity clothing (Fletcher, 2010; Ertekin and Atik, 2014). Slow fashion and more specifically sustainable fashion seek to empower workers throughout the supply chain, utilise upcycling, recycling, and traditional production techniques, and incorporating renewable and organic raw materials (Johnston, 2012). Thus, slow fashion moves away from current industry practices of growth-based fashion, which requires a change in system thinking, infrastructure, and throughput of goods (Fletcher, 2010). Key to the slow fashion movement and sustainable fashion is a balanced approach to fashion production, which fosters long-term relationships, builds local production, and focusses on transparency (Ertekin and Atik, 2014). The latter aspect has received increased attention since the Rana Plaza incident, which called for enhanced supply chain check-ups and transparency throughout the manufacturing process (e.g. Pookulangara and Shephard, 2013; Jung and Jin, 2014).

The original meaning of slow fashion highlights sustainability values and ethical conduct, yet media only seem to promote sustainable fashion as garments that are somehow "less fast", which is enhanced by the fact that slow fashion companies usually produce collections only twice a year for Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter (Pookulangara and Shephard, 2013). Although changes in the environment have already occurred, for example, introducing organic materials or promoting sustainable collections (e.g. H&M conscious line), which should make it easier for organisations to promote sustainable fashion, the "mobilization of a sustainable fashion system is both complex and difficult" (Ertekin and Atik, 2014, p. 8). Various barriers to mobilising sustainable fashion emerge: first, transparency in a globalised supply chain may not always be feasible. In order to stay competitive manufacturers are pressured into lowering their prices and at times cut corners. Second, increased production and availability of garments enhances a "fashion appetite" that strengthens the attitude-behaviour-gap of consumers who want ideally to purchase sustainable fashion, yet may not always follow through in their behaviour (e.g. Goworek *et al.*, 2013; McNeill and Moore, 2015). This could be due to a lack of knowledge and awareness, which may hinder further development of sustainable fashion (Goworek *et al.*, 2013). Third, in a competitive environment such as the fashion industry, it is vital to distinguish oneself from others, which can be achieved through "greenization" (Ahluwalia and Miller, 2014; Du, 2015). With sustainability emerging as a "megatrend" (Mittelstaedt *et al.*, 2014) organisations start to use buzzwords, such as eco, organic, environmentally friendly, or green in their marketing communications (Chen and Chang, 2013). Although communicating aspects of sustainability in the garment manufacturing process is beneficial, more and more companies engage in greenwashing, which is defined as misleading advertising of green credentials (Delmas and Burbano, 2011). This implies that an organisation knowingly has a poor environmental performance, yet communicates positively about it (Du, 2015). Consumers mistrust sustainability and green claims, as they cannot verify the credibility of the organisation's claims (Chen and Chang, 2013). A consequence of greenwashing is that any company promoting social or environmental credentials is first and foremost treated with suspicion. Trusted relationships may emerge later, but take a long time to establish, foster, and maintain (Rahman *et al.*, 2015). Finally, past research omits to investigate the concept and scope of slow fashion, as well as a common definition for sustainable and slow fashion (Prothero and Fitchett, 2000; Watson and Yan, 2013). This is addressed in this research.

2.2 Social constructionism

Sustainable fashion is investigated through social constructionism, which distinguishes two types of "reality" (Shotter, 2002): first, "reality" refers to the world that exists independently without any interactions; and second, "reality" is constructed through social interactions (Shotter, 2002). The latter suggests that there may be a gap between meanings of different situations/circumstances and the "reality" (Bañon *et al.*, 2011). Thus, some people may have a set of associations or beliefs about sustainable fashion that differs from those of others. Whilst a common ground can be reached, parties in different "realities" may reject these ideas and interpret sustainable fashion in a different manner (Bañon *et al.*, 2011). Thus, the assumption is that multiple "realities" exist on what sustainable fashion entails. It is through these "realities" that the concept of sustainable fashion is interpreted and understood.

Sustainability is intuitively understood, yet has no coherent definition (Partridge, 2011). Sustainability is context dependent and situational and has different meanings

for different people. A question that arises is: can a vague concept such as sustainability be dismissed "as an empty vessel that can be filled with whatever one likes"? (Dryzek, 2005, p. 147). Although sustainability has been criticised and contested, it cannot be dismissed (Dryzek, 2005; Naderi and Strutton, 2015). A challenge that emerges within sustainability debates is that people may be talking about – metaphorically – different fruits in a basket, which emphasises the fact that "sustainability does [not] apply to the physical environment in itself, but rather our human relationship with the world" (Bañon *et al.*, 2011, p. 180). Yet, the lack of a coherent definition can lead to new opportunities in a changing environment (Dryzek, 2005). Within this paper sustainability is understood as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs" (WCED, 1987). Although this definition is general and presumptuous, it is still the most cited definition used to date (Baumgartner, 2009).

Sustainable fashion has often been described as an oxymoron (Clark, 2008), as fashion assumes something goes in and out of style, which contrasts with the long-term perspective of sustainability (Walker, 2006). We see fashion as an art form that complements the long-term perspective of sustainability in that it focusses on craftsmanship and artisanry and is not bound to seasonality (Norell *et al.*, 1967). A piece of clothing can be transformed from simply being a wearable item to a unique creation that suggests creativity and character, as well as expressing a particular identity (Poon and Fatt, 2001).

In focussing on the scope of sustainable fashion and investigating the underlying principles from a social constructionist point of view this paper contributes to knowledge and addresses a gap in the literature.

3. Methodology

This paper is exploratory in nature and uses social constructionist theory to investigate sustainable fashion. Qualitative research methodologies (e.g. Pookulangara and Shephard, 2013), such as semi-structured interviews (Is), semiotics (SE), Twitterfeed (TF), and questionnaires (Qs) form the basis to investigate principles of sustainable fashion. Thus, findings not only rely on subjective interpretations of the term, but also investigate how "sustainability" is communicated with the boundaries of the cases selected (e.g. Eisenhardt, 1989).

A database compiled through keyword searches on social media and fashion events provided the basis for recruiting micro-organisations. Judgement and convenience sampling led to four micro-organisations fulfiling three criteria: UK based, local production, and self-proclaimed sustainable fashion manufacturers. Consumers were accessed through these micro-organisations. Sustainable fashion experts were carefully selected following the same sampling approach. Interviewees recruited had different experiences and knowledge of "sustainable fashion": micro-organisation members (owner-managers, employees) shared their experience from the perspective of sustainable fashion creators. Industry experts including a marketing director of a leading trend-setting agency, provide a broader overview of the term in association with fashion movements and industry trends. Consumers were seen to contribute to the definition from an everyday perspective. SE and TF analysis illustrate how sustainability is communicated by the selected four micro-organisations. Data in the micro-organisations were collected over a three month period in 2013-2014, which allowed us to gain an in-depth understanding of these organisations and access to their consumer base. Table I provides a data summary.

Table I.
Data summary

	Case 1 non-customer facing	Case 2 non-customer facing	Case 3 customer facing	Case 4 customer facing	Experts	Consumers (follow up interviews from questionnaire)
No. of interviews (Is)	5	6	7	5	7	6
Interview duration	13:33-57:22 min	10-60 min	7:51-45:35 min	10:52-34:10 min	25-52 min	23-25 min
Twitterfeed (TF)	✓	✓	✓	✓		n/a
Semiotics (SE)	Website; social media; blog; newsletter; e-mail; photographs; garment tags					n/a
Questionnaires (Qs)	(no access to consumers granted)		300 questionnaires			n/a

The datasets were carefully analysed utilising Easterby-Smith *et al.*'s (2008) seven-step process of: familiarisation, reflection, conceptualisation, cataloguing concepts, re-coding, linking, and re-evaluation. Multiple researchers dealt with the data, which were coded and re-coded as many as five times. In order to guarantee continuity, coherence, and clarity the researchers first analysed the data independently, focussing on phrases and words most commonly mentioned by interviewees and across the semiotic datasets and the TFs, and explored within their natural boundaries. The themes, patterns, and categories that emerged naturally from the data were reviewed and discussed collectively. We developed 20 broader themes, each of which had various sub-categories. Throughout the coding processes these merged into two dominant patterns with several associated clusters. The research results were presented to the research participants for validation.

Limitations of this research include, but are not limited to: first, the sample size, which focusses on a specific niche market within the segment that may be more familiar with the term sustainable fashion than the general public. This, however, provides the opportunity to understand what the individual target groups understand as sustainable fashion and thus, allows for key criteria to emerge. Second, the sample size is not a "true" representation of the population, but rather was selected strategically. Although these limitations cannot be neglected, we feel that the findings bring forward an engaging discussion, which can be followed up with further research.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1 Background information

4.1.1 A non-mainstream phenomenon. In the qualitative questionnaire, consumers were asked the question "how do you define sustainable fashion?" and predominantly used the term sustainable as part of their definition: "sustainably sourced clothing, fair trade"; "sourced from sustainable resources and manufactured in a similar fashion"; or "produced from sustainable materials/materials which are made from sustainable resources". This indicates that participants define sustainable fashion in terms of sourcing and production processes, whilst seemingly ignoring social aspects, such as fair wages and working conditions. Consumers state that due to using more environmentally friendly materials sustainable fashion comes at a considerably higher price than mainstream fast fashion (Is; Qs). The price premium of these garments is seen as a hindrance to engaging in sustainable consumption as consumers, even if willing to purchase sustainable garments, may not be able to follow through (e.g. McNeill and Moore, 2015). Although this finding is not new, an interesting

observation is that the participants who mentioned price had not previously purchased "sustainable fashion" nor actively searched for it. Thus, the perceived price premium is an assumption based on their reality, rather than an actual experience.

Sustainable fashion was described as "a bit out there" (Is), different from mainstream collections, and produced by designers, who model their "it pieces" on the catwalk (Is). Sustainable fashion is perceived as a high-end phenomenon linked to aspects of exclusivity and luxury, which may not be affordable for the everyday consumer. Similarly, these garments are not necessarily seen to be to everyone's taste (Is), which might be why they are described as non-mainstream (Is) and "different from the high street" (Qs). Thus, within the consumers' socially constructed reality sustainable fashion is not perceived as a high street alternative, but rather a non-mainstream phenomenon that can be observed in the fashion world.

Contrarily, the micro-organisations' owner-managers insist: "sustainable fashion can be affordable, fashion forward, versatile and […] interesting" (Is). In their reality, sustainable fashion is a high street alternative. However, the "affordability" of sustainable garments is questionable, with prices ranging from £10 for one pair of socks to £250 for an upcycled dress and up to £500 for a vintage garment. Whilst some items may be comparable in price, the majority of garments sold by these micro-organisations come at a price premium justified by aspects, such as the use of environmentally friendly and/or organic materials, and their one-off, hand-made design (Is; SE; TF).

Consumers and micro-organisations both acknowledge that environmentally friendly materials are determining factors for charging higher prices for sustainable fashion. A challenge is to persuasively communicate the benefit of sustainable fashion to consumers to increase buy-in within the mainstream fashion landscape. Although the two realities described show similarities, consumers are not aware that sustainable fashion can be more affordable than they think. Experts agree, insisting that although companies such as Burberry, Stella McCartney, and H&M raise the sustainable fashion profile, this does not necessarily bridge the gap towards a mainstream feel – an aspect we return to later. Experts state that the understanding of sustainable fashion has no impact on their actual business, which could suggest a lack in communicating sustainability values effectively to consumers. Although shoppers are now more familiar with the term sustainable fashion, they still see it as a high-end phenomenon that has no applicability in high street retailers (Is). Experts further stated that sustainable fashion promoted through high street retailers could be misleading as these brands still produce new lines with an average turnover of 60 days, thereby going against the "sustainable fashion principles" (Is). This explains consumers referring to sustainable fashion as "an oxymoron" (Qs) or a "contradictory term" (Qs), as the fashion industry is based on fast stock turnovers and fashion consumption, which contradicts aspects of slow fashion (e.g. Joy *et al.*, 2012).

Experts explained that although they ideally want to produce in a sustainable manner, this is not always possible as "some of the organic stuff is just too expensive" (Is). Designers insist that they "promise to make environmentally friendly choices, where possible" (SE), "all the footwear is made in China […] [as producing in the UK] would have made a completely unsustainable business [financially]" (Is). It could be argued that this contradicts aspects of sustainability, as overseas production fosters a larger carbon footprint than producing locally (Clark, 2008). Yet, in its advertising this micro-organisation stresses that it is a UK brand, due to being UK based and designing the products in the country (Is; SE). Although designers understand that overseas

production may be a less sustainable choice, trade-offs are accepted to overcome financial challenges. Such trade-offs must not lead to "cutting corners", and maintaining fair payments and good working conditions is essential. Experts point out that care should be taken if referring to a brand as being "British" when production processes are overseas, as this could lead to consumers' distrust of "green" or "sustainable" products, as they imply greenwashing due to being deceptive and misleading (e.g. Du, 2015).

Commonalities between the different viewpoints identified are price premium and the use of environmentally friendly alternatives. Barriers to sustainable fashion from the perspective of experts and micro-organisations are financial capabilities and being able to produce "affordable" garments. Thus far, a key implication is that sustainable fashion manufacturers need to better communicate their offerings and clearly highlight what makes their collections "sustainable" in order to avoid allegations of greenwashing.

4.1.2 Knowledge and awareness. Our analysis found that large organisations, especially high street retailers, play a key role in disseminating the core message of sustainability. An owner-manager states: "If I'm 100% ethical and I have 5,000 customers and [large retailer] is like 0.05% ethical and has 5 million customers they're actually reaching more, doing more good and making better change, even though what they do in entirety isn't great. Big companies need to drive change" (Is). Consumers concur, explaining that media outlets such as TV and magazines play a role in raising awareness of issues surrounding sustainable fashion (Is). Newspapers report on sustainable fashion collections and events (Siegle, 2014), for example the "Green Carpet Challenge", which led "sustainable style into the spotlight […] highlighting the issues of sustainability within the fashion industry" (Eco Age, 2013). However, the experts' opinions remain twofold: those in favour say: "I think the Green Carpet Challenge is a really good idea" (Is), whilst sceptics insist: "I think it's trickling through very gradually. 'The carpet' isn't immediately identifiable for everyday people who may read 'heat magazine', they can't go and buy these clothes, it's not immediately accessible. With media and celebrity it can really influence people, however, it has to be done in the right way and it has to be accessible, because seeing celebs[sic] makes it aspirational […] But it makes it difficult to go down to the shop and find something like that" (Is). Although exploring the full magnitude of media influence on sustainable fashion and consumer behaviour exceeds the scope of this paper, it suggests a fruitful direction for further research. However, it is apparent from our research that communication emerges as a key issue. The realities among experts differ in that they acknowledge communication is key, yet its execution strategy needs to be carefully considered to meet consumer expectations. If sustainable fashion is seen as an alternative to fast fashion, it needs to be communicated as such, rather than creating a celebrity hype in magazines, which implies these garments are unaffordable.

Consumers' awareness and knowledge of sustainable fashion has increased. A concern mentioned, however, was that "at some point when you know enough and even still it doesn't always mean that you can act on it. But when you know enough about sourcing patterns or labour cost or how employees are treated […] pro union, anti-union […] then you can make the choice, and it's difficult sometimes. It's not always something you can do, which is an uncomfortable position to be in" (Is). Consumers state that in addition to finances, other factors may hinder the purchase of sustainable fashion, such as style, trend, and availability (e.g. McNeill and Moore, 2015). Although social sustainability became centre stage after

Rana Plaza, concern for how people across the supply chain are treated does not necessarily result in changed action.

Slow fashion seems to be interpreted on a surface level in that participants were familiar with the term, but their actions limited to what they feel fits with their everyday consumption patterns. The reality is predominantly constructed through media interaction that highlights social and environmental issues as key concerns. However, the philosophical underpinning of the slow fashion movement that seeks to break the boundaries of the fast fashion paradigm does not seem to be of concern. In order to address this aspect, the underpinnings of sustainable fashion are investigated.

4.2 Attributes of sustainable fashion

4.2.1 Sourcing and production process. Sustainable fashion is predominantly associated with environmental sustainability, such as the use of renewable and eco-friendly raw materials, the reduction of the carbon footprint, durability, and longevity (Is; Qs), which are also featured in extant research (e.g. Joergens, 2006; Shen *et al.*, 2013). Social aspects were also mentioned, with issues concerning fair wages, safety measures, and labour rights forming the top three concerns, which aligns with past research (Pookulangara and Shephard, 2013; McNeill and Moore, 2015). An explanation for social sustainability taking a backseat could be this research's setting: the UK and EU have strict labour laws to which every organisation needs to adhere. However, this aspect may change in the future with research "exposing" UK garment factories as unethical, due to having sweatshop-like conditions and failure to pay national minimum wage (Hoskins, 2015). Environmental issues also play a more prominent role within consumers'everyday lives – a reality they not only experience, but also have to deal with. A consumer summarises sustainable fashion as "a combination of things. You have to have a consciousness about the planet, about what's happening environmentally, in the factories around the world where clothes are produced, about the working conditions of the people who make them […] It's a lot about awareness and consciousness […] There's another very real aspect of finances […] it always feels like it costs a lot more money" (Is). Only one participant positively elaborated on the price aspect, explaining: "you know you are getting quality" (Is), when purchasing sustainable fashion. Thus, slow fashion is associated with quality rather than quantity, again implying a price premium (Fletcher, 2010). Yet, the "locally made" aspect raised concerns that garments produced in the UK were perceived to neither achieve the same quality as high street fashion nor be as fashionable (Is). Although the UK has historically been a fashion hub and led the industrial revolution, consumers distrust local production.

Yet, the case companies predominantly focus on the local aspect within their promotional material emphasising that they source materials within the EU and manufacture in the UK, which endeavours to reduce the carbon footprint for production to a minimum – this is in comparison to other organisations, which source their materials from outside the EU. The owner-managers interpret sustainable fashion as "fashion with a conscience" (Is), which links to good working conditions and a positive organisational atmosphere. They further insist that any organisation producing sustainable fashion needs to have a personal relationship with their stakeholders. One participant explains that she gains feedback daily from her employees, which helps her to improve the production processes along the supply chain and keeps her workers

happy (Is). Other stakeholders, such as consumers and suppliers also have the opportunity to engage with these micro-organisations through creating the feel of "shared ownership" (Is) whereby actions are collaboratively discussed and – if financially viable – implemented by the owner-manager. This active engagement fosters stakeholder empowerment and creates trusted relationships that enhance the slow fashion cause, by promoting sustainable values and ethical conduct (e.g. Fletcher, 2010; Ertekin and Atik, 2014). Choosing to involve stakeholders in the business is an active choice made by the owner-managers, thus, their description of sustainable fashion heavily features the product and production processes, and the supply chain, rather than the design (e.g. versatility) and sustainable production techniques (e.g. upcycling, recycling). A contradiction that emerged, however, was that although stakeholders are an integral part of the owner-managers' definition, our data show that the involvement of employees, suppliers, and other stakeholders is selective and not explicitly mentioned within any of their communications (SE).

The owner-managers seem to have a personal affiliation with sustainable fashion. One owner-manager recalls that she had her first experience with sustainable fashion when she was 16, working for a London-based organisation. The owner-manager claims that this London-based company pioneered slow fashion, as "nearly all their products [were produced] in London or Spain" (Is). For her sustainable fashion goes beyond the local aspect to further incorporate "looking at things in a different way […] thinking about things differently and [re]using things" (Is), which is reflected in her micro-company's fashion collections: the raw materials are sourced locally, reclaimed, and upcycled (Is; SE; TF). She highlights that she imposes limitations on her company, by sourcing materials within a 20-mile radius of the production site (SE). This aspect is vital for this micro-organisation emphasising that they are "big on heritage – many of our products are 100% made in [company's region], right down to the trimmings" (SE). The owner-manager believes that the 20-mile radius is inclusive enough to have various suppliers, reduces carbon emission, and fosters the local aspect. This, however, contradicts observations made during the research: first, the website highlights that the company is "forward thinking" (SE) and utilises new techniques to create unique collections (ES). The company produces these items on machines that have been reclaimed. Whilst this fits within the overarching idea of sustainability – making use of "waste" resources – these machines do not incorporate the newest technology and have high-energy usage (SE; TF). It is questionable whether using out-dated machinery that is not energy and eco-efficient can necessarily be classified as "forward thinking" (SE). Second, although the material is reclaimed, recycled, upcycled, and sourced within a 20-mile radius, the owner drives a "big old banger car, which probably isn't economic[al]" (Is), uses a lot of petrol and emits more pollutants than a new car. Two different realities are emerging, first the "reality" that sees its origins in a philosophical viewpoint where garments are locally produced with forward thinking, and second, the "reality" in which the owner-manager is constrained by their own limitations and financial capabilities.

Consumers and micro-organisations alike identify sustainable fashion as being locally produced, which links to aspects of good working conditions, fair wages, and a reduced carbon footprint. Although these micro-organisations heavily feature the local aspect within their promotion, as it is seen as a vital selling point for sustainable garments, those consumers who doubt the quality standards of local production, do not necessarily perceive this as beneficial.

4.2.2 Transparency and traceability. Transparency emerged as a further theme throughout the data analysis. Transparency looks at the origins of raw materials, dyes and chemicals used in the manufacturing process, and the employees and their working conditions (Is; SE; TF). Participants say that they "strive to achieve a green balance between economics and environmental consciousness, [they] manufacture all [their] products in a 100% sweatshop free environment, in the UK" (SE). The owner-managers believe that being transparent is vital. One owner-manager insists that her consumers should come visit her manufacturing site to see their process for themselves (Is). She comments "they should come, see it. I don't have anything to hide. It's who we are and what we are. We only had one chap coming in before unannounced […] it's been great, showed him around and got talking. Got a really nice review after, too" (Is). The owner-manager prides herself in sourcing environmentally friendly fabrics within the EU for her products, which are either made out of polyester (outside) and cotton (inside) or leather (outside) and cotton (inside). All raw materials have been tested for harmful substances and are classified as child safe (Is). Although the owner-manager can trace her raw materials back to the original source, it is noteworthy that the product description on the website does not explicitly state what raw materials were used in the production process. The owner-manager repeatedly states that the products are made from real leather (Is), yet this is omitted from the company's communications (SE). Questions could be raised whether these materials are in line with the "green balance" advocated on the website, as leather is an animal fibre and polyester a strong pollutant material (Coen, 2011). This paper does not seek to judge materials used in the manufacturing process, but rather highlights that although materials may be sourced consciously, they may not always be sustainable. Cotton, for example, is a monoculture that drains water resources from ground and surface water and even when produced organically, the pesticides may damage the environment (Parker, 1999; Leech, 2013).

Various participants reuse and upcycle pre-loved garments for their fashion collections, which keeps textile fabric out of landfill. These micro-organisations claim they are able to trace their raw materials to their original source, which may be misleading. Tracing the origin of an upcycled jumper can be impossible, as tags are removed. Thus, there is no guarantee that these were originally made in good working conditions and not in a factory such as Rana Plaza. Greater care needs to be taken in order to avoid aspects of greenwashing in this kind of production. A participant emphasises that producing sustainably implies a long-term perspective – how "sustainable" is defined, however, depends on the way the micro-organisation produces their clothes and thus refer to either certified textiles or reusing pre-loved garments. An aspect that the majority of participants agree on is that "the product needs to be sustainable from its core" (Is) which is seen as a philosophical underpinning of the production process rather than an "add on" strategy.

Experts suggest that consumers make "a lot more considered choices […] one example is the luxury industry, which saw a rise over the recession, [which] showed that people […] were making more investment purchases and actually also stems into what you might call sustainable fashion or sustainable practices" (Is). Moreover, interviewees suggest that sustainable fashion is about profitability, transparency, environmental principles, and viability. "A brand has to be completely open […] with Twitter and everything […] so you cannot hide all this information, it's out there […] You literally have to look at the process from A to B and be sustainable from there off […] this relates not just to the fabrics that are used, but how the product goes from

manufacturing to the store and how that affects the [carbon] footprint" (Is). This further emphasises the need to communicate sustainable aspects of slow fashion garments and clearly indicate how and why they are classified as sustainable. The various realities presented thus far in the paper see similarities in their notions of the use of raw materials and transparency, yet the gap between what manufacturers and consumers believe sustainable fashion to be differs, making it challenging for companies to create engagement. Different production techniques, such as upcycling further extend the meaning of sustainable fashion as being "based on sustainable design principles. So designing for end-of-life management […] using waste as a source material and diverting it from landfill […] If it wasn't upcycled it would be thrown into landfill" (Is).

Particularly among experts and the owner-managers, transparency and traceability were seen as key aspects to distinguish sustainable fashion production. Within this understanding it is more important to focus on long-term relationships and being able to show transparency along the supply chain rather than establishing the origins of raw materials, such as pre-loved garments.

Sustainable fashion – what have we learned?. The paper set out to answer two research questions: first, to investigate the underlying principles of sustainable fashion; and second, how the concept of sustainable fashion relates to aspects of social constructionism. Data suggest that although similarities exist between the various realities of sustainable fashion, different aspects are not only emphasised, but also understood differently (e.g. Shotter, 2002).

Underlying principles that emerged include local sourcing and production, transparency across the supply chain, traceability of work processes and (ideally) raw materials, environmentally friendly raw materials, and social aspects, such as safe working conditions and fair wages. An observation that was made is that the individual principles gain different levels of priority depending on the group discussing these aspects. Whilst local production and sourcing is a distinguishing factor for micro-organisations and experts, it is of less prominence for consumers, who see the use of environmental friendly raw materials as a priority.

Due to sustainable fashion being interpreted from different "realities" experts and micro-organisations may face challenges and trade-offs when classifying themselves as "sustainable fashion" producers: first, the choice of raw material can lead to an ethical dilemma. Utilising leather is negatively perceived by animal rights pressure groups, which could be a reason why one of the micro-organisations omitted this information. Whether excluding information about raw materials (intentionally or unintentionally) is ethical goes beyond the scope of this paper, but could provide the basis for future research. Although the majority of case companies use reclaimed material, which extends their initial life-cycle, the origin of the recycled garment may be unknown, thus claiming that the fabric was locally sourced is misleading, as the original product may have been manufactured abroad.

Second, these self-imposed limitations may have an impact on the product price: limiting resources will delay availability of the finished products, which can result in a market deficit, due to an unaligned supply and demand curve. In order to balance this deficit, the price-point of these goods is set at a higher level, thereby restricting purchase to customers who can/are willing to pay the premium. The question that emerges is whether the increased price is justified. This may be linked to consumers describing sustainable fashion as an "oxymoron" (Qs). Looking at the overall fashion industry, organisations are producing fashion lines to satisfy consumer needs to buy new products

(e.g. Jung and Jin, 2014). Slow fashion is based on principles of sustainability and ethical conduct that seeks to challenge the fast fashion cycle. Yet, sustainable fashion collections are still produced to satisfy consumer needs and are based on the assumption that garments will be consumed. A vicious circle begins: Kate Fletcher, author of the book *Sustainable Fashion & Textiles*, writes that "we buy many more clothes than we need and the clothes we buy, 'exploit workers, fuel resource use, increase environmental impact and generate waste'" (O'Connell, 2013). This could lead to the conclusion that sustainable fashion cannot exist, because as soon as fashion garments are produced, consumers are encouraged to buy these products. Developing this thought further, this could imply that the demand for these particular garments may increase over time, which leads to producing larger batch sizes, which over time may result in moving from a slow fashion to a fast fashion approach. Thus, opponents may argue that sustainable fashion cannot exist, as the economy is based on consumerism.

Third, can an industry that is based on consumerism ever produce a "sustainable product"? Utilising environmentally friendly materials, decreasing the use of pesticides, and promoting recycling and upcycling collections may be a start to encourage more mindful behaviour. However, the fact that clothes are still being sold and produced seems to contradict what sustainability stands for: preserving the environment. Similarly, it is important to ask whether sustainable fashion can be the future. If sustainable fashion was a lucrative business, why would major players in the fashion industry hesitate to change their business practices? The experts highlighted that sustainable fashion needs to be supported throughout the industry (Is). Small organisations can easily adapt to changes in the market, however it is multinationals that have a larger share in the industry, and due to their structure cannot adapt to changes quickly. Although the argument that not all multinationals can spontaneously change their business practices holds true, collaborations could overcome this challenge.

In summary, sustainable fashion can be interpreted from various different realities and incorporate several aspects. Data indicate that there is no one way of defining what sustainable fashion entails. Rather than providing a clear-cut answer more questions are raised that need answering. The only commonality to emerge is that changing current practices in the fashion industry is important and attempts should be made to reduce the current fashion cycle by being more mindful and conscious of raw materials.

Moving forward. Our analysis proposes that understanding the term sustainable fashion is vital, as it:

- provides a common understanding upon which various groups (organisations, stakeholders) can act;
- prevents greenwashing; and
- allows organisations to align their strategies and objectives with key criteria associated with the term.

Although sustainable fashion can be seen as an oxymoron (Qs), this research suggests that a majority of participants strongly believe that this type of fashion not only exists, but also is currently produced. At the same time the participant groups stress different aspects of what makes sustainable fashion, which implies that the term itself is difficult to define, and even harder to act upon. Taking these challenges into account it becomes apparent that the term is subjective, in that it can mean different things to different people (Shotter, 2002).

In order to overcome the challenge of defining sustainable fashion, this paper proposes a matrix that provides companies with the flexibility to highlight how they interpret sustainable fashion, what their priorities are, and how they move forward in the future. Table II provides an example of such a matrix. The individual components of this matrix are based on principles underpinning sustainable fashion and link to the different realities highlighted in this paper.

The categories on the left hand side emerged from our analysis, with the ticks indicating which aspects were important to the participants or emerged from the literature. The matrix is designed to cater for various realities in that it allows each micro-organisation to set their own targets, by indicating which elements of sustainable fashion are "low", "medium", or "high" priority. The last column, third party evidence, can include, but is not limited to eco-labels, partnerships with third parties, and industry specific awards or prizes the organisation has won or was nominated for. Stated alternatively, an outsider certifies that the organisation's claims made about specific aspects have been independently evaluated and found to hold true.

5. Conclusion and implications

This paper contributes to knowledge by exploring principles underpinning sustainable fashion from a social constructionist viewpoint. The findings indicate that sustainable fashion is subjective in nature and we suggest a matrix that allows companies to indicate their sustainable fashion priorities. This has various implications for practitioners, as in order to sell fashion items that are classified as "sustainable" they need to communicate this clearly to their stakeholders. Highlighting their unique ways

	Basic	Low priority	Medium priority	High priority	Organisational evidence	Third party evidence
Forward thinking						
Innovation						
Ethical/sustainable design	✓					
Ethically sourced						
Meaningful, interesting						
Local production						
Production techniques (recycling, upcycling, traditional techniques)						
Versatile						
Promoting fair trade, fair wages	✓					
Transparency/traceability						
Checks for harmful substances	✓					
Long-term focus						
Environmental standards	✓					
Human rights/working conditions	✓					
Community support/integration						
Financially viable						
Environmentally friendly materials						
Renewable sources						
Limited transportation						
Fashion with conscience						
Heritage						

Table II. Sustainable fashion matrix

of creating fashion could lead to a competitive advantage that strengthens their image. Understanding the various viewpoints is vital for marketers, who can utilise the matrix and clearly communicate what sustainable fashion means to individual companies, which helps to prevent greenwashing.

A limitation of this research is the sample size in a specific niche market: the slow fashion industry. Thus, it is suggested that future research investigates whether the individual categories highlighted within the matrix hold true for the wider fashion industry.

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