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Understanding how awareness of a fashion company's social sustainability practices influences consumers' perception of brand image, as compared to one's interest in fashion.

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ABSTRACT

Sustainability in relation to fashion has been a hot topic for many years, and especially the social consequences of apparel produced under sweatshop conditions has caused major scandals, and has become an enormous concern for consumers. Many fashion companies have taken measures to reduce their negative impact, but have been reluctant to communicate these efforts to their consumers, and are therefore described as 'muted sustainable' fashion brands. This paper aims to explore how awareness of a fashion company's muted social sustainability practices in comparison to one's interest in fashion affects consumers' perception of brand image. Based on this, this paper's purpose is to see how important consumers perceive social sustainability practices of fashion companies, and in turn to find out whether fashion companies should start communicating these practices. Further, the relationship between consumers' perception of brand image and awareness of a company's muted social sustainability practices is analyzed to see if it is affected by a person's environmental and social sustainability concern. This paper examines consumers' perception of the brand image of a chosen 'muted sustainable' fashion company, namely: Acne Studios. Questionnaire responses from 172 consumers were analyzed, confirming the influence of both awareness of a fashion company's muted social sustainability practices and one's interest in fashion on the perception of the brand image of Acne Studios. The results show that awareness of a fashion company's muted social sustainability practices and one's interest in fashion are almost equally important in explaining consumers' perception of brand image. Implications are concerned with the importance of fashion companies to communicate their sustainability efforts in order to increase awareness on these matters amongst consumers, and thus enhance brand image.

Keywords: Sustainable fashion • sustainable communication • sustainable awareness • brand image • fashion interest • 'muted sustainable' fashion brands

INTRODUCTION

In today's society issues related to environmental and social sustainability have become particular relevant in the apparel industry. The industry has been on governmental and societal watch since the early 1990's when the first sweatshops scandals became common currency worldwide. Since then, many fashion companies, in particular fast fashion companies have been involved in scandals in the media. Despite this high media attention, the apparel industry is still one of the dirtiest businesses on earth today with a complex supply chain, unsafe working conditions, pollution and workers getting paid below the living wage (Ross & Morgan, 2015).

Fashion and sustainability seem like two

contradictory terms, the first one recognized by hedonism and short product life cycles, and the later one seen in connection to moral and ethics, the reuse of products, as well as long product life cycles (Lundblad & Davies, 2016). In addition, various studies point out that many consumers regard 'fashionability' as more important than ethical matters when shopping for clothes (McNeill & Moore, 2015; Joergens, 2006; Shaw, Hogg, Wilson, Shiu, & Hassan, 2006), and that there is a general perception that clothing produced in a sustainable way is not 'fashionable', or to put it in other words: "*Let's face it sustainability isn't sexy! Fashion is sex!*" (Streit & Davies, 2013, p. 216). In connection to this, Solér, Baeza and Svärd (2015) point out that various fashion companies have already integrated social and environmental sustainability practices in their business, but have chosen to keep the communication of these efforts on a low and/or corporate level. They further argue that fashion companies fitting into this scheme are constructing silence on sustainability issues in the fashion market, and thus can be described as 'muted sustainable' brands (Solér et al., 2015; Crane 1997; 2000).

Establishing a strong brand image is important in order to create a successful brand, maintain a positive relationship with the consumers (Keller, 1993), and it is a fundamental component for brands to differentiate themselves from competitors and survive in the long term (Aaker, 2010). In this context, BBMG and GlobeScan (2016) find that 'aspirational consumers', which are defined by their love and excitement for shopping, their interest to consume responsible, as well as their general trust in brands to act as a good citizen, most likely support brands that have a positive impact on society at large. It is therefore believed that responsible brands can differentiate themselves from the competition by

communicating their good practices and what they stand for (BBMG & GlobeScan, 2016). Despite this, various fashion companies believe that consumers are not interested in sustainable information, and that a strong brand image is build upon 'fashionability', trendiness and style, rather than sustainability practices (Solér et al., 2015). Based on this information, it can be argued that most fashion companies do not consider communication of sustainability practices as a tool to build up or enhance their brand image.

Previous research on the phenomena of sustainable fashion consumption and communication has also been conducted in connection to consumers' awareness and perception of sustainable fashion concepts, especially in relation to the perceived consumer 'attitude-behavior gap', which is explained as weak link between consumers' attitudes and final actions regarding the consumption of sustainable fashion (Shen, Richards, & Liu, 2013). Further research has tried to find out whether attitudes and beliefs towards ethical issues in the apparel industry affect consumers' fashion purchase behavior (Joergens, 2006). It has also been pointed out that successful green branding in the fashion industry depends on the way consumers process the communicated green information in the context of the existing brand scheme (Kim & Hall, 2015). Further, it is argued that both a fashion company's current brand image and its sourcing practices significantly affect how consumer perceive a fashion brand's sustainability practices (Strähle & Köksal, 2016). However, there seems to be little knowledge on how a fashion company's social sustainability practices affects its brand image, particularly with regard to 'muted sustainable' fashion brands (Solér et al., 2015; Crane, 1997; 2000). Therefore, our research aims to explore if and how consumers' perception of brand image is affected both by awareness of a fashion company's muted

social sustainability practices and by a person's interest in fashion. Further, the objective is to find out whether and how the relationship between awareness of a fashion company's muted sustainability practices and consumers' perception of brand image is influenced by one's concern for environmental and social sustainability. Due to the focus on Acne Studios as a 'muted sustainable' fashion brand, our study also tries to give an answer to the question of whether Acne Studios and fashion brands in general should start communicating their sustainability practices to their consumers in order to attain a more favorable brand image. We aim to explore and give answer to these three research questions in particular:

1. How important is awareness of a fashion company's social sustainability practices in explaining consumers' perception of brand image?

2. How does fashion interest affect consumers' perception of brand image, as compared to awareness of a fashion company's social sustainability practices?

3. How is the relationship between awareness of a fashion company's social sustainability practices and consumers' perception of brand image influenced by a person's environmental and social sustainability concern?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

Sustainable communication
From a consumer's point of view, there is a need for fashion brands to effectively communicate what types of sustainable practices they are in involved in. Many consumers are not able to fully grasp what sustainability actually means, in particular with regard to fashion, and often get confused

by unbranded and inconsistent marketing messages sent out by brands (Weiss, Trevenen & White, 2014). It has also been found that consumers often perceive sustainable information as too vague, voluminous or simply too hard to understand, which presents a barrier for consumers to act on or engage with the presented information, and consequently to act in a responsible manner (Markkula & Moisander, 2012; Moisander, 2007). Moisander (2007) further argues that due to low credibility associated with green marketing messages and perplexity of environmental information, it is up to the consumers themselves to attain knowledge on sustainable brand options, which however, presents a task too complex for most consumers. Adding to this, Yan, Hyllegard and Blaesi (2012) find that consumers more likely form positive attitudes towards a fashion brand when provided with more explicit information about environmentally friendly goods in advertising campaigns. Due to consumers' low understanding of production methods of environmentally friendly clothing, eco-fashion is perceived as a complex product, which explains the need for more explicit information in marketing claims (Yan et al., 2012).

In prior studies it is shown that apparel consumers are interested in getting more information about production methods and country of origin, and thus form positive attitudes towards increased transparency in the supply chain (Egles-Zandén & Hansson, 2016; Bhaduri & Ha-Brookshire, 2011). Bhaduri and Ha-Brookshire (2011) further argue that consumers' attitudes towards purchasing transparently produced apparel is related to a company's advertising of their supply chain transparency efforts. However, their study also shows that price and quality are generally being prioritized over transparency by consumers. This has also

been supported in several other studies arguing that consumers generally prioritize 'fashionability' over ethical concerns when purchasing apparel (McNeill & Moore, 2015; Joergens, 2006; Shaw et al. 2006).

Given the importance for consumers to build individual identities through the consumption of socially accepted fashion items (Murray, 2002; Thompson & Haytko 1997), many consumers regard being 'fashionable' as more important than being ethical. This does not only present a great barrier to increase sustainable fashion consumption (McNeill & Moore, 2015), but also raises the question of whether sustainable marketing communication can be effective. As opposed to this, other research argues that marketing can play a crucial role in encouraging consumers to change their behavior through its capability of triggering the symbolic dimension of sustainable consumption practices as part of constructing pro-environmental identities (Dermody, Hanmer-Lloyd, Koenig-Lewis, & Zhao, 2015).

Muted Sustainable brands
It has been shown that various brands in the fashion industry have started to integrate social and environmental practices in their business, but have been reluctant to communicate these efforts to their consumers (Solér et al., 2015). Crane (1997; 2000) describes the non-communication of social and environmental sustainability efforts as 'muted greening'; a strategic marketing orientation, whereby companies integrate environmental considerations in their business practices, but keep the communication of these on a low level. Building on this, Solér et al. (2015) argue that fashion companies' sustainability reports are found away from apparel collections both in store and on online shops. As sustainable information is located away from where fashion is consumed, these types of actions are interpreted as addressing

other stakeholders than consumers. They describe this marketing approach as constructing silence on issues of sustainability in the fashion market. As a result, this approach supports an image of the fashion market that is build on stable agreements regarding what are socially and environmentally sustainable/unsustainable accepted consequences in the production of apparel. In addition, the non-communication of sustainable fashion meanings prevents consumers from integrating 'sustainability-related' attributes in their consideration set when purchasing clothing. As a consequence, consumers perceive 'sustainability-related' attributes as less important in comparison to other product attributes, such as quality, price and style (Solér et al., 2015), and thus are struggling between remaining 'fashionable' and consuming more sustainable (McNeill & Moore, 2015).

Brand Image
Brand image has been a topic of discussion in marketing since the 1950's (Cho, Fiore & Russell, 2015) and has since then been recognized as an important concept. Brand image is defined as the total sum of perceptions, both reasoned and emotional that consumers associate with a particular brand (Keller, 1993; Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990). Establishing a strong brand image is important in order to create a successful brand, maintain a positive relationship with consumers (Keller, 1993), and it is a fundamental component for brands to differentiate themselves from competitors and survive in the long term (Aaker, 2010). Stronger emotional bonds are more likely to be created by consumers if the brand image is congruent with consumers' self-concept (Islam & Rahman, 2016). Especially with a fashion company's brand image the self-concept for consumers becomes evident, and they use a fashion brand's rich symbolic

image and meaning to express their self-identity (Escalas & Bettman, 2005).

Consumers' perceptions of brand image is based on direct experiences with the brand and/or the consumer can also be affected by the brand's communication (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990). Purchasing products by a familiar brand can save time for the consumer, reduce uncertainty and risks (Su & Tong, 2016). As stated by Cho & Fiore (2015), elements that are important to the brand image may vary between different product categories, therefore it is important to have a specific scale in order to measure a fashion company's brand image. Their proposed scale is based on the proposed dimensions of a fashion brand's image by Roberts (2005): Mystery, intimacy and sensuality. The dimension mystery reflects the cognitive associations a consumer has with a brand. The cognitive associations are shaped by past and present interactions, great stories, direct and indirect interactions with the brand that reveal non-product-related attributes, functional benefits and symbolic benefits. The dimension intimacy captures the subjective emotional associations a consumer has with a brand. It reflects the feelings a consumer derives from direct and indirect interactions with the brand. The dimension sensuality captures how consumers engage with the brand using their senses. It reflects how the senses are used to shape brand experiences when interacting with product-related and retail-environment-related attributes (Cho & Fiore 2015; Cho et al., 2015).

Awareness of sustainable fashion

Even though, many textile and clothing companies make a large amount of sustainable information available to their consumers and investors, including detailed reporting about their social and environmental practices (Fliess, Lee, Dubreuil & Agatiello,

2007), awareness of sustainable fashion options is still low amongst consumers, and many of them are missing sufficient knowledge about what is considered sustainable in relation to fashion (Shen et al., 2013). This unawareness of sustainable fashion has been pointed out as one of the key reasons for the weak link between consumers' attitudes and final actions regarding the consumption of sustainable fashion (Shen et al., 2013), also referred to as the consumer 'attitude-behavior gap' (Young, Hwang, McDonald, & Oates, 2010; Arbuthnott, 2009; Yates, 2008). It is further pointed out that due to lack of information and knowledge about sustainable fashion options, consumers are unable to make an ethical choice (Shen et al., 2013; Connell, 2010; Joergens, 2006). For consumers to be able to make an effective purchasing decision, one need to be knowledgeable enough to carefully choose between different product alternatives (Sproles, Geistfeld & Badenhop, 1978).

Awareness of social sustainable fashion

Social sustainability presents one dimension of the corporate sustainability concept and as described by the United Nation Global Compact deals with identifying and managing social impacts of business, both negative and positive, on humans. More specifically it is about ensuring safe and fair labor conditions throughout the supply chain (United Nation Global Compact, n.d.). The social consequences of purchasing apparel that is produced under sweatshop conditions, in particular, have been pointed out as a major concern and a drive to consume sustainable fashion (Lundblad & Davies, 2016). Due to the highly vocal anti-sweatshop movements in the 1990s, attention has been drawn to the exploitation of labor by many well known brands such as Nike and Gap (Greenhouse, 2000). We therefore hypothesize that consumers' awareness of a fashion company's muted social sustainability practices positively affects a person's

perception of brand image in total, and also its three sub-components that were described earlier. Further, it is believed that the more a person is aware of a fashion company's social sustainability practices, the more brand image enhances.

Hypothesis 1: Awareness of a fashion company's social sustainability practices (SSA) has a significant and positive impact on consumers' perception of the brand image (BI).

Hypothesis 1a: Awareness of a fashion company's social sustainability practices (SSA) has a significant and positive impact on consumers' perception of the cognitive brand image component (CBI).

Hypothesis 1b: Awareness of a fashion company's social sustainability practices (SSA) has a significant and positive impact on consumers' perception of the emotional brand image component (EBI).

Hypothesis 1c: Awareness of a fashion company's social sustainability practices (SSA) has a significant and positive impact on consumers' perception of the sensory brand image component (SBI).

Fashion Interest
An individual's attitude towards, interest in and opinions about fashion brands is explained by their fashion orientation (Gam, 2011). Fashion leaders are highly engaged in fashion, and use fashion as a means to differentiate themselves from others. They further value the symbolic attribute more than consumers less interested in fashion (Beaudoin, Moore & Goldsmith, 2000). Fashion leaders also tend to spend more money on apparel products (Goldsmith, Heitmeyer & Freiden, 1991). Gam (2011) argues that highly fashion interested consumers are more likely to seek new

knowledge regarding apparel products, and are therefore more updated about new and more popular fashion brands. Product knowledge influences the acceptance of new products (Gam, 2011). Due to the reasons mentioned above, consumers that are interested in fashion and shopping are more inclined to adopt and purchase new fashion products (Gam, 2011). We therefore hypothesize that consumers' perception of brand image is affected by one's fashion interest. The more interested a consumer is in fashion, the stronger consumers' perception of brand image will b. Consumers who have a high interest in fashion are exposed to more information, and looked for more information on their own about fashion brands and trends. They look for more innovative fashion, and this will affect the strength of the perceived brand image.

Hypothesis 2: Fashion interest (FI) has a significant and positive impact on the consumers' perception of the brand image (BI)

Hypothesis 2a: Fashion interest (FI) has a significant and positive impact on the consumers' perception of the cognitive brand image component (CBI).

Hypothesis 2b: Fashion interest (FI) has a significant and positive impact on the consumer's perception of the emotional brand image component (EBI).

Hypothesis 2c: Fashion interest (FI) has a significant and positive impact on the consumers' perception of the sensory brand image component (SBI).

Concern for social and environmental sustainability
Since the 1980's there has been an increase in consciousness about sustainable issues worldwide (Bohlen, Schlegelmilch &

Diamantopoulos, 1993). Dickson (2001) points out that consumers are concerned about the social consequences of purchasing products, particularly with regard to the violation of human rights. This is especially evident in the apparel industry where consumers are starting to demand fairer practices for factory workers in developing countries (Tomolillo & Shaw, 2004). Consumers in general are becoming more concerned with the environment and sustainability when shopping, and evaluate products more aggressively than before. Consumers who are concerned with sustainable issues perceives the ecological dimension of a product more salient than consumers without a concern for sustainable issues (Kim & Damhorst, 1998). Understanding consumes' concern for sustainable issues is essential in understanding attitudes about sustainable apparel products (Gam, 2011). Prior concern and knowledge amongst consumers about the exploitation of the apparel industry workers have found to affect consumers' purchase intention for fashion, and also to increase their support for companies that work with social sustainability (Dickson, 2000). We therefore hypothesize that the relationship between awareness of a fashion company's social sustainability practices and consumers' perception of brand image is affected by one's concern for environmental and social sustainability. As described before, this is explained by the fact that consumers concerned with sustainability issues are more inclined to purchase sustainable apparel products.

Hypothesis 3: The relationship between awareness of a fashion company's social sustainability practices (SSA) and consumers' perception of brand image (BI) is affected by one's social sustainability concern (SSC).

Hypothesis 3a: The relationship between awareness of a fashion company's social sustainability practices (SSA) and consumers' perception of the cognitive brand image component (CBI) is affected by one's social sustainability concern (SSC).

Hypothesis 3b: The relationship between awareness of fashion company's social sustainability practices (SSA) and consumers' perception of the emotional brand image component (EBI) is affected by one's social sustainability concern (SSC).

Hypothesis 3c: The relationship between awareness of a fashion company's social sustainability practices (SSA) and consumers' perception of the sensory brand image component (SBI) is affected by one's social sustainability concern (SSC).

Hypothesis 4: The relationship between awareness of a fashion company's social sustainability practices (SSA) and consumers' perception of the brand image (BI) is affected by one's environmental concern (EC).

Hypothesis 4a: The relationship between awareness of a fashion company's social sustainability practices (SSA) and consumers' perception of the cognitive brand image component (CBI) is affected by one's environmental concern (EC).

Hypothesis 4b: The relationship between awareness of a fashion company's social sustainability practices (SSA) and consumers' perception of the emotional brand image component (EBI) is affected by one's environmental concern (EC).

Hypothesis 4c: The relationship between awareness of a fashion company's social sustainability practices (SSA) and consumers' perception of the sensory brand image

component (SBI) is affected by one's environmental concern (EC).

RESEARCH METHOD

Research approach
A quantitative research approach was used in order to explore how brand image and sub-components of brand image are affected by awareness of a fashion company's muted social sustainability practices, as well as by a person's interest in fashion. Further it is analyzed how the relationship between awareness of a fashion company's muted social sustainability practices and perception of brand image is influenced by consumers' concern for environmental and social sustainability. If carried out correctly, using a quantitative approach carries the advantages of reliability and objectivity, as well as the usage of statistics to generalize findings to individuals other than those who take part in the research (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Another main reason for choosing a quantitative approach is that it enables researchers to look at relationships between selected variable. Thus it provides explanations for certain issues in the social world (Bryman & Bell, 2015) rather than producing and describing in-depth knowledge about real-life phenomena as done in qualitative research (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2010). Regression

Figure 1: Research model

analysis is used in this study to predict relationships between the the independent variables of social sustainability awareness and fashion interest, and the dependent variable of brand image. Multiple regression is useful when the researcher is interested in how independent variables affect and change a dependent variable (Hair, Black, Babin & Anderson, 2010).

Survey object
A survey object was redeemed useful for our research since the chosen dependent variable is brand image, and the perception of brand image is easier to research if the brand image is regarding one specific fashion brand. The sample brand was chosen based on various important selection criteria: (1) The sample is a well known fashion brand in Sweden or, more specifically, in the Gothenburg area. (2) The fashion brand is ranked highly on social sustainability practices regarding improving conditions for apparel factory workers but (3) keeps communication of sustainable efforts on a low and corporate level, and thus can be regarded as a 'muted sustainable' brand (Solér et al., 2015, Crane, 1997; 2000). The high-end fashion brand Acne Studios has been identified as a suitable brand to focus on as it fits these requirements. Since its founding in Stockholm in 1996, the fashion house Acne Studios has opened several boutiques in high-end fashion cities around the world including Paris, London and Los Angeles, and has established itself to be "*[...] one of the fashion's most elusive and covetable brands*" ("Exclusive: Interview with founder of Acne Studios", 2014). As a member of the Fair Wear Foundation (FWF), which is a multi-stakeholder initiative working to improve and monitor working conditions in countries where apparel products are manufactured (Fair Wear Foundation, n.d.), Acne Studios agreed to adopt their Code of Labor Practices and to follow various requirement. This includes
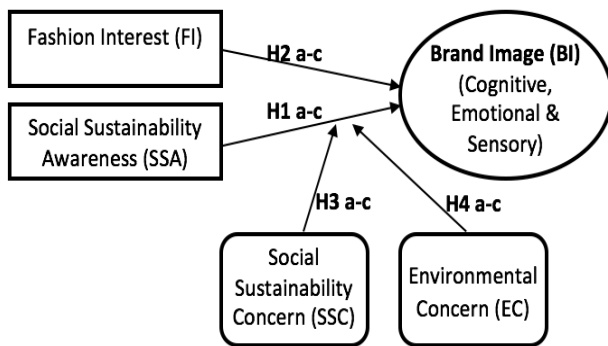
providing a list of all factories used, monitoring the working standards of the listed factories, and providing an annual 'Social Report' containing progress and results of initiatives (Acne Studios, 2016). In their annual 'Brand Performance Check', FWF (2016) has graded Acne Studios as a 'leader', implying that the fashion brand performs exceptionally well on improving social standards at its manufacturing sites. In the exclusive interview with The D'Vine, Johnny Johansson founder of Acne Studios states that sustainability and transparency are as important as details. The exploitation of people is a result of brands following a strategy based on cheap prices, which is a major problem connected to the industry he wants to address ("Exclusive: Interview with founder of Acne Studios", 2014). In the brand's Social Report (Acne Studios, 2016, p. 3), it further says "*[we] believe being proud of our products includes being proud of the conditions in which they are made*". While putting big emphasis and incorporating sustainability into their business practices, Acne Studios presents their brand as cool and simple in store and on their website, and chooses only to communicate its sustainability efforts on a low and corporate level.

Measurement development

In order to test how awareness of a fashion company's muted social sustainability practices affects consumers' perceptions of brand image an online survey was conducted. The questionnaire developed for the study consisted of 40 mandatory and three not mandatory questions. The two first questions asked about brand familiarity, in order to make sure the respondents who answered had some knowledge about the survey object, and the four last questions were demographic questions. The other questions regarded the dependent and independent variables, and the moderators. The different pages in the

questionnaire had an introductory text to make the questions clearer. All items, except the demographic and the first question "Do you know the brand Acne Studios?" were measured using a metric measurement scale, which are appropriate when measuring attributes involving amount or magnitude (Hair et al., 2010). All different scales were gathered and adapted from previous research (Appendix 1), in order to ensure validity and reliability of the items and constructs (Hair et al, 2010). All items in the survey, (except the demographic and the first question asking if the respondents knew about the brand) were measured using a 5-point Likert scale. The 5-point Likert scale ranged from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree".

The survey was first tested using a pilot study in order to ensure clarity, and that the questions were understood as intended. This is important for the validity and reliability, and further because the questionnaire had been translated from English to Swedish. In the pilot study the questionnaire was reviewed by 12 subjects. Different studies have different recommendations for how many respondents are appropriate for a pre-study regarding complexity etc., the recommendations vary from 12 - 30 respondents (Hunt, Sparkman & Wilcox, 1982). 12 subjects were however seen as appropriate for our study. Some words and meanings were a bit unclear for some of the subjects, and were therefore changed to ensure that the questions would be interpreted as intended by the population.

Data collection and sample characteristics

The respondents for the online survey were sampled via a probability sampling using a systematic sampling technique. The respondents were collected from downtown Gothenburg at five different days, during an hour were a lot of people are gathered to ensure that the population was well

represented. The first sample unit was randomly chosen, then after the first every fifth person was approached. For the results of a survey using regression analysis to be acceptable, Hair et al., (2010) suggest a requirement for minimum of 50 respondents, but preferably 100. Further the suggested ratio of independent variables and respondents is 15:1 or 20:1 (Hair et al., 2010). We therefore had to get at least 80-100 respondents for our study. The respondents were asked if they were willing to help us fill out the survey, and if they said yes their email were collected. The link to the online survey was sent out the day after to the emails we had collected the day before. After some days had passed, a reminder email was sent out. The data was collected during the period 07.04.2017 - 17.04.2017. The sample technique was chosen in order for our results to represent the general population, and not a specific group in society. The respondents collected had different background, education, age and gender.

The survey was sent to a total of 303 subjects, of which 172 responded. This constitutes a response rate at 56,8%. Everybody that started the questionnaire finished it. 9 cases were removed from the final sample because they had answered "No" on the question asking if they knew the brand, giving us a final sample size of 163 respondents. Finally, the items SBI1 - SBI3 were deleted due to a high rate of missing answers, these questions were the only three not mandatory and regarded the store environment and the web site design. The high rate of missing answers to these three questions may be explained by the fact that even though a respondent knows the brand, it does not mean it has visited a store of Acne Studios because the brand is sold elsewhere too.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Descriptive statistics

Our survey population consists of 76.7% female respondents and 23.3% male respondents. The age groups 21-25 (50.3%) and 26-30 (26.4%) make up the largest part, accounting for three quarters of our survey population (table I). The overall large number of female respondents and young people can be explained by the fact that the survey object is a brand arguably more known by females

Table I: Characteristics of subjects

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender		
Female	125	76.7%
Male	38	23.3%
Age		
16 – 20	11	6.7%
21 – 25	82	50.3%
26 – 30	43	26.4%
31 – 35	8	4.9%
36 – 40	4	2.5%
41 – 45	3	1.8%
46 – 50	5	3.1%
51 – 55	4	2.5%
56 – 60	3	1.8%
Education		
High School	35	21.5%
Practical Education	12	7.4%
Bachelor's Degree	60	36.8%
Master's Degree	55	33.7%
PhD	1	0.6%
Income		
Under 100 000	56	34.4%
100 000 – 250 000	34	20.9%
250 001 – 400 000	38	23.3%
Over 400 000	28	17.2%
Other	7	4.3%
Brand Familiarity		
1	1	0.6%
2	20	12.3%
3	45	27.6%
4	40	24.5%
5	57	35%

because females generally are more interested in fashion, and by a younger population due to the image of a hip and young brand they try to represent. Concerning the aspect of education, the largest percentage are respondents with a Bachelor's degree (36.8%), and the largest percentage concerning income are respondents that have a yearly income of 100.000 SEK or less (34.4%) (table I). Further, the descriptive results show that the survey population is stating that they are very familiar with the survey object (35%), and the values three and four accounting for over 50% together indicating that the survey population has high knowledge about the brand (table I).

Reliability

Our research model consists of 34 (after the deletion of SBI1 - SBI3) observed items measuring five constructs: brand image, fashion interest, social sustainability awareness, environmental concern, and social sustainability concern. The underlying structure among the 34 observed items was determined by conducting an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using a principal component analysis (PCA) (table III). A direct oblimin rotation method was chosen to interpret the factors, as it allows and expects the correlation of factors, and thus is useful if the goal is to obtain various theoretically meaningful constructs (Hair et al., 2010). The factor analysis had a satisfying KMO, and a statistical significant Bartlett's test (KMO=0.88, p=>0.05), confirming sufficient correlations amongst the items to be able to proceed (Hair et al., 2010). Due to low factor loadings, three items were subsequently dropped from further analysis: SSA1, SSA2, and SSC1. The EFA and the items with their factor loadings are presented in a table III.

The results from the EFA show our items loading on five different constructs: brand image (BI), fashion interest (FI), social

sustainability awareness (SSA), social sustainability concern (SSC) and environmental concern (EC). The EFA shows all 14 brand image items loading on one construct, and brand image was therefore made into one construct, excluding the items CBI3 and EBI3 due to low factor loadings. The brand image construct was used for further analyses. However, as mentioned in the theoretical framework, a fashion company's brand image can further be divided into three different sub-components; cognitive brand image, emotional brand image, and sensory brand image (Cho & Fiore, 2015; Cho et al., 2015). We further wanted to use the three different sub-components of brand image in order to do a more in depth analysis, and to see if there were any differences between the three regarding how they were affected by fashion interest and social sustainability awareness.

Table II: Scale reliabilities and descriptive statistics

	Items	Mean	S.D.	Cronbach's α
Dependent constructs				
Brand Image (BI)	12	2.85	0.85	0.93
Cognitive Brand Image (CBI)	6	3.07	0.82	0.86
Emotional Brand Image (EBI)	5	2.60	0.91	0.87
Sensory Brand Image (SBI)	3	3.13	0.97	0.82
Independent constructs				
Fashion Interest (FI)	6	2.59	0.97	0.89
Social Sustainability Awareness (SSA)	5	2.98	0.94	0.95
Moderators				
Social Sustainability Concern (SSC)	3	4.44	0.72	0.81
Environmental Concern (EC)	3	4.57	0.66	0.85

Table III: Items and Exploratory Factor Analysis

	Component					Communalities
	1	2	3	4	5	
This brand comes to mind immediately when I want to purchase a fashion product (*CBI1*)	0.74					0.51
This brand is up to date (*CBI2*)	0.60					0.58
This brand is consistently high quality (*CBI3*)						0.63
I have positive memories about experiences with this brand (*CBI4*)	0.72					0.65
I can create my own style with the products of this brand (*CBI5*)	0.65					0.63
Wearing this brand helps me create the image I want (*CBI6*)	0.79					0.70
This brand knows what I want to wear (*EBI1*)	0.75					0.64
I am committed to this brand (*EBI2*)	0.74					0.66
I can rely on this brand (*EBI3*)						0.62
I really enjoy wearing this brand (*EBI4*)	0.86					0.75
I feel happy when I wear this brand (*EBI5*)	0.80					0.71
The design of the brand's packaging really appeals to me (*SBI4*)	0.50					0.46
The texture of this brand feels better to touch than other brands (*SBI5*)	0.76					0.64
The texture of this brand is pleasant to touch (*SBI6*)	0.69					0.66
I am the first to try new fashion; therefore, many people regard me as a fashion leader (*FI1*)			0.74			0.77
I am aware of fashion trends and want to be one of the first to try them (*FI2*)			0.75			0.72
I spend a lot of time on fashion related activities (*FI3*)			0.79			0.72
I always buy at least one outfit of the latest fashion (*FI4*)			0.79			0.67
Clothes are one of the most important ways I have of expressing my individuality (*FI5*)			0.75			0.71
I spend a lot of money on clothes and accessories (*FI6*)			0.79			0.76
It is important that we are concerned with improving the general well-being of society (*SSC2*)				-0.85		0.76
It is important to me that human rights are being honored in all countries around the world (*SSC3*)				-0.87		0.70
It is important to me to help raise awareness of issues such as hunger, discrimination and domestic violence (*SSC4*)				-0.79		0.70
We should devote some part of our national resources to environmental protection (*EC1*)		0.81				0.73
It is important to me that we try to protect our environment for future generations (*EC2*)		0.94				0.82
It would mean a lot to me if I could contribute to protecting the environment (*EC3*)		0.84				0.78
I believe that Acne Studios offers safety at work to the employees at the factories used (*SSA3*)					0.90	0.83
I believe Acne Studios treats the employees at the factories used fairly (without discrimination or abuses) (*SSA4*)					0.95	0.88
I believe Acne Studios offers training and capacity building to the employees at the factories used (*SSA5*)					0.86	0.80
I believe that Acne Studios offers a pleasant work environment for the employees at the factories used (e.g. no excessive hours, right to collective bargaining) (*SSA6*)					0.94	0.85
I believe Acne Studios honors human rights of the employees at the factories used (*SSA7*)					0.92	0.81
Cronbach's alpha	0.93	0.85	0.95	0.89	0.81	
Percentage of variance explained	34.13	11.24	9.13	7.81	3.91	

Scale: 1, strongly disagree… 5, strongly agree.
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Oblimin with Kaiser Normalization.
Total variance explained: 66.23%; KM0 = 0.879; Bartlett's test: df = 496, p-value = 0.000.

The three different brand image components were therefore also made into three different constructs in order to be able to examine them. Cognitive brand image (CBI) included the items CBI1 - CBI6, emotional brand image (EBI) included the items EBI1 - EBI5, and sensory brand image (SBI) included the items SBI4 - SBI6.

In a next step, the Cronbach's alpha (α) of the scales were assessed, ranging from 0.85 to 0.95 (table II). As the general agreed upon lower limit for Cronbach's alpha is 0.70 (Hair et al., 2010), all constructs have thus been confirmed as reliable.

Hypothesis testing
Regression analysis was used to test the proposed hypotheses of this study. In a first step, we used the construct brand image (BI) as the dependent variable, and tested the effect of the two independent variables social sustainability awareness (SSA) and fashion interest (FI) on it. In a second step we used the three different divided brand image sub-components; cognitive (CBI), emotional (EBI) and sensory (SBI), and analyzed them as dependent variables in our model together with fashion interest (FI) and social sustainability awareness (SSA) as independent variables.

The first regression analysis conducted using brand image (BI) as the dependent variable shows that the model has an overall good fit and significant relationships between the variables (R^2 = 0.32, F-value = 38.27, p-value = <0.001). We can see significant and positive effects on BI of both FI (B-value = 0.32, p-value = <0.001) and SSA (B-value = 0.30, p-value= <0.001). Hence, **H1** and **H2** are supported. Our results also show that FI in comparison to SSA has a higher explanation power on the dependent variable BI's variance (table IV).

The second regression analysis conducted using cognitive brand image (CBI) as the dependent variable shows that the model has an overall good fit and significant relationships between the variables (R^2 = 0.34, F-value = 40.91, p-value = <0.001). We can see significant and positive effects on CBI of both FI (B-value = 0.30, p-value = <0.001) and SSA (B-value = 0.32, p-value = <0.001). Hence, **H1a** and **H2a** are supported. Our results also show that SSA in comparison to FI has a higher explanation power on the dependent variable CBI's variance (table IV).

The third regression analysis conducted using emotional brand image (EBI) as the dependent variable shows that the model has an overall good fit and significant relationships between the variables (R^2 = 0.32, F-value = 37.91, p-value = <0.001). We can see significant and positive effects on EBI of both FI (B-value = 0.35, p-value = <0.001) and SSA (B-value = 0.31, p-value = <0.001). Hence, **H1b** and **H2b** are supported. Our results further show that FI in comparison to SSA has a higher explanation power on the dependent variable EBI's variance (table IV).

The fourth regression analysis conducted using sensory brand image (SBI) as the dependent variable shows that the model has an overall good fit and significant relationships between the variables (R^2 = 0.25, F-value = 27.02, p-value = <0.001). As the R^2 is low, SSA and FI do not explain a lot of the variance in the dependent variable SBI. We can see significant and positive effects on SBI of both FI (B-value = 0.29, p-value = <0.001) and SSA (B-value = 0.34, p-value = <0.001). Hence, **H1c** and **H2c** are supported. Our results also show that SSA in comparison to FI has a higher explanation power on the dependent variable SBI's variance (table IV).

Table IV: Regression models, step 1 and 2

	Variable	Beta/Standardized Beta	t	Sig.
Step 1				
Model 1: Dependent variable: brand image (BI); $R^2 = 0,32$, F = 38,27, Sig = 0.00				
	Fashion interest (FI)	0.32/0.37	5.34	0.00
	Social sustainability awareness (SSA)	0.30/0.33	4.78	0.00
Step 2				
Model 2: Dependent variable: cognitive brand image (CBI); $R^2 = 0.34$, F = 40,91, Sig = 0.00				
	Fashion interest (FI)	0.30/0.35	5.14	0.00
	Social sustainability awareness (SSA)	0.32/0.36	5.32	0.00
Model 3: Dependent variable: emotional brand image (EBI); $R^2 = 0.32$, F = 37.91, Sig = 0.00				
	Fashion interest (FI)	0.35/0.37	5.37	0.00
	Social sustainability awareness (SSA)	0.31/0.32	4.69	0.00
Model 4: Dependent variable: sensory brand image (SBI); $R^2 = 0.25$, F = 27.02, Sig = 0.00				
	Fashion interest (FI)	0.30/0.30	3.98	0.00
	Social sustainability awareness (SSA)	0.34/0.33	4.52	0.00

In the third and fourth step of our regression analysis the moderator effects of social sustainability concern (SSC) and environmental concern (EC) on the relationship between the dependent variables and the independent variable social sustainability awareness (SSA) were assessed. Hair et al. (2010, p. 154) defines a moderator effect as an "*[effect] in which a third independent variable (the moderator variable) causes the relationship between a dependent/independent variable pair to change, depending on the value of the moderator variable*". In the third step the moderator effects of social sustainability concern (SSC) and environmental concern (EC) were tested on the relationship between the dependent variable brand image (BI) and the independent variable social sustainability awareness (SSA). In a fourth step the moderator effects of social sustainability concern (SSC) and environmental concern (EC) were also tested on the relationships

between the independent variable social sustainability awareness (SSA) and the three different sub-components of brand image to see if there was any difference between the three. Eight new regression analyses were conducted for the third and fourth step to see if there are significant moderator effects from SSC and/or EC on the four different relationships regarding the four different dependent variables BI, CBI, EBI and SBI, and the independent variable SSA.

First, the moderator effects of SSC and EC were tested on the relationship between the dependent variable BI and the independent variable SSA. There is no significant moderator effect of either SSA or EC on the relationship between BI and SSA (table V), and thus **H3** and **H4** are rejected.

Second, the moderator effects of SSC and EC were tested on the relationship between the three different sub-components of brand

image (CBI, EBI and SBI) and SSA. The first regression analysis was conducted with CBI as the dependent variable. The moderator effect of SSC on the relationship between CBI and SSA is significant. The moderator variable has a significant and negative beta value (B-value = -0.16, p-value = 0.045). Meaning, the more concerned a consumer is with social sustainability, the less effect SSA has on CBI. The R2 is also slightly higher for this model (model 7), than for the model without a moderator effect (model 2) (table IV and V). The moderator effect is however not very high, but it is significant and present and thus **H3a** is supported (table V). There is no significant moderator effect present for EC, and thus **H4a** is rejected (table V). Further, there are no significant moderator effects present of either SSC or EC in the last four regression analyses conducted. Hypotheses **H3b**, **H3c**, **H4b** and **H4c** are thus rejected (table V).

Table V: Regression models with the moderators, step 3 and 4

Variable	Beta	t	Sig.
Step 3			
Model 5: Dependent variable: BI; Moderator: SSC; $R^2 = 0,35$, F = 21.64, Sig = 0.00			
Fashion interest (FI)	0.31	5.29	0.00
Social sustainability awareness (SSA)	0.29	4.73	0.00
Social sustainability concern (SSC)	0.13	1.65	0.10
Moderator (SSA*SSC)	-0.14	-1.72	0.09
Model 6: Dependent variable: BI; Moderator: EC; $R^2 = 0,34$, F = 20.15, Sig = 0.00			
Fashion interest (FI)	0.32	5.28	0.00
Social sustainability awareness (SSA)	0.30	4.85	0.00
Environmental concern (EC)	0.15	1.82	0.07
Moderator (SSA*EC)	0.01	0.09	0.93
Step 4			
Model 7: Dependent variable: CBI; Moderator SSC; $R^2 = 0.38$, F = 23.79, Sig = 0.00			
Fashion interest (FI)	0.29	5.1	0.00
Social sustainability awareness (SSA)	0.31	5.32	0.00
Social sustainability concern (SSC)	0.13	1.79	0.08
Moderator (SSA*SSC)	-0.16	-2.02	0.045
Model 8: Dependent variable: CBI; Moderator EC; $R^2 = 0,35$, F = 21.66, Sig = 0.00			
Fashion interest (FI)	0.29	5.11	0.00
Social sustainability awareness (SSA)	0.32	5.41	0.00
Environmental concern (EC)	0.15	1.87	0.06
Moderator (SSA*EC)	0.024	0.35	0.73
Model 9: Dependent variable: EBI; Moderator: SSC ; $R^2 = 0.34$, F = 20.19, Sig = 0.00			
Fashion interest (FI)	0.34	5.3	0.00
Social sustainability awareness (SSA)	0.31	4.55	0.00
Social sustainability concern (SSC)	0.13	1.47	0.14
Moderator (SSA*SSC)	-0.09	-0.97	0.33
Model 10: Dependent variable: EBI; Moderator: EC ; $R^2 = 0.33$, F = 197, Sig = 0.00			
Fashion interest (FI)	0.34	5.33	0.00
Social sustainability awareness (SSA)	0.32	4.75	0.00
Environmental concern (EC)	0.14	1.53	0.13
Moderator (SSA*EC)	0.03	0.41	0.69
Model 11: Dependent variable: SBI; Moderator: SSC; $R^2 = 0.28$, F = 15.11, Sig = 0.00			
Fashion interest (FI)	0.28	3.91	0.00
Social sustainability awareness (SSA)	0.34	4.55	0.00
Social sustainability concern (SSC)	0.09	0.9	0.37
Moderator (SSA*SSC)	-0.18	-1.84	0.07
Model 12: Dependent variable: SBI; Moderator: EC; $R^2 = 0.27$, F = 14.3, Sig = 0.00			
Fashion interest (FI)	0.28	3.86	0.00
Social sustainability awareness (SSA)	0.34	4.53	0.00
Environmental concern (EC)	0.15	1.45	0.15
Moderator (SSA*EC)	-0.09	-1.01	0.31

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This research aims to explore, if and how important awareness of a fashion company's muted social sustainability practices is in explaining consumers' perception of brand image in comparison to one's interest in fashion. Further, it is investigated how the relationship between awareness of a fashion company's muted social sustainability practices and consumers' perception of brand image is influenced by one's concern for environmental and social sustainability. Due to the focus on 'muted sustainable' fashion brands, this study also tries to give answer to the question of whether fashion brands should start communicating their sustainable efforts to their consumers in order to attain a stronger brand image.

Theoretical implications

The results from our study indicate that both social sustainability awareness and fashion interest have a significant and positive impact on brand image. Thus **H1** and **H2** of this research can be confirmed as true. When compared with social sustainability awareness, fashion interest is more relevant in explaining brand image. This can be explained by the fact, that most consumers still prioritize ´fashionability´ over ethics when purchasing apparel products (McNeil & Moore, 2015; Joergens, 2006; Shaw et al., 2006). Nevertheless, our results show social sustainability awareness to be almost as important as fashion interest in influencing brand image. Arguably both variables play a crucial role in enhancing consumers' perception of a fashion company's brand image. This is in contrast to a recent study conducted by Solér et al. (2015), stating that 'muted sustainable' fashion brands believe consumers not to be interested in information about sustainability practices, and therefore choosing to keep communication of their efforts on a low and/or corporate level. It is

however in line with various other studies. For instance, it is found out that apparel consumers are interested in getting more information about production methods and country of origin (Bhaduri & Ha-Brookshire, 2014) and form positive attitudes towards fashion brands when provided with more explicit information regarding environmentally friendly goods in advertising campaigns (Yan et al., 2012). Based on our findings that awareness of social sustainability increases consumers' perception of brand image, and also that it is almost as important as fashion interest, we suggest fashion companies to start communicating their sustainability activities. However, fashion companies should still promote their brand as being ´fashionable´. Our results show that the communication of both social sustainability activities and fashion interest will in turn establish a stronger brand image. Weiss et al. (2014) also state that fashion companies more effectively need to communicate what sustainable practices they are involved in, because many consumers are still not able to understand sustainability in relation to fashion. Our research, however, suggest that if consumers are aware and understand sustainability in relation to fashion, a fashion company's brand image will increase.

When dividing brand image into its three sub-components; cognitive brand image, emotional brand image, and sensory brand image (Cho & Fiore, 2015; Cho et al., 2015); results show that both social sustainability awareness and fashion interest have a significant and positive effect on all three brand image components. Thus **H1a-c** and **H2a-c** can be confirmed. These findings further support Cho et al. (2015) study that emphasizes the role of all three brand image attributes in influencing consumer attitudes, preferences, choices, perceptions, as well as consumption behavior. When compared with

fashion interest, the data indicates social sustainability awareness to be more relevant in explaining both cognitive and sensory brand image. I.e. awareness of social sustainability is more important than fashion interest for the cognitive and sensory brand image sub-components. Consumers seem to value a company's social sustainability activities when thinking about and experiencing a brand. In previous research it is found that consumers most likely purchase fashion brands that fit with their desired self-image (Escalas & Bettman, 2005) and that cognitive associations, in particular, are related to a person's desired self-image and also a brand's ability to represent one's self-image (Cho & Fiore, 2015, Cho et al., 2015). While for some consumers 'fashionability' is particularly relevant in building a socially accepted identity (McNeil & Moore, 2015), it is also said that some consumers construct pro-environmental identities (Dermody et al., 2015) or at least desire a self-image that is more socially responsible (Cho & Fiore, 2015). Regarding emotional brand image, fashion interest has a higher explanation power than social sustainability awareness. Different to cognitive associations, which reflect consumers' experiences with the appropriate size, fit and durability of a brand's garments, emotional associations are connected to a brand's ability to understand their consumers' opinions and preferences regarding design, color and packaging (Cho & Fiore, 2015). Fashion interested people in particular buy garments because of their symbolic value, such as attractiveness and fashionability, rather than their functional benefits like durability and comfort (Gam, 2011). While, our findings support that fashion interest is more important in explaining the emotional brand image sub-component, our results show that social sustainability awareness is also important in order to enhance the emotional sub-component of brand image. Our findings

states, however, that the cognitive and the sensory sub-components enhance more than the emotional sub-component when social sustainability awareness increases. Arguably, awareness of social sustainability practices is more important for consumers' self-image and experiences with a brand, rather than consumers' enjoyment with a brand, and a brand's ability to show empathy.

Our results show no significant moderator effects of either social sustainability concern and environmental concern on the relationship between the dependent variable brand image and the independent variable social sustainability awareness. Thus, **H3** and **H4** are rejected. Consumers' awareness of social sustainability practices affect brand image directly, and the relationship is not affected by consumers' prior environmental and social sustainability concern. We could find no significant moderator effect of environmental concern on either one of the three brand image subcomponents, thus **H4a - H4c** is rejected. The relationships between social sustainability awareness and the three sub-components are not affected by the consumer's environmental concern. Our findings therefore show that environmental concern is not important for consumers' perception of a fashion company's brand image. This is further supported by other studies stating that social sustainability is more important for consumers regarding fashion than environmental sustainability (Dickson, 2001). We found no moderator effects of social sustainability concern on the relationship between emotional and sensory brand image, we found however a significant moderator effect with a negative beta value of social sustainability concern on the relationship between cognitive brand image and social sustainability awareness. Thus, **H3b** and **H3c** are rejected, and **H3a** is confirmed. Our findings of the moderator effect tells us that the more a consumer is

concerned with social sustainability matters, the less social sustainability awareness affects the consumer's perception of cognitive brand image. If a consumer, for instance, is highly concerned with social sustainability, the impact of social sustainability awareness on the perception of the cognitive brand image is decreasing. This can be explained by the fact that consumers that are highly concerned with social sustainability see fashion and sustainability as two contradictory terms (Lundblad & Davies, 2016), and further view the sustainable aspect more salient than other consumers (Gam, 2011). These consumers are more critical and skeptical about social sustainability practices of fashion companies (Lundblad & Davies, 2016). Our result that the moderator effect of social sustainability concern is only present in the relationship between cognitive brand image and social sustainability awareness supports our findings that social sustainability awareness is more relevant in explaining cognitive brand image. The finding that environmental concern has no significant moderator effect on any of the relationships between social sustainability awareness and the three brand image sub-components can be explained by prior research, describing the social consequences of apparel produced under sweatshop conditions as a bigger concern for consumers than environmental issues (Lundblad & Davies, 2016).

Practical implications
In order to enhance brand image, our results suggest, that fashion companies should not only rely on promoting their brand as 'fashionable' and trendy, but also start communicating their sustainability practices and efforts to their consumers. Reference groups and opinion leaders are seen as a big influence on fashion consumers' behavior as they present individuals with new lifestyles and behavior (Kotler, Armstrong, Harris, & Piercy, 2013), and thus have the ability to

convince other fashion interested consumers to adopt and purchase new fashion products (Gam, 2011). Based on this, we suggest fashion companies to specifically target fashion leaders with their sustainable communication, so they can spread it to other fashion consumers. Due to the extensive research fashion leaders do on fashion related topics and their interest in trying out new trends, they are more inclined to accept and purchase sustainable clothing (Gam, 2011).

As social sustainability awareness is found to be more relevant in explaining both cognitive and sensory brand image, we suggest fashion companies to focus on the cognitive and sensory associations consumers have with their brand when communicating their sustainability activities. As suggested by Cho and Fiore (2015), cognitive associations are related to a person's desired self-image and a brand's ability to represent one's self-image, and thus cognitive associations can reflect a consumer's motivation to be more socially responsible. Based on our findings that fashion interest is more relevant in explaining emotional brand image, we suggest fashion companies to focus their communication on emotional associations that are connected to a consumer's enjoyment with the brand's products, and a brand's ability to understand their consumers' opinions and preferences regarding design, color and packaging (Cho & Fiore, 2015).

In addition to enhancing brand image through increasing communication on sustainability practices and efforts, popular and highly favored apparel brands are, due to their persuasive ability of gathering support for sustainable production methods and designs, believed to have the potential of becoming influential leaders in the sustainability movement (Kim & Ma, 2014). Thus, we conclude that knowledge on sustainable fashion options among consumers and the

general population can be increased, and through increased awareness barriers to the consumption of sustainable clothing will be reduced (McNeil & Moore, 2015).

The risk of being perceived as a 'greenwashing' company has been pointed out as a key reason for fashion brands deciding not to communicate their sustainability engagements (Crane, 2000). However, recent research has found that a fashion company's current brand image and sourcing practices, have a great influence on consumers' perception and evaluation of the fashion brand's sustainability performance (Strähle & Köksal, 2015). Further it is found that a brand image is depending on whether consumers feel that the brand and its green strategy fit together, as well as how the brand's sustainability efforts are being communicated (Kim & Hall, 2015). As a fashion brand with a transparent supply chain and one that follows the idea of slow fashion (Acne Studios, 2016), we suggest that Acne Studios will be positively evaluated on their sustainability performance by their consumers since their social sustainability strategy is in line with their current brand image and sourcing practices (Strähle & Köksal, 2015; Kim & Hall, 2015). Acne Studios should therefore start to communicate their sustainability efforts to consumers in order to enhance their brand image. Our findings show that 'muted sustainable' fashion brands should not only rely on promoting their brand as just trendy and fashionable, but as sustainable too. If 'muted sustainable' fashion companies start to communicate their sustainable practices, awareness and understanding about sustainability in relation to fashion will increase, which in turn increases consumers' perception of their brand image further. In addition to that, many other fashion brands, such as H&M (H&M Conscious Collection), Mango (Mango Committed Collection) and Gina Tricot (Gina

Tricot, The Way), have developed and presented a sustainable collection next to their normal apparel assortment, and have started to communicate it to their consumers on a relatively high level. Thus, we assume that they have contributed to raising awareness and acceptance on sustainable fashion options.

CONCLUSION

This research aims to explore, how important awareness of a fashion company's muted social sustainability practices is in explaining consumers' perception of brand image in comparison to one's interest in fashion. Focusing on Acne Studios as a 'muted sustainable' fashion brand, this paper further tries to give an answer to the question of whether fashion brands should start communicating their sustainability practices. It is also tested if the relationship between awareness of a company's muted sustainability practices and consumers' perception of brand image is affected by environmental and/or social sustainability concern. Both fashion interest and social sustainability awareness is found to be significant and positive contributors to the perception of brand image. The results show that both variables are almost equally important in explaining consumers' perception of the brand image of Acne Studios. While fashion interest is found to be more relevant in explaining the emotional sub-component of brand image, social sustainability awareness is found to be particular important in explaining the cognitive and sensory sub-components of brand image. The only relationship affected by a moderator effect is the one between social sustainability awareness and cognitive brand image, and it is only affected by social sustainability concern. Our results suggest in order to enhance brand image, 'muted sustainable' fashion companies should not only rely on promoting their brand as

'fashionable' and trendy, but also start communicating their sustainability practices and efforts to their consumers in order to increase awareness on these practices amongst consumers. Increased awareness amongst consumers will in turn lead to an enhanced brand image for a 'muted sustainable' brand, especially if the brand has a fit with the green communication done, as we conclude is the case for Acne Studios. Further, we suggest fashion companies to focus on the cognitive and sensory associations consumers have with their brand when communicating their sustainability activities, and on emotional associations when promoting their brand as 'fashionable'.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Notwithstanding the presented findings, there are a few limitations that should be addressed as part of this research. First, regression analysis was used in this study to analyze how the dependent variable brand image is affected by the two independent variables social sustainability awareness and fashion interest. Regression is a useful method when analyzing a change in one dependent variable and several independent variables (Hair et al., 2010). Our study, however, only had two independent variables, and thus other factors affecting consumers' perception of brand image have not been considered and explored. Second, the study is limited by the fact that it focuses on one specific fashion company's brand image; Acne Studios, which was chosen based on several criteria set by the authors. As Acne Studios is a fairly new brand that seems to target a younger

population, most of our respondents belonged to a relatively young population. The reasons mentioned above limit the generalizability of this paper. The population further consists of only Swedish people and should therefore not be interpreted as applicable to populations outside of Sweden. Finally, it is necessary to bear in mind that the independent variable social sustainability awareness was measured as consumers' beliefs of the social sustainability practices of Acne Studios and not actual awareness.

With regard to future research it is therefore suggested to investigate both other fashion companies and other cultures elsewhere in the world. Further, it is suggested that future research should be conducted with more independent variables in order to see how important social sustainability awareness compared to other variables is in explaining perception of brand image. As this study was carried out using a quantitative research approach, a qualitative approach could be used in future research to attain more in depth-knowledge. One of our main recommendations is that 'muted sustainable' fashion brands should start communicating their sustainability practices with a focus on the cognitive and sensory associations consumers have with a brand. Based on this, another suggestion could focus more on how fashion companies can successfully communicate their sustainability practices in order to enhance brand image. The effect of different green communication strategies could be explored, and also how consumers should be targeted.

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Appendix 1. Overview over which studies the measurement constructs and their items are adapted from

Construct	Item	Coding	Adapted from
Brand Image (BI) (CBI)	This brand comes to mind immediately when I want to purchase a fashion product	CBI1	Cho & Fiore (2015) and Cho et al. (2015)
	This brand is up to date	CBI2	Cho & Fiore (2015) and Cho et al. (2015)
	This brand is consistently high quality	CBI3	Cho & Fiore (2015) and Cho et al. (2015)
	I have positive memories about experiences with this brand	CBI4	Cho & Fiore (2015) and Cho et al. (2015)
	I can create my own style with the products of this brand	CBI5	Cho & Fiore (2015) and Cho et al. (2015)
	Wearing this brand helps me create the image I want	CBI6	Cho & Fiore (2015) and Cho et al. (2015)
(EBI)	This brand knows what I want to wear	EBI1	Cho & Fiore (2015) and Cho et al. (2015)
	I am committed to this brand	EBI2	Cho & Fiore (2015) and Cho et al. (2015)
	I can rely on this brand	EBI3	Cho & Fiore (2015) and Cho et al. (2015)
	I really enjoy wearing this brand	EBI4	Cho & Fiore (2015) and Cho et al. (2015)
	I feel happy when I wear this brand	EBI5	Cho & Fiore (2015) and Cho et al. (2015)
(SBI)	This brand has incredible displays	SBI1	Cho & Fiore (2015) and Cho et al. (2015)
	The well-ordered store environment appeals to me	SBI2	Cho & Fiore (2015) and Cho et al. (2015)
	The Web site design for this brand is really well done	SBI3	Cho & Fiore (2015) and Cho et al. (2015)

	The design of the brand's packaging really appeals to me	SBI4	Cho & Fiore (2015) and Cho et al. (2015)
	The texture of this brand feels better to touch than other brands	SBI5	Cho & Fiore (2015) and Cho et al. (2015)
	The texture of this brand is pleasant to touch	SBI6	Cho & Fiore (2015) and Cho et al. (2015)
Fashion Interest (FI)	I am the first to try new fashion; therefore, many people regard me as a fashion leader	FI1	Gam (2011) and Gutman & Mills (1982)
	I am aware of fashion trends and want to be one of the first to try them	FI2	Gam (2011) and Gutman & Mills (1982)
	I spend a lot of time on fashion related activities	FI3	Gam (2011) and Gutman & Mills (1982)
	I always buy at least one outfit of the latest fashion	FI4	Gam (2011) and Gutman & Mills (1982)
	Clothes are one of the most important ways I have of expressing my individuality	FI5	Gam (2011) and Gutman & Mills (1982)
	I spend a lot of money on clothes and accessories	FI6	Gam (2011) and Gutman & Mills (1982)
Social Sustainability Awareness (SSA)	I do research on the brand's social sustainability work on my own	SSA1	The authors*
	I believe that Acne Studios' supply chain is very transparent	SSA2	The authors*
	I believe that Acne Studios offers safety at work to the employees at the factories used	SSA3	Perez & de Bosque (2013)
	I believe Acne Studios treats the employees at the factories used fairly (without discrimination or abuses)	SSA4	Perez & de Bosque (2013)
	I believe Acne Studios offers training and capacity building to the employees at the factories used	SSA5	Perez & de Bosque (2013)
	I believe that Acne Studios offers a pleasant work environment for the employees at the factories used (e.g. no excessive hours, right to collective bargaining)	SSA6	Perez & de Bosque (2013)

	I believe Acne Studios honors human rights of the employees at the factories used	SSA7	David, Kline & Dai (2005)
Social Sustainability Concern (SSC)	It is important to me to make donations to social projects to advance the situation of the most underprivileged groups of the society	SSC1	Perez & de Bosque (2013)
	It is important that we are concerned with improving the general well-being of society	SSC2	Perez & de Bosque (2013)
	It is important to me that human rights are being honored in all countries around the world	SSC3	David, Kline & Dai (2005)
	It is important to me to help raise awareness of issues such as hunger, discrimination and domestic violence	SSC4	David, Kline & Dai (2005)
Environmental Concern (EC)	We should devote some part of our national resources to environmental protection	EC1	Gam (2011)
	It is important to me that we try to protect our environment for future generations	EC2	Gam (2011)
	It would mean a lot to me if I could contribute to protecting the environment	EC3	Gam (2011)

 * Were tested by the pre-study and therefore assured that the questions were understandable and clear