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CSR is more than PR
Consumer perception of digital sustainability communication from fast fashion brands

Master Degree Project in Marketing and Consumption
Authors: Julia Hafström & Antonella Shahin
Supervisors: Cecilia Solér & Jeanette Hauff
Graduate School

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Julia Hafström & Antonella Shahin

Master of Science in Marketing and Consumption, University of Gothenburg, School of Business, Economics and Law, Gothenburg, Sweden

Abstract

This article focuses on consumer perception of digital sustainability communication and how the perception affects brand credibility. Sustainability has become an important matter and consumers today are aware of the consequences the fast fashion industry has on the environment. A way for companies to act on this is by including external stakeholders in their CSR efforts. However, CSR is a delicate matter to handle since consumers are expecting companies to communicate about their CSR efforts whilst at the same time some consumers are reluctant. This research draws from a qualitative approach where phenomenological interviews was used to explore the first-hand experiences and emotions evoked by consumers when being exposed to the communication. The study shows that consumers tend to perceive the digital sustainability communication differently depending on previous knowledge of sustainability matters as well as personal preferences, where the ones who have a high level of knowledge are generally negative about the communication, whereas the less knowledgeable are mainly positive. The study also shows that these different perceptions in turn has an effect on how credible the consumers experience the fast fashion brands.

Keywords: Corporate social responsibility, brand credibility, digital communication, sustainability, fast fashion brands

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Introduction

This article will focus on how consumer perceive digital sustainability communication received from fast fashion brands and what effect it has on brand credibility. One of the main contemporary challenges humanity is facing is the environmental crisis of the planet (Martin & Schouten, 2012). People are living way beyond the natural resources offered, and way faster than they can be replaced. Even though the environmental issues now are a collective concern and people are aware of the fact that sustainability matters need to be addressed (Birtwistle & Moore, 2007), there is still a long way to go. The reason for the increased awareness among people is that the issues regarding the social and environmental ethics has increased (Ha-Brookshire & Norum, 2011). Sustainability

is not an easy matter, on the contrary rather complex and everchanging (Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang & Chan, 2012). The dimensions of sustainability are many, however, this study will focus on the environmental aspect.

There are many different causes for the ongoing climate change. One of the industries that has a major impact on the environment is the textile industry, both fashion and furnishing (Shen, Li, Dong & Perry, 2017). Within fashion, the so called fast fashion brands are the ones having the biggest impact on the environment (Bick, Halsey & Ekenga, 2018). Joy et al. (2012) describe fast fashion as *"low-cost clothing collections based on current, high-cost luxury fashion trends"* (p. 275), and refers to brands who launch new collections in a

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high pace and encourage consumer to a purchase-dispose kind of consumption. Besides the fact that the consumption of fast fashion implies massive production volumes, the amount of pesticides used when growing cotton is negatively affecting the biodiversity (Bick et al., 2018; Solér, Lang, Brinkberg, Hars, Graffner, Rhodin, Strand, Fernmo, Nilsson, Soxbo & Sundh, 2019). To be able to keep up with the sustainability awareness pace of consumers around the world, the fast fashion giants have been more or less forced to formulate more adequate sustainability goals and practices. A few common ways for fast fashion brands to do this is by putting up goals of circular fashion and recycling clothes and textiles (Solér, 2020), as well as bragging about climate compensating for their package deliveries and transportation (Caesar, 2019). Related to this, a post on LinkedIn was shared from a fast fashion brand and its founder communicating about the company's CSR efforts and in the comments to the post there are both cheering comments, but also comments questioning whether this is actually a legit effort and sustainable in the long run (Caesar, 2019). Solér (2020) argue that this is just a way to get around the actual problems and, in the eyes of the public, get away with doing what they claim to be good enough. Even though fast fashion companies cannot claim to have a green brand identity (Hartmann, Apaolaza Ibáñez & Forcada Sainz, 2005) they still communicate their alleged sustainability efforts.

Nowadays it is a necessity for companies to communicate their CSR efforts in some form. However, CSR has become a delicate matter to handle since the question of how to do it arise (Du, Bhattacharaya & Sen, 2010). The complexity of CSR arises when companies need to communicate their efforts whilst some external stakeholder are reluctant towards the communication. However, without the communication the efforts would not have any impact (Du et al., 2010). Furthermore, being in an industry such as the fast fashion industry makes the complexity reach another level. Also, previous research on sustainability and fashion has partly focused on how consumers build their identity around their consumption of sustainable fashion (Gabriel & Lang, 2006), as well as the relation between wanting to consume more and more clothes while at the same time wanting to act sustainable (Joy et al., 2012) and the complexity of green consumerism (Moisander, 2007). This previous research all discusses how consumers react to fast fashion and sustainable fashion brands in relation to sustainability. The gap found in previous research regards the external communication from the fast fashion brands towards consumers regarding their alleged sustainability work and what consumer emotions it evokes. The researchers of this study also find that there is a gap where the digital aspect has not been taken into consideration regarding CSR communication in relation to consumer perception and fast fashion. However, prior research has emphasised the importance of digital communication as a tool for communicating important matters (Oksiutycz & Kunene, 2017; Van Prooijen & Bartels, 2019). Furthermore, Du et al. (2010) imply that further research should focus on consumer emotions towards CSR efforts and its communication since prior research has emphasised the company perspective.

Lastly, this study will focus on the environmental aspect of the fast fashion companies CSR efforts. Therefore, no emphasis will lie on social or economic sustainability efforts. Furthermore, having stated that there is a gap in previous research regarding the digital aspect of communicated CSR efforts in relation to consumer perception, as well as the increase of non-traditional ways to communicate (Van Prooijen & Bartels, 2019), this study will not have traditional CSR communication in focus.

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Aim and research question

The researchers of this study find that the understanding of consumer emotions and reactions towards fast fashion brands attempts to highlight their sustainability strategy is lacking. Therefore, this study aims to increase the understanding of consumer perception of fast fashion brand's digital sustainability communication. Furthermore, the study will contribute to a deeper understanding and knowledge of different consumer segments based on their thoughts and emotions towards fast fashion brand's CSR efforts. Having investigated the consumer segments perception of the communication, the researchers will close up by looking into whether there will be any effect on brand credibility and what this effect could be. To research these specific fields, the researchers of this study will use a qualitative phenomenological method. In order to enhance the research, the following research questions were formed:

How do consumers perceive fast fashion brands attempts to digitally communicate their sustainability efforts?
- *Does the communication affect brand credibility?*

Theoretical framework

To be able to study the consumer perception and experience regarding digital sustainability communication and how this affect brand credibility, certain theoretical frameworks will be used to get a better understanding of the phenomenon. To get a hold of the study the theoretical framework will start with theory based on sustainability and fast fashion brands from a consumer perspective. A section about digital sustainability communication will follow, including Corporate Social Responsibility (hereinafter: CSR) which is the main aspect of the study, and how the communication has transformed. Taking a stand in the consumer perception of the communication, the focus throughout this theoretical framework will lie on the consumer

perspective. However, to get a deeper understanding the corporate perspective will be somewhat included as well. Lastly, the theoretical framework will be concluded with a section about brand credibility and which aspects that affect the brand credibility.

Sustainability and fast fashion brands

Since people in general has become a lot more aware of the problems humanity is facing in regard to sustainability issues, many more industries are put under the microscope. Being an industry that follows fast trends, produces low-cost garments and put out new lines in stores every other week, the fast fashion industry has been especially targeted (Joy et al., 2012). However, Joy et al. (2012) find that even though the environmental awareness has increased, and consumers know more about the fast fashion industry in relation to sustainability, the fast fashion consumption does not necessarily decrease. Park and Kim (2016) discuss a few reasons for why consumers tend to consume fast fashion even though they are aware of the environmental issues associated with the industry. They mention aspects as the consumers not being informed enough and that the benefits offered by the fast fashion brands are hard to resist since they offer apparel that are a quick response to trends from high fashion brands to a low cost and that have a fresh design. Another aspect of what drives the fast fashion consumption is the fact that consumers use clothes as a way to form their identity (Kim, Jung Choo & Yoon, 2013) as clothes are a visible way of showing of wealth. Kim et al. (2013) discuss the fact that previous research showed that ethical and environmental considerations were factors that consumers cared about the least when shopping clothes, although studies show that this has changed due to the fact that consumers are more educated nowadays (Joy et al., 2012).

Various consumption aspects

Fashion consumers in general tend to shop different depending on their personal preference. The typical fast fashion consumer tends to care mostly about how trendy the garment is, the availability, the low prices and not so much about the quality. On the contrary, consumers who oppose the fast fashion brands tend to care more about material and durability of the clothes, as well as the ethical and environmental issues the industry is responsible for (Kim et al., 2013). In other words, they "*opposes the speedy production and consumption of fast fashion*" (Kim et al., 2013, p. 246). However, as discussed by Park and Kim (2016), the fast fashion consumers will most likely continue to consume the clothes offered by the fast fashion brands until the benefits of not doing so is greater than the benefits they experience in their shopping habits.

Digital sustainability communication

Corporate Social Responsibility

According to Martin and Schouten (2012), CSR refers to companies' actions within social and environmental ethics. Although CSR can be viewed from several perspectives, the main idea with the concept is that companies induce ethical, social and environmental aspects in their business plan. CSR has become more important since the awareness among consumers and other stakeholders has increased. In addition to this, Welford, Chan and Man (2008) argue that one of the main reasons for the increased amount of CSR initiatives is companies coming to realization that decreasing the companies' negative impact on the environment can lead to a general positive outcome. Furthermore, Morsing and Schultz (2006) argue that most consumers think that CSR initiatives should be communicated. However, many consumers are at the same time sceptical. Therefore, a dilemma occurs when companies need to communicate there CSR

efforts since there is a demand for it, whilst at the same time some people are reluctant to this kind of communication.

Martin and Schouten (2012) emphasise the importance of companies' transparency behind their CSR actions. Acting responsibly will most likely increase the companies' reputation, sales revenue and legal risks. However, by predicating CSR values and not being able to perform will on the other hand decrease the same aspects and cause damage to the company. According to Du et al. (2010) consumers react to companies CSR initiatives in several different ways and used in the right way it can lead to unique opportunities to strengthen the relationship with external shareholders.

Furthermore, Du et al. (2010) argue that beyond awareness is something of even higher importance; communication. Whilst consumers expect to be informed about the companies' CSR efforts, being too aggressive about the CSR initiatives can make the consumers suspicious and sceptical. This has led to CSR communication being a delicate matter to handle and stakeholders has become more aware of the different motives behind the communication. Hence, Du et al. (2010) emphasise the importance of two kind of motives behind the CSR, named extrinsic and intrinsic motives. An intrinsic motive is viewed as a genuine motive whilst the extrinsic motive is driven by profits, in other words with no real concern for the aspects included in the CSR, but only driven by the benefits the effort will provide. The necessary actions to handle the CSR communication in a trustworthy way is to minimize the scepticism among stakeholders by conveying intrinsic motives behind the CSR efforts. However, according to Ellen, Webb and Mohr (2006), stakeholders and consumers has increased their tolerance regarding extrinsic motives, which has led to consumers being more willing to accept the motives of a

company's CSR activities as long as the result lead to a win-win situation. In other words, being less harmful towards the environment and society and at the same time serve the bottom line of the company. On the other hand, Forehand and Grier (2003) emphasise that consumers do not respond negatively about the motives, but rather the marketing strategies that might seem manipulative and fallacious.

As briefly mentioned in the introduction, the fast fashion industry stands for one of the biggest environmental threats in contemporary society (Shen et al., 2017). However, this is not something the fashion brands want to emphasise. On the contrary, they find ways to include sustainability efforts in their business models and external communication. In order to create a positive image around their brand, companies communicate and emphasise the positive aspects of their environmental work and obscure the negative ones. In turn, this lead to an incorrect view and understanding of the actual environmental CSR work the company performs (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). The use of CSR has increased during the years and as sustainability has become more important, therefor the efforts behind the CSR is communicated differently towards consumers and external stakeholders (Van Prooijen & Bartels, 2019).

Digital communication
A factor that has had a significant role in the change in communication is the digital development, making digital communication an important tool for contemporary companies (Oksiutycz & Kunene, 2017). Online communication is defined as communication through networked computers. Digital communication has during the last years become a necessity for companies and brands to communicate with their consumers, which has led to an increase in different communications channels with the companies' different stakeholders. Success

in today's business landscape can be argued to be highly affected by how consumers and other external stakeholders perceive a company and their actions. Thereby, increasing the importance of communicating with stakeholders (Oksiutycz & Kunene, 2017).

The digitalization has evolved, and individuals use social media in their everyday lives (Gummerus, Liljander & Sihlman, 2017). Hence many companies today are using digital communication to communicate with their consumers regarding their actions in different fields and facilitating for consumer engagement (Oksiutycz & Kunene, 2017). For example, the way brands communicate about their CSR initiative.

CSR is traditionally communicated through one-way communication, in other words with no space for the receiving part to interact (Van Prooijen & Bartels, 2019). An example of one-way communication can be a yearly CSR report that is accessible for external stakeholders. However, Van Prooijen and Bartels (2019) state that the increase of social networking sites (hereinafter: SNS) has led to the opportunity for brands and companies to communicate their CSR through two-way communication, leading to the receiving part being able to engage by for example commenting on social media posts. Previously, CSR reports had to have more of a certain standard and strictly follow certain rules and regulations, whilst nowadays CSR efforts to a greater extent are communicated less strict and are more inclusive (Nicolopoulou, 2011).

According to Du et al. (2010), including consumers in the CSR efforts will increase the trustworthiness of the actions the company takes. Furthermore, Kent and Taylor (2016) argue that communicating CSR through SNS will increase the more realistic aspect and facilitate for consumers to relate to the brand. By communicating

CSR through SNS, the CSR reporting no longer favour only the company (Kent & Taylor, 2016), but rather have a greater focus on the consumers and their requirements. In addition to this, it opens the opportunity for consumers to engage directly and question insecurities leading to a more open-minded conversation between consumers and companies.

Since sustainability is such an important contemporary matter, communicating the efforts is highly relevant (Martin & Schouten, 2012). Both companies and consumers nowadays have an increased awareness on sustainability issues which has led to a development and change in how companies include sustainability effort in their strategy and how consumer perceive the communication (Zatwarnicka-Madura, Siemieniako, Glińska & Sazonenka, 2019).

Brand credibility
Brand value and the role of brand credibility in branding
Previous literature and research on the concept of brand value has emphasised the focus on the product offered, making the product the value maker of the brand (Arvidsson, 2005). Brand value is described by Arvidsson (2005) as an immaterial asset that builds on brand attention and different kinds of brand performance. For this study, it is relevant to begin the discussion on brand credibility with explaining the concept of brand value, since the perception of the value of a brand is a major contributor to how consumers experience a brand and its credibility (Dwivedi, Nayeem & Murshed, 2018), as well as one of the mainstays in the foundation of a brand. In contemporary branding, the product or service offered is only one of several parts of what is building brand value. Now, much more focus lies on the company values and commitments (Arvidsson, 2005), CSR efforts in order to strengthen the brand (Pratihari & Uzma, 2018) and other efforts to strengthen customer loyalty (Keller,

2009). One can state that by actively working on increasing brand value, the stronger the brand will be (Arvidsson, 2005) and the more effective the marketing communication and efforts will be (Keller, 2009). Considering the endless possibilities that comes with the digital development in modern time, the importance of building a strong brand is greater than ever (Keller, 2009). By focusing on developing a strong brand, the likeliness of an increased brand awareness with consumers, and possibly affecting their brand choice, is much higher (Keller, 2009; Erdem & Swait, 2004). Also, in order to build a successful brand, not only is the brand awareness among consumers important, but also that consumers deepen their relation to a brand and actually identify with the brand (Weilbacher, 1993).

As Erdem and Swait (2004) discuss the concept of brand credibility, they take a stand in two components that facilitate the building of brand credibility; trustworthiness and expertise. Trustworthiness is presented as the willingness for companies to act in a way that enhance consumer trust and thereby brand credibility, and expertise is described as the ability for companies to stay true to what they promise in terms of consumer trust enhancing performances (Erdem & Swait, 2004; Dwivedi et al., 2018). When discussing brand credibility in general, it is common to focus on the corporate benefits. However, when discussing brand credibility, it is important to also focus on the consumer perspective since the consumers are the ones that determine whether they find the brand credible or not (Dwivedi et al., 2018). Therefore, brand credibility is of importance from a consumer perspective as well since brands that are perceived as credible can function as an assurance of high quality performance (Jeng, 2016). To conclude, it can be stated that brand credibility is of importance both for companies and consumers, as the brand communication goes both from brand-to-

consumer and from consumer-to-brand (Sweeney & Swait, 2008).

Below a presentation of the two components, trustworthiness and expertise, will be presented. Both components will be elaborated on by including theory on consumer trust in the part on trustworthiness and information to the part on expertise, to be able to bring further depth to the following discussion of this study.

Consumer trust and trustworthiness

The importance of building consumer trust for brands is increasing as the technical development is growing in a rapid pace and digital communication channels are becoming a standard way of communicating (Rybak, 2018). However, consumer trust and strong relationships between brands and consumers has always been important. Rybak (2018) emphasise that the fact that the possibilities for consumers to gather information on brands and their product/services has increased, as well as the many ways to connect and communicate with brands. Thereby, there are now many ways to build trust and customer-company relationships. If consumers perceive a company's effort to show willingness to provide their customers with real and truthful information, the likeliness of the consumers finding the brand to have a high level of trustworthiness will increase (Jeng, 2016). In other words, trustworthiness is determined based on the level of believability consumers perceive when experience a brand's performance and communication (Sweeney & Swait, 2008).

Expertise and information

According to Erdem & Swait (2004), expertise is determined by companies' ability to show competent and consumers perception of the company as competent. In addition to this, the authors argue that expertise is also the ability to deliver what has been promised. Another aspect that has proven to be important is for brands to show

clarity in the information they communicate regarding their products and/or services (Erdem & Swait, 1998). If not being clear in your communication as a brand, consumers will start doubting the credibility of the brand (Erdem & Swait, 2004). Furthermore, Du et al. (2010) discuss the common mistakes companies make regarding the information they share. Many companies highlight their role regarding the social cause rather than motivating and informing stakeholders about the social cause. Therefore, to enhance brand credibility it is of great importance to be thorough, informative and concrete about the social cause itself, not only inform about the brands specific interest in the social cause. Viewed from the consumer perspective, learning about the issue is as important as learning what the company do to prevent it (Du et al., 2010).

Methodology

In order to study consumer perception of digital sustainability communication, a qualitative approach was applied to this research. According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) a qualitative method is the most appropriate method when studying understanding and meaning. To get an understanding and detailed knowledge of the individual experience, in-depth semi-structured interviews was conducted. Since the study aimed to investigate the individuals subjective meaning of the phenomenon, a phenomenological approach was used (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

Interview design

To be able to investigate and get a deeper understanding of the consumer experience and the personal thoughts regarding digital CSR communication from fast fashion brands, a qualitative and phenomenological approach was used. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) argue that a qualitative approach is the most appropriate approach when a study aims to produce new

knowledge regarding a phenomenon. Furthermore, the phenomenological approach is appropriate when it is necessary to understand a phenomenon through the consumer perspective, which was the case in this study. Thompson, Locander and Pollio (1989) discuss the phenomenological approach and state that *"Existential-phenomenology seeks to describe experience as it emerges in some (context(s) or, to use the phenomenological terms as it is "lived""* (p.135). This study focuses on how individuals experience different situations where they are being exposed to digital sustainability communication from fast fashion brands and what kind of emotions are evoked by the communication. Furthermore, by conducting phenomenological interviews the consumer perspective is emphasised and the consumers share their view and experience freely. Thompson et al. (1989) discuss the importance of getting a first-hand description of the situations the interviewees experience, which is made possible by using a phenomenological approach. However, Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) argue that one should be careful generalizing results when using qualitative methods. This study does not aim to generalize results, but rather to gain understanding and insights of consumer experience regarding digital sustainability communication.

In addition to this, the study included an elicitation technique to facilitate for the interviewees to re-experience and visualize different situations. The use of elicitation technique enables the researchers to obtain detailed information about specific experiences, and is grounded in phenomenology (Hogan, Hinrichs & Hornecker, 2016). Furthermore, it enables an interviewee to retrospect certain situations which leads to less influenced answers (Hogan et al., 2016). Elicitation technique was in this study used by visualizing three different ways fast fashion brands communicate their CSR efforts. Two

of the three posts were taken from social media such as LinkedIn, whilst the third one was taken from a newsletter sent to consumers by email. By visualizing the situation for the interviewee, the interviewee could speak freely about the situation without being influenced by the researchers. Furthermore, before reaching this section in the interview, the interviewee was asked to describe the last time she was exposed to sustainability communication from a fast fashion brand in order to encourage the interviewees to take a stand in their own thoughts and feelings. The reason for adding the elicitation technique as complement to the phenomenological interviews was due to the fact that the interviewees could share their experience of situations more easily and was not led into the subject by the researchers. The two approaches together facilitated for the interviewees to re-experience and speak freely about their experience regarding the phenomena (Hogan, Hinrichs & Hornecker, 2016), which was considered important since the personal experiences of the participants was in focus of this study.

The criteria and selection
In order to find relevant participants for the study, a few criteria were set up, in line with the method of criterion sampling (Bryman & Bell, 2013). The first criteria set up was that the interviewees had to have a general interest in fashion. Furthermore, since women consume clothing to a greater extent than men (Statista, 2019), the researchers decided that the study should focus on women. In addition to this, Barnes and Greenwood (2006) argue that fast fashion consumers are young people and Crane (2016) emphasise that fast fashion consumers are usually below 35 years old. Therefore, the interviewees chosen for this study identify as women in the age of 20-35 years old. Furthermore, in one way or another, the participants of the study had to be exposed to digital communication from fast fashion brands such as H&M, Kappahl,

GinaTricot, Lindex, Na-Kd and/or Nelly.com. Having established this, the researchers of this study decided that the last criteria should regard the participants' knowledge of and interest in sustainability. When deciding who to ask to participate in the study, the researchers approached both people who was known to have a lower level of knowledge and interest in sustainability, as well as people who had a higher level of knowledge of and interest in sustainability.

Furthermore, Goulding (2005) argue that purposive sampling is appropriate when conducting phenomenological interviews. Miles and Huberman (1994) defines purposive sampling as a way for the researchers to choose participants based on

the aim of the study. Therefore, the purposive sampling method was appropriate since the participants in this study contributed to achieving the aim by sharing their experience. The number of participants chosen for the interviews ended up being ten, which according to Dukes (1984) is an appropriate number for this kind of phenomenological study. In order to find participants that met the specific criteria, the researchers begun to search within their own circle of contacts and relationships. This had a positive outcome and resulted in the ten participants that ended up being interviewed. Table 1 below show all the participants of the study, however pseudonyms are used due to confidentiality. Further detailed information can be viewed in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of respondents

NAME*	AGE	OCCUPATION	CONSUMER SEGMENT
LOUISE	27	Copywriter	Green Conscious consumer
IDA	27	Student	Green Conscious consumer
PETRA	32	Student	Green Conscious consumer
OLIVIA	26	Student	Conflicted consumer
ANNA	34	Sales coordinator	Conflicted consumer
MIKAELA	30	Student	Conflicted consumer
SARA	24	Student	Conflicted consumer
INGRID	26	Business Developer	Positive Naive consumer
ISABELLE	28	Teacher	Positive Naive consumer
SOFIE	27	Healthcare provider	Positive Naive consumer

*All names are replaced with pseudonyms

Data collection

As mentioned above, the data collection consisted of ten in-depth semi-structured interviews aiming to get a deeper understanding of consumers' thoughts and feelings regarding the digital sustainability communication of fast fashion brands. As mentioned by Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) when using this kind of qualitative method for a research project, it is of great importance to gain information that is insightful and meaningful, rather than

focusing on conducting as many interviews as possible. When conducting a semi-structured or guided interview, the researcher uses an outline of predetermined themes, also called an interview guide, in order to make sure that all the topics are covered (Bryman & Bell, 2013). However, the questions during the different interviews can come in different order, just as long as the themes are covered. Semi-structured interviews are by definition flexible and the emphasis is on getting knowledge of how the interviewee perceive and understand the

themes discussed and the questions asked (Bryman & Bell, 2013). Having this in mind, the researchers chose to apply the previously mentioned existential-phenomenological approach to the semi-structured interviews for gathering data. To make sure that the relevant information was gathered through the interviews, the researchers wanted to test the interview guide before starting with the interviews aimed for the study, in accordance with Majid, Othman, Mohamad, Lim and Yusof (2017). This was done by doing a test interview with a respondent who met all the criteria established in order to get accurate answers. After the test interview, the researchers discussed the interview design and analysed the answers in order to improve the interview guide with additional questions for the real interviews.

The interviews lasted between 30-45 minutes, depending on the interviewee and in what directions the interviews went. This amount of time was enough to gather the information needed for further analysis, and also short enough so time and energy was not spent on discussing irrelevant questions or topics. In accordance with Thompson et al. (1989), it is of great importance to make sure that the participants of a study are informed about the study and thereby consent to participating. Further on, due to ethical considerations, the participants were informed about the fact that they are anonymous in the written article and that they did consent to being audiotaped (Thompson et al., 1989), which they all did. All of this was mentioned in the beginning of the interviews. Having presented a short description of the study (without giving away too much), the interview started with an opening question regarding the latest memory the participant might have about any digital sustainability communication from any fast fashion brand. However, this was shown to be a challenge, since most of the interviewees had trouble to recall a situation being exposed to digital sustainability communication. After a brief

dialogue on this matter, the three posts and newsletters were presented to the participants one by one, and the participants were asked to discuss the information, talk about how they perceived it and the emotions related to their thoughts which facilitated for the interviewees to recall these kind of situations. In the end of the interview, having discussed the participants' thoughts and feelings toward the communicated information in the posts and newsletter, the researchers wanted to find out whether the communication had any effect on the participants' feelings towards the brand and if the information affected the brand credibility. Therefore, a few questions were asked regarding the perceived honesty and potential credibility experienced by the participants post being exposed to the posts/newsletter. This discussion enabled the researchers to deepen the analysis regarding the possible effect of the communication on the perceived brand credibility.

Analysing the material

As the analysis of data from phenomenological interviews is based on meaning and understanding, it is of importance to get a deep understanding of the consumer experience. Therefore, notes were taken during the interviews, facilitating for the researchers to have facial appearance in mind. Also, afterwards the notes were complemented by a transcription of the recorded material. To get a deeper understanding both researchers listened to all the interviews and then discussed their individual thoughts to decrease any obscurities. Thereafter the material was analysed in line with Sandberg (1994) and his intentional analysis method, that aims to describe both *what* the interviewees experienced and their perception of the digital sustainability communication, as well as *how* they felt about it.

The process was followed by reading through the interview material several times

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to understand each interviewee's experience with and emotions evoked by the digital sustainability communication, and thereafter cross-checked by the researchers (Sandberg, 1994). Taking this into consideration, sub-groups were created and each sub-group consisted of interviewees sharing similar perception of and emotions towards the communication. As stated earlier, the researchers of this study had parted the interviewees into two groups beforehand, based on level of sustainability knowledge. However, during the interviews the researchers came to a realisation that the two groups probably should be divided into three consumer segments. When analysing the material this became even more clear and when cross-checking the material, the three segments were confirmed to be a better categorisation. The deep understanding that came from analysing the material goes in line with Sandberg (1994), who state that it is of importance to study both the meaning and the perspective to be able to get an in-depth understanding of the interviewees and how they should be parted in the different segments. Having parted the interviewees into the three segments, each segment was analysed separately and a discussion followed. The discussion included previous research for an in-depth understanding of the empirical results (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). Furthermore, the discussion aimed to compare the differences among the segments and lastly to be able to discover new findings regarding the phenomena

Trustworthiness

In order to establish trustworthiness in a qualitative study, Lincoln & Guba (1985) discuss four criteria that need to be considered; credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. In order to achieve credibility, the researchers need to be familiar with the subject and the gathered empirical data needs to be sufficient enough for future researchers to

come relatively close to the claims made. Furthermore, the links between the empirical data and the categories needs to be logical (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). It can be argued that the researchers of this study are very familiar with the subject, having done an in-depth research due to the start of the study, as well as having studied the subject during previous higher education. Furthermore, since the empirical data was analysed by both researchers and thereafter cross-checked, one can argue that future researchers have the same prerequisites to make similar claims as the researchers. Lastly, since the consumer categories was initially thought of during the interviews, one can argue that the logical reasoning can be confirmed as the categorization process was initiated even before all interviews was conducted. Also, the reasoning behind the categorization was further strengthened as the analysis and discussion begun. Solér (1997) discuss the phenomenological research method and mean that respondents have different abilities to re-experience and explain situations in their own words, which could lead to difficulties building credible narratives. However, one can argue that by using the elicitation method the researchers of this study facilitated for the interviewees to visualize and re-experience situations, and therefore the credibility criteria was arguably fulfilled.

The second criteria, transferability, is defined as the criteria showing similarities between the research conducted and previous research (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). This has arguably been done since using previous research within the field for aggradation of the theoretical framework section and for comparison in the discussion section. The third criteria, dependability, is fulfilled when logical reasoning is used during the process of the study, when information is accessible for the readers and when one can verify the origin of the empirical results (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). To be able strengthen the

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dependability the researchers had the logical reasoning in mind during the whole process, the origin of the empirical results can be verified and the information is accessible for the readers. The fourth criteria, conformability, mainly regards the fact that the research needs to be strengthened by theory and not linked to personal values of the researchers (Bryman & Bell, 2013). Furthermore, Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) emphasise the importance of linking the findings in a way that facilitates for the readers. This has arguably been fulfilled since personal values have not affected the research and claims made are based on theory and the empirical results. Furthermore, findings are presented in a way facilitating for the readers to understand and the links are made in the same order as the theories and empirical data is presented.

Empirical results

As mentioned in the methodology section, the researchers conducted ten interviews with consumers with different experience and knowledge of sustainability in the fast fashion industry. Since this difference occur, the researchers had a thought that there would be a difference in perception of the communication among the consumers, and also a difference in how brand credibility was affected based on this perception. During the interviews, similarities and patterns among the interviewees started to appear and when having conducted all ten interviews the researchers analysed the material and found even deeper connections among some of the consumers. Not only was it made clear that there was a major difference in perception between the most knowledgeable and experienced consumers and the consumers of low knowledge and experience, but also that there were other levels of consumer perception in between that needed to be further investigated. Therefore, the consumers were parted into three segments based on their perception of the communication. The segments have different perception of the themes that the interviews covered, and their experience of the situations varied. In order to study the various perspectives, the interviewees were categorized as followed:

- *The green conscious consumers*
- *The conflicted consumers*
- *The positive naive consumers*

The empirical results will be presented within each segment, since they all emphasise different constructs. They do tend to emphasise the same constructs, however they do it in various ways.

The green conscious consumers

The main characteristics of this segment of consumers is the in-depth knowledge and consciousness of sustainability and the effects that the fast fashion industry has on the environment. The green conscious consumers give the impression of, in general, being very sceptical about sustainability communication from fast fashion brands and question the intent of the communication to a great extent. In accordance with this, they discuss the fact that a lot of the communication makes them think in terms of greenwashing and dishonesty, as well as the fact that the motive behind the CSR efforts might not be generated solely from consumer demand and that they want to use it to get good publicity. A noticeable aspect is that the green conscious consumers are very personally invested in sustainability matters in general and emphasise this during the interviews. Since their interest in sustainability is so major, they tend to spend a lot of time and energy on educating themselves and keeping up with the latest research on sustainability and the fast fashion industry. Therefore, the criticism they lay on the digital sustainability communication from the fast fashion brands discussed in this study draw on more negative thoughts and feelings. Also, even

though the personal preferences to some extent differ among the consumers in this segment, there are many similarities in mindset towards fast fashion brands.

The general perception of the communication

The green conscious consumers are, as mentioned above, very sceptical about what the fast fashion brands communicate. They view the communication as a way to generate good publicity by showing that they also work with sustainability issues and also find some of the sustainability work very questionable.

"I, who consider myself to be quite knowledgeable, feel like this is good PR (public relations). They want to portray themselves in a certain way, which I feel don't really add up with what they actually do." - Ida

"Once again I come back to the fact that climate compensation is very problematic. (...) How can you call yourself a pioneer within your industry? Yes, you climate compensate, but I mean you can plant as many trees as you want and donate how much money you want to charity organisations - you are still doing a bad thing from the beginning. And isn't it better to not create a wound instead of creating one that you then try to heal?" - Louise

Another aspect of the communication that was emphasised throughout the interviews with the green conscious consumers was the choice of words in the communication. The fast fashion brands all use words as "more sustainable", which was noticed by the green conscious consumers. They all marked the choice of words and instantly questioned the meaning of "more sustainable". In general, they were very sceptical to this kind of embellishment and making it look better than it actually is.

"More sustainably produced? I find it quite unclear, but I suppose it is a conscious formulation from H&M" - Louise

"The first thing I am thinking is, what is sustainable fibres for them? And also, what does 57% more sustainable fibres mean?" - Ida

"I wonder a bit about more sustainable, that is a bit unclear… What does that really mean? How sustainable is it? What is their requirement for something to be called sustainable?" - Petra

Greenwashing

As mentioned above, the green conscious consumers were very sceptical to the digital sustainability communication from the fast fashion brands. Since they have a lot of knowledge of the fast fashion industry, they immediately started questioning the communication and saw through the CSR efforts of trying to picture themselves as a brands who act sustainable. As one of the participants from this segment discussed:

"If you are not as familiar with the concept of greenwashing and the fast fashion industry you believe that this is good and you feel like they do a lot. I, who am familiar with the concept of greenwashing, feel like it is just good PR (public relations)." - Ida

Motive

Furthermore, the green conscious consumers emphasise the importance of the motives behind the CSR efforts. As mentioned in the citation above, Ida discussed the fact that the sustainability communication from fast fashion brands in general felt like PR. Also, the green conscious consumers mention that they believe that the motive behind the communication is based on the fact that consumers of today demand some kind of sustainability efforts and expect that brands take some responsibility, even though it might be an effort that fits the brand and not one that makes more of a difference. Since

sustainability work is so up-to-date, even consumers who are not environmentally engaged have become more aware of sustainability issues in the world and thereby expect that companies include sustainability work in the CSR strategy. In other words, the companies mainly want to please the consumers and use sustainability as sales argument. As the green conscious consumers discuss:

"Is it just because the consumer demand it or is it because it is trendy to be sustainable at the moment?" - Ida

"They present what they believe the consumers want to hear, so to speak." - Petra

"My feelings and thoughts are also that they use it as a sales argument, and I think that is a bit disgusting. This is companies who really want to claim that they work with sustainability, but at the same time they operate in a branch of industry who have an extremely big ecological footprint." - Louise

Information
When discussing the communication, the green conscious consumers express thoughts of wanting more information from the brands and their sustainability efforts. Since they consider the communicated information being vague and unclear, they all emphasise that if the information was more extensive, they might feel a bit different about the communication.

"To me, I feel that I would like some more information. It can be out of curiosity - what fibres is it? What is it that they actually do and what is only a statement?" - Ida

"It would have made a bit of a difference if I understood what they meant with "more sustainably produced"" - Louise

Furthermore, Petra reflect upon the fact that companies put a lot of responsibility on the

consumers to understand and have knowledge of sustainability work.

"They could definitely include a link to their website with more info, but this is how it is in general in society today. Everything is up to the consumer, to find out things - you put a lot of responsibility on the consumers to know things." – Petra

Trustworthiness and honesty
During the interviews, trustworthiness was also discussed by the green conscious consumer. All of them experience very low trustworthiness with the communication and find that the efforts made by the fast fashion brands are not entirely honest. When discussing the feelings and thoughts on the honesty behind the communication, they mention that they think that the fast fashion brands use sustainability in their digital communication as a way to gain sales.

"I just don't think that it is honest, I only see the gaining sales part of the messages. Just big companies who try to increase their sales numbers." - Louise

In general, all aspects mentioned above regarding the feelings and thoughts of the green conscious consumers did affect the trustworthiness that they felt towards the fast fashion brands' communication, and in turn the brands in general. They all describe feelings of low trust towards the fast fashion brands even before discussing honesty and trust in the communication. Since they are all quite knowledgeable of sustainability matters in the fashion industry, the scepticism is obviously very noticeable when being presented with this kind if digital communication.

The conflicted consumers
Consumers within this segment have good knowledge of sustainability and the effects that the fast fashion industry has on the environment. Furthermore, they are aware

of the ethical issues the industry struggle with. Besides their interest in the fashion industry, they all had some kind of professional or academic experience from it, which was emphasised during the interviews. In addition to their sustainability knowledge they are also quite well-grounded speaking of the fast fashion industry overall, leading to visualizing the issues from a different perspective. Even though they are knowledgeable of and experienced in sustainability matters within the fast fashion industry, their current profession or academic education makes them conflicted since they really want to see the positive aspect of it. The conflicted consumers are, as the name might reveal, quite conflicted about how fast fashion brands communicate their sustainability efforts. On one hand they are aware of the negative impact the industry has on the environment but on the other hand they are positive about the progress the industry has made so far and about the sustainability communication generally. This segment uses their prior knowledge and their current profession/education when discussing the communication, they are exposed to from fast fashion brands, leading to shared meanings and difficulty to decide where to stand.

The general perception of the communication
As mentioned above, the conflicted consumers have shared meanings and thoughts of how the sustainability efforts from fast fashion brands are communicated. They are positive about the efforts but tend to show disappointment of how it is communicated. Furthermore, this segment visualizes the communication for what it is and are aware of the underlying motives but do not emphasise them.

"I do not get any negative associations, but is this enough? But I am also aware that BCI (Better Cotton Initiative) is the option when using mixed materials, so at least they do what they can" - Olivia

"Positive, nice that Gina Tricot are trying. Spontaneous, maybe greenwashing? They communicate because they have to, and maybe a bit too late? But absolutely positive that they are going in that direction" - Mikaela

The emotions towards the communication is quite conflicting, on one hand they emphasise the positive aspects of the efforts on the other hand they view it as quite lacking and far from enough. All four interviewees agreed on the conflict of being sustainable in an industry such as the fast fashion industry since the core business has a big ecological footprint.

"I believe that it is good, but feel a bit conflicted when they toss around messages on sustainability. The fashion industry is not especially sustainable. I don't think that the words sustainability and fashion industry sound good together. I mean, it is good that they are trying and also try to be more circular but hmm…" - Anna

Furthermore, this segment reflects over the way fast fashion brands choose to communicate their CSR and sustainability efforts. They question if the used approach is the most appropriate, but are at the same time positive about the development towards the use of more inclusive accessible CSR communication. Another aspect that has been emphasised is the fact that fast fashion brands in many ways highlight their engagement in a social or environmental issue rather than inform about the social or environmental issue itself, leading to only informing the consumers about their work to prevent it. Furthermore, they emphasise the fact that by communicating sustainability to much you get tired of it, which in turn leads to ignorance.

"I would most probably just scroll past it" - Sara

Furthermore, they emphasise the choice of words used in the communication such as

"57%" and "sustainable fibres" and question the meaning of highlighting something without further explanation.

"I mean what does sustainable fibres mean? It is a quite vague expression" - Anna

Personal preferences
This segment's perception of the communication is influenced by their personal preferences regarding the fast fashion brands. Even though they are aware of the impact of their preference, they tend to emphasise situations that implicate their oblivious state. Every interviewee in this segment tend to have less requirements on the brands they consume from, leading to having more indulgence speaking of their preferred brand's sustainability efforts. They emphasise negative aspects in some of the communication posts, whilst emphasising the positive aspects when speaking of the communication from their preferred brand. Furthermore, they all shared the same meaning when speaking of brands they choose to not consume from, which led to increased requirements. Another aspect regarding personal preferences is, when discussing fast fashion every interviewee was quick on revealing which brands they consume from. Furthermore, they emphasise the impact the relation with the brand has and state that there is a difference having had a relation with a brand for the most part of your life, compared to a newly found brand.

"Personal preferences have a great impact, but also the relation you have with the brand" - Mikaela

"I rarely shop at GinaTricot and Na-Kd however H&M is one of the fast fashion brands I do consume from" - Olivia

Information
This segment finds that the information in the communication is lacking and question the use of word, as mentioned above.

Furthermore, they emphasise the importance of explaining statements such as "57 % of our total collection is made of more sustainable fibres" and not leaving the consumer in a questioning state. Even though they are aware of the strategies behind the communication they emphasise that knowing is a better alternative comparing to receiving obscure information. In addition to this, the interviewees within this segment are all aware of that the brands share obscure information which leads to the brands redirecting the responsibility to the consumer to understand the information correctly by doing research. Furthermore, Olivia emphasise the importance to describe the issue generally and not only emphasise what the company is doing to prevent it.

"57 more? 57 % more of what? To be honest it feels obscure" - Sara

"Once again I want to know more about how they improve the cotton production, in what way?" - Anna

Motive and trustworthiness
The consumers in this segment emphasise the fact the motives behind the CSR effort is not as important as the actual effort. However, some of them question the motives whilst other are careless. The consumers within the segment has shared meanings; some believe the motives are important even though the actual effort is of greatest importance, whilst others are quite careless about why the companies do engage in CSR efforts but do care about whether they engage at all or not. The conflicted consumers are, as mentioned, questioning about the communication but the motives behind it does not have a bigger impact.

"I really do not care about why they engage in their sustainability efforts as long as they do engage" - Mikaela

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However, they question facts such as why the women's department is not included in the effort or express that they do not feel included. They can also question the time frame and why brands have chosen this particular time to communicate their CSR efforts. Furthermore, this consumer segment is impacted by relation to the brand and how the brand has built a trust during several years. In addition to this, consumers within this segment emphasise the importance for brands to build a relation to their consumers. By communicating their CSR efforts continuously and by engaging the consumers, the trustworthiness towards the brand tend to increase. As mentioned above, their personal preferences have a great impact on their requirements of the brand. The relation the consumer has to the brands tend to make them naive regarding the communication.

"It does not really affect me, they write about the children's department and men's department but nowhere about the women's department" - Sara

"I think it is good that they engage with their consumers by including them in the sustainability efforts to come" - Mikaela

The positive naive consumers

The main characteristics of this consumer segment is that they have an overall positive view of fast fashion brands' communication. This segment has a superficial knowledge of sustainability, meaning that they are aware of what it is but do not have a deeper knowledge. However, they know what negative impact the fashion industry has on the environment but at the same time they relate to the fast fashion brands' struggle with this issue. They emphasise the importance of having a positive approach and view fast fashion brands' efforts to communicate this as something positive. They tend to agree on the saying "doing something is better than doing nothing". Furthermore, this consumer segment has no academic education or professional experience of the fashion industry or sustainability. Their perception is based on the knowledge they have, that has been provided by external information sources. Furthermore, they all agree that the positive aspects overcome the negative ones which within this segment is not emphasised at all. Since they all agree that there is nothing negative about companies communicating their CSR efforts, they tend to only view the positive aspects.

The general perception of the communication

As mentioned above, the consumers in this segment are mostly positive towards the communication from fast fashion brands. They view the communication for what it is and do not reflect over it as the two previous segments do. Furthermore, they emphasise the positive aspects of the communication such as the brands using numbers in their communication, making it more relatable and real. Another aspect they emphasise is the fact that the fast fashion brands are trying and that they actually do communicate and raise awareness of the issue even though they might not be the predecessor. Furthermore, they emphasise the fact that they communicate in a laid back, simple and reminiscent way which they find appealing. Ingrid and Sofie emphasise the impact numbers have on them as consumers. Furthermore, they view it as positive when the brands are aware of their potential for improvement and highlight it in their communication.

"By using numbers they show legitimacy, they emphasise that they work towards 100 % and are not satisfied until they do." - Ingrid

"It tempts me as a consumer to purchase more when they emphasise relevant numbers and goals." - Sofie

"By showing a high number as Gina Tricot do, they make me as a consumer feel safe in my choice." - Isabelle.

Information

When discussing the three posts and emails, the positive consumers to some extent discuss the non-detailed and small amount of information provided by the fast fashion brands. More or less, they all acknowledge the fact that words such as "more sustainable" are used and that the information is scanty, but at the same time they also say that they probably would not care if the communication was more informative.

"You see it from time to time, but I honestly don't think about it that much." - Sofie

"He (Jarno Vanhatapio) is doing a good thing, I wouldn't think any more about it." - Isabelle

Another aspect this segment highlight is the fact that the brands remind the consumers about the importance of sustainability. Their thoughts on this matter are positive and they all agree on the fact that the fast fashion brands increase the awareness regarding sustainability with their efforts. Furthermore, by communicating to the extent they do they increase the awareness of the issue by including it in their newsletters, in their social media posts inter alia. However, they are also aware of the challenge these brands face by being in the business they are and trying to make the best out of it.

Trustworthiness and honesty

The positive naive consumer discuss how trust is an important aspect and they emphasise that they believe that the communication is trustworthy. They have a hard time believing that fast fashion brands would share untruthful information. However, even if they can feel suspicious since being aware of the core of the business, they believe that these brands do

what they can based on their circumstances. As mentioned above, they do not reflect so much over the communication itself, but more appreciate that fact that they actually do it. They all agree upon the fact that the communication is a step in the right direction and emphasise that the fast fashion brands actually do communicate their future goals, making the communication more trustworthy.

"Well, I have to trust them and the information they share, there is no way for me to investigate it further" - Isabelle

"I believe that they do what they can with their prerequisites" – Ingrid

Aspects of interest

Another aspect this segment emphasise is that even though they might be aware of the impact that sustainability and CSR efforts has on the environment, they tend to be a bit naive about it. They do not have knowledge to the same extent as the green conscious consumers and the conflicted consumers, but when speaking of their experience they highlight a feeling of satisfaction reading about fast fashion brands efforts regarding sustainability and CSR. Furthermore, they all emphasise that even though they think sustainability is an important matter it will not have an impact on their future consumption choices or change their view of the fast fashion brands. They emphasise aspects that matter more such as what material they find most comfortable in a garment and the looks of it.

"Sure, I am careful when I shop, I always check the material." - Isabelle

"If I buy a dress from Na-Kd, I only care about the looks of it." - Sofie

Discussion

Having presented the analysed empirical results and the consumer segments, a discussion grounded in the theoretical

framework will now follow. The researchers discovered that the experience of how the digital sustainability communication is perceived varies depending on what segment the individual belong to and that the credibility of the brands differ depending on how the communication is perceived. This section begins with a discussion on different aspects that affect the consumer perception of fast fashion brands digital sustainability communication, aiming to answer the main research question. Thereafter, a discussion will follow on how these different perceptions affect brand credibility in order to answer the second research question.

Consumer perception
How the perception is affected by the relation to the fast fashion brands
Consumers and individuals have different requirements depending on external factors that affect their judgement and their requirements. One major difference detected during the analysis of the interviews, was the effect that the personal preferences and relations to the fast fashion brands had on the perceptions of the communication. The green conscious consumers, who did not have much of a relation to the brands at all, and also are very educated on both sustainability and ethical issues in relation to fast fashion brands, felt negative and very sceptical to the communication. This feeling of negativity falls in line with what Kim et al. (2013) discuss in their research, that since they are more aware and educated on sustainability issues they oppose the fast fashion industry and therefore have negative feelings towards them. This in turn affect their feelings towards the digital sustainability communication. Since they know about the negative consequences the industry has on the environment, they do not really buy the talk about the fast fashion brands making sustainable choices.

On the contrary, the positive naive consumer show similar attributes as the fast fashion consumer discussed by Kim et al. (2013). They mostly care about the looks of the clothes and that it is easily available. Also, they are generally positive towards the brands (and their communication) since they are all consumers of fast fashion, and have been shopping at for example H&M for their entire life. However, the positive naive consumers are not entirely unaware of the sustainability issues related to the fast fashion industry. In line with Joy et al. (2012), consumers in general are more aware of this kind of matter. However, even though the positive naive consumers are aware of the negative environmental effect fast fashion has, they do not really care about the communication unless it targets them specifically (even though it regards sustainability), which can be viewed as a parable to the typical fast fashion consumer discussed by Kim et al. (2013). The personal preference and positivism towards the one or many of the fast fashion brands influence the positive naive consumers to perceive the digital sustainability communication as positive.

Regarding the conflicted consumers, they all either have some kind of professional or academic relation to the fast fashion industry and express thoughts and feelings that imply that they want to see the good aspects of the sustainability efforts. However, since the conflicted consumers have knowledge of sustainability matters, they also know what negative effects the fast fashion industry has on the environment. In line with the study by Kim et al. (2013), these prerequisites put the conflicted consumers somewhere in between the other two consumers segments of this study since they are not the typical fast fashion consumer, but neither oppose the fast fashion brands. This reflects in their perception of the digital communication. They are generally positive towards the communication and the fact that they "do something", but at the same time they

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acknowledge that the fast fashion industry has a negative effect on the environment. Lastly, the conflicted consumers all acknowledge having a personal bond to one or many of the fast fashion brands (like H&M), which has an effect on their view of the brand and their perception of the communication, in line with Weilbacher (1993) who discuss the successfulness of a brand and state that if consumers start to identify and bond with a brand this will strengthen the brand in general.

How the perception is affected by different requirements of the CSR efforts
The three consumer segments all share the meaning that CSR actions is something they expect and that should be communicated, in accordance with Morsing and Schultz (2006) who state that consumers think that CSR initiatives should be communicated. Furthermore, Morsing and Schultz (2006) emphasise that CSR is a delicate matter, since some consumers are sceptical and reluctant. As the empirical results of this study show, it is of great importance to do it correctly. Depending on which consumer segment the individuals belong to, the requirements differ. The green conscious consumers are sceptical whilst the positive naive consumers emphasise the positive aspects of the communication. Martin and Schouten (2012) argue that by acting responsibly, companies will most likely increase their reputation. However, the authors also emphasise that by communicating certain CSR efforts and not being able to perform will lead to a decrease of the company's reputation and lead to damage. The green conscious consumers expect fast fashion brands to do much more than climate compensate and do not see this effort as an action of responsibility, whilst the positive naive consumers view the action as a good step for a company in the fast fashion industry. The conflicted consumers are generally positive about the CSR efforts, but emphasise the conflict of fast fashion brands trying to be sustainable since the industry has such a big ecological

footprint. This in turn leads to the different segments classifying actions of responsibility differently. By climate compensating a brand can increase their reputation among the positive naive consumers, and at the same time decrease their reputation among the green conscious consumers. However, one can probably argue that the brands are aware of which group to target and what impact it will have.

How the perception is affected by various requirements of different motives behind the CSR efforts
The consumer segments perceive the CSR efforts differently and have different requirements on the motives behind the efforts. The green conscious consumers view the motives behind fast fashion brands as a way to promote themselves, in line with what Du et al. (2010) describe as an extrinsic CSR motive. The conflicted consumers have shared meanings on this matter. While some emphasise the importance of doing good by genuine concerns, others are quite careless. In accordance with Ellen et al. (2006) the tolerance for extrinsic motives have increased which can be noticeable among the conflicted consumers. The positive naive consumers view the motives behind the CSR efforts as genuine and emphasise the efforts as something positive. Therefore, this segment is not viewing the efforts as extrinsic but intrinsic, and thereby experience a higher level of trust. This goes in line with Du et al. (2010), who argue that by minimizing the scepticism among consumers (by using intrinsic motives), trustworthiness can increase.

Forehand and Grier (2003) argue that it is not the motives the consumers respond negatively to, but rather the feeling of manipulation. The empirical results show that consumers within the green conscious consumer segment express emotions such as manipulation when emphasising that they view the CSR communication as a PR

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more than an action of responsibility. Furthermore, the analysis of the empirical results show that the different consumer segments have different perceptions, whilst previous theories are based on an overall population. This study shows that depending on what consumer segment one belongs to, the perception differs. Furthermore, it is of importance to emphasise that the different consumer segments have different experience and knowledge which in turn can lead to motive not having the impact expected.

How the perception is affected by different expectations regarding the digital communication
The way the fast fashion brands communicate have various impact on the different consumer segments. According to Oksiutycz and Kunene (2017) digital communication has become an important tool for companies, leading to possibilities to communicate with their consumers more openly (Van Prooijen & Bartels, 2019). Furthermore, Du et al. (2010) state that including consumers in the CSR communication will increase the trustworthiness of their actions. The empirical results of this study shows that the different consumer segments have different expectations on the communication, and the trustworthiness do not necessarily increase due to the inclusiveness of consumers in the communication. The positive naive consumers emphasise the positive aspects of the communication such as increasing the awareness among consumers, whilst the green conscious consumers are not impacted by the change to digital communication more than being able to question the communication directly if wanted.

The different segments are positive about CSR efforts being more inclusive and communicated with a more laid back approach. However, differences between the segments occur. The green conscious consumers emphasise that by making CSR

efforts more inclusive, responsibility is put on the consumers since the communication is not as informative comparing to for example a CSR report. The conflicted consumers share the same meanings as the green conscious consumers, however they can view specific parts of the communication as positive. Lastly, the positive naive consumer segment is even more positive about the digital CSR communication and express emotions of inclusiveness. Furthermore, they emphasise that by communicating digitally, fast fashion brands increase the awareness among the consumers. These results can be discussed in accordance with Nicolopoulou (2011), who state that traditional CSR communication in form of CSR reports has had more strict rules and certain standards to follow, whilst CSR communicated today are to a greater extent less strict and more inclusive. By communicating their CSR efforts digitally, the CSR efforts from fast fashion brands are therefore in many ways seen as more promotive than informative.

The positive naive consumers express thoughts that imply that digital communication facilitates for consumers to understand, and brands to communicate in a simple and understandable way. This goes in line with Kent and Taylor (2016), who argue that communicating digitally will lead to a more realistic aspect and facilitate for consumers and external stakeholders to relate. The conflicted consumers and the green conscious consumers are open minded and emphasise the positive aspects of digital communication and sharing links to inform external stakeholders. However, they also emphasise the lack of information and the strategy behind it, which they believe is quite contradictory. Furthermore, the conflicted consumers emphasise the fact that ignorance can be the outcome, when brands communicate their sustainability efforts to much. Digital communication has led to inclusiveness but as the empirical result shows, it is not always a positive aspect.

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Brand credibility

Having discussed the main aspects of what affects the perception of the digital sustainability communication, a discussion will now follow on how brand credibility is affected by the perception of the communication. As stated in the theoretical framework, Erdem and Swait (2004) discuss two main factors that build brand credibility; trustworthiness and expertise. These will be used as a foundation when discussing how brand credibility is affected by the three consumer segments of this study. First, a discussion will follow on the consumer trust and trustworthiness experienced by the various consumer segments. Thereafter, expertise and information will be discussed. Lastly, the two components will be put together and the total effect of the perception of the communication on brand credibility will be analysed.

Consumer trust and trustworthiness

The green conscious consumers, who are very knowledgeable and have previous experience with the fast fashion industry in relation to sustainability, generally have a negative perception of the communication. Having previous knowledge which affect their personal preferences, their feelings are negative which has an impact on the way they view the communication. Even though the fast fashion brands take advantage of the development of social networking sites and two-way-communication (Van Prooijen and Bartels, 2019) and the fact that brands now have endless possibilities to communicate with their consumers (Rybak, 2018), the empirical results show that the green conscious consumers do not fully appreciate this communication. Being very familiar with environmental issues, they tend to mostly question the fact that they feel like messages are more promotive rather than informative, and also the motive behind the action. When discussing the general perception of the communication, the green conscious consumers all

mentioned feelings of distrust and scepticism, since they saw the digital sustainability communication as PR and not a genuine effort to take environmental responsibility. They believe that the motive behind the sustainability efforts and the communication of it is somewhat shady. Discussing these feelings in terms of trustworthiness (Erdem & Swait, 2004), one can state that this scepticism towards the CSR efforts and the communication is a clear indicator that the trustworthiness is low among the green conscious consumers.

On the contrary, the positive naive consumers express thoughts and feelings that imply that they consider the communication regarding the CSR efforts very trustworthy. Being the typical fast fashion consumer (Kim et al., 2013), they have a strong personal connection to one or many of the fast fashion brands, and feel positive about the communication. The positive naive consumers are genuinely positive about the fact that the fast fashion brands include their consumers in their CSR efforts, which falls in line with what is discussed by Martin and Schouten (2012) regarding that transparency towards both internal and external stakeholders considering a company's CSR actions is very important to increase trust. Even though they are aware of the sustainability issues related to the fast fashion industry, they still express positive feelings towards the brands and their communication. This in turn has a positive effect on the trust the positive naive consumers experience.

Somewhere in the middle between the green conscious consumers and the positive naive consumers on the trustworthiness scale, the researchers of this study place the conflicted consumers. In general, since they all have some kind of either professional or academic experience with sustainability and the environmental issues related to the fast fashion industry, they are aware of the problematic aspects of the communication. However, they all have a positive attitude

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towards the fact that the fast fashion brands take some kind of action, which goes in line with the theory from Du et al. (2010) who claim that by including consumers in a company's CSR efforts the trustworthiness can increase.

Having presented how the trustworthiness towards a brand and their digital sustainability communication is affected by all three consumer segments, it can be stated that it mostly depends on their personal preferences and previous knowledge. As mentioned above, Du et al. (2010) state that by including consumers in your CSR work, a company can increase its trustworthiness. This can be confirmed regarding the positive naive consumer segment, who feel great trust in the brands, and partly by the conflicted consumer segment who feel some trust in the brands. However, the green conscious consumers find the CSR efforts communicated by the brands to not be genuine and do not feel trustworthiness towards the brands and their communication.

Expertise and information
As mentioned previously, expertise and information is of importance when discussing brand credibility (Erdem & Swait, 2004). As the empirical results show, the information shared through the different posts and emails are questionable among the different consumer segments. All three segments emphasise the fact that the information shared is non-detailed and not as informative as they might expect. However, the requirements on the information and the motive behind the lack of detailed information is perceived differently among the segments. The green conscious consumers are very sceptical towards the non-detailed information shared and argue that fast fashion brands are aware of their tactics by not sharing enough information, and believe that the companies do have the knowledge needed. The vague description leaves the reader in an ambient state. Since the green conscious consumers

view the lack of information as a part of the fast fashion brands tactics, they do not view the shared information as genuine, which in turn affects the brand credibility negatively. This goes in line with Erdem and Swait (1998), who argue that clarity in the information is of importance when brands communicate about their products or services. Not being clear enough can lead to consumers doubting the brand credibility. Furthermore, Erdem and Swait (2004) argue that expertise is defined as a company being competent and the consumers view the company as competent, which the green consumers do. They believe that the knowledge of the subject exist, however they believe that it is a part of their tactic to not expose too much.

The conflicted consumers share the same meaning regarding the information and emphasise that by being more clear about what they do, the brands can make the consumers more secure with their choice. This leads to the consumers not feeling the need of doing research on uncertainties shared in the information. Furthermore, the conflicted consumers emphasise the fact that the fast fashion brands inform about their engagement in the social or environmental cause, rather than emphasise and inform about the social or environmental cause itself. This goes in line with Du et al. (2010), who discuss the importance of informing the consumers about the social cause itself. Being concrete and thorough regarding the social cause can lead to brands enhancing the brand credibility. The conflicted consumers indicate emotions such as disappointment regarding the obscure information. By sharing obscure information, the brands decrease their credibility. Speaking of the aspect expertise as Erdem and Swait (1998) discuss, it is of importance to show the competence and make the consumers view the brand as competent. Sharing more information about the social cause itself will probably lead to this consumer segment viewing the brand as competent. However,

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the knowledge does not reach them, and they feel a responsibility to do the research themselves, making the consumers consider the brand to not be competent enough.

Lastly, the positive naive consumers react on the lack of information regarding certain words used, however they also state that a more informative post would not impact them in a greater extent. They do not feel the necessity to research the uncertainties but trust the brands word for it. In turn, this imply that to even though the positive naive consumers feel insecure about information shared, they express emotions such as trust and have a hard time believing brands would share obscure and incorrect information deliberately. Furthermore, the last segment view the fast fashion brands as competent and have a hard time believing they would share information and then not deliver what has been promised. Again, this goes in line with Erdem and Swait's (1998) theory on expertise and brand credibility.

This study shows that depending on the consumers' previous knowledge and experience of sustainability the communicated expertise will be perceived differently. They all acknowledge the information and expertise presented by the brands, however this communication is perceived differently and affect the consumers differently depending on their previous knowledge and personal perceptions of the brands.

How is brand credibility affected by the communication?
Having discussed how the different aspects affect how consumers perceive the digital sustainability communication, and how these perceptions in turn affect trustworthiness and expertise, a discussion will now follow on how these components affect brand credibility (Erdem & Swait, 2004).

As stated by Dwivedi et al. (2018), focusing on the consumer perspective when

discussing brand credibility is of great importance since it is the consumers who experience the brand and therefore decide whether the brand is perceived as credible or not. Taking a stand in this, the researchers of this study has found that the different consumer segments have different perceptions of the fast fashion brands brand credibility. The green conscious consumers express thoughts and emotions that imply that they experience a low trustworthiness towards the fast fashion brands and their digital sustainability communication and are very sceptical and negative about the fact that they feel that the communication is not genuine and the information is vague. This in turn affect the way they view the expertise within the fast fashion brands. By taking this into consideration, it can easily be stated that the green conscious consumers' perception of the digital sustainability communication is affecting fast fashion brand credibility in a negative way. On the contrary, the positive naive consumers have a different experience with brand credibility towards the fast fashion brands. They find the communication as very trustworthy, since they believe that the communication is genuine. Furthermore, even though they find the sustainability information given through the digital communication quite spare, they still believe that the fast fashion brands would not be untruthful about the work they claim to do. Therefore, it can be stated that the positive naive consumers experience a high level of brand credibility, especially in comparison to the green conscious consumers. Lastly, the conflicted consumers end up somewhere in between the two other consumer segments. Since they have either some kind of professional or academic experience with sustainability in relation to fast fashion brands, they tend to be both sceptical towards the communication but also positive towards the fact that they do something. Also, they emphasise their personal preferences. This leads them to feel some kind of trust in the fact that they work towards making a

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difference in sustainability matters, but at the same time they know what a negative ecological footprint the industry has and therefore tend to not be as positive and feel as much trust as the positive naive consumers. Regarding the expertise and information, the conflicted consumers feel that the information shared is a bit obscure and that they could inform more about the sustainability cause itself instead of putting it all on the consumer, implying that they still are positive about the fact that something is communicated at all but also that it could be more extensive. To conclude, it can be stated that the conflicted consumers experience brand credibility with the fast fashion brands on different levels; some positive and some negative. However, the brand credibility differs depending on what fast fashion brand it regards. With the brands they prefer, the brand credibility, as an effect of the digital sustainability communication, is higher in comparison to brands they do not prefer.

Worth discussing is the fact that the personal preferences and previous sustainability knowledge has great impact on the fast fashion brand credibility. The researchers of this study initially had an idea that level of knowledge and experience with sustainability issues would affect the perception, and thereby brand credibility, however both this aspect as well as the personal preferences of fast fashion brands turned out to be of greater importance than expected.

As mentioned earlier, with the strong digital development comes a lot of challenges for contemporary brands, and the importance of building a strong brand is greater than ever (Keller, 2009). In this study, the researchers have looked into how digital sustainability communication is perceived by different kind of consumers and what the possible effect on brand credibility can be. The results clearly show the importance of brand credibility, for both consumers and companies (Sweeney & Swait, 2008), as a

way to enhance brand value (Dwivedi et al., 2018) and affect brand choice (Erdem & Swait, 2004). Also, as studied by Weilbacher (1993), building a strong relation to your consumers as a brand and making them identify with the brand, has proven to have a big impact on brand credibility with the different consumer segments found in this study.

Conclusion

This article contributes to and extend existing research on CSR communication (e.g. Du et al., 2010; Martin & Schouten, 2012; Morsing & Schultz, 2006) by studying how consumers perceive digital sustainability communication. Du et al. (2010) discuss that future research should focus on emotional attributes regarding CSR efforts, which has been the main focus of this study. The qualitative phenomenological approach facilitated for the researchers to study consumer emotions, perception and experience (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2011), and the elicitation method used in the interviews facilitated an even deeper understanding of the consumer experience. By also focusing on the digital aspect of the CSR communication, this study contributes with a broader understanding and a more contemporary view within the field of research. This study took a stand in the two research questions, *"how do consumers perceive fast fashion brands attempts to digitally communicate their sustainability efforts? Does the communication affect brand credibility?"*, that facilitated for the researchers to build on previous research and contribute to a deeper understanding of consumer perception. The researchers state through this article that different aspects are of importance depending on consumer segment. Three consumer segments were identified due to different perception of the communication; the green conscious consumers, the conflicted consumers and the positive naive consumers. Factors having a significant role when categorizing

the consumers are their sustainability knowledge, interest and experience. The main aspects spoken of in this study are relation to fast fashion brands, motive behind the CSR efforts, expectations on the digital communication and how these aspects affect trustworthiness and expertise, that in turn affect the brand credibility. This article therefore contributes to a more in-depth understanding of different consumer segments and how different aspects affect each segment.

The green conscious consumers perceive the digital communication with scepticism and are quite negative about it. Furthermore, this consumer segment emphasise that the communication does not evoke any feelings of authenticity, but rather view it as PR and believe that extrinsic motives impregnate the communication. This is reinforced by Morsing and Schultz (2006) who discuss the difference among consumers and emphasise that some are reluctant towards CSR communication, whilst some are not. Furthermore, the green conscious consumers, due to the emotions evoked, do not find this as a way for the brands to increase their credibility. Erdem and Swait (2004) emphasise that trustworthiness enhance the brand credibility. Therefore, one can argue that the credibility felt for the brands most likely decrease due to lack of trustworthiness towards the fast fashion brands communication regarding CSR.

The conflicted consumers are, as the name reveal, both positive and negative about the digital sustainability communication from the fast fashion brands. Since they have either professional or academic experience with sustainability in relation to fast fashion, they see the negative aspects of the industry but are at the same time personally invested. This leads to them wanting to see the positive aspects of the fast fashion brands CSR efforts. Also, their personal preferences of some of the brands indicate their personal bonds with the brands, which

is important when building a successful brand (Weilbacher, 1993). The conflict explained is present through all aspects of the perception of the communication discussed. Due to these conflicted feelings that colour their perception of the brand, brand credibility is affected in different ways. Even though they are positive about the increased level of inclusiveness in the CSR efforts (Du et al., 2010), due to the digital communication, they still acknowledge the fact that the fast fashion brands still do environmental harm. The conflicted consumers therefore have mixed feelings about the fast fashion brands credibility, and also find different levels of brand credibility depending on what specific brand is discussed.

The positive naive consumers perceive the communication as positive and are very pleased with the development within the industry. The expectations of the communication are reached and therefore emotions such as happiness and satisfaction are evoked. Furthermore, this consumer segment perceives the communication as authentic and genuine, which in turn increase trustworthiness (Du et al., 2010) and thereby also increase brand credibility (Erdem & Swait, 2004). Inclusiveness play a significant role and one can state that this consumer segment's emotions are enhanced due to inclusiveness.

To conclude, it can be stated that the perception of the digital sustainability communication varies among the three consumer segments, and different aspects have various effects. A negative perception of the communication shows to have a negative effect on the brand credibility, while a more positive perception affects the brand credibility in a positive way.

Further research
This research focus on consumers' emotions and perceptions of digital CSR communication. However, the research

field of emotional attributes within CSR are generally lacking (Du, et al., 2010). Since this study has commenced the research within the emotional and experience field, further research can extend the research within the field and study if the emotional attributes can affect actual purchase decisions. Furthermore, an interesting aspect to consider would be how the effect would differ between the different consumer segments. In addition to this, further research can include aspects as gender and various geographical areas to see whether digital CSR communication is perceived differently and if so, to what extent. Lastly, a suggestion for further research could be to upscale the study and include a larger sample of respondents to be able to generalize the results.

Managerial implications

The recommendations presented below are mainly directed towards fast fashion brands, however some can be applicable on companies in other industries as well. The recommendations will facilitate for companies to develop their CSR efforts and communicate them in a trustworthy way which in turn can increase the brand credibility.

- Consumers in all three segments emphasise the importance of informative communication. Therefore, the communicated CSR should be informative and show expertise. Obscure information led to negative

emotions and scepticism among some of the consumers. Therefore, a recommendation is to make sure to include goals and be clear with what you mean with the shared information.

- Consumers are more or less knowledgeable but emphasise the importance of wanting companies to share detailed information that might not account for as general knowledge, for example sharing information about BCI but not clarify what BCI stands for and what it is. Therefore, a managerial implication is to rather share more detailed information and clarify what might not account for as general knowledge.

- Another implication is that it is important to be aware of which consumer segment your communication is targeting. This can lead to companies being able to align the information towards the segment. This is of great importance, since the different segments has various perceptions of the communication. However, the researchers of this study are aware that this can be a delicate matter to handle and practically difficult to implement.

- The motive behind the efforts are of importance depending on consumer segment and is something companies should have in mind when considering sharing CSR information digitally. An implication is to make sure that the motive is reflected in the communication.

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