

Saimaa University of Applied Sciences  
Faculty of Business Administration, Lappeenranta  
Double Degree Program in International Business  
Specialization in Marketing

Hannah Sofie Seel

**The role of sustainability in brand communication  
of SMEs using content marketing  
Case: fashion industry in Saarbrücken, Germany**

Bachelor's thesis 2019

## **Abstract**

Hannah Sofie Seel

The role of sustainability in brand communication of SMEs using content marketing, Case: fashion industry in Saarbrücken, Germany, 56 pages, 2 appendices

Saimaa University of Applied Sciences

Faculty of Business Administration Lappeenranta

Double Degree Program in International Business

Specialization in Marketing

Bachelor's thesis 2019

Instructors: Anu Kurvinen, senior lecturer, Saimaa University of Applied Sciences

Prof. Dr. Petra Garnjost, University of Applied Sciences Saarbrücken

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of sustainability in the brand communication of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the fashion industry. More precisely, the research aimed to find out how sustainable values of small companies can be communicated authentically and to what extent content marketing can support this. A closer look was also taken at the integration of sustainability into marketing activities and the expectations these arouse in customers.

The theoretical part discusses the theories of brand communication aspects, content marketing and sustainability in the fashion industry. This information was gathered from online journals, surveys and from books dealing with marketing and the sustainable fashion industry. Data for the empirical part were collected by conducting interviews with owners of small clothing shops in Saarbrücken.

As society's interest in environmental-friendly garments is increasing, it is essential for small, truly sustainable fashion stores to communicate this value to potential customers. Entrepreneurs should focus on transparency and authenticity in their brand communication in order to be able to differentiate themselves from global players. In this field, social media plays a major role and can be pushed through content marketing campaigns. The results of the study can be applied to SMEs in Germany who are engaged in the sustainable apparel industry. Further research is required to find out how the brand communication of environmentally friendly values is organized for large companies or how this is done in other countries. A more detailed analysis of the consumer's view on such marketing activities will also be necessary in the future.

Keywords: brand communication, content marketing, sustainable fashion

## Table of contents

1	Introduction .....	4
1.1	Literature review and research justification .....	4
1.2	Objectives and research questions .....	6
1.3	Delimitations .....	7
1.4	Central concepts .....	8
1.5	Theoretical framework .....	10
1.6	Research methodology and implementation .....	12
1.7	Thesis structure .....	13
2	Brand communication .....	14
2.1	Brand communication strategies .....	14
2.2	Marketing communications mix .....	19
2.3	Communication channels .....	20
3	Content marketing .....	22
3.1	Definition and Explanation .....	22
3.2	The five A's – customer path in a connected world .....	24
3.3	Step-by-step content marketing .....	27
3.4	Opportunities for SME's .....	29
4	Sustainability in the fashion industry .....	30
4.1	Development of the fashion industry .....	30
4.2	Environmental, social and economic sustainability .....	31
4.3	The attitude of German consumers towards sustainable fashion .....	32
5	Communicating sustainability in the fashion industry .....	34
5.1	Communication of sustainable values .....	34
5.2	Opportunities for SMEs to communicate sustainable values .....	36
6	Research on the clothing industry in Saarbrücken .....	37
6.1	Research design and data collection .....	37
6.2	Case companies .....	39
6.2.1	Grünstreifen .....	39
6.2.2	Zweigesicht .....	39
6.2.3	Marienkäfer Naturtextilien .....	40
6.2.4	Loup Store .....	40
6.3	Sustainability and its communication in SMEs of the fashion industry in Saarbrücken .....	40
6.4	Marketing activities in SMEs of the fashion industry in Saarbrücken ...	41
6.5	Entrepreneur's opinion on consumer behavior in the field of sustainable fashion in Saarbrücken .....	43
6.6	Suggestions of entrepreneurs in Saarbrücken for the future development of the fashion industry .....	45
6.7	Research results .....	46
7	Conclusion .....	50
	Figures .....	53
	Tables .....	53
	References .....	54
	Appendices	
	Appendix 1	English questionnaire
	Appendix 2	German questionnaire

# 1 Introduction

Since sustainability is a very relevant issue in our society and entrepreneurial activities, it can be interesting for entrepreneurs to see how this value can be incorporated into the brand communication of companies. Furthermore, content marketing can help to convey transparency and trustworthiness to the consumers from the very beginning of their connection to the brand. Therefore, this thesis will help small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to figure out how to communicate the value of sustainability best in an authentic way in order to encourage consumers in buying.

## 1.1 Literature review and research justification

Over the past decades the marketing sector has changed significantly as well as the buying behavior of consumers. Already in 1900, people figured out that demand is not only about purchasing power but about needs and desires of consumers. With the help of advertisements, it was possible to increase the desire for a specific product or service and to outperform competitors. (Bartels 1976, p. 2.) Throughout the twentieth century, the perception and concept of marketing has changed from a focus on production to sales to the modern societal marketing and lastly to the holistic marketing orientation by Kotler (Fucia & Dumitrescu 2017, p. 34).

Philip Kotler is a world-renowned professor of International Marketing and is considered as *the Father of Modern Marketing* (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan 2017, p. XiX). His widely known and successful books about Marketing 1.0 to Marketing 4.0 are emphasizing that this field is constantly evolving, and that consumers' expectations of companies are continuously changing as well (Fucia & Dumitrescu 2017, p. 34). While the focus in Kotler's concept of Marketing 1.0 was still on the products themselves, the customers in Marketing 2.0 moved more into the foreground. Already in its approach to Marketing 3.0, it became clear that customers were increasingly viewed as individual human beings with their own feelings and thoughts. Moreover, the consumers themselves are attaching more and more importance to values and an emotional connection to a product or a brand and are looking for more than just a functional product. In Kotler's latest

book Marketing 4.0, this thought was then further elaborated, in connection with today's technological progress which also affects the field of marketing. His latest marketing insights can be seen as an extension of the Marketing 3.0 concept, as the focus of marketing activities is still on the human aspects of customers. Overall, Marketing 4.0 is committed to making every step of the customer's journey as convenient as possible, while addressing the individual needs of customers in the best possible way. In this context, special significance can be assigned to the interaction of online and offline marketing activities. (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan 2017, pp. XV-XVII; Fucia & Dumitrescu 2017, pp. 34,35.)

Within today's digital economy, the concept of content marketing has proven to be very effective and successful. This phenomenon has gained importance especially through the high presence of various internet platforms and should be known by all entrepreneurs nowadays. In his latest book, Kotler has dedicated an entire chapter to this subject, explaining how valuable content can attract customers, convince them of the brand and thus win long-term customers. When using content marketing, the values of a company, such as its commitment to the environment, sustainability and social projects, can help to arouse the interest of consumers and to differentiate from competitors. (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan 2017, p. 121.)

Another aspect that has gained more and more importance and attention within our society over the last 20 years is the concept of sustainability. While at first, only a small number of the world's population was involved, current issues such as global warming, air pollution and other negative consequences of human life on the environment have led to an indispensable presence in our society. The topic of sustainability and the protection of the environment is no longer only discussed in private lives, but also as a political and social issue. This circumstance resulted in an increasing pressure on companies to take responsibility for the impact of their entrepreneurial activities on society (Mohr, Webb & Harris 2001, p. 45). Consequently, more and more different sized enterprises have evolved various corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs (see Maignan & Ralston 2002, p. 15). Integrating the value of sustainability into a corporate strategy not only shows that a company takes responsibility for its business activities, but also that it is committed to society. Those aspects provide

a company some advantages, such as a stronger relationship with stakeholders or better competitiveness on the market. Both can also lead to higher profitability in the long run. (Demetriou, Papasolomou & Vrontis 2009, p. 2.)

## **1.2 Objectives and research questions**

Previous literature has dealt either with the topic of brand communication, content marketing or sustainability in marketing. However, there is no work that links these three areas. Moreover, many articles on these topics were written about ten years ago or more which questions their actuality.

The overall objective of this paper is to investigate how the value of sustainability can be incorporated into a company's brand communication in a trustworthy manner. In more detail, it is investigated how content marketing can be used to communicate the value of sustainability to customers. By conducting interviews with owners of SMEs in Saarbrücken, the possibilities for such companies to integrate their commitment to the environment into the marketing of their fashion shops are shown. This thesis is expected to find out how consumers are concerned about sustainability. These findings can help SMEs to improve their overall marketing strategy and to meet customers' expectations better.

Consequently, the main research question of this paper is formulated as follows:

### **What is the role of sustainability in the brand communication of SMEs in the fashion industry?**

In order to answer this main question, there are four sub questions which will cover parts of the main question and thus provide the overall answer for it:

- How can the value of sustainability be communicated through content marketing in SMEs?
- How can the value of sustainability help a company to be perceived as trustworthy and authentic by consumers?
- How can SMEs integrate their commitment to the environment into their marketing?

- What do consumers expect from products which are marketed as environmental-friendly and sustainable?

### **1.3 Delimitations**

As the field of brand communication is very broad and various tools exist in this area, the focus in this thesis is put on content marketing as one example. This is due to the fact, that the phenomenon of content marketing that, in conjunction with the rise of digital and social media marketing in recent years, has gained more and more importance in the business world and is used frequently. This marketing concept matches the latest trends in consumers' buying behavior and should therefore be considered in any marketing strategy of companies nowadays.

Furthermore, the connection of sustainability and brand communication will be limited to SMEs. This can be attributed to the fact that several papers already exist dealing with the role of sustainability in large global companies. However, so far, there is less literature on this topic in combination with SMEs which is why this area should be further researched.

More delimitations can be found in the empirical part of this paper which only includes business-to-consumer (B2C) interactions as this can be better realized in the chosen geographical region.

Moreover, the focus will be only on the fashion industry as the topic of sustainability and its integration into this industry is an up-to-date and frequently discussed topic which is worth studying more closely. This limitation could have the consequence that results of the empirical part may not be transferable to every other industry.

Additionally, in this part of the work only those owners of SMEs are interviewed who already offer sustainable fashion in their business and advertise this in order to stand out from the competition. This simplifies the survey of possibilities to use a company's commitment to the environment as a marketing factor and enables a better comparability of the fashion stores' strategies.

Finally, the region of the fashion stores to be surveyed was restricted to the area of Saarbrücken. The capital of the state of Saarland can be found in the southwest of Germany with approximately 180.000 inhabitants. In order to find out how the sustainable fashion industry and the phenomenon of content marketing is represented in the Saarland, Saarbrücken is a suitable place to research. In addition, conducting face-to-face interviews in only one region reduces the time required for data collection.

#### **1.4 Central concepts**

As the objective of this thesis is to study the role of sustainability in the brand communication of SMEs with the help of content marketing, some individual concepts have to be examined and explained in more detail in order to understand the overall topic.

First of all, it should be clear that a brand is a *unique design, sign, symbol, words, or a combination of these, employed in creating an image that identifies a product and differentiates it from its competitors. Over time this image becomes associated with a level of credibility, quality, and satisfaction in the consumer's mind.* (WebFinance Inc. 2019.) As this is a frequently used term in this thesis, it is necessary that readers understand what exactly is meant by it.

Furthermore, the concept of brand communication can be defined as a *combination of activities that influence customers' opinions of a company and its products* (Cambridge University Press 2014a). According to Chinomona's paper, the marketing of a brand, its products or services in such a way that it stands out from the competition and is associated with certain values by customers is part of the field of brand communication (Chinomona 2016). Since this term represents a key issue in the work as well, it should be made clear that it covers a broad field, including various communication tools, strategies and channels, and that only a part of it will be discussed in the following.

Brand communication strategy is about positioning a brand in a way that consumers think of that brand in a specific situation rather than of competitive ones and that they connect this brand automatically with various benefits. The major aspects combined in the brand communication strategy are brand

positioning, brand attitude and brand awareness which build together a brand's equity. (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy & Pervan 2011 p. 120.)

Content marketing is a concept which is about creating interesting or entertaining content while addressing a specific target group. This method implies that companies put their focus in marketing on offering free and valuable content to their customers instead of only promoting their products or services. Content marketing is about building a story around the brand and attracting the interest of consumers through it. (Jefferson & Tanton 2015, p. 15-16.)

According to the EU recommendation 2003/361, SMEs can be categorized according to their headcount and annual turnover. Medium-sized companies are those with less than 250 employees and a maximum turnover of 50 million euros. If a company has fewer than 50 employees and less than 10 million euros turnover, it is classified as small. (European Union 2019.) As SMEs are subject to this study and the selection of case companies for the empirical part was limited to those, readers should know what is meant by this term.

Sustainability can generally be defined as *the quality of causing little or no damage to the environment and therefore being able to continue for a long time* (Cambridge University Press 2014b). In other words, it is about living in such a way that not only the present needs of society and the environment can be satisfied, but also future needs. That is why sustainability can be divided into an economic, environmental and social part. (Grant & Kenton 2019.) As sustainability is becoming increasingly important in our society and in the global business world due to global warming, this value will be examined more closely in order to determine to what extent it can contribute to positive brand communication.

## 1.5 Theoretical framework

Brand communication strategies and channels can be structured into subitems which are represented in the following Figure 1.

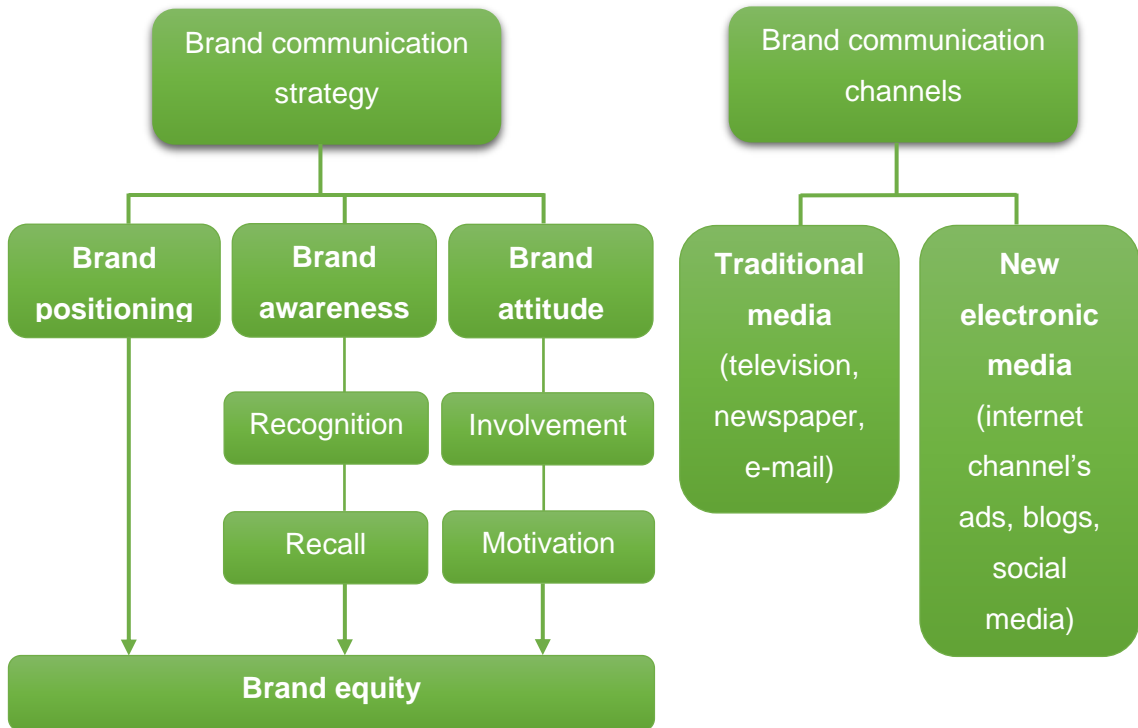


Figure 1. Brand communication strategy and brand communication channels. (based on Kotler & Keller 2012)

The sustainability aspect is also considered to have a certain relevance in this work which is why it should be made clear that there are three categories, as shown in Figure 2.

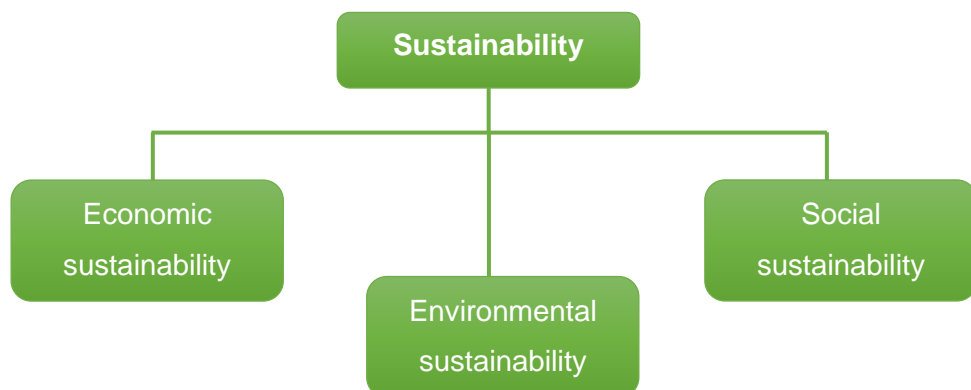


Figure 2. Categories of sustainability. (based on Elkington 1997)

This thesis deals with the area of brand communication using the example of content marketing. This has to be connected to the sustainable aspect and linked with a company's marketing activities in order to reach and attract customers. An overview about this theoretical part is shown in Figure 3.

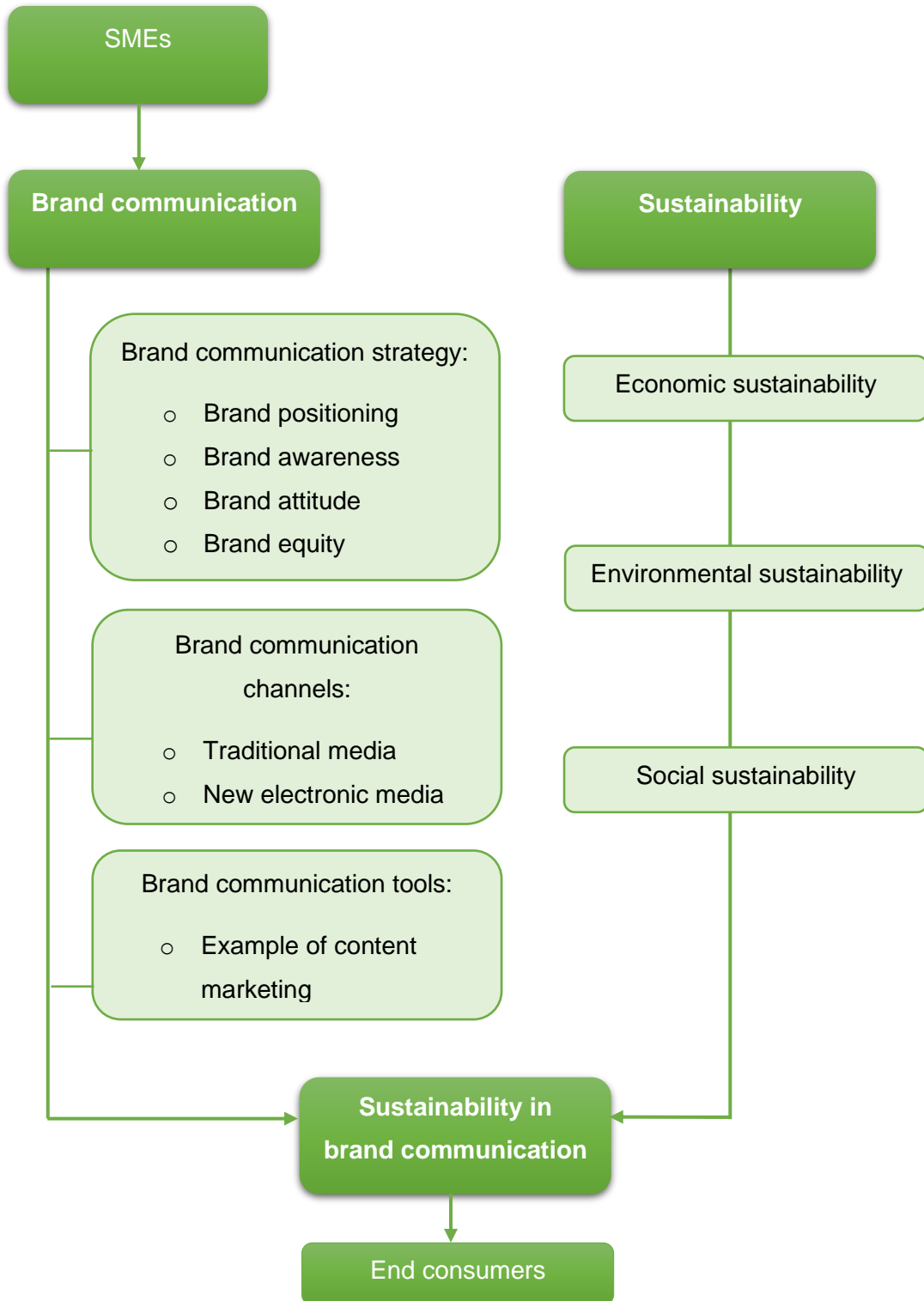


Figure 3. Thesis theoretical framework.

## 1.6 Research methodology and implementation

For the empirical part of the thesis, qualitative interviews with owners of SMEs in the area of Saarbrücken were conducted.

In general, a distinction in research methods must be made between quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods. While quantitative research deals with numbers and statistical analyses that are finally compared, qualitative data are not measurable and emerge in the form of language and subjective observations of respondents. Qualitative research is concerned with studying individuals in their natural environment in order to investigate their behavior, values, social contexts or opinion on a specific phenomenon. (McLeod 2019.) Overall, qualitative research is very *effective in identifying intangible factors, such as social norms, socioeconomic status, gender roles, ethnicity, and religion*. Moreover, data collected through qualitative investigation can often be transferred to groups with similar characteristics and thus serve as a model for certain populations to deal with the specific concept, phenomenon or social aspect studied. (Family Health International n.d., p. 1.)

Since only qualitative research was carried out in the empirical part, the focus in the following will only be on this form of research. The most common methods for qualitative research are semi-structured ones like participants observations, in-depth interviews and focus groups. Participant observation is about gaining data in the natural environment of those studied, whereby in-depth interviews are used to get an insight in a person's experiences, opinion or history. The method of focus groups can be used to observe discussions or to collect *data on the cultural norms of a group* in order to gain an overview about the issue researched. Generated data from those methods include *field notes, audio (and sometimes video) recordings and transcripts*. (Family Health International n.d., p. 2.)

The analytical objective of qualitative research is to describe individual experiences, variation or group norms using a flexible study design. The open-ended questions can be modified in reaction to a participant's responses. This means that each survey is individually and precisely tailored to the respondent, which includes that his or her opinion and statements are passed on unadulterated. In addition, qualitative investigations are very meaningful, since

there are hardly any misunderstandings and inquiries possible. (Family Health International n.d., p. 3,4.)

As this paper is about brand communication of SMEs in terms of sustainable fashion, conducting interviews with owners of SMEs in the region of Saarbrücken is an appropriate way to gain suitable data. In this context, the interviews help to answer the research questions and to give ideas to owners of SMEs how to include the value of sustainability in their brand communication in the fashion industry.

### **1.7 Thesis structure**

The thesis consists of four major parts namely an introduction chapter, the theoretical part, an empirical part including new findings and at the end an overall conclusion.

In the introduction chapter, some background information is given, existing literature is reviewed, and key findings written down. Additionally, the research questions and the theoretical framework are introduced in this part.

In the theoretical part, the major concepts connected to the thesis topic are shown and explained in more detail. Strategies and channels of brand communication are presented as well as the aspect of sustainability in the fashion industry. A focus is put on content marketing in connection with sustainability.

For the empirical part of this work, interviews with business owners of SMEs were conducted in order to gain new information and findings in this field.

In the end, findings from the empirical part are analyzed and used to answer the research questions. In addition, the empirical findings are compared to previous research mentioned in the theoretical part and a general conclusion on the subject is drawn.

## 2 Brand communication

During the branding process, the consumer is to be made aware of which product is evolved and for which associated values a brand stands for. The aim is to make it clear why consumers should buy the product or service and why the product is better than that of other brands and competitors. The overall goal is that people associate positive attributes with the brand which leads them to purchase the product or service (Keller 2003, p. 8). A key aspect to achieve this goal is a successful communication of the brand between the company and the consumers. By satisfying consumers' needs in the best possible way and meeting their expectations, a high recognition value and brand loyalty can be achieved and thus, the brand awareness maximized. Additionally, brand communication should be used for a clear differentiation on the market and to strengthen competitive advantages. After all, brand communication should support a long-lasting positive brand image in the minds of consumers and strengthen their brand relationship over time. (Panda 2004 p. 9.)

### 2.1 Brand communication strategies

As a brand is not only about the product, the right strategy for communicating its positive aspects is crucial for companies to be successful. According to Rosenbaum and his colleagues, brand communication strategy is about positioning a brand in the right way and about how to achieve the communication objectives of *brand awareness and brand attitude*. Those three aspects help to define the equity of a brand. (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy & Pervan 2011, p. 120.)

Brand equity:

In the overall branding process, including various strategies and the creation of brand equity, differentiation is a key aspect. When consumers are convinced that there are different benefits and attributes of the numerous existing brands and products, organizations can use this and address their motivations and desires. (Keller 2003, pp. 8-9.) The term brand equity describes *the value of a particular brand for the company that makes it* and is seen as *a leading indicator of business's future success* (Cambridge University Press 2014c). There are different perspectives on the creation of brand equity and one of them is the

customer-based brand equity model. It assumes that *the power of a brand lies in the minds of consumers or customers and what they have experienced and learned about the brand over time*. Through wise investments and thoughtful marketing activities, companies can establish brands with a high value and a good brand equity that are successful in the long run. (Keller 2003, p. 9.)

Brand positioning:

As positioning is the first step in communicating a brand it should lead consumers to associate a brand directly with a specific product category (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy & Pervan 2011, p. 120). In general, brand positioning is pointing out *a company's decision about how a product is marketed in relation to its other products, and to competitors' products* (Cambridge University Press 2014d). It is used to analyze brands by comparing the specific characteristics of one brand with those of its competitor with the purpose of identifying differences and the product segment. Kapferer points out *that a product is nothing unless it has been clearly positioned in people's minds versus the competition*. (Kapferer 1997, p. 39, 40.)

Brand awareness strategy:

To create brand awareness, a successful positioning of the brand is very important. Without a connection between a product and a certain segment, it is hardly possible to make one's own brand stand out in the minds of consumers compared to the competition. Rosenbaum-Elliott and his colleagues introduce two different objectives in the brand awareness communication namely recognition and recall which form the basis of the final purchase decision of consumers (Table 1). (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy & Pervan 2011, p. 121.)

In the event that the purchase decision is only made in the store at the time of purchase, recognition brand awareness applies. Consumers do not look for products of a specific brand but see the product selection of a certain category in the shop and then decide spontaneously or routinely for the brand that stands out for them personally. Recognition brand awareness also occurs when the need for a product is only evoked by seeing it in the store. If companies want to use this type of brand awareness communication, the advertising for the product must also be adapted accordingly. This means that it is important to present a brand's

products in advertising in the same way customers will see them in the shop, so that they can be quickly recognized. Thereby packaging plays an important role. (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy & Pervan 2011, pp. 121, 122; Percy & Rossiter 1992.)

The second brand awareness strategy is about recalling a certain brand or product when the time of need for it has come. Recall brand awareness occurs, for example, when a restaurant needs to be chosen, or when a wine or beer is chosen to accompany a meal in a restaurant. When doing so, consumers remember previous experiences, advertising or recommendations and make their decision based on them. Also, in this case, the advertising must be adapted to the goal of brand communication. In order to establish the brand in the customer's memory, it is particularly important to point out a certain need in advertising and to present your own product as a solution. A constant repetition of the product name and the corresponding category is also very important so that customers remember the product in a suitable situation and buy it. Overall, it is important to create a unique brand identity so that customers will remember a product later and choose it over that of competitors. (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy & Pervan 2011, p. 122; Percy & Rossiter 1992.)

While in recognition brand awareness the brand designs its advertising more visually with the help of product packaging, in recall brand awareness the focus is more on the verbal, cooperative learning of the customers. However, sometimes it is difficult to decide whether customers will make their purchase decision more dependent on recognition or recall. In these cases, a company must then adapt its marketing to both possible customer groups. (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy & Pervan 2011, pp. 122, 123.)

	<b>Recognition brand awareness</b>	<b>Recall brand awareness</b>
<b>Definition</b>	<i>The purchase decision is made at the point-of-purchase and the need for the product is stimulated by seeing the brand.</i>	<i>The brand name must be remembered or recalled once the need for the product occurs.</i>
<b>Advertising</b>	Visual, packaging: product should be shown in the same way as customers will see it in the shop	Repetition of the brand or product name, connection between product and a specific category, pointing out a need and the product as the solution
<b>Type of learning</b>	Visual iconic learning	Verbal paired-associated learning

Table 1. Brand awareness strategy. (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy & Pervan 2011)

Percy and Rossiter add in their work, that the distinction between recognition and recall depends on what firstly comes into the customer's mind when buying, brand awareness or the categorical need. So, if brand awareness is used in communication, it is possible that, at the point of purchase, a brand attracts the attention of the buyer through brand recognition and only afterwards, the category need comes to mind. At the same time, it is also possible that the category need is in the foreground first and then, with the help of memories and recall, a brand is decided upon. (Percy & Rossiter 1992.)

Brand attitude strategy:

According to Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy and Pervan, brand communication contributes to the brand attitude, while this in turn shapes the equity of the brand. Once the advantages of a brand have been identified for a successful communication strategy for brand attitude, involvement and motivation also play

an important role in the development of this strategy. (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy & Pervan 2011, p. 123.)

On the one hand, the involvement section deals with the risk that the purchase involves and the question of whether the message communicated must be accepted in its entirety resulting in a high level of involvement, or whether a gentle positive attitude is sufficient which means that there is a low level of involvement. (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy & Pervan 2011, p. 123.) Moreover, a purchase decision including a high level of involvement requires a prior search for information about the product as well as conviction (Percy & Rossiter 1992).

On the other hand, it is important to understand the motivation behind the purchase of a product. Managers need to find out whether the purchase is based on negative motivation, which in brand communication requires a focus on the benefits themselves, while positive motivation should result in advertising the emotional consequences of the benefits. (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy & Pervan 2011, pp. 124, 125.)

Rossiter and Percy designed a strategic model dealing firstly with the interaction between brand awareness and brand attitude *and then, within brand attitude, of involvement and motivation* (Percy & Rossiter 1992).

Furthermore, four special characteristics were assigned to the brand attitude: it relies on the temporary motivation of a buyer, whereby a change in this motivation can also change the buyer's attitude to the brand. Additionally, the attitude to a brand can be divided into *both a cognitive and affective* part, addressing the logical feelings as well as emotions. *The cognitive component may be compromised of a series of specific benefit beliefs. In and of themselves these are not the attitude, but rather the reasons for the brand attitude.* Lastly, it is of great importance for companies in every product segment to meet the purchasing motivation of the people best in order to succeed against the competitors on the market. (Percy & Rossiter 1992.)

Overall, it is important that a brand is associated with *strong, positive and unique* attributes effecting the brand attitude and the brand equity (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy & Pervan 2015, p. 106).

## 2.2 Marketing communications mix

While communicating a brand's value, companies must decide for their individual matching marketing communications mix which is divided into eight major modes: *advertising, sales promotion, public relations and publicity, events and experiences, direct marketing, interactive marketing, word-of-mouth marketing, and the sales force*. Businesses have to consider which media and communication channels suit them best, because each mode provides its own characteristics. (Kotler & Keller 2012, p. 512-513.)

Advertising can be used in many different forms and might require a large budget or only a small amount of money. It helps to repeatedly remind customers of the brand value, increase sales and win long-term customers. In addition, a wide geographical region can be addressed. In advertising, it is the seller who is able to control the attributes connected to a specific product or brand, while the buyer has the opportunity to compare promotion activities of competing brands. (Kotler & Keller 2012, p. 512-513.)

Sales promotion tools include coupons, contests or premiums and generate short-term attention for a product. With the help of rebates or other benefits, customers are offered a value that encourages them to purchase the product. This communication tool is well suited to make customers aware of an unknown brand or product and maybe to win new customers in the long run. (Kotler & Keller 2012, p. 513.)

With the help of publicity, a brand can clear up its image and appear in a more credible and respectable way. In addition, public relations can lead to the opportunity to use more individual media and thus address new target groups. Furthermore, reports about a brand or background information can be published which make a brand seem more tangible to people. (Kotler & Keller 2012, p. 513.)

Moreover, events and experiences can be used to bring a product closer to consumers. The customers themselves are often engaged and therefore more tempted to buy a product. (Kotler & Keller 2012, p. 514.)

Marketing communication is either direct or indirect and can appear in various forms. The main characteristics are that the message can be designed

individually, up-to-date and interactive, so that answers can be quickly and individually tailored to a person. (Kotler & Keller 2012, p. 514.)

Especially in today's world of connected customers, word-of-mouth communication is very important to consider for companies. Customers attach great importance to the opinions of others, which is why they are easily influenced in their purchasing decisions by the individual experience and opinions of other people. (Kotler & Keller 2012, p. 514.) Even if this area is not so easy for companies to influence, a constant exchange with customers can improve the purchasing experience and thus lead to more positive feedback (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan 2017, p. 26).

Finally, personal selling is a very effective method to bring customers to a purchase decision through face-to-face interaction on a personal basis. Through the interaction, the needs and individual reactions of the customers can be responded to well and quickly. (Kotler & Keller 2012, p. 514.)

### **2.3 Communication channels**

In order to create a strong brand equity, various media are used to communicate the values of a brand. On the one hand, traditional media like television, e-mail, radio, newspapers, magazines, telemarketing and door-to-door sales can be used for marketing communication. On the other hand, new electronic communication channels evolved during the last decades including internet channel's banner ads, blogs and advertising via social media. (Danaher & Rossiter 2011, p. 7, 10.) Social networks such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram or Twitter can be mentioned as the most recent marketing communication channels. Since there is an increasing range of communication channels, marketing managers must decide what purpose they want to serve with their promotion campaign and therefore select a suitable medium (Danaher & Rossiter 2011, p. 8). Thereby the age, gender or geographical background of the target group that should be addressed influence the choice of a communication channel as well as the amount of available financial resources or the needs of the communication receivers. Advertisements in newspapers and radio will nowadays especially reach the older population and will probably be more expensive than using social media for marketing purposes. In order to reach the younger part of consumers,

the social media are particularly suitable for communicating a brand. Additionally, Danaher and Rossiter point out in their work that *print media are, for example, often seen to be more information-rich than television, while television is more entertaining* (Danaher & Rossiter 2011, p. 8).

There are various studies existing stating that those new electronic media already lead and will continue to result in a decline in the use of traditional media as marketing communication tool, e.g. Danaher & Rossiter 2011. However, the trend in the modern age is that consumers demand a combination of the respective advantages of online and offline channels. This is the result of a change in the relation between buyer and supplier which shifts to the trend of the connected customers. According to Kotler's book about Marketing 4.0, the majority of the customers in the future will be *young, urban, middle-class* customers who live in a very time-efficient way, commanding a high mobility as well as connectivity. The term connected customers refers to the high degree of their interconnection and their possibility of exchanging information globally within a short timeframe. Companies must be aware of this change and adapt their customer relationships and marketing strategies to it in order to be successful in the market. The three biggest shifts amongst the interests of customers which have to be considered are the following:

On the one hand, a company must ensure the coexistence of both online and offline communication channels. It is important that a smooth switch between individual media is possible in order to achieve the best possible customer experience. Furthermore, connected customers attach great importance to the opinions and experiences of friends, families or ratings from digital forums. It is difficult for companies to control this communication about their products, which is why a high customer satisfaction rate as well as a lively exchange of information with them is of great importance to maintain a loyal customer base. This is the third important point, namely, to get people to talk and discuss about your brand. In doing so, a loyal customer group that had positive experiences with a brand can invalidate negative feedback, which is essential for a company's reputation nowadays. (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan 2017, pp. 19-28.)

Companies must keep all this in mind when choosing their communication channels in order to address the needs and expectations of their target customers as best as possible.

As this thesis deals with the brand communication of SMEs, it should be clarified that those companies usually only have a limited amount of financial resources. This implies that large communication channels such as television and international magazines are rather unaffordable for SMEs. Therefore, these smaller companies benefit from the high connectivity and digitality of today, since even with cheaper, non-traditional communication channels a wide range of people can be reached.

### **3 Content marketing**

In the present time, a large number of companies and products can be found on the markets which makes it difficult for companies and brands to stand out and arouse people's interest. Therefore, nowadays it is essential to constantly develop products and innovative marketing strategies in order to gain a competitive advantage. Modern consumers expect more and more from companies, for example high quality, fast delivery, good customer service and they want to pay less and less money for it. Due to these changes in the business world, new marketing tools are required to draw customers' attention to a certain brand and to convince them of its value. Content marketing is an example of such a new, successful concept offering huge possibilities and success in today's digital world of marketing. Especially in the field of digital marketing, high quality content marketing is a fundamental tool.

#### **3.1 Definition and Explanation**

*Content marketing is a marketing approach that involves creating, curating, distributing, and amplifying content that is interesting, relevant and useful to a clearly defined audience group in order to create conversations about the content.*

The focus here is on the fact that marketers not only promote a product, but that they also build a story around a brand and thus achieve a closer relationship between customers and the brand. (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan 2017, p. 121.)

The difficulty of this concept is that enough free content must be made available to arouse curiosity, yet not too much should be revealed. (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan 2017, p. 84.) Content marketing should be used by companies *to inform and educate audiences in order to develop a privileged relationship with them and to determine brand loyalty* (Baltes 2015, p. 117).

According to Kotler, content marketing can be divided into two steps: first, ideas for valuable content must be found and implemented. The content should address a topic that is both relevant to the customer and strongly linked to a particular brand. The second part includes the distribution of this content. When distributing the content, a suitable marketing channel has to be chosen. Using a company's own social media profiles and website is the simplest way to share the valuable content. Depending on the available budget, chargeable communication channels can also be used to reach as many people as possible. With this type of marketing, it is particularly important that people perceive the content as authentic so that it is shared and disseminated further by them. (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan 2017, pp. 84,85.)

The rapid growth of social media in recent years has led to the fact that traditional marketing channels are hardly noticed by customers anymore. Instead, they are in the position to choose when and where they want to look at which content. That is why it is important for marketers to consider the characteristics of social media marketing. For example, the shared content must catch people's attention in the first five seconds of an online advertisement in order to be viewed further. Additionally, effective two-way communication with customers is possible on the internet which should be used to respond and react to opinions and comments of them. In general, companies should try to support consumers with relevant content that they can achieve personal goals and maybe become new customers. It might happen that in this context the promotion of the own brand and its values will not be directly contributed. (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan 2017, pp. 122-124.) The focus is on winning the confidence and admiration of potential new customers and convincing them of your own brand or company with the help of free interesting information and to create long-lasting relationships (Baltes 2015, p. 112).

### 3.2 The five A's – customer path in a connected world

When evaluating content marketing activities, companies need to analyze the customer path whereby specific tools and metrics can help. There are several models describing the customer path but since this path has changed over time due to higher connectivity, the related models must also be adapted. That is why Kotler mentions the newest modification of AIDA to the four A's and from the four A's to the five A's. (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan 2017, p. 60.) The five A's model is about the *categories of metrics that measure whether the content is visible (aware), relatable (appeal), searchable (ask), actionable (act), and shareable (advocate)* (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan 2017, p. 133).

- 1) **Aware:** First, customers need to know that a brand or product exists. This can be achieved e.g. through own previous experiences, *word of mouth by others* or advertising. In this context, content marketing activities can help to draw attention to a brand or a product and to make it visible for the audiences.
- 2) **Appeal:** In this phase it is important to build a brand appeal and to attract the target group in order to stand out from several brands. In today's digital world, the social environment of people plays an important role, influencing their buying decisions and attitudes towards a brand. Again, content marketing can help in this respect, as it assists in establishing a connection between the audience and a brand.
- 3) **Ask:** When people are attracted to a brand, they start doing research about it, e.g. through the internet, social media or by asking friends. At this stage, many questions are asked, and information is sought on different channels, which is why it is necessary for companies to be present in several communication channels. With regard to content marketing, it can be used to stimulate people's curiosity about a brand and make them ask questions, communicate and search for information about the brand.
- 4) **Act:** When the questions about a brand have been clarified, the purchase of a product takes place. This stage includes not only the purchase, but also the service afterwards in case of problems.

5) Advocate: When consumers are satisfied with the purchased product and brand, they develop a loyalty to it. In this case, they become brand proponents and buy more products of the brand, make recommendations and convince other people of the brand. This means that positive advertising is made for a company without it being actively involved. That is why this is a very important stage which requires the previous consumer path to run smoothly.

(Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan 2017, pp. 62-64.)

An overview about mapping the customer path with the help of the 5 A's can be found in the following Table 2.

	<b>Customer behavior</b>	<b>Possible customer touchpoints</b>	<b>Key customer impression</b>
<b>Aware</b>	<i>Customers are passively exposed to a long list of brands from past experience, marketing communications, and/or advocacy of others.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Learn about a brand from others</i></li> <li>• <i>Inadvertently exposed to brand advertising</i></li> <li>• <i>Recall past experience</i></li> </ul>	<i>I know</i>
<b>Appeal</b>	<i>Customers process the messages they are exposed to – creating short-term memory or amplifying long-term memory – and become attracted only to a</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Become attracted to brands</i></li> <li>• <i>Create a consideration set of brands</i></li> </ul>	<i>I like</i>

	<i>short list of brands.</i>		
<b>Ask</b>	<i>Prompted by their curiosity, customer actively research for more information from friends and family, from the media, and/or directly from brands.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Call friend for advice</i></li> <li>• <i>Search for product review online</i></li> <li>• <i>Contact call center</i></li> <li>• <i>Compare prices</i></li> <li>• <i>Try out product at stores</i></li> </ul>	<i>I'm convinced</i>
<b>Act</b>	<i>Reinforced by more information, customers decide to buy a particular brand and interact deeper through purchase, usage, and/or service processes.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Buy in-store or online</i></li> <li>• <i>Use the product for the first time</i></li> <li>• <i>Complain about problem</i></li> <li>• <i>Get service</i></li> </ul>	<i>I'm buying</i>
<b>Advocate</b>	<i>Over time, customers may develop a sense of strong loyalty to the brand, which is reflected in retention, repurchase, and ultimately</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Keep using the brand</i></li> <li>• <i>Repurchase the brand</i></li> <li>• <i>Recommend the brand to others</i></li> </ul>	<i>I recommend</i>

	<i>advocacy to others.</i>		
--	----------------------------	--	--

Table 2. *Mapping the customer path throughout five A's.* (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan 2017, p. 64)

### 3.3 Step-by-step content marketing

When developing a content marketing campaign, it is especially important to have the right pre and post processing. To ensure no step is forgotten, marketers should stick to the following stages:

- 1) Goal setting: First, the objectives of a marketing campaign must be clearly defined. These goals should be aligned with the company's overall strategy and philosophy. Marketers must determine what they want to achieve with content marketing and whether the goals they set belong more to the category of brand building or to sales growth. The content of the marketing campaign must then be adapted to the respective category in order to be successful in the end.
- 2) Audience mapping: In this step, a suitable and precisely specified audience for the marketing campaign must be identified. This helps to tailor the valuable content more closely to the target group and to be able to respond to their needs and wishes in more detail.
- 3) Content ideation and planning: Then the marketers must think about the content of their campaign and find a suitable theme, format and story for it. Here it is important to pick up a theme that is up to date and relevant to the target audience, while addressing their fears, feelings and desires. These must then be linked to the advertised brand or product by the content in order to achieve a successful content marketing campaign.
- 4) Content creation: This step is particularly important because the whole campaign is unsuccessful without creating effective, relevant and high-quality content. Since this step is very time consuming and money intensive, the company must decide whether the valuable content for the campaign will be produced by people inside the company or from outside, e.g. journalists or writers. Additionally, it should be kept in mind that new content needs to be

found all the time, so content creation is a long-term task. Moreover, a content production plan might be prepared in this stage.

- 5) Content distribution: The second main aspect of content marketing is the question of the appropriate distribution channel for the generated content. In this context, it is important to keep the target group in mind to reach them effectively with the campaign. A large number of different distribution channels is existing, including digital as well as non-digital ones. The main distinction of media channels is between *owned, paid and earned media*. The first type includes all channels that are under the full control and owned by the company itself. Furthermore, a company can pay for the right to use a medium for the distribution of content. The third category of channels deals with the distribution of the content by satisfied and convinced customers who share and spread it via *word of mouth or advocacy*.
- 6) Content amplification: This stage is about how the content is handled and how it is used to stimulate communication about the brand or product. For example, it is recommended to identify influencers within the defined audience group and get them to spread the content in order to reach as many people as possible. It can help to offer the influencers something in return, such as increasing their reach. Marketers should constantly monitor and track communication about their brand or product in order to provide new input or impulse at the appropriate point in time.
- 7) Content marketing evaluation: After the previous points, it is important to assess the process to show whether the objectives were achieved and how successful and efficient the marketing campaign was. Both strategic and tactical performance measurements, including key content marketing metrics, are considered.
- 8) Content marketing improvement: Ultimately, the question arises how existing content marketing could be further improved. By tracking and observing performances, new opportunities can easily be identified and exploited. However, marketers must regularly consider whether a change of content marketing strategy is necessary and simply test new themes, formats and media channels to be constantly successful.

(Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan 2017, p. 124-134.)

Figure 4 illustrates the order of the steps to use content marketing the correct way.

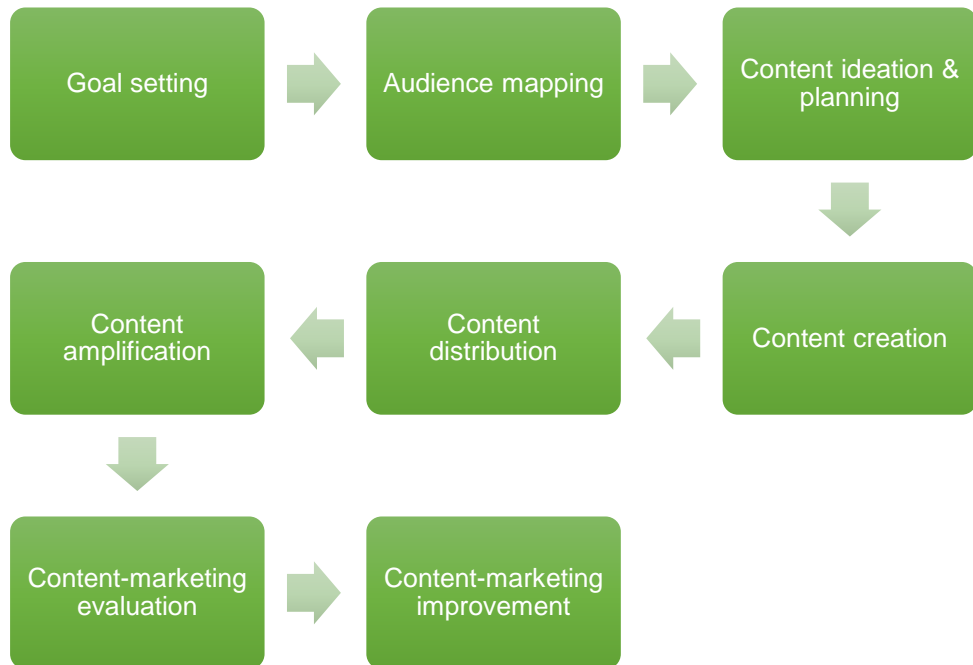


Figure 4. *Step-by-step content marketing*. (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan 2017, p. 125)

Overall, it should be known that each stage has to be completely worked through before the next step can be taken. Every single step is important for a successful campaign and the focus should not only be on content production and distribution, but also on pre- and post-processing. (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan 2017, p. 125, 134.)

### 3.4 Opportunities for SMEs

Since SMEs often have a limited budget for advertising, the shift towards using social media advertising to promote brands has opened new opportunities for them. A company's success is no longer determined by its size, budget or origin as geographical and demographic boundaries lose importance. Through social media it is now also possible for smaller companies to be perceived and known globally. Globalization and digitalization also facilitate collaboration between several international companies. All in all, *smaller, younger and locally based companies will have the chance to compete against bigger, older, and global*

*companies* in today's world. Nevertheless, it should be noted that these developments are also leading to a steady increase in the number of competitors on the market, which creates a great pressure of competition. This is also because companies are increasingly working across industries meaning that competition from other industries might also emerge. That is why it is especially important for SMEs to stand out from the crowd and content marketing is a well-suited instrument which can be used for the brand communication of SMEs in order to achieve worldwide attention and awareness. (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan 2017, p. 10, 11.)

## **4 Sustainability in the fashion industry**

Sustainable fashion can be classified in the field of slow fashion which stands for high quality products, local production sites and compliance with ethical values. Furthermore, fewer products are produced in one year than in the fast fashion industry. (Henninger, Alevizou & Oates 2016, p. 402.) The term "sustainable" fashion can also be replaced by "eco-friendly", "*green*", "*ethical*", "*ecological*" or "*organic*" as all words have a similar meaning. Brands that are committed to sustainability try to minimize their ecological footprint and thus act in a responsible way and with consideration of the environment. There are many ways to make a company's professional activities more sustainable, such as switching to renewable resources, making the value chain more sustainable and respecting workers' human rights. (Dickenbrok & Martinez 2018, p. 130.)

### **4.1 Development of the fashion industry**

Since this thesis refers to the clothing industry in Germany, it should be examined to what extent this sector has changed in recent years. First, there is a very strong price competition on the market, which means that production costs must be minimized in order to keep the final price as low as possible. Therefore, most production sites are outsourced to low-wage countries, as wages, laws, etc. are much lower there than in Germany. Due to the high supply, consumer demand is also declining. (Adler 2004, p. 300, 301.) Since consumers' awareness of the environment and their ecological footprint has increased significantly, especially

in this modern age, interest in sustainability is growing in all industrial sectors. That is why more and more clothing companies are addressing the issue of sustainable fashion to demonstrate the company's dedication for its social responsibility. As a result, new consumer groups are attracted, a market advantage is created, and the brand image can be greatly improved.

#### **4.2 Environmental, social and economic sustainability**

*From the cultivation of raw materials to processing, refining, packaging, use and recycling, the environmental relevance lies not only in the emissions caused by transport but also in the high use of chemicals, energy and water and in emissions from soil pollution, wastewater and exhaust air (Piegsa 2010, p. 3).* In this era of global warming, the business activities of companies acting in the apparel industry are particularly harmful to the environment and companies should be aware of their social responsibility. It is therefore important that the number of sustainable apparels steadily increases in order to reduce their environmental footprint and to spare our environment. That is why companies should rethink and change their business systems (De Brito, Carbone & Blanquart 2010, p. 24). As the apparel industry has a long and complicated value chain, every single step should be evaluated and optimized to achieve a sustainable value chain and thus sustainable products in the end. All in all, companies should ensure that the environmental, social and economic aspects of their activities are of a sustainable nature. Elkington has developed the Triple Bottom Line in this context, including the following three dimensions:

Environmental benefits a company should contribute to are for example the reduction of its ecological footprint, reduction of raw material usage and using renewable resources, development of recycling programs and usage of sustainable packaging materials.

Social sustainability includes a fair treatment of employees, a good social structure in which the wishes of each stakeholder group are respected and the general support of communities.

Economic aspects include increased profit, as sustainable activities encourage customers to pay more. In addition, the advantage over competitors who do not carry out sustainable activities can be seen as a benefit.

(Elkington 1997.)

### **4.3 The attitude of German consumers towards sustainable fashion**

In order to assess the overall importance of sustainability in the German apparel industry, it is necessary to analyze trends in the German apparel market and changes in the consumer behavior.

First, the garment industry is the *consumer goods segment with the highest sales in the non-food sector* in the German economy. According to data from the German Federal Statistical Office, German private households spent around 64.9 billion Euros on clothing in 2018. (Statistisches Bundesamt 2019.)

In 2016, a study by Dr. Grieger & Cie investigated the consumer behavior of Germans with regard to sustainable clothing. For this purpose, 1,019 consumers were interviewed and most of them attached importance to the good quality and longevity of clothing. Already in 2016, 75% of the respondents expressed an interest in sustainably produced clothing. Nevertheless, many sustainable fashion labels are still relatively unknown, and consumers are more likely to buy sustainable collections from larger fashion chains. However, this study also found that consumers want to be sure that the product they buy is truly sustainable, above all, through seals of quality. This shows once again that transparency and trust are of great importance in the field of sustainable fashion. (Splendid Research GmbH 2016.)

Furthermore, a survey was conducted in 2017 asking whether Germans are willing to pay a higher price for sustainable clothing (Figure 5). It was found that overall, women are more willing to pay a higher price than men. Nevertheless, almost half of the respondents were willing to spend more money on fair fashion compared to low-cost clothing. (TextilWirtschaft 2017.)

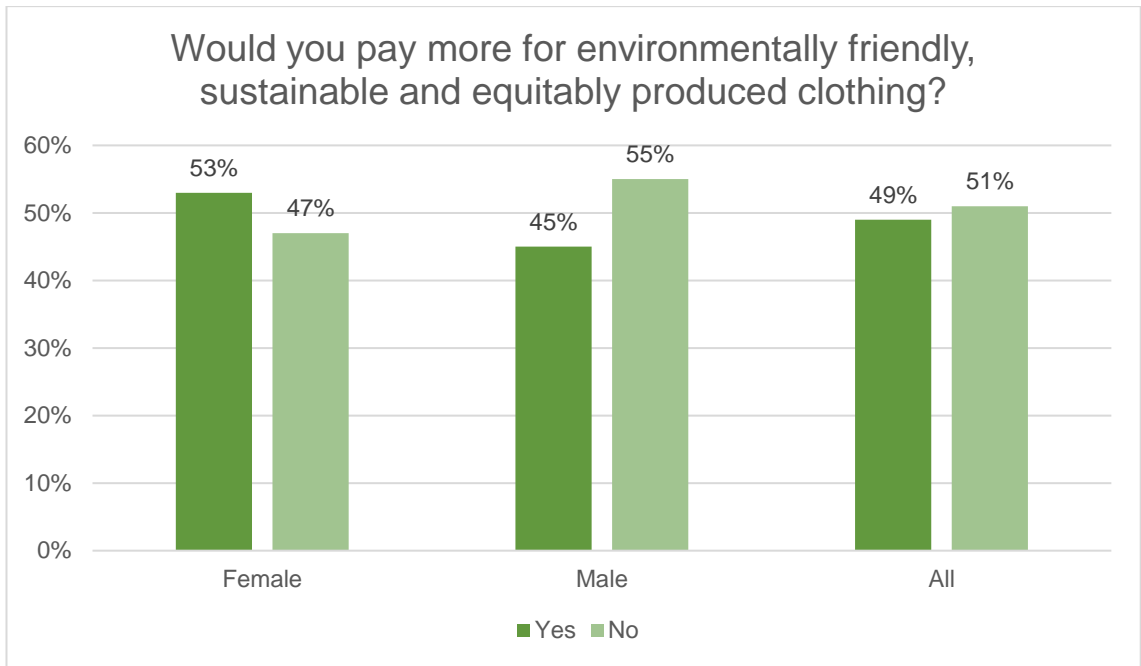


Figure 5. Survey on spending willingness for sustainable clothing in Germany 2017. (TextilWirtschaft 2017)

Finally, it can also be observed that sales of fair textiles in Germany have risen in recent years which testifies to the fact that society is rethinking and that consumers are becoming increasingly aware of sustainability (Figure 6). In this area, it should be noted that only 16.3 million euros were generated in sales in 2011. In 2017, the turnover was already at 129.13 million euros and in 2018 it increased again by 13% compared to the previous year. (TransFair 2019.)



Figure 6. Turnover with Fairtrade textiles in Germany in the years 2011 to 2018 (in million Euros). (TransFair2019)

## **5 Communicating sustainability in the fashion industry**

When having a closer look at sustainability in the fashion industry, it should also be considered how this value could be communicated to the end consumers. Communication is a key factor to make consumers aware of a company's sustainable fashion and to encourage them to buy it. Furthermore, it is crucial to build a relationship and trust between customers and salespeople. That is why companies need to think about the best way to reach their customers and how to give them a good feeling about a brand or a product.

### **5.1 Communication of sustainable values**

Many accidents and documentations about grievances in textile factories in third world countries are making consumers more and more critical about cheap clothing. As awareness for environmental conservation and sustainable products grows in general, fashion companies need to consider a strategy to compete with companies that sell environmentally friendly clothing. This offers a good opportunity for SMEs that can gain an advantage over the big fashion chains through local, organic fashion. Finally, the desire of consumers for ecological clothing increases the pressure for transparency on the part of individual companies. Not only does this concern the origin of the materials used for a product, but also the wages and working conditions of employees during production. The shortest possible transport distances also contribute to the sustainability of clothing. In this context, it is important to address the large number of quality labels. These play an important role in the communication between companies and customers, as they are an important reference point for customers to find out whether the products are fair or not. However, consumers are also responsible for dealing with the authenticity and trustworthiness of the seals on their own. (Zukunftsinstitut GmbH 2013.)

The book "The New Brand Spirit" by Conrad and Thomson deals with the question how sustainability can be communicated best in order to build brands,

reputations and profits. The field of CSR and sustainability in companies evolved from an internal communication in companies to a public discussion about the performance of a company throughout the last years. Especially through social media, companies themselves have less control over their public communication, today. It is also made clear that CSR and sustainability communication cause a lot of work within companies, as customers are becoming increasingly critical in this area.

According to the experts interviewed for the book, customers and consumers are expecting honesty, accuracy, transparency, integration and engagement from companies' sustainability communication. In more detail, companies should be very accurate and transparent in documenting and they should not avoid talking about difficulties. It is very important to report on a regular basis and to communicate with customers to make them feel integrated. Moreover, the CSR and sustainability issue itself should be more integrated into the messaging of the company. Additionally, companies should create engaging, relevant and interesting CSR and sustainability communication in order to arouse the interest of customers. As customers are the first and foremost recipients of CSR and sustainability-related communication, companies should try to give them short and valuable information rather than overwhelming them with sustainability spam. Furthermore, it is important that companies involve consumers in their decision-making and that there is mutual communication. If companies can identify what is important to customers in terms of sustainability, they can respond to it and go deeper into these specific issues. It is also important to avoid misunderstandings in the communication with consumers. As in Kotler's theory of Marketing 4.0, it is pointed out in this book, that companies need to take the sensitivities and emotions of consumers into account in order to meet their expectations and needs. (Conrad & Thomson 2013, pp. 71-75.)

In this context of sustainability-related communication, content marketing can also lead to success as it is important to convince customers with relevant content. However, it can also be difficult to communicate sustainable values because it is a very complex issue. Therefore, companies should consider a strategy to give each customer the information about the products he needs without overwhelming him. (Conrad & Thomson 2013, p. 76.)

According to experts with practical experience in this field, there are some key success factors for communicating sustainable values:

First of all, companies should ensure that their business activities and products are environmentally friendly before they advertise sustainable products. It is therefore important to actually act and not just communicate values that cannot ultimately be adhered to.

Furthermore, the sustainable value of a product should be seen as an additional factor and quality should not suffer from the ecological aspect in order to remain competitive on the market.

It is emphasized again that honesty and transparency are of particular importance. In order to radiate a trustworthy brand image, all aspects should be communicated honestly and not just the best ones chosen to publish. In other words, it is better to set yourself smaller, achievable goals than large ones that cannot be realized.

In addition, it is important to communicate with the target group in an appropriate language so that they feel understood and their needs can be met.

(Conrad & Thomson 2013, p. 85, 86.)

## **5.2 Opportunities for SMEs to communicate sustainable values**

More and more fashion companies are realizing the change towards environmentally friendly fashion and are joining up with sustainable collections. However, large fashion chains are often faced with the question of how sustainable their products actually are, as there are usually hardly any differences in price compared to conventional garments and no conversion of all internal processes could have taken place in this short timeframe.

While larger companies sometimes struggle to implement sustainable values in their companies, SMEs have a great advantage. Smaller companies can change their processes faster and with digitalization and globalization it is much easier to share their products with the world. Shops that buy their products from certain sustainable brands can also stand out from the crowd with these unique products and gain an advantage over large fashion chains. Furthermore, smaller

companies are more likely to make a trustworthy and transparent impression on consumers than giant corporations which helps when communicating eco-friendly fashion. As already mentioned, transparency in the field of environmentally friendly fashion is an important point for customers to make a purchase decision. Transparency can then create trust in a company which is fundamental for a long-term relationship between customers and an organization. Additionally, the trend to the purchase of local products forms an opportunity for the SMEs. A further benefit of small regional boutiques is the personal atmosphere and with good service, high quality and convincing designs loyal customers can be won in the long term.

(Dickenbrok & Martinez 2018, p. 132, 137.)

## **6 Research on the clothing industry in Saarbrücken**

The empirical part of this study deals with the personal opinions and experiences of owners of small fashion shops in Saarbrücken. In order to get an impression of how sustainability can be used in brand communication, the selected case companies present their approach in marketing environmentally friendly products. Thereby, communication strategies, channels, consumer behavior and suggestions for the future of the sustainable fashion industry are discussed.

### **6.1 Research design and data collection**

As already mentioned in chapter 1.6, qualitative research was chosen for the empirical study of this paper. The opinion and personal experiences of owners of fashion stores in Saarbrücken offering sustainable fashion helped to answer the research questions of this work and to provide an insight into the industry. The author's goal was to conduct face-to-face interviews in approximately five fashion shops in this area. Possible case companies that are committed to sustainability and already use this value throughout their marketing strategy and marketing campaigns were chosen.

The interviewed entrepreneurs were selected by searching the internet for clothing stores that offer sustainable fashion in the area of Saarbrücken (Fairtrade Initiative Saarbrücken 2019). This resulted in a list of six companies, one of which

was merely an online shop offering mainly bath products and was therefore excluded from the selection. Moreover, one of the entrepreneurs did not reply to the thesis author's e-mail. The other four stores offer sustainable clothing in different variations and are all located in Saarbrücken, which means they fit the previously defined limitations for the research.

The four shops which were contacted and have agreed to be interviewed are: Grünstreifen, Zweigesicht, Marienkäfer Naturtextilien and Loup Store.

Following, a questionnaire was designed which covers the different research questions and was slightly modified individually for the shops concerning their individual apparel segment. Questions to the operators of sustainable fashion stores include their connection to sustainable fashion, their individual perception of the consumers' attitude towards sustainability, observations of trends or changes in the buying behavior of their customers and how the company shows its commitment towards environmental-friendly business activities in its marketing.

The selected shops were contacted via e-mail and agreed to answer the questionnaire. Whereby the owners of Zweigesicht and Grünstreifen were willing to participate in a face-to-face interview meaning that the author of this thesis visited the two shops and talked to the owners in person. Additionally, information about Loup Store and Marienkäfer Naturtextilien were collected via mail due to lack of time of the entrepreneurs. In this case, the questionnaire was sent to them and they answered the questions on their own. Nevertheless, they had the possibility to contact the thesis' author in case there was any confusion about a question.

This means that this empirical research includes exclusively primary data as it was collected directly from the entrepreneurs.

The first mail to the entrepreneurs was sent in the end of August and the data was collected completely until the end of September 2019.

## **6.2 Case companies**

The owners of five smaller clothing stores were selected, which fit to all limitations given for the work. The companies are briefly presented below to learn more about their background and to understand the given perceptions better.

### **6.2.1 Grünstreifen**

Grünstreifen is a small fashion shop outside the city center of Saarbrücken. The owner is Cornelia Gränz and her husband Hans Peter Schwarz is helping her with the marketing part. The couple previously ran an ecological cafe with a small wine shop where the ecological aspect also was a priority. In 2016, they took over the clothing store 'Grünstreifen'. The two entrepreneurs adhered to the sustainable concept of the previous owners but changed the assortment, the labels and the location of the shop. Nowadays, the small shop offers both men's and women's clothing as well as fair-manufactured accessories. The products are purchased exclusively from companies that produce under fair conditions. Thereby, Cornelia Gränz attaches importance to fair seals of clothing, e.g. from Fair Trade, the Fair Wear Foundation or IVN Best Naturtextil. In general, she prefers to support small labels which are hardly to be found in other shops and are following a sustainable concept. While Grünstreifen offers clothing by some German brands, customers usually have to pay a higher price for these products. This is due to the high production costs caused by the minimum wage which is comparatively high in Germany. Nevertheless, there are many products in the assortment for which the price is not much higher than it would be for conventional products. Cornelia Gränz wants to show that sustainable clothing does not always have to cost twice as much as traditional clothing.

### **6.2.2 Zweigesicht**

The young entrepreneur Jessica Mohr opened her small boutique in the center of Saarbrücken in 2011. Customers find a large selection of exclusively environmentally friendly women's clothing in the shop. Jessica Mohr attaches great importance to offering colorful and patterned clothing in her assortment to show that sustainable clothing does not necessarily has to be boring. When selecting the brands for the shop, it is taken care to ensure that product prices

are in the mid-price segment and that different natural and advanced fabrics are used to manufacture the clothing.

### **6.2.3 Marienkäfer Naturtextilien**

Marienkäfer Naturtextilien owned by Claudia Pawlik is a store specialized in children's clothing. She opened her shop in 2002 and already moved twice in order to find a bigger location. Brands for this shop are selected with respect to environmentally friendly production and origin of the resources. Claudia Pawlik prefers offering products and brands from Germany.

### **6.2.4 Loup Store**

90% of the clothing offered in the Loup Design store in the city center of Saarbrücken is fair and sustainable. Ludwig Schöpf is the owner of the shop and he sells mainly European, fair and organic brands. Moreover, the business concept includes good music and a Scandinavian-style interior to create a friendly atmosphere for the customers. This successful shop opened in 2011 and offers a large selection of men's and women's clothing, shoes, accessories such as bags, watches and mobile phone covers as well as various home accessories in the Scandinavian style. Currently the Loup Store team is in the process of creating a private label which will include several organic items like shirts and caps.

## **6.3 Sustainability and its communication in SMEs of the fashion industry in Saarbrücken**

Since all the selected shops for the interviews are already offering environmental-friendly fashion, sustainability is a very important value for all their business philosophies. While sustainability is a very broad term, which can be understood and interpreted in different ways, the interviewed entrepreneurs associate similar terms with this value in the fashion industry: low consumption of resources, fair production process, fair working conditions, recycling, positive ecological balance, conscious shopping and avoidance of fast fashion.

However, the entrepreneurs have different approaches while selecting brands to be sold in their fashion stores. In the case of Grünstreifen, great importance is attached to ecological and fair seals and to supporting small brands. Large

brands, which advertise sustainable products and production, but are sold by large conventional fashion chains while generating enormous sales, do not fit the concept of the owners. Jessica Mohr from Zweigesicht also seeks to support smaller sustainable brands. She makes sure to only cooperate with brands that offer exclusively sustainable products and do not additionally manufacture conventional clothing, as in her opinion this does not fit together ethically. In all four clothing stores, great importance is attached to the selection of trustworthy and ecological brands for the collection, whereby recognized certifications and product seals are decisive. In addition, the companies like to support small companies that preferably produce in Germany or Europe.

The entrepreneurs were all already interested in sustainable ways of living before opening their businesses. In the interviews, they stated that they only want to sell products of which they are 100% convinced and which they can recommend to their customers without hesitation. This conviction of the shopkeepers of their own assortment is also a key aspect in communicating the sustainable values of the products to the customers. In the environmentally friendly shops in Saarbrücken, these values are conveyed above all through communication in the shop and during the consultation. Customers often have questions about the environmentally friendly products and the competence and conviction of the entrepreneurs automatically creates authenticity. The owner of Loup Design pointed out: "The consumers recognize whether you represent the opinion in an honest way. Trust is the key." Through the personal contact in the shop, a trusting atmosphere is quickly created and the mutual interest in sustainable values often connects salespeople and customers at the first attempt.

#### **6.4 Marketing activities in SMEs of the fashion industry in Saarbrücken**

First, all of the interviewees pointed out the overall importance of word-of-mouth recommendation in the area of Saarland and Saarbrücken. In this small region, many recommendations and suggestions for good shops are communicated among friends, family and acquaintances. This underlines the significance of good customer service, competent advice and know-how in the store. Customers who visited a shop and are convinced and satisfied with the shopping experience might recommend it and become loyal long-term customers.

Moreover, Grünstreifen and Marienkäfer Naturtextilien have their own webpage where consumers can find the offered brands, products, the business philosophy, address and opening hours. Zweigesicht and Loup Store do not own a traditional webpage but a public Facebook profile where general information about the shops can be found.

Additionally, in Zweigesicht, Loup Store and Marienkäfer Naturtextilien social media plays an important role in terms of marketing activities.

Jessica Mohr is using Facebook as well as Instagram to stay in contact with her customers and to keep them up to date about new collections, products, brands or news related to her shop. Furthermore, she likes to post private photos of her customers wearing clothes bought at Zweigesicht. In her opinion, this is the “most authentic way” of marketing, because real and happy customers attract new customers more than hired models. Sometimes, content is posted that is not related to the fashion store, for example photos of decoration ideas or a photo of a regional ice cream manufacturer. Jessica Mohr uses social media platforms to lure customers with interesting content which means that content marketing is a matching marketing tool for her. One successful example of her posts is that she shares on social media when new products have arrived, but only shows part of the product on a photo. That is why customers who like the color or the pattern of the clothing must visit her store in order to see the whole product and decide whether they want to buy it or not.

For the marketing of the Loup Store, Facebook is frequently used to provide customers and interested people with valuable information. New products, information and photos of their own collection, events and general information about the shop, such as minimizing the number of brands offered, are shared on the Facebook page of Loup Store. As Ludwig Schöpf already uses content marketing for his shop, he pointed out in the interview that it is an effective marketing tool but in the area of Saarbrücken it is more important for small shops to appear trustworthy, authentic and sympathetic in order to be successful in the long run. He will continue to use content marketing in the future on social media platforms.

Marienkäfer Naturtextilien can also be found on Facebook and on Instagram. Claudia Pawlik uses mostly online channels to promote her business. Nevertheless, she never used content marketing so far and is not willing to use it in the near future. The owners of Grünstreifen hardly use any social media platform for marketing activities, they only shared a few posts on Facebook. But they want to use this channel more frequently in the future.

All four entrepreneurs are using online as well as offline channels for their marketing communication. For offline communication the owners of the shops use, for example, sending e-mails and newsletters to loyal customers, distributing flyers and sometimes newspapers are writing reports about environmental-friendly shops in the region. But sustainability is playing a role in this context as well as Ludwig Schöpf pointed out: "In terms of printed material our motto is 'less is more'."

### **6.5 Entrepreneur's opinion on consumer behavior in the field of sustainable fashion in Saarbrücken**

When asking the shop owners whether they think that the general interest of consumers in the concept of sustainable fashion has increased in recent years or not, they came to different resumes.

Cornelia Gränz from Grünstreifen did only perceive a slightly increased interest in her shop which might be due to the location being a little outside the city center. The other three entrepreneurs recognized an increasing interest in the concept of sustainable fashion and a higher demand as well. While the owner of Loup Design fears that this could only be a current trend, Jessica Mohr and Claudia Pawlik are quite sure that there is serious interest behind the upswing. The customers of Zweigesicht are joined by more and more younger people, which the business owner attributes to the general change in values of our society today.

Furthermore, entrepreneurs have noticed that the interest in offered materials, the origin of products and production processes is increasing. Due to digitalization and the resulting networking, customers are better informed than in the past and ask for more detailed information. However, it should also be made clear that the

main customer group of the companies surveyed is not only interested in fair clothing, but in a sustainable and conscious lifestyle in general. Nevertheless, Jessica Mohr recognized that also students and people with only a low budget are willing to invest at least occasionally in a more expensive but environmental-friendly garment. In general, women are more likely to buy sustainable fashion in the area of Saarbrücken than men. The main customer group in Zweigesicht, Grünstreifen and Marienkäfer Naturtextilien can be classified as women between 30 and 60 years old. The products of Marienkäfer Naturtextilien are mainly bought by mothers and grandmothers which are searching for high quality clothes for their children and grandchildren.

Asking the entrepreneurs about the most frequently asked questions by customers, they said for example: What are the latest products?, Where are the products from?, What materials is this product made of?, Are all of your products fair trade?. The most frequently asked questions in the shop of Claudia Pawlik is dealing with the right size for a certain age of the children as she is the only interviewee selling children clothing. In general, the customers seem to attach particular importance to the place of production of the garments, whereby an attractive design plays also an important role in their purchase decision.

In terms of the essential aspects that customers might expect from fair clothing stores compared to conventional stores, the interviewed entrepreneurs are in agreement. The customers seem to expect good quality and longer durability above all, which could be mainly due to the higher price of fair clothing. In addition, many consumers automatically associate environmentally friendly fashion with individual fashion and unique items. In the area of children's fashion, the absence of harmful substances and chemicals also play a major role for parents and grandparents.

When comparing Saarbrücken and the Saarland in general with other regions in Germany regarding sustainable fashion, the managing directors have different opinions. Cornelia Gränz and her husband, from the store Grünstreifen, suspect hardly any differences between the supply of environmentally friendly fashion compared with other German cities. They are much more likely to suggest that there are differences between city and countryside, as there are hardly any

clothing stores in the rural areas and these few then tend to offer conventional clothing. The owner of Zweigesicht, on the other hand, has the impression that the concept of sustainable fashion is particularly widespread in Saarbrücken and more represented there than in other larger German cities. Claudia Pawlik, however, has the impression that the demand for sustainable children's fashion is higher in other federal states in Germany. She mentions the example of cotton diapers which are subsidized by the government in some federal states, whereas this is not the case in Saarland. The owner of Loup Store did not recognize any major differences between Saarbrücken and other German cities so far.

Finally, Jessica Mohr had a comment about the customer groups in Saarbrücken: she mentioned that there is a gap between the consumers who are trying to buy more consciously and who care about sustainability in their whole lifestyle and those who are not worried about the environment and want to buy as cheap as possible. She also suspects that in the future, this gap could get bigger and that there will be a group of customers in the apparel industry that will mainly shop at smaller, regional boutiques, while a second group will be customers of the large, international fashion chains.

## **6.6 Suggestions of entrepreneurs in Saarbrücken for the future development of the fashion industry**

In view of the possible future development of the sustainable fashion industry in Saarbrücken, the owners of Grünstreifen can well imagine that the growing lack of resources and the change in values of society could continue to push politics to act in the field of environmental protection. Thus, the couple expects a further increase in demand for fair clothing in Germany and Saarland. However, they say that people are only gradually rethinking, since many are not interested in environmental protection and climate change or do not see themselves in the position of having to act themselves. In addition, the owners of Grünstreifen suspect that many people have a misconception about fair clothing and associate it directly with very expensive and unattractive designs. In general, however, they also say that it is difficult for fair entrepreneurs to make profit because price margins are very low. Fair products are more expensive than conventional clothing in production and therefore also when purchasing for retail. It is therefore

hardly possible for smaller, environmentally friendly companies to offer discounts or promotions, and there are far fewer collections per year than with large, well-known brands. Customers have to be prepared for this in order to protect the environment.

Jessica Mohr, on the other hand, points out with regard to the future that although society is changing its values, at the same time more and more large companies are "jumping on the bandwagon of sustainable fashion". This makes it difficult for consumers to see which products have been produced in a truly environmentally friendly way and which products are only being marketed in this way. She therefore sees the duty of the German government to create more transparency and clarity in the market by means of laws on more precise labelling of fair garments.

Claudia Pawlik suspects that the number of fair labels dealing with fashion for children and younger people in general will increase in the future. However, she also sees a problem in the higher price segment of eco-friendly clothing compared to the conventional one. She sees that not all people have the budget or even the insight to pay a higher price when there are products for a significantly cheaper price on the market.

Ludwig Schöpf is also very positive about the future and expects a growth of the organic fashion industry. He also suspects that the recognizability of fair clothing will actually be improved and that the importance of certificates and seals will increase. In general, the owner of the Loup Store believes that people's attitudes need to change, so that the sustainable clothing sector can continue to grow in the future.

## **6.7 Research results**

As the previous paragraphs show, the four respondents have different opinions on some of the covered areas while they share the same view on other points. In general, it should be noted that these are only subjective statements of individual entrepreneurs and that the information collected can only be partially generalized for the region of the Saarland or whole Germany. Nevertheless, the main ideas deducted from the interviews are illustrated in the following table in order to get a

better overview of the opinions, insights and expectations of the four entrepreneurs (Table 3).

Research area	Major arguments
Sustainability and its communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Association with sustainability in general: low consumption of resources, fair production process, fair working conditions, recycling, positive ecological balance, conscious shopping and avoidance of fast fashion</li> <li>• Supporting small, German brands</li> <li>• Importance of ecological and fair seals</li> <li>• Competence and conviction of the entrepreneurs automatically creates authenticity</li> <li>• Trusting atmosphere because of personal contact and advice</li> <li>• Mutual interest in sustainable values and environmental-friendly lifestyle connect salespeople and customers at the first attempt</li> </ul>
Marketing activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overall importance of word-of-mouth recommendation</li> <li>• Importance of good customer service, competent advice and know-how in the store</li> <li>• Own webpage, Facebook, Instagram, e-mail as online channels</li> <li>• Newspaper articles and flyers as offline channels</li> <li>• Social media is widely used to keep customers up to date about new collections, products, brands or news relating to the shops</li> <li>• Content marketing as effective tool in marketing of SMEs but not most important to convince customers to buy</li> </ul>
Opinion on consumer behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing interest in fair fashion but it might be only a trend</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing interest in offered materials, the origin of products and production processes</li> <li>• Change in values of our society</li> <li>• More and more students and people with only a low budget are willing to invest in environmental-friendly garment</li> <li>• Main customer group in the stores: women between 30 and 60 years old</li> <li>• Importance of fair production process and attractive design for the purchasing decision</li> <li>• Expectations from fair fashion: good quality, long durability, individual fashion, unique items and the absence of chemicals</li> </ul>
Suggestions for the future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Government in charge for more laws concerning transparency</li> <li>• Growing interest in the sector of fair fashion and change in values of society</li> <li>• Growing competition from fair collections of large stores</li> <li>• More transparency needed to avoid dissemblers in the sustainable fashion industry</li> <li>• Misconception of the fair fashion industry need to be corrected by entrepreneurs</li> </ul>

Table 3. Summary of the interviewee's major arguments

Comparing the results of this survey with the research questions mentioned in chapter 1.2, it is possible to draw some conclusions:

In general, it is difficult for small businesses to effectively use content marketing as their primary marketing strategy. This can be explained by the fact that especially in small fashion stores, mainly word-of-mouth and personal contact contribute to success and their reach on social media is not very large. However, content marketing can well be used as an effective complement to other marketing activities, such as refreshing a Facebook or Instagram profile.

Consumers associate sustainability with doing something good for the environment. But now that more and more larger companies are bringing sustainable fashion collections onto the market, it is becoming increasingly difficult for customers to see which products have really been produced ecologically and which have not. On the other hand, it is getting more difficult for truly sustainable companies to prove their authenticity. Therefore, fair seals are becoming more and more important in today's world. Although, the sustainable value of a company can be communicated with the help of marketing, it needs to be confirmed in customer contact and by the products themselves in order to convince customers of the trustworthiness. If the owners of such an organic shop have the necessary know-how in the field of fair fashion and can communicate good customer service and their own convictions to the customers, they automatically appear trustworthy and authentic. Also, the close personal contact and the sharing of equal values between seller and buyer creates a closer relationship in the consultation.

The companies surveyed have deeply anchored environmental protection in their respective corporate philosophies and therefore it is also part of their marketing activities. This can already be seen in the name of a business, e.g. Grünstreifen, which can be translated into English with "green strips". In addition, shop window decorations, slogans and flyers can be used to communicate the sustainable values of a small shop. However, the four interviewed entrepreneurs from Saarbrücken put most emphasis on recommendations and word-of-mouth propaganda from satisfied customers. Especially for small companies this is a free and very effective advertisement. Clearly, fair entrepreneurs should also live sustainably in their normal business operations and not distribute disposable cups or plastic tableware at events, for example. Also, the minimizing of paper use and possibly sometimes riding a bicycle to work has an impressive and authentic effect on customers and can also be posted as a motivation for customers on social media.

As the overall interest of society in fair fashion is increasing, people are better informed and more critical than ever before. Especially the higher price of clothing from sustainable brands and shops means that customers demand durability and excellent quality. Products that are advertised sustainably are often associated

with uniqueness, fair production and freedom from harmful substances. In the same way, seals for ecological clothing are becoming more and more important, as they are a tangible proof of sustainability for consumers.

## **7 Conclusion**

The overall aim of this research was to explore the role of sustainable values in the brand communication of SMEs in the fashion industry. In order to examine this more closely, it needed to be found out how sustainable values of small companies can be communicated authentically and to what extent content marketing can support this. Additionally, a closer look was taken at the integration of sustainability into marketing activities and customers' expectations.

In general, it is no longer enough to just communicate the sustainable values of a company to the outside world, as more and more businesses are advertising supposedly sustainable products. This is where fair entrepreneurs need to make a difference and consider how they can communicate their authenticity and trustworthiness to customers. In this context, it is important to find a suitable strategy for positioning the company and thus also to influence the brand equity in a positive way. In the case of small fashion stores in Saarbrücken, the interviews revealed that authenticity can be achieved above all through the personal contact with customers, know-how of the sellers in the field of sustainable fashion and product transparency. It is important to show customers that the sustainable concept is fully supported, and that the entrepreneur shares the same environmental-friendly lifestyle as customers do. Additionally, customers want to feel integrated and they like also hearing about difficulties in the business activities as this seems to be more authentic. Entrepreneurs should try to make them feel understood and that they are involved in a two-way-communication and decision-making processes concerning the company.

SMEs can easily integrate their commitment to the environment into their marketing with the right choice of communication mix. This includes a mixture of direct and interactive marketing, events, advertising and word-of-mouth marketing. Moreover, communication channels supporting the philosophy and strategy of the business need to be chosen. Meaning that fair stores should, for

example, try to minimize their use of paper or waste. Moreover, social media plays a major role in brand communication especially for small shops as online promotion is very cheap. Small shops can use Facebook, Instagram or send newsletters via e-mail in order to stay in permanent contact with customers and keep them up to date. Shared content does not necessarily need to be directly connected to the products but should match the overall values of the business in order to appear authentic. The interviewed entrepreneurs pointed out the importance of word-of-mouth promotion in the area of Saarbrücken as satisfied customers can acquire new customers which is essential in order to be able to compete with the big players in the industry.

Content Marketing is a tool working very well in today's social media environment. Especially for small companies it is interesting to draw people's attention to a business and to arouse their interest without having to pay a lot of money for it. Nevertheless, the survey showed that in small fashion stores, mainly word-of-mouth and personal contact contribute to success and the reach of their social media is not very large. That is why content marketing should be used as an effective complement to other marketing activities.

Unfortunately, the empirical part of this study only covers the entrepreneurs' point of view but not the opinion of customers themselves. Nevertheless, previous studies already showed that the interest in fair clothing in Germany increased throughout the last years. Additionally, the interviewed entrepreneurs have noticed an increasing demand, which can be traced back to the change in values, that is particularly noticeable in our society due to the clear consequences of climate change nowadays. Nevertheless, both previous research and the interviews in Saarbrücken show that more women than men are involved in the field of sustainable fashion. Environmental protection is playing an increasingly important role in the lives of many people and after the food industry, this trend now seems to be reaching the apparel industry as well. However, more and more companies are following the trend without actually incorporating the advertised values into their business philosophy. Companies are overwhelming customers with allegedly sustainable products, and it is difficult for them to find out which products are actually fair. On the one hand, entrepreneurs need to educate their customers even more and be transparent. On the other hand, the government

should demand this transparency from companies through laws and use transparent seals that help consumers to gain an overview. After all, today's consumers are better informed than ever before, which is why they can easily inform themselves about truly fair fashion and trusted seals. In addition, customers have certain expectations of sustainable clothing, such as longevity and high quality, which should justify the higher price. If products do not live up to these expectations, the real environment-friendly stores may have a chance against the big competitors in the long run.

As society's interest in environmental-friendly garments is increasing, it is essential for small, truly sustainable fashion stores to communicate this value to the outside in an authentic way. SMEs' contributors should focus on transparency and their own conviction in brand communication in order to be able to differentiate themselves from global players. In this field, social media plays a major role and can be pushed through content marketing campaigns.

Nevertheless, the delimitations of this study should be kept in mind when dealing with the empirical research. The results of the survey are covering the subjective opinions of entrepreneurs offering exclusively sustainable fashion. Moreover, the four shops are located in a small city in Germany surrounded by a rather rural area. The findings of this work should provide possible approaches and ideas on how SMEs can successfully convey sustainability to consumers. Findings can be applied to SMEs in Germany offering organic garments.

Further research is required to find out how the brand communication of environmentally friendly values is organized for large companies and how this is done in other countries. A more detailed analysis of the consumer's view on such marketing activities will also be necessary in the future. This is where future research needs to start and find out how entrepreneurs in other regions of Germany or other countries are tackling this difficulty or what strategy they are following. The perspective of large companies or the customers' point of view in terms of marketing activities in the field of sustainability also offers further investigation possibilities. Moreover, other industries could be explored more closely in order to identify differences or similarities to the fashion industry.

## **Figures**

- Figure 1. Brand communication strategy and brand communication channels, p. 10
- Figure 2. Categories of sustainability, p. 10
- Figure 3. Thesis theoretical framework, p. 11
- Figure 4. Step-by-step content marketing, p. 29
- Figure 5. Survey on spending willingness for sustainable clothing in Germany 2017, p. 33
- Figure 6. Turnover with Fairtrade textiles in Germany in the years 2011 to 2018 (in million Euros), p. 33

## **Tables**

- Table 1. Brand awareness strategy, p. 17
- Table 2. Mapping the customer path throughout five A's, p. 25-27
- Table 3. Summary of the interviewee's major arguments, p. 47-48

## References

- Adler, U. 2004. Structural change: The dominant feature in the economic development of the German textile and clothing industries. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 8(3), 300-319.
- Baltes, L. P. 2015. Content marketing - the fundamental tool of digital marketing. *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Brasov. Economic Sciences. Series V*, 8(2), 111-118.
- Bartels, R. 1976. *The History of Marketing Thought*. <http://www.etcases.com/media/clnews/14224274041683537134.pdf>. Accessed on 23 April 2019.
- Cambridge University Press 2014a. Definition of brand communication. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/de/worterbuch/englisch/brand-communication>. Accessed on 13 of April 2019.
- Cambridge University Press 2014b. Definition of sustainability. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/de/worterbuch/englisch/sustainability>. Accessed on 13 of April 2019.
- Cambridge University Press 2014c. Definition of brand equity. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/de/worterbuch/englisch/brand-equity>. Accessed on 21 of Mai 2019.
- Cambridge University Press 2014d. Definition of brand positioning. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/de/worterbuch/englisch/brand-positioning>. Accessed on 25 of Mai 2019.
- Chinomona R. 2016. Brand communication, brand image and brand trust as antecedents of brand loyalty in Gauteng Province of South Africa. *African Journal of Economic and Management Studies*, 7(1), 124-139.
- Conrad, C. & Thomson, M. E. 2013. *The New Brand Spirit. How Communicating Sustainability Builds Brands, Reputations and Profits*. Gower Publishing Limited.
- Danaher, P. J. & Rossiter, J. R. 2011. Comparing perceptions of marketing communication channels. *European Journal of Marketing* 45(1/2), 6-42.
- De Brito M., Carbone V. & Blanquart C. M. 2010. Towards a sustainable fashion retail supply chain in Europe: Organisation and performance. *International Journal of Production Economics* 114(2), 534-553.
- Demetriou, M., Pappasolomou, I. & Vrontis, D. 2009. Cause-related marketing: Building the corporate image while supporting worthwhile causes, in *Journal of Brand Management* 17(4), 266-278.
- Dickenbrok, C. & Martinez, L. F. (2018). Communicating green fashion across different cultures and geographical regions. *International Review on Public and Non - Profit Marketing* 15(2), 127-141.
- Elkington, J. 1997. *Cannibals with Forks: the Triple Bottom Line of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Business*. Oxford: Capstone.

- European Union 2019. What is an SME?. [https://ec.europa.eu/growth/smes/business-friendly-environment/sme-definition\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/growth/smes/business-friendly-environment/sme-definition_en). Accessed on 13 of April 2019.
- Fairtrade Initiative Saarbrücken 2019. Faire Kleidung. [http://www.faires-saarbruecken.de/fairtrade/faire\\_kleidung](http://www.faires-saarbruecken.de/fairtrade/faire_kleidung). Accessed on 13 of April 2019.
- Family Health International n.d. Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector's Field Guide. Module 1: Qualitative Research Methods Overview. Northeastern University. Khoury College of Computer Sciences. <https://course.ccs.neu.edu/is4800sp12/resources/qualmethods.pdf>. Accessed on 30 of August 2019.
- Fuciu, M. & Dumitrescu, L. 2017. The consumer confidence report – a tool for developing marketing strategies designed for the online environment. *Annales Universitatis Apulensis: Series Oeconomica* 19(2), 34-42.
- Grant, M. & Kenton, W. 2019. Sustainability. Investopedia. <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/s/sustainability.asp>. Accessed on 13 of April 2019.
- Henninger, C. E., Alevizou, P. J., & Oates, C. J. 2016. What is sustainable fashion? *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management* 20(4), 400-416.
- Jefferson, S. & Tanton, S. 2015. *Valuable Content Marketing: How to Make Quality Content Your Key to Success*. 2nd edition. London, Philadelphia, New York, Delhi: Kogan Page Limited.
- Kapferer, J. N. 1992. *Strategic Brand Management. New Approaches to Creating and Evaluating Brand Equity*. London: Kogan Page Limited.
- Keller, K. L. 2003. Understanding brands, branding and brand equity. *Interactive Marketing* 5(1), 7-20.
- Kotler, P., Kartajaya, H. & Setiawan, I. 2017. *Marketing 4.0*. Wiley.
- Kotler, P. & Keller, K. L. 2012. *Marketing Management*. Pearson Education Limited.
- McLeod, S. A. 2019. What's the difference between qualitative and quantitative research?. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/qualitative-quantitative.html>. Accessed on 30 of August 2019.
- Maignan, I. & Ralston, D. A. 2002. Corporate social responsibility in Europe and the US: insights from businesses' self-presentations. *Journal of International Business Studies* 33(3), 497-514.
- Mohr, L. A., Webb, D. J. & Harris, K. E. 2001. Do consumers expect companies to be socially responsible? The impact of corporate social responsibility on buying behavior. *Journal of Consumer Affairs* 35(1), 45-72.
- Panda, T. K. 2004. Consumer Response to Brand Placements in Films Role of Brand Congruity and Modality of Presentation in Bringing Attitudinal Change Among Consumers with Special Reference to Brand Placements in Hindi Films. *South Asian Journal of Management*. New Delhi. 11(4), 7-19.

Percy, L. & Rossiter, J. R. 1992. A Model of Brand Awareness and Brand Attitude Advertising Strategies: ABSTRACT. *Psychology & Marketing* (1986-1998). New York 9(4). 263.

Piegsa, E. 2010. *Green Fashion: Ökologische Nachhaltigkeit in der Bekleidungsindustrie*. Diplomica Verlag GmbH. Hamburg.

Rosenbaum-Elliott, R., Percy, L. & Pervan, S. 2011. *Strategic Brand Management*. 2nd edition. Oxford University Press, New York.

Rosenbaum-Elliott, R., Percy, L. & Pervan, S. 2015. *Strategic Brand Management*. 3rd edition. Oxford University Press, New York.

Splendid Research GmbH 2016. Studie: Slow Fashion Monitor 2016. <https://www.splendid-research.com/de/slowfashion.html>. Accessed on 22 July 2019.

Statistisches Bundesamt 2019a. Konsumausgaben der privaten Haushalte in Deutschland für Bekleidung in den Jahren 1991 bis 2018 (in Milliarden Euro). Statista GmbH. <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/283616/umfrage/konsumausgaben-fuer-bekleidung-in-deutschland/>. Accessed on 17 July 2019.

TextilWirtschaft 2017. Sind Sie bereit für umweltverträglich, nachhaltig und gerecht produzierte Bekleidung mehr zu zahlen?. Statista GmbH. <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/663185/umfrage/ausgabebereitschaft-fuer-nachhaltige-bekleidung-in-deutschland/>. Accessed on 17 July 2019.

TransFair 2019. Umsatz mit Fairtrade-Textilien in Deutschland in den Jahren 2011 bis 2018 (in Millionen Euro). Statista GmbH. <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/299493/umfrage/umsatz-mit-fairtrade-textilien-in-deutschland/>. Accessed on 17 July 2019.

WebFinance Inc. 2019. Definition of brand. <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/brand.html>. Accessed on 13 of April 2019.

Zukunftsinstitut GmbH 2013. FAIR: Von der Nische zum Mainstream. Messe Westfalenhallen Dortmund. [https://www.zukunftsinstitut.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Publikationen/Auftragsstudien/Fair\\_Trendstudie\\_web.pdf](https://www.zukunftsinstitut.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Publikationen/Auftragsstudien/Fair_Trendstudie_web.pdf). Accessed on 19 July 2019.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1 English questionnaire

### Empirical part interview questions for owners of SME in SB

#### 1) Background questions

- Is the company offering only sustainable fashion or also conventional fashion?
- How long does the company already work in the field of sustainable fashion?
- How many stores does the company have? Where are they located?
- Do you produce the economically friendly garments by your own or do you buy them from other companies? How did you choose the brands?

#### 2) Sustainability in the company

- What does the term sustainability mean to you?
- Why did you choose to offer sustainable fashion? Philosophy of owner?
- How do you include sustainability in the company's business activities?
- How do you communicate your sustainable values in a trustworthy/authentic way?
- Did the sustainable concept become more successful throughout the last years?

#### 3) Marketing

- What kind of communication channels do you use in order to promote your products and your store?
- Do you use mostly offline or online channels in your marketing communication? Combination of both?
- What is the marketing communication strategy you are following in your store?
- How do you integrate the value of sustainability in your marketing strategy?
- Do you know the term "content marketing"?
- Did you already use content marketing for promoting your store or your products?
- If yes: what kind of tools/platforms have you already used for content marketing? (giving some examples for them)
- If yes: what do you think about content marketing? Successful?
- If not: are you planning to begin to use content marketing in the near future?  
(short definition/explanation of content marketing)

#### 4) Customers

- Is the overall interest in sustainable fashion or its production process increasing?
- Do you perceive some trends/changes in consumers' buying behavior? Do you think the demand will change in the near future?
- How would you characterize/describe the behavior of consumers towards environmentally friendly clothes?
- How would you characterize the main customer group of your products?
- What are the most typical questions asked by customers about your products?
- What points do consumers most care about?
- What do you think consumers expect from sustainable fashion compared to conventional garments?
- Do you think that there is a difference in the attitude towards sustainable fashion of people living in the Saarland compared to other Germans?
- If yes: what kind of differences?

#### 5) Future development of the fashion industry

- How do you think will the sustainable fashion industry develop in the future?
- In your opinion, what would need to change in order to increase the buying interest in sustainable clothing?

## Appendix 2 German questionnaire

Fragebogen zur Bachelorarbeit von Hannah Seel zum Thema:

**„The role of sustainability in brand communication of SMEs using the tool of content marketing. Case: fashion industry in Saarbrücken, Germany”**

Befragte: ... in Saarbrücken

Fragen:

### 1) Hintergrund des Unternehmens

- Bieten Sie in ihrem Geschäft ausschließlich nachhaltige/umweltfreundliche Mode an oder auch konventionelle Bekleidung?  
- Antwort:
- Beschreiben Sie kurz was Ihr Geschäft ausmacht, was es aus der Menge heraushebt? Oder was Sie den Kunden bieten?  
- Antwort:
- Ist dies Ihr erstes Geschäft, in dem Sie nachhaltige Bekleidung anbieten?  
- Antwort:
- Wie lange sind Sie (mit diesem Geschäft) bereits im Bereich der nachhaltigen Mode aktiv?  
- Antwort:
- Produzieren Sie auch selbst nachhaltige Bekleidung oder kaufen Sie diese bei anderen Unternehmen/Marken ein? Von welchen Unternehmen und wie wurden diese ausgewählt?  
- Antwort:

### 2) Nachhaltigkeit im Unternehmen

- Was bedeutet Nachhaltigkeit für Sie? Definition?  
- Antwort:
- Wieso haben Sie sich dazu entschieden nachhaltige Mode/Produkte anzubieten?  
- Antwort:
- Wie integrieren Sie Nachhaltigkeit in Ihre unternehmerischen Aktivitäten?  
- Antwort:
- Wie kommunizieren Sie nachhaltige Werte auf eine vertrauenswürdige/authentische Weise zu Ihren Kunden?  
- Antwort:
- Hat das nachhaltige Konzept, Ihrer Meinung nach, in den letzten Jahren einen Aufschwung erlebt?  
- Antwort:

### 3) Marketing

- Welche Art von Kommunikationskanälen nutzen Sie, um Ihre Produkte und Ihr Geschäft zu bewerben?  
- Antwort:
- Nutzen Sie hauptsächlich online oder offline Kanäle zur Marketing-Kommunikation? Oder eine Kombination aus beidem?  
- Antwort:

- Wie integrieren Sie nachhaltige Werte in das Marketing Ihres Geschäftes?  
- Antwort:
- Ist Ihnen Content Marketing ein Begriff?  
- Antwort:
- Haben Sie Content Marketing schonmal genutzt, um Ihre Produkte zu bewerben?  
- Antwort:  
Wenn ja: welche Plattformen/Vorgehensweise haben Sie dafür genutzt?  
- Antwort:  
Wenn ja: Wie beurteilen Sie diese Art des Marketings? Ist es ein erfolgreiches Modell? Funktioniert es für Ihre Branche?  
- Antwort:  
Wenn nein: Content Marketing dient dazu, das Interesse von Verbrauchern durch kostenlosen, beratenden, unterhaltenden und interessanten Inhalt zu wecken, so dass diese sich über die beworbenen Marken/Produkte informieren und diese im besten Falle kaufen. Oft wird dieses Konzept im online Marketing genutzt.  
Wenn nein: Haben Sie geplant Content Marketing in näherer Zukunft zur Bewerbung Ihrer Produkte/Ihres Geschäftes zu nutzen?  
- Antwort:

#### **4) Kunden**

- Ist das generelle Interesse an nachhaltiger/umweltfreundlicher Bekleidung und deren Produktionsprozessen, Ihrer Meinung nach, in letzter Zeit gestiegen?  
- Antwort:
- Haben Sie in den letzten Jahren Trends oder Veränderungen in dem Kaufverhalten von Konsumenten festgestellt? Gehen Sie davon aus, dass die Nachfrage in nächster Zeit zunimmt?  
- Antwort:
- Wie würden Sie Ihre Hauptkundengruppe charakterisieren/beschreiben?  
- Antwort:
- Was sind die meist gestellten Fragen von Kunden zu Ihren Produkten?  
- Antwort:
- Was ist den Kunden bei Ihren Produkten besonders wichtig?  
- Antwort:
- Was glauben Sie, erwarten Konsumenten von nachhaltiger Bekleidung verglichen mit konventioneller Mode?  
- Antwort:
- Besteht, Ihrer Meinung nach, ein Unterschied in der Einstellung zu umweltfreundlicher Mode zwischen Saarländern und Menschen aus anderen Bundesländern?  
- Antwort:  
Wenn ja: welche Unterschiede?  
- Antwort:

#### **5) Zukunftsentwicklung der Bekleidungsindustrie**

- Wie wird sich die nachhaltige Modeindustrie in der Zukunft, Ihrer Meinung nach, entwickeln?  
- Antwort:

- Was müsste sich Ihrer Meinung nach verändern, um das Kaufinteresse an nachhaltiger Mode zu steigern?  
- Antwort:
- 

Vielen lieben Dank für Ihre Mithilfe an meiner Arbeit!

Falls Interesse besteht, lasse ich Ihnen gerne die finale Version meiner Arbeit zukommen, sobald diese fertig ist.

Mit freundlichen Grüßen,

Hannah Seel