



# **Communicating Sustainability Clearly and Effectively to Avoid Greenwashing: Small Slow Fashion Brands**

Jennie Barck

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# Communicating Sustainability Clearly and Effectively to Avoid Greenwashing: Small Slow Fashion Brands

Jennie Barck  
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Jennie Barck

### Vastuullisuudesta viestiminen selkeästi ja tehokkaasti välttämättä viherpersua: pienet hitaan muodin brändit

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Tämän opinnäytetyön tarkoituksena on analysoida vastuullisuusviestintää hitaan muodin brändien kesken. Vertailu keskittyy brändeihin, jotka ovat saavuttaneet korkeimmat sijoitukset Good On You -sivustolla. Lisäksi siinä vertaillaan brändien vastuullisuusviestinnän menetelmiä sekä kehitetään niiden perusteella uusi viestintämalli. Tavoitteena on, että Baserange ja vastaavat yritykset voisivat käyttää viestintämallia, jonka avulla viestiä yrityksen vastuullisuudesta asiakkaille. Viestintämalli on kehitetty Baserangea varten, jotta he voisivat viestiä selkeämmin vastuullisuudesta asiakkaille.

Teoreettinen viitekehys koostuu vastuullisuusviestinnän keskeisistä teemoista, kuten 'triple bottom line', vastuullisuusarvioinnit, vastuullisuuslinjaukset, vastuullisuusvisio, sertifiointit, tarinankerronta ja läpinäkyvyys. Jotta vastuullisuusviestintä olisi tehokasta, sen on oltava selkeää, uskottavaa ja tunteisiin vetoavaa. Tarinankerrontaa pidetään tehokkaimpana tapana herättää lukijassa tunteita.

Opinnäytetyössä käytettiin benchmarking-menetelmää, jotta voitiin ottaa oppia brändien parhaista käytännöistä. Löydettyjä vastuullisuusviestintämenetelmiä analysoitiin temaattisen analyysin avulla, jonka pohjalta muodostettiin uusi viestinnän malli. Hitaan muodin brändien verkkosivustoilta saadut tiedot yhdistettiin kirjallisuuskatsauksen tuloksiin ja luokitusjärjestelmien kriteereihin temaattista analyysia varten.

Työn tuloksena saavutettiin uusi vastuullisuusviestinnän malli, jossa yhdistettiin teoreettisessa viitekehyksestä ja Good On You, OSEC ja Shades of Green malleista löydetty elementit. Korkea luokitus Good On You -sivustolla ei välttämättä tarkoita, että brändin viestintä on ollut asiakkaiden silmissä selkeää. Sen vuoksi oli tarpeen kehittää uusi malli, joka koostuu vastuullisuusviestinnän arviointia varten luoduista malleista, vastuullisuusluokitusjärjestelmien kriteereistä ja teoriasta siitä, mitkä viestintämenetelmät ovat tehokkaita.

Suositus, jonka annan Baserangelle, on uuden kestävän kehityksen viestintästrategian luominen luodun mallin pohjalta. Tämä johtaisi perusteellisempaan viestintään brändin vastuullisuusviestinnän kautta. Baserangen nykyisestä viestintästrategiasta puuttuu ennen kaikkea selkeät vastuullisuuslinjaukset. Brändi hyötyisi myös siitä, että se kertoisi yksityiskohtaisemmin luonnon resurssien käytöstä. Lisäksi olisi hyvä tuoda esiin vaatteiden eri käyttö mahdollisuuksia ja huoltoa. Viestinnän selkeyteen tulisi kiinnittää enemmän huomiota ja tarinankerrontaa viestinnässä voisi lisätä.

Asiasanat: vastuullisuusviestintä, hidas muoti, tarinankerronta

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The purpose of this thesis is to analyse the sustainability communication of slow fashion brands that are achieving high rankings on the sustainability rating site Good On You, benchmark their methods of sustainability communication and develop a new communication framework. The objective is that the communication model could be used by the client company Baserange and other similar companies to help them clarify sustainability efforts to their customers. The communication framework was developed for Baserange to be clearer in their sustainability communication to customers.

The theoretical framework centres around key themes in sustainability communication including the triple bottom line, sustainability rankings, policy, sustainability vision, certifications, storytelling, and transparency. For sustainability communication to be effective, it must be clear, credible and emotionally evocative. Storytelling is seen as the most effective way to evoke emotions in the reader.

Benchmarking was used to understand and learn from the best practices of high-performing brands in the fashion industry. Their methods of sustainability communication were then analysed through thematic analysis, which was used to form the new model of sustainability communication. For the thematic analysis, data from the websites of slow fashion brands was combined with findings from the literature review as well as the rating system Good On You.

The result was a new sustainability communication framework, that combined the elements found in the theoretical framework with the sustainability rating system Good On You, the OSEC model and the Shades of Green instrument. Rating highly on Good On You does not necessarily mean that a brand's communication has been clear in the eyes of the customers. It was therefore necessary to develop a new framework, consisting of models created for assessing sustainability communication, the criteria of sustainability rating sites and the research into what communication methods are effective.

The recommendation I have given Baserange is creating a sustainability communication strategy based on the new framework created. This would result in more thorough communication of the brand's sustainability efforts. The main element missing from Baserange's current communication strategy is a clear sustainability policy, but the brand would also benefit from being more detailed about their resource use, mentioning the use phase of the clothing, paying more attention to storytelling and generally being more explicit and clear in their communication.

Keywords: sustainability communication, slow fashion, storytelling

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## 1 Introduction

Organisations have realised that business cannot continue as it has and that sustainability must now be considered (Allen 2016, 1). The problem with many small sustainability-focused fashion brands today is that they are not communicating their sustainability efforts effectively enough for the customers to see that sustainability is an inherent quality of small brands. Customers are not correctly identifying the most sustainable brands despite ratings by independent third parties. This may be because sustainability initiatives are difficult for customers to understand (Allen 2016, 15). Smaller sustainable brands are also not able to communicate sustainability as thoroughly as larger brands and it may even come across as them hiding information (Brydges et al. 2022, 363). In sustainable brand ratings such as the Sustainability Brand Index, customers rank larger, traditional brands with an established image as the most sustainable. Simultaneously, many small sustainability-focused fashion brands are focusing on sustainability actions rather than convincing their customers of their sustainability, trying to seem trustworthy in their claims or ranking high on any sustainable fashion lists. Companies have more opportunities than ever to communicate their sustainable practices to customers, but information about these initiatives is still lacking (Da Giau, Macchion, Caniato, Caridi, Danese, Rinaldi and Vinelli 2016, 77).

I will be focusing this study on small fashion brands in Europe with a sustainability focus because these are brands that are struggling to get the message out to the masses regarding what exactly it is that makes them sustainable. Many are also struggling with reaching the highest scores in fashion brand ranking. Being listed at the top of sustainability ranking systems gives customers the perception that the brand is trustworthy in their claims of sustainability. On top of this, many do not have the time, financial or human resources to invest in carbon calculations, performing LCAs (Life Cycle Assessment), transparency software, certifications, third-party auditing, writing policies or sustainability reporting to strengthen their claims of sustainability.

A move towards more effective sustainability communication on the part of small businesses would also serve to strengthen their image as sustainable brands, and in turn, make the greenwashing of bigger brands more evident. To emphasise the importance of sustainability communication, the increased use of sustainability reporting and the importance placed on corporate social responsibility shows that companies are not able to ignore these issues anymore (Greco and De Cock 2021, 56). There is also a need for clearer sustainability communication that leads to purchasing behaviour. Current methods of communication used are confusing customers, difficult to understand and unreliable (Turunen and Halme 2021, 2).

In a study done on sustainability communication of luxury brands, among seven luxury fashion websites the most used keyword was “sustainability,” with a relative percentage of 71,42% (Candeloro 2019, 188). Therefore sustainability, its meaning and its communication is at the centre of this thesis.

The sustainability-focused fashion brands have been chosen for this thesis based on their rating on Good On You (<https://goodonyou.eco/>). The brands chosen for this study are all based in Europe but have a global market. The primary market of each brand is clothing retail.

The purpose of this study is to analyse the sustainability communication of smaller brands that are achieving high rankings, benchmark their methods of sustainability communication and develop a model to improve the sustainability communication strategy for small fashion brands. This is done for the brands to differentiate themselves from those brands that seek to confuse customers with false claims of sustainability and greenwashing.

Through benchmarking a better understanding is built of the sustainability communication methods and storytelling techniques used on the websites of European slow fashion brands. The methods are then categorised through thematic analysis. Their effectiveness in communicating sustainability efforts to potential and existing customers are assessed via looking at their ranking on Good On You.

The research question for the thesis is:

What are the best practices in the sustainability communication of small slow fashion brands?

Based on these best practices, a new sustainability communication framework is built for small slow fashion brands to build more effective strategies for communicating sustainability to their customers.

## 1.2 Case company: Baserange

Baserange is a fashion brand that was founded in 2012. They make clothing made to last from natural and recycled materials, while aiming to reduce environmental impacts at all stages of production. Production is done collaboratively with suppliers to develop new textiles. The brand is always aiming to improve its practices and question the practices of the industry currently. Community conversations are also a central part of the brand, where discussions are had on Instagram live with different individuals around the world about our differences,



similarities, and mistakes to learn from each other. The Baserange collections consist of a core collection of basics that remains the same year after year, as well as seasonal collections that are released in spring, summer, autumn, and winter. Occasionally, the brand releases collaborative collections designed collectively with individuals or other brands. Collections are made up of mostly underwear, but also athletic wear, trousers and skirts, tops, sweaters, socks, dresses, and jackets. Materials used by the brand include organic cotton, bamboo, silk, hemp, modal and linen and natural dyes are used to dye some pieces. The production network is mostly based in Europe, with most suppliers located in Portugal and France. Most suppliers have worked with Baserange since the beginning. In Portugal the brand works with a local agent that connects the brand to the factories. The brand has stockists in Asia, Europe, Middle East, North America, and Oceania, with their own stores in Copenhagen, Tokyo, Kyoto, Melbourne, and Seoul (Baserange 2022). Most of the brand's sales are done in Asia and North America.

The main operating company of the group is Baserange France. In the fiscal year 2021-2022 closing June 30th 2022, the turnover of Baserange France was 6.8 million euros. 12 full time employees worked at the organisation alongside 10 recurring freelancers. Alongside that, the recently founded subsidiary Baserange Denmark ApS has five employees (Gibert 2022. Personal communication.)

The sustainability communication of the brand on the website includes a care page, material impacts, a production network map, interviews with factory representatives, fact sheets about factories, fibre origin map and a certification map (Baserange 2022). The brand has a strong focus on using undyed fabric, however, the environmental benefits of this are not presented. Recently, the brand has been focusing more on introducing a repair service and selling repairs made of samples. There is also a shift into using more deadstock materials. These initiatives are not introduced on the website. Baserange is working on an updated version of the website that is easier to navigate and has clearer information about the products' sustainable characteristics.

One of the biggest challenges Baserange as a group has been facing recently is the company being divided to two teams in different countries and the communication between them. The team in France focuses on operations whereas the team in Denmark focuses on the creative side. On top of this, the teams liaise with stores in Asia and Australia as well as freelancers in the US. There are cultural differences in how things are understood between countries, leading to a stronger need for clear communication. There have also been issues in communicating to the retailers. Stores have returned naturally dyed pieces as the colour is different from what they expected to receive. This is something that could be combatted through clearer communication of what natural dyes are and how they manifest in garments. Another problem is with production being unable to source natural dyes in the timeline

demanded by the brand, which could also stem from a lack of communication about the pace of natural dyes. The brand website was also lacking care instructions, which might be the cause in leading to customers returning garments after washing them in incorrect temperature. Returns for certain products have also been high, which could be combated via clearer communication of environmental impacts of returns and communicating alternatives to ordering multiple sizes.

Based on conversations I have had with the founder of the company, Marie-Louise Mogensen, she views internal and external sustainability communication as strongly interlinked and stemming from the same place (Mogensen 2022. Pers. com.). While this thesis focuses on external sustainability communication to customers, it is seen to also make the communication between the two teams and retail stronger. If external communication to customers is made clearer, internal communication can improve as a result.

In this thesis the communication of Baserange will be benchmarked with four other small fashion brands that are rated highest on the Good On Your platform: Story mfg., Le Pirol, MUD Jeans and DEDICATED.

Companies are categorised as small if their staff is 50 or under and their turnover is 10 million euros or under (European Chemical Agency 2023). Story mfg. is classified as a micro company, as their staff is under 10 and turnover under 2 million pounds (Endole 2023). The last reported turnover from DEDICATED. is from 2020 and is 4.9 million euros and the staff was 22 in 2021, putting it in the category of a small company (Largest Companies 2023). At the time of writing this thesis, Le Pirol has closed their website and social media and financial information on them is no longer available. Reliable information about the turnover of staff of MUD Jeans was not found. The term small brands is therefore used loosely based on data gathered from various sites including LinkedIn on the number of employees and turnover of these companies.

Story mfg. is a UK based brand that makes naturally dyed, unisex clothing and accessories as well as homeware that has stores in Asia, Europe, Middle East, North America, and Oceania (Story mfg. 2022). Le Pirol, founded in 2018, creates timeless wool and organic cotton knitwear with men's and womenswear that are made in Denmark (Le Pirol 2022). MUD Jeans is a B-corp circular denim brand, founded in 2012, with women's and menswear from the Netherlands and 300 stores around the world (MUD Jeans 2022). DEDICATED is a Swedish brand founded in 2006 that makes organic and certified clothing for men, women, and children with stores all over the world (DEDICATED 2022).

	<b>Baserange</b>	<b>Story mfg.</b>	<b>Le Pirol</b>	<b>MUD Jeans</b>	<b>DEDICATED.</b>
<b>Base</b>	France & Denmark	UK	Denmark	Netherlands	Sweden
<b>Founded in</b>	2012	2013	2018	2012	2006
<b>Focus</b>	Womenswear	Unisex	Men's and womenswear	Men's and womenswear	Men's and womenswear
<b>Country of Production</b>	Portugal, Turkey, France, Tunisia	-	Denmark	Tunisia, Spain	India, China
<b>Materials used</b>	Bamboo lyocell, organic cotton, silk, wool, hemp, linen, recycled and deadstock fabric	Recycled and organic cotton, linen	Organic cotton and wool	Recycled and organic cotton	Lyocell, organic cotton, recycled polyester, recycled wool, hemp
<b>Stockists</b>	ca. 200	ca. 60	1	ca. 300	ca. 150
<b>Where it is stocked</b>	Asia, Europe, Middle East, North America, Oceania	Asia, Europe, Middle East, North America, Oceania	Online	Asia, Europe, North America	Asia, Europe, Middle East, North America
<b>Shipping</b>	International	International	International	International	International
<b>Languages on website</b>	English, French	English	Danish, English, German	English, German, Dutch, French	German, English, Swedish
<b>Sustainability section</b>	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Care page</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
<b>Blog</b>	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
<b>Search tool</b>	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Good On You rating</b>	It's a start	Great	Great	Great	Great

Table 1: Benchmarking slow fashion brands

### 1.3 Structure of the thesis

This thesis consists of a literature review and a development task. The literature review revolves around three main themes: sustainability, slow fashion, and communication, and

how they interact. The themes are explored through literature in the field, focusing on how they apply to the fashion industry and small organisations.

The development task centres around creating a sustainable communication framework. This is developed based on the benchmarking on sustainability communication themes gathered from the literature review through comparing small slow fashion brands, as well as previous models of assessing sustainability communication. These models include the Good On You rating system, the OSEC model and the Shades of Green Instrument.

#### 1.4 Literature review

The literature review in this thesis consists of three primary areas: sustainability, slow fashion, and communication. Within communication, the focus will more specifically be on areas relevant to the thesis, namely internal vs external communication, cross-cultural communication, website communication and sustainability communication. Research is pulled on why doing sustainability communication is important for fashion brands, what makes sustainability communication effective and clear and what the issues in it are, with an emphasis on greenwashing. At the end of the literature review section the theory behind the methods of sustainability communication are explored. Each section defines the terminology used and elaborates on research in that field.

#### 2. Sustainability

As sustainability is such a vague, abstract, and contested term, it is the most critical area in this thesis to define carefully. This thesis is focusing on sustainability from a business perspective, which is why its relation and importance in business activities is explored in this section. Issues and obstacles in the sustainable business sphere are also touched on. The relation of sustainability to fashion is also a key consideration, so sustainable fashion activities are also mentioned. Slow fashion is seen as an area of sustainability, so the larger context here is important to understand.

Sustainability is about making sure our actions do not stand in the way of the economic, social, and environmental options of future generations. Sustainable development is seen as the solution to issues such as climate change, the collapse of ocean fisheries and the spread of disease (Elkington and Rowlands 1999, 20). The definition of sustainability is also inherently connected to the triple bottom line.

The triple bottom line underpins how sustainability is viewed today, with the dimensions of economic prosperity, environmental quality, and social justice. Economic prosperity refers to the profits of the company, but it also includes physical, human, and intellectual capital.

Environmental quality refers to how the business affects natural capital, energy, material and water use of production, waste generation and the impact of products throughout their life cycle. Social justice is related to human capital as well, including skills and education, and the health of society, including many stakeholders. Issues related to social justice can include charity, animal welfare, human rights, impact on indigenous people, working conditions and women's rights. All three dimensions also have issues that overlap and connect them (Elkington and Rowlands 1999, 70-88). Sustainability is when these three dimensions are thriving.

It is evident however that the three dimensions do not exist in silos. Sustainability is about interconnected systems and how the ecosystems are intertwined with environmental, social, and economic spheres (Robertson 2019, 4). Holistic thinking is therefore needed when considering sustainable development. Sustainability issues in the environmental and social spheres of fashion are also seen as interlinked and connected to structural inequalities (Brydges, Henninger and Hanlon 2022, 358). The ecosystem and structure of the fashion industry needs to change. True environmental sustainability also cannot be reached within the current economic system. Holistic system change is needed for true sustainability. However, the idea of holistic systems thinking is often pushed aside in organisations for practical issues regarding management, technology, and economics (Allen 2016, 47).

As a business goal, sustainability is about action that leaves a positive impact on environmental, social, and economic levels (Sheth 2011, 23). Sustainability actions within fashion brands include the use of organic materials, closing the material loop, the use of eco-labels, and looking after employee welfare (Han, Henninger, Apeagyei and Tyler 2017, 2). However, sustainability actions in fashion brands are as varied as the brands themselves. The levels of sustainability also differ drastically.

Many sustainability goals are dependent on the actions of customers, hence why a strong customer focus is important in the sustainability efforts of an organisation. Mindful consumption, which is central to customer-centric sustainability, pursues the three facets of sustainability holistically, putting the well-being of the customer at the centre (Sheth 2011, 23). When the triple bottom line is considered, the well-being of customers is often considered as well. Customer centricity is therefore key in sustainability.

Sustainability issues are known to be complex, uncertain, and ambivalent (Fischer, Lüdecke, Godemann, Michelsen, Newig, Rieckmann and Schulz 2016, 4). Sustainability connects many spheres as well as how they interact with each other, and brands take part in these actions in diverse ways.

For the fashion industry, considering the social and environmental impacts of production is especially important. Holistic thinking is important here, as these impacts often overlap and are inherently connected. Social and environmental impacts must be considered by fashion brands in many different contexts at the same time (Brydges et al. 2022, 360). This leads us to the next chapter that explores slow fashion and the brands that operate within that sphere.

### 2.1. Slow fashion

Slow fashion brands form the centre of this thesis, and it is therefore crucial to understand what is meant by that slow fashion and the philosophy behind it. The brands explored in this thesis all adhere to the slow fashion principles explained below in their own ways. The slow fashion themes mentioned here can be seen in the website communication of the brands analysed.

Slow fashion is seen as not adhering to the conventional fashion cycle, not participating in trends, and producing garments of high quality at a slower pace (Watson and Yan 2013, 141-145). By creating a greater understanding of clothing and its production processes, customers of slow fashion are encouraged to buy less and better quality (Jung & Jin 2016, 1). Slow fashion is seen as a vision for a more sustainable fashion industry, fashion as a part of a larger ecosystem and a dialogue about changing the entire fashion system. Additionally, it seeks to create a relationship of trust with the customers by considering the environmental and social costs of producing garments and therefore giving customers control over institutions that affect them (Fletcher 2010, 262-264). Slow fashion seeks to make sure that all people get socially and economically dignified treatment. The main five themes identified in slow fashion research are quality and reliability, after which sustainability, ethics, durability, localism and timeless are most discussed (Solino, de Lima Teixeira and de Medeiros Dantas 2020, 166-180). Other themes discussed include transparent supply chains, challenging existing hierarchies by bringing customers closer to the production process, collaboration, and community-based production (Clark 2008, 429-434).

Slow fashion is also seen as an approach to providing sustainability solutions to the problems of the fashion industry on a grassroots level. The emotional connection between the wearer and the garment can allow brands to explore sustainability within fashion, as it makes the wearer more invested in the garment and its materiality and more likely to keep it (Clark 2008, 428-443). This again highlights the customer-centricity of sustainability issues and how important it is to the success of slow fashion brands. The use phase of the product life cycle of a garment has such a big environmental impact that it is vital for fashion brands to communicate appropriately to get customers emotionally invested in the care of the garments.

The slow fashion approach is inherently linked to sustainability, as it has a strong customer centric focus through the communication of the use phase of garments and their care and repair. Durability, quality and timelessness of clothes is related to the environmental dimension of sustainability, as by extending the use phase of clothing we have less of a need and desire to buy more. The slow pace of production also affects the reduced quantities. Localism is related to reducing carbon emissions, as it shortens the distances within the supply chain, which is linked to the environmental aspect of sustainability. It is also related to the social aspect, as it empowers local communities and aims to preserve local skills and craft traditions. Ethics and transparent supply chains reflect the social dimension of sustainability, where workers rights are brought to the forefront. All these social and environmental impacts are often communicated by slow fashion brands. In the next sections, the links between sustainability and communication are discussed in more detail.

#### 4 Communication

Communication of fashion brands is the central aspect and basis of this thesis. This section defines communication, its purpose and explains how it is done. Later the nature of website communication is explored in more detail. Then sustainability communication, its purpose, complexity, and different uses are analysed.

Communication is about creating understanding between the sender and receiver (Robertson 2019, 23). To create understanding, messaging must be clear. For clear communication, empathy for the reader, avoiding jargon, putting the content in chunks, and using sections are key (Robertson 2019, 24-26).

The role of communication has always been seen as persuasion, social influence, behavioural change, and citizen mobilisation (Allen 2016, 274). Communication, therefore, plays an integral role in the sustainability of a fashion brand, as the role of slow fashion brands is often to persuade customers of their sustainability, change their consumption habits and activate them to think about sustainable fashion as a system and how to see their active role in it.

In communication, frames are used to express ideas. “Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world” (Robertson 2019, 20). Frames tell stories and connect to emotions in a way that facts cannot (Robertson 2019, 22). An example of a frame in sustainability communication is quality; it encompasses many ideas, and it is something that people are familiar with. This leads us to the importance of storytelling, which is introduced as a key part of the sustainability communication model in later chapters. Storytelling is a form of communication that is key in connecting to emotions.

This thesis focuses on brand communication to international audiences, which brings a host of challenges such as cultural differences leading to misunderstandings and expensive translation services. Differences in values, norms, beliefs, ideals, biases, and orientations can lead to difficulties in cross-cultural communication. To combat these differences, communicators must understand and appreciate the distinctiveness of cultures and incorporate them into communication strategies. It has been argued that culture is the underlying theme that affects economic, social, and environmental aspects of sustainable development and communication shapes culture (Aririguzoh 2022). Language barriers are seen as the greatest obstacle to cross-cultural communication. Digital tools make cross-cultural communication processes easier, however, with the use of translation and autocorrection tools (Lifintsev and Wellbrock 2019). Website communication is explored in more detail in the next chapter.

Communication is often divided into external and internal communication or marketing and corporate communication. Many researchers believe that they should be looked at as together instead of separate entities, as consistency between the two is important (Christensen, Fratt and Torp 2008, Rogala 2016, Conaway et al. 2012). Consistency in all communications is also found to be a key factor in the success of an organisation. Communication must be clear and in line with the activities of the organisation (Conaway et al. 2012). What connects internal and external communication is the internal image of the company and internal activities directly or indirectly affect external communication. It has also been suggested that external communication should be based on internal processes. Communication strategies must therefore be holistic and integrate internal and external aspects (Rogala 2016, 488-499).

In this thesis internal communication is not analysed, but the consistency between the two must be considered when adapting the sustainability communication model to the organisation, which is introduced at the end of this thesis. The focus of this thesis is solely on external communication on brand websites. Next website communication is explored more specifically.

#### 4.1 Website communication

In this thesis the communication analysed focuses solely on website communication. This section explores the issues of website communication, aspects that affect the effectiveness of the communication and why website communication is important. On websites, brands use many different methods of communication, which will be explored later in the section on facets of the sustainability communication framework. Focusing on website communication in the thesis allows for a deeper dive into website specific communication methods, but it is not



representative of all the communication efforts of a brand. It excludes internal communication documents, press releases, advertising, and social media presence, which all form an important aspect of a brand's communication and have a great effect on customer perceptions of a brand. However, the focus of this thesis is on customer facing informative and credible content on sustainability and websites are the main platform fashion brands currently use to spread this information.

Website communication refers to the brand's website as a communication channel. According to researchers the website is the starting point of the online presence of any company. What is communicated must also be adapted to the audience. The key in website communication is having a site that is easy to navigate, up to date information and good search functionalities (Pollák, Soviar and Vavrek 2022). The communication of sustainability information through company websites is important especially with millennials, as they prefer to research on the internet. Information should therefore be updated regularly (Nadanyiova & Das 2020, 130).

Online communication strategies are also seen as one of the key ways of telling if the relationship between a brand and the public will be successful (Kim, Kiouis and Molleda 2015, 506). It is therefore valuable to keep in mind how the brand communicates and comes across to the audience.

An advantage of website communication is the ability to have an impact of the behaviour of the audience via engaging content through a blog for example (Conaway et al. 2012). Website communication is therefore seen as an effective way to communicate sustainability.

When organising the written content on a website, the most important things to remember are to keep it concise, break the text into sections, use plain language, an active voice and use headings (Robertson 2019, 140). Similar ideas guide all communication. Website communication is affected by the content as well as the design of the website (Amritha & Suresh 2020, 552). In this thesis however, the focus will be solely on the content of websites.

A blog is a website created for posting entries about a specific theme. Blogs usually build credibility, help spread information and build connections (Martin & Schouten 2012, 229). Blogs also encourage commenting, leading to important dialogue with customers. Many fashion brands use blogs to tell stories about their brand, supply chain, their products and related phenomenon. They are important aspects of the website communication of slow fashion brands.

One of the downsides of website communication is the spread of false information. The Internet increases the likelihood of false information on sustainability spreading, adding to

the confusion of customers (Martin & Schouten 2012, 63). Therefore, credibility and clarity are especially important when communicating through websites. It allows for differentiation from the false information.

#### 4.2 Sustainability communication

Sustainability communication in this thesis includes all types of communication relating to sustainability issues on the websites of fashion brands. As sustainability and communication have already been defined, this section focuses on the purposes of sustainability communication, what role it plays in relation to sustainable development, the risks it poses and its complexity. While there are disagreements on what sustainability communication should and can do, this thesis relies on the definition of communication as the basis, which is about creating understanding.

Sustainability communication is designed to facilitate sustainable development and advocate sustainability action. It also plays a significant role in bringing sustainability issues into public consciousness (Fischer et al. 2016, 5-9). It might also bring about systemic change (Brydges et al. 2022, 360). Sustainability communication plays the role of alerting, persuading, and helping people to bring about sustainability action (Allen 2016, 1). Communication of sustainable development can drive behavioural change (Bucur and Petra 2011, 48). It is therefore multi-purpose, and a sustainable communication strategy must consider the different outcomes it can and should have on customers.

Others argue that individuals cannot be changed, and sustainability communication should instead support the critical thinking of current systems and values and develop individuals' competencies for social change (Barth 2011, 93). This supports the thinking that sustainability communication should be actionable and engaging instead of just telling people what is right and wrong.

The purpose of sustainability communication is for companies to describe their sustainability commitments and prove that results have been achieved through their reporting. However, sustainability communication without proven action runs the risk of being construed as greenwashing and exposing the company to reputational risk (Siano, Conte, Amabile, Vollero and Piciocchi 2016, 2). Sustainability communication strategies must therefore keep in mind that there must be a balance between storytelling and facts.

This thesis will be focusing on communication for sustainability (CfS), where the sender is not just informing the receiver of sustainability-related issues, but also aiming to bring about social change. Communication can be categorised as CfS when it is actively stimulating

reflection and behavioural change (Fischer et al. 2016, 7-8). As a large chunk of the environmental impact of the fashion industry comes from the use phase, bringing about behavioural change is key in the sustainability communication of fashion brands.

Sustainability is a word that connects many different frames that people understand and must be used strategically to activate those frames (Allen 2016, 50). Around complicated sustainability issues, many frames need to be activated with different words and symbols (Robertson 2019, 21). Sustainability is therefore an umbrella term that encompasses many different ideas and values.

Sustainability is often communicated via strategic ambiguity. This means using abstract terms purposefully to minimise conflict and adapt to changes quickly (Allen 2016, 4). In fashion brands, this can mean using words like green or eco to describe clothing, alluding to sustainability while not explicitly stating it.

Sustainability communication is done via free-form communication and third-party accreditation. Free-form communication is the organisation's ideas on the sustainability of products that appeals to the customer's emotions, whereas third party accreditation appeals to the cognitive side. Both forms of communication are used to enact behavioural change in customers (Turunen and Halme 2021, 2). In this thesis, we will be looking at both forms of communication as necessary for the most effective communication strategy.

#### 4.2.1 Why do sustainability communication?

For the thesis's purposes, it is important to understand why sustainability communication is so important to small fashion brands. In this section the benefits of and the need for sustainability communication is explained. Sustainability communication poses opportunities especially for small brands in the fashion industry and that is explored in this section.

It has been argued that communicating about the responsible actions taken by a business is the most important part of managing a responsible business (Conaway & Laasch 2012). When businesses invest time and money in sustainability endeavours, they should also invest in the communication of these efforts. The main benefits of targeted sustainability communication for a company are improved brand image and reputation, building customer relationships and customer loyalty (Nadanyiova & Das 2020, 120-130). Communicating the specific ways a brand is doing sustainability can therefore lead to competitive advantage and prevent greenwashing (Henninger, Alevizou and Oates 2016, 413). Therefore, it is especially important to keep sustainability communication clear and specific and use concrete examples.

Using sustainable materials is not enough for the systemic change the fashion industry needs. Customer behaviour must be changed in the consumption and use phases, which can be influenced by communication. In a survey done in 2013, ten established Swedish fashion brands did not have any sustainability information on the first page of their website. This leads to them losing the interest of certain customers who are not ready to do deeper research. Brands that have sustainability at the core of the brand were found to communicate sustainability more extensively on their websites, compared to brands that have it as a part of their operations. Extensive sustainability communication was an exception at that time (Svengren Holm 2013, 148). Nowadays brands are communicating much more openly about their sustainability initiatives on their websites, whether it truly is an integral part of the brand or not, but information is still lacking for many smaller brands.

Sustainability communication of slow fashion brands can also help differentiate from fast fashion brands and bring better value to customers, especially when representing what makes the products unique and exclusive. Studies show that exclusivity brings the highest value to slow fashion products in the eyes of customers and has the biggest impact on the buying decision (Jung & Jin 2016, 11, Han et al. 2017, 9). Exclusivity goes along with the slow fashion mindset of smaller quantities, one-of-a-kind products, and artisanal handcrafting. A way for slow fashion brands to stand out from fast fashion brands is differentiating with communication.

Customers are expecting brands to have a stance on social issues and consider sustainability at the design stage (Rodriguez 2020, 65). It is therefore important to clearly communicate the stance the brand has on various social issues and practice activism. This is also important because customers are starting to think of brands as friends, meaning brands must share the same values as the customer. Brands are expected to build a relationship with their customers that is closer to friendship, as brands are seen as reflections of the customers themselves. Additionally, the values of the company must be presented clearly and may even provide a moral compass for customers (Rodriguez 2020, 65-67). More customers are identifying as conscious consumers, making it important for brands to identify as conscious to attract customers to their 'tribe.' Millennial customers especially want to know how purchasing from a brand can help solve societal issues and reach sustainability goals (Nadanyiova & Das 2020, 128).

#### 4.2.2 Issues in sustainability communication

While sustainability communication has many benefits, there are also problems that can arise if not done carefully. This chapter identifies the issues at present and where those issues arise from. It also attempts to suggest solutions. Greenwashing, one of the biggest issues

standing in the way of clear sustainability communication, is also defined, and elaborated on in this chapter.

Stakeholders are not able to identify which organisations are performing above average on sustainability correctly, despite having a high ranking on ratings done by third-party organisations. People also infer from one sustainability initiative that the organisation is performing similarly in other sustainability issues, therefore incorrectly estimating its sustainability (Allen 2016, 15). Ratings are therefore not enough to help customers understand the sustainability of the brand. Sustainability that is proven through ratings and facts is not enough in creating a perception of sustainability from the customer's perspective, and effective sustainability communication is key in this regard. Additionally, brands that are perceived as sustainable by customers are not necessarily the most sustainable, but simply the brands that have communicated their sustainability initiatives the most effectively.

People misunderstand the sustainability of brands because they lack the motivation to decode the message or the frames to understand it. Product quality is usually more important than sustainability because it is a framework people understand (Allen 2016, 15). Product quality is therefore a frame within the sphere of sustainability that can be invoked to aid customers in understanding the message easier.

Sustainability is a word that has contested meanings. People sometimes respond better to ambiguous messages with words that have uncontested meanings. Therefore, some brands choose different words with less contested meanings (Allen 2016, 54-56). Fashion brands might choose to describe their clothing as conscious fashion for example, which is a less contested and more ambiguous word than sustainability and would therefore confuse customers less.

#### *4.2.2.3 Greenwashing*

As greenwashing is what is being avoided by doing clear and effective sustainability communication, it is important to keep in mind what exactly it consists of. Greenwashing is when an organisation explicitly or implicitly refers to positive environmental impacts and by doing so, creates misleading environmental claims to deceive stakeholders. This can be done on a product or firm level (de Freitas Netto, Sobral, Ribeiro and Soares 2020, 7-10). Greenwashing is often seen as organisations communicating about progress that isn't happening. This can have disastrous financial consequences to companies (Conaway et al. 2012).

Greenwashing can be defined through three different lenses. Selective disclosure, where negative environmental impacts are hidden, and positive ones exposed. Decoupling, where the organisation is symbolically performing sustainably without concrete action. Lastly corporate legitimacy theory, where cognitive, pragmatic, and moral legitimacy are reduced (de Freitas Netto et al. 2020, 6). An example of greenwashing in fashion might be using words like eco-conscious without demonstrating how exactly the brand is conscious of the environment. Another example could be talking about the environmental benefits of using hemp, but not exposing the disastrous effects of conventional cotton.

To combat the spread of vague or misleading information about sustainability, organisations are turning to third-party certifications and sustainability ranking lists (Martin & Schouten 2012, 64). In this thesis certifications and sustainability ranking are explored as ways of communicating sustainability and bringing credibility to claims.

Inaccurate information about sustainability spreads, because it is usually fashion journalists that relay the news, not knowing the intricacies of production processes or their environmental impact (Anguelov 2021, 48). It is therefore the job of fashion brands and other industry professionals to relay accurate information about the sustainability of their supply chains. This includes concrete examples and technical details about sustainability solutions.

The ambiguity of the term sustainability and its irresponsible use adds to the spread of misinformation about sustainability in fashion (Anguelov 2021, 53). When communicating about sustainability, fashion brands need to use the word sustainability carefully, explain what they mean by using the term and transparently communicate how this is seen in their operations.

#### 4.2.3 Clear, credible, and effective sustainability communication

After exploring the problems of sustainability communication in the previous chapter, this chapter suggests ways of communicating in a clear, transparent, and effective way, to avoid greenwashing. The expectations of customers with regards to sustainability communication are also explored.

Sustainability communication should ideally address the triple bottom line, including social, environmental, and economic considerations (Allen 2016, 84). One key consideration in effective sustainability communication is understanding where the audience is at in their knowledge of sustainability and how to keep the information accessible (Allen 2016, 1). This sentiment is echoed by Conaway and Laasch, who say that sustainability communication must be adapted to the audience via an understanding of the topics that are important to them and using language at their level (Conaway et al. 2012). In the website communication of a

fashion brand, this requires an understanding of the current customer profile or the desired customer profile. To have the greatest effect on stakeholders, organisations should segment their stakeholders and customise the content to them (Nadanyiova & Das 2020, 120).

Thoughtful messages and repetition also play an essential role in conveying sustainability to customers (Allen 2016, 16). In sustainability communication, appealing to the values of the customer is important as it makes them see the personal relevance of the sustainability facts (Martin & Schouten 2012, 192). This also emphasises the importance of understanding the customer not only their level of sustainability knowledge but also their personal values, which vary a lot depending on the person's background.

The clarity in sustainability communication is important as it ensures only relevant information is being relayed to the customer. Credible sustainability communication consists of verifiable claims and detailed information told transparently and comprehensively using examples (Allen 2016, 72; Guyader, Ottosson and Parment 2020, 126; Han et al. 2017, 13). This is echoed by Nadanyiova and Das, who found that social responsibility and sustainable production must be defined clearly and realistically for effective communication with millennials. Millennials are found to be an important target of sustainability communication, as they are seen as the driving force of conscious consumption (Nadanyiova & Das 2020, 128).

One effective way to communicate credibly is internet communication, as it can increase the accessibility of information as well as add to the comprehensiveness of the information (Allen 2016, 82). Comparability of products is also important to keep in mind and makes sustainability communication more effective (Guyader et al. 2020, 127). Comparability can be increased using certifications, numerical data, or third-party ranking lists.

Sustainability communication has the largest impact when communicated over a long time and integrated into the strategy of the brand (Rodríguez, Mcquillan and Segarra-Saaavedra 2021, 20). The aim of this thesis is to create a framework for communication that can be implemented into the overall strategy of brands.

Customers have become more knowledgeable about sustainable fashion and expect measurable results and real changes regarding the environmental and societal impact of their operations. Customers expect information on sourcing, production, logistics, labelling and distribution (Cervellon & Wernerfelt 2012, 188-189). These areas are related to and can be achieved with supply chain transparency, details about resource use and certifications.

Sustainability is a term that many customers have trouble defining correctly, so it is important to state clear sustainability actions and why they are beneficial to different

stakeholders to engage customers. It can be beneficial to focus on a key sustainability theme (Evans & Peirson-Smith 2018, 265). This also supports the theory that sustainability communication should be based in practice, gives actionable tasks to readers to enact sustainable action and is customer centred (Brydges et al. 2022, 367). The effectiveness of knowledge accumulated from communication therefore depends on the content, the source of the content and who the reader is. It helps that the communication strategy is driven by the outcome, meaning the action that can be taken by the reader (Yan, Henninger, Jones and McCormick 2020).

Often appealing to a customer's emotions in communicating sustainability is more effective than intellectual arguments and information (Martin & Schouten 2012, 192). The credibility of the communication must be kept in mind, however, to make sure the customer sees the brand's claims as reliable. Storytelling is one of the most effective ways of appealing to emotions. The emotions that arise from messages in online communication play a significant role in the perception the public has of organisations (Kim et al. 2015, 506).

To be transparent and credible in their communication, brands must use a mix of storytelling and story-proving and the content must be both educative and emotional (Amritha & Suresh 2020, 552). Storytelling will be explored further in the next chapters. In this thesis, educational and story-proving content include supply chain transparency, certifications, and details about resource use.

#### 4.2.4 Sustainability communication of fashion brands right now

Sustainability communication of fashion brands on brand websites is often divided into sections including details about fibres, fabrics and materials, manufacturing, and workers as well as garment care. The care section usually focuses on extending the life of the garment by caring for it correctly.

The fashion industry is responding to the growing demand for sustainability information and the growth of the movement by adding new methods of communication on their websites. Brands are developing CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) policies, LCAs and supply chain transparency. Brands cannot forget the importance of implementing the policies (Kozlowski, Searcy, and Bardecki 2015, 18-19).

Brand websites aim at supporting transparency as well as introducing all the sustainability initiatives the brand is involved in. Fashion brands are also careful not to be too transparent in their communication in the fear of attracting negative press (Brydges et al. 2022, 362-364). This may however be true mostly for bigger brands that are involved in bigger operations that



they do not control fully themselves. Smaller brands can use transparency in their favour much more, because they tend to know their suppliers better and are therefore able to share more genuine information that is not going to hurt them overall.

Fashion brand websites often include a mission, vision, and philosophy (Henninger, Alevizou, and Oates 2017, 19). These are not always explicitly stated but can be inferred. Brand websites are also the place where you can find the most detailed information on sustainability (Brydges et al. 2022, 366). Therefore, websites have been chosen as the focus for the study.

Slow fashion brands often use their websites to communicate their values and brand philosophy, transparently display the supply chain of their products as well as provide conscious consumption alternatives. Brands are also balancing communicating the benefits of producing clothing more consciously and their aesthetic appeal. Dialogue between suppliers, brands and customers is deemed vital in developing a more circular fashion system (Han et al. 2017, 15-17).

The communication of fashion brands is ambiguous, which leads to the confusion of customers and to the impression that sustainability claims may be unfounded (Evans & Peirson-Smith 2018, 254). It is therefore important for small slow fashion brands to keep their communication clear to avoid confusing customers further and to stand out from those brands that attempt to confuse customers with ambiguous claims.

#### 4.2.5 Creating a sustainability communication model

In this thesis, the focus is on creating a sustainability communication model for slow fashion brand websites. Based on this model, brands can develop their communication plans and strategies.

A communication plan is how an organisation provides and acquires information and engages in a conversation with people (Robertson 2019, 188). The stages of developing a communication plan include setting the goals and time frame, understanding the audience, setting objectives, creating a key message, picking communication channels, deciding how to implement the plan, and creating a project plan (Robertson 2019, 190). The sustainability communication model created in this thesis focuses on setting the objectives for sustainability communication.

Creating an online CSR communication plan requires doing a stakeholder analysis with an information requirement analysis. It is also important to integrate the plan into the overall

communication plan of the organisation, make sure the plan is tailored to the target group and that it is interactive (Isenmann 2006, 250-252). This has also been highlighted in previous chapters, where it was explored how important it is to keep in mind the values of the customers and where they are on their level of understanding of sustainability, as this has a notable impact on the effectiveness of the content.

#### *4.2.5.1 Facets of the sustainability communication model*

Brands must communicate sustainability through many different methods and there is no one method that is enough on its own. An effective sustainability communication model is made up of a variety of different facets including a sustainability vision, supply chain transparency, certifications, storytelling, and brand ranking. A sustainability communication model that combines emotional appeal as well as facts is the most effective. All these elements are explored in more detail in this section, including an analysis of their effectiveness and downsides.

#### **Sustainability vision**

A sustainability vision is a central part of many sustainability-focused brands and often communicated on their websites. It sets the tone for the brand and is therefore at a focal point in the sustainability communication of a brand and important to analyse. Many brands represent a sustainability philosophy or manifesto which is seen as equal to the sustainability vision in this thesis. The vision is often represented with the brand values, which are also reflected in the vision.

A vision is an organisation's base for their long-term strategy of what they want to achieve. It is an important communication tool that conveys key information to stakeholders (Conaway et al. 2012). A sustainability vision is seen as the starting point for the formulation of an organisational strategy and is considered essential on the journey to sustainability. It represents the organisation's dream. Attributes that affect the performance of a sustainability vision are brevity, clarity, future orientation, stability, challenge, abstractness, and ability to inspire, as well as demonstrating a positive impact on stakeholders. These attributes of a sustainability vision have also been proven to improve sustainability performance (Kantabutra 2020, 1-19). Visions in general have been researched to need to be visionary, sustainable, systemic, coherent, plausible, tangible, relevant, nuanced, motivational and shared. When looking at sustainability visions, they are characterised by the need to address complex issues that relate to many stakeholder's needs and values (Iwaniec, Childers, VanLehn and Wiek 2014).

When evaluating website communication of sustainability, one key question is if there is a clear sustainability vision and if clear ways of achieving this vision are listed (Allen 2016, 83).

This highlights the importance of a vision in communicating the sustainability of an organisation. It additionally shows the need for clarity in the vision.

### **Supply chain transparency**

The next aspect of sustainability communication is supply chain transparency, which is key for small fashion brands especially. The fashion industry is notorious for being secretive and non-transparent about the processes and behind-the-scenes happenings. For many fast fashion brands, it is the source of the most backlash and PR crisis, as they are unaware of or unwilling to reveal their supply chains. Therefore, it is an important way for slow fashion brands to stand out and differentiate themselves. Small brands usually have a more intimate relationship with their suppliers.

Supply chain transparency includes information on the raw material origins, the product processes, and paths from place of origin to customer and sustainability details such as emissions and product life cycle (Bai and Sarkis 2020, 2145). Transparency is the act of organisations openly sharing the good and damaging effects on the environment and society of their supply chains (Gutterman 2021, 131).

Transparency is used by organisations to appeal to customers who deem sustainability important in their purchasing behaviour (Gutterman 2021, 137). Organisations signify social responsibility by marketing about the country of origin of the products or describing how the social responsibility is audited (Martin & Schouten 2012, 118). This can be done in many ways, including a combination of storytelling and story-proving.

Consumers care about the origin of products, so it is important to tell them transparently about the supply chain of products and their entire life cycle (Gutterman 2021, 117). Traceability and the origin of raw materials have been deemed more important than labels by both experts and customers of fashion brands (Henninger 2015, 6024). As transparency is of interest for customers, it is a requirement for customer-facing communication on websites.

Currently, customers feel no connection to the individuals involved in the garment creation process. There is a need for creating more collaborative relationships between brands and their suppliers to reach better supply chain transparency. Close collaboration between brands and partners throughout the supply chain allows customers to gain a better understanding of the people included in the garment creation process and change their buying habits to be more sustainable (Fuxman, Mohr, Mahmoud and Grigoriou 2022, 389-391). One vital aspect of supply chain transparency is therefore the introduction of the people involved in the garment creation process.

### **Certifications and labels**

While transparency is often the brand's own claims of the journey of a product through the supply chain, certifications give trustworthy third-party confirmation of a brand's degree of sustainability. Even though they do come with their own set of issues, certifications are also important in assuring customers of the credibility of their claims.

Sustainability certifications are third-party assessed standards relating to the environmental, social, and ethical issues of the company's products (Allen 2016, 84). Certifications are a way for organisations to symbolically communicate the legitimacy of their environmental claims, making the organisation seem trustworthy in all areas of the business when recognised (Allen 2016, 87). Eco-labels are labels on products that communicate a positive impact on the environment and society (Robertson 2019, 133). Fashion brands use certifications to overcome issues brought on by greenwashing and to display how they match up to industry standards. The advantage of them is that they are typically easy for customers to spot (Brydges et al. 2022, 360-363).

Most fashion brands use some certifications. The certifications most used by slow fashion brands, including the ones analysed in this thesis, are GOTS, GRS and OCS. All the certifications are related to the fibre used in fabric production.

GOTS certifies that a product is made of organic material. The GOTS certification can certify any stage of the textile supply chain including spinning, weaving, wet-processing, manufacturing, and packaging. The process of certification includes an assessment of dyes used, water consumption and wastewater treatment systems. The certification also considers social criteria by ensuring a living wage is paid and prohibits forced or child labour as well as discrimination and harassment (Global Organic Textile Standard, 2022).

GRS is a certificate developed in 2008 to ensure the correct labelling of recycled material. It further regulates chemical usage and working conditions in the spinning, weaving, dyeing, printing, and stitching phases of the production. Auditing is done by third-party organisations (Textile Exchange, 2022).

OCS 100 verifies the presence of between 95-100% organic material. It does so from the fibre to the finished garment through independent third-party inspections, to ensure that the labelling of the product is correct. The certification covers processing, manufacturing, packaging, and distribution. Certified facilities include ginning, spinning, weaving, and dyeing (Control Union Certifications, 2022).

Since globalisation is expanding our sense of belonging, certifications such as Fairtrade appeal to our desire to purchase sustainable products (Martin & Schouten 2012, 61). Customers deem eco-labels to be valuable in identifying sustainable products (Henninger 2015, 6022). However, it can be difficult for consumers to recognise or understand the meaning of many labels (Turunen and Halme 2021, 2; Henninger 2015, 6022). It is therefore important to explain the meaning of the certifications and not simply use the recognisability of the label. Customers want to understand what exactly it is that makes products sustainable and explaining what certification really certify can aid in this.

Environmental sustainability is easier for organisations to market through certificates, whereas some suggest that social responsibility does not have equally strong branding (Gutterman 2021, 118). This could be because certifications that signify social responsibility specifically have not become as widely recognisable or understood by the public. Most labels do not incorporate all aspects of the business, so they are not enough to certify everything is done sustainably. Furthermore, eco-labels can be out of reach as they are too expensive for small brands and eventually increase the price of the product for the end customer (Henninger 2015, 6024). However, many small slow fashion brands use certifications, as evidenced by the brands studied in this thesis.

### **Storytelling**

As mentioned in previous sections about effective sustainability communication, appealing to a customer's emotions is key in affecting their thoughts on a brand's sustainability. Storytelling is one of the main ways of evoking emotions and as a communication method, it has many other benefits too. Storytelling is defined here as well as its effect, how it should ideally be done and what it constitutes of.

Stories teach values and shape behaviour and culture, making them memorable (Robertson 2019, 37; Rodriguez 2020, 8). According to research, stories can be up to 22 times more memorable than other forms of communication (Rodriguez 2020, 7). A good story can activate the whole human brain. Humans make emotional decisions when buying, making storytelling an effective tool by connecting emotions to information. Stories also grab the attention of the audience (Rodriguez 2020, 8).

People tend to organise their understanding of the world in terms of stories, which is why storytelling is one of the most effective ways of communicating sustainability (Martin and Schouten 2012, 204). Because sustainability in fashion is so ambiguous, stories are especially important in supporting purchase decisions by conveying the sustainability impacts of a product (Charles and Marciniak 2021, 51). It is therefore important to include storytelling as a

part of sustainability communication and it is often done by small slow fashion brands instinctively.

Stories and storytelling guide us in our decision-making and are therefore powerful ways of communicating sustainability (Allen 2016, 100). In sustainable fashion communication research, it has been suggested that customers connect more with stories about humans involved in the creation process of the clothing, rather than ideas of climate change (Han et al. 2017, 10). Storytelling is used by ethical brands to highlight the relationships with producers or the stories of dyes and fibres. It is most effective when the design relates to the stories behind the product (Sinclair 2014, 548). This can be seen from the blogs of small slow fashion brands, where they introduce the process behind the garments.

Instead of just telling stories, brands need to actively engage the customers to be accountable and become drivers of change through education, creating communities and empowering customers to share their stories and become activists (Charles et al. 2021, 51). By making the customer the main character or hero in your brand story, you are putting them in a position where they care about what happens to the brand and the story (Rodriguez 2020, 21). The story of a brand should be about how the brand has a positive impact on the customer (Rodriguez 2020, 70). The customer can be made the main character or hero of the story by putting them in a position where they have the power to enact change with their behaviour and have a positive impact on the planet with their consumption habits.

The main aspects of good storytelling include a main character, conflicts, and morals (Amlani, Bertels and Hadler 2016, 14-15). A mission statement forms the foundation and beginning of the brand story. The main function of a story is to evoke emotion in the audience (Rodriguez 2020, 7-13). A good story would therefore have the customer as a main character, a mission, then introduce conflicts that they encounter and finally what the moral of the story is.

The design thinking process can be applied to the storytelling building process (Rodriguez 2020, 22). This can be implemented when the communication plan and strategy are made. The process of building and planning storytelling is therefore slightly different than other forms of sustainability communication.

### **Sustainability ranking and rating**

Organisations such as Good on You, Fashion Revolution, Business of Fashion and Sustainable Brand Index rank brands according to various criteria, but mostly relating to the sustainability communication of brands on their websites. Out of these four organisations, Good On You is the only one that ranks small brands, such as the ones chosen for this study. The other three

focus on the largest brands with the highest turnover in fashion or in other industries. Good On You is therefore chosen as the way of looking at the rating of small fashion brands.

A positive ranking on an independent third-party site communicates that the organisation is doing well consistently in many areas of business (Allen 2016, 88). Since credibility is key in effective sustainability communication as mentioned previously, sustainability ranking is used as a lens of looking at brands that are doing sustainability communication well and evaluating the effectiveness of sustainability communication.

Apps like Good On You provide customers with information about brands hoping that they will reward 'good' companies and avoid those that are benefiting from labour exploitation (Limoncelli 2020, 34). This demonstrates the customer facing nature of the Good On You platform.

Rank-a-Brand is a non-profit foundation that developed a scoring system which ranks the sustainability of brands by evaluating the sustainability communication offered on their websites. This ranking system is used as the basis of the "Good On You" app (Wolfe 2019). The Good On You rating system aims to support the UN (United Nations) Sustainable Development Goal 12: "Ensure sustainable production and consumption patterns". The app was founded in 2015 and uses all publicly available information including company websites, third-party reports (Fashion Transparency Index and CDP Climate Change and Water Security projects) and certification schemes. It runs on founder contributions, crowdfunding, sponsorships, affiliate marketing, grants, and seed capital from investors. The founders are business professionals, campaigners, sustainability experts and tech developers from all over the world. Sponsorships and marketing are only done with brands rated the two highest scores, 'Good' or 'Great.' The app has ranked a mix of small and large brands, but standards are more demanding for larger companies with bigger turnover, and they are expected to publish more detailed information. The fashion brands rated include those that produce clothing and accessories from all over the world. Users can suggest brands to be ranked and brands can also apply to be ranked by Good On You. Brand search on the platform can be refined by the brand values, location, and product type among other criteria (Good On You 2022).

The methodology is developed together with industry professionals, academics, and organisations such as FairTrade, Fashion Revolution and Fashion for Good. Together with them, the rating system is constantly reviewed and details about new sustainability initiatives are added. The rating is divided into the categories of environment, labour, and animals with 500 data points from all three. Brands that are rated great are usually very transparent and have both strong policies and strong assurance from certifications. The environmental

category includes material use and disposal, energy use, chemical use and disposal and water use and disposal. The labour category includes worker rights, living wage, gender equality, worker empowerment, knowing suppliers, supplier relationships, purchasing practices, production risk and COVID-19. Animal category includes policy, the use of fur, leather, wool, down, angora, animal hairs, animal skins and the traceability to the farm (Good On You 2020).

#### *4.2.5.2 Assessing sustainability communication*

As explored in previous sections, sustainability communication must be actionable and consumer-centered to be effective and clear. To build a sustainability communication model, I will be using the key facets introduced in the previous sections that are taken from previous literature, the ranking categories of Good On You as well as the OSEC-model and Shades of Green instrument as the basis. This allows for an integration of ranking criteria for sustainability action, as is the case for Good On You and the Shades of Green instrument and the effectiveness of the sustainability communication via the use of the OSEC-model and academic literature.

The OSEC model is built by Siano et al. (2016) on measurable items taken from company websites to assess their sustainability communication. I will be adjusting elements of this model to measure brand websites rather than corporate websites. The framework is divided into Orientation, Structure, Ergonomics and Content. Orientation is about the philosophy and core values of the brand that is visible on their website, mainly on the 'about us' page. The structure is about how the company proves the credibility of their sustainability statements, including stakeholder relationships and the sustainability operations of the company. Ergonomics refers to how easy the website is to navigate; how interactive it is and how usable. The content relates to the information about the sustainability initiatives done by the company. The model also gives penalty points for things construed as greenwashing. The OSEC model introduces all elements necessary for successful sustainability communication and allows companies to improve their efforts. The model also allows for benchmarking within the industry, therefore identifying competitors in the industry and how well they are performing in sustainability communication. It also allows managers to identify effective sustainability communication strategies (Siano et al. 2016, 5-12).

The OSEC model was developed by researchers in communication and is based on literature of corporate sustainability and digital communication and an analysis of the websites of organisations. It was initially used to study energy companies (Siano et al. 2016, 1). However, the model is lacking mostly in the content section. While information about sustainability initiatives must be listed, it does not specify what kind of information or what types of initiatives are required here. The measurable items are therefore quite subjective and



flexible and may not give an accurate idea of how truly sustainable the organisation is, just how much they are communicating. The elements introduced are also not actionable as the model is made for corporate websites and is not consumer centred. For analysing the sustainability communication of small fashion brands, there are many elements that do not apply because of the small size of the organisations, such as a sustainability report. I will therefore be adjusting the model to be applicable to the fashion industry as well as for smaller organisations.

The Shades of Green instrument is developed by researchers specifically for the textile industry and is seen as being in between third-party accreditation and free form communication. The view of the instrument is wider than individual certifications, considering a wider range of sustainability issues. Compared to free form communication, the instrument gives more specific requirements for sustainability action and addresses the level of commitment to them. It was developed based on the World Commission on Environment and Development definition of sustainable development and the existing criteria of certifications. The instrument has been divided into environmental and social aspects of the economic value creation of organisations. The environmental aspect is divided into design, materials, production, and support services. The social aspect consists of working conditions. For social sustainability to reach higher levels in this model, they must adhere to the SA8000® guidance and the Fair Wear Foundation's Code of Labor Practices. It also divides sustainability action into three levels of integration, with different requirements for each level (Turunen and Halme 2021, 2-5).

However, the instrument is not created to assess sustainability communication, but the level of sustainability of individual products. For this thesis, the instrument will be used to inform ways in which sustainability of products can be communicated in an actionable way and applied to all products instead of individual ones. While the Shades of Green instrument is built for assessing the level of sustainability rather than the effectiveness of the communication, it can be used to determine what elements of sustainability are deemed important to communicate. This is a model that is especially useful as it is built for textile products. However, the model only focuses on environmental and social aspects, so it lacks economic sustainability. The highest level, sustainability innovation, is what we will focus on. It is divided into design, materials, production, support services and working conditions. This will add to the concrete content aspect that the OSEC model is lacking in, as well as moving the focus to the fashion industry. It will also ensure that the sustainability communication model has a customer-centric approach.

## 5. Summary of literature review

The literature review introduces the key tenets of sustainability communication in fashion, which form the basis for developing a new sustainability communication model for small brands. The key idea to communicate about sustainability is the triple bottom line including social, economic, and environmental sustainability. These three areas encompass a wide range of issues in fashion, such as effective resource use, durability, and ethics. Customers have been found to be especially interested in supply chain transparency. They also expect information about the entire process of production.

Effective methods of communicating found through previous research and models of sustainability include sustainability rankings, policy, a sustainability vision, certifications, storytelling, and transparency. Certification and transparency are also used to combat greenwashing. These methods must be used in conjunction with one another and are not sufficient on their own. Literature found that for sustainability communication to have the best effect on the reader, it must be clear, credible, emotionally evocative, educative, and actionable. Storytelling is found to be the most effective way to evoke emotions in the reader. Brands must also understand the values of their customers and where they are in their level of understanding of sustainability.

## 6. Methodology and development task

### 6.1 Purpose, objectives, development tasks and issues

The purpose of the development part of the thesis is to firstly understand the methods of sustainability communication and storytelling that are currently being used by high-performing brands fashion brands, secondly to see how the communication efforts are rated through different independent frameworks and thirdly build a framework for small slow fashion brands to build a clear and easily understood sustainability communication model.

The objective is that the communication framework could be used by the target company or other companies in the same industry to help them clarify sustainability efforts to their customers. It is specifically suitable for small fashion brands as they have been studied in this thesis. It gives an overview of what sustainability communication and storytelling methods are used by brands that are deemed successful in their communication via Good On You and based on criteria taken from the literature review. This can help brands identify communication methods that have been successful for other brands and create a strategy that works for them. With clearer communication of sustainability initiatives, brands can push the discussion of sustainability to another level, where definitions of sustainability are less ambiguous and there is an increase in transparency.

I am developing a communication framework where storytelling can be employed along with objective and transparent sustainability information, based on the benchmarking of sustainability communication and storytelling of brands ranked great on Good On You. The research is limited to written communication only and excludes all visual aspects such as graphic design, as the focus is on how to communicate the sustainability actions with words instead of alluding to the idea of sustainability through visuals. This is done, because the focus is on avoiding greenwashing which is often done by brands through visuals. Research on written sustainability communication has also been researched widely and visual communication is another discipline with a separate set of criteria.

The focus is also solely on website communication and excludes social media. The thesis centres on brand websites because a website reaches the widest possible audience, allows people to look at content whenever they want, and lets you edit the content whenever needed (Robertson 2019, 137). Because of this, websites can influence the largest amount of people and therefore have a substantial impact compared to the different communication channels. It is also accessible to most people. The ability to edit whenever needed also offers brands the possibility to flexibly add and delete content when new sustainability initiatives are explored. This allows the sustainability communication strategy to be updated when necessary. Brand websites are also the place where you can find the most extensive sustainability communication, as many social media channels focus on visual communication.

## 6.2 Methodology

The research for this thesis is done through a predominantly iterative process, which is common in qualitative research (Bartlett and Vavrus 2017). This type of research is a process of iteration and a conversation back and forth between theory and data.

First a literature review was conducted through searches of key words such as sustainability communication, storytelling and slow fashion of Google Scholar and Finna. The literature focuses solely on research published in English, with the studies focusing on Europe, all papers published after 1998 and a focus on papers published in the past few years. The research excludes the topics of reporting, graphic design, and visual communication. Research was then done of the best practices in the industry, through an analysis of the criteria of the rating site Good On You that ranks fashion brands. Brands were chosen based on their rating on Good On You. Data was then gathered from the five brand websites through note taking to conduct benchmarking. The data collected focuses on two categories: sustainability communication and storytelling. Based on the results of this, theory was referred to again to build the final framework that combines theory and data from the research.

The target company has been selected because it represents a small Europe-based slow fashion brand that I have access to study and observe in detail while working at the company. The benchmarked brands are chosen as they are ranked highest on the Good On You ranking website, which analyses the sustainability communication of brand websites. They are of an equivalent size to the target company, are based in Europe but have global markets and have clothing retail as their main function. All the brands selected sell women's and/or menswear. I have chosen four companies, because it gives me the opportunity to see a sample of brands from different countries with a slightly different focus and branding, but still within the criteria set for this thesis.

I conducted benchmarking to understand sustainability communications in small brands now. The four brands chosen to benchmark with Baserange all received the highest rating on Good On You and were therefore identified as the highest performers in sustainability communication to learn from. Benchmarking is considered a management tool for learning from the best practices of others to attain or exceed their performance (Anand and Kodali 2008, Stapenhurst 2009). The positive impacts of benchmarking have been found to come true in all cases where it is applied with an understanding of the reasons why it is done and used thoughtfully. The reasons companies perform benchmarking include to improve their practices or motivate them to improve practices, to solve problems or to justify a proposal (Stapenhurst 2009). In this case, the objective is that the benchmarking will do all the above. The aim is that the benchmarking can help Baserange improve their sustainability communication and solve some of the issues the company is facing, introduced earlier in the case study. The benchmarking can also be shown to management to justify why the sustainability communication model needs to be adjusted.

The themes for benchmarking are based on existing sustainability communication literature as well as the content on the websites of small slow fashion brands analysed. I conducted industry benchmarking, as I focused on fashion brands in the industry with different specialisations, even ones that are not direct competitors. The purpose of this benchmarking is strategic as it focuses on the communication strategy of different fashion brands and what strategic choices they have made and should be making. The purpose of this benchmarking is also collaborative, as the purpose is to share knowledge found for small slow fashion brands to make more informed decisions about their sustainability communication strategies (Fong, Cheng, and Ho 1998). The benchmarking can also be categorised as database benchmarking, where a consultant has gathered data about two or more organisations and controls the study. In this type of benchmarking, it is important that definitions for the data are clear and that the objectives for the study are known. It can lead to recommendations for improvements and even facilitation of those recommendations. In this thesis, the aim is that

the improvements suggested based on the benchmarking will be applied by Baserange. Trial benchmarking is also applicable to this thesis, as it is carried out by one organisation against its competitors without them knowing. Benchmarking websites in this way is shown to provide concrete improvements to the organisations. This process begins with understanding the objectives, identifying target organisations, creating a list of data requirements, carrying out the comparison and finally analysing the data (Stapenhurst 2009). The process described is applicable to what was done in this thesis.

The benchmarking of the five brands was straightforward, however it was challenging to find certain things on all the brands, for instance the turnover, number of employees and an accurate and up to date number of stockists. This information was naturally easier to access at the target organisation. It was also difficult to choose which themes to analyse in the benchmarking, as the literature review represented themes that were not highlighted by rating site Good On You and that were not done by the case companies. This was a process where I went back and forth with the practices of the brands on their websites, the rating criteria as well as the literature about sustainability communication to find the best themes for the benchmarking tables.

I identified the sustainability communication methods used by similar small slow fashion brands that are rated highest on the Good On You rating system. The primary framework used for identifying if the sustainability communication of a brand is effective was the Good On You rating system. The OSEC model and Shades of Green Instrument were used after checking the criteria of a high rating brand on Good On You to determine the effectiveness of the communication further. The literature review was also used to determine what forms of sustainability communication are seen as best practices in the industry.

A framework was then made for building an effective sustainability communication strategy, based on the previous frameworks for sustainability communication. This framework consists of the different communication methods used, what information needs to be provided and how it should be communicated, based on the literature review and the practices of other high-performing brands.

### 6.3 Data collection

This research centers around qualitative methods, as qualitative methods allow for research that represents the subtle and complex aspects of the study, allows for critical and comprehensive analysis of data, and gains new insights to a topic (Seale, Gobo, Gubruim and Silverman 2004). Qualitative research also suits especially well for in-depth research in relatively new areas (Basias and Pollalis 2018). As sustainability communication research has focused primarily on large companies, this thesis investigated a relatively new area of

research. This thesis does not comment on the frequency of any method of communication, but only analyses the effectiveness of methods according to different criteria.

The research centers around the case study of Baserange. I used the target company as the base case study and analysed it through qualitative methods. A case study is an in-depth analysis of a real-life phenomenon (Yin 2009, 18). Case studies are used to create a holistic view of all processes involved in a business, as it offers up multiple perspectives about how things work in practice. Case studies use many methods of collecting data and can be used to test new management frameworks (Basias et al. 2018). In this case, the sustainability communication framework can be implemented by Baserange as it has been designed with the processes of the business in mind.

The case study focuses on Baserange operations globally in 2022. Baserange was chosen in March 2022 after contacting many small slow fashion brands based in Europe with a proposal for the research. All the companies fit the purpose of finding small brands that operate in clothing retail with a focus on slow and sustainable fashion. Baserange replied and was the most interested in going ahead with the research proposal as it was presented. It was also an interesting organisation to study, as it was clear that the brand focuses on sustainability actions over written communication. Their focus is on visual communication, which is considered the strength and focal point of the brand. This offered a clean slate that allowed for development in written communication of sustainability. The collaboration with the company started right away and consisted of research, written content creation, sustainable development including working with production partners and finally creating a sustainability communication framework as the result of the thesis. One challenge in conducting research about website communication for the brand was that there is no one at the brand that has specialised in sustainability communication until now. Communication was done by PR firms, freelancers, and people in other positions at the company, so there was no clear existing strategy or plan. This allowed for freedom in choosing a suitable direction for the framework, but also made it difficult to make decisions with little previous experience or expectations from the brand. However, the founders of the brand have been very open to suggestions in the direction for the communication strategy from the beginning.

Data was collected from many case organisations, representing a comparative case study, and was analysed through benchmarking. The data gathered will be from one point in time, reflecting the situation at that point and not how the results evolve. A comparative case study is heuristic, in the sense that it is a method of discovering from experience. One way of conducting comparative case study research is identifying units of analysis and comparing those. These units of analysis have a place, purpose, or identity in common that relates to the central phenomenon. Context, including the social, political, and economic processes, is

a key theme in comparative case studies (Bartlett et al. 2017). In this sort of study, it is more usual to think of the phenomenon, in this case sustainability communication in small slow fashion brands, rather than the individual case, Baserange. The comparison would be classified as horizontal by Bartlett et al., as it compares cases with each other and looks at external influences of all cases. The methods of data collection for the case study were as follows.

### 6.3.2 Observation

I used observation as one method of research. The observations started when I first contacted Baserange in March 2022 and continued until the thesis was completed at the beginning of 2023. Observations of the organisational structure, challenges and practices were made in Copenhagen at the office and store space of Baserange Denmark as well as the internal team meetings had online with employees of Baserange in France and freelancers that the organisation works with globally. Observations also extended to customer interactions in the store, internal documents and meetings with suppliers and production partners. Meetings observed includes sales meetings, design meetings, weekly team meetings, digital and editorial meetings. Notes have been taken throughout the period, recording the observed needs and challenges of the brand.

My observation of the internet focuses on the use of it as a tool for brands to communicate to different stakeholders. In internet-mediated research discussion forums, blogs and social networking sites allow the observation of written communication (Hewson 2014, 436). Observing competitor websites allows for learning from the success of others and helps avoid mistakes (Conaway et al. 2012). The analysis of brand websites uses unobtrusive data, as the content on the websites is already in existence. Data collected from multiple websites allows for data triangulation and therefore more reliable findings (Gray 2021). The observation of the websites was done covertly. Notes were taken of the data collected from the websites of five brands: Baserange, Story mfg., Le Pirol, MUD Jeans and DEDICATED. The observations of websites that were done with note taking was in November of 2022.

Observation entails recording the patterns in an organisation without communicating with individuals. Participant observation as a complete participant describes what I have done to build the case study of Baserange, where I have gotten fully involved in the day-to-day activities of the organisation. This was combined with highly unstructured interviews, as is often the case (Sreejesh & Mohapatra 2014). According to Sreejesh & Mohapatra, biases and misunderstanding can come in the way of the reliability of observation as a research method. Therefore, observation has been combined with other research methods to get a full understanding of the case.

Doing observation for research while simultaneously working for the brand had its challenges and it was difficult to determine when to share the progress of my research, the results of it thus far or when to reveal the purposes of my observation. It was difficult to draw a line between my work for the brand and the thesis work as there were many overlaps and one influenced the other. It also became difficult to compile and make conclusions about the various views of people in the organisation especially in different positions, with different backgrounds and coming from different cultures. However, the observations have formed a baseline understanding of how the organisation currently does communication, what is possible and what would work best for them.

### 6.3.3 Interviews and Personal conversations

Alongside this, interviews were conducted and observed with producers and suppliers of the brand. I interviewed four production partners in Portugal in-person as well as online on Skype. These production partners worked on the wet processing, knitting, and sewing stages of production. One knitting production partner in France was interviewed via Skype. Other production partners in fabric dyeing, weaving, knitting as well as sewing have been interviewed via email. The purposes of these interviews were to do research for content production for Baserange but ended up giving me an understanding of the way the producers operate, how Baserange collaborates with them and how this can be used in building a sustainability communication framework. Some of the personal conversations and interviews have been recorded with the permission of all parties involved and notes have been taken on all conversations. The personal conversations that have not been recorded were with the two co-founders, store manager, graphic designers, and fashion designers that work at the brand. The conversations were had during the fall of 2022 when participating in meetings and daily activities of the organisation. These conversations were not explicitly had with the intention of using them for the thesis but ended up being useful for understanding how the employees view the operations of the company, understanding the customer interests and challenges the employees have encountered in sustainability communication.

Using interviews and personal conversations as further research for the thesis felt like a natural extension of the work I was doing for the brand otherwise. The two complemented and informed each other well. They also gave a good view of the operational model of the brand to understand how the sustainability communication framework could be implemented and what information is possible to acquire.



#### 6.4 Data management plan

Data collected is stored in the Google Drive cloud that only the researcher has access to. The data is password protected. It will all be deleted once the thesis has been evaluated, unless the target company wishes to keep the data, in which case the data will be given to the company. Research papers found are stored, along with notes taken from the thematic analysis of brand websites and observations and the Good On You rating app. Recordings of interviews with production partners are stored on a password protected phone.

#### 6.5 Methods of data analysis

The data analysis procedure I used is thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a way of identifying, organising, and offering insight into themes in a set of data to analyse it. The steps of a thematic analysis include becoming familiar with the content of the data set, generating initial codes, constructing themes, reviewing the themes, defining the themes, and producing the report. Codes provide labels to data relevant to the research question. Around six themes tend to be sufficient (Braun & Clarke 2012, 57-69). Data was categorised into codes representing themes in sustainability communication and storytelling. I codes the data through concept-driven coding, where most of my themes have come from previous studies done in the field and observations of websites made. Codes may also appear when the data analysis begins (Gibbs 2018, 38-44).

The data set's content included the literature review on best practices in sustainability communication and storytelling and the website content of the brands used for the benchmarking. The initial codes came from the literature review in the field and those were analysed in comparison to the data from the brand websites. This allowed the research to focus on central themes that appear in both theory and practice. Themes were then defined according to the most common wording used in literature and the websites. First themes for thematic analysis came from literature, and these were further defined by the communication done on the brand websites analysed. Especially in the analysis of storytelling, themes from literature were wide ranging and were heavily filtered by the website communication of brands. Two tables were then created to enact benchmarking of the sustainability communication and storytelling found on brand websites. Thematic analysis was an appropriate method of analysis for the data because it allowed for the iterative process of developing the central themes. It was hard to keep track of the different streams of data and which ones to prioritise for the final methods. In the end, the methods chosen were ones that were most appropriate for the cases studied.

The sustainability communication benchmarking table is made up of five main themes in sustainability communication and quotes to illustrate their use on websites. The themes are sustainability vision, how the vision is achieved, supply chain transparency, certifications, and

environmental, social, and economic sustainability. All themes were analysed through the lens of the website communication of five small slow fashion brands.

The storytelling benchmarking table is made up of five main themes in storytelling and quotes to illustrate their use on websites. The themes are emotionally evocative, values, mission statement, conflicts and moral of the story. All themes were analysed through the lens of the website communication of five small slow fashion brands. The themes were picked with the intention that the brands utilise these aspects of storytelling on their websites. There are aspects of storytelling not adapted by the brands on their websites or too abstract or subjective, so they were not chosen for the benchmarking.

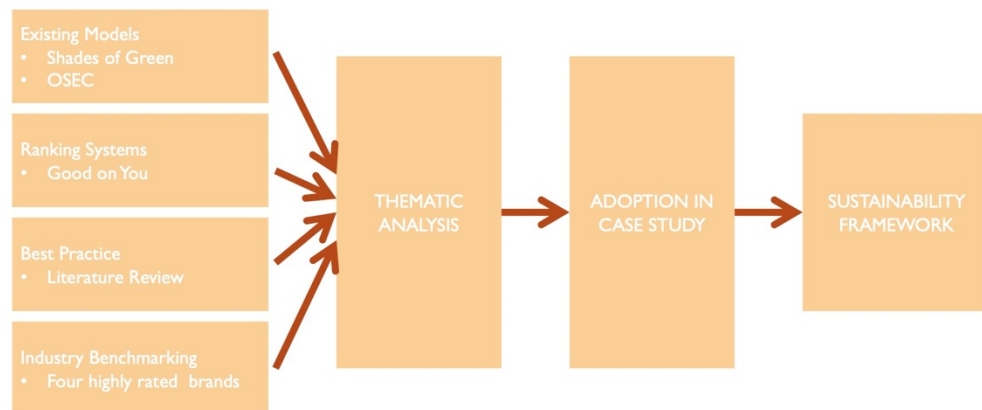


Figure 1: The thesis research process

The categories that I created following the adoption in the case study were

- Policy
- Certification
- Use phase
- Resource use
- Capital
- Transparency
- Sustainability vision
- Storytelling

Each category, or sustainability communication method, includes items that brands must communicate clearly for the message to be effective and to avoid greenwashing.

## 7. Results

### 7.1 Good On You

Baserange is the only brand in the benchmarking that does not have a 'Great' rating on Good On You. The purpose is to benchmark the sustainability communication of Baserange to the ones that are performing best on the rating system's website. When looking at the rating criteria of Good On You, one can see that Baserange is performing 3 points out of 5 on all three categories: people, planet, and animals.

In the environmental category, material use is discussed by Baserange on the production & sustainability page, as exemplified by Table 1. However, textile waste disposal is not explained in a lot of detail. Energy use of factories is touched on, but it is not made clear what the energy used is for the brand's own operations. Water use practices and disposal at the factories is explained, which can also be seen in Table 1. Chemical use is limited through natural dyes and certifications, which also control chemical disposal. These are also all communicated on the website, and they are public information.

In the labour category worker rights are discussed by Baserange, but the policies in place are not made clear. The methodology for ensuring living wage is also not stated explicitly. Gender equality, worker empowerment measures are also not listed. Baserange tracks subcontractors, even though suppliers are not listed by name on the website. It is made clear on the website that worker interviews and auditing is done. The website content also touches on long term contracts with suppliers.

For the animal category, there is no policy for animal welfare. However, Baserange does not use any fur, leather, down, angora, exotic animal hairs or skins. When wool is used it is non-mulesed or recycled, which is mentioned on the website. The source of the wool is also traced back to the origin of the fibre.

To reach a higher rating on the Good On You, Baserange needs to communicate textile waste disposal, energy use, worker rights, living wage, gender equality, worker empowerment and animal welfare policy. In general, the website is lacking a policy or a code of conduct on all these topics to reach a higher rating.

The Good On You platform values transparency, strong policies, and strong assurance from certifications equally. It is evident that strong policies are where Baserange is lacking to reach a higher rating. Baserange tends to have a focus on storytelling to convey sustainability actions taken by the brand and their factories, including topics related to materials, energy, chemicals, water, worker rights and empowerment.

## 7.2 The OSEC model

If we look at Baserange communication through the lens of the OCEC model, we can see that many aspects introduced by the model are missing. As a brand website rather than a corporate one, the vision and mission must be inferred and are not explicitly stated. The mission references environmental, social, and economic sustainability to an extent. There is a vision that touches on environmental and social sustainability, but economic aspects are not explicitly stated here. There is no stakeholder engagement section, materiality matrix, stakeholder case study, forum, FAQ, governance of sustainability, code of conduct, sustainability index or sustainability report. There is a blog, interactive graphs of sustainability and a glossary of materials' sustainability. Certifications are also presented and there is a multilingual functionality.

## 7.3 Shades of Green

When looking at Baserange through the Shades of Green instrument, specifically at the design aspect, the systemic durability of the design of the products is not communicated besides in the durability of the fabrics. The second part, materials, is more effectively communicated on the sustainability page through introductions of innovative and recycled materials. On the production part, attempts to minimise waste is explored on sustainability pages, however this could be discussed more extensively. This is discussed in the waste treatment of factories and the waste and resource minimisation of certain materials. The product service system part is not explained on the website at all, which is a key part of work in sustainability. This is something that the brand could do through the introduction of the repair service piloted in the Copenhagen Store. The working conditions aspect is covered through transparent production in distinct phases and long-term partnerships. The supply chain is communicated transparently from yarn spinning mills to the sewing factories. There is no assurance of socially responsible working conditions, however.

## 7.4 Results of sustainability communication benchmarking

When analysing the results of sustainability communication methods used on the websites of small slow fashion brands, we can see that most of them are doing similar things.

	Baserange	Story mfg.	Le Pirol	MUD Jeans	Dedicated
Sustainability vision	Ecological and humane sustainability	Change the fashion industry for the better and create a positive future	Create sustainable, long-lasting, and timeless design	Change the fashion industry and create a world without waste	Fair and responsible sourcing, less chemicals and transparency
Quote	"Baserange is constantly seeking better solutions across the industry and questioning its	"Story mfg. was born out of a desire for a more authentic, fulfilling and kind	"Le Pirol was founded in 2018, based on a desire to create sustainable, long-	"We want future generations to enjoy this planet as much as we do"	"We wanted to show that fashion can be done differently. In touch with nature.

	<b>Baserange</b>	<b>Story mfg.</b>	<b>Le Pirol</b>	<b>MUD Jeans</b>	<b>Dedicated</b>
	own practices with the goal of ecological and humane sustainability."	approach to fashion"	lasting and timeless designs."		Fair & responsible. And without the use of toxic pesticides and fertilizers"
<b>How the vision is achieved</b>	Materials with less of an impact are chosen and material impacts are explored	Supporting the arts, not creating waste, using regenerative agriculture, being kind to animals, anti-racism and having family values.	By producing clothing in Denmark, creating timeless designs, and caring for them in the proper way.	Circular design through using recycled fabrics, fair production, and positive activism	The use of certifications, long term partnerships and organic materials.
<b>Quote</b>	"Baserange is now working on changing our previous Bamboo "viscose" into Bamboo "lyocell." This new fiber has the same positive qualities as viscose, as it is derived from the fast-growing bamboo plant, but the process of rendering it into textile fibers is done using non-harmful chemicals"	"We collect our natural fibre offcuts from production and re use them for lining, stuffing or other items."  "Our natural indigo sourcing comes from an effort to fix nitrogen levels in over-tilled and farmed soil, and our dyeing takes place in a re-planted forest where all our waste is used to fertilise the gardens."	"We know that when we have good communication and close cooperation with our partners, we also get better products and thus a longer shelf life."	"MUD Jeans has become an exemplary circular fashion company, one of the world's first B Corps, pioneering the Lease a jeans model since 2013 and consistently putting the circular economy principles into practice."	"To this day, organic cotton remains our main material. The farming process requires up to 91% less water, 62% less energy, and emits 46% less Co2 compared to conventional cotton farming."
<b>Supply chain transparency</b>	The locations of the production network and material origins are fully revealed	Some locations where certain stages of production are done are revealed on product pages and the blog	The supply chain of the wool is clear, but the origin of cotton is not revealed.	The supply chain is transparent all the way from the cotton farmers, with factories being named on the website.	Factories producing garments are revealed, but it is not clear where materials are made.
<b>Quote</b>	"We are the only integrated silk producer in Turkey, which means that we have had to learn everything by ourselves and in turn to teach the people who work for us."	"Our beanies are naturally dyed and hand knit by our lovely partners in India."  "Hand embroidery at The Colours Of Nature, where these garments were first sewn"	"Le Pirol styles are Made in Denmark, Danish manufactured knitwear, knitted and sewn in the small town of Isenvad near Herning."	"All the virgin cotton that is mixed with our recycled cotton is GOTS certified. Through this process of certification we know that our cotton comes from Izmir, Turkey. "	"Armstrong is our main supplier for organic cotton jersey, and we've worked together since 2012. A family-owned company that was founded in 1969, and was one of the first to promote organic cotton and fair production in India."
<b>Certifications</b>	Each certification is explained and there is a table that shows which fabric correspond to which certificate	No certifications are mentioned	Certifications are mentioned but not proven.	Each certification is explained and there is information about which fabric correspond to which certificate	Each certification is explained and there is information about which fabric correspond to which certificate
<b>Quote</b>	"To fulfill the promise made to the consumer, we use recognized certifications"	-	"We buy yarns that are GOTS certified, but since our production is less than 10,000 units a year, it is too big a cost to get the	"All recycled material is GRS certified. The GRS is a full product standard that sets requirements of recycled content, chain of custody,	"DEDICATED has a Fairtrade license, is certified GOTS, and PETA Approved Vegan."

	Baserange	Story mfg.	Le Pirol	MUD Jeans	Dedicated
			Danish joint certified"	social and environmental practices and chemical restrictions."	
<b>Environmental, social, and economic sustainability</b>	Environmental and social aspects are explored in detail, from worker's rights to the impacts of fibres. Economic impacts are also explained with the skills of people at factories and the machinery used.	From an environmental perspective, waste and agriculture are discussed. From a social perspective, anti-racism and family values are brought up. Economic issues such as craft skills are mentioned.	Environmentally organic fabrics are mentioned and from an economic perspective, the experience of local production partners. Social aspects are not talked about.	Environmental, social, and economic impacts are all discussed in a lot of detail, from fair wages to water consumption, working conditions and innovation.	Environmental and social impacts are discussed in detail including working conditions and CO2 compensation, and economic impacts are mentioned such as experience of factories.
<b>Quote</b>	"The first factory we worked with really made us think about what it means to be "sustainable." They'd say, it's good you're getting these certifications, but what about these other things? They showed us their processes – how they clean and reuse water, how they cut the fabric so as not to consume too much"	"Our work is heavily craft-based and involves both teaching and learning new techniques together with our craftspeople. We are invested in giving continuous, well-paid work and do not switch for cheaper alternatives."	"We strive to be a leader in sustainable and locally produced organic knitwear, where the sustainable aspect lies both in the local production, but also in that fact that, Le Pirol's styles are made to last for a long time, so we can contribute to protect the environment."	"We want to provide fair and equal pay so we can enrich the livelihood of everyone working across our supply chain. Therefore, we aim to pay every worker in our supply chain above minimum wage."	"We've donated over 20.000 Fruit Trees to local farmers in India. The benefits with healthy forests are many. Their value for biodiversity, social impact, and the stability of the global climate are well documented."

Table 2: Benchmarking the sustainability communication of slow fashion brands

All brands introduce a clear sustainability vision and ways of achieving it on their websites. Some brands have a vision that is broader and overarching, whereas others are more actionable, making it clear how the vision can be achieved. Each vision is related to changing the fashion industry in some way, doing things differently or creating better products using better materials.

How the vision is achieved is described by all the brands and it is also demonstrated by the products made, materials used, and methods used to make the products. Brands describe achieving their respective visions by using material with less of an impact, not creating waste, using regenerative agriculture, producing locally, creating timeless and circular designs, fair production as well as the use of certifications.

The brands do differ on the degree of supply chain transparency of their websites. Some have described and illustrated a detailed chain from the farmer all the way to the final product, whereas others only mention final stage factories. The Baserange sustainability page introduces where all the fibres originate from and where various stages of productions are happening including spinning, dyeing, knitting, and sewing. The main factories are also

introduced with details about their practices and workers alongside interviews with the factory owners (Baserange 2022). Story mfg. leaves much more to the imagination, where it can be inferred where most production is happening, but it is not stated explicitly. For instance, it is mentioned that one type of dye grows in the foothills of the Himalayas, giving the impression that it is sourced from there while it is not made explicit. One product also mentions that it is block printed by Sufiyan Khatri and a quick Google search reveals that this factory is in India. The brand does not reveal any part of the supply chain in an obvious way (Story mfg. 2022). The product pages on the Le Pirol website reveal where the zipper is produced and where the garment is knitted and sewn. The sustainability pages further explain the origin of the wool fibre and where it is spun into yarn and dyed. The origin of cotton yarn is also revealed, but the origin of the fibre is not (Le Pirol 2022). MUD Jeans opens the entire supply chain of their products including farming, shredding, and spinning, dyeing, and weaving, stitching, and washing, logistics to selling. Each phase of production also has its own page, where the brand goes into detail about the processes and chemicals used and the people involved in production (MUD Jeans 2022). Dedicated names all their suppliers including their location with a breakdown of the employees of each factory and an explanation of their practices. Not all steps of production are revealed however, including dyeing and printing. It is not explicitly stated where these processes are happening (DEDICATED. 2022).

Most brands reveal the certifications they use for which fabric and what they mean. They explain the criteria of the certification and which fabric corresponds to which certification. Baserange has created a table on the sustainability page that displays which fabric corresponds to which certification, with an explanation of the certificates on the side. The certificates used by Baserange include GOTS, OCS, GRS, Oeko-tex, FSC and REACH (Baserange 2022). Dedicated lists GOTS, GRS, Fairtrade, PETA, SA8000 and WRAP on the certifications page and lists what exactly all of them consist of (DEDICATED. 2022). MUD Jeans lists certifications used on the materials page, which include GRS, GOTS, OCS, FSC and Cradle 2 cradle and explains what each certification means briefly (MUD Jeans 2022). Story mfg. does not mention any certificates on their pages and explains that some of their cotton cannot be labelled organic, because it is not always possible for farmers to get certifications that can be expensive and corrupt. They also say that they use organic cotton that adheres to rules set by a governing body, but do not mention what that certification system for the organic cotton is (Story mfg. 2022). Le Pirol alludes that wool is certified organic but does not mention the certification. Le Pirol also explains that the cotton used adheres to the criteria of the GOTS certificate, but because of small quantities they cannot perform the audit required to receive certification (Le Pirol 2022).

All brands studied discuss the environmental impact of production and the brand's activities, and touch on the economic impacts. Le Pirol is the only one that does not mention social

impacts at all. For environmental impacts, brands discuss things such as the impact of fibres, waste, animal welfare, agriculture, water consumption and CO2 compensation. Social impacts that are talked about include worker's rights and conditions, anti-racism, family values and female empowerment. Economic impacts that are discussed include profit sharing, skills, experience, innovation, and economically marginalised people.

The Baserange sustainability site discusses economic prosperity from the perspective of human capital mostly. Textile education, weaving skills and other skills production partners have are mentioned. Physical capital of factories, such as the machinery used is also brought up. From an environmental perspective, energy, material, and water use in clothes production are discussed. Renewable energy sources at factories, materials used and their impacts and water cleaning and reuse at factories are all explained. Social justice is also present on the website, with working conditions and rights and profit sharing at factories as the focus (Baserange 2022). On the Story mfg. website, economic prosperity is also discussed through human capital, namely artisan craft skills. Environmental impacts are discussed through waste generation and regenerative agriculture. Social justice is talked about more thoroughly, with the rights of marginalised people, well-paid work, animal welfare, promoting artistic skills and anti-racism (Story mfg. 2022). Le Pirol mentions human capital, by saying they work with a production partner that has 70 years of experience in knitting. The only environmental impact that is expanded upon is waste generation, as the brand utilises all by-products. Other impacts are mentioned, but it is not explained how the brand does it. Social justice and impacts on society are not discussed on the website (Le Pirol 2022). The MUD Jeans highlights economic prosperity by being a B corp company and therefore creating economic value and human capital by talking about innovation and the expertise of their workers. Environmental impacts are brought up through CO2, energy and water saved in production and chemical use. Waste generation of production is also discussed. Societal impacts such as the importance of human rights, working conditions, living wage and women's rights are brought up in the code of conduct and sustainability report. Education of workers is also evident (MUD Jeans 2022). Economic impacts are introduced by Dedicated through the human capital and the experience that factory workers have. Environmental impacts are also talked about such as energy use, CO2 compensation and wastewater treatment and reuse. Social justice is discussed, such as the benefits that employees of factories get, living wage, medical insurance and improving working conditions through auditing (DEDICATED. 2022).

### 7.5 Results of storytelling benchmarking

When looking at how the five brands do storytelling on their websites, many explore similar themes, have similar values, conflicts, and morals in their story. This is understandable as they are all small slow fashion brands operating in the sphere of sustainability. Most themes



explored in the benchmarking exercise were done by all brands equally, with a few exceptions.

	<b>Baserange</b>	<b>Story mfg.</b>	<b>Le Pirol</b>	<b>MUD Jeans</b>	<b>Dedicated</b>
<b>Emotionally evocative</b>	The stories from the factories that Baserange are emotionally evocative with themes like love, family, relationships, struggles, challenges, and generational shifts.	Products named after personality traits and feelings. These give the clothing a strong spirit and character. The manifesto evokes emotions with its strong stances against injustices.	The joy felt by the customer from the clothing is brought up as well as the love poured into the products.	Emotions are evoked with adjectives like 'happy' and 'good,' positivity, themes such as activism, exclamation marks and the negative impacts of conventional fashion production.	The story evokes emotion with words like care and kind and talking about the negative impacts of the fashion industry.
<b>Values</b>	Sustainability is a key value through its exploration, as well as collaboration, innovation, and constant learning.	The values of the story are clear through the manifesto: arts, animal rights, regenerative agriculture, and family.	The values are clear from the story of the brand and its mission: sustainability, local production, and timelessness.	The values are communicated across the website: sustainability, circularity, innovation, and fairness.	The brand lists values including sustainability, transparency, and honesty.
<b>Mission statement</b>	Their mission is to reduce their environmental impact at all stages of production.	The mission is to create an authentic, fulfilling and kind approach to fashion.	The mission is about making long-lasting and timeless designs.	The mission of the brand is clear: less waste through circular design to make sure future generations have a planet to enjoy.	The brand explicitly states the mission: making kinder clothing.
<b>Conflicts</b>	Conflicts include high energy and water consumption, dyes, chemicals, and packaging used in clothing production.	Conflicts in the story include the fashion industry, racism, waste, chemicals, and animal abuse.	Conflicts in the story are overproduction and waste, as well as the bigger fashion houses.	Conflicts in the story include the high price of recycling and the waste problem of the fashion industry.	The conflict in the story is the fashion industry at large, the pollution it causes and ethical fashion lacking fun and modernity.
<b>Moral of the story</b>	The moral is that the learning never ends, and improvements need to be constant.	Morals in the story include that synthetics are not always bad, learning is never ending and buying less is better for the planet.	Moral of the story is that coming back home is good, producing locally is better and introducing seasonless styles instead of collections is how the industry should work.	Moral of the story is that sustainability is an all-encompassing, never-ending process and journey.	Partnerships and teamwork are the foundations of a kinder fashion brand and that eco fashion can also be fun are the morals of the story.

Table 3: Benchmarking the storytelling of slow fashion brands

Emotionally evocative storytelling is repeatedly found to be the most effective in getting the receiver to remember the message being given. Therefore, it is the first theme chosen in the storytelling table. The storytelling on the Baserange website is most emotionally evocative on the Production & Sustainability page, where the brand introduces the production partners they have. These stories centre around the stories of the owners of the factories including their struggles in the business. The production partners are introduced as if they are telling their stories directly to us, in first-person narrative. The partner in Turkey, Tugba Mert, introduces her work as follows: “it is difficult work, and we have to give 100% of ourselves - but we do it out of love, because we are a family” (Baserange 2022). It makes readers invested in the family and their work and feel more connected to the producers and the process. Emotionally evocative storytelling is done slightly differently on Story mfg., where products are named after personality traits and feelings to make receivers feel something about the products. The manifesto has strong stances on injustices that evokes emotion as well as the blog that does deep dives into the brand’s practices. On the blog, the brand explains about their growing pains with a recent collection: “we’ve had a turbulent time, both in good ways (growth, experimentation, innovation, research) and bad (pandemic, climate change)” (Story mfg. 2022). This allows readers a peek into the inner workings of a brand and everything they go through to get a collection out, allowing them to connect to the process and the product. It is much harder to produce examples of when storytelling on the Le Pirol website is emotionally evocative. Unlike Baserange and Story mfg., Le Pirol makes less references to emotions, using language that is more factual. There are a few lines of text that attempt to build an emotional connection between the wearer and the garment, for example when they state that: “we design our products to stand the test of time so that they will bring long-lasting joy when cared for” (Le Pirol 2022). MUD Jeans uses more colloquial language, such as “well, jeans are one of the most polluting items in fashion. Using 7.000 litres of water and nasty chemicals” (MUD Jeans 2022). This makes readers feel more negatively about conventional denim production and puts the mainstream fashion industry in conflict with what MUD Jeans does. Dedicated does something similar, positioning itself as the antithesis to the polluting fashion industry: “it’s no secret that fashion is a shady business. Filled with harmful chemicals, and in-human working environments” (DEDICATED. 2022). This statement can also awaken feelings of sympathy in the reader.

Unsurprisingly, the values of all five fashion brands are evident on their websites and remarkably like one another. From Baserange, sustainability, collaboration, innovation, and constant learning come off as some of their key values, as exemplified in their Production & Sustainability page: “the first factory we worked with really made us think about what it means to be “sustainable”...This was the beginning of what has been a constant dialogue” (Baserange 2022). Story mfg. lists their values on their about us page as well: “Art and craft

are not only beautiful but crucial and important culturally for so many left behind in an ever faster and more automated economy” (Story mfg. 2022). Le Pirol’s values come across repeatedly on many different pages, such as their home page: “The first collection from Le Pirol saw the light of day in August 2018 and consists of timeless styles, all of which are created based on the brand’s three basic principles: Local production, organic wool and timeless design” (Le Pirol 2022). The values of MUD Jeans are also represented on different pages, including the Fair Production page: “we believe in a world where everyone is responsible for cleaning up their own mess” (MUD Jeans 2022). The underlying value of sustainability comes across from all these statements. Dedicated has values that fall under sustainability, as evidenced on their Sustainability page: “We wanted to show that fashion can be done differently. In touch with nature. Fair & responsible” (DEDICATED. 2022).

The mission of each brand is also closely related to sustainability and even though the mission is not always stated explicitly by each brand, it can be deduced. The mission of Baserange is not explicitly stated, but they do state that “since its inception, Baserange is committed to discovering and implementing innovative ways to reduce environmental impact at every stage,” showing a strong link to sustainability (Baserange 2022). The reason Story mfg. exists is made evident: “Story mfg. was born out of a desire for a more authentic, fulfilling and kind approach to fashion,” which can be construed as a sort of mission statement (Story mfg. 2022). Le Pirol also states why the brand was founded on their About page: “Le Pirol was founded in 2018, based on a desire to create sustainable, long-lasting and timeless designs” (Le Pirol 2022). As MUD Jeans has a page called ‘Our mission,’ it is clear to spot that the mission is “creating a world without waste” (MUD Jeans 2022). Dedicated also states it explicitly with “our mission to make clothing kind” being a title on the page “Our story” (DEDICATED. 2022).

The conflicts in the storytelling of the brands are also similar and related to the issues in the fashion industry currently. The slow fashion brands seem to be critical of the fashion industry, which could be a way of building credibility. It is a way of showing that the brand recognises the harmful effects of the industry and is working towards changing it for the better. Baserange battles with the environmental impacts of clothing production, which they explain on their Production & Sustainability page when introducing the bamboo fibre: “processing bamboo viscose requires some harmful chemicals to dissolve the plant and transform it into a paste that can be spun into textile fibers” (Baserange 2022). Story mfg. introduces all the conflicts they have with the conventional fashion industry such as animal cruelty, racism, and single use plastic: “the Fashion industry is one of the most powerful oppressors. If it were a government, we would call it the cruelest regime on the planet for the way it upholds racist practices, disenfranchises, economically enslaves, and perpetuates racist stereotypes” (Story mfg. 2022). Le Pirol also discussed their issues with the practices of the fashion industry and

how they conflict with their own values: “realizing that the amount of waste Morten had no interest in being a part of, became Morten Underbjerg's turning point and at the same time the beginning of Le Pirol” (Le Pirol 2022). MUD Jeans recognises the obstacles standing in the way of making circular fashion a more common phenomenon: “there is one tiny challenge here. In order to make the circular economy an attractive proposition in fashion, recycled cotton would have to be cheaper than newly produced cotton, and not the other way around” (MUD Jeans 2022). Dedicated identifies the emissions of the fashion industry as one of the main conflicts for any fashion brand: “the textile industry now accounts for 10% of global carbon emissions. We wanted to show that it didn't have to be like this” (DEDICATED. 2022).

The moral of all these fashion stories is also related to sustainability and many of them are related to acknowledging that sustainability is a never-ending process and journey. Baserange expresses that the solution to most conflicts is that the learning, collaboration, and dialogue should not end: “Baserange is constantly seeking better solutions across the industry and questioning its own practices with the goal of ecological and humane sustainability” (Baserange 2022). Story mfg. echoes the fluidity of sustainable practices as well: “Story mfg. is constantly adapting to new discoveries and our manifesto is a living document. We are careful not to get stuck in an ideology if new, better, kinder, production options arise” (Story mfg. 2022). Le Pirol showcases local production as a key value and the moral of their story is that this makes for better products: “we know that when we have good communication and close cooperation with our partners, we also get better products and thus a longer shelf life” (Le Pirol 2022). It is evident from the MUD Jeans that constant learning and improvement is a key theme for the brand: “for us the sky is not the limit, we always try to improve our products. Our goal is to be the first to introduce jeans made from 100% post-consumer recycled cotton” (MUD Jeans, 2022). One of the morals of the Dedicated story is that collaboration is key to their success: “by collaborating with photographers, illustrators and artists from all over the world we're able to give you unique, fun and diverse collections” (DEDICATED. 2022).

## 8 Development

### 8.1 The new sustainability communication model

To put together a sustainable communication model fit for small fashion brands, I will be using elements from all three of the existing models as well as elements from the literature review. On top of this, I am looking at the sustainability communication and storytelling benchmarking tables where the aim was to learn from the best practices of four small slow fashion brands.

The communication of sustainability can be divided into the aspects introduced in the benchmarking table: vision, supply chain transparency, certifications, environmental, social, and economic sustainability, and storytelling. These themes are gathered from academic papers and the brands analysed in this thesis.

Vision	Policy	Transparency	Certificates	Resource use	Use phase	Capital	Storytelling
Is the vision clear?	Is there a policy on the use of animal materials?	Are raw material origins specified?	Are there certificates used?	Is energy use explained?	Is it explained how the products are made durable?	Are skills, experience or expertise of workers discussed?	Is the storytelling emotionally evocative?
Is the vision future oriented?	Is there a social policy that references SA8000® and Fair Wear Foundation's Code of Labor Practices?	Is the entire path of the product explained?	Are the certificates audited by third-party organisations?	Is material use and disposal explained?	Is it explained how the products can be taken care of to extend the use phase?	Is innovation discussed in conjunction with sustainability?	Does the story teach values?
Is achieving the vision challenging?		Is it clear how the product is made?	Are the criteria of each certification revealed?	Is water consumption and disposal explained?	Are repair, mending or resale services of the product discussed?	Are long-term partnerships discussed?	Is there a conflict?
Is it explained how the vision will be achieved?		Are the people involved in production introduced?		Is waste generation and disposal explained?	Is the content actionable and engaging?	Are tools, machinery or techniques used discussed?	Is there a moral of the story?
Is the vision connected to environmental, social and economic sustainability?				Is chemical use and disposal explained?			Is the customer a hero or main character in the story?

Table 4: New sustainability communication framework

From Good On You, the divide of people, planet and animals fits into the spheres of environmental, social, and economic sustainability. However, these aspects do not explicitly state the need for policy, which is highlighted as a requirement on the Good On You ranking system.

From the OSEC model, many aspects that are stated are more appropriate for a corporate website than they are for brand websites. However, what can be inferred from this model is that communication needs to be more explicit. As this thesis focuses on written and not visual communication, the model will not include things like graphs introduced on the OSEC model.

Sustainability of materials belongs to the theme of resource use and transparency and certifications are also introduced. Code of conduct will be seen as a part of policy.

On the Shades of Green instrument, durability of the product is brought up as an essential element of sustainability communication that has not been introduced in this thesis before. Product service systems have also not been introduced before. Sustainable and recycled materials and zero waste production will be part of resource use and transparency. Transparency goes into the supply chain transparency category and working conditions belong to policy.

As all these models are missing the aspect of storytelling, but it has been introduced as a key effective method of sustainability communication previously, it will also be added to the new sustainability communication model. The sustainability communication aspects can be further divided into vision, policy, transparency, certificates, resource use, capital, use phase and storytelling. These categories touch on the triple bottom line including social, environmental, and economic sustainability. Vision is the first category, as it should state the explicit connection to social, environmental, and economic sustainability. It should also be explained how the vision can be and is implemented in practice.

Policy relates to social sustainability, as it should cover the practices of the company in protecting worker's rights. The SA8000® guidance and the Fair Wear Foundation's Code of Labor Practices are mentioned as policies to follow in the Shades of Green instrument as well as Good On You. The brand should additionally have policies about the use of animal products and list which ones they are not using. Policy is a way of assuring customers of the commitment of the company to social sustainability.

Transparency relates to both social and environmental sustainability. It shows the distances throughout the supply chain, signifying CO2 emissions. It also becomes important for social sustainability as you see the countries of production and can deduce labour laws and therefore working conditions from that. Knowing the origin of products also allows customers to gain a better understanding of the production process and the people involved and this can drive behavioural change in consumption habits. This category favours tracking and communicating the lifecycle of the product from start to end of life. It allows customers to see concrete evidence of the practices of the company.

Certification also relate to social and environmental sustainability, as they often certify working conditions and the controlled use of chemicals and water management. The more certifications used, the better, and this is a valuable tool to use with other sustainability

communication themes. It gives important third-party assurance and credibility to the claims made by the company.

Resource use applies to material, energy, water, waste and chemical use and disposal as explored on Good On You and Shades of Green. This belongs to the environmental sphere as it relates to emissions and the effect of production on the environment in general. It is also a way of showing concrete action taken to combat environmental sustainability issues, beyond just certifications.

Capital encompasses financial, human, social and physical capital and is connected to economic sustainability. It covers the skills and experience of workers, the sustainability innovation of the company, long-term partnerships between factories and brands, profit sharing and machinery owned and used in production. It can be communicated by introducing education and well-being workshops to enhance human capital. Social capital can be introduced through highlighting the importance and strength of relationships and social networks the brand is in. This is important to communicate, as it highlights the economic performance of a sustainable brand as well as where it stems from and how they are bringing value to not just the owners but everyone down the supply chain. As economic sustainability is not touched on explicitly by the other categories and is the third aspect of sustainability in theory, it was found to be crucial to make explicit references to it in this model. It is called capital here as it highlights the resources the brand has for it to be economically sustainable. This also highlights the collaborative aspect of the communication framework and how it is about understanding how sustainability is and can be strived for. It emphasises the holistic and eco-system thinking necessary for sustainability.

The use phase relates mostly to environmental sustainability. This is about enhancing the durability of the product with the right design, material, and manufacturing choices, as well as communicating about services to lengthen the use phase of the product even further. This might include repairing and mending services and products as well as a resale platform. The use phase is important because it is the only one of the categories that activates the customer to participate, which is found to be important in sustainability communication. This was brought up in the Shades of Green instrument as a key part of sustainability.

Lastly, we have storytelling, which is key in effective communication as it is the only one that focuses on aiming to evoke emotion in the reader. Aspects for this category have been taken from literature and have been found to be the ones that brands currently do or could do in storytelling of their brand. They are also found to be effective in making the customer remember the story of the brand and learning something new. Storytelling can be done in relation to all aspects of the triple bottom line.

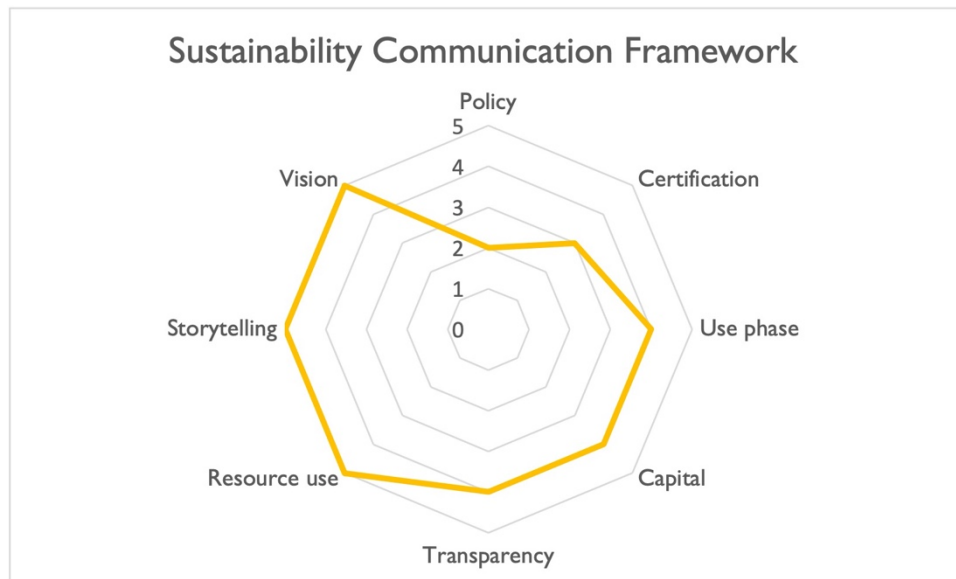


Figure 2: The Sustainability communication framework

The sustainability communication framework highlights eight methods of communication and the items that each method includes. Each method of communication has between two to five items that should be checked off for holistic, effective, and credible sustainability communication. In general, it is evident from the existing models, literature, and previous research that sustainability communication needs to be explicit and clear. All aspects of sustainability communication need to be more explicit. This is one of the main things lacking in the communication of Baserange currently and what this model nudges toward.

It is also good to keep in mind that sustainability is an ever-changing field, and the sustainability actions of fashion brands are constantly changing, so for the sustainability communication to be up to date, it needs to be checked at regular intervals. This also applies to the sustainability values and knowledge of customers, which are also constantly developing.

## 9 Discussion

It has been interesting to see how different streams of research highlight such different areas of sustainability communication as important. Sustainability communication literature highlights certain things, brands are doing something different and sustainability rating sites are evaluating a distinct set of things too. Then there is the fourth area of what customers want to read and learn about on fashion brand's websites. The new model is built from the crossroads of these sources. The literature represented sustainability vision as an important



aspect of sustainability communication, which was not mentioned in sustainability communication models, the rating sites or in what customers want to see. However, it is especially important internally, which is why it was included in the sustainability communication model. Policy came through as something missing especially in the communication of Baserange through the rating sites, but it was not mentioned as important in literature or what customers want to see. However, it was included because it is the main thing that is missing for Baserange to rank higher on Good On You and a high rating is seen as important for customers to view the brand as sustainable. Transparency was deemed important in literature, on previous communication models and it is also seen as important to customers. Certifications also came up in the literature review and previous communication models as important ways to certify the credibility of claims made. Resource use was highlighted in sustainability ratings, but it links strongly to the concrete actions taken in sustainability, which was highlighted in literature and existing communication models. It is also important for customers who have higher levels of knowledge about sustainability and therefore expect more concrete examples. Capital is a method of communication that does not come up in existing sustainability communication models, but it is something analysed in this study as it was highlighted in the literature review and brands are already communicating about it on their websites. As it is often listed as the first aspect of the triple bottom line that is central to sustainability, it was found important enough to include in the model. The importance of the use phase came from the Shades of Green instrument that ranks the level of sustainability of individual products. However, it strongly links to the actionable aspects of sustainability, which was proposed in literature as an important part of storytelling and making sustainability more customer centric and engaging. Storytelling was highlighted in literature as the main way of evoking emotions in readers, which is seen as the most memorable way of communicating to readers. Therefore, it has been added to the new model, that on top of being about clarity and credibility, also needs to be effective in making customers regard the brand as sustainable.

Regardless of the highest rating on Good On You by the benchmarked brands, they are not all consistent in their sustainability communication. There are many aspects of communication others are doing more clearly than others, but all are ranked as the highest. Even though the rating criteria of Good On You seems clear, it is evident that one can reach a high rating with many different methods of communication. Most surprisingly, even vastly different levels of transparency or use of certificates in communication of brands can reach the highest rating on the platform. As found in the literature review, customers place a lot of importance on ratings of brands. It is however evident that the Good On You ratings are not always the most accurate representation of how thoroughly brands are communicating sustainability efforts. Just because a brand is highly rated on Good On You, also does not necessarily mean that their communication has been clear and effective in the eyes of the customers.

The theoretical framework consists of models created for assessing sustainability communication of brands, the criteria of sustainability rating sites and research into what communication methods are effective. When these three streams are put together with the practices small fashion brands do, we get the sustainability communication model built for this thesis. The theory was therefore central in producing the results to the problem introduced at the beginning. Good On You, the OSEC model and the Shades of Green instrument were used as the three models to inform the new model created. These were then combined with storytelling, which came up repeatedly in the literature review implicitly through the importance of connecting to emotions and explicitly through concrete methods of storytelling.

This thesis set out to find the best practices in sustainability communication from a set of small slow fashion brands. This was done through selecting the highest-ranking brands from Good On You, which assesses the sustainability communication of small brands. These methods from the rating website were then looked at in comparison to existing sustainability communication models and literature. A new set of sustainability communication practices were then collected based on these sources of data.

The sustainability communication model created combines what was found in existing models and creates a comprehensive and straightforward checklist that can be applied by small brands. It is like the kind of checklist Good On You uses as their rating criteria, but it adds elements found from other models and literature that was found to be critical to efficient sustainability communication. It also combines categories and themes found to simplify the model. The model works in the sense that it should get the brand a high rating on the Good On You platform, meaning it is deemed a sustainable brand by a third-party and consequently customers. It also incorporates other aspects deemed important by researchers and especially those things deemed important for customers to know.

The sustainability communication model is directly applicable to Baserange. It is a straightforward checklist made for small slow fashion brands specifically. The model considers the smaller budgets and limited workforce of the brand and can be applied for internal as well as external communication. It focuses on clarity, credibility and effectiveness, which would improve the communication of Baserange to their customers, teams and employees globally. There are many areas in the model that Baserange can tick off as is, but it also represents areas of improvement that should be doable for the organisation. The recommendation I would give Baserange is creating a sustainability communication strategy based on the model created, that includes all the themes introduced in the model. Baserange should then create a plan on how to enact this communication strategy, that

specifies the timeline and the people involved in communicating. This would result in more thorough communication of the brand's sustainability efforts that have thus far been hidden from customers. It would allow their customers to see the full picture of how the brand has taken concrete actions to be more sustainable. Secondly, it should result in Baserange being rated higher on the Good On You platform, which is used by many customers around the world to assess the sustainability of brands.

Unless Baserange wants to specifically rate highly Good On You, it is not necessary to base their entire sustainability communication strategy on their rating system. Applying the new sustainability communication framework would be sufficient in gaining the brand the best rating on the app. The literature review suggests many methods that constitute effective sustainability communication and the criteria of Good On Your does not always correlate with this. It is useful however to keep their criteria in mind, because there is overlap between sustainability communication literature and the criteria of Good On You.

As a result of research around sustainability communication and analysis of best practices by similar brands to Baserange in the fashion industry, I would recommend Baserange has a look at their existing communication efforts and see how they can be improved. The brand is rated low on Good On You compared to peers of comparable size in Europe, which could be a problem for their competitive position in the eyes of customers. It makes it evident that customers that look at Good On You will see Baserange as less sustainable as its peers. There is work Baserange can do to clarify all methods of sustainability communication mentioned in the framework. Baserange could start by understanding what actions they are hoping the customer will take as a result of interacting with their website content. Because of this, it would be important for the brand to understand who the audience is, what their values are and where they are with their knowledge of sustainability. It would be useful to start the process with a vision workshop at the company, to hear from employees and collaborators in all the different countries on what they see as the future of Baserange and what they are working towards. As mentioned previously, Baserange should focus on policy, which is an area that they do not communicate at all currently. Simple sentences about their stance on using certain animal products and their code of conduct would be sufficient in this case. A detailed policy document would not be necessary for a brand their size. For the policy, the brand can also reference existing documents and doesn't have to create anything new. Regarding transparency, the brand is doing relatively well on all the items introduced in the framework. However, Baserange could be more open here about their struggles, what they don't know and why they are struggling to find this information. It is a central part of transparency to reveal what the brand is not doing well or what they find challenging. Certifications are explained well, but in future the brand could look at certifications that cover even more areas of sustainability. The brand should also go into more detail about their resource use,

which could be done by using data or numbers. This is also simple and low cost and could be done in collaboration with their producers, who they already have a close collaborative relationship with. Baserange should also investigate their own resource use at their own spaces and reveal this information on the website. Durability and quality of products could also be discussed in more detail, as it is not explained on the website. This could be fixed by adding a few sentences about what makes the products last on the product pages. Repair, mending, and resale services are also not represented and since this is something that the organisation is already exploring it should be communicated to customers. Customer centricity could also be improved, and the brand should give more actionable and engaging content to their customers. This could be done via content that encourages the customer to be more involved in making their own consumption practices more sustainable. Within communicating capital, the brand could go into more detail about the skills of the people they work with, using innovation to push sustainability forward, the importance of the relationships with production partners and the machinery used in production. Regarding storytelling, making the customer the main character of the story and giving them authority is of vital importance. This could be done via a storytelling workshop within the company as well as using design thinking to create a new storytelling approach. At the end of this work, Baserange could contact Good On You to see if they could rate the brand again according to the updated website content.

While the framework was built for Baserange, it remains to be seen how it's going to be used. The brand has favoured a more minimal communication approach with an element of abstractness up until now, whereas the framework favours clarity and detailed information. Some of this information can also be difficult to retrieve. The brand is also more focused on visual narratives. As this thesis' purpose was to create a model for small slow-fashion brands, it is applicable to other organisations in the textile industry. The model can be used as a way for brands to rate highly on Good On You, but also to make sure their communication is done clearly and in a way that the customers will believe in its credibility. It can also be used as a checklist to ensure that the organisation is avoiding greenwashing and communicating sustainability holistically, as the model offers clear and comparable sustainability actions. Brands can also choose to use the model as a guide of the best practices, from which they can choose which aspects fit their communication strategies. Therefore, the framework has many ways of using it.

It is especially relevant to small brands, but it could be used by organisations in other B2C industries as well. As brands operating in the spheres of slow, ethical, and sustainable products are already communicating widely about their processes, the model is easier to apply to their strategy. If, however the organisation has not taken the time to create policies, get certificates, investigate resource use, the supply chain and minimising environmental

impact, then applying the model will be much more time consuming. As seen from the five brands benchmarked in this thesis, many of them already do most things mentioned in the model and would therefore find it easier to apply it into their strategies. The results of this thesis can be used in understanding diverse ways in which storytelling can be done by brands on websites, by offering concrete examples. This thesis also works as a critical analysis of the reliability of rating systems as it compares the positioning of brands on a rating system and compares this to their criteria and how the criteria is applied.

The method of learning from the best practices of brands was benchmarking. It is a tool often used by brands to learn from other companies and improve their own practices. The model developed based on these results represents concrete steps Basera can take to improve their sustainability communication, based on many sources of data. The themes for the benchmarking tables were chosen through thematic analysis, which allowed looking at different terminology and categorisation and creating new themes that encompassed all of them. As there were many diverse sources of data that use different terminology, thematic analysis was an effective way of sorting them into categories. Reliability of the results has been ensured by thorough research. The results are based on publicly available data on the brand websites at the time of the research and they do not represent the brands' commitment to sustainability outside of what is communicated on their websites. It also only represents their communication efforts at the time of the research.

From an ethical perspective, I have made sure to cause minimal disruptions to business as usual at the target company and conduct thorough research and development to achieve meaningful results for the company. I have also received written consent from the company to research the area of sustainability communication and develop a strategy for the company based on this research. Good quality research is also an ethical consideration, and the quality of the research has been ensured through reliability of the results and applicability to the case. The risk of harm to the people being observed was minimal, which justifies using undisclosed observation (Hewson 2014, 441). With regarding the observation of communication of websites, only publicly available data from websites has been analysed. All parties that have been observed were aware of the purpose of the research and observation. To increase the reliability of the results, I have attempted to describe the process and methodology of the research as carefully as possible. I have also justified the conclusions I have reached based on the results of the research and literature review.

### 9.1 Limitations and further development

This thesis only focused on one industry and only explored a small set of communication methods. The applicability to other industries or different sized organisations was not

explored. Brands explored in this thesis only focused on Europe-based organisations that operate globally, so it would be interesting to look at how their communication differs from brands based in other continents. It could also be interesting to do a comparative study on small versus large organisations in fashion or one where slow fashion brands are compared with fast fashion brands. The research of the thesis could also be expanded by adding the element of visual communication and how that interacts with and adds to the effectiveness of the written communication.

In benchmarking the sustainability communication and storytelling of the brands, the contents of each theme or category are subjective and could be subject to debate. The contested definition of sustainability poses problems for the themes of sustainability communication. The categorisation of themes and differences between themes such as economic and social impacts of fashion is also not clear, as there is overlap in the triple bottom line as mentioned in the literature review. On top of the contested meanings of sustainability, the values of individuals and their level of knowledge is central to the effectiveness of sustainability communication. As the values and knowledge of people are always changing, it is important to keep in mind that this model may be sufficient at this moment but will need to be reworked as society learns more about sustainability and delve deeper. The model is also sufficient in disseminating sufficient sustainability information, but it does not consider the values or knowledge of the individual and assumes that the organisation is actively attempting to understand their customer on an individual level.

Further research could be done to investigate the sustainability communication needs of organisations of different sizes, in various industries and for other communication channels. While the sustainability communication of larger organisations in fashion and the effectiveness of it has been researched before, this has been on a general level and not so much on the effectiveness of each separate method explored in this thesis. This thesis only looks at communication to customers in general, but an interesting avenue of research would be to explore how it varies or should vary between audiences of different ages, levels of knowledge or interest in the topic of sustainability for example. Furthermore, the thesis only focuses on the sustainability communication of brands at one point in time and it could be researched how their communication methods change over time. This would allow a glimpse into how brands develop their strategies over time, how they differ from one another and what that says about customer's expectations of sustainability communication strategies. Social media has also been researched as an effective tool for reaching millennial and gen-z audiences especially, but the interaction of this and the brand website could be further researched. Integrated marketing communications is a growing field of research which could pose a new angle to consider in sustainability communication of a brand.

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