

## **Consumer interpretations of fashion sustainability terminology communicated through labelling**

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# Consumer Interpretations of Fashion Sustainability Terminology communicated through labelling

## Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this research is to examine how consumers interpret and understand sustainable-fashion-production and how this informs their fashion consumption practice.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The research adopts an interpretivist approach with in-depth interviews with 28 participants. Sampling criterion sought consumers already engaged with sustainable-production – professionally working mothers – to explore how their sustainability knowledge was evaluated for sustainable-fashion claims. Garment labels that described facets of sustainable-production were introduced to encourage discourse of sustainable-fashion knowledge.

**Findings:** The findings illustrate that sustainable-fashion-production is not understood and efforts to apply sustainability concepts were often misunderstood which led to scepticism for higher pricing and marketing claims. Despite this, there was concern for the wider implications of sustainability.

**Originality:** There has been little research examining consumer interpretation of sustainable-fashion-terminology, this research adds to understanding how sustainability is evaluated within fashion-production.

**Research limitations/implications:** Limitations include the small sample from one geographical area (Edinburgh), despite the richness of the data collected.

**Practical implications:** The research offers practical advice for fashion marketers to educate consumers through effective communication strategies how sustainable-fashion concepts improve consumer concerns surrounding fashion-production.

**Social implications:** The research indicates increased concern for fashion-sustainability, something that fashion-retailers should be mindful of.

**Keywords:** Sustainable-fashion; sustainability terminology; consumer behaviour; fashion-production; sustainable-production; sweatshop labour; environment; organic; fashion factory

## Introduction

Momentum around sustainability is growing, amid concerns there is limited time to halt the irreversible consequences of climate-change (Cockburn, 2018). Sustainability discourse has exposed fashion industry practice as damaging to the environment (Davis, 2020). There have

been protests about the lack of response in addressing the unsustainability of the fashion industry, such as Extinction Rebellion hosting a funeral at London Fashion Week 2019 to indicate the death of the planet and to call to action legislators, businesses and consumers (Cochrane, 2019). Increasingly consumers are adopting sustainable behaviours (Hammad *et al.*, 2019), progressing from niche markets into mainstream consciousness, and nudging consumers who are typically disinterested or unaware of the implications for sustainability (Wiederhold and Martinez, 2018). Take, for example, the rise of plant foods in mainstream supermarkets in response to the rise of vegan diets, much of which emerges from climate-change concern (Phua *et al.*, 2019). However, the fashion industry has yet to respond meaningfully to sustainability (Evans and Peirson-Smith, 2018; Sonnenberg *et al.*, 2014); fast-fashion-retailers seem to focus on encouraging consumers to dispose of fashion responsibly, rather than address sustainability in production or accelerated consumption (Ritch and Siddiqui, 2020). While there has been a plethora of research examining how consumers engage with and perceive sustainable-fashion, much of this has identified established barriers of style, cost, accessibility and a lack of supporting information (Wiederhold and Martinez, 2018; Ritch and Brownlie, 2016). However, an avenue for further investigation has been neglected (Sonnenberg *et al.*, 2014): how do mainstream consumers interpret and understand sustainable-fashion terminology, and how does this support their consumption practice?

This research examines consumer evaluations of sustainability-concepts on garment labels to examine whether marketing can encourage consumers to consider sustainability and to better inform them of fashion-production practice. Although marketing is criticised for encouraging consumption (Nilssen *et al.*, 2019), there are also opportunities to educate consumers of the issues and empower them to make better consumption choices (Lim, 2016). This paper aligns with the concept of sustainability as a series of processes and practices within a journey towards better outcomes, as this captures more effectively the activities and complexities involved in understanding fashion supply-chain-management (Blasi *et al.*, 2020). Although progressing the sustainability agenda requires a network of actors (Harris *et al.*, 2016), understanding how consumers navigate this domain is of particular relevance given that sustainable-fashion is not considered as following evolving fashion trends (Wiederhold and Martinez, 2018). This is where sustainability and fashion present a divergence (Blasi *et al.*, 2020; Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau, 2020). New collections featuring changes in style and colour palettes reiterate that fashion is '*made to be unfashionable*' (Chanel, cited in Davis, 1994: 162), and so it is transitory and ephemeral, whereas sustainability is lasting to encourage protection of natural sources, fairness and equality for those who work in the industry (World Commission for Environment and Development, 1987). With a lack of transparency in fashion-production, consumers remain uninformed of how sustainability is compromised (Evans and Peirson-Smith, 2018; Harris *et al.*, 2016), and focus more acutely on their consumer needs of style and identity formation (Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau, 2020; Harris *et al.*, 2015), rather than consideration towards wider society and the environment,

despite the opportunity for garments to reflect both ideologies (Hammad *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, understanding what terminology would support consumers to prioritise sustainability and bring about meaningful change is imperative.

This paper focuses on the communication of fashion sustainability and what is known about consumer understanding of sustainable-fashion terminology and therefore does not review the extant literature of sustainable-fashion consumer behaviour or the impact of fashion-production on sustainability, despite recent extensive research in both those areas. Rather, the literature reviewed examines the current sustainable-fashion market to determine consumer understanding of fashion sustainability, including efforts to make sense of fashion-production, sustainable-terminology and the use of labelling as a communicative tool. Consequently, the literature included is relevant to the communication of sustainability. Following the literature review, the methodology is outlined, and the findings are discussed before presenting the conclusions.

### Current sustainable-fashion market

While sustainability is increasingly used by brands and consumers to illustrate responsibility for business practices (Evans and Peirson-Smith, 2018), terminology often focuses more on environmental than social issues (Weise *et al.*, 2012). Similarly, research has identified that consumers exhibit more concern for environmental exploitation than allegations that employees are mistreated (Hansen *et al.*, 2019). This is evident in recent reports that key search filters applied to online fashion retailers include 'organic', 'vegan' and 'biodegradable' (Blasi *et al.*, 2020; Evans and Peirson-Smith, 2018; Cheng, 2019) – popular environmental terminology that has emerged from the food market (Ritch, 2015). Yet, Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau (2020) argue that consumers are not aware of which fashion-retailers meaningfully address sustainability, and fashion-retailers often avoiding promoting specific sustainability activities that could be challenged. Without positioning value from sustainable-production, fashion consumption is evaluated for style and price (Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau, 2020; Ritch and Brownlie, 2016), both known barriers to progressing the sustainable-fashion market. Although some consumers may be able to afford and willing-to-pay more for sustainable-production (Hyllegard *et al.*, 2012; Bernard *et al.*, 2013; Hustvedt and Bernard, 2008), both D'Souza *et al.* (2006) and Sonnenberg *et al.* (2014) found that price sensitivity prevented wider sustainable-consumption. Wiederhold and Martinez (2018) found that consumers could not understand the justification for higher pricing and sought tangible attributes to explain this. While tangibility can be viewed as observable and measurable in encouraging positive environmental outcomes, (Hanson *et al.*, 2019) intangibility can lead to scepticism that sustainability claims are a form of greenwashing to justify higher pricing (Wiederhold and Martinez, 2018; McNeil and Moore, 2015).

Scepticism was also evident in the research by Hiller Connell (2010), who reported misconceptions of sustainability led to a skewed understanding of which fibres had the least

environmental impact. Her participants assumed that as cotton was a natural fibre, production had no detrimental impact on the environment. That cotton grows naturally is a tangible concept, however, it does implicate that organic-cotton is meaningless. Similarly, Hustvedt and Bernard (2008) investigated consumer willingness to pay for socks made from organic, GM cotton, and PLA fibre (made from a renewable corn). Although the context (socks) does not portray fashion-involvement, the findings offer an idea of how fibre content is evaluated. Hustvedt and Bernard's (2008) participants believed that that PLA fibres required further manufacturing processes that increase carbon-emissions, which is considered damaging. Hustvedt and Bernard (2008) assumed this indicates consumer lack of knowledge regarding fibre manufacturing technologies. Bernard *et al.* (2013) advanced this research with experimental consumer bids for woollen socks with specific production values (organic, sustainable, eco-friendly, natural and conventional) and provided explanations of the production implications. They found that organic production incurred the highest willingness-to-pay more, while eco-friendly, sustainable and natural production did not yield much variation and conventional production was viewed negatively. Bernard *et al.* (2013) concluded that value in sustainable-production can increase willingness-to-pay more, however they advocate that this is dependent on consumers understand the meaning of the terminology. Therefore, further investigation into how consumers deliberate on the environmental impact of fashion-production and navigate the terminology is necessary to progress effective communication and help society become more sustainable.

Conceptualisations of sustainability include protection of the environment and for those who work in the industry (World Commission for Environment and Development, 1987). Despite media reports of labour issues in fashion-production, consumer responses have been mixed; although consumers express distaste for '*sweatshop labour*', there are assumptions that exploitation is unavoidable and that workers in developing countries cannot expect the same labour conditions and salaries as found in developed countries (Ritch and Brownlie, 2016; McNeil and Moore, 2015). Moreover, some consumers assume that any opportunities for workers in developing countries to earn money will help alleviate poverty (Ritch and Brownlie, 2016; McNeil and Moore, 2015). Collectively, this indicates that consumers are drawing sustainable-concepts from a variety of media and marketing sources and attempting to draw conclusions that can inform their decision-making (Ritch, 2015). However, the transient nature of fashion-production adds to the complexity of tracing fashion-supply-chains (Blasi *et al.*, 2020; Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau, 2020; Nilssen *et al.*, 2019), especially when brands who regularly communicate sustainability efforts are simultaneously alleged of exploitative practices, leading to consumer mistrust (Wiederhold and Martinez, 2018). Moreover, the broad terminology responding to fashion sustainability does not provide an easy definition (Bly *et al.*, 2015) and fashion marketing does not acknowledge production implications, either in terms of environmental impact or social responsibility (Sonnenberg *et al.*, 2014; Hyllegard *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, a closer examination of how consumers evaluate sustainability would benefit both fashion-retailers and marketing managers.

## *Communicating fashion sustainability*

Blasi *et al.* (2020) examined twitter data mining and identified higher consumer engagement with sustainability, amid expectations of fashion industry responsiveness to sustainability concerns. Coupled with reports that fashion consumers utilise search filters to source environmentally friendly fashion (Cheng, 2019) there are indications that consumer desire for sustainable-fashion is increasing. However, consumers are overwhelmed in determining which production aspects of sustainability to prioritise when allegations range from exploitative labour standards from cotton picking to fashion factories, as well as environmental implications from the use of chemicals to filling landfill sites, all contributing to climate change (Bly *et al.*, 2015; Sonnenberg *et al.*, 2014). Label content provides information that will contribute to consumer evaluation and decision-making, such as price, material content, etc. (Evans and Peirson-Smith, 2018). Yan *et al.* (2008) suggest that labels help to mitigate risk in consumption, reducing uncertainty and ambiguity. However, sustainability labelling relies on assumptions that consumers understand fashion-production implications and related sustainability issues, to ascertain what aspects of sustainability are being addressed (Evans and Peirson-Smith, 2018; D'Souza *et al.*, 2006), as well as increasing their confidence in decision-making (Yan *et al.*, 2008).

Evans and Peirson-Smith (2018) challenged Hong Kong residents to match sustainability terminology with a description, to measure their understanding of sustainability meanings. This research was an update of research carried out by Thomas in 2008, under the premise that given the rise in sustainability discourse, consumers would be more familiar with sustainable-terminology. While Evans and Peirson-Smith (2018) found a high understanding of 'fairtrade', 'eco' and 'upcycling' sustainable-fashion terminology, there was less understanding for 'organic', 'eco-fashion' and 'environment', with even less recognition for what 'recycled' and 'downcycled' referred to. Evans and Peirson-Smith (2018) also found that certain macro-words aligned with wider lifestyles principles that their participants were actively involved in, such as 'sustainability' and 'ethical'; however, others were confused by the ambiguity of the concepts, which led to distrust for the claims. The research by Evans and Peirson-Smith (2018) illustrates that there is still much confusion over sustainable-terminology, especially in the fashion context, and there is no clear definition on how sustainable activities are responsive. D'Souza *et al.* (2006) also investigated the influence of environmental labels within consumer decision-making and identified consumer confusion and scepticism surrounding green terminology within the number of sustainability references (such as recycled, degradable, environmentally friendly) that did not respond to how sustainable-production actually advances the sustainability agenda. Similarly, Hyllegard *et al.* (2012) found that consumers were overwhelmed by technical jargon and ambiguous symbols, a consequence of implicit information that hints at sustainability, without providing meaningful guidance. As consumers are not involved in production decisions and have little

understanding of what this entails, effective communication is required (Evans and Peirson-Smith, 2018; Wiederhold and Martinez, 2018; McNeil and Moore, 2015).

Given the complexities described above, some consumers are hesitant to make significant consumption changes, particularly when their individual efforts seem insignificant against the scale of the issues (Taljaard *et al.*, 2018; Wiederhold and Martinez, 2018; Hiller Connell, 2010). Although consumers express distaste for the fashion industry as a whole, this is not often related to their own consumption practice (McNeil and Moore, 2015), which could be due to lack of knowledge for production consequences. Despite D'Souza *et al.*'s research being published over a decade ago, within which the sustainability agenda has escalated (Davis, 2020; Cockburn, 2018), there is still little recognition for advancing sustainability within the fashion industry – rather fast-fashion-production and consumption have accelerated. Nilssen *et al.* (2019) recommend that brands need to communicate sustainability initiatives in tandem with educating consumers on what makes a product, production or retailing sustainable. Therefore, adopting exploratory research to explore consumer experiences without prompt or definition will enable more clarity of what production information is required to support sustainable-fashion consumption (Thompson *et al.*, 1989).

### Image-elicitation interviews

As the research sought to understand consumers' evaluation of sustainability in a fashion context, qualitative data were gathered from unstructured in-depth interviews with participants recruited through convenience and snowball sampling (Smith *et al.*, 2009). The unstructured interviews provided a platform for the interviewee to attach meaning (feeling, knowing, thinking, remembering) and express independent views regarding the topic of fashion, ethics, consumer responsibility and lifestyle constraints, set within the context of everyday life (Thompson *et al.*, 1989). The exchange in dialogue does not define the '*nature of the world*', rather the current status is accepted subjectively (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). The paradigm determines the crucial aspect of replicating the consumers' perspective to understand the potential for sustainable fashion within the mass-market; interpretivism enables the understanding of the consumer in an environment which is socially influenced and interpreted subjectively. By adopting an interpretivist approach, similar to that of Wiederhold and Martinez (2018); Bly *et al.* (2015); and McNeil and Moore (2015), this research aims to better understand how sustainability is perceived by consumers. Unlike those aforementioned studies, this research is informed by mainstream fashion consumers. Given the in-depth nature of interpretivism, sampling sizes are relatively small to provide deeper insight and the cohort under investigation is defined as professional mothers. The rationale for this emerged as the extant literature indicated how women tend to be more fashion involved, browsing and purchasing garments more frequently than men (Goldsmith and Clark, 2008). Women are also said to be more engaged with sustainability (Taljaard *et al.*, 2018), while mothers tend to purchase organic food for their children out of concern for

health (Aitkinson, 2014). Finally, higher levels of education are said to increase knowledge and awareness of the issues surrounding sustainability (Ma and Lee, 2012). To ensure this, the sample exclusively composed of people who worked in professional occupations. This focused criterion captured similar lifestyles (Szmigin *et al.*, 2009) and experiences of mothers working in professional occupations, and collectively, these characteristics were thought to heighten interest in sustainability issues which would inform knowledge and understanding of sustainable-fashion.

Unstructured interviews began with a grand tour question, as advised by McCracken (1988), of asking how fashion was selected for the participant (mother) and her children. To determine the meaning contained in both fashion and sustainable-consumption within their idiographic experiences (Smith *et al.*, 2009), garment-labels from current high street fashion retailers were introduced as a vehicle for discussion (Pink, 2005). The labels included sustainable criteria, for example, organic-cotton or PET (made from recycled plastic bottles) fibres to determine the meaning applied to the terms used and how the participants subjectively evaluated the content (Pink, 2005). As the labels were obtained from established UK high street retailers, there was familiarity of the retailer, which may lead to assumptions that sustainable consumption was convenient to access. Consequently, discourse from familiar cultural imagery would enhance the sustainable context (Pink, 2005). Moreover, the labels include common terminology of sustainable fashion and as this research examines mainstream consumers interpretation and understanding, it was deemed relevant to locate sustainable fashion within mainstream retailing and to focus on the terminology used in marketing. Therefore, the participants subjectively evaluated the label content, including text and images (Pink, 2005). Below is a description of each label and the anticipated discussion:

- M&S (Marks and Spencer) child's fleece made from recycled plastic bottles: to encourage discussions of textile recycling.
- M&S (Marks and Spencer) eco-factory label: the label describes carbon-neutral-production and may inspire consideration of reducing carbon-emissions in fashion-production.
- M&S (Marks and Spencer) organic-cotton school shirts: to encourage consideration for organic-cotton production.
- John Lewis enzyme-washed child's top: to stimulate discussions for chemical application.
- Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF) charity t-shirt: the label describes child exploitation within the cotton industry and may lead to reflections on child labour.
- Global Girlfriend woman's top (Fairtrade and organic): presented information about the women workers' non-profit, fair trade organisation in Nepal and may encourage discussion of garment-workers generally.

The labels were selected as each introduced a facet of fashion sustainability, and 28 participants based in Edinburgh contributed to the research, ranging in age from 28 to 48 years, and two were single while the others were coupled. All had children between 8 months and 14 years old, some had only one child whereas others had two, three and four. They all worked in professional roles, for example in law, teaching and management. As Edinburgh is the capital city in Scotland, the fashion retailers present in the city are typical of UK wide shopping centres. Although millennials are considered the cohort most concerned about sustainability (Kapferer and Michaut-Deniseau, 2020), most of the participants fell within the age range of Generation-X and will recall when fashion was more expensive and style changes occurred biannually. While many did not purchase fast-fashion themselves, there was a reliance on inexpensive fashion for their children.

### *Data management*

The interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes and were audio recorded. The narratives were transcribed in full, prior to employing Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), an approach that utilises double hermeneutics as the researcher interprets the participants' interpretation (Smith *et al.*, 2009). Grand tour questions were supported by probing the responses, resulting in unique interviews that are not quantifiable as reality was perceived and reported by each participant. Therefore, the context in which the phenomenon is situated, is subjective (Olsen, 1995) or 'intersubjective' through shared meaning typical to the sample (Poonamallee, 2009). For example, it must be recognised that while societal norms and information regarding fashion trends and ethical concerns, for example climate change and workers conditions, are disseminated within society and are objective, interpretation is subjective (Kakkuri-Knuuttila *et al.*, 2008). This is reflected within the participants' view where their experience of life informs knowledge (Hirshman and Holbrook, 1992). Although the research is subjective, it was captured objectively to form a conceptual construct, therefore the role of the researcher is to interpret the participants' subjectivity and develop themes (Schwandt, 2003). Interpretation included analysis, set in the constructed 'real' life social context within the account offered by the participants (Schwandt, 2003), relating to what is known objectively and subjectively both from the previous literature and information widely available. Subjectivity is established within an interpretivist paradigm, whereby an immersion '*in the participants' experiences*' (Nutt Williams and Morrow, 2009: 577) infers purpose from the participant, who in turn communicates their consumption experience (Smith *et al.*, 2009). IPA supports exploratory research that seeks to capture '*shared experiences across a group of participants*' (Smith *et al.*, 2009: 17).

To ensure validity of the data, there was a focus upon trustworthiness and authenticity (Creswell, 2009) to minimise researcher subjectivity. Trustworthiness was established through transparency of the theoretical framework, paradigm, research methods and process (McGregor and Murnane, 2010). Validity emerges from gathering data from well-chosen participants who can speak to the topic and report on their experience (Stenbacka, 2001); therefore, the sampling criteria was informed by extant literature. Trustworthiness also includes a reflective acknowledgement of subjectivity (McGregor and Murnane, 2010) or in this case intersubjectivity (Poonamallee, 2009). Adopting an ontological position of interpretivism indicates assumptions of subjectivity (Olsen, 1995), particularly when examining agents operating within similar lifeworlds (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Intersubjectivity acknowledges shared meaning between the participants and the researcher as influencing data interpretation (Poonamallee, 2009). This included: gender; motherhood; socioeconomic standing, and life-experience. This reflexivity can aid understanding of the context of lifeworld's (Olsen, 1995; Appleton, 1995), adding an authentic voice to the experience. Minimising subjectivity and enabling transparency was addressed by asking selected participants to validate the analysis and thematic development (Creswell, 2009; Nutt Williams and Morrow, 2009). This ensured that the data reported aligned with the participant's own interpretation and meaning of their experiences. This was then developed to reflect a narrative interweaving the data with the phenomena of interest within a theoretical construct.

The analytic process began by examining each of the participants narrative through a descriptive lens, followed by linguistic tendencies and finally through an interrogative form to apply meaning to understand the underlying sustainability-concepts (Smith *et al.*, 2009). A representation of the coding analysis is presented in Table 1 below, indicating thematic development in the first column, the verbatim conversation transcribed from recording the interview in the central column and the analysis process in the right-hand column that included: descriptive analysis of what was stated; *linguistic analysis of tone, pace and additional sounds, such as laughter*; conceptual - what is the underlying meaning. All quotes presented in the paper were captured in the interviews and are stated verbatim, after response tokens (um, ok, ah) and involuntary vocalisations were removed (Poland, 1995).

Table 1. Thematic development and coding process

Thematic development	Verbatim conversation from the interview from which quotes are derived	Analytic process of IPA capturing: descriptive analysis of what was stated; <i>linguistic analysis of tone, pace and additional sounds, such as laughter</i> ; <u>conceptual - what is the underlying meaning</u>
Engaged with outcomes (macro value)	Global Girlfriend [reading] I like the name already. [reading] Women made Eco friendly,	Likes the name Global Girlfriend immediately. <i>Spends a bit of time reading through the labels, savouring the content,</i>

Familiar terminology (macro value)	Fairtrade. Is that a wee girl sitting cross-legged? With something on her, or something. [reading]	<i>she is really interested in the content and imagery.</i> These attributes of eco-friendly and Fairtrade are established within the context of food, she is aware of the implication of acknowledging workers' rights on this label and finds this an attractive inclusion. <u>The participant has previously expressed concern for exploitation of workers earlier in the interview, acknowledging awareness of media allegations that workers in fashion factories allegedly experience exploitation. In reading this label, she is enthused by the suggestion that workers have received a fair wage and that the garment has been produced without exploiting the environment. This information appeals to her ideology and makes the brand an attractive proposition, as evident in the words 'like', 'love', 'adds absolute kudos'. 'I love that: very involved; absolutely love that': passionate wording, she is aligning with the philosophy of this company.</u>
Connected by values (micro value)	..... and what, what garment was this on? [reading]	
Individual - to wearer - style driven (micro value)	..... Freya top ..... I love that, yep, I absolutely love that, again if the garment was nice, I just think that just adds absolute kudos, and is very cool, and, ... a good cause, I love the name, it's kind	
Involved with the story (macro value)	of quite, em, ..... it explains a lot of stuff, but it is also, ..... you know, its quite arty as well, they have obviously thought about their, .....their image, .. I like the name, Global Girlfriend, ..... it's kind of snappy, you know, its, its marketed, its marketing, without a doubt.	
Linking consumption with positive outcomes (macro value)		Kudos: much praise on the provenance. Likes what the label is suggesting. Believes the ethos to be an attractive an attractive attribute as well as beneficial to those who need support. <u>She wants to know what the garment looks like, testing to see whether she can relate to the style. 'I love the name:' The name Global Girlfriend links with female solidarity, women supporting women.</u>

Including the hermeneutic turn facilitates greater depth to the narrative to identify phenomenological insights (Smith *et al.*, 2009), through identifying idiographic and collective experiences. This evolves from the subject analysing their individual thoughts and meaning behind their behaviours, this analysis is further interrogated during the research process examining the participants narratives independently and as a whole. Themes were developed for each participant then reduced collectively for similarity. Although this emphasises a subjective interpretation, it also allows the adoption of a consumer lens to capture consumers efforts to evaluate meaning within fashion sustainability (Thompson *et al.*, 1989). Subjectivity was not managed or reduced, rather the quotes were utilised as a representation of the consumer experience and the transparency of reporting enhances reliability (Nutt Williams and Morrow, 2009).

Data analysis led to two themes: firstly, understanding micro-sustainable-fashion terminology, where sustainable-concepts were considered for consumption characteristics as adding value for the wearer; and secondly, macro-terminology that has implications for the wider sustainability agenda, including the environment and society.

## Findings and discussion

Typical of phenomenological research, the broad nature of the initial enquiry (Smith *et al.*, 2009) began by asking the participants how they selected fashion for themselves and their children. The majority focused initially upon their fashion selection, expressing the style which reflected their sense of self and what attracted them to a garment; this was expected and is consistent with the literature (Goldsmith and Clark, 2008; Wiederhold and Martinez, 2018; McNeil and Moore, 2015; Hiller Connell, 2010). It was not until the garment labels were presented that the participants began to explore their perception of sustainability through evaluating sustainable-production and their consumer responsibility for wider sustainability implications.

### *Micro-sustainable fashion terminology: value perceptions of material characteristics*

The concept of sustainability was familiar to participants, although they assumed this related to environmental issues rather than concern for workers involved in production (Weise *et al.*, 2012). The participants were well versed in sustainable practice, including purchasing sustainably produced food (organic, Fairtrade and locally produced) and reducing what was sent to landfill, often through recycling household waste; this approach was similar to the actively engaged participants identified by Evans and Peirson-Smith (2018) who aligned their lifestyles with concepts of sustainability and ethicality. However, as sustainability-concepts had been gleaned from wider discourse, mainly from the food industry (Nilssen *et al.*, 2019; Ritch, 2015), transferring concepts of 'organic' to fashion seemed imponderable, as expressed below:

*Organic-cotton. I am not sure what that means. (Participant-24)*

*I would think about buying organic-cotton clothing for my son's health and not for the way that it is grown and the environment. (Participant-26)*

The food industry has successfully marketed 'organic' food as being a healthier option, and most of the participants purchased organically produced food to avoid their children from digesting chemicals (Aitkinson, 2014); however, how the relevance of organic-cotton production from either a personal health or wider social and environmental perspective bore little relevance, similar to Evans and Peirson-Smith (2018) and Hiller Connell's (2010) findings. Continuing to draw upon their knowledge of sustainable food, there were assumptions of higher quality and pricing:

*Organic-cotton, I would assume was hugely expensive. (Participant-1)*

*I assume it was expensive, by my standards. (Participant-15)*

As organic food was more expensive than non-organic, it was assumed that organic-cotton would also be more expensive than regular cotton. Although there was no recollection of organic-cotton pertaining to added value attributes, when garments made from organic-cotton were comparably priced and available in mainstream fashion-retailers, organic status increased their overall satisfaction:

*[My son has] organic jeans. That was a fluke, [they were] the pair that fitted him best. Then you think, not only that, [they're] organic. (Participant-5)*

Participant-5 suggests it was a 'fluke', that without making an effort she had the advantage of sourcing the organic-cotton jeans for her son; although she is unable to articulate why, she perceives added material value. This seems to illustrate a superiority of organic production, perhaps transferred from notions that organic food is representative of a higher quality, despite the fashion industry omitting to position organic fibres as being advantageous. Similar to Wiederhold and Martinez's (2018) research, the participants negated assumptions on the meaning of organic-cotton for tangible characteristics; for example, Participant-21 questioned if the omission of chemicals in material would be healthier:

*I think about organic-cotton quite a lot, because we tend to buy organic. My youngest, has got bad skin and I think, is organic-cotton better? By the time I've washed organic-cotton four times in a washing machine, surely, it's no different to non-organic-cotton, so that argument doesn't wash with me. (Participant-21)*

While the assumption organic-cotton would be more sympathetic to sensitive skin, such as eczema, due to the omission of chemicals is a tangible assumption, it is also tangible to expect that laundering will remove chemical residue, illustrating confusion for the purpose of organic-cotton when seeking material value. Around this discourse of chemical use in fashion-production, Participant-4 also expressed concern:

*I remember reading an article about Teflon, that it was a chemical that could be taken into the skin. I can't find [school] trousers [without] Teflon and it bothers me. I feel I am the only person in the whole world who knows about this, because nobody else seems to care. I think this can't be bad or they wouldn't let it out there. (Participant-4)*

Participant-4 expressed her isolation and internalised ignorance of chemical applications used within fashion-production, as well as other consumers' lack of concern. Amid this, she began to question whether her doubts were rational, believing that if chemicals in textiles were detrimental to health, legislation would prevent them being used within fashion-production,

again a tangible assumption. It is evident that the participants are drawing upon wider notions of sustainability and applying this to a fashion context, indicating both the mainstreaming of sustainability information (Wiederhold and Martinez, 2018), as well as the silence of sustainability implications from the fashion industry (Blasi *et al.*, 2020; Bly *et al.*, 2015). Without supporting information, the participants expressed scepticism of the higher price of organic-cotton:

*Why should they be more expensive? Organic-cotton uses less pesticides, surely [production] must be cheaper? (Participant-16)*

*You shouldn't have to pay a premium price for organic. These are natural products in the world. (Participant-28)*

The quotes are similar to findings reported by Hiller Connell (2010) where cotton is viewed as a natural fibre, therefore, the concept of organic-cotton was deemed unnecessary. This sentiment illustrates trying to understand production and pricing implications. While some consumers are willing-to-pay a premium for sustainable-production (Bernard *et al.*, 2013; Hyllegard *et al.*, 2012; Hustvedt and Bernard, 2008), others are not (D'Souza *et al.*, 2006; Sonnenberg *et al.*, 2014), as evidenced by participant's 16 and 28 who both expressed frustration and scepticism that organic status is used to enable higher price points (Wiederhold and Martinez, 2018; Bly *et al.*, 2015; McNeil and Moore, 2015; D'Souza *et al.*, 2006). Hiller Connell (2010), Hustvedt and Bernard (2008) and Bernard *et al.*, (2013) all reported on a skewed understanding of fibre production, material value and wider social and environmental issues. Although Bernard *et al.* (2013) found increased willingness-to-pay more for woollen socks, this may be related to animal welfare considerations and assumptions that the sheep producing the wool fibres have better living conditions – similar assumptions cannot be applied to cotton which grows from plants. This ambiguity of sustainability-terminology that resulted in scepticism was also experienced when evaluating 'carbon-neutral' fashion-factories. Their lack of familiarisation of the terminology in a fashion context led to frustration, as illustrated below:

*It doesn't mean anything to me. If they are not going to explain the terminology they think we have been educated in, then it's pointless. (Participant-8)*

Participant-8 rejects the claims, unable to determine the meaning of the terminology and expressing scepticism over the claims. While assumptions around macro-sustainability maybe preferred in some contexts – such as Participant-21 who explained above that '*we tend to buy organic*', and evident in marco-concepts of 'vegan' and 'biodegradable' (Blasi *et al.*, 2020; Cheng, 2019) understandings around carbon-neutrality are linked to transport and local production, neither of which fit within assumptions of fashion-production, where it is accepted that fashion is produced overseas. While Participant-8 expressed frustration at the '*pointlessness*' of marco sustainability claims, other participants felt embarrassed that they

did not understand the terminology meaning, as identified by Evans and Peirson-Smith (2018). Hindered by their lack of 'education' of environmental sustainability implications, and as though to illustrate some fashion-production knowledge, the focus moved to allegations of worker exploitation which has been covered within media discourse:

*Organic-cotton can be produced as unethically as ordinary cotton; it doesn't tell you how the garment was made [and] who made it. (Participant-27)*

*I was thinking about the people who make the clothes, and doing better for them, rather than the environment. (Participant-2)*

The exploitation of garment-workers was of particular concern to the participants, especially allegations of child-labour. As reported by McNeil and Moore (2015), Wiederhold and Martinez (2018) and Ritch and Brownlie (2016), there was uncertainty as to what would pertain to a better outcome, given the complexities around developing countries building their economy and cultural expectations. While the participants' sought assurance that garment-workers were not exploited, there was also concern that the labelling claims were over exaggerated, as illustrated when evaluating claims from the Environmental Justice Foundation label that the cotton was not sourced from exploitative practice:

*I wonder if that's true? Child slave labour isn't a consequence of being non-organic. I have scepticism about that type of claim. (Participant-5)*

Participant-5 makes assumptions of a macro-sustainability claim, 'organic', that has connotations to environmental production and dismisses any link to working conditions - expressing annoyance at the label. This is similar to the findings from Evans and Peirson-Smith (2018), Hyllegard *et al.* (2012) and D'Souza *et al.* (2006) where ambiguity and confusion for sustainable-terminology led to scepticism for claims that exist on a broad sphere of sustainability-concepts but lack any real meaning. While there was concern for allegation that garment-workers in fashion-factories were exploited, there was no knowledge of exploitation in cotton production. Uzbekistan is the world's largest cotton producer and adopts forced labour, including children, to grow and harvest cotton; globally, over 260 brands have pledged to avoid using cotton from Uzbekistan whilst this practice continues (International Labor Rights Forum, N.D.). While assurance that fashion has been produced without exploitative practice may not yield any material value, it does reduce any feelings of guilt of fashion consumption and contributes to macro-sustainable-terminology implications, as discussed next.

### *Macro-sustainable-terminology implications*

Although many participants expressed concern for environmental issues, there was a disconnect between how they could make a 'difference' through purchasing 'organic-fashion', as explained by participants-21 and 3:

*I am sceptical how much difference me buying two organic shirts will actually make to the world. I don't know why, because I think quite a lot about us only having one planet and if we don't look after it, it's not going to be there anymore. (Participant-21)*

*I am not convinced whether organic actually makes a difference in the larger environmental scheme of things. (Participant-3)*

Participant-21 explains that she 'thinks quite a lot' about conserving planetary resources and this has stimulated a sense of responsibility to protect 'our planet', using 'our' rather than 'the' to illustrate ownership and involvement. Similarly, Participant-3 questioned the 'difference' that organic makes to the 'larger environmental' agenda. Interestingly, the concept of 'making a difference' arose a number of times; the participants were seeking tangible outcomes that would support sustainable behaviour, particularly to mitigate higher pricing. However, macro-terminology and broad claims were not dismissed for material value – the narratives illustrate concern for wider sustainable issues but without substance or meaning. For example, although Participant-25 thought that organic may in some way be beneficial for the environment, she was also aware that there are contrasting opinions:

*I assume, because the word organic is there, that it has been produced in [a] healthy way for the environment. But actually, I don't know and I have begun to challenge that. I watched a documentary about the green lobby and [their agenda] has not been that beneficial to humans or the environment. So, I have begun to wonder whether just because the word 'organic' or 'recycled' is there, is it actually a good thing? (Participant-25)*

Participant-25 draws on macro-sustainability-concepts, and collectively, assumptions of 'making a difference' and being 'a good thing', illustrate attempts to grasp the bigger concepts of environmental issues and positive attitudes toward engaging with sustainability. This also indicates that the participants recognise their consumer behaviours impact on boarder concepts of sustainability. However, the breadth of actors and processes involved in fashion supply chains and which to prioritise as a consumer is overwhelming (Bly *et al.*, 2015; Sonnenberg *et al.*, 2014). Similarly, sustainability jargon that alludes to better provenance (Hyllegard *et al.*, 2012), but there is no evidence of how this does relate to fashion-production. Confusion over which production process supported the sustainability agenda (Bly *et al.*, 2015; Hustvedt and Bernard, 2008) extended to recycled products, as illustrated by

Participant-8 who questioned whether recycling was the best option to reduce the environmental impact:

*Anything recycled demands a process, whether that process costs more than the recycling is the question. [Not] financially, but environment[ally]. Plastics have to be melted down in order to be reformed, that's carbon-emissions. Polyester, [is] a man-made product, what has it cost? You have to weigh up the value of [the process] versus [environmental] cost. (Participant-8)*

Addressing environmental 'cost', as moving beyond financial, to consider the wider impact – or true cost – has long been a focus of those concerned about sustainability. Participants were aware that political and economic agendas may manipulate consumer sentimentality to encourage engagement with sustainability – often at a higher price. There was also awareness that progressive outcomes for ensuring sustainability contrasted with the economic agendas of government and business profits. It is difficult to get consumers to move beyond practical and personal attributes that impact on their practice to consider ambiguous implications amid this confusion (D'Souza *et al.*, 2006). This is especially true when production lacks transparency and occurs overseas, yet still contributes to global emissions that are detrimental to the environment; although consumers are not directly affected by the consequences of overseas production, they still contribute to global emissions through their consumption. Given the global interconnectedness of economies, societies and the environmental consequences propagated by multi-national organisations and governments, evaluating consumption within families was considered as trivial in comparison (Taljaard *et al.* 2018; Wiederhold and Martinez, 2018). Participant-26 expresses feeling overwhelmed, after having chanced upon information relating to the impact of cotton production for cotton producers in Uzbekistan:

*The environmental emissions of production are worrying, especially when you think of factories in China, India and Third World countries, spewing out emissions. You think, where the hell is that going to land us? I couldn't believe the difference in [the Uzbekistan] landscape. The places where they had rivers before, there's none now, [it was] used for cotton [production]. I was shocked. They [did] that because it was the best cash crop that they could get. When they have used the water in that area, they are left with nothing; then they have to up-sticks [from where] they have been farming for years and move out. (Participant-26)*

Participant-26 expresses her 'shock' at the impact that Uzbekistan cotton production had upon the environment and consequently, the cotton producer's predicament of exploiting their land irretrievably. The Aral Sea in Uzbekistan is one of the biggest environmental disasters caused by intensive cotton production (BBC, 2019). However, despite her 'shock', she felt that this was not something she could incorporate into her consumption practice; not only because how could she know where the cotton was produced, she also recognised that

the cotton farmers were trying to make a living and, as a consequence, had destroyed the land they owned, again illustrating unawareness of forced labour in Uzbekistan. This indicates that individual efforts seem insignificant against the scale of the issues in a global context (Taljaard *et al.*, 2018; Wiederhold and Martinez, 2018; Hiller Connell, 2010). Further, the complexities over which outcome best supports all actors within production and supply-chain management is similar to acknowledging that although garment-workers may be exploited, questionable employment is better than no employment (Ritch and Brownlie, 2016; McNeil and Moore, 2015). Here, participant-26 acknowledges that this is an environmental disaster, but recognises that Uzbekistan farmers have limited alternative opportunities to make a living. Additionally, her quote symbolises the detrimental impact environmental degradation will have on producers and their future productivity, as underpinned by the World Commission for Economic Development's (1987) definition of sustainability.

Collectively, evaluations reflected the inner turmoil of household practice and knowledge around sustainability, where the desire to limit the impact of their practice conflicted with consumer led attributes and trying to make sense of how fashion-production, and consumption, impacted detrimentally to wider concerns for sustainability. Despite the green and slow fashion movements responding to production processes and water conservation (Taljaard *et al.*, 2018), the participants expressed disengagement through limited availability, undesirable styles and the higher price of sustainably-produced fashion. Further, their limited understanding of production processes, water and chemical usage, did not offer a clear pathway to purchase sustainable-fashion. Participants were seeking triggers that would provide insight into sustainable-production-processes and when terminology was emotively responsive, they felt greater involvement and affiliation with the garment, as evidenced below during an evaluation of the Global Girlfriend label that described the producers as non-profit, women led, Fairtrade and the garment as being made from vegetable dyes:

*Women, non-profit clothing, wow, Fairtrade in Nepal. I had no idea you could get to this. That's magic. I would buy that. (Participant-20)*

The wording on this label connected with a number of participants, and given that fashion-factories primarily employ women, allegations of exploitation adopt a feminist stance. McNeil and Moore (2015) suggested that creating an emotional connection would increase involvement in sustainability. Through purchasing this brand, participants feel that they are '*doing their bit for women in Nepal*' (Participant-3) and through altruistic nudges this increased post-consumption satisfaction, as well as reduced guilt of contributing to exploitative practice. Although the labels presented during the interviews contained sustainable-concepts, participants were unable to contextualise the meaning for sustainability, as they did not understand fashion-supply-chain-management. Therefore, regarding the suggestion by Hiller Connell (2010) that education of supply-chain-management and production-processes is required, this should expand to include detrimental impacts and how sustainable-production is responsive. This was something that participants appreciated

when reflecting upon the labels, particularly the Global Girlfriend label, as expressed by participant-16:

*I am happy it's out there, showing awareness to the general public. (Participant-16)*

## Conclusions

This research sought to examine how mainstream consumers interpret and understand sustainable-terminology underpinned by assumptions that mainstream societal interest in sustainability is growing (Blasi *et al.*, 2020; Davis, 2020; Cockburn, 2018; Wiederhold and Martinez, 2018), while the fashion industry has been slow to acknowledge consumers sustainable concerns (Evans and Peirson-Smith, 2018; Sonnenberg *et al.*, 2014). Although there is evidence that consumers transfer macro-sustainable-terminology to fashion, the participants narratives provided evidence that their concern that was hampered by limited knowledge, depicting the capaciousness of the issues surrounding sustainable-fashion. It is unsurprising that the participants felt overwhelmed by the issues. Yet, their narratives illustrate the '*social awareness*' for fashion sustainability found by Blasi *et al.* (2020) and McNeil and Moore (2015), particularly through drawing on their obligations towards '*our planet*'. The participants wanted to understand how their practice could make a '*difference to the world*', and there were indications of assuming responsibility for better outcomes. This research advances knowledge by illustrating that consumer actions themselves are ineffective without knowledge and supporting information. Moreover, the interpretivist methodology illuminated upon the complexity of deliberating fashion sustainability and how this is made meaningful for idiographic households. Although the participants were unable to utilise sustainability claims to support their consumption practice, due to ambiguity over how the concepts relate to fashion-production and a lack of understanding of the material value indicated in sustainable-production, this rich insight offers pathways for marketing management.

This research has much to offer fashion marketers, especially as there has been little attention paid by academic research to examine how consumers evaluate specific sustainability-concepts the fashion context. To advance sustainability within wider society, determining how sustainable-terminology is made meaningful is essential to appeal and engage with consumers. While marketing is criticised for encouraging consumption (Nilssen *et al.*, 2019), it can provide a pathway to educate and inform consumers of sustainability within supply chain management (Lim, 2016) and to demonstrate responding to the environmental and social impact (Sonnenberg *et al.*, 2014; Hyllegard *et al.*, 2012). This has the potential to move beyond simply advising consumers to recycle unwanted garments (Ritch and Siddiqui, 2020), which could also ensure commercial success. While the context of fashion consumption differentiates to other consumption contexts (Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau, 2020; Nilssen *et al.*, 2019), because consumer preferences for style take precedence (Wiederhold and Martinez, 2018; Harris *et al.*, 2016; Bly *et al.*, 2015; McNeil and Moore, 2015), material value

can be added from addressing sustainability. To do this, acknowledgement of the processes and practices require attention (Blasi *et al.*, 2020). Previous research has indicated that a clear consensus of theoretical and conceptual development has yet to be defined (Bly *et al.*, 2015), this research illuminates that determining fashion-sustainability-production can be used to direct consumer behaviour through carefully constructed marketing and labelling. By aligning those theoretical constructs around production terminology and consumer perceptions, a pathway can be developed. Fashion-retailers should recognise that fashion that has literally cost the earth could soon become unfashionable.

The research has unpacked the meaning of sustainable-concepts represented in fashion-production, illustrating that broad definitions do not encourage consumer confidence (Bly *et al.*, 2015) as consumers are unable to unpack the terminology in relation to fashion-sustainability (Bernard *et al.*, 2013). In particular organic-production was referred to more frequently than carbon-neutral, chemical applications, a reflection of transferring better known terminology from other consumption contexts. Their narratives reflect the sentiments of Bly *et al.* (2015), who suggested that the concepts included within sustainable-fashion are vast, complex and rely on assumptions that consumers understand the issues (D'Souza *et al.*, 2006). It is also because complex fashion-production spans from cotton picking, chemical and dyes usage, to labour standards (Bly *et al.*, 2015; Sonnenberg *et al.*, 2014). Although sustainability-terminology focuses more on environmental than social issues (Weise *et al.*, 2012), even within environmental sustainability there are a number of sustainability implications described by ambiguous technical jargon (Hyllegard *et al.*, 2012), none of which elucidate to how sustainable-production advances the sustainability agenda (D'Souza *et al.*, 2006). This was particularly evident when considering price differentials (Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau, 2020; Harris *et al.*, 2016) and the participants expressed scepticism that sustainability was superficially used to increase pricing (Bly *et al.*, 2015; Hyllegard *et al.*, 2012). The research supports Nilssen *et al.*'s (2019) assertion fashion-sustainability marketing should educate consumers on what makes a product, production or retailing sustainable. The evidence presented above indicates that there was much altruism experienced in the labels that addressed sustainability, especially the labels offering assurances' of avoiding worker-exploitation.

## Limitations

The research has limitations in generalisability, nevertheless, it benefited from an idiographic approach to understanding the nuances of how sustainability fits into everyday lifeworlds. Although other cohorts may have different evaluations, adopting a narrow approach enabled a richer understanding of how this cohort of professional working mothers deliberated on the meaning of the garment-labels. This cohort were already evaluating sustainability within their consumption experiences, and other cohorts may not be so mindful. Nevertheless, younger consumers are said to be more aware of sustainability. The knowledge gained from this

cohort could be applied in a quantitative study to gain a wider perspective or a similar approach could be applied to a different consumer life-stage to examine whether sustainable concepts are considered within wider consumption contexts and which attributes are sought from sustainable-concepts. Lastly, the purpose of this paper was to examine sustainable-terminology and this focus does not reflect the nuances involved in fashion that cover self-identity represented in the visual presentation of fashion or the socialisation of branding and fashion that was important to both the participants and their children. This, along with examining the tensions of sustainability within dynamic households, would be worthy of further exploration.

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