

# THE MILLENNIAL EYES

- A STUDY OF CONSUMERS' RESPONSE  
TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE FASHION  
COLLABORATIONS' COMMUNICATION

Thesis for two year Master, 30 ECTS  
Master Programme in Fashion Management and Marketing

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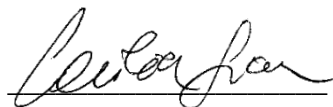
## Acknowledgements

As long as we can remember fashion has always been an intriguing and delightful topic for us to immerse in. Both of us have a background within the fashion field. One of us (Cecilia) has a Bachelor Degree in Fashion Design and the other (Yasmine) has a Bachelor Degree in Textile Engineering, and by combining both of our expertise as well as our knowledge that we have been enriched with during our studies of Fashion Management and Marketing on Masters level, this thesis around Sustainable Fashion Collaborations was developed.

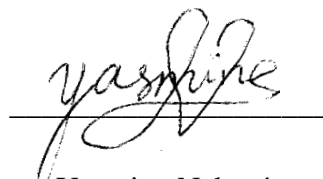
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This thesis topic has fascinated us on so many levels so please,  
Enjoy!

*Borås, 7 June 2020*



Cecilia Sion



Yasmine Nehmé

# Abstract

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**Title:** The Millennial Eyes - A study of consumers' response towards sustainable fashion collaborations' communication

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## Background and Problematization

The fashion industry has faced a radical change in how the market has been operating towards a more digitized landscape, and several fashion brands have started developing greater customer experiences as well as engaging the consumers with conveyance of authentic content. Since fashion collaborations can increase awareness and have an immense impact on the consumers' perception, the concept of creating sustainable collaborations have become an ideal way to meet the needs of the millennial consumers. The topic of sustainable fashion collaborations has started to emerge and the way it is perceived by consumers appears to be unstudied, which makes it very fascinating to analyse.

## Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to investigate consumers' response towards sustainable fashion collaborations and how these co-branding projects are marketed to and perceived by millennials.

On the basis of this purpose, the following research questions have been formulated:

*How are sustainable fashion collaborations communicated in the consumers' eyes?*

*How is the response of millennial consumers towards sustainable fashion collaborations?*

## Methodology

This study was conducted with an abductive approach, and data was obtained from literature and interviews. A qualitative method was applied, with the definition of four case studies to analyse through semi-structured interviews conducted with twelve millennial consumers.

## Conclusion

Messages and campaigns can not be superficially developed and need to be explanatory to the eyes of consumers, in order to avoid greenwashing and generating the need to fill in communication gaps. In this sense, storytelling also resulted to be a positive addition to the communication of sustainable fashion collaborations, creating an emotional connection with consumers. Since positive sustainable associations to a brand can only be developed through recognition, this aspect is also fundamental when communicating sustainable products. Moreover, millennial consumers require brands to have a balanced communication in terms of sustainability and fashion content, even when it comes to sustainable fashion collaborations. To conclude, it can be said that millennial consumers are definitely drawn to social media communication, but if brands want to reach a wider audience with their products and sustainability efforts, millennials themselves suggest the use of other communication channels. This study can, in the long-term, contribute to the knowledge and strategies of fashion companies and understanding the needs and expectations of consumers towards the communication of current matters like sustainability.

**Keywords:** Fashion collaborations, sustainable fashion, communication of sustainability, fashion communication, millennial consumers

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# 1. Introduction

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This chapter begins with an introduction to the topics of; Fashion Industry & Consumers' Behaviour, Fashion Collaborations and more specifically sustainable fashion collaborations as well as the Communication around Sustainable Products. Moreover, the section continues with the discussion of the purpose and research questions developed for this thesis.

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## 1.1 Background

In the past twenty years the fashion industry has faced a radical change in how the market has been operating towards a more digitized landscape. Since social media has gained an increasing importance in the communication with consumers, fashion brands have engaged most of their investments in developing greater customer experiences as well as conveying authentic content. Therefore, the concept of creating collaborations have become an ideal way to meet the needs of the twenty first century consumers (Sadler, 2018).

Fashion consumers have been seeking diverse benefits from products such as uniqueness, utility and rarity to satisfy their needs. Due to that, consumers have diverse needs and demands and the product consumption is utilized as a means to express consumers own value. Nowadays, consumers want more than just a product which can express their image and characteristics (Shim, 2006). Except from providing products with tangible values, brands should also create an intangible value such as differentiation, rarity and uniqueness in order to actually be a selection to the consumer. To provide such intangible values, fashion collaborations have become an important business strategy for the fashion brands to promote themselves in a virtuous way (Hoon Kim, Lee, Kim, Ko, & Mattila, 2014).

Collaborations have been implemented by companies regardless of their changing genres and characteristics to differentiate themselves from competitors (Coste-Manière, Hoffmann, Panchout, & Rollet, 2013). By cooperating with new artists, designers and unexpected brands as well as other industries they have been able to intensify their uniqueness and novelty on the market. These co-operations between parties have the power to engage and excite consumers as well as generate long-term loyalty and profitability if the collaborations made are well-managed (Ibid).

### **1.1.1. Fashion Industry & Consumers' Behaviour**

The fashion industry has always been an industry of change, trends and innovation and these characteristics have not transformed till this day. Change in the fashion industry is visibly fast-paced and can be regarded as a strategic tool used by brands and retailers to keep a high level of interest in the consumers' eyes (Ka Ming, Zhi-Ming & Leung, 2004). As a result, these fast-paced processes encourage overconsumption and waste accumulation. The fashion industry alone is responsible for 10% of global greenhouse gas emission and for 20% of global water waste, mainly due to the production of fast-fashion (Fletcher, 2007). Moreover, the garments produced for the mass market are made out of poor fabrics and trimmings by people with poor working conditions and salaries, which are dominated by a cost pressed system that has managed to build a strong, though unethical, supply chain for the retail industry. The high level of competition that characterises today's fashion market has definitely enhanced a lack of transparency when it comes to the production systems which have lowered the prices for retailers (Ibid).

According to Fletcher (2014), in the last ten years consumption has increased not only in pace, but also in amount with consumers buying one-third more clothes than they used to. The volume of products created for the fast fashion industry has also generated other issues in terms of disposal and created enormous dumps of textiles (Tojo et al., 2012). Moreover, with the industry producing overabundance and therefore giving more and more choice to its clients, consumers have become indecisive when it comes to purchases (Clarke & Miller, 2002).

In order to face the challenges and threats that the fashion industry has today, both companies and consumers have started to develop an upstream mindset that cares about sustainability and society. The aim is to reduce the waste of resources and environmental weakening, while enhancing ethical treatment of workers, as well as to slow down production and consumption processes, with the goal of developing an industry that will be more sustainable in the long-term. However, sustainability does not only regard the system of supply chains and marketing practices, but also consumers that will be able to make more ethical purchases with the help of growing brand transparency and information (Kutsenkova, 2017). However, it is important to remember that sustainability does not have to be tedious or uncreative. In this sense, sustainable brand collaborations can constitute a big opportunity for brands to share their knowledge with the aim of creating something unique. Trendy ideas can flourish in a sustainable mindset just as well as they do in a production oriented one. In this sense, the collaboration between Stella McCartney and Adidas is of great inspiration for the future of sustainable fashion. What Stella McCartney did with Adidas was focusing on a timeless piece of the German shoe brand, the Stan Smith sneaker, and making it more sustainable by just replacing real leather with vegan leather. This little change did not influence the appearance of the product, which therefore is still fashionable and attractive to the eyes of consumers. Therefore, the idea of sustainable fashion should be the one of putting good design ideas first and adding value to these ideas with an ethical point of view (Yotka, 2020).

### 1.1.2. Fashion Collaborations

In the last two decades, the fashion industry has been rapidly growing and became more competitive than ever. This strong necessity of standing out amongst the others, together with the increasing dynamism of marketing, are putting a lot of pressure on brands to come up with original strategies that will guarantee their survival in the system (Ko et al., 2016). One of the most effective ways with which brands are facing the instability of the fashion market is the one of engaging in collaborations with other brands. This strategy is also known as co-branding (Shen et al., 2017; Voss and Mohan, 2016). The main goal of this kind of partnership is to generate consumers' positive associations towards the engaged brands, a process that has the ability to improve both partners' image (Oeppen and Jamal, 2014). Fashion collaborations are a kind of brand co-operation that involves two or more brands in the development of a common project (Voss and Gammoh, 2004).

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has been the scene of a multitude of remarkable fashion collaborations, particularly between fast fashion brands and luxury designers that have drawn significant attention from the media (Lee and Decker, 2016). The fashion industry went through a lot of fruitful collaborations, many of which included the fast fashion Swedish brand H&M and a number of luxury brands and designers (Shen et al., 2017). The first ever collaboration between H&M and a designer goes back to 2004, when the Swedish brand engaged in a cooperation with German designer Karl Lagerfeld. From that moment, the fast fashion brand has been going through a series of luxury collaborations across the years.

According to Lidbury (2016), in 2015 H&M reported a 10% rise in sales as an outcome of its co-branding with French luxury brand Balmain. The successful partnership between Balmain and H&M saw people queueing for three days straight outside of H&M stores just before the launch of the line (Brooks, 2015). The collection went viral on social media as well, particularly on Instagram, where top models like Gigi Hadid and Kendall Jenner were endorsing the collection for a big public of about fifty-eight million followers. Another incredible success for the fast fashion brand was the collaboration with British brand Erdem to create a menswear collection. The line was launched in November 2017 and generated incredible excitement and anticipation among consumers, who queued for about twelve hours just to get their hands on some of the fashionable pieces (Carvell, 2017). All the collaborations established by H&M since 2004 can be denoted as joint co-branding, a form of collaboration in which two partners develop a joint collection (Shenet et al., 2017).

The outcome of these forms of collaborations are not always positive. As a matter of fact, consumers may develop positive or negative associations towards one of the parties involved or both (Geylani et al., 2008). Previous research in the field has demonstrated that designer collaborations represent a great way of drawing media attention and creating excitement for both retailers and brands (Shenet et al., 2017). Consumer awareness and profits are also factors that are positively influenced by collaborations (Rollet et al., 2013). As a matter of fact, the ability to draw the attention of the media is fundamental to make the collaboration successful and profitable (Friedman 2010). Another advantage of fashion collaborations is the one of being able to meet emerging trends expectations among consumers, and therefore increase the loyalty towards the brand (Voss and Mohan, 2016). Nevertheless, positive outcomes for both partners can not always be taken for granted, since most co-

branding experiences have actually generated positive results for fast fashion brands, but their impact on luxury brands could be debated (Simonin and Ruth, 1998). According to Geylani et al. (2008), fashion collaborations may also risk compromising the brand image of one or both partners. Previous research on luxury brands have confirmed this concern, as most studies have concluded that co-branding with fast fashion brands can definitely draw consumers' attention, but may diminish the value of the luxury brand's image (Cheng-Hsui Chen and Chen, 2000). As a matter of fact, McEnally and de Chernatony (1999) states that collaborations should also be arranged on the basis of consumers' perspective, with the intent of creating an added value, not only to the eyes of the brands involved, but also to the eyes of consumers. However, the luxury-fast fashion collaboration is not the only type of collaboration that brands are engaging in at the moment.

### **1.1.3. Sustainable Fashion Collaborations**

Sustainability has become an urgent topic for most fashion brands of all segments, and there is a need for new forms of co-branding to spread knowledge and understanding on how to achieve positive changes for our planet and the fashion system itself. The idea of collaborative initiatives with a purpose has started to emerge in the last five years, and the fashion industry has also been eager to take a part in these projects (Niinimäki, 2013). Sustainable fashion collaborations can be regarded to as a form of partnership between two or more brands that has the intent to give contribution towards a more sustainable society. This can be done in different forms, by collaborating with international organisations to raise funds to support humanitarian and environmental issues, like global hunger and endangered species, or, more commonly, by collaborating with other fashion brands to create fashion products with more sustainable materials and therefore less environmental impact. Back in 2018, luxury fashion house Balenciaga started collaborating with the United Nations World Food Programme in an effort to stop global hunger by 2030 (Hirwani, 2020). The partnership resulted in the design of garments with the organisation's logo and motto embroidered on them. This coordinated effort managed to raise considerable funds from the sale of the garments, money that helped providing more resources for various vulnerable communities across the world (Ibid). Another example is the brand Stella McCartney that started a partnership with Adidas in 2018. The collaboration between the two brands saw the launch of the first ever vegan Stan Smith on the market, a shoe made with the use of cruelty-free glue and faux leather (Bounsall, 2020). It is clear from these examples that fashion and sustainability are no longer topics that only regard small niche brands, but have become a universal matter for many. Big fashion houses have started endorsing the trend of creating and launching sustainable fashion collaborations, with the intent of drawing more attention to ethical issues (Mc Gowan, 2015). However, even the smaller brands have started taking actions. Sustainable collaborations between big and small brands could accelerate better practices across the industry, and increase the pool of conscious consumers. No brand is too small to make a difference, if the correct strategies are applied (Wong, 2019). Consumers and society could only benefit from this new mindset that promotes openness in the industry, and companies that have the ability to take on projects with the purpose of sustainability, can build consumers' trust by sharing the knowledge they gained from this experience (Niinimäki, 2013). Moreover, increasingly younger consumers are investing their money where their ideals stand, which means they choose to buy from brands that have a purpose. As a matter of fact, seventy-two percent of Millennials claim that they would happily spend more money on something if it was sustainably made (Bounsall, 2020). That is another reason why brands are leaning towards collaborations in a different way. For instance, the German sportswear brand

Adidas did not only collaborate with Stella McCartney towards more sustainable solutions for the production of shoes, but also with the non-profit organization Parley for the Oceans. The partnership started out in 2015, and its very first drop saw the amount of seven thousand pairs of shoes sell out within twenty-four hours. The shoes had been created with the use of recycled plastic waste from the ocean and made a great deal for the German company, both in terms of revenue and contribution to environmental problems. This means that collaborations for good causes can actually work; therefore, as they look into their future, fashion brands should keep re-imagining the meaning of ‘collaboration’ and use it as a tool that does not only drive revenues, but can also help solving sustainability issues within the industry (Ibid).

#### **1.1.4. Communication around Sustainable Products**

As fashion collaborations have become a vital part of many retailers marketing strategies to increase the hype around the apparels and gain access to a new customer base, the communication of the advertisements are highly important to take in consideration (Ibberson, 2020). To make a successful advertisement, independently where in the world, relies on targeting the right audience with the right message (Pettersson, n.d.). Consumers are exposed to around 4000 to 10,000 marketing advertisements on a daily basis (Simpson, 2017). However, it is only a small number of actual adverts of products and services that can be recalled by the consumers without being prompted. This can occur due to many different reasons; the first and main reason is that the ads do not reach the actual targeted consumer group (Alevizou, Goworek, Henninger, & Ryding, 2017). The second reason is that the consumer might interpret the ads as an overflow with information, which makes it challenging for him/her to recall it and the third reason is that the consumer actually only notices messages that are relevant to them. Therefore, to overcome the challenges faced with information overload and to increase the efficiency of recalling a brand and a product; fashion companies seek to broadcast their core values through variety of channels such as, billboards, social media adverts, webpage pop-ups, in-store communication, magazine adverts and garment labels. To communicate their message efficiently, retailers need to identify their market and target a specific segment group (Ibid).

To stand out from competitive brand advertising, the messages communicated through advertisements should ideally be short, creative and spread through a variety of channels. For marketing of fashion brands and products, a major part is visual or non-verbal, which can easily be identified by consumers (Alevizou, et al. 2017). Moreover, consumers and brands have been requiring sustainability within the social and environmental aspects more. Sustainability is a fuzzy concept but the key aspects of sustainability should encompass a social, environmental and economic aspect (Ibid).

The consumption behavior has changed in time and decisions are no longer merely based on the quality and price (Caruana & Crane, 2008; Langguth, & Schnee, 2018). Nowadays consumers favour companies that offer meaning by exemplifying authentic traits (Langguth, & Schnee, 2018; Vallaster, Lindgreen, & Maon, 2012). According to Gaudelli (2009) millennials have also proven to possess a more positive attitude towards sustainability and result to be the targeted group when marketing for sustainability due to their spending power for green products. Moreover, studies have also shown that millennials have a great impact on family members and other people’s consumption behaviour

(Muralidharan, et al. 2016). According to Debevec, Diamond, Madden & Schewe (2013), millennials are also known to be digitally oriented and are highly up to date on new information. Previous studies show that millennial consumers are more willing to actually pay more for products and services from companies committed to positive social and environmental impact (Langguth, & Schnee, 2018). Since multitude fashion brands subsequently are taking environmental and ethical factors into consideration during the production process, studies have proven that consumers would support brands that convey sustainability aspects through their marketing channels. Yet, researchers suggest that it is not always easy to market eco-friendly fashion (Gilliland, 2017).

## **1.2 Problem Discussion & Purpose**

Marketing within the fashion industry has faced a radical change in the past twenty years and in order to meet consumers' needs and expectations several fashion brands are now promoting sustainability through their products and services. Fashion collaborations can increase awareness and have an immense impact on consumers' perception as well as on both parties' relevance in the industry (Hoon Kim, et al. 2014; Sadler, 2018). The literature has emphasized the imperative need for the fashion industry to become more socially and environmentally responsible in regard to sustainability. Moreover, previous literature on fashion collaborations has also been mostly exploratory research such as case studies, overall analysis of phenomenon and some few investigations on collaborations between luxury brands and fast fashion brands (Langguth & Schnee, 2018). In addition, an emerging literature concerning fashion collaborations and consumers' characteristics has begun to be developed (Choi & Chang, 2010), but there is no specific evidence of previous literature regarding sustainable fashion collaborations and their perception by millennials. Since millennials have become the largest consumer segment worldwide (Hudson, Kim & Moulton, 2019), their perception is highly important for the industry and represents a big gap in the literature concerning fashion collaborations.

*Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate consumers' response towards sustainable fashion collaborations and how these co-branding projects are marketed to and perceived by millennials.*

The collaborations that will be chosen, will be considered sustainable on the basis of them having a cause connected to either recycled or less harmful materials for the environment. The purpose of this study will be achieved in the following manner: first, on the basis of previous academic literature, to give insight in the theories that characterise consumer behaviour and communication; second, to investigate the response of consumers towards diverse sustainable fashion collaborations and the way each one is communicated; third, to identify a pattern in the manner consumers respond to different types of communication marketing of sustainable fashion products.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

On the basis of what has been introduced in the previous headings, the following research questions have been formulated:

*How are sustainable fashion collaborations communicated in the consumers' eyes?*

*How is the response of millennial consumers towards sustainable fashion collaborations?*

The research questions meet the purpose of the study and aim to increase the knowledge regarding sustainable fashion collaborations and the efficiency of their communication to consumers. The aim is the one of filling the research gap with theories and data collected from twelve fashion consumers. With millennials becoming more and more demanding and conscious about social and environmental issues, it is imperative for fashion brands to communicate their efforts in this direction effectively. Therefore, it is interesting to investigate millennial consumers' responses towards the communication of sustainable work. This study can therefore contribute to the knowledge and strategies of fashion companies, understanding the needs and expectations of consumers towards the communication of current matters like sustainability.

### **1.4 Delimitations of Research**

This research has been delimited to focus on millennial consumers and sustainable collaborations within the fashion industry. The study is also delimited in its perspective as it is only analysing consumers' point of view and not companies' point of view. Lastly, consumers' response about sustainable fashion collaborations will be examined, on the basis of their visual perception independently of whether they have been or not customers of the fashion collaborations.

### **1.5 Relevance of the Research**

The topic of sustainable fashion collaborations has started to emerge in the last five years and the way it is perceived by consumers appears unstudied, which makes it very interesting to analyse in order to comprehend how its communication to consumers can be improved in the future. This study is relevant to professionals within the textile industry, textile students and fashion companies that are currently using this business strategy, and engaging with other brands to create sustainable fashion collaborations, as well as to fashion brands that are willing to take on this business strategy in the future.

## 2. Theoretical Background

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This section has been developed to understand the theories associated with consumers' response to advertising, and reports valuable knowledge and theories for the chosen subject. Therefore, a description of the following topics will be provided: The Metrics of Consumer Response, Consumers' Reactions and Responses to Advertisements, Visual Communication, Communication of Sustainability through Social Media, The Challenges of Sustainable Marketing and Millennials; and The balance of Fashion and Sustainability Content.

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### 2.1 Introduction to Fashion Communication

Fashion is a visual phenomenon that consists of a constructed image that can be spotted as clothing worn on the streets, in the pages of fashion magazines or on the runway (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2011). Since fashion is mostly visually-based it makes sense that fashion advertising often tends to be largely image-based (Santaella, Summers, & Belleau, 2012). Therefore, to understand what factors make fashion advertisements effective, one has to understand the consumer perspective. The communication channels that the brands have been using to reach out to consumers and new customer segments play a great role on how they act towards these ads, and their purchase decision relies mostly on that. On that account, the visual imagery of the fashion advertisements and the role these elements play in the ad is very important (Taylor, & Costello, 2017). The authors are not studying the way the advertisements are marketed towards the consumers, but are studying the way the consumers are perceiving the advertisements once they reach them. In other words, the authors are studying the communication of the specific case studies presented in this thesis and the millennials perception of them.

### 2.2 The Metrics of Consumer Response

Consumers' attitudes, values, perceptions and opinions are the concepts acquired as behavioural dispositions. The concepts mentioned will be defined further to comprehend an enhanced understanding of their relevance to this research. The behavioural dispositions describe consumers' tendencies toward specific acts; such as how they evaluate and react towards an object or a particular process (Batra, Holbrook, & Olney, 1991; Campbell, 1963). In other words, these factors are forced by the channel perception, organization, categorization or choice, that are acquired through the process of socialization such as a person's history, group membership or context-dependent experience at a given point (Bergman, 1998).

The concept of *attitude* can be defined as a person's relation to diverse objects that are in some way stable over time. These objects can be; different cultures, social issues as well as politics amongst many others. On the contrary, the concept of *value* encapsulates a person's actions, motives, aspirations and suggests appropriate behaviour, which are more stable over time. Thus, the concept

of attitude is characterised as cognitive and affective evaluation of an object, whereas the concept of value are inactive dispositions that surpass attitudes to drive life's mode of behaviour (Bergman, 1998; Ekström, Ottosson & Parment, 2017).

Moreover, *perception* is the third concept which defines the process of how people select, organize and interpret sensations, as for an instance, the immediate response of sensory receptors to stimuli such as color, light and/or sound. In other words, perception is the way a person interprets the meanings of a stimulus that are consistent with the needs, experiences and biases of the person (Madichie, 2012). The fourth concept is *opinion* which explains a person's way of evaluating and creating a meaning of an abstract or a concrete. It is more or less a statement-based evaluation. In previous research attitude and opinion have been used as synonyms of each other. However, with more in-depth analysis attitude and values are considered as more stable dispositions that have the ability to drive perception and opinion in response or evaluation of an object presented (Bergman, 1998). Despite that these concepts are being cognitive and have an affective evaluation of objects, attitudes and values are considered to impact the development of opinion and perception (Ibid).

## **2.3 Consumers' Reactions & Responses to Advertisement**

Previous studies on consumers' responses to advertisement have resulted in a hierarchical model of the advertising effects, which are the conceptual factors mentioned above. However, evolving technological developments have given consumer researchers a purpose to emphasis attention and the exposure variables on another level (Batra, Holbrook & Olney, 1991). Advertisement have long been acknowledged under two dimensions; cognitive or informational dimension and emotional or feeling dimension (Ambler & Tellis, 2007).

### **2.3.1 Conveying with an Emotional Approach & Content**

When creating a fashion advertisement the emotional dimensions play an important role when trying to appeal to consumers. This content of advertisement is often conveyed with an emotional appeal or message to saturate consumers' elicit emotions or feelings (Taylor & Costello, 2017; Amber & Tellis, 2007). Humans are not complete rational beings therefore, the communication of emotional messages can be an effective way to reach out to them, since emotions to some extent reasons peoples' actions (Hawksworth, 2014; Williams & Kolster, 2013). The aspect that emotions are essential to messages has also been described by brand management literature, declaring that the sentiments about a brand are induced by emotions enkindled by communications (de Chernatony, 2009). The consumer wants to find a product that is compatible with the needs of relationship, trust and well-being, therefore, the transparency of products considered sustainable can be very important for the consumer to reconnect them with their sense of self (Karlsson, 2015). Moreover, diverse research suggests that feelings captured by emotion-driven advertisements are considered as a vigorous indicator of their effectiveness, as they can lead to an elevated attitude and engagement with the content. Thus, when fashion advertisements utilizes a more emotional appeal versus informational, it has a great impact on the consumers and changes their attitudes towards the brand in a positive way; which leads the consumers feeling optimistic after viewing the advertisements (Acharya & Ristimäki, 2019).

Emotional responses can also be categorised through three different dimensions, which are; pleasure, arousal and domination (Batra, Holbrook & Olney, 1991). Consumer response has also been divided into two classifications whereas one is the hedonic dimension and the other is the utilitarian dimension. The first one, hedonic, can be described as pleasure and arousal and they correlate with entertaining dimensions within advertisements, while the utilitarian dimension is more focused on the consumers' personal relevance or usefulness (Ibid). Studies have also shown that arousal and pleasure have a positive authority on consumers' attitude towards the brand and advertisement while the domination element does not have any particular influence (Anastasiie & Chiosa, 2014).

Previous studies show that respondents have been found to be more interested, involved and captivated by a utilitarian approach rather than a hedonic (Bhosle, Chaudhary & Sharma, 2012). Contrariwise, if the domination emotion is aroused much stronger, the consumers will emphasize much more on the characters or message rather than the brand or the advertisement as a whole (Orth & Holancova, 2003). According to Bhosle et al. (2012), using a hedonic approach in advertising led to a greater focus on the visual elements rather than highlighting the meaning or core purpose when comparing it to the utilitarian approach.

### **2.3.1.1 Storytelling**

Compelling stories can actually get consumers emotionally connected to the brand (Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012). In other words, storytelling is commonly used to develop relationships between brands and consumers and is claimed to be an effective tool to educate on sustainable consumption behaviors (Schwartz, 2013). In addition, stories can alleviate the communication of a brand's sustainability impact by creating empathy and awareness among consumers (Gensler, Liu-Thompkins, Völckner & Wiertz, 2013) and since sustainability is complex and can create tension, it has been argued that it is well suited to be communicated through stories. According to Wahbe (2019) when two brands are in collaboration with each other they will often have similar storytelling goals which can be told collaboratively to reach new customers. Effectively accomplishing a storytelling strategy is both a science and an art, and the collaborators should be required to merge visual content, such as video and images with audio to fully capture customers eyes with their story. A great example of this is when the fitness fashion brand Barry's Bootcamp collaborated with the luxury fashion brand Balmain and created limited edition hoodies. They hosted a video explaining the fashion collaboration and integrated a countdown clock on their homepage to create a sense of urgency to buy their limited-edition products. Furthermore, the campaign helped raise awareness and provided medical supplies and legal support with the revenue earned by this campaign, to youth who are victims of homophobia (Wahbe, 2019).

During the past few years many fashion brands have collaborated with Disney to create fashionable products and according to the chief executer at Chloé, Geoffery de La Bourdonnaye, who have previously spent many years as a senior executive at Disney, expressed that to attract common emotions of people lays in the power of the story being told. The story should be able to create a world of different characters and themes that can draw common feelings from people all around the world which Disney have been eminently good at (BoF, 2016). According to Sandra Choi, the creative director of Jimmy Choo, some kind of synergy has to exist when choosing to collaborate

with another brand and referred to the successful collaboration Jimmy Choo had with Disney to recreate the Cinderella shoes. Therefore, if a collaborator which in this case is Disney is in sync with the other collaborator, customers will be able to see it in the final product. In other words, there is a delicate balance in the act of collaboration. Storytelling is one component of many different components that the consumers expect from designers and brands; and how to balance these diverse components to create a selling story that can be converted into a memorable experience is a challenge that many brands can resonate with (Ibid).

### **2.3.2 Authenticity, Reliability & Credibility**

The impact that a brand image has on the consumer cannot be disregarded. According to Batra et al. (1991) and Campbell & Keller (2003) repetitive images in advertisement or prior knowledge of the brand reduces the effectiveness of the advertisement and have a direct effect on the consumers' emotional response and reaction to it. In other words, evaluation of distinctiveness/uniqueness and newness in advertisements are very important and depend oftentimes on what the consumer has viewed before when seeing similar advertisements with similar messages using the same prior knowledge (Ibid). The theory of the psychological phenomenon called "The mere exposure effect" implies that images seen beforehand with a positive attitude, change into a negative one when new information about the brand or repeated depictions are portrayed and therefore lead to boredom. Batra and Scott (2003) claims that the change of the attitude, from positive to negative of a brand and its advertisement has a phenomenon that can be called the "inverted U curve". For instance, when the brands are formulating themselves about being sustainable or producing sustainable products they have to engage their consumers as such, that the brands should reveal what they are actually doing instead of what is planned to be done to become an authentic brand and achieve higher credibility (Kolster, 2016; Welth, 2016). In addition to that, the brands should also use and express reasonable goals, apply a precise language and provide more specific information about their sustainable fashion products and the work behind it instead of broad references to increase the reliability and credibility towards their brand and brand image (Gruber, Kaliauer, & Schlegelmilch, 2017; Schmeltz, 2012). Therefore, if a partnership creates a collection meticulously, with mutual goals and have a clear communication, an immense impact on the brand's long-term position and profitability can also be achieved (Sadler, 2018).

## **2.4 Visual Communication**

The one thing that connects the transmitter and the receiver is the message that is provided by the transmitter to the receiver. The content in a message is very important for the marketer to figure out which problem it would solve for the consumer (Noble & Bestley, 2011). By having access to consumers' responses one can gain a better understanding of the consumers' visual processing of the information exposed to them. Schroeder (2002) claims that visual processing often involves viewing without cognition/understanding or without engagement. Which results in the viewer tending to fill in unfinished visual descriptions to comprehend the visual elements presented to him/her in a holistic way. This occurs in video advertisements as well as in image advertisements (Bhosle et al., 2012). According to Chang (2013) the responsibility lays on the advertisers to ascertain that the message provided is received steadily without any gaps since they can lead to confusion and doubts.

For instance, the visual communication of fashion brands who have been collaborating with Disney have resulted in a nostalgia feeling being created in the consumers, which have brought back poignant memories of different Disney movies and characters. In other words, for a collaboration to productively succeed it must truly engage consumers with well designed visuals, a lot of context and a good narrative (BoF, 2016). To provide a better processing of the visuals; the messages, depictions and information should be clear to derive better fluency of the brand's narrative (Chang, 2013).

Apart from that the emotions derived by an ad is important to understand beforehand, the advertiser should also figure out which needs and dreams that should be taken under consideration to satisfy the consumer (Noble & Bestley, 2011). The message provided in the visuals should also be well thought of; if it should be dramatically, emotional or passionate. Moreover, signs, materials and images are assessed as symbols that can provide organised information if it is displayed in an illuminating way (Ibid). According to Bergström and Carlsson (2012), color palettes and the different combination of colors can also be appointed to constitute designs that are aesthetically pleasing to the receiver.

### **2.4.1 Semiotics**

Today's society is constructed by semiotics to make it unchallenging for the people to communicate with each other and to get a better understanding of one another (Noble & Bestley, 2011). Semiotics is the subject area of signs and symbols and can also be described as the elements of language and the systems of communication both spoken and unspoken (Nordquist, 2020). The signs and symbols can be used as a strategic method when developing logos, graphical brands and messages which the brands often call the “brand loyalty” (Noble & Bestley, 2011; Nordquist, 2020). Therefore, visual images and texts have the ability to communicate with us about one’s thoughts and reflections as well as it has the means to inform us about ideas, warnings and knowledge (Bergström & Carlsson, 2012).

A semiotic triangle model has been developed and illustrates how a linguistic symbol can be related to an object that it represents. Take notice of that the symbol does not directly relate to the object it represents, but it can be interceded through thoughts or references (Vogt, 2011). For instance, the representation can be a fashion brands logo and the “Concept” is the index that may describe the characteristics or a property of that brand or logo (Baldwin & Roberts, 2006). The last part connected to them is referent, which implies to the understanding, description or agreement of what the object means - in other words, it is the phenomenon that describes if it is a real world thing (Ibid). It can also be said that the referent is represented by a word or concept belonging to the real world that acquires meaning when the concept and representation are linked together.

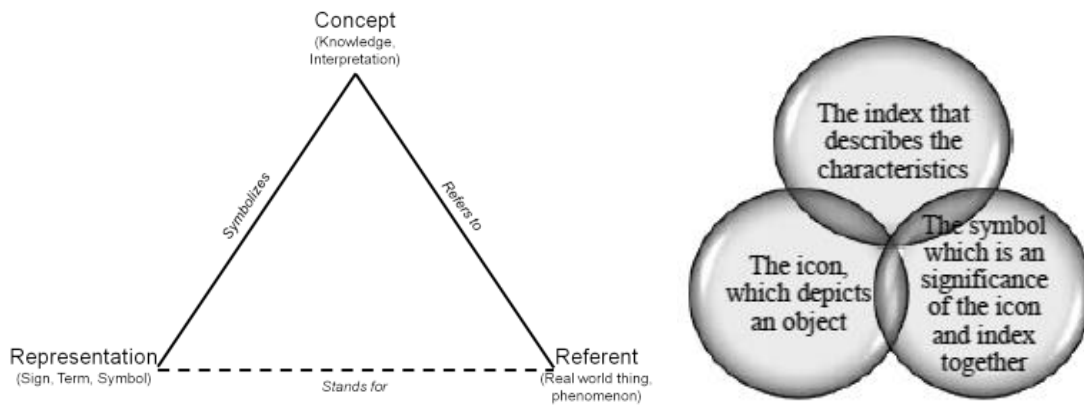


Figure 1: The semiotic triangle

### 2.4.2 Message Formulation

In visual communication colors are used as an appliance to design structure, mood, information as well as to educate people. Moreover, the colors used in the visuals can have different significance on the basis of the context they are used in (Bergström & Carlsson, 2012). Message formulation is a very important factor to take in consideration when marketing, especially when communicating sustainability and sustainable fashion products. Studies have shown that the importance lies in the design of the message and that it takes two different perspectives to discuss the content (Langguth & Schnee, 2018). The researcher means that it is about the “what” specific content is presented in the ad and the “how” is the communication elements incorporated in the message. Accusations of greenwashing towards sustainable products often originate when the environmental message is too complex or vague (Moisander, 2007; Schmeltz 2012). In other words, the message should add to the sustainability knowledge gap of consumers and create a meaning.

Studies on the challenges that the consumers face with sustainability communication is very scattered since it is a topic that is still under development of finding good solution approaches within sustainability communication (Langguth, et al, 2018). According to the eminent author Kate Fletcher (2014), a successful sustainability communication should be consistent and the message should be assembled in how the parts work together and not the opposite. This can be conveyed by providing clarity about the sustainability values of the fashion product through the use of descriptions (Blaesie, Hyllegard & Yan, 2012). If this can be established a reduction in consumers’ scepticism can be achieved which can result in positive perceptions of sustainable fashion brands (Ibid).

## 2.5 Communication of Sustainability through Social Media

Since sustainable fashion collaborations is considered as a kind of a co-operation between two or more brands that has the intent to give contribution towards a more sustainable society, the way of communicating these collaborations is of importance. Over the past decade people have witnessed two important components, social media and sustainability. These two components have changed and improved consumers' interaction with the way businesses conduct and talk about themselves (Klein, 2011; Scranton, n.d.; Sutton, 2016). Studies have shown that social media has quickly become an eminent platform for the consumers to receive information and the trends shows no sign of slowing down. However, the main issue has been that the fashion brands have not really been able to figure out how the two components go together, social media and sustainability (Sutton, 2016).

Since the communication of sustainability in fashion is a sensitive topic, the brands have started taking small steps towards finding a communicational approach to improve their brand perception of emphasising their sustainability progress (Futerra, 2015). Corporations have been more pushed towards being transparent and almost forced to rethink their role in society and aligned businesses, communities and people around one shared purpose (Klein, 2011; Sutton, 2016). In order to come to a purchasing-decision the consumer has to relate to the brand and get suitable information (Phau & Ong, 2007). Therefore, if sustainability messages seek to reach a specific audience then the most effective way is to communicate it through the audiences' preferred channels (Sutton, 2016). Thus, the social media channels that are used more frequently both by consumers and fashion brands are Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, and Youtube (Influencer marketing, 2020; Marta, 2020).

These channels are seen as highly visual platforms for fashion brands to use if they want to market their brand and products. These platforms have been growing immensely recently and Instagram alone has over 1 billion active users on a daily basis. Fashion brands have become real experts when it comes to showing off content targeted ads and for example their behind the scenes footage on their Instagram stories (Marta, 2020). Influencer marketing is also a tool for the brands to use when marketing their products on these platforms. In addition, fashion brands and designers who shares content of their collaborations on social media can mutually benefit from it since it exposes both parties' networks (Perino, 2018). Studies have shown that this is a highly effective way of promoting a fashion brand since it can increase brand awareness, reach new audiences, develop trustworthiness in the relationship between consumers and brands and can create higher engagement with a brand (Marta, 2020). Moreover, studies claim that by 2021 more than 3 billion people will be using social media, which means that there is a huge potential for marketers to reach an engaged and massive audience on social media (Influencer marketing, 2020).

Marketing has the ability to create a need and a demand in the consumers, which are therefore brought to believe that they originate from themselves (Belz & Peattie, 2010). Therefore, it is important that marketing comes from a credible and reliable source seeking to contribute to our society. A study executed by Nielsen (2014) shows that fifty-five percent of online consumers across sixty countries are willing to pay more for products and services provided by brands that are dedicated and committed to positive environmental and social impact. In other words, fashion brands who undertake a much more sustainable approach in their marketing strategies to communicate their sustainable progress,

have great advantages in the establishment of the brand being sustainable in the consumers' mindset. Additionally, this can create a competitive advantage for the fashion brands (Ottman, 2011).

### **2.5.1 Communicating Sustainability towards Millennials**

Since millennials have become the largest consumer segment worldwide, millennials strong preferences should be taken under consideration. This group of people crave the authentic and the new different (Hudson, et al. 2019). When it comes to their fashion choices they are three times more likely to create a relationship to new brands that they consider being better and innovative than baby boomers. They are also twice up more likely to choose new and upcoming designers. These attitudes are affecting other generations as well and boosting the impingement of millennial preferences (Ibid). According to Gaudelli (2009) millennials have also proven to possess a more positive attitude and value recognition towards sustainability. However, while their consumption habits are highly swayed by protecting the environment their actions are still not translated fully towards that as well (Muralidharan, Rejon-Guardia & Xue, 2016).

Millennials have proven to be the targeted group when marketing for sustainability due to their spending power for green products as well as their impact on family as well as people purchase decision around them (Muralidharan, et al. 2016). According to Debevec, Diamond, Madden & Schewe (2013) this targeted group is well known for being digitally oriented and are highly up to date on new information. They are also fast respondents to virtually oriented contents and have a great impact on trend setting. In other words, the millennial minds hold differences in behaviour, attitudes and experience, which makes them the generation who are tempted by transparency and authenticity (Ibid). A study executed by Himmel (2008) has also proven that since this group is driven by visuals and images they are fonder of consuming fashion that can illustrate their personal statements.

Many fashion brands have adjusted their strategies when collaborating with others to be able to reach and satisfy a younger audience. For instance, the luxury fashion brand Gucci has not only formed some valuable collaborations with fashion designers but they have also partnered with poets, illustrators and artists who have bestowed to the creation of exclusive collections (Dimitrova, 2019; Rawal, 2018). However, Gucci had to revitalise its brand strategy throughout all their channels to attract millennial consumers which resulted in higher engagement on its eco-friendly and socially conscious initiatives. In other words, it is always possible for a brand to adjust their strategies in conjunction with the changing customer group (Wahbe, 2019).

## **2.6 The Challenges of Sustainability Marketing & Millennials**

Fashion collaborations are no longer obligatory for a brand's accomplishment, but they are a strategic imperative and advancing fashion collaborations a step further to co-create sustainable fashion products must be marketed thoughtfully (Sadler, 2018). However, the challenges of marketing sustainable products do not only create information, but can also develop suspicion from the consumers (Ottman, 2011). Consumers have sometimes experienced that they have been 'manipulated' by unclear communication and this is usually presented as greenwashing (Ibid). Peart and Vermillion (2010) claims that this act can emphasize to the consumers that the fashion brands are more concerned about their economic benefits and to make profits than actually caring about the environment. Which can have an immediate effect on consumers' purchase interest and their potential trust in the brand (Ibid).

As mentioned in section (2.5.1) millennials do have differences in their behaviour, attitudes and experiences. Therefore, they inquire more conformational messages and want proof for the contribution they have made to the environment as well as knowing that brands are putting effort in their sustainability work (Debevec, et al. 2013). Otherwise, a negative impact on millennials sustainable purchase behaviour can occur if this instant satisfaction and lack of personal involvement does not get fulfilled (Gaudelli, 2009). Another challenge that has been claimed by Ehlers, Grové & Jordaan (2011) is that there is a lack in empowering millennials to consume less or be sustainable when promoting sustainable products and campaigns which makes them fail in delivering the right knowledge when marketing. However, by implementing laws and using improved product technologies, brands have regained consumers interest which has resulted in meeting consumers expectations well (Kumar, Rahman & Kazmi, 2013).

## **2.7 The balance of Fashion and Sustainability Content**

To creatively connect two brands with each other has been a great strategy to boost the recognition of the brands and drive revenues (Sadler, 2020). However, collaborations that are made to help solving sustainability issues could not only benefit the brands and consumers but the society as well (Bounsall, 2020; Niinimäki, 2013). Since the fashion industry is very much focused on appearances, sustainability and fashion are not naturally linked, which means that sustainable fashion as an alternative has to seem more appealing to consumers (Kibbe, 2013; McNeill & Moore, 2015). Essentially, there tends to be a negative association of sustainability in fashion regarding the style (Kibbe, 2013). On that account, in order to persuade consumers about the value of sustainable fashions, a balance between sustainability and fashion has to be established. According to Yael Aflalo who is the CEO of the fashion brand Reformation, the focus should be shed on the fashion pieces to stand out when being communicated and not to over magnify consumers when ensuring that the product itself is sustainable (Maccarthy, 2018). Another researcher suggests that the solution is to prioritise communication of fashion over sustainability content, meaning that the communication should be focused on talking about innovation in the fashion context while making sustainability secondary (Angel, 2013; Grace, 2016). As apparels are tangible, buying clothing or/and shoes is an emotional decision which becomes an extension of the consumer's personal brand when worn. A

well-executed sustainable collaboration of two or more brands and designers can significantly boost consumers perception of the brands involved. In addition, a loyal and like-minded consumer group will be formed as a result of a successful collaboration (Sadler, 2018). To summarize, studies indicate that it is important for brands to keep a balance between their sustainability and fashion content when communicating it to consumers; since sustainable fashion can be perceived as unattractive and the message concerning sustainability can be overused. Thus, with respect to the purpose of our thesis we strive to generate knowledge on how millennials respond to the advertisements of four sustainable fashion collaborations and how these co-branding projects are perceived.

Nevertheless, even though there is much literature concerning the communication of sustainable fashion products, authors are not studying brands' sustainability communication strategies in general, but the communication of the specific sustainable fashion collaborations that are presented in this thesis.

The above mentioned theories will be used and discussed throughout the paper to ensure clarity of the sustainable fashion collaboration projects. The authors are analysing different themes within the main theme of consumers' perception of sustainable fashion communication, which are: Communication aspects of Advertisements and Communication of Sustainability towards Millennials. The theme of Communication aspects of Advertisements covers the theories from chapter 2.1 (Introduction to Fashion Communication) to 2.4.2 (Message Formulation); whereas the theme of Communication of Sustainability towards Millennials covers the theories from chapter 2.5 (Communication of Sustainability through Social Media) to chapter 2.7 (The balance of Fashion and Sustainability Content). To conclude, this will be applied during our investigation of the interviews since the authors consider it valuable in revealing how sustainable fashion collaborations are perceived when conveyed to this targeted group of people - millennials.

## 3. Methodology

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This chapter describes the methods used in this thesis. The chapter begins with a description of the scientific approach and continues with the explanation of research methods, chosen case studies and selection of respondents. Finally, the chapter ends with the validity and reliability of the conducted study and its ethical approach.

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### 3.1 Scientific Approach

A research study can be conducted through several scientific approaches. The main forms of reasoning are three: deduction, induction and abduction. A deductive approach implies that theories are tested in the research and it is often used in the link between theory and empirical data (Karlsson, 2015). An inductive approach, instead, implies that the researcher starts his study from reality and uses it as a framework to discover new patterns that can be applied to the development of new models and theories (Björklund & Paulsson, 2012; Patel & Davidsson, 2011). Finally, an abductive approach is one that combines both deduction and induction and therefore formulates a hypothetical pattern that explains the incident at hand. The authors also explain that usually the first phases of abduction are characterised by an inductive approach, but later phases like the testing of theories involve a more deductive approach (Ibid).

This study uses an abductive approach since it first gathers theory and knowledge about the subject matter in an inductive method and then presents a deductive method with an open approach to interviews in the discussion of empirical findings. The abductive method is also connected with a hermeneutic approach. The purpose of data collection was the one of understanding consumers' response to sustainability communication in the advertisements of sustainable fashion collaborations as well as what makes them satisfied and positive in terms of sustainable communication. This kind of approach is defined as hermeneutic (Bryman, 2012) and it is characterised by the fact that individuals are seen as meaning-seeking beings, to find out the impact that a specific phenomenon has on a specific group of people, which in the case of this study is Generation Y. In addition, the epistemology of this study is constructivism, since it accepts reality as a construct of the human mind and is perceived to be subjective. Constructivism is also related to qualitative methods, the use of semi-structured interviews for the collection of data and provides an interpretation of empirical findings (Andrew, Padersen & McEvoy, 2011; Bryman, 2012).

## **3.2 Research Methods**

Methodology can be defined as the strategy with which a specific topic is investigated and the methods used in it. In this case, the topic is how sustainable fashion collaborations are being communicated in the consumers' eyes and how they are perceived among millennial consumers. According to Blaxter, Hughes & Tight (2010), the use of a qualitative or quantitative method is to be decided according to the purpose of the research, as the choice of one method or the other generates different kinds of results and data.

In this case, a qualitative research method has been chosen, since the aim of the researchers is not the one of quantifying the relationship between sustainable fashion collaborations and their communication, but rather the one of understanding behaviours and opinions of participants, in relation to the way sustainable fashion collaborations are being communicated. Furthermore, the study investigates to what extent the participants' values can lay the basis for the best conveyance of such collaborations. The researchers have decided to analyse the phenomena from a consumer's perspective, in order to understand how sustainable collaborations' communication is perceived in the market. A qualitative research method is the most suitable for this kind of study, as the researchers are interested in the qualities of sustainable fashion collaborations and communication, rather than in a quantitative measurement of the phenomena. Since the purpose of the study is to explore the thoughts and perceptions of consumers on sustainable fashion collaborations, the use of a qualitative method enables the researchers to dive deeply into the analysis of consumers' responses to different communication cases of selected collaborations. Moreover, qualitative methods are generally used as the preferred research approach to grasp new thoughts and views on a specific topic, and have therefore become more and more popular in communication science studies (Bryman, 2012). Considering the fact that this study is strictly related to communication techniques, the use of a qualitative research method seems to be further reasonable in this case.

### **3.2.1 The Qualitative Method**

According to Bryman (2012), qualitative methods aim to research valuable data into words and contexts. The kind of data generated by the investigation of language is a very unstructured and realistic one, which is therefore very variegated in its form, but lacks a bit of accuracy and consistency, which results in the analysis of qualitative data being slightly more difficult (Eriksson & Wiedersheim-Paul, 2011). Bryman (2012) affirms that the reason behind the characteristics of qualitative research is to be found in its nature, one that portrays a dynamic social reality in which the involvement of social actors and individuals generates a continuous construction of phenomena. In other words, since phenomena are observed and understood from the perspective of participants, it can be said that qualitative methods constitute a scheme of interpretation (Tjora, 2012).

The objective of this research is the one of understanding the reality and perspective of the involved participants, to therefore draw an inference about the way in which fashion collaborations engage consumers in sustainability. The researchers aim to investigate the communication of sustainable fashion collaborations from a consumer's perspective, and therefore choose qualitative interviews as the preferred method of research for this study. As a matter of fact, the free-flowing language that

characterises semi-structured interviews helps the authors of this research to have a better understanding of the way in which the communication of sustainable fashion collaborations is perceived by consumers. The use of semi-structured interviews in this study seems to better suit its purpose and research questions. In comparison with a questionnaire, interviews allow to cover the desired topics more freely and to rearrange questions according to the interviewees' flow of thoughts, providing a better analysis of their responses. Moreover, the engagement of an almost free flowing conversation, encourages the arise of multiple links between thoughts and topics; something that is less frequent in questionnaires that follow a prefixed structure (Bryman, 2012). Therefore, since the purpose of the study is the one of understanding the perception of millennials towards the communication of sustainable fashion collaborations, semi-structured interviews are believed to be more precise and thorough when portraying the opinions and views of interviewees, allowing a wider covering of issues related to the topic.

### **3.3 Design of Research**

According to Bryman (2012), the research design represents the way in which data is collected and analysed. The choice of one framework among the others is strictly related to the approach and goals of the research. Characteristics that need to be taken into consideration are the urge of analysing different behaviours, the capability of applying the findings to the whole population and the valuation of time that might concern different phenomena. Bryman (2012) states that research designs can be divided into five main groups which are; comparative designs, cross-sectional designs, experimental designs, longitudinal designs and case studies.

Each research design has its own characteristics and case studies entail a deep analysis of one or many cases with the purpose of comparison (Bryman, 2012). In the case of this study about sustainable fashion collaborations and their communication to consumers, the case study design is the most suitable for the researchers to observe the phenomena, without altering the behaviour and response of participants.

#### **3.3.1 The Case Study**

According to Eriksson & Wiedersheim-Paul (2011), a case study is a research design that examines one or many companies or elements in different contexts. This kind of research framework is characterised by three main features: it may communicate a portrayal of reality, it may involve the study of historical contexts and the role of participants may be emphasized. Olsson & Sörensen (2007) affirm that researchers who choose case studies as their research design are often part of a sequence of events that can change in scope and time and sometimes include both past, present and future.

Considering the fact that the aim of this thesis is the one of understanding how sustainable fashion collaborations are being communicated to consumers, different case studies of modern-day sustainable fashion collaborations are believed to be suitable for analysis. The engagement of case studies is relevant for the research, since the focus is on real life consumers' responses and not on measuring or quantifying the topic of interest. Moreover, this research involves four sustainable fashion collaborations. Therefore, the framework of the study is based on multiple case studies in

order to provide the researchers with the desired profound understanding of how consumers respond to the communication of sustainability. The use of multiple case studies in this context is believed to be more thorough and accurate than the use of a single case. Furthermore, the sustainable fashion collaborations chosen as case studies for the researchers' interviews are the following ones: Stella McCartney and Adidas, Reformation and New Balance, Elvis & Kresse and Burberry as well as Christopher Raeburn and Timberland.

### **3.3.1.1 Stella McCartney x Adidas**

In September 2018, Stella McCartney and Adidas launched the first ever vegan Stan Smith sneaker. The partnership between the pioneer of sustainable fashion and the German label is one of the greenest and longest-lasting collaborations between a sportswear brand and a luxury brand (Talon, 2018).

The Stella McCartney vegan Stan Smith has been created with the use of faux leather, though maintaining its iconic simple design. There are just a few small characteristics that have been changed in the shoe, like the Stella McCartney logo on the back accompanied by three blue and burgundy stripes as well as three series of stars on the side in place of the classical Adidas' stripes (Talon, 2018). The shoe also has the stylised face of Stella in place of Stan Smith's face, the famous American tennis player that gave the name to the sneakers. A more recent drop of the sustainable shoe presents itself with the addition of colourful neon laces, which make the sneakers even more appealing (Ibid).

Moreover, in order to make the Stan Smith even more sustainable, the usual glues that are used to produce the shoes have been substituted with animal-free options, therefore do not present any chemicals derived from animals and fish that can be potentially harmful for the environment. The launch of the vegan Stan Smith has also brought a new wave of younger consumers to the company: in one of her interviews, Stella McCartney reported that a lot of young people went into stores to ask questions about how the sneaker was made, and with what kind of materials, underlying the importance of choosing sustainability over waste and harmful products (Devaney, 2019).

The communication and advertising of the vegan Stella Stan Smith has been mainly done through social media. Both Adidas and Stella McCartney's Instagram and Facebook pages have been posting pictures of the sneakers with some captions highlighting their vegan and stylish characteristics, even though the campaign pictures do not convey the idea of sustainability in an explicit way (Yotka, 2018). The focus is still on the looks of the product, as if the intention of the designer was the one of encouraging the purchase of sustainable shoes exclusively through the allure they generate in consumers. As a matter of fact, consumers can barely tell that the vegan Stan Smith is not the typical one everybody knows, and according to Stella McCartney that is the key for success. When it comes to fashion, customers will most probably buy something because it is cool and good-looking, not because it is sustainable, therefore the attention to detail and design comes first (Ibid).

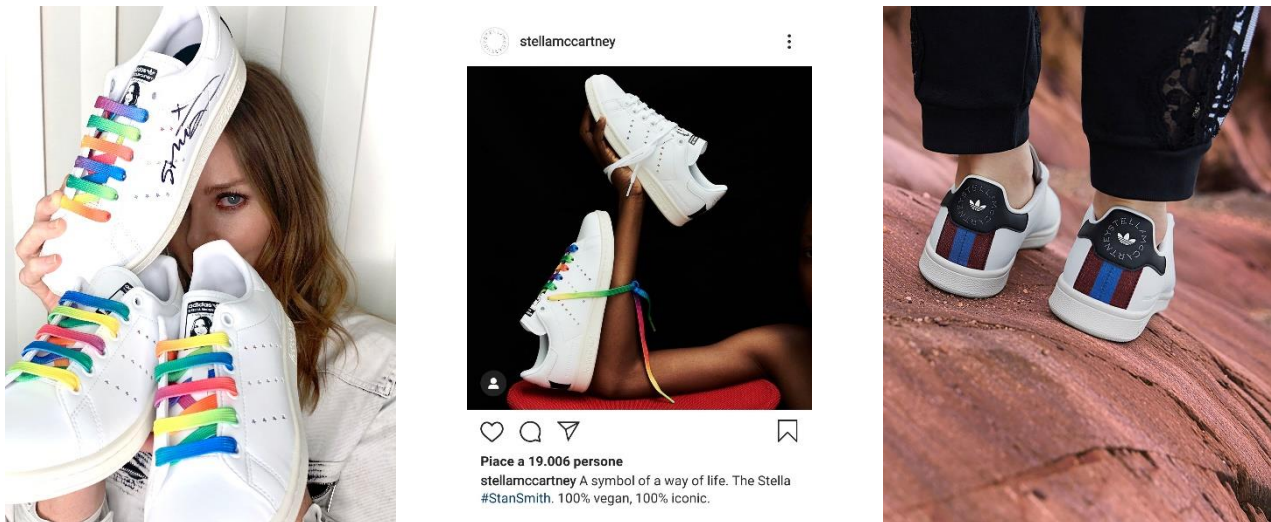


Figure 2: Stella McCartney's vegan Stan Smith's campaign and Instagram advertising

### 3.3.1.2 Reformation x New Balance

In October 2019, the sustainable brand Reformation teamed up with the cult-sneaker brand New Balance for a ground-breaking collaboration. The outcome of this partnership was the creation of a reinvented sustainable collection of New Balance's 574 and X90 designs, available in three new styles and five colours (Huber, 2019).

In order to do so, Reformation's CEO Yael Aflalo together with the manager of operations and sustainability Kathleen Talbot, searched for new, eco-friendly materials that could be similar to those used in the production of sneakers (Huber, 2019). This research led to the creation of the shoes' inserts with a mix of bloom algae and eva foam. These two materials help reduce the amount of fossil fuels usually engaged in the manufacturing of shoes and thus help cleaning the environment. Moreover, the team also tried to eliminate potentially carcinogenic substances by working with a special tannery that only uses chrome-free tanning methods (Ibid).

The partnership project gave both brands great benefits: New Balance was able to increase its sustainable credibility and Reformation gained more visibility in the footwear market (Wong, 2019). Nevertheless, Reformation CEO Yael Aflalo affirmed that the project was taken with a little bit of hesitation in the first place, due to the heavy environmental footprint caused by shoe production. As a matter of fact, American consumers alone are said to be buying over 300 million pairs of shoes every year, causing extreme waste conditions. Therefore, the partnership with New Balance gave Reformation the opportunity of educating more and more consumers about sustainability and the impact that everyone's consumerism has on the planet (Huber, 2019).

The collaboration project has mainly been advertised by Reformation on its social media pages, such as Instagram and Facebook. It can be noticed that, just like in the Stella McCartney x Adidas case, the sneakers campaign has been focused on the looks and appealing characteristics of the shoes, like the pastel and neon colours combined together in a more romantic-sporty allure that could draw the attention of young female consumers.

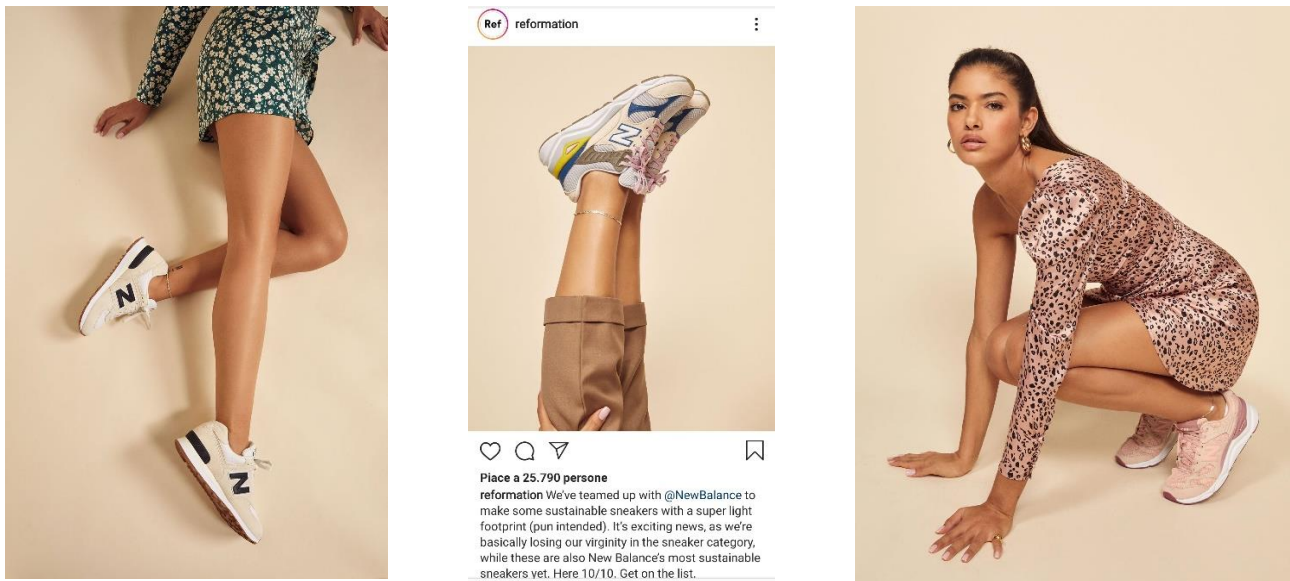


Figure 3: Reformation's sustainable New Balance sneakers' Instagram advertising and campaign

### 3.3.1.3 Elvis & Kresse x Burberry

In October 2017, the British brand Elvis & Kresse, a pioneer in the production of recycled luxury accessories since 2006, announced a five-year partnership with Burberry with the purpose of giving new life to about one-hundred-twenty tonnes of wasted leather produced by the renowned luxury brand each year. The collaboration resulted in a luxurious accessory line made with the use of a peculiar patchwork technique and showed how sustainable fashion collaborations can represent a great opportunity for brands to establish a knowledge-sharing relationship (Wong, 2019).

It is a fact that a lot of environmental and social initiatives in the fashion industry are still growing and result unproven at scale, but just like in this case, the union of large-sized businesses with the niche expertise of smaller companies can result in better practices (Wong, 2019).

The leather industry is estimated to produce eight-hundred-thousand tonnes of leather waste each year. The cause of this huge amount of waste lies in the fact that the design of leather products generates small off cuts, which inevitably occur, even when patterns are thoughtfully planned to maximise the use of material. These pieces are often considered to be unusable due to their size and shape, even though they present the exact same characteristics of the leather used: high quality and fresh dye. What Elvis & Kresse managed to do was inventing a system that could make these leather fragments usable by weaving them into a new piece (Santamaria, 2017).

Elvis & Kresse and Burberry have demonstrated that the regard of leather waste can generate great products and aim to change the leather industry's supply chain for the better. In a world where leather waste is normally destroyed, the partnership between these two brands will hopefully stop the usual approaches and give new solutions (Santamaria, 2017). Half of the profits gained from the rescued-leather line have been donated to charitable projects focused on renewable resources, whereas the other half has been reinvested by Elvis & Kresse with the aim of expanding their work on the reduction and reuse of wasted materials and therefore protect the environment (Ibid).

Moreover, this collaboration has been promoted through Elvis & Kresse's social media account such as Facebook and Instagram. In this case the bags' communication has been focusing more on sustainability aspects with details that recall a recycled process.

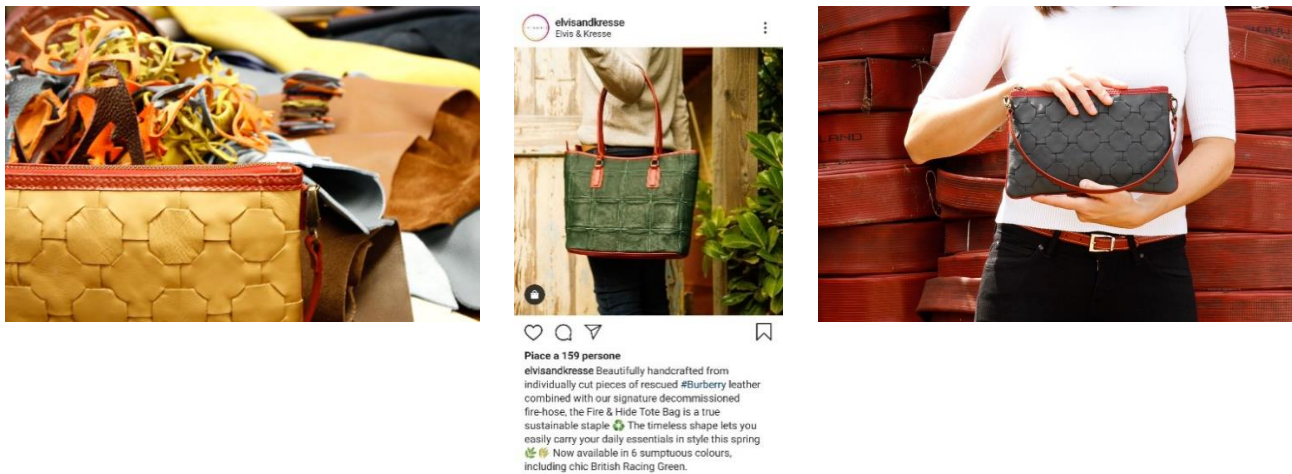


Figure 4: Elvis & Kresse rescued Burberry leather bags' campaign and Instagram advertising

### 3.3.1.4 Christopher Raeburn x Timberland

Christopher Raeburn, the co-leader of the brand Raeburn, is one of the most renowned creative directors when it comes to conscious design. His creations are well known for their original design and the use of wasted textiles from the military, including silk from parachutes. Over the years, Christopher Raeburn has also put his responsible design ideas into fashion collaborations with many global leading brands like Clarks, Eastpak and Timberland. This last partnership, that came to life in October 2019 with a sustainable capsule collection, was the one that gave Raeburn the opportunity to become creative director at the well-known outdoor brand (Wong, 2019).

The sustainability-minded collection in collaboration with Timberland is one that puts the consumer in an adventure-ready silhouette with the co-branded logo prints of both Raeburn and Timberland and many streetwear and patchwork details. There is a great variety of textiles that constitute the overlayers statement pieces, whereas fifty simple graphic t-shirts are used as base layers. Moreover, Timberland's Brooklyn sneaker has also been transformed into a winter version of the shoe made with meshed textiles and characterised by vibrant orange laces (Silbert, 2019).

At the Drapers Sustainable Fashion Conference in 2019, the Ethical Fashion Group CEO Tamsin Lejeune had a conversation with Christopher Raeburn about his cooperative approach with big brands, and the young designer compared his experience to the one of being a small fish in a shark ocean. The idea of it is that even small realities can make a big change and just like the fish, they have the opportunity to affect the direction in which the shark swims (Wong, 2019). With regard to this concept, Timberland representatives have declared to be very satisfied with Raeburn's work within the brand, since it has allowed to expand the brand's community as well as improve its commitment towards inclusivity and responsible sourcing. As a matter of fact, the brand's latest

collections have included products made with organic cotton, other recycled materials and of course, Raeburn's beloved military parachutes (Ibid).

The collaboration between Raeburn and Timberland has been mainly advertised through their social media platforms, including Instagram and Facebook, though it is also possible to read about the collaboration on Timberland's website. Apart from the usual social media posts, the partnership between the two brands has also been communicated to consumers with a special commercial strictly related to the world of military. In the video, one can see a man falling from the sky and getting through different environments until he opens his parachute and lands on the ground. There is no evident link to sustainability, but the atmosphere of the commercial conveys the idea of being outside, surrounded by nature and feeling its power.

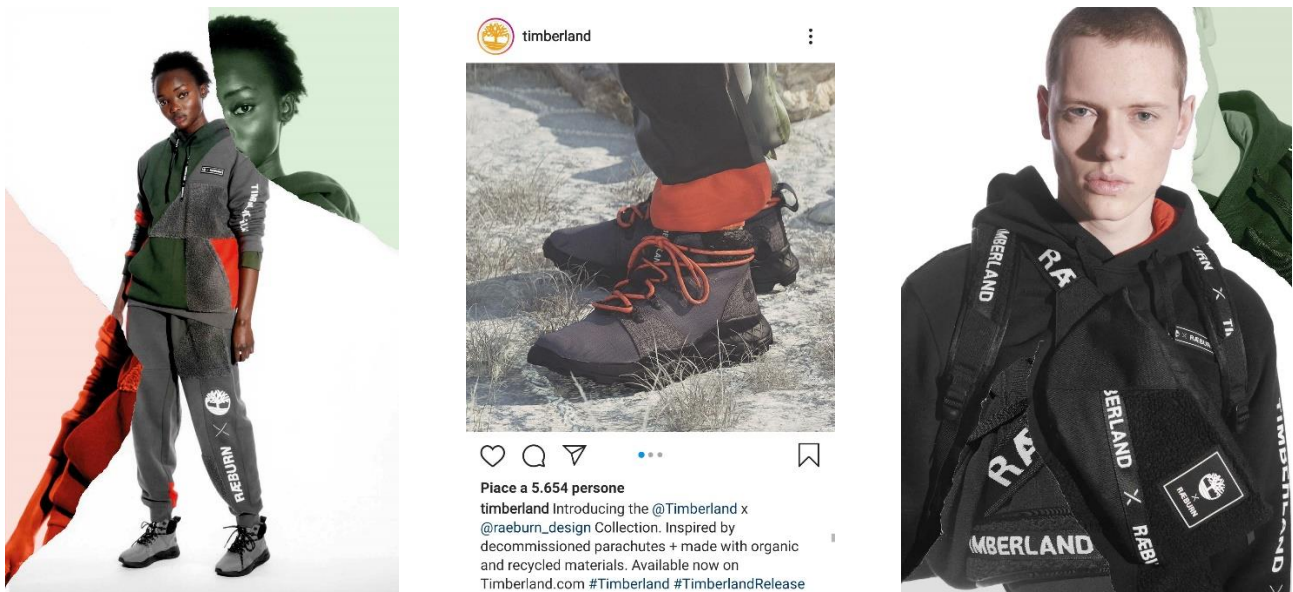


Figure 5: Christopher Raeburn's sustainable collection for Timberland

### 3.4 Selection of Respondents

The researchers' purpose is the one of investigating consumers' responses towards the communication of sustainable fashion collaborations. In order to do so, a semi-structured interview has been developed with the aim of collecting fundamental information about consumers' attitude towards; fashion, shopping behaviour, perception of sustainability and, in particular, sustainable fashion collaborations. Twelve fashion consumers belonging to the Generation Y were selected as respondents for the interview; the choice of interviewing millennials was made on the basis of the fact that this generation is considered to be the most thoughtful when it comes to sustainability and also constitute a big part of fashion consumers (De Brito et al., 2008). Respondents were also selected on the basis of their interest in fashion, since the semi-structured interview required some knowledge about the fashion industry to be effective.

The respondents who have participated in this interview are millennials and in the age range between 23-28. Therefore, the only delimitations applied were age, educational background and occupational status. These last two aspects in particular, were taken into consideration as sampling technique since the personal involvement in the field of fashion was fundamental for us to approach the topic of sustainable fashion collaborations.

Eight of them who answered were students and studying either a fashion or art program, and the rest of the respondents were employees working within the fashion and supplier industries.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
Alice	25	Diploma in Art & Photography Bachelor in Social Work	Student
Ana	25	Master in Fashion Marketing and Management	Student
Arianna	24	Bachelor in Fashion Styling	Student
Divine	24	Bachelor in Product Development	Student
Dumitru	25	Master in Fashion Marketing and Management	Student
Linda	23	Bachelor in Design Technician	Student
Marta	23	Bachelor in Fashion Design	Student
Randa	25	Diploma in Fashion Design Bachelor in Business Engineering	Environmental Manager
Riccardo	23	Bachelor in Visual Arts	Student

Anonymous 1	25	Diploma in Fashion Design Bachelor in Arts	Visual Merchandiser
Anonymous 2	23	Bachelor in International Management and Economics	Intern in Quality and CSR Department
Anonymous 3	28	Master in Sustainable Development	CSR Manager

*Table 1: Participating respondents*

### 3.5 Data Collection

The researchers collected primary data from qualitative interviews with a semi-structured approach, whereas the information gathered in the Theoretical Background was used as secondary data. The theories explained in the Theoretical Background were gathered from scientific articles, books and websites. Semi-structured interviews are characterised by a flexible question order and phrasing. According to Björklund & Paulsson (2012), the researcher prepares a list of possible topics to be discussed and may also come up with additional questions as the interview progresses. Patel & Davidsson (2011) claim that these interviews are very similar to a free-flowing conversation in which questions may be added and adjusted in their order according to the direction taken by the respondent. For this study, the researchers have chosen semi-structured interviews as their preferred method, developing a brief list of topics to be discussed and therefore making sure that the concepts presented in the theory (Chapter 2) could be deeply analysed. The researchers developed an interview guide with a list of questions to be addressed on topics like attitude towards fashion, shopping behaviour, perception of sustainability and, in particular, communication of sustainable fashion collaborations. At the beginning of each interview, the researchers asked the participants for their permission to record the conversation as well as giving them the choice to be anonymous in the study. All participants, except three, allowed the use of their names in this text.

Due to the circumstances created by the COVID-19 pandemic and due to geographical distance, all interviews occurred through Zoom Video Conferencing or phone, except for two interviews which the researchers were able to conduct in real life. Both video conferencing and real life interviews gave the opportunity to observe the participants' body language and reactions to the questions. All interviews were conducted in English, except three which were conducted in Italian and then carefully translated into English by the authors of the thesis. The aim of the interviews was to allow the respondents to answer with complete freedom to the questions they were asked (Gadamer, 1997). In order to gather as many interpretations as possible, the researchers had an open approach and avoided leading questions or prejudice-based notes. However, respondents were also guided through the questions, making sure that they would give information and understandings about specific cases (Bryman, 2012; Teorell and Svensson, 2007). Each interview lasted from forty minutes to one hour and a half according to the amount of thoughts and knowledge each respondent had about the topic. The only information given to participants before the interview was that this research aimed to investigate consumers' responses towards sustainable fashion collaborations. The questions developed for the interview were not just about the communication of the four sustainable fashion

collaboration case studies chosen for the analysis, but also about shopping behaviour and sustainability in general.

The first half of the interview aimed to understand each consumer on a personal level, whereas the second half was divided into two parts and aimed to understand consumers' responses towards different types of fashion communication. The respondents were provided with two sets of pictures and a video to observe and think about at a different time: the first set was composed of campaign pictures and a video from the four selected case studies (Stella McCartney x Adidas; Reformation x New Balance; Elvis & Kresse x Burberry; Christopher Raeburn x Timberland) whereas the second set comprised pictures of Instagram posts only since the Facebook posts included the exact same content published by the same companies that represent the case studies. The objective of this structure was the one of observing participants' responses towards different kinds of communication and allow them to make comparisons which could offer more insight into the topic.

### **3.6 Data Analysis**

Once all the interviews were recorded, the conversations were then transcribed by the researchers and read through several times to get an overview of different interpretations and responses (Ödman 1994). Ideas and keywords were written down by both researchers with the aim to find similarities in the participants' perception of how sustainable fashion collaborations communicate their products through images and messages.

These responses have then been quoted by the researchers in the text, in order to link thoughts, give further support to certain concepts as well as provide an accurate and realistic description of empirical data, gaining more credibility. Information that was considered to be irrelevant to the subject matter, was collected and put aside for possible clarification of contexts. The data collected from the interviews was also critically analysed for parallels and patterns in the phrases used by the respondents.

### **3.7 Validity and Reliability**

According to Bryman (2012), there are two measures that determine the quality of a research, and these are validity and reliability. Validity represents the value and relevance of the collected empirical data and is divided into internal and external validity. Internal validity is achieved when theories and results find a connection between each other. In the case of this study, most of the theories presented in the theoretical background, later find a deep connection with information gathered from interviews and results; all the theories related to communication strategy have proven to be fundamental when wanting to communicate sustainability to millennial consumers. External validity, instead, is achieved with a thorough explanation of processes and selection of respondents (Ibid). In this case, external validity is increased through the presentation of the essential parts of the research process to the reader. It was imperative to provide clear information about the collection of data, which was done through the interviews of participants, so that the reader can go through the whole study in a critical

way and replicate it (Bryman, 2012). The choice of respondents has been described in detail, giving information about their background, like age, educational level and occupational status. To make the empirical findings as transparent as possible, as well as to make it easy for the reader to find information, the respondents' quotations have been ordered according to a topic list, giving more evidence to the comparison of different thoughts. However, a hermeneutic approach risks falling into trivial interpretations (Ödman, 1994), therefore the avoidance of unreasonable and speculative interpretations is crucial in this study. In order to do this, clear patterns in the analysis of data can be contested to give a deep understanding of the phenomenon. Moreover, validity is also increased through the presentation of counter arguments in the empirical findings; these arguments identify possible gaps and give an overall and more complete interpretation of the subject matter (Gadamer, 1997). Lastly, when it comes to reliability, which is the measure that shows the trustworthiness of a research, the conducted interviews have been recorded and the researchers have taken into consideration the necessity of letting the respondents answer as freely as possible, without interrupting or contaminating the answers (Bryman, 2012). Moreover, an accurate presentation of the criteria used for the development of interviews has been carefully explained.

### **3.8 Ethical Approach**

The collection of data has been conducted with great attention to ethical considerations. Before each interview began, all participants were asked for permission to record the conversation as well as informed about the purpose of the interview and the use of the collected data. All interviewees were given the complete freedom to decline the interview or require anonymity in the study. As reported in chapter 3.4 Selection of Respondents, most of the interviewees allowed the use of their name when referring to parts of their interview, whereas three required anonymity and were therefore renamed Anonymous 1, 2 and 3.

## 4. Empirical Findings and Analysis

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This chapter has been developed on the basis of presenting the collected data from the interviews. The interviews covered diverse topics to get a full understanding of the respondents' answers. The first half of the interview aimed to understand each consumer on the personal level and the second half was divided into two parts and aimed to understand consumers' responses towards different types of sustainable fashion collaborations' communication. The topics that have been covered are consumers' attitude towards fashion, shopping behaviour, perception of sustainability and, in particular, communication of sustainable fashion collaborations.

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### 4.1 Communication aspects of Advertisements

#### 4.1.1 Respondents' Attitudes and Perceptions

The twelve respondents have answered the questions as freely as possible, due to the use of semi-structured interviews that gave them the possibility to conduct a free flowing conversation with the researchers. Since the interview questions were divided into two parts the following table has been developed to present the most valuable responses of the first half, which included questions about their personal approach to fashion, what means of communication they use when seeking fashion products, if they hold knowledge about fashion collaborations and if they purchase fashion collaborations' products, as well as their approach to sustainability.

Since millennials have become the largest consumer segment worldwide, it was obvious for the authors to choose them as respondents for this study. According to Hudson et al. (2019) millennials are three times more likely than baby boomers to create a relationship with new brands that are considered being better in the sustainability aspects. This is due to the fact that they have a more positive attitude and value recognition towards sustainability (Gaudelli, 2009). Moreover, studies have also shown that millennials are fast respondents to virtually oriented contents and are themselves great trendsetters (Madden & Schewe, 2013).

Name	Product key characteristics	Means of communication used	Could they mention any fashion collaborations?	Have they purchased items from fashion collaborations?	Purchase of Sustainable fashion?	Consider themselves sustainable?
Alice	Comfort, Uniqueness	Social media, Retailers' websites	Stella McCartney x Adidas	No	Occasionally	Yes

Ana	Comfortable Fashionable Uniqueness Colours	Shops Social media	Gucci x Disney H&M x Kenzo	No	Yes but more of second- hand clothing, longevity	Yes
Arianna	Vintage Quality Colours Details	Magazines Instagram Fashion websites	H&M x Giambattista Valli JW Anderson x Uniqlo LV x Yayoi Kusama D&G x Smeg	No	Yes, but more of second- hand clothing, longevity	Yes
Divine	Quality Price	Instagram Pinterest Designer's website	H&M x Moschino	No	Yes, buys some second- hand clothing, longevity	Yes
Dumitru	Necessity Price	Social media Retailers' websites (Zalando and Asos)	Louis Vuitton x Supreme Louis Vuitton x Murakami H&M x Balmain	No	No	No
Linda	Functionality Design	Instagram Pinterest Brands' websites	H&M collaborations	No	Occasionally	No
Marta	Personal emotions Functionality Comfort	Social media Magazines	Puma x Rihanna	Yes	No	No

Randa	Modesty Quality	Instagram Pinterest	Ida Sjöstedt x Bubbleroom	Yes	Occasiona lly	No
Riccardo	Vintage Price Necessity	Instagram	H&M x Margiela H&M x Kenzo H&M x Eytys	No	Occasiona lly	No
Anonymo us 1	Fashionable Quality	Instagram, Magazines	JW Anderson x Uniqlo H&M x Kenzo H&M x Balmain H&M x Versace	Yes	Yes, putting a lot of attention into materials	Yes
Anonymo us 2	Colours Patterns Design	Social media Brands' websites	Acne Studios x Mulberry	No	Occasiona lly	Yes, to an extent
Anonymo us 3	Quality Design	Instagram Brands' websites	H&M collaboration Acne Studios x Fjällräven	Yes	Occasiona lly	Yes

*Table 2: Respondents' attitude towards fashion, fashion collaborations and sustainability*

The first theme discussed with respondents concerned their personal approach to fashion and specifically the key characteristics that draw their attention towards fashion products. Most of the respondents affirmed that comfort, colours, quality, price and design are essential factors when it comes to their purchase decision for fashion products; whereas, only few of the respondents mentioned uniqueness, vintage, details, personal emotions, modesty, necessity, functionality, pattern and fashionable as their preferred features. The factors that affect their purchase decision the most were based on that they were the most repetitive words when describing the key characteristics that they look for, whereas, the other key characteristics were mentioned either once or twice.

The second theme covered the question about the means of communication they use when seeking for fashion products. All of the respondents answered that they use social media as the main inspiration platform, whereas seven of them specified that Instagram or/and Pinterest were the go-to platforms. Moreover, seven of the participants mentioned either brand websites, fashion

websites, retailers' websites or designers' websites as an addition to social media and only three mentioned magazines as another means of communication used for inspiration and information.

The third theme covered the respondents' knowledge about fashion collaborations. Eight respondents out of twelve mentioned the collaborations between H&M and various designers and brands. Anonymous 2 and Anonymous 3 recalled two collaborations made by Acne Studios with Fjällräven and Mulberry, Anonymous 1 and Arianna could refer to the fashion partnership between JW Anderson and Uniqlo. Collaborations done by luxury brands, such as Louis Vuitton, Gucci and Dolce & Gabbana were also regarded to by Dumitru, Arianna and Ana. Marta mentioned the celebrity collaboration between Puma and Rihanna, whereas Randa mentioned the collaboration between the online brand Bubbleroom and Ida Sjöstedt. Lastly, Alice was the only participant who talked about Stella McCartney and Adidas, which is one of the sustainable fashion collaborations picked for this study.

The participants have also been questioned about whether they ever purchased an item from a fashion collaboration and it resulted that sixty-seven percent of respondents have never, whereas thirty-three percent actually bought either one or several items.

The fifth question made by the authors was conveyed to participants with the idea of allowing them to interpret fashion sustainability in all its forms, from environmental and social issues to a product's life-cycle in terms of longevity and second-hand buying. Therefore, the question around the purchase of sustainable fashion was answered according to the participant's perception and idea of sustainability. Fifty percent of respondents affirmed to occasionally buy sustainable garments, twenty-five percent stated that their efforts towards sustainability rely on the fact that they mainly buy from second-hand shops, seventeen percent claimed to not buying sustainable fashion and only eight percent stated that their effort towards sustainability relies on the material composition of the garments.

The last question reported in this table refers to whether the respondents consider themselves as sustainable consumers. Thus, fifty percent claimed to perceive themselves as sustainable human beings, forty-two percent do not believe that they were sustainable and eight percent argued to be sustainable, but only to an extent.

This table analysis gives the authors a good basis to comprehend the nature of the participants involved in the study, from the perspective of their approach towards; fashion, fashion collaborations and sustainability. The above collected information represents a fundamental base to better understand the following section, which will go more in depth with the analysis of the specific case studies selected for this research.

#### 4.1.2 Consumers' Response Metrics

The respondents involved in this study have demonstrated to have different attitudes and perceptions towards the themes of fashion collaborations and sustainability. According to Bergman (1998), one's beliefs and choices are based on personal history and experience, which can be connected to the fact that the respondents answered specific questions on the basis of their educational background and knowledge, as well as their acquaintance with the mentioned topics. It can be stated that Anonymous 2 and 3 conveyed more constructive criticism in their answers, due to the knowledge developed in the industries of fashion as employees in CSR departments. Anonymous 2 and Anonymous 3 affirmed the following:

*... for example, since I work in this industry I know that when you buy a hundred percent cotton, it does not make you more sustainable than buying a hundred percent polyester, if you do not know what kind of cotton or polyester was used. So, it is very tricky... - Anonymous 2*

*... on the care label you can only see where the final product is made, but I think it is more important to know where the material is made or where the material is sourced. I know this since I have some experience in the field and unfortunately there is no way for a customer to find out where the material was made just through the care label. - Anonymous 3*

The participants' behavioural dispositions describe their responses towards different questions. Since the behavioural dispositions consist of attitudes, values, perceptions and opinions (Batra, et al. 1991; Campbell, 1963), the authors could analyse the participants' responses on the basis of these factors. For instance, the questions "What is fashion for you?" and "What does sustainable fashion mean to you?" brought up the *attitude* of each respondent in relation to the mentioned themes - fashion and sustainable fashion. Most participants referred to fashion as a way to express themselves through clothing.

*For me, it's more a way to express myself and maybe my mood and how I feel I want to dress myself that day, and of course it also depends on where I am going and who I am going to meet, but yeah it just very much reflects my mood. - Ana*

*It's more than just expressing myself. First things first, I express myself through clothing, but I also use clothing to differentiate myself in a social environment. I just try to show my vision, to make a claim, to show who I am. - Dumitru*

Moreover, the concept of *values* could also be spotted in the respondents' way of thinking about fashion. According to Bergman (1998) and Ekström et al.(2017) value refers to a person's aspirations and motives over time. Anonymous 1 stated that his efforts towards sustainable clothing are driven by his aspiration to contribute to the development of a more sustainable reality.

*...I am very caring about the environment and I am also vegetarian so I feel like I want to do the best I can for this world. And I feel like I want to have my fashion sense but I also want to be able to be*

*sustainable. And I also want the people to have a good salary in the factories but I know that part is a bit hard to control. - Anonymous 1*

According to Madichie (2012) the concept of *perception* defines consumers' responses to stimuli like sound, light and color; which are consistent with a person's needs, experiences and biases. When asked about their perception of the selected sustainable fashion collaborations, participants could point out the mentioned elements in the partnerships' campaigns. Alice, Anonymous 3, Randa, Ana, Marta and Dumitru had a positive perception of the partnership between Stella McCartney and Adidas since they were all attracted to the colours, details and design of the shoe. For instance, Alice and Dumitru reported the following:

*I liked the Adidas shoes a lot, maybe because I like the stripes and the colours. Especially the colourful shoelaces are a fun addition to the shoe and I think the pictures of them are nice. - Alice*  
*I like the Adidas collaboration, the design is simple, classy... and I think I like the combination of colours with the blue and reddish stripes at the back of the shoes. – Dumitru*

Lastly, the concept of opinion refers to a person's manner of creating meaning and having the ability to evaluate a concrete or abstract. In other words, it is an evaluation based on statements (Bergman, 1998). Participants were questioned about their opinion of brands that get in partnership with the purpose of sustainability, and it was possible to observe variegated responses according to their personal conceptions. For an instance, Randa who has working experience and knowledge within the fashion business field argued that partnerships with the purpose of sustainability often appear as mere marketing strategies to the eyes of consumers, stating that they oftentimes feel dishonest and only drive consumerism. However, Alice and Ana could also state similar opinions.

*...Do the brands really care about the environment themselves or do they care about consumers having that perception of them so that they are going to buy their products? ...Is it a marketing strategy to get people to buy more things or is it that they actually care about the environment. - Alice*

*...When one collection is sustainable and the store is not, then it feels very dishonest. It is like saying that the whole ocean is really bad but someone will take a glass of water from it and make it good. – Randa*

*I think it is all about marketing. I remember when Toms was giving a pair of shoes to a kid in Africa when customers were buying their collection. But if you really think about it, it was not sustainable because they were making people consume something they didn't need. I think it was just a way of driving materialism. - Ana*

On the contrary, Anonymous 1, Linda, Marta and Arianna thought that it is good that brands are making an effort towards sustainability but could not mention any sustainable partnerships in particular.

*That's really good and amazing. I can't say right now if I know any brand who has done it right now.*  
- Anonymous I

*The companies I know are H&M and maybe Naturkompaniet. I think it is good that they are working with the sustainability part and that they are trying to make their products last for a longer time.* - Linda

*I don't really know about sustainable partnerships but for instance, Elisabetta Franchi uses a lot of sustainable materials and she manages to give them a nice look as well.* - Marta

*I don't really know any of them... Some nordic brands are definitely more sustainable than other Italian and French brands.* - Arianna

Dumitru and Riccardo stated that they believe in brands starting their business on sustainability but do not believe in fast fashion brands being sustainable. The quotations are the following:

*I know brands that started with being sustainable from the beginning. I believe much more in these brands than the brands that are based on fast fashion business models who try to be sustainable. This is what I don't believe in.* - Dumitru

*I know that Sunnei, an Italian brand that I work with sometimes, produces everything in Italy, but it is also quite expensive, probably because having their garments produced in Italy and in a certain way is definitely more expensive. Another one I know is Weekday. I like their products and the prices are quite cheap as well as stressing out their sustainable efforts, like the use of recycled materials. When I got to know it, I was happily surprised about it, but when I understood that it is part of the H&M group, I started having some doubts.* - Riccardo

#### **4.1.3 Consumers Reactions & Responses to Advertisements**

Taylor and Costello (2017) claim that emotional dimensions play an eminent role in fashion advertisements since they have the power to draw consumers' attention. As a matter of fact fashion advertisements are often conveyed with the intention of generating emotions in consumers. Hawksworth (2014) discusses that since human beings tend to resonate without complete rationality, the communication of emotional messages can result in a successful strategy to capture their attention. Consumers tend to build an intimate relationship with products, therefore, the transparency around sustainable products is fundamental for consumers' trust and well-being (Karlsson, 2015). Apart from the emotional dimension that should be taken under consideration when developing fashion advertisements, an informational dimension should also be constructed to address the needs of consumers to acquire knowledge about the product. When asked about their emotional responses to the sustainable fashion collaborations' campaigns, participants could come up with different feelings about them. Alice stated that the Elvis & Kresse x Brurberry campaign made her feel curious about the products due to the construction of the pictures.

*The first one with the bag makes me curious and I feel like I want to look into it more and I want to know how it is made, why would they put these things in the back.. like I feel I get so many questions when I look at it. – Alice*

Anonymous 1, Randa, Dima and Riccardo argued that the collaborations' advertisements did not fulfil their expectations in terms of exclusivity and surprise.

*They were very uninspiring for me actually, boring and basic. - Anonymous 1*

*I didn't feel anything special. - Randa*

*I feel like these are not the most luxurious collaborations, they involve big companies that produce big quantities, so not very exclusive or surprising. - Dumitru*

*...they didn't make me feel that curious about them. - Riccardo*

Linda, Anonymous 2 and 3 could feel some kind of excitement when looking at the Stella McCartney x Adidas collaboration. As a matter of fact they stated the following:

*The Stella Mccartney felt trendy... - Linda*

*Maybe the best would actually be Stella McCartney. It appears maybe to a certain lifestyle and the colours are very special and what they use is very special. To me and my personality I think I would be most interested in those shoes so yeah. - Anonymous 2*

*When I looked at the Adidas shoes for example, I felt like this kind of style is something that I really like. So, I got excited. - Anonymous 3*

Ana and Divine expressed the feeling of curiosity when looking at Christopher Raeburn x Timberland communication. In particular the commercial video developed by the two brands had a positive impact on their emotional perception.

*I felt quite curious about the video, because it looked quite apocalyptic, also the way the man is dressed looks like something from an apocalypse movie. – Ana*

*The Timberland one was quite interesting... - Divine*

Moreover, consumers' responses can also be defined by two other dimensions: The hedonic dimension and the utilitarian dimension. According to Batra et al. (1991) the hedonic dimension can be regarded as a feeling of pleasure and arousal, whereas the utilitarian dimension focuses on creating a need or sense of usefulness in the consumers' eyes. Previous research has highlighted how consumers have always felt more involved and attracted by a utilitarian approach (Bhosle, et al. 2012). However, if the advertisers use a hedonic approach consumers focus will be drawn to the

pleasurable features of the visuals rather than the meaning or core purpose which instead is typical of utilitarian approaches (Ibid).

This theory can be linked to the argument brought up by respondents when referring to one of the campaign pictures from the partnership between Reformation and New Balance. Seven participants out of twelve stressed out the fact that the communication of the collaboration product (which were the collaborated shoes) was put aside by the excessive focus on the dress worn by the model. Hence, consumers were confused and thought that what was being promoted was actually the dress instead of the sustainable shoes. It can be said that the brands missed to communicate with a utilitarian approach in regard to the sustainable shoes and led consumers to put more focus on the cumbersome presence of the dress.

*I think in this picture the shoes are not really in focus, it is the dress for sure for me and I barely noticed the shoes. But I feel like the shoes are okay, like I said... I didn't even notice them. So I think it is a bad advertisement for the shoes. - Alice*

*But I actually thought that the ad was maybe for the dress because of the other picture of the girl in the pink dress. – Linda*

*And I think that the pictures are very confusing because I feel that you don't even see the shoes. You only see the dress. So I would feel like they should have put the shoes more in focus because this is very confusing for me. The first thing I recognized was the dress and maybe it was because of the focus and because of the colours they have used, it is very screaming if you know what I mean. - Anonymous 1*

*The second New Balance shoes don't really highlight the shoes. Or I feel like the shoes are not maybe bright/vibrant to pop out enough you know what I mean? I thought that maybe because usually you put the outfit to show the clothes, and if it was the shoes you would put the feet in focus. Since it is such a statement dress it made kind of the shoes to fade behind, if you get what I mean. - Anonymous 2*

*And the leopard dress lady as well. I can't really... like I knew that the focus is the shoes, because in the pictures before we were looking at the Stella McCartney shoes. So I kind of maybe thought that the shoes would be the focus in the next pictures as well... and it was the only product that had like the brand name, New Balance there on the shoes. So I just understood that it's the shoes that I'm supposed to look at, but the leopard print just took my eye and I'm not a big fan of leopard. - Anonymous 3*

*I do think they lost the focus of the shoes, because they were showing off the whole body, so all my attention was on the dress, but the shoes were actually cute. – Randa*

*Looking at the New Balance pictures, you can't even notice the shoes that well, you mainly see the model and the dress she is wearing. – Marta*

#### 4.1.3.1 Storytelling

It is well known that compelling stories have the power to get consumers emotionally connected to brands (Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012). Storytelling is an effective tool to use when wanting to educate people on sustainable consumption behaviour (Schwartz, 2013). According to Gensler et al. (2013) stories can actually create more empathy and awareness among consumers which turns out to be useful when communicating complex topics like sustainability. Throughout the course of the interviews, respondents were asked to give their opinions about campaigns' pictures as well as a commercial video created for the collaboration between Christopher Raeburn x Timberland. The aim of the commercial was the one of conveying a sense of nature and empowerment, but mainly to tell a story behind the idea of the sustainable fashion collaboration. This concept was assessed by six out of twelve participants, who expressed their understanding of the brands' intention to convey a story.

*About Timberland I now understand why the video is made with a computer game graphic, because of the parachute and they wanted to give it a nice purpose. – Dumitru*

*If we talk about Timberland... Now when I see it like this in the Instagram posts and with the video I feel that I get it more, but in the previous pictures I felt that they were trying to make some kind of fashion thing, which I found a bit weird. - Anonymous 1*

*It is sort of a fantasy which would probably attract some customers I think... but you get a clear understanding that the products are assembled together in different ways or something. So, I think they have made the video very well to say what their project is about. I think the video really helps to portray the idea because if I only look at the pictures that I had to look at the beginning, I would never get the idea of parachutes or anything. - Anonymous 2*

*...When I read what they have written and watched the video, it all makes sense, like that's how they came up with it and it is really cool that they tell a story behind it, but if I would just have seen the video, I wouldn't really understand what is going on. – Alice*

*I thought that the main message was to show that all the pattern pieces with all the different kinds of fabrics were sewn together... maybe they wanted to show that they have used recycled material by the design of the clothes that they have created. I also think that they wanted to show some functionality with the fabric especially when he fell down from the sky and continued to fall through so many different layers if you know what I mean. Maybe they mean that the clothes have some good properties like that they have good 'breathability'. – Linda*

*The Timberland one I didn't know, but apparently it's inspired of decommissioned parachutes and it's made of recycled materials. Which also makes more sense now and I understand the video. Because I was wondering a bit what this cyborg looking guy jumping out with a parachute meant. But now, I understand. - Anonymous 3*

#### 4.1.3.2 Authenticity, Reliability & Credibility

Repetitive images in advertisements or previous knowledge of the brand has a direct effect on consumers' emotional response and reaction to it, and can reduce the effectiveness of the ad and result in consumers responding to it negatively. Therefore, the evaluation of advertisements is very vital and relies on what the consumer has seen before when viewing similar advertisements and messages (Batra et al., 1991; Campbell & Keller, 2003). Researchers claim that there is a theory called "The mere exposure effect" which infers to a change of consumers' positive attitude into a negative one when repeated depictions or new information of the brand overtakes their psychological constituent and results in the negative contrary effect and leads to boredom (Ibid). This theory can be connected to when the respondents were asked to compare the advertisements provided by the authors to other ones seen in the past. The aim of the question was the one of understanding whether the shown campaigns were seen as different or similar by the participants. Three respondents found that the Elvis & Kresse ad was quite original with the pieces of fabric whereas one respondent (Anonymous 2) expressed the contrary about this specific ad.

*I think the first one is a little bit different cause I think they are trying to tell some story of the leather or of the brand maybe? And also the picture with all the fabric cut up, it also looks a little bit different and maybe it tries to make me think more about where it all came from and how it was made. - Alice*

*If I understood your question correctly, for example, the leather bag, I could see like the leather scraps behind in the picture. So I understand that it's made of recycled leather or like scraps. So I think that's what gives the difference between like other backpacks or other bags. - Anonymous 3*

*And if I look at the ads of the bag: I would say that they look a bit different because you can see in the background for example that they have some cut leather materials and it feels a bit creative and you can see the details.. so I don't think I have seen a picture like that in any commercial. - Linda*

*The pictures afterwards of the bags looks like a commercial from year 1995 or maybe it is a tv-commercial or maybe it is from a TV show from year 2000. Maybe that's why I don't like it. Maybe it is very old. Because I feel like the overall style of the woman is not something from today's style... like this little belt that she is wearing I mean.. I don't know. - Anonymous 2*

Two respondents found the collaboration between Christopher Raeburn and Timberland quite original and coherent with their communication of sustainability, through the use of ripped-paper effect on the campaign pictures; whereas two other respondents (Linda and Anonymous 1) expressed their disappointment with the communication since it looked quite basic and old to them.

*Timberland I recognize them. And I think their ads look a little bit different and I think if you are looking at the picture and you are thinking about sustainability I can see maybe how like they have made the papers look like they are ripped apart and like put together to maybe empower recycling and reusing stuff. - Alice*

*Moving on to the woman in the Timberland outfit, I feel like it is probably something for their website. I think it is funny that they cut some parts in the picture but I think it might also be because they want to say that 'oh look, our project is cut fabric. So therefore, we are going the same for the picture.' Which sends a message and I think is nice. - Anonymous 2*

*The last ones of the Timberland ones I feel like I have seen something like that actually so yeah. - Linda*

*And the Timberland ads look very old to me and that they are maybe from 2013-2014. I feel like they are a bit unmodern for me. - Anonymous 1*

Alice, Anonymous 2 and Linda referred to both Reformation x New Balance and Stella McCartney x Adidas as two very basic campaigns, which could be compared to other advertisements already seen in the past on other websites or other brands' campaigns.

*New Balance, I think they look like a normal ad to me also that they are not so different from others I think. – Alice*

*The New Balance shoe is also very much of a website shoe and very basic. - Anonymous 2 (referring to the New Balance ad)*

*...when I look at those ads; I feel that it could be something from Nelly.com maybe. Because I feel that I have seen this style before. - Linda (referring to the Reformation x New Balance ad)*

*Moving on to the Stella McCartney shoes, I don't think they catches my eyes in a very different way. - Alice (referring to the Stella McCartney ad)*

*Hmm, I feel that the ads of the Stella McCartney shoes are very basic for social media. - Anonymous 2*

*Yeah if I look at the Stella shoes then I feels like I have seen maybe something like this before. - Linda (referring to the Stella McCartney ad)*

Moreover, four respondents out of twelve thought that all the sustainable fashion collaborations' campaigns looked quite similar to other ones previously seen. In particular, Arianna saw a big similarity between the commercial video created for Christopher Raeburn x Timberland and the one created for the perfume A\*Men by Thierry Mugler, with the sprinter Oscar Pistorius.

*The man in it reminded me of another commercial made for Thierry Mugler's perfume A\*Men with the athlete Oscar Pistorius, with the concept of becoming a hero and he was also falling down from the sky, but it is clear in Timberland's commercial that the things you are going to buy are things related to earth and sustainability. – Arianna*

*No, they don't look different in any way and I felt that they looked a bit boring. - Anonymous 1*

*I think they all kind of look the same. - Divine*

*I think they look kind of similar to other ones... there is nothing really striking about them. – Marta*

Furthermore, to create a higher credibility and become an authentic brand in the eyes of the consumers, the brand should engage the consumers in a way when they formulate themselves about being sustainable or producing sustainable products (Kolster, 2016; Welth, 2016). In other words, the brand should be clearer with what they are actually doing instead of what is planned to be done (Ibid). The question “How did you view the main message in the ad?” can be related to the concept exposed by Kolster (2016) and Welth (2016). Participants were asked about their perception of the message conveyed through Instagram posts by the brands chosen as case studies. Since the Facebook ads presented the same content both in terms of message and pictures, the authors chose to use the Instagram posts as visual material for their interviews, considering the fact that Instagram is also one of the most used platforms for fashion content (Marta, 2020).

All twelve participants could recognize that the message of the posts is related to sustainability and it was actually describing how the products created by the collaborations were sustainable. The following six quotations have been extracted from the interviews to further explain this acknowledgement:

*It seemed like they all had a sustainability agenda. - Anonymous 3*

*I think the main message in all the other posts was maybe that all of them had some kind of sustainable thinking. – Linda*

*Definitely sustainable! - Ana*

*It is a message about sustainability and brands working together to achieve this goal. – Marta*

*It is definitely a message about sustainability on different levels. In the Stella McCartney case, it is a vegan sustainability, for Timberland and Elvis & Kresse it is about recycled materials... - Riccardo*

*I think that the main message that they are going for is that this is something new and exciting that they have done and that sustainability is the focus of the collaboration. - Alice*

In terms of consumers’ engagement, Dumitru and Anonymous 2 had different opinions about the message presented by Reformation x New Balance in their Instagram post. The former thought that the use of some specific terms was actually entertaining, and the latter pointed out the fact that the irony behind the message was actually quite disappointing.

*The second Instagram post (the Reformation and New Balance post) I feel like the ‘joke’ is hard to get. ...I really don’t think they are funny with their caption, they are trying but they are not funny. - Anonymous 2*

*...I really like Reformation's touch saying they lost their virginity in the sneaker's category, it is funny.*  
- Dumitru

#### **4.1.4 Visual Communication**

Visual communication is a fundamental element for marketing, since it has a major impact on consumers' view of the information that is conveyed to them (Noble & Bestley, 2011). This process is, according to Schroeder (2002), characterised by a cognition and engagement-free viewing, which results in consumers trying to fill visual descriptions with their personal cognition. Bhosle et al. (2012) argues that this process often occurs in video advertisements as well as in image ones. Advertisers have the main responsibility of avoiding gaps and confusion in their communication, since this can lead to consumers having doubts about what they are seeing (Chang, 2013). In the following quotes by Dumitru and Anonymous 3, it can be observed how the first one was perplexed about the Christopher Raeburn x Timberland video and how the second one was trying to fill in gaps in the communication of Reformation x New Balance.

*I can see that Timberland did a collaboration with a brand called Raeburn... I liked the video though I was asking myself why it is created with the feeling of being a computer game, I was thinking that maybe the collaboration is targeted to gamers, but I don't think gamers would do outdoor so much! It got me a little bit confused. – Dumitru*

*And the New Balance was Interesting and cool. And they say that they have a lighter footprint which I think they want to say that it has a short/light carbon footprint. And 'losing our virginity in the sneaker category' which I think means that they are going towards recycled material with that quote. Interesting. But that I didn't understand in the initial photo, but yeah. - Anonymous 3*

##### **4.1.4.1 Semiotics**

A big part of visual communication is composed of semiotics. According to Nordquist (2020), semiotics is the totality of signs and symbols that are part of the language of communication, both spoken and unspoken. Signs and symbols have the power to provide recognisable and organised information if displayed in an illuminating way. As a matter of fact, they can play a big strategic role in the development of logos, graphics and messages, which can enhance brand loyalty and therefore have a major impact on a company's survival within the industry (Noble & Bestley, 2011; Nordquist, 2020). Throughout the interviews, respondents have been asked about four specific sustainable fashion collaborations and were also questioned about their ability to recognise the brands involved in the partnerships. It is interesting to notice how most of them could mention New Balance, Stella McCartney, Adidas, Timberland and Raeburn, but not Elvis & Kresse, Burberry or Reformation. This is due to the fact that some of the logos were extremely recognisable and consumers had the ability to link specific details to the names of the brands, whereas in other cases the recognition of brands like Raeburn was possible due to the name of the brand printed on most of the garments.

*Yeah, I recognized them probably from the logo and the Adidas stripes as well because one of them is in the back and one of them has the three small little stars and Timberland because of the tree*

*symbol and the logo and also both of the brands name are written all over the garment. And yeah I couldn't recognise the other two brands. I could recognize the New balance ones but wouldn't have known just by looking at the picture maybe. And the bag I don't recognize at all! - Alice*

*The ads with the bag I have no clue of who that is. Absolutely no clue! And then it is New Balance and hmm... then I don't have a clue who the other partner could be. How should I know, they are just New Balance and the other ad of the New Balance shoes I can only recognize New Balance. I can't see another brand in this collaboration. And the last one is Raeburn(?) and Timberland. I have never heard of Raeburn. Then we have Stella McCartney and Adidas. - Anonymous 2*

*I also recognized that Adidas had made a collaboration with Stella Mccartney and then I see that it is a New Balance ad but I would not be able to tell who the other part of the collaboration is. The last one is Raeburn (?) and hmm... is it Timberland because I can see that it is written on the clothes now. The bags I don't recognize at all. – Randa*

*I only liked the New Balance shoes, but nothing too special about them. I don't see them as being a product resulting from a collaboration between New Balance and another brand because it is basically the usual design... I also like the Adidas shoes in collaboration with Stella McCartney. I can see that Timberland did a collaboration with a brand called Raeburn, which I don't know about... - Dumitru*

Baldwin & Roberts (2006) claim that the representation of fashion brands' logos can be seen as the construction of a semiotic triangle model, where "Representation" is a symbol, "Referent" is a real world thing and "Concept" is an individual's interpretation of knowledge and links the representation and referent. This model can be applied to many of the brands chosen as case studies. For instance, the association between stripes (representation) and shoes (referent) would generate the idea of Adidas (concept) in consumers' minds, because stripes symbolise the brand Adidas and the brand refers to a wide range of sports' products, which includes shoes. The same can be applied to New Balance, Timberland and Stella McCartney, where the N letter, a tree and stars symbolize the representation of these brands. Contrariwise, brands like Elvis & Kresse, Burberry and Reformation were hard to recognise, since the campaign pictures for their sustainable fashion collaborations did not portray any symbols or specific characteristics that could be associated by consumers to these brands.

#### **4.1.4.2 Message Formulation**

Langguth and Schnee (2018) discuss that message formulation has a very big impact on marketing, especially on the communication of sustainability and sustainable fashion products. According to previous studies, the design of messages is extremely important and can be analysed with the use of two different perspectives, which are "what" specific content is presented and "how" it is being communicated. A good explanation is crucial to a good understanding of the content, particularly when it comes to the communication of sustainable products, since the excessive complexity or vagueness of a message can lead consumers to accusations of greenwashing (Moisander, 2007; Schmeltz, 2012). In the case of this study, it has been possible to observe different opinions from respondents about the collaborating brands and their sustainable work's communication. As a matter

of fact, a couple respondents felt that the Instagram communication of Reformation x New Balance and Stella McCartney x Adidas were lacking more specific information about their sustainable work, giving a feeling of vagueness and greenwashing.

*The New Balance, I feel like you don't really get what they did. When they mention 'a super light footprint'... I mean you don't really understand what they did. I think that is a little bit a mistake because they are just putting the word sustainable out there with absolutely no meaning... So they should have defined it better in the caption if it was maybe the sole of the shoe that was sustainable or recycled or like whatever they did. Because I don't know what they did. I don't know if it is the fabric or if it is the sole you know. I don't know if it is like a sustainable initiative thing that they have done... I don't know. And Stella McCartney, here you know that it is 100% vegan but for me it is misleading and would confuse people and drive them to buy more things. It is not transparent to me.*  
- Anonymous 2

*Stella McCartney, it says it's 100% percent vegan, 100% percent iconic: by meaning it has an iconic design basically. But it was a little bit maybe surprising because is vegan really sustainable? It's sustainable in a way that it doesn't torture animals, but like all the chemicals that has to go in making fake leather, I don't know...But the new balance is 100% percent made of recycled materials, it seems, according to them say losing our virginity, but super light footprint. I think they want it to mean like, it's like double meaning where they say the shoes are light and also that they have short footprints. But it could be any footprint; water footprint; carbon footprint. But I do get the intention, but it could also be kind of like deceptive in a way. Recycled materials are not necessarily always like the most sustainable choice in the world. It really depends on how they make it and stuff.* - Anonymous 3

One respondent thought that the communication of Elvis & Kresse x Burberry as well as the one of Chrisitopher Raeburn x Timberland were very explanatory, giving a lot of details about the work behind their products, whereas Reformation x New Balance and Stella McCartney x Adidas were lacking a lot of information.

*Actually I think that it was really nice how Elvis & Kresse presented their product and what they said about rescued Burberry leather. And also the Timberland one, that they have said that its decommissioned parachutes that they have been inspired by and that they tell a story behind it a little bit more, it makes the pieces a little bit more interesting. The other collaborations didn't surprise so much, maybe because I didn't feel that they were telling a story behind their collaborations like the others did. I just felt like that they were saying that 'we teamed up together and yeah' - Alice*

Another respondent felt that the collaboration between New Balance and Reformation as well as Timberland and Raeburn did not portray the products in the campaign pictures in a proper way to induce sustainability.

*About New Balance and Timberland, I didn't think they were sustainable before seeing the Instagram posts. The pictures themselves didn't give me the feeling of a sustainable collaboration, so maybe this is also a bad mistake from the communication side. Maybe they should have thought of something else when developing the campaign ideas. - Dumitru*

On a final note, four other respondents than the mentioned above declared to be satisfied with the message formulation used in the Instagram posts by the brands.

## **4.2 Communication of Sustainability towards Millennials**

### **4.2.1 Communication of Sustainability through Social Media**

The communication of sustainability is a delicate topic that needs to be addressed with particular attention. Therefore, fashion brands have started taking small steps towards finding a communicational approach that can emphasise their sustainability efforts (Futerra, 2015). In order to reach consumers, brands should not forget that different communication channels have different abilities, and can therefore reach a variety of individuals. According to Sutton (2016), the key of this process is understanding which are the communication channels preferred by the aimed target group. This concept can be related to the answers given by some respondents when asked about whether the communication of the observed case studies should have been extended to more channels, besides social media. The following quotations are explanatory:

*I think it is about who the target group is. So if the brands are aiming for example to gain the attention of teenage girls then they should definitely go for Instagram. But if you want people in the sixty and plus age group, then you should maybe go to the TV. – Randa*

*I think it depends on what the company wants. If they are trying to target mainly millennials, then I guess social media is the best tool, but if you're trying to target another generation then maybe you should consider what are the other means of communication that are mostly used by them. – Ana*

*I think it depends on what kind of consumers they are targeting. Social media is a very good tool to reach younger generations, since we always use Instagram and Facebook and spend a lot of time on them, but if they want to reach a wider audience, with older people as well, then I think that television commercials and things like that would be useful. – Marta*

*...it depends on the audience I guess, because there's also a large audience that is not on social media so I think it really depends on what target you want to market the products to... - Divine*

It is also true that in the past twenty years, social media like Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest and Youtube have become extremely popular within the fashion industry (Influencer Marketing, 2020; Marta, 2020). These channels have highly visual characteristics, which turn out to be very useful for brands to market their products. Their growth has been moving at a notable pace and Instagram has now reached more than one billion active users every day. Moreover, studies claim that the amount of users on social media will reach three billion by the year 2021, which means that fashion brands

could really take advantage of this huge potential to reach a massive consumers' audience (Ibid). This potential was also confirmed by four respondents, who claimed that social media is probably the best tool to use when communicating fashion and sustainable messages in particular.

*I think it is good that they are on those social media sites and it is probably where I would find them and look at them the most as well. – Alice*

*Yes maybe on other social media platforms to reach out to more consumers... maybe they could be on Pinterest. – Linda*

*I think that social media is the best tool to reach people and communicate a message. - Riccardo*

Anonymous 1 and 3 stressed that the communication of the discussed sustainable fashion collaborations should be extended with videos on Youtube since it would be captivating and more interesting than reading a small caption on social media. Anonymous 1 added that TV would be a great compliment to promote the Timberland collaboration and Anonymous 3 proposed the use of brand websites to give a further explanation about a product's sustainable characteristics.

*I can see the Adidas and the New Balance on like a Youtube commercial video. And I could actually see the Timberland video as a TV-commercial as well. It could definitely work as a TV commercial... - Anonymous 1*

*I think if you can extend the communication medium, they could definitely be on their brand website. I think I could also think of YouTube maybe because for people who are not super interested in reading, they can see how like a product is made or what kind of materials that are put in. For example, this visual ad of Timberlands is way better than just reading because people tend to not bother to read. - Anonymous 3*

According to Marta (2020), influencer marketing is also another powerful tool for brands to use when marketing their products on social media platforms. Previous studies have demonstrated that influencer marketing is a highly effective way of promoting fashion products, since it has the power to reach wider audiences, create higher engagement, develop trustworthiness and increase brand awareness. Indeed, two respondents stressed the importance of communicating sustainable products through influencers. Due to that a higher trustworthiness feeling would be perceived by the consumers and the famous influencers would leave a great impression as well as a great impact on the consumers' willingness to purchase more sustainable products.

*I would prefer to see an ad with an influencer who is promoting the products instead, because it would have felt more true. – Randa*

*...I must say that influencers' endorsement always works, if you see a famous influencer wearing a sustainable product, you will most likely go and take a look at it if not buying it, because people nowadays gain most of their information from social media. – Arianna*

With specific regard to the communication of the chosen sustainable fashion collaborations, Anonymous 2 and Dumitru argued that the communication of sustainable products should be extended to all possible channels. In other words, not only through social media but it should also be communicated through TV, billboards, radio and others. Moreover, Dumitru stressed the popularity of streaming services like Netflix and suggested the use of these to provide short documentaries or movies about the sustainable efforts made by fashion brands.

*I think they should be like across all channels because... if you target through social networks and you are only targeting the youngest of our population. Which is not bad in any way, because people will get used to maybe buying more sustainable stuff or used to have sustainable collaborations and so on, so for the long term it is better... Everybody should get exposed to it but this can also be challenging because sometimes the older generation don't really know what sustainable means or they are not really interested in that and in where the younger generation is. But I feel like I would like to have it on all channels, like social media, TV, billboards and more. - Anonymous 2*

*I think brands should focus on social media and put effort on it, but they should also not forget about other means of communication such as television, radio and especially when it comes to a topic of social importance like sustainability, they should talk to the big masses. I also think that streaming services like Netflix and so on are very popular right now, and they could be a great tool to provide this type of content, maybe with movies or short documentaries about collaborations, brands and sustainability measures and so on. – Dumitru*

On a final note, a study executed by Nielsen (2014) illustrates that fifty-five percent of online consumers are actually more drawn to purchasing sustainable products when their perception of the brand is already related to positive environmental associations. In other words, fashion brands who undertake a more sustainable approach in their communication strategies, have more chances of establishing a sustainable association with their names in the consumers' mindset (Ibid). It can be noted how the participants in this study already had positive associations with some of the brands involved in the research. Arianna and Divine claimed to consider Timberland as a very sustainable brand, as it can be observed in the following quotations:

*I have always seen Timberland as a very sustainable brand, and the idea behind the commercial and pictures is clear. – Arianna*

*...the Timberland collaboration seems the most interesting, it is a good brand or at least it has a positive association in my mind. - Divine*

Dumitru and Anonymous 3 could recall a positive sustainable association with Stella McCartney, confirming that the brand engages in a lot of efforts towards this issue, whereas Anonymous 1 and Dumitru also perceived Adidas to have a good connection with sustainability matters.

*With Adidas and Stella McCartney for me it makes perfect sense, because Stella McCartney is known to be the only sustainable luxury brand and Adidas is also known to be a brand that always tries to be sustainable, so it is a good match I would say. – Dumitru*

*Like when I hear Adidas I know that they do a lot of sustainable work actually but I don't know much about Stella McCartney... - Anonymous 1*

*...I know that Stella McCartney is like one of the considered sustainable brands and it has collaborated with Adidas. - Anonymous 3*

#### **4.2.2 The challenges of Sustainability Marketing & Millennials**

The marketing of sustainable fashion products is often a difficult process, since it might generate suspicion in the consumers' eyes (Ottman, 2011). The reason behind this issue is that consumers sometimes feel manipulated by unclear communication which is usually referred to as greenwashing (Ibid). With regard to this topic, millennials are way more demanding than consumers belonging to other generations, since they require proof of the brands' sustainable efforts (Debevec et al., 2013). If this requirement, along with a feeling of personal involvement, do not get marketed well, they will have a negative impact on the willingness of millennials to purchase sustainable products (Gaudelli, 2009). This concept can be connected to already reported quotations by Alice, Randa and Ana in section 4.2, who expressed their perception of brands getting in partnership with the purpose of sustainability as mere marketing strategies. In addition, two other respondents (Dumitru and Riccardo) previously stated that they believe in brands starting their businesses on sustainability, but do not believe in fast-fashion brands being sustainable. These responses are, beyond doubts, related to the fact that all the participants involved in this study are indeed belonging to the millennial generation, which confirms that they are more demanding towards sustainability and social issues as well as more tempted by transparency and authenticity. Another example of this attitude, can be observed in the following quotations by Dumitru and Anonymous 2:

*Well, as I told you before I don't believe in big companies being sustainable, so this came to me when I saw the New Balance post, they are not sustainable as a company and this collaboration is giving me the vibe of greenwashing, because on the other side we have this sustainable sneakers brand called Veja, and those I believe to be sustainable, because they built their business on sustainability... - Dumitru*

*...if a brand would only display sustainable information and make you be strongly focused on sustainable information, it could look like greenwashing. - Anonymous 2*

Moreover, another challenge for the marketing of sustainable products towards millennials is the ability to deliver the right knowledge when marketing sustainability (Ehlers, et al. 2011). According to Anonymous 3 the sustainable collaboration between Reformation and New Balance failed to deliver the right content or message with the choice of putting in the same picture a sustainable shoe and a leopard printed dress. As a matter of fact, according to the respondent the view of such a print would cause a bad impression in consumers' eyes since it recalls the use of exotic skin.

*I don't know what kind of sustainable aspect that has gone into the shoe, but I do understand that it has something to do with sustainability, because of our previous conversations, but I mean does it*

*really give a good impression? Because this is a statement, since they talk about a sustainable product then it obviously should mean something that has to do with anti-exotic skin and if you have a leopard dress, it's a statement, you know what I mean. It promotes exotic skin, although I know that this is not a real leopard. But it's a statement. - Anonymous 3*

#### **4.2.3 The Balance of Fashion & Sustainability Content**

It is renowned that the fashion industry is one born on the basis of appearances. Therefore, sustainability and fashion are not naturally linked, which means that the communication of sustainable fashion should result more appealing to consumers than the communication of fashion in general. Unfortunately, Kibbe (2013) discusses the presence of a negative association towards sustainable fashion products when it comes to their design. On that matter, Randa and Divine expressed their difficulties in finding aesthetically pleasing sustainable products which can be seen below.

*But I think that 'very good looking' clothes are very hard to make sustainable. – Randa*

*I think that the reason why a lot of customers, especially myself, don't buy a lot of sustainable brands is not only because of the price, but also because most of the products don't look good. – Divine*

Furthermore, other researchers claim that the best way to persuade consumers towards sustainable fashion is the one of balancing both the sustainability and fashion content. When asked about whether a sustainable product should be communicated with more focus on its looks or on its sustainable characteristics, most of the participants stated that there should be a balance.

*I think they should have both. They should go hand in hand. Like for example how they did it with the Instagram posts and that they had texts below to describe more about their product that was really good. Because before I could only see the pictures and I don't really get the ad - Anonymous 1*

*So it definitely should be appealing in a really nice way. But also I think it's good to advertise like the sustainability aspect of the product, for example, because like for new balance, for example, I would not have expected that it's made of sustainable materials or made sustainably if it wasn't for this Instagram post, for example, because of it's previous photos. But I just guessed that it should be a sustainable product because that's the topic of our interview today. But I wouldn't have expected it if I would only have seen it in a magazine or something. And this goes also for the Timberland. - Anonymous 3*

*I would say that it would be good to focus on both the looks and the products sustainable characteristics. But I think that people might not maybe have knowledge about the sustainability part and are interested in that because maybe they would care about the design. – Linda*

*I think it should be clear to consumers what they are looking at, so it is important to stress the sustainable characteristics as well as giving a good image of the product itself, from an aesthetical perspective. – Marta*

Angel (2013) and Grace (2016) instead, affirm that the solution would be the one of prioritising the communication of fashion content over the sustainability one, meaning that the communication of fashion should always be related to a fashion context and put sustainability as a secondary addition. This is also stated by Yael Aflalo, the CEO of Reformation, who believes that the fashion content should stand out and that there is no necessity to over magnify consumers when ensuring them about the products being sustainable (Maccarthy, 2018). One respondent found himself in accordance with this statement, saying that consumers are mainly drawn to products because of their aesthetics and therefore the communication of sustainability aspects can be limited to the brands' websites. Contrariwise, another respondent claimed that putting a spotlight on sustainability and making it the main point of sustainable products' communication is the best thing to do. Both opinions can be observed in the quotations reported below:

*I don't think it should always be explicit that the product is sustainable, even in their campaign. People mainly buy things because of their aesthetics. It is something that can be communicated through the brand's website or with social media like they did, or through a specific campaign... - Riccardo*

*I think that these advertisements do a good job of making sustainability the main point. And I think that they should be focusing on the sustainable characteristics when communicating. - Alice*

Four respondents also argued that it should also be clear that the product is sustainable not only from the captions in the Instagram posts, but also from the campaign pictures. This concern interested all the case studies analysed throughout the interview, which, according to the participants, were not clear enough in their images' communication.

*I think that when it comes to sustainability, campaigns should allow consumers to understand that the products are sustainable. – Arianna*

*I think it should be clear to consumers what they are looking at, so it is important to stress the sustainable characteristics as well as giving a good image of the product itself, from an aesthetical perspective. – Marta*

*...For new balance, for example, I would not have expected that it's made of sustainable materials or made sustainably if it wasn't for this Instagram post, for example, because of it's previous photos. But I just guessed that it should be a sustainable product because that's the topic of our interview today. But I wouldn't have expected it if I would only have seen it in a magazine or something. And this goes also for the Timberland. - Anonymous 2*

*I think they should have both. They should go hand in hand. Like for example how they did it with the Instagram posts and that they had texts below to describe more about their product that was really good. Because before I could only see the pictures and I didn't really get the ad... - Anonymous 1*

Another perspective was brought up by Ana and Randa, who believe that the communication of products' sustainable characteristics depends on the target market that the company is aiming for, since a bigger stress on sustainability or fashion would probably attract different types of consumers.

*It depend on what the company wants I think...it depends on what kind of target market they want to address, because if you want to attract the stereotypical vegan and sustainable- only kind of consumer then you are going to communicate the sustainable aspects first, but if you want to reach any consumer, millennial or not, then you try to communicate something more than just sustainability, which is the design and the image. - Ana*

*It depends on which target group the company is aiming for I believe. - Randa*

On a final note, one respondent claims that brands should have a good explanation of their sustainability work, and referred to Elvis & Kresses Instagram post as being a notable example of how the balance of fashion and sustainability content should look like. This respondent was also stressing that a good story and a real precise description of the sustainability aspects should be included.

*But what they did here, they really go in the middle, they give you normal information which they would do to other products as well and then they give you this extra thing which is kind of them sharing the core thing of their project which is really nice. Because you see this but how can you know it is really sustainable if they don't say something like this. I think it can also change the perception of the product a little bit because when you understand that they have used recycled material and that they didn't really get to choose for example the colours of the material... because you can't really choose the waste material. So then maybe you feel a bit more inclined to actually buy the product if you know the story behind it. - Anonymous 2*

To summarise, the analysis of empirical findings together with the theoretical background shows that respondents had different opinions about the communication of sustainable fashion collaborations. However, it was possible to identify common patterns throughout the different themes discussed in the process of data collection. These patterns will be further discussed and linked together in the following chapter.

## 5. Discussion

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In this chapter, the results obtained through interviews are discussed in relationship with the theoretical framework, with the intent of drawing parallels and comparisons that can further explain the perception of millennial consumers towards sustainable fashion collaborations. These observations will be analysed through the following themes: Communication aspects of Advertisements and Communication of Sustainability towards Millennials.

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Since the topic of sustainable fashion collaborations is very recent and the authors perceived the consumers' perspective to be unstudied, the purpose of this study was the one of investigating consumers' responses towards sustainable fashion collaborations, and to further understand how these co-branding projects are marketed to and perceived by millennials. The discussion will also assess the research questions developed for this study.

The data collected for this study was gathered through literature and semi-structured interviews, where the interviews provided a free-flowing conversation, which gave the participants the freedom of expressing their opinions and perceptions on sustainable fashion collaborations and their communication. Responses in regard to this topic could be found by authors throughout all the questions developed for interviews, therefore it was possible to link participants' thoughts and ideas to identify common patterns that could be applied to the theoretical background.

### 5.1 Communication aspects of Advertisements

The first half of the interview provided the researchers with a good foundation about the qualities of each participant. It was possible to observe that all respondents were social media users and described them as their preferred channel to seek fashion content. Brand's, designer's and retailer's websites were also identified as complementary platforms for this purpose. Nevertheless, fashion magazines resulted to be still quite favoured in this regard. Moreover, key characteristics like comfort, colour, quality, price and design were emphasised by most participants to be the main factors to be found in fashion products. It was interesting to notice how quality was mentioned in terms of a product's longevity and material composition, and thus has an indirect connection to sustainability. It was evident that all consumers had previous knowledge about fashion collaborations, since they could mention either one or several of them and in some cases had also been customers of fashion collaborations. In accordance with Table 2 results, one can claim that fifty percent of the interviewees perceived themselves as sustainable consumers and had their own personal approach to this matter. This information represents a stable foundation for the authors to rely on, and the ability to analyse further obtained data.

The theory about consumers' response metrics explained by Bergman (1998) is applicable to all interview questions, since it provides behavioural dispositions such as attitudes, values, perceptions and opinions. These concepts were noticeable in several quotations reported in the empirical findings,

since the interviews allowed the participants to apply their life's mode of behaviour to the questions in terms of sustainable beliefs, educational background and experience. As a matter of fact, it is interesting to see how Anonymous 2 and 3 were able to apply more constructive criticism to the topic of sustainability, due to their working experience within the field of CSR. This does not exclude the fact that the other respondents were also knowledgeable within this field. However, because of their experience within the industry, Anonymous 2 and 3 could face the topic of sustainability with a more critical eye, giving an in-depth insight of the processes that characterise production and supply of the fashion industry.

Another element that characterises human beings as consumers is the tendency to resonate without complete rationality. Therefore, Hawksworth (2014) explains that emotional communication can be a very successful strategy to draw the attention of consumers, since they tend to build an intimate relationship with products. This concept also applies to the communication of sustainable fashion collaborations' products in terms of transparency, trustworthiness and consumers' well-being (Karlsson, 2015). Emotional communication could also be found in the responses given by participants about the analysed case studies: feelings of curiousness and excitement could be captured by some respondents as positive outcomes of the collaborations between Elvis & Kresse x Burberry, Stella McCartney x Adidas and in particular the commercial video from Christopher Raeburn x Timberland. However, feelings like dissatisfaction and un-fulfilment of expectations were expressed by other participants. In particular, some of them argued that all the collaborations did not meet their suspense in terms of exclusivity and surprise. Moreover, the communication of Reformation and New Balance felt confusing with regard to one of the campaign pictures. The participants thought that the display of the shoes was not appropriately planned, resulting in the dress worn by the model to be put in excessive focus. In accordance with Batra et al. (1991), it was noticeable how there was a miscommunication with regard to the conveyance of a utilitarian dimension of the shoes, which led consumers to put more focus on the dress.

As previously stated by Schwartz (2013), storytelling is an effective tool to use when wanting to educate people on sustainable consumption behaviour. This is due to the fact that stories have the power to get consumers emotionally connected to brands, and can create a much more enhanced awareness among consumers (Gensler, et al. 2013; Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012). This concept was evident when consumers were asked to give their opinions about campaign pictures as well as a commercial video created by Christopher Raeburn and Timberland. Most participants were able to see the storytelling behind the video, stating that it well conveyed the brands' intention and sustainable purpose. As a result, the participants felt more empathic and positive towards the collaboration. The authors, therefore believe that the creation of a commercial video could have also been useful to the other sustainable fashion collaborations, with the purpose of providing consumers with a greater involvement around sustainability. Nevertheless, storytelling could also be applied to pictures in order to create an emotional bond with consumers and positively affect their consumption behaviour towards sustainability.

Batra et al. (1991) and Campbell & Keller (2003) discussed the concepts of authenticity, reliability and credibility, affirming that repetitive images in advertisements as well as previous knowledge of brands can reduce the effectiveness of the ad and result in consumers responding negatively.

According to the responses given by participants, Stella McCartney x Adidas as well as Reformation x New Balance presented campaigns which were lacking in originality and therefore lowered the excitement towards them. Elvis & Kresse x Burberry and Christopher Raeburn x Timberland were instead found to be more original and consistent in their communication as well as having a better approach towards the conveyance of their sustainability work.

When it comes to sustainable products' visual communication, the messages should provide clarity to avoid confusion in the consumers' eyes (Schroeder, 2002; Blaesie, et al. 2012; Langguth & Schnee, 2018), otherwise the risk is that consumers feel the need to create their own stories and fill in gaps which are not explained by the brands (Chang, 2013). It was possible to notice this behaviour in two participants' responses about the collaboration between Christopher Raeburn and Timberland and the one between Reformation and New Balance. One of them felt perplexed about the video communication of the first collaboration, since the visuals of the video looked like the ones from a computer game. The second participant instead was trying to fill in gaps on the Instagram post from the collaboration between Reformation and New Balance, since some of the words used by the brands were questionable in terms of specificity.

The concept of semiotics explained by Noble & Bestley (2011) and Nordquist (2020) could be applied to the sustainable fashion collaborations chosen as case studies by the authors, since most of the brands involved in the partnerships were popular fashion brands that the consumers were able to recognise through associations made with the method of the semiotic triangle. As a matter of fact, the theory of the semiotic triangle states that a concept is a human-generated idea that results from the connection between referent and representation (Baldwin & Roberts, 2006). In other words, it can be said that all participants were able to make this kind of connection with the following brands: Stella McCartney, Adidas, New Balance and Timberland. The stars, stripes, N letter and tree that characterise the logos of these brands could be associated by consumers with the products that they usually trade, and therefore could recall the name of the brands. However, in the case of the collaboration between Elvis & Kresse and Burberry there was no visual element that could make the participants associate the product with the brands. Indeed, the sustainable bags that came out of this partnership were not characterised by any recognisable pattern, logo or name. The same observation goes for Reformation which did not make its name evident on the shoes produced in collaboration with New Balance. Thus, the authors believe that these brands could have used the same strategy pulled out by Christopher Raeburn with Timberland. As a matter of fact, the brand confirmed its presence with its name printed all over the garments created for the sustainable partnership. It turns out that recognisability is an effective tool when communicating sustainable fashion collaborations, because if consumers are able to recognise a brand and associate it with sustainability, they will be more likely to keep the brand in mind, purchase from it and perceive it as reliable. With that being said, the researchers believe that if the brands involved in the selected collaborations would have used either their names, logos or patterns in the products, consumers would have given more value to them.

The communication of sustainable fashion products should also present particular attention to the formulation of messages, since a thorough explanation of sustainable characteristics can avoid accusations of greenwashing (Moisander, 2007; Schmeltz, 2012). It could be observed how consumers related better to sustainability efforts when these were communicated in a clear way,

specifying processes, materials and intentions behind the products. A specific pattern could be obtained from the investigation, with Stella McCartney x Adidas and Reformation x New Balance being considered too superficial in their approach to consumers about their sustainable work within the specific collaboration, whereas, Elvis & Kresse and Timberland were more explanatory and giving details about their projects. It could also be noted how all respondents perceived that the collaborations presented to them were sustainable after reading the Instagram posts, except from a few respondents who could also sense that the collaborations done by Elvis & Kresse and Timberland had a sustainability aspect to it just by viewing the campaign pictures. In addition, most of the respondents were actually open and satisfied with the information presented to them through the Instagram posts. However, some differences in opinion could still be spotted in the way a couple participants perceived the communication of Reformation x New Balance. The brands decided to use some irony to keep consumers more entertained and attracted to the ad; a strategy that turned out to be both appreciated and disliked.

## **5.2 Communication of Sustainability towards Millennials**

The communication of sustainable products towards millennials resulted to be efficient on social media, such as in channels like: Instagram, Pinterest, Youtube and through influencers. However, respondents could also claim that if the aim of the brands was to reach other consumers or generations, other channels should be considered such as: TV, radio, movies, magazines, documentaries or/and brand websites to educate and give a better insight on the sustainable part that the brands have contributed with in their collaborations.

Fashion brands who undertake a more sustainable approach in their communication strategies, have more chances of establishing a sustainable association with their names in the consumers' mindset (Nielsen, 2014). This thought could be assessed when some of the respondents had a positive association towards brands like Timberland, Adidas and Stella McCartney. These names were associated with other sustainable efforts that the brands have done in the past. The study executed by Nielsen (2014) also claims that fifty-five percent of global online consumers are more likely to buy a sustainable product when their perception of the brand is related to positive environmental associations. In other words, this could generate a more specific value of the products in consumers' minds and eyes, which could maybe lead to a future purchase of their products.

The marketing of sustainable fashion products is often a difficult process, since it might generate suspicion in the consumers' eyes (Ottman, 2011). If this requirement, along with a feeling of personal involvement, do not get marketed well, they will have a negative impact on the willingness of millennials to purchase sustainable products (Gaudelli, 2009). This concept can be connected to already reported quotations by Alice, Randa and Ana in section 4.2, who expressed their perception of brands getting in partnership with the purpose of sustainability as mere marketing strategies. In addition, two other respondents (Dumitru and Riccardo) previously stated that they believe in brands starting their businesses on sustainability, but do not believe in fast-fashion brands being sustainable. These responses are, beyond doubts, related to the fact that all the participants involved in this study

are indeed belonging to the millennial generation, which confirms that they are more demanding towards sustainability and social issues as well as more tempted by transparency and authenticity.

Moreover, another challenge for the marketing of sustainable products towards millennials is the ability to deliver the right knowledge when marketing sustainability (Ehlers, et al. 2011). According to Anonymous 3 the sustainable collaboration between Reformation and New Balance failed to deliver the right content or message with the choice of putting in the same picture a sustainable shoe and a leopard printed dress. As a matter of fact, according to the respondent the view of such a print would cause a bad impression in consumers' eyes since it recalls the use of exotic skin. Again, due to the fact that Anonymous 3 has a background and experience within CSR and more specifically CSR in the fashion industry, this person's view of the presented material was examined in a more critical way in terms of sustainability content. These observations demonstrate that millennials have knowledge about this specific topic and are very well informed about all its aspects. This issue could also be noticeable in the other respondents' quotations and not only in Anonymous 3, even though the researchers have acknowledged that this participant has experience in this field than most of the other respondents.

According to millennials there should be some kind of balance in terms of aesthetic and sustainability when communicating a sustainable product. Nevertheless, one respondent argued that the focus should be more on the looks since an aesthetically pleasing product can have a bigger impact on consumers' attention and therefore the sustainability aspect should be advertised on the brands' websites instead. Contrariwise, another respondent claimed that sustainable characteristics should be put in first place when communicating sustainable fashion collaborations. Furthermore, other respondents argued that the balance between these aspects should be achieved through campaign pictures that can combine design with clear captions and claims about sustainability. Another perspective was that the communication of sustainable products should be based on the target market that the brands aim for and therefore, the adjustment of communication should be made in accordance with the chosen segment.

To summarise, the communication of sustainable fashion collaborations is not always perceived by consumers in a clear way, and the sustainable strategies used by the partners involved should be implemented both in terms of message and visual content. The first one to satisfy consumers' need for knowledge, particularly when it comes to delicate topics like sustainability; and the second one to meet the aesthetic essence that has always characterised the fashion industry and that represents the driver of consumers' choices.

## 6. Conclusion

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This chapter presents the conclusions drawn from the discussion of empirical findings and answers the research questions of the study. Suggestions for future research are also included.

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To meet the purpose of the study, the research questions were developed with the aim to investigate consumers' perception of sustainable fashion collaborations and were therefore formulated in the following way:

*How are sustainable fashion collaborations communicated in the consumers' eyes?*

*How is the response of millennial consumers towards sustainable fashion collaborations?*

The aim is the one of filling the research gap with theories and data collected from twelve fashion consumers. With consumers, and more specifically millennials, becoming more and more demanding and conscious about social and environmental issues, it is imperative for fashion brands to effectively communicate their efforts in this direction. This study is therefore relevant to theoretically implement the academic literature regarding fashion collaborations and consumers' behaviour; and it is also relevant to textile students since it covers a topic that has only recently started to emerge in today's fashion industry. Moreover, the study is managerially relevant to professionals within the textile industry since it contributes to the knowledge and strategies of fashion companies, and understanding the needs and expectations of consumers towards the communication of current matters like sustainability.

On the basis of the observations made during the analysis of consumers' perceptions on four sustainable fashion collaborations, the authors need to acknowledge that the following conclusions may not be the only valuable perspective on this topic. However, the researchers propose what they believe to be helpful, in a promising step towards understanding how sustainable fashion products created in partnership can be communicated in the most effective way. Therefore, in accordance with the study, the following conclusions are developed:

- Millennial Consumers

The authors were able to obtain common patterns regarding the attitudes of millennial consumers, recognising that all of the participants involved in the study were; social media users; had a developed sense of sustainability and are prone to make efforts towards the consumption of sustainable fashion products; showed openness to innovative work and creative fashion collaborations; demonstrated to be attracted by design and art; and valued quality in terms of a product's longevity and material composition.

- Visual Communication

It is clear that the communication of sustainable fashion collaborations was overall perceived in a positive way. However, it was also possible to identify some negative patterns which should be taken under consideration when directing the communication towards millennial consumers. The collaborations between Stella McCartney and Adidas as well as the one between Reformation and New Balance were found to be lacking in originality and decreased consumers' excitement in both their campaigns and Instagram posts; whereas Elvis & Kresse x Burberry and Christopher Raeburn x Timberland were considered to be explanatory in their Instagram posts, which were positively received by the respondents, even though the products themselves were not extremely appealing to the eyes of our millennial respondents. To conclude, it was evident that all participants perceived the Instagram messages to be conveying sustainability, and few respondents were also able to tell that the collaborations done by Elvis & Kresse x Burberry and Christopher Raeburn x Timberland had a sustainability intent when viewing the campaign pictures.

- Storytelling

Storytelling resulted to be a positive addition to the communication of the chosen sustainable fashion collaborations. Indeed, most participants perceived the commercial video from Christopher Raeburn x Timberland to be telling a compelling story behind the partnership. It was possible to observe how this element generated more empathy and positive feelings towards sustainability in the consumers' eyes. Thus, the authors conclude that the creation of a commercial video would have also been beneficial to the other sustainable fashion collaborations' cases. This could also be applied to campaigns since it allows consumers to create an emotional bond with sustainable products.

- Semiotics

The authors believe that the sight of logos, brand names or well-known patterns can enhance the communication of sustainable fashion collaborations, giving both partners equal recognisability. Since positive sustainable associations to a brand can only be developed through recognition, the researchers conclude that this aspect is fundamental when communicating sustainable products. As explained by Nielsen (2014) in the theory, fashion brands who undertake a more sustainable approach in their communication and are recognisable, would establish a positive association in consumers' mindset and make them more sustainable-oriented.

- Balance between Sustainability and Fashion content

It can be concluded that millennial consumers prefer a balanced communication in terms of sustainability and fashion content, even when it comes to sustainable fashion collaborations. Nevertheless, this idea can not be applied to all millennial consumers, since there could be observed different perspectives on the matter. In some cases the communication of only fashion or sustainable content was believed to be sufficient in drawing consumers' attention towards sustainable products. In addition, it can also be specified that the balance of both contents should not only be achieved

through Instagram posts, but also through the visuals of campaigns, which too often fail at conveying sustainability.

- Communication Channels

It can be said that millennial consumers are definitely drawn to social media communication, particularly to Instagram, when it comes to fashion content in general as well as sustainable fashion collaborations. Nevertheless, if brands want to reach a wider audience with their products and sustainability efforts, millennials themselves suggested the use of other communication channels such as; TV, radio, streaming platforms, magazines and billboards. Moreover, the participants stressed out Pinterest, Youtube, influencers and brands' websites as other useful channels to educate consumers about sustainability.

## **6.1 Limitations & Future Research**

The communication of sustainability in fashion is a delicate topic, and fashion brands have only taken small steps towards an efficient communicational approach that could point out their sustainability progress (Futerra, 2015). Therefore, this study has focused on the communication of sustainable fashion collaborations towards millennials. The limitations of this thesis mainly include aspects related to its scale. As a matter of fact, the research only explored the perspectives of twelve millennial consumers and is also limited in the amount of case studies chosen for the analysis. Since the study was applied to twelve respondents, it is not possible to draw a general conclusion regarding all millennials' opinions of the communication of sustainable fashion collaborations. Therefore, it could be interesting to investigate whether the results would have differed if the study was applied on a bigger scale in terms of participants and case studies. This could provide companies with a better understanding of how millennial consumers perceive their communication around sustainable products. This research could also be studied from a company perspective since it would allow to better understand the reasons behind specific types of communication. Moreover, this study could be investigated on other consumer segments to comprehend their perception of sustainable fashion collaborations. Lastly, another suggestion for further research is the one of examining other case studies than the ones chosen by the authors of this thesis. The hearts and minds of consumers have not yet been fully captured by sustainability messaging (Hawksworth, 2014) but the authors hope that further research on this delicate topic could provide new perspectives.

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Figure 1: the semiotic triangle

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Figure 2: Stella McCartney's vegan Stan Smith's campaign and Instagram advertising  
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<https://www.instagram.com/stellamccartney/>  
<https://www.riveroaksdistrict.com/events/2019/12/2/the-new-stan-smith-at-stella-mccartney>

Figure 3: Reformation's sustainable New Balance sneakers' Instagram advertising and campaign  
<https://www.instagram.com/reformation/>  
<https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2019/10/8518024/reformation-new-balance-sustainable-sneaker-collection-2019>

Figure 4: Elvis & Kresse rescued Burberry leather bags' campaign and Instagram advertising  
<https://www.issuewire.com/breathtaking-luxury-accessories-from-rescued-fire-hose-reclaimed-leather-off-cuts-1598266461084876>  
<https://www.instagram.com/elvisandkresse/>  
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Figure 5: Christopher Raeburn's sustainable collection for Timberland  
<https://www.raeburndesign.co.uk/explore/collaborations/post/id/timberland>  
<https://www.instagram.com/timberland/>

## Appendix

Interview guide for sustainable fashion collaborations

Name (Anonymous?)

Age (Millennials)

Educational level? (high school, university level, masters...)

Occupational status? (student, employee, entrepreneur...)

Hello,

We will interview you about sustainable fashion collaborations. Do you mind us recording you?

### **PERSONAL APPROACH TO FASHION**

When you think about fashion, what do you think about?

What is fashion for you?

What does it mean when something is "in" fashion for you?

Do you consider yourself as a fashionable person?

When purchasing a product, what is it that drives your decision?

What draws your attention when looking at fashion products?

What mean of communication do you prefer when seeking for fashion products? Why? (example: magazines, fashion billboards, social media or other online platforms)

## **FASHION COLLABORATIONS**

What do you think of fashion collaborations? Do you know any?

What do you think of the products that come out of collaborations?

Have you ever purchased an item from a fashion collaboration? What was the item and which collaboration did you purchase from?

## **SUSTAINABILITY AND FASHION COLLABORATIONS**

Do you remember your latest purchase? What did you buy?

Was it from a specific brand? Why did you buy it?

Do you look at the design or brand? Why?

What would you say if I told you for example that the item you bought is sustainable? Would that alter your perception of the item? Would you be more inclined to purchase an item that is sustainable?

Would you still buy the item if I took the brand away?

What if I lower the price point and leave it with the same brand and the same design?

Do you purchase sustainable clothing? Why?

What does sustainable fashion mean to you? Why do you see it as sustainable?

Is it important for you to know what material is used to create the product and where it has been produced?

...ease into this one

How important are these issues for you? how do you think about them?

Do you consider yourself a sustainable consumer? Please explain in what way you consider yourself like that.

What do you think of brands that get in partnership with the purpose of sustainability? Do you know any of them?

Now, we're going to show you 4 fashion collaborations and we would like you to look at them and answer some questions...







## **COMMUNICATION TO CONSUMERS**

Did the products above appeal to you? How do you view these collaborations? Would you purchase any of the products from the collaborations presented to you? Why? Why not?

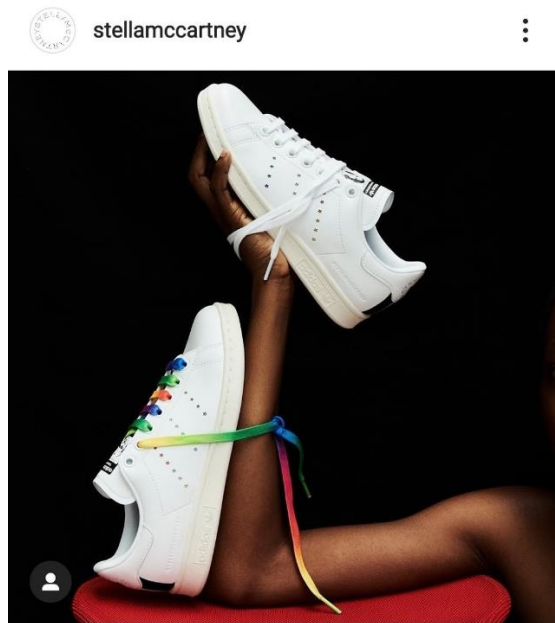
Compared to other fashion ads you have seen in the past, in what ways do you find this ad different or the same? Do you look at these products in a different way than you would for an advertisement for something else?

Can you recognize the brands behind the collaborations? (Logos, colors etc.)

How did the advertisement make you feel and why? (Happy, sad, curious, powerful, surprisingly nice, useful, relevant to you)

Did you find the ads attractive or not? What is attractive about it? What is another ad that you find attractive (In general)?

Here we show them the *Instagram posts* and start asking the questions below:



**Piace a 19.006 persone**  
stellamccartney A symbol of a way of life. The Stella #StanSmith. 100% vegan, 100% iconic.



**Piace a 25.790 persone**  
reformation We've teamed up with @NewBalance to make some sustainable sneakers with a super light footprint (pun intended). It's exciting news, as we're basically losing our virginity in the sneaker category, while these are also New Balance's most sustainable sneakers yet. Here 10/10. Get on the list.



**elvisandkresse**  
Elvis & Kresse



**Piace a 159 persone**

**elvisandkresse** Beautifully handcrafted from individually cut pieces of rescued #Burberry leather combined with our signature decommissioned fire-hose, the Fire & Hide Tote Bag is a true sustainable staple 🌱 The timeless shape lets you easily carry your daily essentials in style this spring 🌿🍃 Now available in 6 sumptuous colours, including chic British Racing Green.



**timberland**



**Piace a 5.654 persone**

**timberland** Introducing the @Timberland x @raeburn\_design Collection. Inspired by decommissioned parachutes + made with organic and recycled materials. Available now on Timberland.com #Timberland #TimberlandRelease

How did you view the main message in the ad? (How did you interpret the main message?)

Did the message in the instagram post surprise you? Did you find something to be off or to be weird?

Does this message resonate with you and how do you feel about this message? (Should fashion be more sustainable)

To what extent does the advertisement match with your idea of buying sustainable products? Do you think that a sustainable product should be communicated to consumers with more focus on its looks or on its sustainable characteristics?

Do you feel that the brands are communicating their sustainable work in the fashion collaborations well or not? Please explain.

These collaborations have mainly been communicated through Instagram and Facebook. Do you think that their communication should be extended to other channels? If yes, which ones?

Thank you for participating,  
Cecilia & Yasmine



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