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**Corporate social responsibility in the fast fashion industry**

**What kind of CSR matters to consumers of fast fashion industry?**

*Understanding the doubts amongst the consumers and the possible road to added legitimacy and convergence via re-adjusted CSR- communication*

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## ABSTRACT

The increased consumer attention towards CSR (corporate social responsibility)- practices, needs and execution is a tendency that has equally developed amongst the consumers of fast fashion industry. This study was inspired by the paradoxical paradigm that exists between fast fashion brands and their CSR.

Previous research highlights the aspect of reputation in the context of CSR, as well as its potential to increase organisational legitimacy. Research on CSR- communication and information is equally vast. However scholars have not specifically addressed the fast fashion industry in this context. Literature further suggests, that CSR- information is interpreted and understood and judged differently by different stakeholders.

12 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with consumers of fast fashion industry in order to research the phenomenon. In order to understand the true meaning behind the paradigm, the following thematic entities were inspected with detail: 1) the understanding of CSR by the consumers of the industry 2) the CSR- preferences of consumers 3) the preferred and most efficient CSR- communication strategies and 4) the possible means for increased legitimacy of fast fashion brands via CSR and its communication.

The author was aware of the prevalent mistrust of consumers of fast fashion brands towards their CSR. Nevertheless, the main findings suggest a plethora of varying beliefs and hidden consumer attitudes towards the CSR of fast fashion brands. Salient findings show that consumers prefer sustainability- and employee- related- CSR.

Understanding the consumer mindset seems crucial in order to build a connection between properly adjusted, executed and communicated CSR. The findings further suggest a re-direction of CSR- policies, initiatives, and communication, without however demolishing the organisational structure and business models of fast fashion brands. As suggested by this research, a possible future road points towards an ideal combination of transparent, relevant, proactive, educative and authentic CSR and CSR- communication.

Consequently, as its main implications, this research proposes transparent and authentic CSR- communication in order to appease the consumer mistrust. Once achieved, consumers have the potential to become more aware of CSR- issues, trust companies more and spread good word-of-mouth. In return, this all can gradually lead to repeated purchases due to clearer consumer consciousness.

**KEYWORDS:** *corporate social responsibility, fast fashion industry, CSR- communication, social media, trust, legitimacy, knowledge gap*

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Problem statement and purpose of study

*What are consumers' expectations regarding the ethicality of corporate behaviour in today's society?* Creyer (1997, p. 423).

The previous is a topical question in the continuously evolving world of business, regardless of industry. Large organisations have devoted whole departments for the execution of ethical business, for the communication of ethics and equally for the planning of ethical business strategies. Around the globe, enterprises strive to understand the customer mentality towards their ethicality (Creyer, 1997). It would be hard to name an industry that is not subject to following certain kind of ethical standards or that is not being monitored either by consumers or officials. Different industries tackle with different kinds of problems in the context of ethical business, and each different industry has developed different kind of corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices in order to answer to the various legitimacy claims that they might face from their external stakeholders.

One of these industries is the fast fashion industry, an industry with a roughly estimated annual turnout of billions of dollars. The fast fashion industry is known to operate in a way that can raise stakeholder concerns about business ethics (Doyle et al., 2006). Large international fashion retailers such as the Spanish Zara and Swedish H&M have expanded their businesses over the years. They have faced multiple stakeholder claims to improve their CSR- policies, especially from the side of consumers and organisations. Furthermore, various NGOs have targeted fast fashion companies in the past and have lobbied for change towards what they think is more ethical business, and thus better CSR, within the industry (Zhao et al., 2014). Additionally, the industry has been in the centre of numerous different CSR- related scandals, such as the rabbit plucking scandal that Zara faced in 2013 (Peterson, 2013). What resulted, was a campaign that was launched by consumers to pressure Zara to quit the cooperation with Chinese Angora rabbit farmers (Peterson, 2013).

Another campaign was launched in 2012 by Greenpeace, a campaign that was aimed at changing the industry towards being more responsible in terms of utilisation of toxic chemicals in apparels (Li, 2012).

Additionally, most fast fashion companies have huge networks of suppliers (Doyle et al., 2006) and it can be challenging for these organisations to monitor the whole logistic cycle, outsourcing of labour and working conditions (Doyle et al., 2006). If the monitoring of supply chains and labour conditions is not executed with sufficient attention, an organisation can find itself in the middle of a corporate crisis that can threaten its reputation (Zhao et al., 2014). The need to monitor and assure the proper management and surveillance of the production highlights again the need for CSR.

Furthermore, neglecting societal norms and conventions can decrease commercial profits (Middlemiss, 2003). Consumers can boycott products of an organisation that they regard as socially irresponsible and therefore the demands of consumers should be heard in order to maintain good reputation (Middlemiss, 2003). No company wants to be targeted with negative consumer activism, and CSR policies can be implemented in attempt to avoid such situations.

Another characters that go together with the previous remarks and that are typical for the fast fashion industry are the following. The industry is often criticised for fast and extensive production cycles, high amounts of garment waste, chemical hazards and outsourced production sites and labour, often located in countries of low labour costs. The existing stakeholder critique can undermine any organisation's legitimacy, and this problem is also encountered within the fast fashion industry. In order to address the stakeholder critique, fast fashion companies can opt for investing in CSR.

Caniato et al. (2012) and Middlemiss (2003) have argued that the fashion industry in general can face strong critique by media, especially critique that is targeted on their sustainability and other societal factors. Media and consumers can target the sustainability and ethical issues of the industry because the industry itself has a high public profile (Caniato et al., 2012). Therefore, the importance of being socially responsible is highlighted even more in the fast fashion industry and this is reflected on the need for corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication. Due to the existing external pressure and surveillance, fast fashion industries are very conscious of the importance of sustainable business (Zhao et al., 2014), in regards to the environment, society and the economies of the world. Therefore, to identify the importance of CSR- communication in fast fashion industry has potential to contribute to CSR- literature, as well as to corporate communication management.

Furthermore, CSR is known to affect investor relations (Middlemiss, 2003; Minor & Morgan, 2011), employee alignment and corporate reputation, and moreover consumer behaviour and the attitude of consumers towards an organisation (Minor & Morgan, 2011; Zhao et al., 2014). Moreover, well-known fast fashion companies such as Zara, Gap, Primark and H&M seem to think that it is of the utmost importance to make sure that they will not get accused of polluting the environment, or of misguided policies of their suppliers, nor be judged as unfair businesses (Roberts, 2003). CSR policies and actions can provide a means for the industry to escape some of these accusations and judgements that contribute negatively to their corporate reputation and overall operations.

Additionally, the need to properly understand CSR communication for organisations has been emphasized by practitioners as well as scholars (Middlemiss, 2003; Palazzo & Scherer, 2007; Kim & Ferguson, 2014). In order to fully take advantage of CSR and its positive effects on reputation and corporate legitimacy, it is in the interest of organisations to know how to communicate about CSR (Kim & Ferguson, 2014). Therefore, to study consumers' opinion about CSR may help to identify the role of different CSR communication strategies and their effectiveness, in terms of satisfying consumers as external stakeholders. Another aspect that should be given scientific value is CSR in social media, since the relevance of social media and peer-to-peer information is very topical in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Furthermore, research has shown that understanding the WOM (word of mouth) and eWOM (electronic word of mouth) about CSR can be crucial for organisations (Colleoni, 2013) in terms of understanding the advantages and disadvantages of different kind of CSR. The way WOM and eWOM reflect CSR messages in society and e-society can be used as a reflection point for companies to understand whether their messages and actions are perceived, as they would like to.

CSR can be seen to construct of different particles such as environmental protection, adhering to laws and ethics, respecting human rights, acting accordingly with labour policies of each country, corporate giving and good doing and other actions that contribute to the good corporate citizenship of a company (Dalhsrud, 2008). Therefore, as will be justified in the following chapters of this study, it is relevant to understand and research the consumer opinion about CSR, since due to the magnitude of the concept, it can include a lot of different segments and psychological connotations within itself, and each segment can have a different emphasis. This in return can complicate the planning of CSR communication, since a balance between highlighting various different factors ought to be achieved in order to succeed in appealing to all external stakeholders.

Taking into account the fact that CSR is essential for successful business in fast fashion industry, this study aims to determine what kind of CSR initiatives are the most important for consumers of fast fashion industry, namely in terms of legitimacy and reputation. As to be explained in the theoretical framework of this study, consumers do not interpret all types of CSR in the same way, neither do they prefer all means of CSR communication (Kim & Ferguson, 2014; Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005). This is not least due to the previously mentioned complexity of CSR as a concept and the plethora of different psychological connotations annexed to it. Therefore it is very justified to study the importance of different kind of CSR for consumers of the industry, and try to shed light on the most preferable ways of CSR communication, as seen by consumers. Ultimately, implications on how fast fashion companies should communicate about their CSR will be given, based on the data that was interpreted via semi structured in-depth interviews of the industry's consumers. This study focuses on the fast fashion industry as a whole, even though prestigious, well-known corporations such as Zara and H&M were often used as examples by the sample and the researcher.

Ultimately, this study was designed to understand the multi-faceted conceptual and practical perceptions, as well as preferences of consumers towards the CSR of fast fashion industry and its CSR communication. Therefore, a main research question was formulated as follows:

***RQ: What type of CSR initiatives matter to consumers of fast fashion industry, and how should fast fashion companies communicate about their CSR via social media and other channels?***

The research question is a two-sectioned one, firstly aiming to inspect the pure preference of types of CSR for consumers and secondly, understanding the best-adjusted CSR communication methods.

For this particular study, a coding approach as suggested by grounded theory was implemented, in order to handle the qualitative data acquired via data collection. Furthermore, the theoretical framework for this study was finalized by combining seven theoretical aspects that all can be seen to contribute to the understanding of the investigated phenomena, and further, to answer the research question in an adequate manner without ignoring the interconnectedness of different theoretical aspects. Respectively, the theoretical framework chosen for this study consisted of theories linked to institutional aspects and theory, such as legitimacy, isomorphism and reputation. The understanding of CSR within the industry is

therefore unveiled by inspecting the phenomena from the combination of organisational and institutional theories. Furthermore, in order to understand the marketing communications related aspects of CSR within the industry, a remarkable section of theoretical framework was devoted to CSR- communication- related theories.

Given the plethora of varying particles that construct the conceptual meaning for CSR and its communication, this study will firstly discuss the previous literature that exists on CSR and CSR communication. Afterwards the study will commence the discussion of the actual research design, data collection and corresponding results.



## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. CSR in the fast fashion industry

A topic concerning the fashion industry in general has been its environmental sustainability and the problems faced by fashion companies within this domain. For example Caniato, Crippa & Moretto (2012) have studied the importance of properly understanding how fashion companies can function and execute their business and simultaneously take into account sustainability issues. Another point that has attracted scientific attention is corporate responsibility management of fast fashion companies; namely how fast fashion companies can manage their responsibility and how they should execute it (Arrigo, 2013). Another example of the multifaceted CSR related paradigms within the fast fashion industry is the example given by Greenpeace's anti-toxic campaign that targeted the industry to change the chemicals they have been using in their production (Li, 2012). Following the arguments of Bhattacharya and Korschun (2006), one could conclude that understanding CSR can bring value to fast fashion companies in understanding how to strengthen their stakeholder relations, namely in the context of this study, their relations with their consumers. A topical question within this niche is also whether consumers see CSR as a way to improve brand image, and this has also been researched on a general level for instance by Middlemiss (2003). Furthermore, a conclusion that could be equally seen to apply on the consumers of fast fashion industry, made by Kim & Ferguson (2014), is that the expectations and needs of stakeholders regards to CSR communication can vary to some extent.

Research has also shown that CSR does not necessarily add direct financial value to an organisation's business (Barnett, 2007). However, it seems that the majority of companies operating within the fast fashion industry seem to practice CSR to at least some extent (Zhao et al., 2014). Research has proven (Nagurney et al., 2013) that the decision makers within the industry understand that fast fashion business cannot only be about making profit; the industry has to conform into sustainable strategies, monitor its supply chains (Minor & Morgan, 2011) and take this into account even in its designs, in order to achieve stakeholder support (Clarke & Clegg, 2000). Clarge & Clegg (2000) have also argued that the industry needs to know how not to highlight its financial profits too much. The industry needs to know how to find a balance in economic, social and environmental performance. When fast fashion companies try to achieve this balance, they can also attempt to use green marketing

(Zhao et al., 2014), meaning that they can sell their products and services by associating them to green and ecologic lifestyle, in order to achieve the consumer's trust.

Failing to monitor supply chains can have long lasting consequences on reputation, even on a global level (Minor & Morgan, 2011). Within a well functioning CSR context of a fast fashion company, the hypothetical company would ensure to have its CSR aligned so that it would not purchase from irresponsible suppliers or employ an irresponsible supplier. Thus properly executed CSR in the context of fast fashion's outsourced supply chains and labour production proves its importance.

Minor & Morgan (2011) have additionally argued, that if a company fails to execute CSR activities that enjoy public acceptance, their management might be considered as incompetent. Following this defined logic, that CSR can increase the trust of investors (Middlemiss, 2003; Minor & Morgan 2011) by maintaining a good reputation and protecting an organisation from bad reputation (Minor & Morgan, 2011), it seems that it is of great interest for fast fashion industry to initiate CSR activities since they can assure proper investment.

Based on previous research within the context of CSR and the fashion industry in general, it is relevant to address the scientific gap proposed by the research question and attempt to find out what paradigms within the field of CSR and the fast fashion industry are attracting the most interest, critique and improvement ideas on the behalf of the consumers of the industry.

## **2.2. Corporate Reputation**

As argued in the previous chapter, it is relevant to talk about reputation in the context of CSR in fast the fashion industry since the two are inseparable. Multiple scholars have given different definitions for reputation and to the components that construct reputation. Shrum & Wuthnow (1988) have described reputation as relative standing or desirability. Podolny (1993) has defined reputation as quality, meaning that attributes that construct quality are also indicators of corporate reputation. Furthermore, scholars have agreed that reputation can also be seen as esteem (Dollinger et al., 1997; Fombrun, 1996; Hall, 1992 & Heugens, 2004). Additionally, Deephouse (2000) has argued that reputation is favorableness, meaning that stakeholders would favour an organisation with a good reputation.

In the context of CSR, it is important to talk about the evaluation of an organisation by its stakeholders. It can be argued, that stakeholders evaluate companies based on various

different attributes. One of these is CSR and the overall ethics and business practices of an organisation, and that is why it is important to look into different factors that constitute the evaluation of an organisation. CSR being an integral part of organisations and their evaluation, the relevance to understand consumer CSR preference is again highlighted. As previously mentioned, corporate reputation and its core is based on stakeholder evaluation, in other words, making a difference between different companies and their characters.

Therefore, the core of reputation is the organisation's relative position amongst its competitors. It is thus important to put peer companies in comparison, in order to evaluate their reputation. Many existing reputation comparison lists like *Forbes*, *Fortune Global 500*, *Interbrand* and *RepTrak*<sup>TM</sup> are also based on the central argument of Ruef & Scott's (1998), that status comparisons are very central in determining reputation. Of these reputation comparison lists, *RepTrak*<sup>TM</sup> has a whole section dedicated for good corporate citizenship, which is directly linked to CSR. Not merely lists like these evaluate the corporate citizenship and the sufficiency of CSR, but consumers as external stakeholders can follow same patterns when judging a company. Therefore, by answering to the research question of this paper, indicators and comparisons of reputation within the industry could also be made, on an abstract, and more concrete, on a company level. Since organisations see CSR as a means to achieve better reputation (Fombrun & Shanely, 1990; Lee & Lii, 2012) in order to seem legitimate to their external stakeholders, the value of CSR becomes clearly emphasized, once again. To conclude, in the context of CSR, corporate reputation is linked to legitimacy and therefore it is relevant to talk about legitimacy in this context as well.

### **2.3. Organisational legitimacy**

Deephouse & Carter (2005) have had scientific discussion about organisational legitimacy and about legitimacy's relationship to organisational reputation. According to them (Deephouse & Carter, 2005), it is important to understand how stakeholders perceive legitimacy. As CSR can be linked as part of organisational legitimacy, the relevance of the research question is once again highlighted, since it is important to understand what kind of CSR is regarded as relevant and preferable by consumers, in order to better understand what truly constitutes the legitimacy of fast fashion companies. Nevertheless, measuring legitimacy is challenging due to the fact that as a concept it is intangible, meaning that there are no existing, simple codes or direct models with which one could measure this attribute.

Moreover, different stakeholders can perceive legitimacy differently (Deephouse & Carter, 2005).

As a theoretic domain, organisational legitimacy remains vast. Previous research by Suchman (1995) argues that legitimacy includes cognitive power as well as normative power within itself. This cognitive and normative power can constrain, construct or empower organisations (Suchman, 1995). Cognitive power in legitimacy can also be linked to the perception of stakeholders. Consequently, stakeholders and their perception about an organisation's legitimacy can represent this cognitive power. In a hypothetical setting, this cognitive power can empower an organisation when stakeholders do regard an organisation as legitimate. Therefore, studying the CSR preference of fast fashion industry's consumers seems justified because it can shed light on nuances that can possibly empower an organisation and its legitimacy. Logically assumed, organisations would pursue this empowerment, and thus studying the research question can shed light on what kind of CSR should be pursued in order to achieve this kind of empowerment. Furthermore, an organisation can be constructed by stakeholder opinion and feedback that is related to its legitimate standing; it can operate as a guideline for an organisation. Moreover, if consumers regard an organisation as completely legitimate and decide to stay as loyal consumers due to this, it represents a situation in which an organisation can be empowered as well.

The norms of society can work in the aforementioned way as well, in a constraining, constructing or empowering way (Suchman, 1995), depending on the context. The norms of society can constrain an organisation in a setting in which society and its norms contradict with certain labour policies or production methods of an industry. The opposite, empowerment, can happen in a situation in which the norms of society can be seen to justify the actions of an organisation or even provide a base for an organisation's business practices. Hypothetically, societal norms can also work as guidelines that can be seen to construct an organisation. An example of the previous is for instance a situation in which societal norms help an organisation to define how to execute business policies. The research question attempts to shed light on the concrete opinion and attitude of consumers when it comes to organisations' adhering and conforming behaviour. Additionally, it can help to understand the division of importance within the field of legitimacy and CSR.

Legitimacy can also be divided into financial regulatory legitimacy and public legitimacy (Deephouse & Carter, 2005). The regulatory standards that are prevalent in society, for instance laws and norms that regulate the actions of an organisation could be seen as a measurement of this regulatory legitimacy (Deephouse & Carter, 2005). If an organisation

fills these regulatory standards, it can be seen to be legitimate in a regulatory way. Public legitimacy in return consists of normative and moral legitimacy, and these are even more linked to respecting societal norms and rules (Deephouse & Carter, 2005). Legitimacy, societal norms and rules are interrelated to the concept of isomorphism and therefore it is logical to discuss this concept next.

## **2.4. Isomorphism**

A major claim by institutional theory is that isomorphism leads to legitimacy. Isomorphism is a central concept of institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983 and Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Isomorphism indicates the extent to which an organisation is similar in relation to other organisations in the same niche, based on certain specific characters. Westphal et al. (1997) argue that isomorphism in its institutional form can empirically be seen in increased conformity. Moreover, isomorphism can be seen as a set of both, forced conformity (e.g. law) and free conformity (e.g. company donations and CSR) (Westphal et al., 1997). Therefore it could be concluded that organisations have many incentives to adhere to conformity, both forced and free. In the context of isomorphism and CSR, one can detect the relevance of the research topic of this paper, since the research question can also help to answer to which kind of organisational conforming is regarded as the most important by consumers. It is relevant to understand this paradigm because it can help to detect patterns of isomorphism that lead to legitimacy.

Organisations with high status do not necessarily have as many incentives to conform into norms and values set up by the societal system, since they might not feel as compelled to do so as smaller organisations (Deephouse & Carter, 2005). An important factor that affects the way stakeholders perceive the isomorphic actions of an organisation is its prior reputation (Deephouse & Carter, 2005). Therefore, isomorphism and reputation are linked to each other. Furthermore, Rindova et al. (2006) have concluded that some organisations attract more public attention than others due to the fact that stakeholders would find their emotional dimension deeper, and thus would more easily identify themselves to these organisations. Subsequently, it is not surprising that organisations can attempt to use CSR in order to appeal to the emotions of their external stakeholders via CSR.

On a general level, isomorphism is directly linked to conforming to societal values and norms (Deephouse & Carter, 2005), and the higher the degree of organisational conforming is, the more the media would cover this kind of organisation (Rindova et al., 2006). This

phenomenon is named after Rindova et al. (2006) as *celebrity firms*, and following their theoretical framework, CSR can be seen to be part of this kind conforming that can lead to increased media coverage and finally even to a state of a *celebrity firm*. The relevance of the research question is again highlighted here, since the importance to understand consumers' CSR preference can help fast fashion companies to detect the best way of conforming to societal values and norms, and consequently help them achieve more positive media coverage.

## 2.5. CSR classifications

There is no unique definition for CSR and one can find plenty of different attributes and theories that try to shed light on the question: *what does CSR truly consist of?* Furthermore, CSR can be a complex concept to grasp, since it attempts to link business to society (Halme & Laurila, 2009). However, regarding this study, a few commonly accepted brief definitions will be deployed here.

When talking about CSR, the concept can be linked to various factors that can be regarded as societal obligations, opportunities and favours towards a company (Dahlsrud, 2008). Furthermore, as briefly discussed before, CSR is also about respecting human rights, acting accordingly with labour policies of each respective country and corporate giving (Dahlsrud, 2008). Additionally, CSR can be seen as a plethora of various good-doing activities and other actions that contribute to the good corporate citizenship of a company (Dahlsrud, 2008). Clearly, CSR can be seen to include the actions and policies of organisations that include e.g. environmental protection, responsible labour policies and adhering to local and global law (Dahlsrud, 2008; Van Marrewijk, 2003). Furthermore, CSR is widely acknowledged to include overall good doing towards society and local communities (Van Marrewijk, 2003) and even respecting the unwritten rules of society as a whole (Dahlsrud, 2008). Namely for the fast fashion industry, the highlight on the need for CSR could be roughly be split into two major sections that call for detailed attention: environmental CSR and employee-related CSR.

A relevant remark for CSR within the fast fashion industry is the increased expectations for CSR in countries where governments or NGOs do not provide for social necessities (Halme & Laurila, 2009). What makes this relevant is the fact that most fast fashion brands have outsourced labour and production in developing countries, such as the South-East Asia,

where governments, law and NGOs are not on the same level of capacity nor function as in the Western countries (Midttun et al., 2006).

For the fast fashion industry, one could see the categorization of Halme & Laurila (2009) apply, when the structure and classification of its CSR is being determined. The authors (Halme & Laurila, 2009) have concluded that CSR could be inspected from three different forms of acting, namely 1) philanthropy 2) CSR- integration and 3) CSR- innovation. The philanthropy category includes charitable actions, sponsoring and volunteerism. By CSR- integration is meant operations that aim at transforming a business and a business model towards more responsible direction. Lastly, by CSR- innovation is meant proactive CSR that attempts to solve inherent environmental problems and further, problems in society (Halme & Laurila, 2009).

Each different CSR- approach offers different outcomes and some of these various outcomes will be discussed in the Results- section.

Additionally, it is commonly accepted, that CSR has become a vital part of organisations' actions that can have a positive impact on their organisational legitimacy (Van Marrewijk, 2003; Deephouse & Carter, 2005). The following chapters of the theoretical framework focus on the most relevant factors of CSR in relation to the topic of this study and will shed light on the overall formation of the CSR- theory that is applied here.

## **2.6. Corporate communication and CSR messages**

As acknowledged before, CSR has been acknowledged to have a positive impact on organisational legitimacy (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Therefore organisations have clear incentives to communicate about their CSR in order to make it visible and understandable to their stakeholders. Previous research has shown that the need to communicate about CSR has also increased, (Palazzo & Scherer, 2007), and this trend affects the most organisations that operate on a global level (Moreno & Capriotti, 2009). Thus the need for CSR communication is also evident in the global fast fashion industry and it is therefore relevant to understand how fast fashion companies should execute their CSR communication.

Research has shown that public expectations about CSR communication can vary to great extent, from the medium utilised to the direction of CSR communication (Kim & Ferguson 2014). Furthermore, publics tend to have varying beliefs about the credibility of CSR communication (Kim & Ferguson, 2014). Therefore it is important for organisations to

determine what are the types of societal factors that they should highlight in their CSR communication (Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005), in order to achieve stakeholder support for their businesses. Kim & Ferguson (2014) argue, that publics tend to appreciate the CSR of organisations to a greater extent, if an organisation explicitly communicates about the true reasons behind their CSR; why and how an organisation would and should support a certain social cause (Kim & Ferguson, 2014). This finding follows the logic, that stakeholders want to know who is benefiting, and how, from an organisation's CSR. This would again stress the need to understand and study what kind of CSR is the most valued by consumers of fast fashion industry. Additionally, it is proven that transparency and openness are important in CSR communication (Middlemiss, 2003). From transparency, it is logical to discuss CSR and stakeholder trust in the same context.

Since stakeholders do not take an organisation's word as a granted truth, it has been shown, that due to third-party credibility, self-sufficient mediums and experts are trusted more than corporate initiated messages (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Furthermore, media coverage is trusted more than corporate messages (Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005). Therefore, intense advertising about CSR might not lead to a growth in stakeholder support (Webb & Mohr, 1998; Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005), it can even increase stakeholder doubt about the authenticity of an organisation's CSR. It would seem that stakeholders prefer CSR messages not be completely controlled by a company, as often is in the case of advertising.

Based on research findings (Webb & Mohr, 1998; Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005; Kim & Ferguson, 2014), it would seem that stakeholders nevertheless accept the fact that organisations promote their CSR, they just do not prefer corporate sources. As Kim & Ferguson (2014) have concluded, one of the most trusted sources of CSR- information is NGOs (non-governmental organisations) and non-profit organisations. Therefore, following this logic, in order to achieve a high degree of credibility for their CSR, organisations might have to be creative when determining how and via who/what channel to disseminate information about their CSR. Yet again, this calls for understanding consumers '*CSR-attitude*' and also the means via which they got to find about particular CSR- initiatives and policies. Once shed light on, managerial implications could be suggested on how to achieve better legitimacy for fast fashion companies via properly adjusted CSR- communication.

Middlemiss (2003) has argued that CSR- communication should not be guided by PR spin-doctors, and organisations should also avoid giving empty promises or trying to over-



deliver CSR to audiences. Furthermore, media tends to report about CSR- related topics that might not be the most beneficial for corporate reputation; they can often report about CSR double standards, blame failed actions and strongly criticise CSR- violations in the field of child and ‘slave’ labour (Middlemiss, 2003). Especially the hazard of child and other labour-related problems can from time to time restrain the fast fashion industry, which can in turn lead to negative media coverage. However, media also cover very positive CSR- related news, such as new CSR- actions (that have not been regularly committed by other organisations in the past), and actions that would have a vast positive impact on local communities (Middlemiss, 2003). Therefore, studying the importance of CSR for consumers of the industry can help to determine what is considered as novel or ground breaking in the context of CSR and fast fashion industry.

Additionally, the aforementioned study by Kim & Ferguson (2014) suggest a demographic detail about the public’s preference for CSR- communication. The study and its sample were merely focused on the U.S., however, it is worth noting that there seems to be a variation in how females and males perceive CSR- communication. More about the sampling method will be discussed later on in this study. For the research question it is also relevant to talk about social media and word-of-mouth in CSR- communication, not the least because the importance of social media for organisations and the power of WOM has steadily grown.

## **2.7. Social media and WOM in CSR communication**

The Web 2.0 has changed the field of communication thoroughly, and stakeholders are thus no longer in the role of mere receivers of corporate messages, but participate in the creation of content, shape messages and are engaged in a dialogue with organisations (Colleoni, 2013; O’Reilly, 2007). Since the emergence of Web 2.0 and the dominance of Internet- based communication methods, online communication has become more and more important for organisations in increasing stakeholder interest in their CSR- initiatives (Colleoni, 2013). With this relatively new stakeholder-company communication paradigm, new models of engagement, input and creation of meaning are applied to organisational CSR- communication.

Social media can be seen as a medium to connect all stakeholders of an organisation, recognising all of the stakeholder groups that have interest in an organisation by including them in the dialogue (Colleoni, 2013). Furthermore, social media can serve as a medium for

organisations, with which organisations can channel their CSR communication input in a way that can attract stakeholder interest and open the organisation and its CSR for direct stakeholder feedback (Colleoni, 2013). However, direct feedback is not always achievable, and therefore it can be seen justified to study consumers' CSR preference, in order to gain deep insights into this phenomenon.

Due to the importance of ever-increasing dominance of social media as a medium for organisations' CSR communication, it seems that organisations have become less and less powerful online, in relation to their stakeholders (Colleoni, 2013). In other words, organisations can no longer purely dominate the discourse around any topic online. Moreover, the importance of WOM (word-of-mouth) has to be mentioned when talking about corporate CSR communication online on social media. It has been proved, that more and more stakeholders would reject the informative output of organisations and the traditional news media, but would heavily interact with their peers and trust them more (Colleoni, 2013; Kim & Ferguson, 2014). Therefore the importance of external stakeholders for organisations' CSR messages is highlighted, since stakeholders also rely on each other's opinion about organisations' CSR. In this manner they can have an impact on each other's deliberation considering CSR in general. For practitioners, it would thus seem to be of the utmost importance to understand the CSR preference of consumers since they could highlight the most preferable CSR characteristics and possibly achieve more positive WOM and eWOM from their consumers. Understanding the effect of different types of CSR and CSR communication on corporate reputation is thus beneficial. Again, this implies the relevance of the research question.

Even though an organisation would do a lot in order to give a certain image about its CSR, at the end the CSR message can be disseminated and interpreted differently by online users, in a way that the organisation would not want to. This is noteworthy, since stakeholders can also seek information to an increasing degree concerning CSR from their peers online (Colleoni, 2013).

Overall, not least due to the fast paced topic circulation on social media, as a medium it has been recognised to be of great value for the CSR communication of organisations (Colleoni, 2013), since the word about actions of organisations can spread fast and reach many online. Naturally, topic circulation can work in both ways, negative and positive, for organisations. Therefore, it seems relevant again to study consumers' opinion about CSR, since negative feelings and thoughts surrounding company CSR can be harmful to company reputation and thus understanding the CSR-consumer paradigm is important.

## 3. Method

### 3.1 Semi-constructed in-depth interviews

This section explains in detail the chosen method, in-depth interviewing, and its relevance to the study and the research question. In order to answer the research question ‘*What type of CSR matters to consumers of fast fashion industry, and how should fast fashion companies communicate about their CSR via social media and other channels?*’, the best choice for this study was decidedly in-depth interviewing. Given the nature of the research question, the need to understand deep meaning and the factor that one would need a lot of different, varying verbal input from the consumers, in other words the respondents, in-depth interviews proved to be a logical choice since they can offer in-depth knowledge into a phenomenon with quite few boundaries (Legard et al., 2003).

Semi structured in-depth interviews as a methodological choice can be approached from different perspectives and traditions. However, there are numerous characters of in-depth interviewing that remain uniform on a large scale. A common and logical scientific acknowledgement is that interviews consist of successful cooperation between the researcher and the interviewee (Legard et al., 2003; Mikecz, 2012).

Interviewing can be seen justified since CSR might not be the first feature in the minds of consumers, and it can take some time for the participants to ponder the phenomenon as a whole. Therefore, a skilled researcher can ask questions and guide the interviews thematically, so that the participant reveals information that she or he has not thought of outside of the interview setting. Via interviewing, a researcher can possibly dig deeply into the phenomenon of CSR and truly make sense of the topic and thus gain deeper understanding than via for instance a questionnaire. Therefore, due to the nature of the research question, it also seemed further justifiable to deploy in-depth interviewing as a method. This can be further argued, since in order to understand the depth of the phenomenon, the researcher needs to have an idea of the very concrete beliefs of the participants in the context of importance of CSR for the fast fashion industry. In order to achieve this, the respondents ought to feel comfortable enough in the presence the researcher. Naturally, it is clear that this method requires certain amount of cooperation and willingness on both sides. This again highlights the importance of a skilled researcher, as defined by Legard et al. (2003), the

researcher needs to have emotional intelligence, well-defined questions and the ability to understand when to probe in a certain direction. In regards to the research question, the researcher can find meaning for the things expressed by probing, and in this study, probing questions and schemes were equally carefully thought of.

Additionally, due to the nature of the research question and the researched phenomenon, a mere survey questionnaire would have not possibly resulted in data as nuanced as what can be achieved with interviews. One reason for this is probing; whenever the discussion during the interview was going to an interesting area, the researcher could probe the participant with supplementary, precise question(s), and therefore gain more valuable in-depth information that could otherwise be hidden (Mikecz, 2012). Furthermore, due to the nature of the research question, many things that are linked to values and maybe even fundamental beliefs were researched. A survey might not have provided the aforementioned opportunities, since normally survey questions are pre-fixed and the researcher does not have any influence over the process of data collection, once a survey has been distributed.

### **3.2 Sampling – Purposive and snowball sampling**

For this study the sample size was set at a number of 12 participants. Ten out of twelve of the participants had obtained a higher education degree. The age range of the sample varied between 22 years of age till 27 years of age, meaning that the representativeness of the sample is not the best possible in this matter. However, young professionals seem to be a continuous source of money for fast fashion brands, in increasing amounts (Birtwistle & Moore, 2007), more than older generations. Therefore, a relatively young sample can be seen to represent the *customer-CSR-paradigm*, due to the fact that they would represent one of the most important customer groups of the industry. The sample consisted of 10 females and only 2 males; a limitation within this research. However, females were significantly more eager to respond to interview demands and seemed in general more interested in the topic of CSR within the fast fashion industry.

In order to achieve higher level of trust between the interviewee and the researcher, the anonymity of the interviews was guaranteed to the participants. Furthermore, the interviewees were asked to give their consent for the interview, indicating that they are fully aware of the nature of the interview and that they are willing to participate in it. Based on the guidelines of

the research, the participants could contact the researcher for a certain time after the interview and demand that the data collected will be destroyed, if they wished so. Since the participants should represent the population as much as possible (population for this study being the consumers of the chosen fast fashion brands), only people who consume fast fashion were selected to be part of the sample.

However, the sampling method can be classified as *purposive sampling*. With this sampling method, one can gain valuable and deep knowledge into a phenomenon with a relatively small sample (Guarte & Barrios, 2006), and the number of the interviewees being only 12 this seemed to be rational choice. In order to have interesting results, the optimal sample ought to include people from both genders, people with different societal status and furthermore, people from different age groups. However, this was not fully achieved for this particular study and this fact will be acknowledged later on in the limitations and suggestions for further research.

The sample consisted of people residing in the Netherlands. However, the participants were not merely Dutch people living in the Netherlands, but included also other nationalities. Finally, the sample consisted of three (3) Dutch persons, two (2) French, one Danish, one Norwegian, two Bulgarians (2), one Romanian and one Austrian.

As known, Netherlands is a highly globalised country that attracts many people from all hemispheres (Rath, 2009). Therefore, this type of sample was equitable considering that companies that represent the fast fashion industry are mostly global companies and thus have global clientele. A sample that consists of more than one nationality also provided the researcher with more nuanced data, and thus the implications of the research can possibly be applied to a broader level.

### **3.3 Operationalisation**

In order to understand the importance of different kind of CSR in the opinion of the participants, a few questions regarding the sense making of CSR were included in the interview. By this meaning that general questions about CSR, the feeling about CSR and other aspects of CSR were included in the interview. Since the study aims to determine what

kind of CSR in the fast fashion industry is the most important for consumers, it was justified to operationalise different kind of CSR- initiatives into interview questions. Furthermore, some questions were constructed around existing fast fashion CSR- activities and well known real life examples. Since it is relevant in the context of the research question to understand CSR communication, interviewees were furthermore asked how they knew about the CSR of a respective company and if they felt that something was left too superficial in the communication, or if something should be highlighted. Further justification and aid for constructing the questions in a systematic way was found by looking into theory and into the literature review.

The practical implications that were successfully extracted from the data during this study are mostly based on CSR- communication based questions that are intertwined with questions regarding legitimacy, trust and other psychological phenomena. It proved to be useful to include the operationalisation of corporate communications and CSR- communication related information and theories in interview questions since these resulted in answers that helped to construct practical implications for the industry.

### **3.3.1 Measure: Interview guide**

Most of the companies representing the fast fashion possess similar characters in terms of CSR, so there is some overlap. Furthermore, they all have certain similar strategies integrated within them. Thus the interviews had some overlap with each other that had a positive impact on the unity of this study. In order to guarantee a clear structure of the interview, an interview guide was utilized, a sheet containing all the themes and questions of the interview. However, as mentioned before, in the beginning of the interview, the researcher went through the main concepts included in the topic, and made clear what was meant with different concepts and abbreviations. For example it was made known to the participants that *corporate social responsibility* was always referred to as CSR, in its abbreviated form, in order to keep the interviews more coherent and less time-consuming. The interview guide worked as a reminder for the researcher and was looked upon when the flow of discussion was interrupted (this happened for example when drinks were brought to the table in cafés). In order to keep the interview as open and investigating as possible, and due to the vast scope of the interview (aiming to understand the feelings of consumers towards the whole industry), instead of a fact sheet real examples of companies and situations to participants were provided, when needed.

Real life examples proved to be useful occasionally, since they clarified some aspect of the interview. This in return assured richer insights into the researched phenomena.

Table 3.1 illustrates the flow of questioning and the thematic parts of the interview. The table includes information about the purpose of questioning and additionally examples of questions, that however were not completely as fixed during the interview. Nevertheless, the same structure and the same themes were always included to ensure the integrity of data and results. Table 3.1 works merely as an illustration of the interview and many more questions were asked and vivid conversations took place during the interviews, for which the transcripts can be checked for more detailed descriptions.

The interviews commenced with general questions concerning the topic, and the natural flow of questions lead the researcher to the actual domain that was the aim of this research. Initial questions included such as asking about the *familiarity* of the interviewee with their preferred companies, *consuming patterns*, what constitutes the *preference* or *willingness to buy* the brand, what did the participants *think* on a general level when purchasing from the brand and furthermore, how did the participants *perceive* CSR on a general level and within the industry.

However, since it is quite clear that the participants were familiar with the companies, more focus were put on asking about how and why they became familiar with the brand and what did they think of the brands and them being “green”. From these questions the researcher was able to probe the discussion further and ask about specific questions concerning familiarity, namely if the industry’s CSR was of any importance for the reason that the participants became familiar with any fast fashion brand. Subsequently, from these general questions the interview flowed onwards and more precise questions were asked in order to provide answers for the research question. The length of the interviews was approximately 35 to 50 minutes per interview, depending on the participant. Differences were experienced due to the fact that some participants were very passionate about certain themes as when others had less to share with the researcher. Additionally, some participants took more time for thinking, as when others had a clear discourse in their head about certain topics and this resulted in some very fast paced interviews.

What should be mentioned as well, is that during the operationalisation process, the researcher tested the interview with another person. This was done in order to verify that the questions would flow naturally and that the interview was planned with sufficient detail.

During the test interview the discussion took around 49 minutes, which was an acceptable time and therefore the research proceeded to the actual data collection.

Theme	Questions	Purpose
<p><b>CSR classifications</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• type</li> <li>• scale</li> <li>• understanding of CSR</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>On a general level, what do you think should be emphasized in the CSR of fast fashion companies and why ?</i></li> <li>• <i>In your opinion, are there any particular characters within the industry that emphasize the need to execute CSR ?</i></li> <li>• <i>Do you think the (concerned) fast fashion companies should concentrate more on social issues or environmental issues in their CSR ? Can you say why ?</i></li> </ul>	<p>Understanding consumers : what do they regard as the most important in the context of CSR in the fast fashion industry ? What are the patterns that guide consumer thinking about the importance of CSR within the industry ?</p>
<p><b>CSR communication</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• channel (corporate websites, social media etc.)</li> <li>• message</li> <li>• frequency</li> <li>• dialogue vs monologue</li> <li>• social media</li> <li>• WOM</li> <li>• sender</li> <li>• company websites etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>How do you normally see/hear about CSR information ?</i></li> <li>• <i>Do you prefer direct messaging or do you prefer to find out the information yourself, for example from company websites ?</i></li> <li>• <i>What do you think about fast fashion companies' usage of social media in CSR communication ?</i></li> <li>• <i>How do you perceive CSR information told by your friends or other consumers online, e.g. on social media ?</i></li> <li>• <i>Is there anything particular aspects in the CSR that should be highlighted in their communication ? Why ?</i></li> <li>• <i>Would you prefer to get company CSR updates on a weekly or monthly basis or can you think of another better frequency ?</i></li> <li>• <i>What do you think about engaging in the companies' CSR communication, for example about possibilities to comment and pose your own ideas online ?</i></li> </ul>	<p>Understanding of the preferred mediums for CSR communication, the effectiveness of different CSR communication mediums and credibility of CSR communication mediums. Drawing conclusions on what should be highlighted in fast fashion CSR communication and what mediums should be used in order to be more legitimate/approachable/trustworthy. Providing material for managerial implications for the industry</p>

**Table 3.1.** An illustration of the interview guide.



### 3.4 Data collection

The data collection proved to be challenging in terms of the time frame of this study. However, the data collection was conducted during one and a half month, starting from the April 4<sup>th</sup> till the 12<sup>th</sup> of May 2016. Participants were initially contacted via social media channels, namely Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. Despite multiple messages and requests were sent, merely a few contacted people responded in a positive matter. Therefore referrals had to be made, meaning that the participants who answered to my requests via social media platforms referred me to other people they knew. All of the interviews were conducted by the researcher either via Skype connection or vis-à-vis at personal meetings. Most of the interviews however took place in Rotterdam and were therefore conducted in a relaxed setting in various places such as cafés and private apartments. Following common sense and the suggestions of Legard et al. (2003), the environments in which the interviews were held were calm and quiet and as comfortable as possible for the participants. The aforementioned conditions were reassured in order to reduce the amount of distraction during the data collection, in order to achieve more reliable results. Merely two (2) out of twelve (12) interviews were conducted via Skype and the rest took place in face-to-face meetings.

Fortunately, no major complications were experienced during the data collection. The data that was collected was in the form of verbal output, and since it is of the utmost importance that the data does not change its form, it was recorded (Legard et al., 2003). The memory of an iPhone was sufficient enough to record the interviews and more advanced devices were not needed in the process. The interview questions being semi-structured, the researcher had the occasion and possibility to probe more according to the varying knowledge of each participant. The same general questions worked for every participant, but some drastic differences were also acknowledged, differences that stemmed from the aforementioned varying knowledge of participants. Therefore a structure that was not too strict worked well. However, despite the flexibility, main points and main situations were always covered during an individual interview.

The language for the interviews was English and all of the participants possessed a very advanced level of English, if not close to a native level. Therefore the fact that none of the participants were English natives did not restrict the participants in their answers, if sometimes only slightly. Despite all but two interviews, another foreign language had to be talked for few brief moments. This was the case with the two French participants that

struggled on a few occasions to find equivalent words in English. Common meaning was however easily found since the researcher masters French and could help the French participants to put things in the proper verbal form.

Finally, the transcribing was done in groups of two or three interviews at a time per day, because the researcher preferred to use completely days on working on the transcribing rather than a few hours per day. The transcribing was done with a MacBook Air 2011 laptop model and with the aid of Apple iTunes program.

### **3.5. Analysis**

After and during the transcribing process, the interviews were analysed with qualitative coding processes following the framework set up by Boieije (2010). This study thus applied the grounded theory method to analyze the data.

The transcripts were re-read and re-read in order to understand the phenomenon that was in the centre of this research. The phenomenon that needed to be understood in order to answer the research question was the consumer perspective on the importance, nature and communication of CSR within the fast fashion industry. The process initially started with open coding, during which everything was went through with all the possible details. At this point of the data analysis, it was not clear yet what aspect and particles would end up being the most important ones. Consequently, questions about the data were posed, as suggested by Boieje (2010) and this lead to gradual understanding of the meaning of the data. General, relatively vast categories, in other words, open codes were created during this first initial analysis.

The open coding required the researcher to get very accustomed with the data, and in order to achieve this the transcripts were scanned through multiple times each. Overall in total the transcripts contained 194 pages of textual data, with a space lining of 1,5 and font style Arial with a font size 12. During this open coding process, main themes were recognized as a result of analysis in the data, and this helped the researcher to organise the data in a more efficient manner. As suggested by Boieje (2010), the codes were constructed of segments of text that can imply meaning, and therefore coding merely single rows of text or simplistic expressions were avoided. This coding process required sometimes quite an amount of creativity since the fragments of the data could have been interpreted to represent more than one code. Therefore, further justification for the selection of codes has to be provided. The data had to be scanned through with precaution since already existing critique (Antaki et al.,

2002) on qualitative analysis methods such as coding might undermine the credibility of results. Consequently, systematic approach and reaffirming the content of the data and codes was necessary in order to avoid analysing with too broad a scope and thus letting “everything pass” through the analysis (Antaki et al., 2002).

The first initial part of open coding commenced after three interviews were conducted. The data was scanned through from A to Z and highlighted different factors in the data with different colours. The approach to data at this point was purely thematic, since the findings were grouped according to different themes. The themes that were recognized during the analysis were numerous, although the final emerging themes were grouped into six thematic categories that were found the most suitable. The thematic categories that were defined as the result of open coding can be read from Table 3.5.1. In the axial coding process that followed, all of the open codes were moved into categories that were interconnected with all the individual codes and particles of data. Table 3.5.2. illustrates this process and additionally the selective coding process. Table 3.5.1 is a simplistic representation of the open coding process that took place. It illustrates the labelling of the data, the characteristics (meaning of the data) and some examples of participants’ words.

<b>OPEN CODES (labelling the data)</b>	<b>CHARACTERISTICS (meaning)</b>	<b>EXAMPLES OF PARTICIPANTS’ WORDS</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Different definitions and understanding of CSR in the fast fashion industry</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Doubting the industry and the authenticity of its CSR</li> <li>• Seeking justification</li> <li>• Defining the need for CSR</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Making big profits means that you’re taking, you’re doing something wrong”</li> <li>• “ There’s this sort of responsibility when you do that because you can’t make clothes as cheap as possible if it goes against other things”</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Associating CSR to good-doing for society</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wanting companies to give back good things to society</li> <li>• Need to see companies making themselves better</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “It should be about how they can make themselves better companies and better for the world.”</li> <li>• “Should focus more on what they can do to compensate for the bad things that they do for society. ”</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thinking about CSR as communicative and marketing strategies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indicating preference for CSR-communication</li> <li>• Categorizing CSR-communication</li> <li>• Comparing CSR- communication &amp; marketing material</li> <li>• Defining trust towards brands</li> <li>• Indicating preference for CSR</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “And yeah they use it to kind of promote their business, look we’re doing this and that, when actually they’re not actually doing this. What they’re stating”</li> <li>• “Social media. It is always the best to way to expose a young person like me”</li> <li>• Definitely word of mouth. I won’t trust a brand just like that.</li> </ul>

	communication frequency	<p><i>Because they can twist things in so many ways"</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>" If they are really doing CSR they should communicate it very often. But.. If it's just a small portion of their business like the Conscious collection, maybe they shouldn't because if they over communicate about something that is actually small.. Then it's lying. A bit."</i></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding CSR as reputation and competitive edge in fast fashion business</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Categorizing CSR as a means for fast fashion brands to improve their image</li> <li>• Comparing fast fashion brands and their reputation via their CSR</li> <li>• Describing the business as opportunistic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"I would say Zara is doing better because for me personally they have better reputation because of their quality and presence"</i></li> <li>• <i>"On the top of competition they should engage in this. If they want to be successful businesses."</i></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Linking CSR to environmental and sustainability issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highlighting the importance of sustainable actions in CSR</li> <li>• Indicating the need to educate customers about sustainability</li> <li>• Wanting to see improvements in supply chain and value chain management techniques</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"It's a big problem because the fashion industry is the second most polluting industry in the world. And I personally consider the environment more important."</i></li> <li>• <i>"I mean obviously it makes sense that they would focus on sustainability"</i></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Associating CSR to obligation to respect human rights and other societal conventions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wanting to see fast fashion companies take responsibility over their actions</li> <li>• Discussing scandals and associating them to mismanagement of CSR</li> <li>• Expressing mistrust towards production methods such as possible child labour, working conditions and animal abuse</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"The environment of the workers in Bangladesh or China. Because, there's so much of it and they sell it for so little.."</i></li> <li>• <i>"Zara the skinning of rabbits thing, so yeah I think that they only start getting really involved in it after scandals."</i></li> <li>• <i>"Follow the rules good enough for people not to go totally crazy on them"</i></li> </ul>

**Table 3.5.1.** An example of the procedure that took place during open coding.

Subsequently, once these categories were created, Microsoft Excel program was used to create a file with all the corresponding colours and names of the codes. After the creation of a table model in Excel, the transcripts that had been previously coloured according to themes were fetched from the transcripts and copy pasted to the Excel- file. Like this, a systematic way of organising the data that was identified during the open coding was used and the integrity of the data was assured.

Consequently, some of these thematic categories that were created during open coding became more dominant in terms of amount of codes and information, than the others. The emphasis of the interviews being on the CSR- communication section (as can be seen from Table 3.4.1, due to the larger amount of examples and characteristics [meanings]), this category was labelled and identified as the one containing the most textual data.

Once open coding of the transcripts was done, the analysis moved on to axial coding. The axial coding process was executed in order to detect patterns and connections between the open codes. During this phase categories were connected and furthermore sub-categories were created for the main categories of the data. When something new was detected in the data, additional codes were created in addition to the ones that were created during open coding process. This step was performed in order to achieve saturation, a point at which new codes would not be needed to cover all of the data. During this process, the transcripts further revealed what were the dominant themes in the data, and this in return helped to define what was truly relevant for the research question.

In selective coding the data was reflected to literature and the research question and relationships between different categories were detected. Each part of the literature review was connected to the existing codes and data and as a result, an overall image of the meaning of the data was achieved. Some theories discussed in the literature review, such as *CSR-Communication* and *Social media and WOM in CSR*, were thematically overlapping to some degree as theories, and thus were combined in Table 3.5.2. As when the literature review discusses seven different theoretical approaches, Table 3.5.2 represents the thematically grouped theories in the brackets of four. Respectfully, the table illustrates the main theoretical acknowledgements (by referring to authors who are mentioned in the literature review). The Table 3.5.2 can be found below and illustrates an example of the overall procedures that were taken during the coding process. Additionally, findings that contradicted the existing literature review will be reflected to other theoretical approaches, in order to ponder their importance in a critical light.

OPEN CODES	AXIAL CODES	SELECTIVE CODES
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Definition of the preferred way of communication</li> <li>• Indication of the preferred kind of CSR</li> </ul>	<p><b>CSR- communication strategies and characteristics</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need to communicate CSR increased (Palazzo &amp; Scherer, 2007 and Moreno &amp;</li> </ul>

<p><b>Thinking about CSR as communicative and marketing strategies</b></p>	<p>communication content</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defining trust towards fast fashion brands via examination of CSR-communication examples</li> </ul>	<p>Capriotti, 2009)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transparency and authenticity (Kim &amp; Ferguson, 2014)</li> <li>• Interactivity, education and frequency (Webb &amp; Mohr, 1998; Schlegelmich &amp; Pollach, 2005; Kim &amp; Ferguson, 2014)</li> <li>• WOM vs brands (Calleoni, 2013 &amp; Kim &amp; Ferguson, 2014)</li> <li>• Third party credibility (and WOM) (Morsing &amp; Schultz, 2006)</li> <li>• Topic circulation on social media (Calleoni, 2013)</li> <li>• Prevalent Web 2.0 culture (O'Reilly, 2007)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Different definitions and understanding of CSR in the fast fashion industry</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Giving meaning to the characteristics that form the CSR in the fast fashion industry</li> <li>• Stating preferred types of CSR within the industry</li> <li>• Explaining relations between different kind of CSR within the industry</li> <li>• Giving meaning to the CSR challenges and issues</li> </ul>	<p><b>CSR classifications and understanding CSR in the industry</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Environmental protection and sustainability (Caniato, Crippa &amp; Moretto, 2012)</li> <li>• Societal good-doing (Van Marrewijk, 2003)</li> <li>• Following the law and rules (Dahlsrud, 2008 and Van Marrewijk, 2003).</li> <li>• CSR something that companies should engage in and try to act ethically, not necessarily linked to their core operations (Nagurney et al., 2013 and Clarke &amp; Clegg, 2000).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Associating CSR to obligation to respect human rights and other societal conventions</b></p>		
<p><b>Linking CSR to environmental and sustainability issues</b></p>		
<p><b>Associating CSR to good-doing for society</b></p>		
<p><b>Note:</b> Open codes that were grouped for this section in order to logically execute axial and selective coding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Associating CSR to obligation to respect human rights and other societal conventions</b></li> <li>+</li> <li>• <b>Associating CSR to good-doing for society</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defining fast fashion brands in relation to societal norms, laws and conventions</li> <li>• Explaining the reasons why the industry conforms or does not conform</li> <li>• Explaining the relationship between consumer behaviour and possible legitimacy issues</li> <li>• Judging the legitimacy of the industry</li> <li>• Defining the effects of conforming on consumer feeling</li> </ul>	<p><b>Isomorphism and means to achieve legitimacy via CSR</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regulatory standards (Deephouse &amp; Carter, 2005)</li> <li>• Perception of (public) legitimacy</li> <li>• Different definitions and categories of legitimacy and conforming (Deephouse &amp; Carter, 2005; DiMaggio &amp; Powell, 1983; Meyer &amp; Rowan, 1977 and Westphal et al., 1997)</li> <li>• CSR as conforming as a means to improve reputation and achieve positive media coverage (Rindova et al., 2006)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Understanding CSR as reputation and competitive</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding the patterns that consumers use in order</li> </ul>	<p><b>Corporate reputation in fast fashion in the context of CSR</b></p>

<b>edge in fast fashion business</b>	to define the reputation and successfulness via CSR <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defining the patterns with which CSR is seen to affect perceptions on quality and corporate image</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality in reputation (Podolny, 1993)</li> <li>• A means for better reputation and image (Fombrun &amp; Shanely, 1990 and Lee &amp; Lii, 2012)</li> <li>• Mass production and mishandling of supply chain, consequences for reputation (Minor &amp; Morgan, 2011).</li> </ul>
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**Table 3.5.2.** An example of the procedures and decisions that were implemented during axial and selective coding.



## 4. Results

The results section illustrates the findings that were driven out of the data as result of analysis. Some of the main themes that will be discussed are the customers' CSR- preference and CSR- understanding within the fast fashion industry. The preference for different kind of CSR varied amongst the participants; some wanted environmental protection and sustainability issues to be highlighted in the CSR of fast fashion brands, as when others clearly had a preference for emphasized employee welfare and improvement of working conditions. Furthermore, the participants had varying understandings of CSR; what it is for the fast fashion industry, what it should be and what it is not in their opinion.

Surprisingly, corporate giving was discussed only to a small extent, and it truly seemed that consumers would associate the need for CSR to environmental and employee- related CSR- efforts. Furthermore, communication preference for CSR- related information within the industry was equally highlighted. A clear preference for a dialogic communication of CSR over monologic communication was expressed. The most preferred mediums were social media platforms and in-store offline communication instead of promotion of CSR in the form of advertising. Concluding the codes resulted in three major themes; transparent CSR- communication, including word-of-mouth and social media, legitimacy, and aspects linked to CSR and its reputation value, and lastly, the associations and images consumers had about CSR in the context of fast fashion companies. The large conceptual umbrella of these three main themes contains many sub-categories that will be discussed in this chapter. The following sub sections of the Results chapter will reason the findings more in relation to the theoretical framework and provide an answer to the research question.

### 4.1 How consumers understand CSR and the need for it within the fast fashion industry?

As commonly acknowledged, CSR can not be defined in one singular way, since scholars as well as stakeholders have various different associations to it (Dahlsrud, 2008). Furthermore, different stakeholders want CSR to be different; NGOs can assume different type of CSR from an organisation than a customer (Jonker & Nijhof, 2006). Based on this



research, this aforementioned fact can be seen as valid since the participants had varying understanding, associations and needs towards the CSR of fast fashion companies.

As just mentioned, the plethora of consumers' CSR preferences is wide in the fast fashion industry. However, during the data analysis and interviews, some themes were clearly identified as the most dominant ones. This being said, the participants had the most to say about environmental and sustainability- related CSR and furthermore, working- and social conditions- related CSR.

What divided the sample in opinion was the importance of these different kinds of CSR- focuses. Furthermore, the data revealed that the preference for CSR within the industry was strongly linked to the understanding and defining of CSR within the industry. This being said, participants who had a deep understanding of CSR within the fast industry, the possible issues within the industry and so on, had the most argued and precise opinions about what kind of CSR the industry ought to engage in. To conclude the data, the conceptual outcome of CSR- preference is interconnected to the conceptual meaning of CSR- classifications and understanding. These two are connected since the outcome for the indication of CSR- preference is to a certain degree dependent on the conceptual and psychological understanding of what CSR is for the consumers of fast fashion industry.

In other words, summarized, the following factors would have an effect on the outcome of their (consumers) preference for CSR: A) *the manner with which consumers understand CSR itself as a concept, and CSR (its form) in the industry*, B) *their amount of knowledge about the industry and its operations* and finally C) *their personal deduction*. Subsequently, varying levels of information and acquaintance in the context of CSR and fast fashion would result in different kind of answers to questions about CSR preference and the need for it and its communication.

A useful remark to continue with, is that most of the participants were the most acquainted with two fast fashion giant retailers, Zara and H&M, and these companies were in the spotlight of discussion when concrete examples and comparisons were made. The acknowledgements that the participants made were implied to apply to the whole industry itself, even though often the participants referred to the industry by mentioning Zara and H&M and talking about the industry as "them". Referrals of this kind were classified during the coding process as *in vivo*- codes, as classified by Boeije (2010). These codes can be seen to represent a meaning that can be derived from the terminology of the participants. In terms of data analysis, it was important to understand the *in vivo*- codes, since each participant was

familiar with a different kind of terminology and was used to speak differently about different phenomena. This, I believe, was a natural way for the participants to talk about the different CSR- phenomena, and using big and familiar enterprises as an example seemed very natural to them.

When discussing CSR in the context of fast fashion industry, it became clear that most participants were aware of the challenges that fast fashion brands can possibly face when trying to execute ethical business. Literally every participant acknowledged, or had an opinion about multiple issues within the industry. As already mentioned, the two themes that got the most attention were sustainability issues and working condition violations. What was intriguing to see, was that the image of the industry and the companies in question, in the minds of the participants, was often based both on actual facts and then again, on vague images, word of mouth and on media storytelling. Additionally, what is worth remarking, is that most of the participants (7 out of 12) partially based their opinions about the efficiency, the relevance and the need of CSR on phenomena or things heard on the media. The influence of media coverage to the perception of CSR amongst the consumers will be discussed in later chapters.

Surprisingly, when the philanthropic activities of the industry were discussed, participants seemed to know quite little. For many, it seemed to be of greater relevance to see fast fashion brands tackling sustainability issues and assuring better conditions for their workers, instead of investing money in local communities or charities. However, in the context of philanthropic activities, a few respondents wished to discuss societal good doing in the form of donations and improvement of the conditions of local communities in the places of production in developing countries.

To conclude, a few (4) participants did wish to see more concrete and positive impact in the global production areas, despite their lack of concrete knowledge about the philanthropic activities of the companies that were discussed. Based on these findings, consumers seem to have incentives to support further CSR- involvement, initiated by companies, but do not necessarily find out everything about the causes they would support themselves. They would however hypothetically appreciate CSR- efforts to a great extent. Nevertheless, differences in which kind of CSR would be wished were great, and therefore the following sections will highlight this fact more in detail.

Clearly dominant themes in the understanding of CSR and the need for it within the industry were sustainability issues, environmental protection, working conditions and the possible CSR- related scandals, that might have been linked to the mass production that is commonly applied by most fast fashion brands (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst 2010). When respondents were classifying the CSR in the industry, they often expressed their feelings of mistrust and even disappointment towards the industry. Often, ideas with very negative connotations such as *green marketing* were expressed. Thus, to conclude, findings showed that often consumers would associate fast fashion companies and CSR to negative things more than to positive things. At least this could be said to be their initial reaction when opening the discussions.

A good example from the underlying thoughts of participants concerning the so-called *green marketing* or *greenwashing* will be provided underneath. Commonly what is meant by *green marketing* or *greenwashing* are the company practices that include the utilisation of sustainability themes, “green products” and ideas in order to do marketing and promote products in a misleading manner (Ramus & Montiel, 2005). In other words, green marketing and greenwashing can take place when a company is trying to frame its business in a more eco-friendly setting, even though this would not be the case (Ramus & Montiel, 2005). One of the participants expressed her self on the previous matter in the following way:

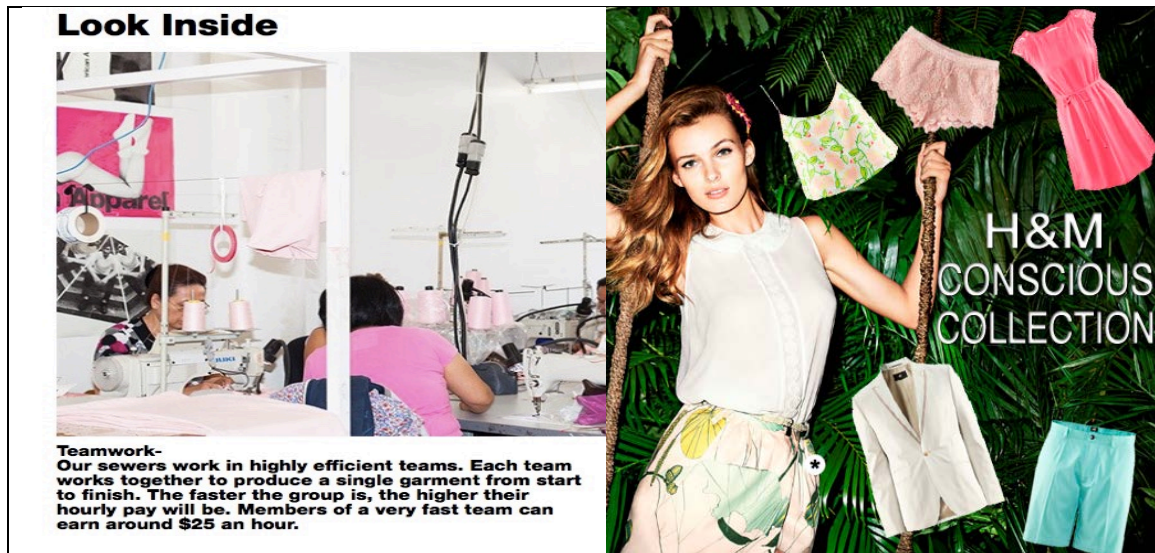
*“And yeah they use it kind of to promote their business like: ‘Look, we are doing this and that’, when actually they are not doing this. What they are stating”*. PP.1 p.13.

Another very exemplifying comment made by a participant was a comparison made with an illustration of two different companies. A participant used one of the numerous sustainability campaigns of H&M as an example and compared the promotion of CSR and its relevance to that of American Apparel, another street fashion brand that was established in Los Angeles, The United States and operates uniquely there. The participant illustrated the paradox, lack of credibility and the nuance of green marketing done in her opinion by H&M in the following way:

*“With H&M, when they communicate about that (their CSR).. They show models in the middle of the jungle. While American Apparel, they post actual pictures of their workers in their L.A factory, so they have like real proof. When H&M is.. We don’t really have the proof.. So..”* PP 7 p. 103.

Image 4.1 further illustrates the point made by participant 7, the disbelief in the communicative method for CSR of H&M. The perception of participant 7 is based on the CSR communicative style of H&M in comparison to that of American Apparel. However, the CSR- phenomena are different; H&M is communicating about its “Conscious Collection” that uses only renewable materials, disseminating a sustainability CSR- message with a model surrounded by green palm leaves behind her – a referral to “*models in the middle of a jungle*”, as defined by participant 7. In comparison, CSR- communication material from American Apparel, that had caught the attention of participant 7, illustrates the fair working conditions that they have in their factory, by showing real workers in a realistic setting without redefined or photoshopped backgrounds.

For participant 7 and for four more participants this seems to illustrate a credibility problem that stems from the lack of relevance and authenticity in the CSR- communication of H&M. H&M, that as a company was often, maybe even misleadingly, be thought to represent the whole fast fashion industry in its practices. Despite the fact that the CSR- phenomena are different, and American Apparel is harder to classify as fast fashion than H&M, this example is relevant to illustrate the existing paradigm of trust issues towards fast fashion brands and their CSR- communication. The findings of this research clearly suggested that these trust issues are prevalent amongst the consumers of the industry. For when it comes to CSR- communication of the industry, it became clear via coding, that for participants it would be hard to completely detach CSR- communication out of the definition of CSR within the fast fashion industry. Therefore, CSR- communication efforts, or the lack of them, would very often be associated with the actual CSR- policies and practices and used to a certain degree as a means to evaluate the whole CSR- plethora of a company. The Chapter 4.3 will discuss the actual CSR- communication in a more detailed manner.



**Image 4.1. Illustration of an example provided by participant 7 about credible and incredible CSR communication in the fast fashion (and fashion brands in general). The picture on the left is material from American Apparel and the one on the right from H&M.**

Furthermore, what was intertwined to some degree during the discussions, was the actual need and hope for certain types of CSR and the very understanding of the nature of the CSR, what it is in the opinion of consumers of the industry. In order to distinguish the ideas of the participants on the real needs and incentives for CSR within the industry, and the pure classifications and understanding of the CSR within the industry, the next sub chapter attempts to reason this existing paradigm, as suggested by this research.

#### **4.2. What characteristics of the industry call for the need to execute CSR ?**

Not surprisingly, consumers who took part in this research, did not have plenty of concrete knowledge about business turnouts, about workers, nor about policies of the industry, neither detailed information about the internal decisions of companies operating in the niche of fast fashion. However, all of the participants had a certain amount of knowledge on what are the characteristics, in their opinion, that demand the need for CSR within the fast fashion industry. The results of this research show a varying scope of ideas, suggestions and opinions on what are truly the important reasons why fast fashion companies ought to practice

CSR. Often, when discussing the phenomenon, the demand for CSR was expressed as the need to operate in an *ethical way* as a business.

Consequently, when the researcher asked for the need to execute CSR within the industry, participants would refer to the fact that all big businesses need to engage in CSR nowadays. One could conclude that in the minds of consumers, the need to execute CSR does not uniquely stem from the characteristics of the industry but simultaneously from a certain responsibility that is due to a large firm size. To provide example, for example the annual turnouts of H&M and Zara in 2015 are both in billions of USD (Inditex, 2016 and H&M, 2016). The results revealed a certain tendency that is directly linked to big corporations; consumers might automatically assume that big corporations have done something wrong, have acted against the norms and conventions of society, because they are doing well in financial terms. This existing dilemma is discussed in the Legitimacy chapter.

Another paradigm that was revealed during the analysis, and one that was briefly mentioned before, was connected to the big firm size of fast fashion corporations and furthermore to a trend-like obligation to execute CSR. Bigger companies would attract more attention towards possible CSR- issues. The previous argument finds theoretical reasoning from studies such as that of (Jenkins, 2006). Therefore, in the context of huge fast fashion corporations, detailed knowledge about the operations, issues or policies of a company might not necessarily be needed in order to convince a customer to think that the companies need to engage in CSR. Additionally, the CSR- efforts of the companies in question were on multiple occasions during the interviews recognized as something “*not directly linked to their operations or businesses*” PP.1 p. 3.

In order to make the distinction between the so-called CSR- understanding of participants, the *CSR- classifications* and the needs to execute CSR, it is justified to make a sharper distinction in fields of CSR that were preferred by the participants. The flow of the interviews resulted in situations in which most of the participants expressed their preference for certain kind of CSR, and the largest categories were the following, as mentioned previously, a) *sustainability issues* and b) *social issues and working conditions*. The fact that these issues were considered important and as reasons for fast fashion companies to engage in CSR and improve things, implied that even without concrete detailed knowledge, the participants were aware of issues and points that need improvement in their opinion. Additionally, rumours and knowledge about scandals that the industry has faced in terms of

production, working conditions and sustainability, were often used as examples when the participants justified their opinion about CSR in the fast fashion industry; the needs for it, the lack of it and the mistrust towards the industry.

Naturally, as also reflected in the literature review, (Minor & Morgan, 2011) the possible scandals and mishandling of CSR can lead to worsened perceptions about corporate reputation. This is a tendency that was also detected from the data; many participants (8 out of 12) associate scandals and violations of ethical business practices as something that decreases the value of the reputation of a company. In comparison to this, CSR was also commonly acknowledged by many participants to be part of the image construction strategies of fast fashion companies, in order to improve and maintain one's reputation. This is not to say that the participants would have always agreed that any CSR- strategies would necessarily improve corporate reputation. However, every participant had understood that CSR was undoubtedly one part of the reputation management strategies of fast fashion companies. This finding is strongly connected to the scientific evidence of Fombrun and Shanely (1990) and Lee & Lii (2012) that have linked CSR directly to reputation, its maintenance and improvement. A failure in managing CSR- related issues might lead to a company becoming *déclassé* in the societal hierarchy of companies. The following paraphrase can be used as an example to illustrate the feeling of the participants towards the CSR- mismanagement (in their opinion) that decreases the reputation:

*“Well it’s not like they don’t know it. So they should not monitor it. They’re just letting it happen and probably..If you take your factories in India you probably believe they are.. So I believe that they already know what is happening..”* PP. 2 p. p. 20.

#### **4.3. The perceptions of consumers on CSR communication**

Corporate communication has its own challenges when it comes to communicating CSR. Consumers are proven to be less aware of the CSR of companies than one might assume (Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009). Research and opinion polls have proven that consumers of any industry, not just the fashion industry, would like to hear more, get more acquainted and learn more from CSR- practices of companies, to a growing degree (Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009 and Auger et al., 2003). However, a paradox could be seen to exist, since consumers still

would wish to do very little amount of effort in order to find out about CSR and equally, would want to spend only little amount of time, if any, to read about the CSR of companies (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010 and Moreno & Capriotti 2009). Naturally, this can be a challenging situation for marketing communications and public relations professionals, who not uniquely need to find the best method to communicate their CSR- messages, but furthermore, do it in an efficient way that catches the attention of consumers. Not to least mention the fact that consumers might have trust issues towards a company and furthermore, might brutally judge the authenticity of CSR- messages (Walter, 2014). However, without CSR- communication there might not be an adequate amount of CSR- awareness amongst consumers, awareness that they would nevertheless want to have. On the other hand, if promoting CSR and communicating about CSR is in some cases seen as far from authentic and truthful, how to solve this paradox? The further sections dig into this issue.

We already know that consumers want to see and understand the real reason and motives for companies to engage in CSR (Kim & Ferguson, 2014). Knowing one's real motives and reasoning behind any type of company policies can be seen to represent the need for transparency. All of the participants discussed transparency in the context of fast fashion brands and their communication; they wanted to see more evidence and more transparency in their CSR- communication. Often, participants used their own vocabulary that implied transparency. This was understood when the *in vivo*- codes were examined.

The question of transparency was further linked to the phenomena of authenticity and relevance. Participants struggled separating the concept of transparency from relevant and authentic CSR- communication. Therefore, based on the results of this research, this study proposes to knit those three concepts together under the conceptual umbrella of transparency, since for consumers it seems to be the case that true transparency also means authentic and relevant CSR- communication and information.

Furthermore, the lack of transparency in CSR- communication might also contribute to the existing lack of knowledge about companies' CSR, which in turn might deepen the mistrust towards fast fashion companies. Subsequently, another factor that was connected during the data analysis to the previous phenomena, lack of transparency in CSR- communication, trust issues towards the companies and the need for authenticity in CSR- communication was the education and reminding of consumers about CSR and the issues of the industry in this context. For more than half of the participants (7 out of 12) some of the



issues of the industry remain unclear up till today and further knowledge via more detailed CSR- communication could be desired in order to improve one's own consuming patterns.

However, what was discussed on multiple occasions, was the very nature of the business model of fast fashion industry; fast fashion brands rely on mass production and their whole business mechanism is dependant on outsourcing of labour, sometimes cheap materials and workers with minimum wages. Therefore, as observed by some participants, (4 out of 12) the fact that even though further transparency and discussion on the issues of the industry and mass production itself could be needed, it might not always be possible since this kind of communication might jeopardize the whole business model and structure of a company.

As previously discussed, the sample of this research consisted of highly educated people, people who possess a fair amount of critical thinking and are aware of global issues. Participants 3, 5 and 7 expressed their ideas on companies educating with CSR- communication, not necessarily themselves, but consumers with lower level of education and awareness, and customers with less knowledge about the possible issues of consuming irresponsibly, for example in the domains of waste and recycling. These participants acknowledged the great potential of huge fast fashion companies in terms of well-executed CSR- communication that might shape consuming patterns towards a more sustainable and ethical direction. Furthermore, another observation made during the interviews was that consumers would enjoy knowing more about the production itself, and this knowledge in the form of CSR- communication might bring the customer closer to the company and the products itself. In other words, make the mass production clothing business feel more personal. A few exemplifying paraphrases will be provided here in order to illustrate this mentality, expressed by the participants:

*"I would love to see companies making customers more aware and make more sense of problems and why H&M is a good company to choose. Because H&M is already so good with that so why not somehow make themselves even better by explaining stuff to consumers who may not know about these issues?" PP. 3 p.45.*

Another paraphrase that well exemplifies the interest to understand the production better and know more about the CSR- related information, and even issues in the production (and in the whole industry):

*“Like ‘this is a business industry, and this is how it works and this is the least that we can do’. I would like that.” PP 2. p. 30.*

Additional factors that might logically affect the transparency of fast fashion companies and their transparency and CSR- communication are their size, the amount of commercial turnout and their global nature; in other words, they are huge corporations with massive production cycles and value chains. As previously discussed, these all are factors that contribute to the need of engaging in CSR, (Doyle et al., 2006 and Zhao et al., 2014) since such massive business entities cannot run without surveillance of ethics.

Another factor that the participants highlighted when discussing the CSR- communication of fast fashion brands, was the frequency of communication and its meaning for the credibility of CSR- communication. The frequency of CSR- communication proved to be a complex issue itself, since some of the participants believed, that communication with too high a frequency (in their opinion) could uniquely be seen as something fake, promotion, green marketing and highlighting obvious things that they thought companies should do without “bragging” about them. Often, *grandieuse* CSR- campaigns were referred to as this kind of “boasting”, and as Schmitt & Rottger (2011) have argued, CSR campaigns can be regarded as too high a corporate self-confidence and thus jeopardize credibility.

The following paraphrase from the transcripts illustrates the feelings of participants on this matter:

*“Well, the thing is that if you're actually doing a good job you don't have to tell the people that.” PP 10 p. 142.*

We know however, that frequent communication with consumers and other stakeholders can increase trust and positive feelings towards a brand (Palazzo & Scherer, 2007 and Moreno & Capriotti, 2009) and that big corporations, not least fast fashion brands that have gone global, need to communicate their CSR to their audiences (Moreno & Capriotti, 2009).

Consequently, it is intriguing to compare the results concerning the CSR- communication frequency, since based on the answers given, CSR- communication frequency is linked to transparency in CSR- communication, to concrete evidence in CSR- communication and finally, to relevance in CSR- communication. This observation is purely based on the data;

the participants would want to hear from CSR- related information more often, if it matched to their standards of relevance and transparency. What is meant by relevance here is the nature of the CSR- communication and its content; consumers expressed their preference for CSR- communication that clearly presents evidence and concrete results on actions taken in the field of CSR. This being said five participants expressed their mistrust in CSR- communication that would uniquely communicate future goals and summarize CSR- policies – consumers wanted to see clear results and evidence presented at them. For 8 out of 12 participants, if this goal would not be achieved, the belief in the authenticity and trustworthiness of the CSR- communication would radically diminish. This would consequently mean, that the customer would want to see CSR- communication less often, if it was valued as something “irrelevant”. An idea that well exemplifies this paradigm is from participant 7 and goes as follows:

*“If they are really doing CSR they should communicate it very often. But.. If it’s just a small portion of their business like the Consciouss Collection, maybe they shouldn’t, because if they over-communicate about something that is actually small.. Then it’s lying a bit.”* PP. 7, p. 102.

The above example also points to the direction of previous section and Image 4.1, which implicitly implied that CSR- communicative methods ought to contain relevant material in relation to the actual CSR- phenomenon. Additionally, a factor that was equally questioned by another participant was the framing of CSR in the communication. Participant 9 agreed with participant 7 on the scope of the actual CSR and what can be said about it in public. Overall, multiple participants shared the view that if the CSR was something small, just a *little piece of production or business*, it should not be labelled as groundbreaking CSR nor promoted as such to the public. What participants wanted to see, was clear evidence on CSR actions that took place in the whole production cycle and the whole business; this kind of CSR and its communication would actually support a brand and make its word more trustworthy in the eyes of consumers. The following paraphrase from participant 8 is to illustrate this perspective:

*“It has to got to do with the fact, I mean.. I don’t know a lot about the politics but.. Since like when H&M has this kind of stuff that is going on like 10% of the collections are ecological. You know? So the fact that they just don’t*

*generalize it and you still buy like some really cheap stuff.. Yeah it makes it less.. Believable.” PP. 9 p. 134-135.*

#### **4.4. Preferred mediums for CSR communication in fast fashion**

In 2016 the reachability of online communication is extensive, and especially young people in developed countries are reached well via online communication. This can be the case especially if one refers to young people. This is true to a certain degree, but however findings of this research propose some interesting conclusions on CSR online and offline communication in the context of fast fashion industry, that might be contradicting some theoretical aspects.

Even though the utility and reachability of social media was acknowledged to be very beneficial and potential for fast fashion brands, as also affirmed for example by suggestions of Calleoni (2013), it would seem that social media also nurtures a hostile environment for the industry's CSR. When the data was interpreted, it became obvious that negative things in the context of CSR, such as company failings and questionable working conditions and other scandals, would often circulate in social media as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). This finding supports the theory of Calleoni (2013) that topics circulate vast and wide on social media, and thus naturally provide companies with huge opportunities as well as impose challenges on them.

Participants, that were not very aware of the industry's CSR developments nor challenges had often heard via social media channels superficial negative rumours about scandals and issues that furthermore had resulted in word-of-mouth actions to friends and other people in their social circles. However, all of the participants that had experienced negative CSR-related information about fast fashion brands on social media, had stumbled upon such information indirectly, and had not participated in active discussion concerning these negative aspects. The findings in the context of social media and electronic word-of-mouth (WOM) will be further discussed in this chapter when the relationship between brand diffused CSR-communication and WOM is given more attention to.

Despite the current media and Internet environment and the prevalence of Web 2.0 communication methods (O'Reilly, 2007), a quite traditional, offline communication method was one of the preferred mediums suggested by most of the participants. Therefore, counting only on online CSR- communication seems to be a grand mistake. By this type of

communication the majority of participants referred to in-store communication, such as stands and screens and even personnel that would educate the consumer about current CSR-initiatives, progress in the context of ethical business and provide information about the products itself as well as of the production cycle. This does not mean that online, especially social media communication in the context of CSR would be regarded as something useless, the opposite. However, it was surprising to realize during the interviews, that actually the willingness of consumers to see more intensified CSR- information in shops was great. The offline CSR- communication aspect emerged during the interviews and coding, in the initial and theoretic planning phase of the research its potential or importance was not still recognized to this extent.

A common reasoning for this offline CSR-communication solution, that was provided by the participants, followed the logic, that once a consumer makes a choice to go into a shop, she or he is already there and is not subject to company advertising or communication that one does not want to see necessarily at the given moment. Therefore one is already in an intrigued and open mindset and therefore more open to CSR- information and maybe even more influenced by it. Innovatively, one participant even suggested a creative way to approach CSR- communication, namely in terms of educating the consumer, providing more information and doing all this in a way that would require very little effort from the side of the consumer. The participant number 1 expressed her preference in the following manner:

*“Like I said, I’d prefer to go to stores rather than checking social media for clothes and other stuff. For example in stores they can have like either screen or some sort of.. How do you call this sort of experimental marketing?.. To show customers what they’re doing in relation to CSR or they just have people in stores that kind of are there just to answer and communicate the CSR messages in a way.” PP 1. p. 15.*

Accordingly, this perception was shared in opinion by all of the participants. Furthermore, suggestions to include screens with videos showing visual descriptive information about the current CSR- efforts were mutually heard. Additionally, another simplistic way to communicate CSR in a more transparent way would be to include more detailed tags in clothes, that would properly indicate where and how and from what materials the garments have been produced.

When it comes to interactivity and consumer engagement in the context of CSR-information, most participants acknowledged the potential of social media. In the context of this study it was seen justified to devote time for investigating the feelings of the consumers in relation to CSR- communication on social media by fast fashion brands, not least due to the characteristics of the sample. A fact concerning the sample, that can lessen the generalibility of the results, is the age and education range of the participants. Due to a sample that was relatively educated, it turned out to be the case that all of the participants would be very familiar with usually more than one social media platform, and would be very active users of social media. Subsequently, as suggested by Selwyn (2009), one could argue that companies make a lot of effort in general to catch the attention of fairly young customers on social media. Therefore it was interesting and seemed justified to research the relation of social media CSR- messages in this context of young and educated consumers, consumers who would be very efficient social media users.

During the data analysis, the themes that were detected in the transcripts revealed that the main prerequisites to increased interactivity, engagement and consumer attention online for CSR- messages were:

a) *authentic messages on social media* b) *emotional dimension of the messages* and c) *the catchiness of CSR messages* (audio, video and visual material).

Consequently, if such requirements for CSR messages were achieved, half of the participants (6 out of 12) would find the messages more credible, more interesting, and as a result might have a feeling of added closeness to the brand and might even like a post, share a post or link an interesting piece of CSR- information to a friend in the private chat option of Facebook for instance. The findings show that the usage of social media for CSR- messages was directly connected to the possibility of interactivity, dialogue, engagement and emotions of consumers. This does not mean that the participants would blindly believe in every CSR-related social media post of a brand, but they expressed their eagerness to see more CSR-stories on the social media sites of fast fashion brands and not uniquely posts related to new collections, articles and clothing. The latter tendency was their perception of the current CSR-social media posts of most fast fashion brands.

Another tendency, that became visible throughout the determining of codes in order of dominance and importance was, if harshly put, pure laziness of consumers. Subsequently, direct messaging option for CSR was approved by the majority of (8 out of 12) participants. This was due to the fact that they would prefer not to use a lot of their own time to search, hear or see CSR- information. Therefore, catchy messages with informative videos were

preferred for CSR- communication on social media, in other words, communication that would not require a lot of time nor understanding to grasp. Another remark concerning the CSR- communication of fast fashion brands on social media was made on the consumer base of the industry. According to participant 8, who possessed clear facts about the industry, CSR- messages on social media would especially benefit the “*general customer*”, a referral made to people with less awareness, education and knowledge about CSR, philanthropy as well as societal and environmental issues. One participant illustrated the previous with the following remark:

*“What they should put on social media, is the stuff that.. The general public can understand. Not too complicated. They should put the details on their website.”*  
PP 7. p. 101.

As concluded from the data, as a medium, social media platforms for CSR- communication provide a very potential communication medium for fast fashion brands. Like the findings of this research suggest, the message and content have to fill some previously mentioned requirements, in order to efficiently reach their recipients and in order to be considered relevant. The scientific acknowledgement of Calleoni (2013) that social media provides a very effective communication method for CSR- messages due to its vast topic circulation and reachability, would seem not to uniquely fill the needs and wants of consumers of fast fashion online. If a brand is to attract consumers via social media towards more ‘heavier’ CSR- content and information, a good technique is to link an URL that leads to a company website into a concise and catchy social media CSR- message.

#### **4.4.1. The meaningfulness of WOM in the credibility of CSR communication**

As discussed in the literature review, the power of WOM and eWOM cannot be ruled out when discussing the need to understand the efficacy of brand initiated CSR- communication. Due to the reason that the sample consisted of educated people, the findings were not surprising in any way, when WOM and its importance and credibility were discussed. As previously argued in the literature review, the effect of WOM might be trusted more than the messages disseminated by companies (Calleoni, 2013 and Kim & Ferguson, 2014). This paradigm became verified to be true based on the sample and the data analysis,

since 10 out of 12 participants argued that they would trust a friend or a person they know more, than a brand.

However, most of the participants equally indicated, that the people in their social circles would not discuss CSR in the context of fast fashion that often. When something would be brought up by a friend or another person in a participants' social sphere, the message would be meaningful, or at least worth mentioning. Two out of twelve (2/12) participants thought that the credibility of WOM would be equal to that of a brand's message. These aforementioned participants concluded that big fashion brands ought not to lie, and could not, so their CSR- messages would and should be true. A similar kind of logic could be seen to apply to WOM in the opinion of these participants. Since the sample was well educated, a common argument that was heard was that the friends or acquaintances of these participants would possess a higher education, and would thus never pass on a message without verifying its credibility or content. The previous argument can be illustrated with the following paraphrases from the transcripts:

Researcher: *“Do you trust WOM more or a brand?” Or it doesn't make a difference?”*

Participant 8: *“I don't think it really makes a difference, because.. Not to brag or anything but I do surround myself with a bit more higher educated people, so I do know, when they say something they have read it or heard it from a trusted source so they won't just blurt out things.”* PP 8. p.122.

Furthermore, one cannot exclude the combined effect of media reporting and eWOM. Most of the participants expressed their knowledge on how the media function in the Western democracies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and made acknowledgements on media “behaviour”. Some (5 out of 12) had opinions about the media covering the CSR of fast fashion industry and concluded that it would normally be uniquely scandals that are brought to public discussion by media. With scandals the participants meant for example the mismanagement of supply chains, animal-related scandals or collapsing factories in for example Bangladesh. These acknowledgements made by some participants go hand in hand with the theoretical suggestions of Middlemiss (2003). Therefore, negative CSR-related news might circulate in the public sphere as WOM and eWOM (on social media and other Web 2.0 platforms) more than the positive, since the media would normally highlight the negativity. This was also experienced by most the respondents, they had from time to time caught a glimpse of negative CSR and fast fashion related information online on social media, in the form of eWOM.



Another acknowledgment that was made during the data analysis and ought to be mentioned here concerns CSR- campaigns and fast fashion brands. It would seem that fast fashion CSR- campaigns achieve high amounts of visibility; people would remember them even distantly. Therefore, advertising CSR seems to work to some extent, and advertising CSR should not be completely discarded as inutile, as proposed by Pomeroy & Johnson (2009). However, the tone and degree to which the CSR- message would circulate among consumers would be defined by the perception of relevance towards the campaign. Based on the findings, it seems that if a CSR- campaign is considered as irrelevant or the means deployed are found misadjusted, consumers do not spread the word onwards as WOM or neither eWOM. Consequently, another option can be to spread negative WOM or eWOM, if a campaign is found annoying or otherwise misadjusted (meaning mostly issues with relevance).

However, based on the data, overall it would require a lot to trigger the sample to spread fast fashion CSR- related messages. The easiest way for a fast fashion brand to obtain positive CSR- related WOM seems to be product-related CSR. By this the participants meant a collection or a line that would have been proved to be ethically produced; in such a case a consumer might tell his or her friends about the collection line and spread the word. Overall, it seems that product related WOM is more tangible for consumers than discussing CSR- policies or other CSR- commitments with their friends for example.

#### **4.4.2. Big players, Zara and H&M, different CSR communication strategies**

Often a good way to exemplify a phenomenon or a paradigm is to talk about them with real life examples. As previously mentioned, this seems to be the case for the consumers of fast fashion industry as well. Based on the findings, consumers would find it easy and logical to refer to the whole industry and its business by mentioning Zara and/or H&M. This is the case not least due to the high level of familiarity amongst the participants.

This short sub-section illustrates the differences of two companies that were the most familiar to the participants, Zara and H&M. A brief overview in this context is useful, since the CSR- communication policies and strategies and their differences can be used to give concrete example on what consumers think is the best, or what reaches and might influence them the easiest.

First of all, in order to understand the differences, we must conclude that H&M and Zara communicate about their CSR in very different ways. The latter one has chosen a discreet, no-advertising or promoting strategy (Runfola & Guercini, 2013) and H&M invests significant sums on communicating their new CSR initiatives and campaigns (H&M, 2015).

There were clear contradictions in the model of Zara, as suggested by theory and the answers of the participants (Kim & Ferguson, 2014 and Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2009) Acknowledging that *transparency* was defined as one of the main and important themes of CSR communication to consumers, Zara’s discreet “no-communication nor promotion” strategy could be judged as misadjusted. This is because Zara’s approach to CSR-communication and information could be seen to represent the complete opposite.

Nevertheless, neither H&M’s CSR- communication seems to perfectly match the expectations of consumers since H&M’s CSR- communication was often referred to as excessive and participants had have struggles understanding its relevance, like in the case of advertising sustainability with models in the “jungle”. Table 4.5.2 below is a summary of the CSR- promotion styles of Zara and H&M that in the opinion of participants exemplify well the two extremes of fast fashion CSR- communication.

	ZARA	H&M
<u>CSR Promotion</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No advertising of CSR</li> <li>• CSR reports and policies found true the entity of Inditex website</li> <li>• Public announcements made by official PR- staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advertising of CSR, deploying models, celebrities and a lot of visual material in order to convince</li> <li>• Huge campaigns launched from time to time</li> </ul>
<u>Strong and weak points</u>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Positive</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less promotion regarded as credible; using CSR for marketing purposes seems to decrease its trust value</li> <li>• Consumers might think that things are in order since nothing is being said</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Negative</u></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Positive</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Every consumer interviewed remembered at least one or two of H&amp;M CSR campaigns</li> <li>• Reaches far; people who would not necessarily be fans of the brand would still have knowledge</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Negative</u></p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consumers were not aware of drastic changes of CSR policies, simply because they had not been communicated openly</li> <li>• Consumers expressed true willingness to find out more about Zara’s CSR, and found it illogical not to update consumers about CSR-improvements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High amounts of promotion can easily be considered as fake or greenwashing</li> <li>• Lacking authenticity which decreases credibility</li> <li>• Highlighting a minor CSR-side of the business does not add credibility (in the case of collections for example, that form 10% of the production)</li> </ul>
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**Table 4.5.2.** Summary of the CSR promotion styles of Zara and H&M and their concluded strong and weak points based on participants’ suggestions and feedback.

These two company examples illustrate well the struggle that fast fashion companies face when communicating their CSR in a legitimate way. Subsequently, neither H&M’s nor Zara’s model seems to be perfect, and consumers give critique for both different strategies. However, it would seem that H&M’s model of communicating CSR, using celebrities, models and impressive visual campaigns, in order to disseminate their CSR- messages, does not go unnoticed by consumers. A valid observation from the data proves this; 12 out of 12 respondents remembered the H&M Recycling campaign, part of their thematic “Consume consciously”- educative CSR- initiative, done in cooperation with M.I.A, a rap singer and a recorder.

The aforementioned campaign was brought up by the participants themselves (4 participants), when “green fast fashion” was discussed. Despite the obvious effort that H&M puts in to communicate and promote their CSR- initiatives, most participants clearly implied that their communicative style lacks relevance. This seems to be the case due to the communicative means for CSR, that could be categorized as fairly commercial due to the plethora of visuals, rhetoric means and celebrities just to mention a few (Nan & Heo, 2007). As previously discussed, this kind of CSR- communication might trigger the consumer to believe that the CSR- promotion is overly done or is merely used for its marketing and promotional value. This goes hand in hand with the argument of Morsing & Schultz (2006), that CSR- initiatives ought not to be advertised in the same way as products.

On the contrary, Zara that is run under the Spanish huge retail owner company Inditex, has committed to extensive CSR- policies and improvements (Inditex, 2014). However, this continuous development had gone unnoticed by 10 out of 12 participants. When asked, a reason for this was the lack of CSR- communication that was expressed by multiple participants. The two participants who were aware of Zara's CSR- improvements and causes had read Zara's CSR- information online from the company website of Inditex. Participant number 5 described the lack of Zara's CSR- communication as follows:

*“ But for Zara I actually I kind of .. They kind of keep everything in secret, I don't know where they.. Yeah.. I don't know a lot about them.”* PP 5. p. 60.

Another participant, number 7, illustrated the feelings towards these differentiating CSR- communication styles that can be detected to be prevalent in the industry in the following manner.

*“...I don't think Zara is doing anything good. Because they don't communicate about it at all. They communicate nothing about anything. And H&M is communicating about it but I think it's only communication, it's not really happening...”* PP.7 p. 95

As previously concluded, a general customer does not want to make a big amount of effort in order to find out about CSR- information (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010 and Moreno & Capriotti 2009). The previous remark was equally verified by the participants; the CSR- information ought to be easily accessed and detected. To add, one cannot access Zara's CSR- reports straightforwardly via Zara's own website, but in order to access the reports, one needs to navigate itself to Inditex's website and search Zara's information from reports that often include more than 300 pages of text and images (Inditex, 2014). As concluded from the data, this amount of information can be seen thwarting to regular consumers, who prefer to avoid information overload and not investigate for long periods of times (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010 and Moreno & Capriotti 2009). An example that was given to the participants was Zara's decision to move most of its and supply chain and production out of developing countries, an action that has been developed throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Inditex, 2014). However, the participants were very unknown of this kind of CSR- development of Zara and concluded that the company ought to update consumers about its CSR, especially if drastic changes were

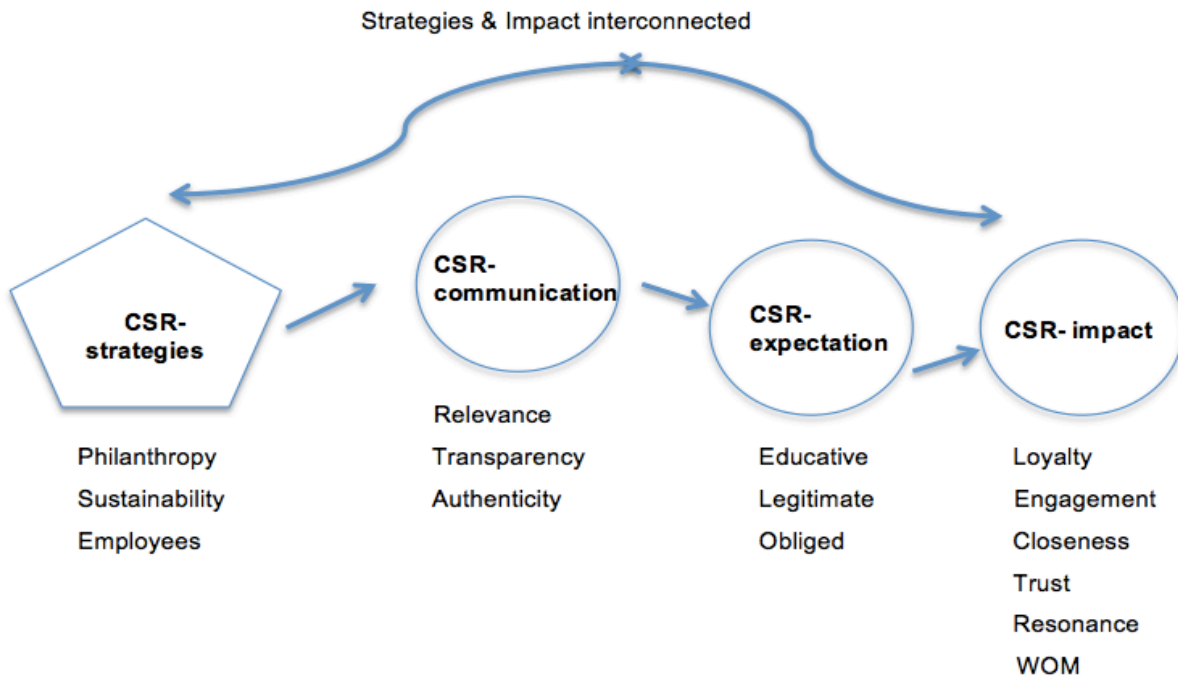
experienced. Therefore, a certain kind of combination of Zara's discreet, non-promotion style and H&M's active, even commercial, CSR- promotion could be consulted.

#### 4.6. Conceptual model

The findings of this study recognize a pattern with the CSR of fast fashion industry is guided. When the results are summarized, one can see a clear interconnectedness with the respective CSR- policies, CSR- communication and consumer- mindset outcome. As discussed before, the main CSR- characteristics that are preferred by consumers are *sustainability-* related CSR, *employee-* related CSR and to lesser extent, *good doing*, in the form of philanthropic activities. The highlight is strongly on the two firstly mentioned CSR- domains, sustainability and employee- related CSR. As discussed in the earlier chapters of Results section, philanthropic activities were mostly referred by participants to as overall need for fast fashion brands to engage in good doing and giving back something to society, without specifically defining the concrete content of philanthropy in this context.

Starting from the left, the two first entities are more corporate- focused, the strategies and communication. The two remaining entities on the right are more consumer- focused, since CSR- expectation and CSR- impact are experienced and felt by consumers.

As one can detect from the conceptual model (Table 4.6.), that summarizes the main findings, in order for CSR- communication to reach and impact the consumers of fast fashion industry in an optimal manner, the communication needs to be *relevant*, *transparent* and *authentic*.



**Table 4.6.** The conceptual model that represents an ideal outcome situation.

Furthermore, consumers expect fast fashion CSR to be the same time *educative*, *legitimate* and *obliged*. Therefore, legitimacy and obligation are strongly interconnected and the education- factor comes a as potential plus, if the foremostly important legitimacy and obligation- standards are fulfilled.

In the most optimal scenario, the CSR- strategies in the organisational and communicative levels can lead to consumer satisfaction that is both beneficial for a brand and a consumer. In this optimal situation, consumers become more loyal towards a brand, more engaged, closer towards a brand, trust a brand more, are aligned with a brand’s CSR- actions and lastly, can spread positive WOM. Furthermore, if this optimal is achieved, consumers feel less “ashamed” and have a better consciousness about shopping at fast fashion brands.

From the conceptual model, one can inspect the relationship between the CSR- strategies and CSR- impact. As the desired impact of fast fashion CSR starts to emerge and becomes tangible, then the strategies might need to be re-thought. More importantly, the core CSR- strategies and their implementation on the corporate and communicative levels will alter the outcome, the impact of CSR. Thus the impact is naturally very strongly linked to the

chosen CSR- policies of a brand. The chosen CSR- strategies, meaning highlight on a certain CSR- sector, in return affects the chosen and available CSR- communication tools.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Comparison of the findings with the literature review

This research looks into how the fast fashion industry manages to control its relationship with its consumers by engaging in corporate social responsibility practices. The research attempted to clarify the paradigm that exists between a consumer and the need for CSR, and furthermore CSR- communication within the fast fashion industry. In order to this study suggests a clear tendency that indicates the need for better-adjusted CSR- communication and rethought CSR- policies.

How could the fast fashion industry tackle down the paradox it seems to be facing? The findings suggest that it ought to provide consumers with low-priced articles by maintaining the business model that has been constructed around a system of mass production. Ultimately, this system however attracts stakeholder criticism on CSR-related issues. Simultaneously, the industry ought to answer to this critique and to intensified demands with relevant, transparent and authentic CSR. Furthermore, this well-adjusted CSR ought to be strategically communicated. This is a dilemma that could be seen as a continuum of CSR-related *expectations, needs, misunderstanding, perceptions, lack of knowledge, and eagerness to know more* on the side of consumers.

Especially problematic for the industry can be the fact that thorough transparency is hard to be made compatible with the inherent characteristics of the industry; as mentioned before, mass production and CSR- issues related to it on a global scale. Can an industry like this be completely transparent about everything in their whole production cycle and value chain, without becoming a target of further critique for neglecting ethical aspects of business? Does being truly honest about issues and adjusting the situation towards better with transparent CSR subject the industry to more reputation hazards, or will these kinds of actions manage to achieve the trust of consumers?



Important evidence was found on the following consumer perception: the fast fashion industry is obliged to tackle environment and employee- related CSR- issues and communicate about its CSR- improvements in a transparent and relevant manner in order to achieve consumer trust and seem legitimate. All this evidence indicates that the industry truly has very real reasons to fulfil the needs to execute CSR, as defined and demanded by its external stakeholders (Doyle et al., 2006).

As the findings of this research strongly suggest, the need for CSR- communication is great according to the perceptions of consumers. However, the complexity of this argument has to be acknowledged, since as described by the participants, consumers are lethargic when it comes to uncovering CSR- information. Consequently, this calls for sophisticated marketing communications methods on the behalf of industry professionals, since the existing paradox between too intensified CSR- communication and losing of trustworthiness is evident. The previous is one of the main acknowledgements of this study. It is again supported by the literature review, as defined by Dolnicar and Pomeroy (2009), that consumers can easily be lethargic in this sense. However, added understanding on how to adjust CSR- communication between the lethargic consumers and their trust issues need to be consulted in future research.

This being said, a well-adjusted CSR- communication for fast fashion brands appears to mean a plethora of complex adjustments that might not always go hand in hand. In order to be ideal, the actual CSR and CSR- communication of fast fashion brands ought to cover numerous factors such as the following: *relevance, transparency, educating, informative, understandable, visual, far-reaching, authentic, proactive, emotional and credible*. Subsequently, this finding supports the theoretical acknowledgements of Bhattacharya and Korschun (2006), that the demands and standards set up by external stakeholders for CSR are rapidly becoming even further conglomerated.

## **5.2 Legitimate CSR and a model for good public profile**

As previously stated and argued with the results of data analysis, consumers seem to hold large corporations accountable for some wrong-doings in society, even though they would not have concrete prove on defects. Therefore, as previously mentioned, large corporations with seemingly impressive commercial profits, global presence and global familiarity, seem to have needs to execute CSR that are rooted in the very nature of their businesses. These

include size, profits, operating mechanisms and presence in the world. Thus, it is not surprising that the examination of the data revealed the following paradigm; the big players of the fast fashion industry, especially H&M and Zara were constantly referred to be subject to doubts on their public legitimacy and legitimacy in general. Primark was not spared from critique either. Deephouse & Carter (2005) who have discussed regulatory standards and conforming to societal norms and conventions, have concluded that public pressure in the form of expectations about organisational conforming can either constrain, empower or construct an organisation. This section focuses on the factors that shape the perception of legitimacy in the minds of consumers of the industry, and exemplifies via the gathered data, how consumer expectations and needs for CSR in the industry are defined.

In the previous chapters this research looked into the various trust issues of consumers that they might have towards fast fashion brands and their CSR, and even whole operations. Furthermore, a theme that was expressed by five participants, was the need of large fast fashion brands to *give back* to society. The question is, why and to give back what? In this matter the participants had often even quite abstract thoughts to share.

What seemed surprising, that the sample often had almost unique voice in these matters of opinion. Based on the analysis of the coded interviews, it would seem that for the fast fashion industry and big brand names like H&M, Primark and Zara, just to exemplify, would inherently have a paradox to solve. Based on literature and findings, this sort of paradox seems to be the very nature of these companies; big fast fashion corporations would suffer of mistrust towards their public legitimacy and profile. This is due to partly because the norms of society, not least in the Western developed countries such as Europe and the North America, are restraining the industry. As Midttun et al., (2006) have concluded, Western societies and companies operating in their markets are facing growing amounts of pressure from external stakeholders and “moral watchers” to operate ethically with CSR. Nevertheless, the norms of society and the big size of the companies would also simultaneously construct and empower the industry. This paradox can be further explained by referring to the analysed data and the perceptions of the participants.

As known, in Europe and the United States, people live in societies that are characterised by capitalism, free market economies and mass consumption. Furthermore, the globalized economy has enabled companies to produce abroad, in countries of cheap labour costs and especially companies in the Western and developed countries take advantage of this

possibility (Bales, 2012 and Taplin, 2014). Due to these possibilities, fast fashion brands have been enabled to commence their way of producing and doing business; producing items and materials in masses, hiring suppliers from all the corners of the world, shipping goods around the globe and selling huge amounts of garments and other articles to hungry consumers, consumers who would not stop buying or demanding more new items. This is a societal norm that has been in the form of making since the very first global market and merchandise tendencies (Goetzmann & Rouwenhorst, 2005).

When the participants were asked *why* do they prefer the fast fashion companies that they are familiar with, every single one of them mentioned price in some form. Therefore, it seems paradoxical, that consumers enjoy a privilege, if in nothing else than in price, that fast fashion brands offer to their customers by producing items in a mass-production way, sometimes neglecting employees, other people and the environment.

The findings suggest, that consumers would judge the industry based on their operational characteristics and even their whole business model and products. Companies such as Zara, Primark and H&M would be considered as *big and evil* due to their way of producing and existing as businesses. However, all of the participants, as undoubtedly most of the existing customer base of fast fashion brands, would still find these industry characters, that enable small prices and fast production of new models, attractive and would list these as one of the first things that they prefer in a brand (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010). Based on the findings, it seems that customers expect CSR from their favourite fast fashion brands also in order to justify their own consuming choices to themselves; they feel that they can shop with better consciousness, if a company is engaged in CSR. When coding was performed, the improvement of one's shopping experience and better consciousness about it was highlighted on many occasions. Therefore, increased CSR- information in the form of CSR-communication could appease consumer feelings and make the shopping experience more pleasant for one's consciousness. Eventually, this might lead to repeated purchases, in the amounts that would slightly exceed previous consumption of a brand.

However, it still seems to be very possible to doubt a company, criticize it, and despite this, continue purchasing products from them. This seems paradoxical, since some critique was given exactly to the characters of the industry that made their favourite companies so desirable for the respondents. An example to illustrate the previous argument can be read from the following paraphrase:

*“Well I normally purchase most of my clothes from Zara. Ahh because I really like the style of the clothes and also the price, I think it is pretty fair. Um I mean they look stylish and elegant and high fashion.. But they’re still.. They’re still on a normal price so.. That’s why I like them and I keep going back there every time. ” PP 4. p. 47*

The same participant, number 4, would later on in the interview criticize the business model of Zara as a representative of the fast fashion industry. Based on the findings, it could be thus argued that consumers want to enjoy the fruits of cheap mass production at the same time acknowledging the problems related to the business, but they would also expect CSR in return to fix the inherent issues of the industry. However, the CSR- initiatives, policies and communication would often be regarded as something that lacks credibility, authenticity and relevance (Middlemiss, 2003 and Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

This type of findings support the theoretical claims made by Mohr, Webb and Harris (2001) on consumer attitudes and behaviour in the context of CSR. They have concluded that consumers’ misunderstandings and lack of knowledge of CSR- initiatives, progress and policies can result in contradictory behaviour between consumer attitudes and actual behaviour.

As findings suggest, the argument made by Mohr, Webb & Harris (2001) would seem very much to apply since consumers would give critique to fast fashion companies, would not always trust their CSR- initiatives and policies, but would still often purchase products from these companies and even admire them to some extent. This seems to be one of the prevalent paradoxes of the industry that marketing communications professionals could try to soften with better-adjusted CSR- communication. This acknowledgement goes hand in hand with the arguments on CSR- communication potential made by Pomeroy & Dolnicar (2009), that CSR- related marketing communications provide organisations with a possibility to shape the image that consumers have on them, and therefore ease existing tensions between actual consumer behaviour and attitude towards a company. However, some theoretical claims give too much importance for CSR in terms of its value on appeasing consumers and their worries about ethics. It seems too strong a sentiment to claim that CSR would always have a positive impact on a business. One needs to inspect this with critical eye since significant differences can already be found between different industries.

### 5.2.1. CSR: a combination of free and obliged conforming

As discussed in the literature review, the institutional theory defined by DiMaggio & Powell, (1983) and Meyer & Rowan, (1977), suggests that conforming to societal conventions and norms is a possible way for organisations to achieve a state of legitimacy in the eyes of external stakeholders, such as consumers. This theory is central for isomorphism, which states that legitimacy can be achieved by conforming to societal norms, either by obligation or by free will, meaning own initiative without external pressure.

However, as indicated by the data analysis, most of the participants defined or understood CSR in the fast fashion industry as a combination of forced and free societal conforming (9 out of 12). The need, obligation for CSR within the industry was argued for example by stating that big corporations like fast fashion brands are subject to *give back something to society*. According to the participants this obligation seems to stem from the belief (either based on facts or perceptions) that fast fashion companies are exploiting or breaking societal norms and conventions while doing business, and are thus obliged to engage in CSR. This finding is compatible with the findings of Westphal et al., (1997) who are cited in the literature review. The authors concluded that in order to achieve legitimacy, organisations have to conform to some rules, meaning obligation. On the other hand, organisations have the option to engage in supplementary actions to prove their legitimacy.

Consequently, organisations can conform to standards and norms they set themselves, or to norms that external stakeholders wish them to conform to, even though such norms would not be dictated by obligation, such as law. For the participants of this study, the feelings towards the free and forced conforming in the context of fast fashion CSR were mixed. 10 out of 12 participants were adamant on the obligation to engage in CSR; fast fashion brands would have to engage in CSR, in order to seem legitimate to consumers. For some participants, this obligation- categorization included CSR that was not imposed on companies, such as corporate giving. Therefore, the line of what is *obliged* conforming and what is *free* conforming varied amongst the sample. Generally speaking, it would seem that the mere respect of written rules and law is not enough for consumers in order to regard fast fashion brands as legitimate.

2 out of 12 participants automatically thought that fast fashion brands could equally operate without CSR in the form of *free conforming*, but that *obliged* CSR, such as taking care of employees and assuring that the chemicals used in garments would be safe, was naturally a

necessity. Most of the respondents identified CSR within the industry as free conforming, since they thought that big corporations like the biggest fast fashion brands could easily avoid obligations, and are doing so. Therefore, CSR activities would be categorized as something that companies would do willingly. As identified by most of the participants (10/12), CSR was nevertheless considered as a means to improve corporate reputation, generate positive feelings towards a brand from the side of consumers and finally, would generate more interest towards a brand in on a general level. This finding follows the logic of Rindova et al., (2006), that corporations can achieve positive consumer feelings, even emotional feeling of belonging to a brand, if they manage to conform to societal norms in a relevant way, for example via successful CSR- initiatives.

Nevertheless, the fast fashion industry has faced scandals from time to time, and has been held responsible for various violations against societal norms and rules. The role of scandals and media cannot be thus ruled out when explaining the perceptions of consumers of fast fashion towards the industry's CSR and legitimacy status. As discussed in the literature review, scholars Rindova et al., (2006) have named the phenomenon of *celebrity firms* after companies that achieve a very positive image within the public sphere. Majority (8 out of 12) of the participants labelled the CSR- efforts of fast fashion brands as attempts to strive towards a more positive image in the media, to improve their corporate reputation. Amongst the sample however, what has more importance in defining an opinion in the context of legitimacy and reputation, seems to be scandals that rise in the media. Clear majority of the participants (11 of 12) stated that fast fashion brands would in their opinion act on CSR- initiatives and improve ethical business related factors in the industry, uniquely when a scandal was risen and a company was targeted with negative attention from the media. This finding demonstrates a clear disappointment in the industry and its CSR- strategies; participants wanted to see more self-initiated, pre-emptive CSR- actions. The ideal for customers would be to see CSR- actions taken and things improved without any real problems arise.

Consequently, a CSR- topic that becomes a centre of public discussion uniquely via initiatives of the media seems to decrease the value of an organisation's legitimacy, in the eyes of consumers (Swaen & Chumpitaz, 2008). An example of scandals like this is for example the collapsing of a factory in Bangladesh, used by multiple fast fashion brands in their production, that was highlighted in the media (Taplin, 2014). After the incident, the industry publically announced that they would improve the situation and not let it happen again. Previously, roughly a hundred years ago, similar working hazards and conditions were equally experienced

in Europe (Taplin, 2014). Since those days, the socio-political development in Europe has made this fairly impossible.

Another one is a NGO initiated campaign, a *Detox*- named campaign by Greenpeace, which took place in 2011. Greenpeace managed to mobilize hundreds of thousands of consumers to pressure the industry to eliminate all toxic chemicals in their garments, and finally big brands from Zara to Adidas took action. However, also in this case, fast fashion brands had not self-initiated this type of CSR before the issue got into the headlines. Incidents of this type had clearly diminished the trust and feeling of legitimacy that the sample had towards the fast fashion industry.

### 5.3 Major managerial implications

Current literature acknowledges the inherent characteristics of fast fashion and mass production economy that can prompt consumers to worry about the ethics of the industry (Doyle et al., 2006; Zhao et al., 2014 and Middlemiss, 2003). These worries can convert to altered consumer behaviour such as lesser purchases (Clarke & Clegg, 2000), less enjoyable shopping experience and negative word-of-mouth (Colleoni, 2013). The findings of this research partially support these acknowledgements, since all of the participants had worries about the ethical execution of business within the industry. Furthermore, 8 out of 12 participants thought that more relevant, more transparent and intensified CSR would improve one’s shopping experience. These glimpses into consumer thinking can be of real value to fast fashion companies and therefore this research assembles major findings into managerial implications for the industry. The major managerial implications in the context of possible CSR- communication techniques for the industry are listed below in Table 5.3.

Means for communication	Type of communication	Type of action
Social media, Web 2.0	Dialogic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating compact, concise and visual material that demonstrates the CSR- actions taken in an understandable way</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cooperating with NGOs such as Greenpeace, in order to prove authenticity and seriousness (co-produced campaigns on social media)</li> <li>• Showing emotion</li> <li>• Interacting with consumers</li> </ul>
In-store communication	Dialogic & Monologic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing consumers with CSR-information in the store via boards, info desks and possible screens</li> <li>• Having personnel ready to answer CSR-related questions</li> <li>• Telling consumers more about the production cycle and the value chain (education)</li> </ul>
Campaigns	Monologic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using visuals, audio and video in a strategic way that attracts attention</li> <li>• Avoiding continuous push for products</li> <li>• Sticking to the commitments told by campaigns – not abandoning them directly after the spectacle</li> </ul>
Advertising (promotion)	Monologic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Authentic points highlighted, combining material that does not commercialize CSR to too great an extent</li> </ul>
Product-related	Monologic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CSR- information in clothes and garments</li> <li>• Visible labels inside, big enough a print</li> <li>• ‘Made in’- tags clearer, not merely indications such as “Made in Europe” but more specified information</li> </ul>
Company websites	Monologic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CSR- policies and commitments clearly formatted on the websites</li> </ul>



		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Achievements on long-term commitments ought to be updated and reports ought to be published more often</li> </ul>
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**Table 5.3.** Presenting the major managerial implications for the fast fashion industry as suggested by this research.

The findings of this study pinpoint towards the prevalent lack of trust towards fast fashion CSR on consumer side. Self-critique and third party credibility seem to make this paradigm less prevalent, as equally suggested by Morsing and Schultz, (2006). Therefore, it would seem that in order to increase consumer trust via CSR, fast fashion brands could attempt to be more open about their CSR- related issues themselves, without hiding things, and furthermore cooperating with NGOs. This kind of involvement might lead to increased trust and show consumers that fast fashion brands are acknowledging various issues themselves, without being uniquely pushed to engage in CSR and change things. Additionally, the findings indicate that this kind of ‘pre-emptive’ CSR and initiating CSR on one’s own initiative without always being pressured or negatively portrayed in the media can create trust. This in return can read to more value via more positive media coverage, as suggested by Rindova et al., (2006).

## 6. Conclusion

This study scrutinized the fast fashion industry, its CSR and CSR-communication and furthermore, the CSR- preferences of its consumers. Previous research has to a great extent investigated CSR as conceptual complexity, as well the effects of CSR on consumer behaviour, in different industries. However, the scientific community has not widely enough addressed the specific characters of CSR within fast fashion industry, neither its relation to the consumers of the industry. Therefore, this study attempted to reveal the patterns that guide the consumers of the fast fashion industry in their deduction and understanding of fast fashion CSR. More importantly, this study addressed the perceptions of consumers of fast fashion brands on CSR- communication, its credibility, efficiency, nature and influence.

The findings, as existing theory and research, suggest noteworthy potential for fast fashion companies when it comes to the execution and communication of CSR. However, this study revealed some paradigms that contradict existing theories. Simultaneously, some existing theories had overlapped with the findings and therefore some theories ought to be extended, as this study suggests.

Findings show that CSR- entities that are the most important for consumers of fast fashion industry tend to be environmental- and sustainability- CSR as well as employee-related CSR.

Major tendencies that were detected in the context of the research question strongly suggest that the fast fashion industry has a relatively big legitimacy issue, despite various active CSR- initiatives and policies. Furthermore, consumers expect proactive CSR from the industry, this being the case despite the fact that an average consumer is not fully aware of all the CSR- actions that the industry has taken and is taking. Another major finding of this study was a clear “knowledge gap- dilemma” in CSR, meaning that consumers are very lethargic when it comes to finding out information about CSR, but nevertheless often would criticize direct CSR- communication, disseminated by brands. However, CSR- communication characters that are the most appreciated by consumers, as suggested by this study, are *transparency*, *relevance* and to a lesser extent, *frequency*.

In answer to the research question, the findings show that consumers appreciate most the CSR- initiatives and policies that are well integrated into the value chain of fast fashion brands. This means proactive and “pre-emptive” CSR, solutions that are well planned within the production cycle, so that CSR would improve the sustainability and social equity of a production chain. Therefore, the findings found strong support for the acknowledgements of

Halme & Laurila (2009). Consumers appreciate the CSR- integration (to the business model) and CSR- innovation (proactively changing the points that need improvement) of fast fashion brands.

The plan to execute perfect CSR is challenging though, since as the participants of this research acknowledge, the fast fashion industry has flaws in its supply chains. Furthermore, consumers want to see concrete results in CSR; communicating about policy changes would be more efficient if consumers would be updated about the concrete progress achieved via CSR, and actual evidence is provided about progress. The evidence that CSR actually works, and is truly implemented, is tightly connected to the *relevance*- factor that consumers want to see in CSR- communication.

Based on the findings, relevance in return consists of elements in CSR- communication that are not “overly done”, meaning that the CSR- messages are framed in an authentic way, that is not highly commercialized, advertised or marketed. A good example to illustrate this preference were the referrals made by participants to a specific H&M’s CSR communicative style, framing CSR- messages to a context with models surrounded by jungle. Findings show that highly educated consumers do not believe that this kind of CSR- communication adds credibility. On the contrary, CSR- messages that show real evidence and real life examples are considered as more credible and trustworthy. An example of this kind of communication was a CSR- communication strategy that showed workers in a factory and provided information about them. Another two characters of CSR- communication that are connected are *frequency* and *relevance*. In order that CSR- communication would be considered as relevant, its frequency must be properly adjusted; updating about concrete progress in CSR- matters is a justification to communicate CSR weekly, otherwise frequency should be less. If CSR is communicated too often, and about minor things, its credibility and trustworthiness decreases.

It clearly seems to be the case that consumers associate *ethically produced* with better quality, and in return, associate CSR- efforts to being and to trying to be more ethical, despite the prevalent trust issues on the side of consumers. However, one of the principal characteristics that attract the consumer of fast fashion industry is *low price* matched with style. All of the consumers that participated in this study clearly expressed their awareness on the policy of affordable prices – fast fashion brands can offer a more affordable price for *chic* items due to their mass production business models. The fashion that these brands offer would not be labelled as affordable fast fashion anymore, at least not by the general consumers that the sample of this research represents, if the prices went for instance 25% up.

In order to do this, the materials, garments and other articles would have to be set under a stricter lens of scrutiny of ethics, in other words, the whole business would have to change drastically. It indeed seems paradoxical, since the business models of fast fashion brands like Zara, H&M and Primark are the characters that make them succeed as well as they are, in financial terms. Therefore, finding a perfect CSR- balance, CSR- communication model and relationship with the consumers of the industry is far from being facile.

Nevertheless, continuous CSR- communication that possesses the characteristics that appeal to consumers seems to have potential to fill in the knowledge gap that consumers often have in relation to CSR within the industry. Increased understanding of CSR-related phenomena can serve a brand as well, even though the disseminated information would not directly be linked to the business, its products or operations. Moreover, it would seem that fast fashion companies could engage in CSR- communication not merely by telling consumers a story about their actions or products in the context of CSR, but additionally explaining CSR-related phenomena in a larger, industry- context. Eventually, this type of CSR- communication might be perceived as more charitable, or at least more self-effacing, since it may manage to prove consumers of a company's good cause as a CSR- advocate and even educator.

Therefore, even though a company might be struggling to adjust its CSR- communication to the best possible form that might fit all the criteria consumers have, it would still clearly seem to be a better option to continuously update consumers about CSR related news. If nothing else, as defined by 10 out of 12 participants, CSR seems to be a set of policies that companies ought to deploy not least to its 'trend' value, it is a prevalent tendency in society and the business world.

Consequently, not communicating CSR might be perceived as ignorance or as not following one's 'corporate time'. However, as concluded on multiple occasions, the need to understand the patterns with which relevant, transparent, authentic and credible CSR- content is created, is a must for marketing communications practitioners. Otherwise a company can miserably fail and be considered as mismanaged, and again, failed CSR- efforts and CSR- related scandals can lead to a downfall in reputation, as widely acknowledged by scholars such as Middlemiss, 2003; Minor & Morgan, 2011; Rindova et al., 2006 and Zhao et al., 2014), and the sample of this research.

## 6.1 Limitations and strengths

This research has some limitations that ought to be discussed next. Due to the nature of the research, being conducted via study design that requires subjective interpretation, this study cannot be labelled as completely objective. Nevertheless, as qualitative research designs demand, the research was conducted with the highest possible degree of precision and critical thinking. The data was carefully scrutinized and nothing was inspected superficially.

To continue with, it is consistent to discuss the sample and its characteristics, what good elements it can bring to this study and what could be more ideal. Firstly, the nature of the sample is a good fit for the research topic, since it contained of people with sufficient financial assets for shopping and it represents an age group that is the most important for most fast fashion brands (Birtwistle & Moore, 2007). However, for future studies, the sample could be improved by accessing a more diversified sample with older people in it, people from more varied educational backgrounds and furthermore, include American and Asian people in the sample. Additionally, a sample with a more balanced sex distribution would lead to more groundbreaking results. In addition to this, a bigger sample would lead to even further saturation, which would have benefitted the research. Naturally, a higher sampling size leads to more generalizable results and better reliability.

Another limitation is that the sample had varying amounts of information about CSR, about fast fashion companies and about mechanisms that shape the overall production and business process of a fast fashion company. A more balanced research could be conducted if the integrity of information and the correspondence of levels of knowledge on these matters were assured beforehand.

To note, the sample included people from many different nationalities, which ultimately corresponds to the nature of fast fashion companies; they have a global presence everywhere and thus have to think about their commercial strategies in a global context. Including people from different nationalities could be seen as a necessity for a well-executed study on CSR-related issues and phenomena, since the detailed understanding of CSR and the perceptions of need for it can vary across nations (Auger et al., 2003 and Runfola & Guercini, 2013). This is a strong point in the sample of this study, however, the geographic nature of the sample could have been even more varied, and thus the aforementioned mention of including American and Asian people. Since the South American and African continents have a significantly lesser amount of fast fashion shop unities and therefore equally less active consumers, a sample

combined of European, American and Asian populations could serve the needs of future, more diverse research the best. However, one ought to equally ponder the differences in the consuming patterns; despite the fact that fast fashion would be consumed in Asia, Europe and the United States, these populations might still inherently regard fashion, consumption and CSR from very different points of view, and thus this factor should not be ignored in the future research.

## **6.2 Future research**

In addition to the previous points of improvement, future research could for example look into different stakeholder groups, for example investors. This type of approach would be more managerial and strategic, since investment relations and CSR are prone to be characterised with financial interests. Another future aspect for this type of research, would be to add a fact sheet for the interviewing; a set of various different CSR- scenarios could be shown to the interviewees, and these could work as a supplementary source of information, which could help determining answers and elaborating in a more detailed manner.

Another suggestion for future research in the context of CSR and fast fashion could be turning the whole research project into a manipulated customer experience experiment, either offline or online. Consumers would participate in a pre-conditioned online or offline experiment, that would include CSR related variables, and the outcome on consumer behaviour would be examined. For instance, two different participant groups would be told information about fast fashion brands and their actions in the context of CSR, and the other group would be manipulated with different information. Like this, one might detect the degree to which CSR truly affects the consumer behaviour and could furthermore assist in calculating the concrete effects that CSR has on a value chain within the fast fashion industry.

Furthermore, a more detailed conceptual understanding in the beginning of the conducted interviews could be a reasonable improvement. This is due not least to the fact that understanding of CSR itself as a concept and in the context of fast fashion industry might vary to some degree (as it did also vary for the participants of this study). By doing this, future research could achieve a more balanced and more concise approach to the investigated phenomenon, and this in return could further assure higher level of integrity of results.

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## Appendix

### Appendix A – Interview guide

Theme	Questions	Purpose
<p><b>CSR classifications</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• type</li> <li>• scale</li> <li>• understanding of CSR</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>On a general level, what do you think should be emphasized in the CSR of fast fashion companies and why ?</i></li> <li>• <i>In your opinion, are there any particular characters within the industry that emphasize the need to execute CSR ?</i></li> <li>• <i>Do you think the (concerned) fast fashion companies should concentrate more on social issues or environmental issues in their CSR ? Can you say why ?</i></li> </ul>	<p>Understanding consumers : what do they regard as the most important in the context of CSR in the fast fashion industry ? What are the patterns that guide consumer thinking about the importance of CSR within the industry ?</p>
<p><b>CSR communication</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• channel (corporate websites, social media etc.)</li> <li>• message</li> <li>• frequency</li> <li>• dialogue vs monologue</li> <li>• social media</li> <li>• WOM</li> <li>• sender</li> <li>• company websites etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>How do you normally see/hear about CSR information ?</i></li> <li>• <i>Do you prefer direct messaging or do you prefer to find our the information yourself, for example from company websites ?</i></li> <li>• <i>What do you think about fast fashion companies usage of social media in CSR communication ?</i></li> <li>• <i>How do you perceive CSR information told by your friends or other consumers online, e.g. on social media ?</i></li> <li>• <i>Is there anything particular aspects in the CSR that should be highlighted in their communication ? Why ?</i></li> <li>• <i>Would you prefer to get company CSR updates on a weekly or monthly basis or can you think of another better frequency ?</i></li> <li>• <i>What do you think about engaging in the companies' CSR communication, for example about possibilities to comment and pose your own ideas online ?</i></li> </ul>	<p>Understanding of the preferred mediums for CSR communication, the effectiveness of different CSR communication mediums and credibility of CSR communication mediums. Drawing conclusions on what should be highlighted in fast fashion CSR communication and what mediums should be used in order to be more legitimate/approachable/trustworthy. Providing material for possible managerial implications for the industry and companies concerned.</p>



