Eco or Echo? Gen Z Decodes the Framing of Sustainable Fashion on Instagram
A Multimodal Analysis of Green Marketing, Visual Culture, and Consumer Perception

Student Name: Maria Spyrelli
Student Number: 698816

Supervisor: Luuc Brans

Master Media Studies - Media & Creative Industries
Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication
Erasmus University Rotterdam

Master's Thesis
June 2025

Word Count: 17140

Eco or Echo? Gen Z Decodes the Framing of Sustainable Fashion on Instagram

Abstract

This thesis explores how fashion brands frame sustainability on Instagram and how young consumers interpret these messages. As the fashion industry increasingly adopts sustainability rhetoric in response to environmental and ethical concerns, it faces growing scrutiny-especially from Gen Z consumers who are both ethically aware and sceptical of brand messaging. Amid rising concerns over greenwashing, this study investigates the tension between visual branding strategies and consumer trust.

The central research question is: How do fashion brands frame sustainability on Instagram, and how do young consumers decode these messages? The study combines Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) of Instagram posts from selected sustainable fashion brands with semi-structured interviews conducted with eight Gen Z participants.

Findings reveal that participants are highly critical of sustainability messaging, particularly when it lacks transparency or appears overly aestheticized. They prefer communication that emphasizes activism, social equity, and honesty over polished promotional content. Many participants reported shopping second-hand or reducing their consumption altogether, indicating a shift toward more intentional, values-based consumer behaviour. Instagram was viewed as both a problematic and promising platform, prone to superficiality but capable of supporting educational, storytelling-driven content.

Grounded in Framing Theory (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1973), Visual Rhetoric (Messaris), and Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model, the study shows that Gen Z consumers often adopt negotiated or oppositional readings of green marketing. Rather than accepting sustainability claims at face value, they actively decode messages through their ethical and social lenses.

This research highlights the need for brands to move beyond aesthetic branding toward more authentic, transparent, and systemically engaged sustainability communication.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

1. Introduction

1.1 Contextualising Sustainable Fashion in the Digital Era

In recent years, fashion has been associated with seasonally changing trends and rapid turnover. However, this model has turned fashion, the fourth largest industry in Europe (Thorisdottir & Johannsdottir, 2020, p.2), to one of the most polluting industries globally, greatly contributing to environmental degradation and unethical labour exploitation (Fletcher & Tham, 2014, p.6). In response to mounting pressure from climate scientists and activists, civil society, and conscious consumers, the industry is now witnessing a rhetorical and structural transformation. The concept of "sustainable fashion" has moved beyond trend status to become an internationally acknowledged priority, aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 12 on responsible consumption and production (UN, 2015).

This shift is occurring along with the rise of social media as a cultural and commercial force. Platforms such as Instagram have emerged as central arenas where the discourse around fashion is being reshaped, not only in terms of aesthetics and trends but also in terms of moral legitimation, authenticity performance and monetization strategies (Pedroni, 2022, p 245-246). Fashion, by its very nature, is a visual and identity-driven industry. Instagram's highly visual, interactive, and algorithmic features offer fertile ground for fashion brands to construct, perform, and circulate sustainability discourses. These are shaped through curated imagery, hashtags and influencer collaborations, creating campaigns that are designed to reach and engage users. This rapid evolution stresses the importance of critically examining not just whether brands communicate sustainability, but how they frame it through visuals and messaging.

While sustainability has gained widespread traction, so have the concerns regarding its commodification. Increasingly, scholars suggest that sustainability is being leveraged as a branding strategy rather than a vehicle for systemic change (von Busch, 2022, p. 404). Terms such as "greenwashing," "eco-aesthetic," and "ethical consumerism" reflect the tensions between genuine systemic change and superficial marketing techniques. Young consumers have become more algorithm-literate, informed and sceptical as a result of their daily exposure to a flood of digital content. Hence, they are beginning to better understand the mechanisms through which sustainability is framed on Instagram and they can evaluate the effectiveness, ethics, and impact of green marketing efforts. The rise of "green" marketing campaigns raises pressing questions: Are these campaigns indicative of genuine systemic

change, or do they merely repurpose sustainability as a branding tool? How do visual and verbal strategies influence public perception and consumer behaviour? What happens when ethical messages meet the performative culture of Instagram?

1.2 Research Problem and Knowledge Gap

Although green marketing and sustainable fashion have been explored in academic literature (Fletcher & Tham, 2014, p.7) few studies (Matthes, 2009, p 349-351) combine both visual and textual analyses of how sustainability is framed on Instagram. Most of the existing scholarship focuses on either corporate branding strategies or consumer psychology (Shen et al., 2012, p. 234), rarely integrating both perspectives, neglecting the powerful interplay between branding and audience interpretation. As a result, the multimodal nature of Instagram where images, reels, captions, hashtags, and interactive features work in sync, is still insufficiently theorized (Nabivi, 2025, p.3). Furthermore, audience interpretation and meaning-making are frequently overlooked, despite the fact that audience engagement is critical to how discourses are produced, shared and debated on social media platforms.

Given Instagram's hybrid media format, which blends visual, textual, and interactive modes, there is a pressing need for interdisciplinary methodologies capable of capturing the nuances of platform-specific sustainability framing. Visuals and captions cannot be understood in isolation because they work together to shape discourses that influence perception and behaviour. At the same time, consumers are not passive recipients of marketing messages. Their interpretations are shaped by cultural context, personal values, and lived experience factors that are crucial for understanding the reception and perceived credibility of sustainability claims.

This research responds to these gaps by adopting a critical, multimodal lens that bridges branding discourse with consumer perception. In doing so, it aims to unpack the complex tensions and contradictions within sustainable fashion communication in the digital era. On platforms like Instagram, where aesthetics, performance and algorithmic visibility are vital, sustainability messaging is often filtered through appealing visual trends, lifestyle cues, and emotionally resonant storytelling. These dynamics can blur the line between authentic ethical commitments and marketable stories, making it difficult for consumers to distinguish substance from symbolism. Moreover, the coexistence of fast-paced content cycles and slow fashion values presents a structural paradox that remains insufficiently explored. By

examining both how brands frame sustainability and how users interpret these frames, this study is seeking to illuminate the gap between communication strategies and consumer meaning-making and increasing scepticism.

1.3 Research Aim and Questions

This thesis aims to investigate how sustainability is strategically constructed and communicated in fashion brand marketing on Instagram and how these representations are perceived, interpreted or contested by young consumers. More specifically, it investigates the multimodal nature of sustainability discourses on Instagram and how visual aesthetics, captions, hashtags, influencers and platform features interact to frame ethical claims. Moreover, it explores how these discursive representations influence consumer perceptions within a media-saturated, algorithmically driven digital environment. Hence, the main research question guiding this study is:

How do fashion brands frame sustainability on Instagram, and how do young consumers decode these messages?

In order to answer the main research question, these sub-questions are addressed:

subRQ1: What visual and textual framing strategies do fashion brands employ to communicate sustainability on Instagram?

subRQ2: How do these framing strategies differ across brands with varying aesthetics, price points and sustainability commitments?

subRQ3: How do young consumers decode, negotiate or resist the sustainability frames?

The first question focuses on how sustainability is frames though the usage of imagery, captions, hashtags, collaborative posts with influencers/ambassadors and interactive features on Instagram. It explores how these elements form brand identity and ethical values. The second question brings a comparative dimension, analysing how the framing strategies differ between fashion brands with different market positions, target audiences and sustainability perceptions. The third question addresses the perceptions of young consumers in response to these brand messages, based on their values, beliefs and media literacy. Based on them, they

either accept, negotiate or resist brand messaging, in line with Hall's encoding/decoding model.

1.4 Rationale and Significance

Understanding how sustainability is framed on Instagram is not only relevant to media and communication scholarship but also vital for the broader debates around ethical consumption, marketing responsibility, and platform culture. By focusing on Instagram, this research situates itself at the intersection of visual culture, green marketing, and digital consumer behaviour.

Firstly, this study contributes to the literature by applying a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) approach to fashion marketing, integrating visual, textual, and rhetorical analysis within a specific platform. Secondly, by combining MCDA with semi-structured interviews, it emphasizes the active involvement of consumers as interpreters rather than passive recipients of brand messaging. This methodological design aligns with Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, emphasizing the dialogic nature of media perception.

Theoretically, this thesis draws on and combines Framing Theory (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1973), Visual Rhetoric (Messaris, 1997), and Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) to analyse how sustainability is shaped through both representation and reception. It also engages with contemporary critiques of green marketing, particularly concerning greenwashing, ethical aesthetics, and the attitude-behaviour gap (White et al., 2019, p.25). It carefully bridges a variety of academic fields, including media studies, fashion communication, and sustainability research.

Practically, the findings offer insights for brands, marketers, and educators seeking to navigate the ethical and communicative challenges of promoting sustainability in the digital age. In an era of increased consumer scepticism and algorithmic saturation, effective and ethical sustainability communication requires more than aesthetic coherence, it requires credibility, transparency, and critical engagement.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how sustainability is promoted, perceived and in a visual-first, fast-paced digital ecosystem, revealing both the

potential and the risks of ethical branding in the age of Instagram. It also sheds light on how consumers interpret these messages through the lens of their personal values, lived experiences and evolving consumption patterns.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Framing & Consumer Perceptions

In order to explore and comprehend how sustainability is communicated and perceived on Instagram, it is first vital to focus on the ways messaging is contracted and deconstructed. This section introduces the theoretical foundations supporting this study, drawing on framing theory to explore how meaning is shaped through textual and verbal elements, and on consumer theory to analyse how consumers decode messages. Section 2.1.1 outlines the evolution of framing theory, Section 2.1.2 turns to visual framing and storytelling, and finally section 2.1.3 highlights audience meaning-making processes.

2.1.1 Evolution of Framing Theory

Framing theory offers a powerful lens for analysing how information is selected, organized and presented to shape interpretation and meaning. First introduced by Erving Goffman (1974, p 10-11) in his book *Frame Analysis*, it will be used as a pillar for understanding how complex topics, such as marketing fashion sustainability, are organized and communicated to audiences. Goffman theorized that frames are socially constructed cognitive schemas that help individuals interpret social phenomena within a given cultural context by locating, perceiving, identifying and labelling occurrences in everyday life.

Drawing from the claim that a significant part of human life consists of dramatizing reality, Goffman (1974, p. 21-22) distinguishes natural frames, referring to events in the non-human realm such as climate change, and social frames, representing the human interpretation of these events. Since the latter are constructed by people, they are influenced by the need for social validation and natural constraints, and are therefore subject to manipulation. Social frames are particularly relevant in communication, as they are not neutral but shaped by cultural norms, social interactions, and power relations. Goffman laid the groundwork for understanding how meaning is constructed not only by the sender of a message but also by the audience's interpretive lens.

Although Goffman developed the framing theory, his work had been criticized by social movement researchers for its theoretical vagueness (Van Dijk, 2023, p. 7-8). Expanding on this foundation in a more strategic and analytical direction, Robert Entman (1993) offered a more systematic and communication-oriented definition of framing, emphasizing the importance of selection and salience. He argued that to frame is *"to select*

some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text" (p.52). This salience serves four key functions: defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral evaluations, and suggesting solutions. According to Entman (1993, p.54), frames operate at multiple levels: they are shaped by communicators, embedded in texts, interpreted by receivers, and conditioned by cultural schemas. Crucially, the influence of frames lies not only in the context of the message but in its interpretation. This selective emphasis can subtly shape public opinion and behaviour by reinforcing dominant ideologies while downplaying or excluding alternative perspectives.

To better understand the evolution and application of framing theory, Jörg Matthes (2009, p. 322) conducted a meta-analysis of 131 framing studies, identifying two key types of frames: issue-specific frames, which apply to particular topics or events, and generic frames, such as conflict or morality. However, his review also revealed major methodological inconsistencies: while Entman was one of the most cited theorists, only 20.5% of studies applied his definition in practice. Over two-thirds of the reviewed studies did not test hypotheses or examine framing effects while 83% of the studies completely ignored visual framing, despite the increasing multimodality of media communication (Matthes, 2009, p 349-351). This methodological inconsistency highlights the need for more theoretically grounded approaches, which this thesis aims to address through a clear focus on both textual and visual framing.

These perspectives show that framing is not merely a method of communication but a powerful mechanism of meaning-making, a way of constructing reality and shape public discourse. As such, framing theory provides a crucial foundation for analysing how sustainability is communicated in contemporary media, particularly in green marketing, visual storytelling, and consumer engagement.

2.1.2 Visual Framing and Storytelling

While much of framing theory has traditionally focused on textual content, contemporary communication, especially in digital environments, relies heavily on visual imagery. In fact, visual content is often more impactful than written text in shaping consumer perception and behaviour. Visual framing refers to the ways in which images, layout, colour, and symbols are used to evoke certain interpretations and emotional responses, influencing how a message is received and understood (Coleman, 2010, p. 175). As the digital sphere

becomes increasingly image-dominated, understanding how visuals frame sustainability is essential to uncover the mechanisms of green marketing in fashion.

Paul Messaris (1997), in his foundational work *Visual Persuasion*, argues that visuals possess a unique rhetorical power. Unlike language, images are not always subjected to the same level of critical scrutiny, often bypassing rational boundaries and reaching audiences on a more emotional or subconscious level. This makes them especially powerful in advertising and branding, where subtle messages can be encoded in visual cues such as facial expressions, colour palettes, and product placement. According to Messaris (p.10), visuals function on three levels: as *iconic representations* (direct resemblance), *indexical signs* (suggesting causality or association), and *symbolic images* (culturally constructed meaning). These levels allow brands to strategically construct a desired discourse or emotional tone without explicitly stating it in text.

Coleman (2010, p. 240) further emphasises that visuals are not neutral reflections of reality but curated frames that influence what we perceive as important. Her study on the agenda-setting and framing effects of visual images demonstrates that photographs and videos can enhance the salience of particular issues, guiding not only what people think about but how they think, expanding Entman's (1993) framing theory of selection and salience. Especially in the context of sustainability communication, visuals can shape attitudes towards ethical consumption, environmental responsibility, or brand identity by reinforcing dominant narratives or challenging them.

From a more sociological lens, Luc Pauwels (2012, p. 2-3) advocates for a "visual sociology" approach, urging researchers to consider how visuals contribute to meaning-making in society. He proposes analysing visual media not merely as aesthetic artefacts, but as carriers of social norms, power relations, and ideologies. In this context, storytelling becomes a vital component of visual framing. Narratives embedded in visual campaigns often draw on cultural archetypes, emotions, and aspirational aesthetics to mobilise engagement, empathy, or action. This aligns closely with digital fashion campaigns, where storytelling through carefully curated visuals often substitutes direct messaging.

In sum, visual framing and storytelling are critical to understanding how sustainability is conveyed. Together with textual frames, images and videos shape the perception of ethical values, environmental urgency, and brand trustworthiness, making them essential elements in contemporary green marketing strategies.

2.1.3 Consumer Perceptions & Meaning – Making

While framing theory offers a top-down perspective on how messages are constructed, it is equally essential to explore how these messages are received, interpreted, and potentially redefined by audiences. Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model is central to this thesis, shifting the focus from the sender to the receiver. In his chapter, Hall argues that meaning is produced at two stages: the encoding process by the sender and the decoding process by the receiver (p. 115). He identifies three decoding positions; dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional, depending on the audience's cultural background, lived experience, and ideological stance (p. 117–127). This framework is especially relevant in the context of sustainability communication, where green marketing messages may be received with scepticism, indifference, or even resistance. Visual persuasion is not always decoded as intended, especially if consumers perceive the message as disingenuous or misaligned with the brand's actions.

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), developed by Arnould and Thompson (2005), further contextualizes how sustainability messaging intersects with identity. CCT offers a useful lend for understanding how consumption becomes a means of self-expression. Consumers may align with green brands to perform ethical identities, resist mainstream consumption patterns, or express belonging to specific subcultures (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, pp. 871–872). This approach also explains possible variations in how sustainability messages resonate across different consumer groups, influenced by class, geography, gender, or generation.

Together, these theoretical insights emphasize that meaning is co-created in the communication process. Brands may attempt to control narratives through framing and visual storytelling, but the consumer's decoding process plays a vital role in shaping the message's ultimate impact. By understanding consumer perception as an active, culturally informed process, this thesis seeks to examine how green marketing messages in fashion are received and what meanings are constructed from them.

2.2 Green Marketing in the Digital Era

To understand the logic behind fashion brands' media framing on Instagram today, it is crucial to study the evolution of green marketing but also the challenges that was, and is still facing. This section traces the shift from ecological to sustainable marketing highlighting key

communicative challenges that shape consumer's trust and perception such as green marketing myopia, greenwashing, and the attitude-behaviour gap. It later transitions into the digital environment, where platforms like Instagram play a central role in framing sustainability through multimodal content. These elements ground the theoretical lens, supporting its aim to analyse how sustainability messages are frames and encoded but also decoded.

2.2.1 From Ecological to Sustainable Marketing

Green marketing has evolved significantly over the past five decades. Initially conceptualized as *ecological marketing* in the 1970s, it focused on minimizing environmental harm through promoting eco-friendly alternatives and waste-reduction strategies (Katrandjiev, 2016, p. 75-76). By the late 80s, following a series of massive ecological disasters, the discourse shifted toward *green marketing*, emphasizing environmental benefits and portraying companies as socially responsible.

However, this tendency of brands to overemphasize sustainability attributes while overlooking essential consumer expectations such as quality, convenience, and affordability led to *green marketing myopia,* a term described by Ottman (2011, p. 28-30). Aiming to overcome this, Ottman suggested integrating ecological value with quality and usability, making green marketing appealing and relatable rather than merely ethical. This paved the way for *sustainable marketing,* a broader approach that integrates social, economic and environmental aspects of sustainability (Katrandjiev, 2016, p.77). Sustainable marketing aligns with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), reflecting a deeper systemic shift, social justice and macroeconomic growth (Belz et al., 2012, p. 5-6).

Table 1. Marketing Phases and Key Characteristics in Green Marketing Evolution

Period	Marketing Phase	Key Characteristics
1970s	Ecological Marketing	Focused on pollution control, resource efficiency, niche environmental concern
Late 1980s–1990s	Green Marketing	Promoted environmental benefits but often ignored consumer expectations
2000s–Present	Sustainable Marketing	Integrate environmental, social, and economic goals; emphasizes CSR and systemic change

This historical transition reveals how green marketing has moved from a niche ecological concern to a strategic pillar for long-term value and ethical market systems (Belz et al., 2012, p. 25).

2.2.2 Green Marketing Challenges

2.2.2.1 Green Marketing Myopia

Despite the theoretical evolution of green marketing, the risk of myopic marketing is still very much present and persistent Stafford and Graul (2020) Brands still tend to overemphasize environmental without addressing vital consumer necessities. This can discourage consumers who are unwilling to compromise on affordability, convenience and lifestyle fit, only to be perceived as environmentally friendly. This leads to weak market engagement and missed opportunities for real impact (Ottman, 2011, p. 28).

Interestingly, Wiederhold, & Martinez (2018, p. 422) observed that even consumers with high environmental concern rarely translate that concern into action, considering that consumers' purchasing behaviour is influenced by complex physiological, social, cultural and practical dimensions. To address this, Stafford and Graul (2020) suggest a more integrated and consumer-centric approach, stressing the urgency to shift from eco-centric to eco-effective communication by framing sustainable products by highlighting lifestyle comparability and emotional resonance. This approach aligns sustainability with consumer expectations, making it more effective and meaningful. They also argue that marketers should target all citizens and not focus solely on the eco-conscious (p. 492).

Green marketing myopia not only reduces the effectiveness of sustainability campaigns but also leads to credibility issues, particularly when environmental statements don't seem to be based on real consumer experiences or fail to deliver visible benefits. Stafford and Graul's (2020) approach reframes sustainability as aspirational and accessible, rather than complicated and elitist.

2.2.2.2 Greenwashing and Credibility

Closely related to green marketing myopia is the hazardous phenomenon of greenwashing. Defined by Jones (2019, p. 730) as the act of misleading consumers about a

product's or company's environmental impact, greenwashing undermines trust and blurs the line between genuinely ethical and opportunistic branding. This false practice gained momentum when businesses started to use misleading sustainability claims in response to rising environmental concerns being the new "trend", leading to what Jones (2019) described as "*ethical discourse that is contradicted by corporate praxis*" (p.746).

Aligning with Entman's theory of strategic framing (1993), greenwashing distorts consumer understanding, with brands using *selective disclosure* (Szabo & Webster, 2020, p. 724) to emphasize certain positive aspects while hiding harmful ones. As Jones (2019) argues, the transformative potential of green marketing is undermined when audiences become disillusioned with misleading claims, reinforcing the false narrative that sustainability and profitability naturally coexist (p.745). Consumer fatigue develops when consumers are repeatedly exposed to vague or exaggerated messages, resulting in cynicism and inertia.

In the face of this narrative, scholars stress the importance of third-party certifications, transparent supply chains, and consistent sustainability narratives (Szabo & Webster, 2020, p. 725). Eco-labels, lifecycle assessments, and publicly available sustainability reports are elements that can help consumers assess the authenticity of green claims and differentiate ethical brands from opportunistic ones. However, these measures come with limitations, including standardization difficulties and the fact that consumers often struggle to interpret labels and certifications (Szabo & Webster, 2020, p. 735).

Greenwashing is not a mere communication malfunction, but a structural one, rooted in the conflict between sustainability and profit maximization. Real progress demands moving from symbolic to substantive action, based on long-term responsibility, regulatory support, and sincere stakeholder engagement (Jones, 2019, p. 746).

2.2.2.3 The Attitude-Behaviour Gap

Following the credibility and communication issues associated with greenwashing, a deeper structural and psychological challenge emerges: the gap between consumers' ethics and actions. White et al. (2019, p.127-133) welcomed the term *elusive green consumer* to describe how even when consumers report positive attitudes towards sustainability, their purchasing behaviour fails to comply. Wiederhold and Martinez (2018, p. 422) confirm this gap, indicating structural and emotional barriers such as: old-fashioned stereotypes around

environmentalism, cost, ignorance, lack of trust, limited availability, established consumption patterns & inertia.

To bridge this gap, White et al. (2019, p. 127-133) suggest leveraging social influence, default settings and emotionally appealing language that gently emphasises accountability, shifting the narrative from ownership to experience while leveraging the domino effect, which proposes that small sustainable actions can spark larger lifestyle changes. For marketers, this means that encouraging a single low-barrier sustainable action, like choosing recycled materials or skipping fast fashion can be a motivation for possibly long-term lifestyle changes (White et al., 2019, p. 130).

Cultural and generational factors also play a role. Sandoval et al (2022, p.6-8) highlight how Gen Z and young Millennials may be more exposed to sustainability discourse due to social media, yet more overwhelmed by the messages. That is why brands that engage in environmental education, foster community-driven campaigns, avoid gender-based messaging and work with young influencers can resonate more deeply. In this context, Wiederhold, & Martinez (2018, p. 425) also emphasize that consumers are not homogenous and the one-size-fits-all model fails because global consumers have severely differentiated realities.

In the context of this thesis, the attitude-behaviour gap is not just a barrier to ethical consumption but a crucial point of analysis. Understanding how visual and textual green marketing strategies either succeed or fail in bridging this gap can reveal the mechanisms through which sustainability messages are interpreted, resisted or embraced, focusing on Gen Z consumers.

2.2.3 Green Marketing on Social Media

The rise of social media has radically transformed the landscape of marketing, positioning platforms like Instagram as critical tools for brands to engage consumers and communicate sustainability as part of its marketing and CSR strategy. Green marketing on social media is no longer only limited to awareness regarding contemporary environmental issues, but incorporates storytelling, emotional engagement and co-creating meaning with audiences (Tazeen & Mullick, 2023, pp. 3-5). This evolution brings both opportunities and challenges as brands attempt to balance authenticity, visibility and the complex psychology

of sustainable behaviour in an increasingly saturated and competitive digitalized environment.

Regarding green marketing, Instagram given its multimodal nature enables brands to frame sustainability through both text and visuals (Tazeen & Mullick, 2023, pp. 3-5). As Coleman (2010) suggested, visual cues like colour schemes, symbols or influencer related content coexisting with captions and hashtags can reinforce values, moral commitments and call-to-action messages.

Social media also excellent platforms for emotional storytelling and community building, two elements that are appealing to younger generations. According to Sandoval et al. (2022, p.8), educational content on sustainability, shared via influencers or campaigns, can foster long-term behavioural change by aligning values with actions and emotional engagement. Instagram thus has the potential, besides a marketing tool to become an educational space. Community-driven marketing, where users are invited to co-create, share, and engage, has been proven to motivate Gen Z and Millennials, especially when campaigns are personalized and values-based. However, as Wiederhold & Martinez (2018, p. 423) emphasize, simply sharing information is insufficient since brands must also account for the attitude–behaviour gap and bridge it through building foundations of trust and relevance.

Despite all these possibilities, in such a saturated digital landscape, trust is based on the coherence between what brands display and what they actually do. The weight of ethical communication that reflects actual accountability rather than symbolic gestures, lies on Instagram's visual and textual framing. Green marketing on Instagram is a performative and participatory space where strategic framing, consumer psychology and branding ethics converge. Understanding how visual and textual messages are strategically framed and decoded is key to assessing both marketing impact and sustainability communication.

2.3 Sustainability & Marketing in Fashion

Fashion is a central pillar of identity formation, bridging personal style and cultural belonging. However, it is increasingly scrutinized for its significant role in environmental damage and social injustice. This section outlines the environmental and social challenges of fashion's global system and then focuses on how these intersect with branding, marketing communication and Instagram strategies. These are core concerns of this thesis, showing how

fashion discourse is being framed in the digital era and how these messages may be interpreted or questioned by consumers.

2.3.1 Fashion's Environmental Impact

The fashion industry has been repeatedly identified as one of the most environmentally damaging global sectors, second only to aviation in regards to pollution footprint as per Niinimäki et. (2020). The environmental costs of fashion span the entire lifestyle of a garment from the fibre production to the disposal of the finished garment and include water overuse, carbon emissions, chemical pollution and unsustainable waste generation.

Excessive water usage is one of the fashion's industry most persistent concerns with cotton cultivation being the main reason. Notably, producing a single T-shirt and pair of jeans can require up to 20,000 litres of water (Niinimäki et., 2020, p. 6). Water stressed areas like China and India, major producers of textiles, are particularly vulnerable to this reliance. Chemical pollution consists another vital issue with chemical remains from dyes and pesticides contaminating local ecosystems, especially in countries with weak environmental regulation like Cambodia, (Niinimäki et al., 2020, p. 8). These pollutants not only threaten biodiversity but also accumulate in the food chain, risking both environmental and human health.

Waste is another major contributor to the environmental impact of fashion. Each year, more than 92 million tonnes of textile waste are generated, with the majority ending up in landfills or incineration (Niinimäki et al., 2020, p. 10). This includes unsold inventory that is often discarded by major brands. Despite growing public awareness and circular economy discourse, less than 1% of that textile waste is currently recycled into new clothes, indicating a failure to properly implement closed-loop systems (Niinimäki et al., 2020, p.11). Meanwhile, the fast fashion model, characterised by speed, low prices, and frequent style changes, plays a central role in waste generation. This disposable mindset, encouraged by corporate overproduction, clashes fundamentally with environmental sustainability.

In light of these impacts, environmental sustainability in fashion must improve. Structural transformations are expected urgently, including; significantly reducing production, shifting from synthetic to regenerative fibres, investing in low-impact

manufacturing technologies, and slowing down consumer demand (Niinimäki et al., 2020, p. 15)

2.3.2 Fashion's Social Impact

While environmental degradation caused by the fashion industry has received growing attention, its social impact remains critically underexamined. The industry's global supply chains are marked by systemic labour exploitation, including forced overtime, unsafe conditions, child labour, gendered inequalities, and modern slavery, especially in the Global South (von Busch, 2022, pp. 405-408)

Despite decades of voluntary corporate responsibility schemes and third-party audits, real progress has not been documented. Fletcher and Tham (2015) emphasize that the structure of mass-manufacture in fashion places the burden of mass production on the most vulnerable populations, particularly women, migrant workers, and informal labourers (p.132). Voluntary auditing systems and corporate responsibility codes have largely failed to bring meaningful change. The commonly used "code + audit" model has proven inadequate, with audits often sporadic, opaque and focused on superficial compliance rather than deeper structural issues. As Parker (in Fletcher & Tham, 2015, p. 139) notes, *"few [brands] have taken significant steps to address their commercial practices," such as unrealistic pricing and fast turnaround demands that indirectly perpetuate labour abuses."* Regulatory oversight is further weakened by political ties between garment industry elites and state actors in key producing countries (Fletcher & Tham, 2015, p. 141).

From a critical perspective, von Busch (2022, p. 405-408) is warning that sustainability agendas often prioritize environmental goals over workers' rights, reinforcing extractive systems under a green label. Brands may highlight closed-loop production or recycled textiles while sourcing from factories that expose workers to systemic abuse. This exposes fashion's paradox: what is being sustained, and for whom? If sustainability caters primarily to the lifestyles of privileged consumers while maintaining extractive labour structures, it becomes complicit in perpetuating inequality.

To be meaningful, sustainability must be understood as political and intersectional, addressing labour rights and conditions alongside environmental concerns. This is especially urgent given the gendered nature of fashion industry, where women constitute approximately

75% of the global garment workforce and are simultaneously the primary targets of fast fashion marketing. Women often endure severely low wages, limited rights, and union repression. As highlighted in the Routledge Handbook of Sustainability and Fashion (p.134), this creates a paradox in which women are exploited both as producers and as consumers, a dynamic that calls for deeper feminist critiques of consumer responsibility and structural dependence (Fletcher & Tham, 2015).

While innovations like transparency apps and blockchain technologies offer greater visibility into supply chains (Brans, 2023, p.1005), these tools alone are insufficient. Without enforceable labour protections, meaningful participation from worker communities, and a shift away from high-volume fast fashion models, efforts to improve social sustainability will remain limited (von Busch, 2022, p. 404). Ultimately, the social cost of fashion is inseparable from its economic model. Until core issues such as underpayment, union repression, and labour invisibility are seriously addressed, sustainability in fashion will remain a partial and performative concept. As Brans (2023, p.1012) argues, the mere availability of information does not guarantee accountability, what matters is how data is used to mobilize action, rephrase narratives and include marginalized voices in sustainability discourse.

A holistic model of sustainability calls for an integrated view that balances environmental regeneration, social justice, and economic equity, not treating these pillars as interchangeable or optional.

2.3.3 Branding Sustainability in Fashion

As sustainability becomes a central narrative in the fashion industry, branding serves as a communicative bridge between ethics, identity, and marketability. In an industry traditionally centred around aesthetics and cultural relevance, branding enables companies to reframe sustainability as a desirable lifestyle choice. Sustainable branding involves not only promoting environmentally friendly practices, but also shaping the discourse to reflect consumers' ethical and emotional expectations, blending values, visual aesthetics and ethical positioning (Ge, 2024, pp. 122-125)

Combining storytelling, ethical positioning, and visual language, brands are aiming to humanize their sustainability efforts to create identities perceived as authentic and purposeful. Stafford and Graul (2020, p.226) emphasize the importance of crafting emotionally stories

related to origin, craftsmanship or activism, that resonate with consumers' aspirations, building emotional digital engagement and trust. Similarly, Fletcher and Tham (2015, p. 260) point out that sustainable branding can help humanize ethical values by evoking emotions to the audience rather than simply advertising products.

Transparent supply chains are seen as a core element of sustainable branding. For example, Brans (2023, 1012) discusses how supply chain apps and brands like *Honest By* use supply chain data as part of their visual and political identity, turning transparency into a marketing asset. The use of ethical language is another key to sustainable marketing. Brands often mention ideals like circularity, justice, and inclusivity. However, Jones (2019, pp.742-745), warns that such language can become performative if not supported by structural change. This distinction between symbolic and substantive change is highlighted by Szabo and Webster (2020, p.723), mentioning that while consumer interest in ethical fashion is rising, so is scepticism. Therefore, brands should legitimize their efforts by providing third-party certifications and lifecycle assessments.

A powerful tool in branding is aesthetics. Sustainable fashion brands often adopt minimalist visual codes, neutral colour palettes, and nature based-imagery to evoke purity and ecological sensitivity in order to influence consumer perception. These visual cues are part of what Messaris (1997, p. 41) describes as a layered meaning-making process in which imagery works symbolically to reinforce brand identity via emotional resonance. Certain brands go as far as employing "radical transparency" by showcasing behind-the-scenes content, including production procedures and worker's stories. Fletcher and Tham (2015, p. 262) point out that aesthetics can shape perceptions as dynamically as ethical claims in a visually saturated environment.

Despite the existence of several sustainable branding tools, the branding paradox still remains a problem. The drive to remain authentic and marketable at the same time risks aestheticizing ethics. Brand must balance the need for profitability with a genuine commitment to sustainability. As Fletcher and Tham (2015, p. 265) argue, the future of sustainable fashion branding lies not only in storytelling but in building the foundations to support it.

2.3.4 Framing Sustainable Fashion on Instagram

Testa et al. (2021, p.2) emphasize that Instagram has become a central platform for branding and communicating the values of sustainable brands due to its image driven nature and broad audience reach. Through curated visuals, caption-based storytelling, influencer collaborations, and interactive content, brands not only inform but also urge participation in ethical consumption (Testa et al., 2021, p. 10). This aligns with Entman's (1993, p.52) framing theory, explaining how brands guide interpretation through textual and visual emphasis.

Sustainable fashion brands selectively highlight specific elements to guide consumer perception in accordance with Entman's (1993, p.56) concept of selection and salience. These are framed both visually through colours, materials, imagery and short videos and textually through captions and hashtags, enabling storytelling that reinforces ethical branding (Testa et al., 2021). Common frames include environmental responsibility, ethical labour, and social justice with each appealing to different audience values (Velasco-Molpeceres et al., 2022, p.15).

Visual aesthetics also key players in shaping perceptions of sustainability. Milanesi et al. (2022, p.6) highlight how brands often use emotionally resonant imagery and language to foster engagement. For example, minimalist aesthetics and nature themed imagery are among the most frequently used codes to communicate ecological responsibility. Testa et al. (2021, p. 10) similarly find that Instagram posts combine aesthetic appeal with educational content such as infographics, captions or storytelling to provoke stronger cognitive and emotional reactions from users. This kind of storytelling is part of a broader visual grammar of sustainable fashion, reinforcing the brand's identity as ethical, through emotional and symbolic associations (Messaris, 1997).

As suggested by Ge (2024, p. 126) influencers function as "agents of trust" which places them in a central role to sustainability's framing on Instagram. With consumer scepticism and attitude-behaviour gap persisting (Jones, 2019, pp. 743), infulencers' perceived authenticity, familiarity and lifestyle integration of sustainable products can validate a brand's ethical perspective. Ge's study shows that the influencer's own sustainable fashion purchase experience and perceived similarity with Gen Z consumers are among the most influential factors affecting purchase intention. This dynamic humanizes sustainability, making it more accessible and relatable for young consumers navigating ethical consumption. In this context, influencers play a key role in bridging the attitude–behaviour gap, by

incorporating sustainable practices in their everyday life and translating abstract values into visible and aspirational choices (Ge, 2024, pp. 130–132).

Furthermore, user-generated content (UGC) and community-building are essential framing tools. Testa et al. (2021, p. 11–12) highlight how reposts, call-to-action captions, and personal sustainability stories foster a sense of inclusion and participatory culture. Hashtags such as #WhoMadeMyClothes and #SlowFashion serve as textual frames that connect individual posts to broader activist discourses and global movements.

2.3.5 Instagram Challenges

Despite these possibilities that this platform offers, framing sustainability on Instagram is not without challenges. Lee and Weder (2021, p. 208) note that consumers may misinterpret minimalistic visual cues such as beige palettes or recycled imagery as indicators of sustainability but a serious ethical commitment might be missing. When many brands adopt similar visual strategies, distinguishing between genuinely sustainable practices and surface-level performance becomes increasingly difficult (Testa et al., 2021, p. 14). Milanesi et al. (2022, p. 8) also observe that despite the emphasis on sustainability, most brands avoid posting behind-the-scenes content related to production, which may stem from Instagram's image-centered design or from strategic branding decisions to avoid reputational risks.

To address these tensions, scholars recommend a shift towards transparency and narrative consistency. For example, Velasco-Molpeceres et al. (2022) argue that slow fashion brands should engage more deeply with their production processes, improve their sustainability communication training, and develop strategies that prioritize interaction over aesthetic perfection. Testa et al. (2021, p. 15) similarly highlight that authentic branding emerges from exposing imperfections, showing long-term commitments, and offering educational content that grounds sustainability in tangible action.

In conclusion, Instagram is not a neutral space for communication. It is a curated arena where sustainability is visually, emotionally and ideologically framed. Frames do not merely present facts, they construct meanings, evoke values, and guide interpretation (Entman, 1993, p. 52). As this section has shown, Instagram provides sustainable brands both opportunities and limitations in shaping their ethical identity. Those that navigate this space successfully

tend to blend visual and narrative tools, foreground transparency over perfection, and invite users into a collective ethical journey.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

This research adopts a qualitative, multi-method approach, which is suited for exploring complex meaning-making processes involved in sustainable fashion communication on Instagram. Qualitative methods will allow to investigate how sustainability messages are constructed, interpreted and embedded in broader sociocultural contexts (Schreier, 2014, p. 2-3). allowing for an in-depth understanding. To address both the construction and perception of sustainability discourse, the research combines Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) of Instagram posts with semi-structured interviews of eight participants aged 18-35.

For the first part of this study, MCDA is employed to analyse how four sustainable fashion brands GANNI, Patagonia, Stella McCartney, and Reformation frame sustainability through visual and textual content on Instagram. MCDA provides a methodological framework for analysing both visual and textual elements of communication, as semiotic resources that structure meaning (Jancsary et al., 2016, pp. 2-3), making it suitable for exploring Instagram's hybrid media environment. It allows the examination of environmental and ethical themes that are embedded in the brands' communication strategies via imagery, captions, hashtags, and layout.

To explore how these messages are perceived and interpreted by audiences, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight Gen Z participants selected based on their regular engagement with fashion content on Instagram and basic awareness of sustainability issues. This group reflects the key target demographic of digital fashion marketing and allows the research to investigate how framing strategies resonate with consumer values and perceptions of authenticity.

This combination will capture both how sustainability is communicated from the brand's side and how it is interpreted by the audience. The use of multiple qualitative methods fosters triangulation and enhances the depth and credibility of the findings, aligning with the iterative and reflexive nature of qualitative research (Schlunegger et al., 2024, pp. 615–618). This multi-method approach enables a more holistic perspective on the communicative dynamics of sustainable fashion and leaves room for emergent insights beyond pre-established assumptions.

3.2 Data Collection & Sampling

3.2.1 Instagram Post Sampling

The sampling for this study followed a purposive, criterion-based strategy, which is commonly used in qualitative research to identify and select information-rich cases that are especially relevant to the research question (Suri, 2011, p. 65). In this context, four sustainable fashion brands, GANNI, Patagonia, Stella McCartney, and Reformation, were selected based on their explicit public positioning as environmentally and socially responsible, and their active engagement with sustainability narratives on Instagram. This type of non-probability sampling is particularly suitable when the aim is to gain in-depth insights into how specific phenomena, such as sustainability framing, are expressed and constructed in a targeted media context (Schreier, 2014, p. 6). The selected brands function as critical cases, offering a rich and relevant site for exploring how sustainable fashion values are communicated through digital branding practices.

For each brand, the first three Instagram posts per month that referred to sustainability, environmental responsibility, ethical production, or social impact were selected over a six-month period from January to June 2024. When fewer than three relevant posts were published in a given month, the sampling continued to the next available posts until the monthly quota was met. This systematic sampling process ensured a balanced temporal distribution of posts, lowering the risk of bias toward isolated campaigns or spikes in brand activity.

In total, 72 posts, 18 posts per brand, were collected. Each post was archived along with its caption, hashtags, image, and date of publication. Posts were selected based on explicit textual or visual references to sustainability themes, including eco-friendly materials, transparency claims, and slow fashion messaging. Due to feasibility constraints, video elements (reels, stories) were not systematically archived or analysed. The visual analysis focused on static feed images, which represent a stable and widely used format in sustainable branding.

An overview of the post sample, including brand name, post date, main frame theme, content summary and visual style is included in Appendix H: Instagram Post Overview Table. and visual framing strategies are described in Appendix E: Visual Frame Codebook.

3.2.2 Interviewee Sampling

To complement the MCDA of brand-generated content, the study also included semi-structured interviews with individuals from the target audience of sustainable fashion

communication. A total of eight participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling in order to identify information-rich cases relevant to the research objective (Suri, 2011, p. 65). Recruitment focused on individuals aged 18 to 35 who engage regularly with fashion content on Instagram and demonstrate basic awareness of sustainability issues. This demographic reflects the key audience for ethical fashion branding on social media, particularly Generation Z and younger Millennials.

Recruitment took place via personal networks and targeted social media posts. Participants received an informed consent form explaining the purpose of the study, their rights, and data protection measures which can be found in Appendix C: Ethics & Consent Form. All interviews were conducted via Zoom call, depending on participant availability, and each session lasted approximately 30-35 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized.

An overview of participants, including age, gender, occupation, fashion orientation, Instagram usage and sustainability attitude is included in Appendix G: Participant Overview Table.

3.3 Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

This study employs Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) to examine how sustainable fashion brands construct meaning through Instagram posts. MCDA provides a framework for analysing the interplay between textual and visual semiotic modes, treating both as resources through which ideologies and values are communicated (Jancsary et al., 2016, pp. 4-5). Given Instagram's highly visual format, this approach is well-suited to understanding how branding practices are framed to align with sustainability discourses.

The analysis is grounded in framing theory (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1993), which conceptualizes frames as interpretive schemas that highlight certain aspects of reality while neglecting others. Visual and textual elements, such as captions, images, emojis, layout, and color were examined as framing mechanisms that shape consumer interpretation and emotional response. The analysis also draws on visual communication theory, particularly Messaris (1997), to interpret how visual cues evoke environmental values, ethical consumption, or aspirational identity.

To operationalize this analysis, a coding framework was developed that categorizes posts into eight recurring frame types. These were derived deductively from theory and literature on sustainable branding, and inductively refined through immersion in the data.

Each frame is associated with specific visual or textual indicators, which were coded in Atlas.ti. The aim was not only to classify individual posts, but also to identify discursive patterns across brands, revealing how sustainability is constructed, simplified, or idealized through Instagram branding.

An overview of the frame categories and their indicators is presented in Table 2 below. The full list of codes and definitions are available in Appendix D: MCDA Codebook and Appendix E: Visual Frame Codebook.

Table 2. Frame Types, Indicators and Example Codes for Instagram Post Analysis

Frame Type	Indicators in Instagram Posts	Example Codes
Temporal Frame	References to slowness, durability, repair, longevity, anti-fast fashion	Slow fashion, repair, recycled
Visual Frames (Messaris)	Use of nature-based imagery, earthy tones, minimalism, soft lighting, symbols (e.g., plants, recycled materials)	Color tone: earthy, natural, simple. Symbol: nature related emojis
Moral/Ethical Frame	Emphasis on justice, ethics, collective action, community	emotional, info-educational, call to action
Transparency & Trust Frame	Certifications, behind-the-scenes visuals, factory/supply chain visibility	Certifications, transparency in production process
Educational and Informational Frame	Posts sharing facts, educational infographics, storytelling about sustainability challenges	Informative storytelling
Influencer and Parasocial Frame	Use influencers as "authentic voices", creation of intimacy through parasocial relationships	Influencer campaign
Performative Culture & Identity Frame	Aspirational aesthetics, portrayal of sustainability as a personal value & fashion as identity expression	Aspirational, eco-consumer, slow living

3.4 Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were selected to investigate how consumers perceive and respond to these media representations. Semi-structured interviews offer the flexibility to explore emerging themes while maintaining a degree of structure that ensures comparability across participants (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p 1361). This method allows to delve into participants' lived experiences and subjective interpretations, which are essential for understanding the broader impact of sustainability marketing on consumer identity and behaviour.

Adding to the Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of Instagram posts, the semi-structured interviews explored how audiences decode sustainability messaging. As Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model suggests, meaning is not fixed by the sender but actively interpreted by receivers based on their cultural background, values, and lived experience. Interviews allowed for a deeper understanding of how consumers interpret, negotiate, or resist sustainability narratives crafted by fashion brands, and whether they perceive these messages as authentic, aspirational, or performative.

Furthermore, Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), further informed consumer interpretation, recognizing that consumers do not simply absorb brand messaging but they use products and brand discourse to construct ethical identities, perform cultural belonging, and express resistance or alignment with mainstream fashion norms. Interviews thus helped uncover how sustainability is integrated into the participant's value systems, lifestyle choices, and identity.

To stimulate more grounded responses, participants were shown a set of four Instagram posts, one for each analysed brand, from the study's dataset during the interview. These visual prompts illustrated a range of sustainability framing types and were used to spark discussion on trust, relatability and visual impact. The full Interview Guide is included in Appendix A, along with screenshots of the four visual prompts used.

A thematic operationalization of how MCDA findings shaped the interview focus is presented in the table 3 below. The full interview codebook can be found in Appendix F: Interview Codebook.

Table 3.Thematic Operationalization of Framing and Interview Focus

Framing Theme (from MCDA)	Theoretical Lens	Interview Focus
Lifestyle & Identity Framing	CCT (Identity Projects); Hall (Negotiated)	How participants relate to eco-fashion as part of their self-image
Moral & Political Framing	Hall (Oppositional or Dominant Decoding)	Whether ethical narratives are seen as genuine or overly idealistic
Transparency & Trust Claims	CCT (Marketplace Trust); Hall (Credibility)	Reactions to certifications, supply chain visibility, brand honesty
Aspirational Aesthetics	CCT (Cultural Symbols); Hall (Visual Reading)	How visual minimalism, beauty, and influencer use affect perception
Sustainability Education Framing	CCT (Knowledge Sharing); Hall (Negotiation)	Do educational posts inform and empower, or feel superficial?
Instagram as a Platform	CCT (Mediated Culture); Hall (Context of Reception)	Role of Instagram itself: influence, fatigue, skepticism

3.5 Data Analysis & Coding Process

The data analysis followed a double sided qualitative strategy, reflecting the study's dual focus on brand messaging (via Instagram posts) and audience reception (via interviews). Both datasets were imported and analysed in Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software, which enabled systematic coding, comparison and thematic categorization of textual and visual elements.

For the Instagram data, a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) approach was applied, treating images, captions, hashtags, and layout as semiotic resources that contribute to meaning-making communicating ideological positions (Jancsary et al., 2016, pp. 2-3). A deductive coding framework was initially developed based on existing literature on framing, sustainability, and fashion communication (see Table 2 and Appendix D: MCDA Codebook for Instagram Post Analysis). While analysing the dataset, inductive codes emerged, capturing recurring patterns or new strategies that were not anticipated in advance.

Posts were segmented into analytical units based on visual and textual dimensions, and codes were applied across both layers to identify how sustainability was framed.

For the interview data, a thematic analysis approach was employed, inspired by Braun and Clarke's (2006, pp. 86-94) six phase model: familiarization with data, initial code generation, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and final reporting. This method was selected for its flexibility and systematic structure as it enabled the examination of recurring patterns of meaning within participant reflections. Interview transcripts were thoroughly read and coded using a combination of theory-driven codes (informed by Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model and Arnould & Thompson's (2005) Consumer Culture Theory) as well as data-driven codes, allowing for themes to emerge organically from participant experiences. Key themes included identity construction, perceived authenticity, aesthetic appeal, and critical scepticism to sustainability content.

Throughout the analysis, cross-referencing between MCDA and interview codes enabled a form of methodological triangulation, strengthening the credibility and analytical depth of the findings (Schlunegger et al., 2024, p. 618). This integrative approach enabled the study to trace how sustainability is simultaneously constructed by brands and interpreted by consumers.

4. Results

In this research the goal was to investigate the way sustainability is communicated by four fashion brands on Instagram and how consumers interpret these messages. This chapter presents the main findings of the study, guided by the research question: *How do fashion brands frame sustainability on Instagram, and how do young consumers decode these* messages? To answer this, the analysis addressed three subquestions. First, it explored what visual and textual framing strategies do fashion brands employ to communicate sustainability on Instagram. Second, it examined how do these framing strategies differ across brands with varying aesthetics, price points and sustainability commitments? Finally, it investigated how young consumers decode, negotiate or resist the sustainability frames encoded by these brands.

The chapter begins with the results of the Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) which represents how brands encode sustainability through visual and textual framing strategies. It then turns to findings from the semi-structured interviews, offering insight on consumer identity and ways in which brand messages are received, interpreted, or negotiated by young consumers. Taken together, the two perspectives offer a multidimensional understanding of sustainability communication, highlighting not only how brands frame sustainability through visual and textual strategies, but also how these messages are interpreted within the context of consumer identity, ethical values, and wider socio-cultural critiques around transparency, lifecycle thinking, and the need for structural change.

4.1. Sustainability Framing Strategies on Instagram

This section presents the findings of the Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), focusing on how brands encode sustainability on Instagram through visual and textual framing. It explores common themes, patterns, and stylistic choices that shape the way sustainability is communicated across the four selected brands while responding directly to the first and second sub-questions of this study.

4.1.1 Strategic Use of Sustainability Messaging

Fashion brands tend to utilize multi-layered framing techniques to present sustainability as part of their identity but also to project ethical values and environmental concern on Instagram. Across the dataset of the 72 posts, a shared set of framing practices emerged,

regardless of brand identity or aesthetic. These include nature-based symbolism, circularity claims, emotional storytelling around circularity, educational content and activist language, and celebrity or influencer endorsement. Yet, beneath these shared techniques lie distinct variations in execution, tone.

Posts from Stella McCartney frequently align sustainability with high-fashion cues and global activism. For instance, the brand's campaigns often feature internationally acclaimed figures such as Harrison Ford advocating for ocean conservation on #WorldOceansDay, combining the launch of capsule collections supporting environmental NGOs. "*S🌍S Fund is a $200 million investment fund empowering the next generation of sustainable innovators, co-founded by Stella McCartney.Shop the S🌍S Capsule in-store and at stellamccartney.com now*." Similarly, the "Falabella Forever" campaign exemplifies how sustainability is framed as a glamorous rebellion against the status quo. By showcasing the iconic vegan bag alongside model and activist Cara Delevingne, the campaign fuses cruelty-free fashion with celebrity appeal, asserting both aesthetic innovation and ethical superiority. The message emphasizes material transparency *"vegan down to the glue*" *"we'd rather go naked than wear leather"* while delivering intense anti-leather rhetoric rooted in environmental data.

"Every year, the fashion industry kills over 1 billion animals for leather (PETA). This has a negative impact on the environment, with animal agriculture responsible for 80% of the Amazon's deforested areas (WWF) and driving 14.5% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions (FAO)"

Reformation, while also aesthetically driven, adopts a more informal strategy, incorporating emotional and lifestyle-based storytelling. The brand frequently employs humorous captions and casual language that makes sustainability appear effortless and cool. It also shares behind-the-scenes glimpses into production, such as factory tours and staff highlights, reinforcing transparency through access. Through intimate, diary-style captions and workplace glimpses, the brand crafts a sense of relatability.

Figure 1. Reformation's Instagram Post January 31st, 2024

Posts frequently mention goals and progress (e.g., becoming climate positive by 2025), while framing these updates within light, conversational tones. This blend of humour, relatability, and casual storytelling humanizes the brand and reduces the perceived distance between brand and consumer. However, the emotional tone sometimes risks crossing into sentimentality, and some sustainability claims lack detailed substantiation within the post itself, relying instead on external links or implied trust.

Patagonia consistently deviates from conventional brand messaging, prioritizing environmental activism, education, and systemic change over product promotion. Across its Instagram content, the brand employs a documentary-like tone, often featuring environmental justice movements, Indigenous sovereignty, and climate policy wins. From the campaign to remove the Klamath River dams to community-led marine protection in Australia, backed by powerful visuals of landscapes, protests, and advice on ethical consumption, Patagonia posts highlight real stories. Captions frequently include direct calls to action, educational statistics, and links to petitions or Patagonia Action Works, reinforcing its role as a platform for mobilization.

Figure 2. Patagonia's Instagram post, February 7th, 2024

This consistent prioritization of activism over aesthetic contributes to Patagonia's framing as a systemic actor rather than a lifestyle brand. Their messaging reflects a strong alignment between purpose, tone, and content. Ultimately, Patagonia's approach embeds sustainability not as a branding feature but as a deeply integrated organizational mission, framed through authenticity, grassroots engagement, and environmental literacy.

Figure 3. Ganni Instagram post, June 11th, 2024

GANNI bridges these approaches having a unique position in the landscape, merging innovation-driven storytelling with playful aesthetics and youth-oriented engagement. Through its "Fabrics of the Future" campaign, GANNI introduces bio-based materials like Oleatex (from olive oil waste), Celium™ (cultivated from fruit waste), and Savian (plant-based faux fur), showcasing a commitment to cutting-edge sustainable innovation. Posts frequently feature immersive digital visuals, colourful 3D animations, and installations at Copenhagen Fashion Week.

GANNI also highlights collaborations with emerging artists and designers, positioning the brand as a curator of creative, responsible futures. GANNI's communication is engaging and rich in technological optimism, focusing on material experimentation and aesthetic appeal.

Visually, all brands use common symbolisms: nature landscapes, ocean vistas, and neutral palettes to visually reinforce their environmental positioning. Overall, sustainability is strategically woven into brand storytelling, but the depth and sincerity of this messaging varies. While brands like Patagonia prioritize education and activism, others lean on aesthetic familiarity and aspirational tones. These findings illustrate how brands encode sustainability through selective emphasis, aligning with Entman's (1993) framing theory and Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model. As Messaris (1997) argues, images function persuasively not by

stating but by showing. In this case, sustainability is framed though carefully selected aesthetic choices.

4.1.2 Building Narrative Patterns in Instagram Posts

Instagram, as a multidimensional platform, allows fashion brands to combine narrative, visual, and emotional appeals in constructing their sustainable identities. In this dataset, several recurring semiotic strategies emerged across the visuals and captions: symbolic alignment with nature, de-centering of the product, incorporation of environmental statistics, and the strategic use of lifestyle aesthetics. The following analysis is based on the visual frames and representational codes applied by each brand to build trust, engagement, and sustainability legitimacy.

Figure 4. Stella McCartney Instagram Post, February 3d, 2024

A dominant strategy observed across brands is the use of nature-based visual symbolism such as ocean waves, forests, rural landscapes, and earth-toned colour palettes meant to signal ecological commitment. This visual language, though familiar, communicates environmental ideals without necessarily offering depth or context. It often serves as a scenery for products, implying a harmonious relationship between consumption and nature.

For example, Stella McCartney's posts regularly feature capsule collections with sweeping ocean scenes or vivid ecosystems, emphasizing the products' environmentally responsible identity. GANNI's visuals, meanwhile, combine digitally enhanced environments and abstract textures that reference nature, suggesting futuristic ecological potential.

Another recurring observation is the use of non-product-centric visual storytelling, as seen in Patagonia's posts. Rather than stressing product qualities, the imagery focuses on activism, protests, Indigenous communities, wild landscapes, and political figures. These visuals go hand in hand with detailed captions or direct calls to action, creating a frame of sustainability as a systemic, social, and political issue, rather than a matter of consumer choice. Patagonia's modest product visibility stood out as it contrasts sharply with the retail-forward aesthetics of the rest.

Lifestyle and relational aesthetics play an important role in Reformation's narrative. Behind-the-scenes shots, factory interiors, casual streetwear shoots, and humorous stills with heavy emoji usage. These strategies foster emotional resonance and relatability, placing the viewer in imagined, desirable everyday scenarios. The integration of humour softens the communication of complex sustainability goals, making them more approachable and emotionally resonant of a wider audience.

Furthermore, celebrity and influencer imagery remains an important aspect of aspirational appeal. Stella McCartney's strategic use of well-known figures like Harrison Ford and Cara Delevingne reflects an attempt to transfer cultural credibility and emotional clout to the brand's environmental messaging. Similarly, GANNI's collaborations with digital creators and eco-activists place the brand in a socially conscious, trendsetting ecosystem.

Overall, the visual and narrative patterns employed by these brands are trying to balance education, aspiration, and emotional appeal. Nature imagery and de-centered products imply moral alignment with sustainability, while lifestyle cues and celebrity presence serve to preserve aspirational brand ideals. Although these framing devices vary in substance and tone, they all contribute to the creation of a cohesive sustainability discourse that is easily consumed and shareable on Instagram, enhancing consumer engagement. This reflects Entman's (1993) notion of framing as the selection and salience of cues, while also

supporting Messaris' (1997) argument that visual persuasion lies in implication rather than explicitness.

4.1.3 Form, Language, and the Aesthetic Construction of Sustainability

Sustainability played a meaningful yet negotiated role in participants' shopping behaviours. While nearly all participants articulated a clear understanding of what sustainability entails, referring to waste reduction, durability, ethical labour, and care for the environment, they also described a complex and often frustrating process of aligning these values with real-life purchasing decisions. Sustainability, as defined by participants, goes beyond environmental concerns to encompass fair production processes and emotional investment in what is worn to protect the future of a planet harmonized with humans. Participant 3 described it as "*creating something that can be produced for generations without harming the planet,*" while another emphasized *"caring about the process of manufacturing, not just selling items on items."*

However, participants rarely positioned themselves as fully "sustainable" consumers. Instead, their choices reflected an ongoing negotiation between ethical aspirations and economic or practical constraints. The majority of participants acknowledged budget limitations, with several stating that while they desired to support sustainable brands, they were often felt excluded out of that option. Participant 4 noted, "*Those materials have their price,*" referring to ethical garments, but also emphasized a deeper frustration with fast fashion: "I hate the fabric." This blend of ethics with personal comfort led many toward second-hand markets, which were seen as both more affordable and more value-aligned. These reflections reflect the broader patterns of the attitude-behaviour gap (White et al., 2019) and reinforce critiques of green marketing myopia Ottman (2011, p. 28-30) where brand messaging fails to address affordability or structural accessibility, thus limiting its real-world impact.

Second-hand and vintage consumption emerged as the dominant strategy to reconcile values and affordability. Platforms like Vinted or local thrift stores were widely used, not only as a sustainability practice but also because they allowed for experimentation, personal style, and affordability. As Participant 2 explained, "*Most of the time I'm in a thrift store... I'm not picking something up because it's in right now. It's, can I wear this for as long as I need it?*" This sentiment was echoed by others who viewed quality and longevity as the most important factors guiding their choices, aligning sustainability with durability over trendiness.

Importantly, few participants described shopping with sustainability as the initial intention. Rather, sustainability became a by-product of habits rooted in frugality, personal expression, or aversion to mass-market trends. Participant 7 captured this duality: "*My main intention is not 'I'm going to be sustainable,' I just go to the thrift store because I like it... but both causes are served.*

Underlying many responses was a sense of confusion and mistrust. As the term "sustainability" becomes increasingly co-opted by brands, participants struggled to distinguish genuine efforts from marketing tactics. This ambiguity, paired with economic limitations, led many to almost abandon brand loyalty altogether and instead form their own hybrid model of sustainable consumption, realistic, imperfect, but deeply value-driven. This embodies the concept of the *elusive green consumer* (White et al., 2019), whose ethical ideals are often constrained by systemic, economic, and emotional realities.

4.2 Consumer Identity, Values & Motivations

While the Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) offered insight into how brands frame sustainability through visual and textual strategies, this alone does not capture how these messages are received by audiences. To fully address the research question and particularly subRQ3: How do young consumers decode, negotiate or resist the sustainability frames? This chapter now turns to the semi-structured interviews. The aim is not to analyse general fashion habits, but to understand how consumers' identities, values shape their perceptions and engagement with brand messaging. These insights help illuminate whether, and how, audiences align with or resist the encoded meanings constructed by fashion brands on Instagram.

4.2.1 Shopping Habits, Values & Identity

Participants consistently demonstrated a strong interest in both fashion and sustainability, showed minimal direct engagement with specific fashion brands either online or offline. Participants' low engagement with fashion brands is not simply due to disinterest but often stems from a values-based conflict: they want to align their consumption with personal ethics but feel most brands seem to fail to offer authentic alignment. As a result, shopping habits have shifted significantly slower, more intentional consumption, often rooted in sustainability and personal meaning. Despite a strong interest in fashion aesthetics,

participants often chose affordable second-hand or vintage alternatives or draw inspiration from influencers, replicating styles through DIY or more accessible means. Participant 6 highlighted, "*I love vintage pieces. When people ask me, where did you get that? I always say it's from my mom or second-hand shops*".

This shift is also mirrored in the conscious reduction in clothing consumption over recent years, with interviewees citing personal ethics or environmental concerns. The reduction in clothing consumption reflects a decoding process where participants resist the consumerist framing of fashion. Quality and affordability were central decision-making factors, emphasizing the desire for longevity, *"if I know that I'm gonna use it a lot. And it's not like just a trend that's passing by"* while acknowledging financial constraints. Thrifting, second-hand platforms like Vinted and local vintage stores were repeatedly mentioned as go-to sources with Participant 6 sharing *"We really see a shift in our generation, Gen Z, to become more sustainable, like buying more second-hand, like, for example, Vinted outsold every brand in France."* On the other hand, several participants explained that they still buy fast fashion but aim to extend the lifespan of those garments as a form of resistance to throwaway culture: *"I still buy from fast fashion brands, but I keep these pieces for 3–5 years,"* shared participant 3.

In-store experiences are highly valued across participant, offering not only a tangible, less overwhelming alternative to online shopping but also a more interpersonal one. Participant 4 expressed frustration with online-only model of many sustainable brands and the overload of options, *"It just stresses me out with the amount of option there is… I just like the idea of going to the store in person and go shopping."* Many described brick-and-mortar shops as spaces of ease and interpersonal connection, in stark contrast to the isolating and overwhelming nature of digital platforms. Participant 4, for instance, shared their frustration with the online-only model adopted by many sustainable brands: "*It just stresses me out with the amount of option there is… I just like the idea of going to the store in person and go shopping.*" For several participants, shopping in-store was not just about trying on clothes but about interacting with real people, discovering curated selections, and forming a more personal, less transactional relationship with the brand. This preference reflects a deeper longing for authenticity and human connection in an era saturated with algorithm-driven marketing and impersonal digital experiences.

Many also valued the emotional, cultural and ethical identity of brands. PoC-owned businesses, local designers, and shops with "a twist" or strong storytelling were favoured for their uniqueness and character. "*If the brand is transparent and aligns with your principles,*" explained participant 4, "*it is worth it to spend more, because you know the quality, and it'll last very long.*" While on the other hand another participant mentioned "*if I know that the company is tied to something that I don't support, I will not shop from them.*"

4.2.2 Perceptions of Brand Messaging on Instagram

Participants expressed widespread scepticism toward the way fashion brands communicate on Instagram, describing brand content as polished, impersonal, and overwhelmingly promotional. Interviewees revealed a low level of engagement with fashion brand accounts, often preferring to follow individual creators or small, local labels. As participant 4 put it, *"I'm trying to not be as infiltrated by them. I get an ad and try to skip it as quickly as possible."* This statement reflects a common fatigue with promoted algorithm-driven marketing and polished business accounts, which participants felt lack in terms of authentic and emotionally resonant content.

Many respondents emphasized the need for relatability and storytelling when engaging with content. They were more likely to be influenced by people they could identify with, such as content creators from similar cultural backgrounds or influencers who openly share their values and stories to whom audiences relate to and draw inspiration. Participant 4, for example, explained this connection clearly: *"If I do have a creator that I like, where I kind of identify also with like Indian heritage... and they recommend something, I would take a look at it more than if it's advertised on my feed."* This demonstrates a desire for identity-based resonance and authenticity rather than corporate distance.

Creativity and aesthetic curation were still appreciated, but only when combined with meaningful storytelling. When asked the key factor that influences their followership and engagement Participant 2 shared *"I guess the creativity... I wouldn't say I really engage with the brands so much as the people."* Influencers and creators were seen as providing a more grounded, honest and holistic perspective, especially when showcasing how clothes fit into everyday life. This contrasts sharply with the way many fashion brands present themselves, often using aspirational imagery without context. *"Everyone is kind of jockeying to be the*

most popular at one thing, and then you all end up doing the same thing," said one participant, critiquing the homogenization of fashion branding on Instagram.

Participants also noted a lack of inclusivity in brand content, both in terms of representation and targeting. Two interviewees pointed out that most fashion content felt female-targeted "*the fashion industry is mainly focused on the female brands and the female market"* and did not speak to broader or more diverse audiences. At the same time, they voiced appreciation for smaller or local brands from their home countries, which felt more personal and values-driven; "*Jamaica is really, really small. So like when I went back to Jamaica, I bought some clothes from my friend, who's a designer"*

Overall, Instagram brand messaging was viewed as aesthetically pleasing but lacking substance. Participants desired more storytelling, inclusivity, and creative engagement alongside a move away from "faceless" marketing. The overarching message was clear: "*if sustainability is to be taken seriously, brands must communicate in a way that is not only beautiful but also believable and human".*

These findings are directly related to the literature on framing and sustainable fashion communication. As noted by Milanesi et al. (2022, p.6), sustainable brands on Instagram often use curated aesthetics and symbolic imagery but such strategies risk becoming generic if not accompanied by clear and relatable storytelling. Participants' call for authenticity and familiarity aligning with Testa et al. (2021, p.10) who highlight that visual storytelling must move beyond aspirational tropes to foster meaningful consumer engagement. Similarly, Ge (2024, pp. 128-129) emphasizes the importance of peer influencers and creators over official brand messaging, reinforcing the idea that consumers trust sustainability narratives more when communicated by relatable figures. This decoding process in which audiences question or resist the frames imposed by brands, reflects Hall's encoding/decoding model, showing that brand-intended meanings are often negotiated through personal, cultural, and emotional lenses.

4.2.3 Sustainability's Role in Consumer Choices

Sustainability played a meaningful yet negotiated role in participants' shopping behaviours. While nearly all participants articulated a clear understanding of what sustainability entails, referring to waste reduction, durability, ethical labour, and care for the

environment, they also described a complex and often frustrating process of aligning these values with real-life purchasing decisions. Sustainability, as defined by participants, goes beyond environmental concerns to encompass fair production processes and emotional investment in what is worn to protect the future of a planet harmonized with humans. Participant 3 described it as "*creating something that can be produced for generations without harming the planet,*" while another emphasized "*caring about the process of manufacturing, not just selling items on items.*"

However, participants rarely positioned themselves as fully "sustainable" consumers. Instead, their choices reflected an ongoing negotiation between ethical aspirations and economic or practical constraints. The majority of participants acknowledged budget limitations, with several stating that while they desired to support sustainable brands, they were often felt excluded out of that option. Participant 4 noted, "*Those materials have their price,*" referring to ethical garments, but also emphasized a deeper frustration with fast fashion: "*I hate the fabric.*" This blend of ethics with personal comfort led many toward second-hand markets as a more feasible alternative. Young consumers are increasingly more informed and aligned to sustainable values but affordability and access often constrain their ability to act accordingly, an inner tension that mirrors the attitude-behaviour gap, as described by White et al. (2019, pp. 23–24).

Second-hand and vintage consumption emerged as the dominant strategy to reconcile values and affordability. Platforms like Vinted or local thrift stores were widely used, not only as a sustainability practice but also because they allowed for experimentation, personal style, and affordability. As Participant 2 explained, "*Most of the time I'm in a thrift store... I'm not picking something up because it's in right now. It's, can I wear this for as long as I need it?*" This sentiment was echoed by others who viewed quality and longevity as the most important factors guiding their choices, aligning sustainability with durability over trendiness.

Importantly, few participants described shopping with sustainability as the initial intention. Rather, sustainability became a by-product of habits rooted in frugality, personal expression, or aversion to mass-market trends. Participant 7 captured this duality: "*My main intention is not 'I'm going to be sustainable,' I just go to the thrift store because I like it... but both causes are served.*

Underlying many responses was a sense of confusion and mistrust. As the term "sustainability" becomes increasingly co-opted by brands, participants struggled to distinguish genuine efforts from marketing tactics. This ambiguity, paired with economic limitations, led many to almost abandon brand loyalty altogether and instead form their own hybrid model of sustainable consumption, realistic, imperfect, but deeply value-driven. This embodies the concept of the *elusive green consumer* (White et al., 2019), whose ethical ideals are often constrained by systemic, economic, and emotional realities.

4.3 Decoding Trust, Authenticity, and Credibility: Consumer Interpretations and Scepticism

This section investigates how participants comprehend and emotionally respond to sustainability messaging by fashion brands. The research demonstrates that audience trust must be earned through logical, consistent, and credible communication. Participants actively decode messages based on their personal values, prior knowledge, and societal expectations.

4.3.1 Authenticity and Transparency as Foundations of Trust

Participants expressed a deeply analytical approach to brand communication, often decoding sustainability messaging through the lens of transparency, authenticity ethical alignment, and consistency across platforms. They consistently emphasized the importance of authentic storytelling in establishing trust. Codes like "authenticity and passion over marketing," "absence of facade/image," and "mixed authenticity - representation vs substance" reflect this. For example, participant 8 expressed, "*I'd rather see a brand admit its flaws than pretend to be perfect.*" Patagonia stood out for its activism-focused, non-product-centric content, resonating with participants who valued honesty and clear purpose. Conversely, Reformation's personal storytelling (e.g., the driver post) sparked both appreciation and scepticism, "*Reformation, I feel like it's trying to make it personal, like they're like, Oh, look. We know the name of our driver, which makes us so green, which, to be fair, they try really hard, so…*" seen as relatable and sweet yet potentially emotional manipulative. Visual analysis supports this, highlighting contrasting approaches between Patagonia's natural, activism-driven posts and the curated, high-fashion imagery of Stella McCartney.

For many, transparency served as the primary trust filter. Brands that provided specific, verifiable information such as location of manufacturing, third-party certifications, or NGO

partnerships were more likely to be perceived as authentic. For instance, Patagonia consistently stood out as a brand that "*practices what it preaches*" with its long-term activism, non-product centric content and educational Instagram posts seen as a benchmark of ethical credibility. As Participant 7 noted, "*They don't point to themselves, and the point is something else that matters more*"

This contrasts with perceptions of brands using "checklist" sustainability, where participants were sceptical of vague eco-friendly claims especially from brands whose background and history are not familiar with. Statements such as "we care about the planet" without concrete evidence were seen as superficial. Participant 5 commented:

"*I feel like it's usually like at the ads while you scroll on reels, and it'll just be like B. Corp certified, or made in Portugal. It feels like greenwashing a lot of the times. Cause it'll be a brand that maybe I've never really heard about or I've seen what they do outside of sustainability. And they're bringing in a lot of really heavy keywords.*"

Similarly, Participant 1 highlighted the trust built through relatable representation:

"*Because there is a picture of an actual worker who is not a big celebrity, and maybe the common person like me would feel more close to something like this rather than a top model*"

For others, authenticity was deeply linked to perceived passion and personal motivation. Participant 8 explained, "*They're passionate about it rather than trying to like show off how cool it is or what is it doing sustainably. They're doing it because they really like clothes.*"

Knowledge of brand ownership structure and purpose-driven governance further strengthened perceptions of credibility. Participant 3 observed: "*Because I know that Patagonia is not owned anymore by corporate. It's owned by an NGO... my associative network is already more positive than with other brands.*" Similarly, Participant 4 echoed this sentiment, implying at the same time that CSR communication tactics are not only obvious but also not convincing anymore on their own:

" I'm rarely enthusiastic about brands, become a public company, sell your shares to an NGO, and then you can truly be like, this is my thing, but anything else is just CSR. It's fair to use it, because it works usually. But I think I'm past the point where it convinces me."

Overall, these reflections show that trust is actively negotiated, rather than passively received. It is derived from concrete practices, narrative consistency, emotional sincerity, and consumer alignment with perceived values. Participants did not simply accept brand messages but engaged in a nuanced interpretive process and decoded messages through the lens of personal values, perceived authenticity and structural coherence. This aligns with Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, which highlights how audiences interpret messages in ways shaped by their own experiences. As Testa et al. (2021, p. 10) note, effective sustainability communication on Instagram must go beyond polished aesthetics to feel human and credible. As Participant 8 concluded:

"If a firm actually wants to be sustainable, it should come from them, not from us to say that they're doing it well... it's worthless if they're always trying to be signals that their customers say, Yeah, you're doing fantastic. Then they aren't actually doing it for sustainability reasons."

4.3.2 Critical Decoding and the Limits of Believability

While authenticity and transparency are key to building trust, participants often engaged in critical decoding, expressing nuanced scepticism toward brand messaging. Many viewed sustainability claims as vague, inflated, or strategically deployed for marketing purposes. As Participant 3 remarked, "*People are now using the term sustainability easily… like it's sustainable because people are using 10% less greenhouse gases. And you're like, well, there's still 90% there.*" The overuse of broad claims has led to doubt, particularly when is not accompanied by verifiable specifics or evidence of systemic change.

Scepticism was particularly prominent when participants perceived branding efforts as performative or targeted toward a privileged consumer base. Terms like "*left richies*" and comments such as, "*Sometimes I can tell that it is just greenwashing,*" reveal a sense of frustration with brands that appear to be capitalizing on sustainability as a market trend. Participant 5, for instance, critiqued the superficial nature of certain campaigns: "*It always feels like we're being lied to… like they spend money to lie.*" This form of scepticism was often fuelled by a perceived mismatch between morals and aesthetics: carefully curated posts

or influencer-led commercials were viewed as overly polished, contributing to feelings of manipulation and alienation.

Participants also questioned the relevance and targeting of sustainability content. Participant 7 noted that some brands "*dump so much information and so much content that I don't feel like it's relevant to me anymore.*" Instead of fostering engagement, content overload and algorithmic targeting contributed to consumer fatigue and disengagement. Others expressed disconnection due to tone or delivery: "*If you want me to care about this thing, I also want to feel like you care about it more than I do,*" said Participant 5, reflecting on insincere corporate tones.

This section demonstrates that trust is not binary but negotiated through a spectrum of emotional, informational, and contextual cues. Participants advised for more humility and specificity: "*Have one really sustainable product… and communicate it as such,*" stated Participant 3. Their response reflects what White et al. (2019, p. 29) describe as the *elusive green consumer*, who is increasingly aware of greenwashing and sceptical of vague claims, yet still motivated by a desire for ethical consumption. The growing literacy around sustainability marketing, combined with digital fatigue and aesthetic saturation, has created a generation of consumers who demand that sustainability messaging be not only genuine but meaningfully substantiated. Despite their critical stance, participants' desire for honest, transparent, and value-driven communication reflects a hopeful shift toward more conscious consumption.

4.3.3 Structural Integrity and Long-Term Credibility

As participants evaluated brands' sustainability claims, a recurring theme emerged: credibility is not only based only on messaging, but on a deeper sense of structural integrity, long-term vision, and internal accountability. This goes beyond storytelling or visual framing with participants expressing a need for brands to demonstrate how sustainability is embedded in their operations, governance, and strategic decisions.

Several participants stressed the desire for brands to lose the façade and unveil their weaknesses and production realities. Subject 2 commented, *"Brands need to be more honest about where they're messing up"* urging companies to acknowledge trade-offs and limitations in their sustainability journey. Similarly, Subject 3 expressed: "*I know they will

never do this, but it would be really nice for brands to say what they're getting wrong… you can always phrase it in a slightly nicer way." This emphasis on humility over perfection reflects a shift from image management to meaningful self-accountability.

Participants also emphasized the importance of supply chain transparency and labour conditions, with Subject 6 stating, "*It should be highlighted how these products are produced, who is producing them, in which country, how… under which regulations*?" This concern suggests that ethical sustainability cannot be reduced to environmental goals alone, but must include social justice and production ethics.

Participants urged brands to not only inform but educate, to explain decisions, quantify trade-offs, and resist the impulse to 'green' everything. Subject 1 underlined the need for information over aesthetics: *"Focus on informing people through their brand regarding sustainability, and how sustainability works, not just to use the term to increase their marketing strategy."*

In sum, credibility was linked to long-term goals, honest communication of challenges, and evidence of internal alignment between ethics and practice. Structural engagement, from fair labour to transparent emissions was viewed as a more powerful trust-builder tool than a polished, high cost campaign. Aligning with Testa et al. (2021, p.2), participants proved that authenticity is not only about surface-level communication, by scrutinizing what brands choose to hide or reveal.

4.4 Socio-Cultural Dimensions and Systemic Critique

This section broadens the analytical lens to explore how participants situate fashion sustainability within wider socio-economic and structural contexts. It reveals a collective desire for systemic accountability, critical reflection on brand motives, and pragmatic scepticism toward sustainable consumption under the contemporary capitalistic system.

4.4.1 Realism, Accountability and Systemic Transparency

Participants regularly expressed a desire for fashion brands to go beyond surface-level sustainability messaging and engage in genuine, systemic transparency. Rather than displaying idealized images or vague green claims, participants want to see brands acknowledge the complexity of fashion industry's impact including their own limitations,

trade-offs, and mistakes. This expectation was not rooted in cynicism, but by a sense that realism creates trust and is consistent with the moral responsibility that large companies bear.

Subject 2 captured this sentiment clearly, stating: "*I wish brands would just be like, yes, we've cut down on X amount of CO_2 emissions. But in order to do that we've had to scale back production X amount which pushed our prices up.*" Participants appreciated the idea of sustainability as a process rather than a perfected image, with transparency about difficult decisions and imperfect solutions. Similarly, Subject 5 underlined that "*it doesn't have to be all perfect now, because it's not,*" calling instead for brands to "*be transparent also about what's to fix in the future.*"

These expectations extended into internal accountability structures. Participants wanted to know not just what a brand had achieved, but how, by whom, and at what cost. As Subject 2 asked, "*who actually set that goal?*" and, if it was unrealistic, "*bring in a new guy who can actually give you a realistic forecast.*" This demand for internal honesty and naming responsibility reflects a shift in consumer expectations from aspirational branding toward corporate self-awareness and structural introspection.

Participants also pointed to the importance of aligning brand storytelling with broader environmental and social realities. Subject 1 critiqued "*marketing images that are not representing the realistic world,*" and instead urged brands to focus on "*informing people regarding sustainability, and how sustainability works*." Others noted the lack of explanation as a missed opportunity. As Subject 8 put it, "*I want to see that they also understand, like, the landfills they're trying not to contribute to.*"

This emphasis on realism also suggested a call to structural humility. Brands were urged not to oversell their sustainability credentials but to situate their efforts within the broader, problematic nature of the fashion industry. Subject 7 noted, "*when you have massive amount of capital, you create a massive amount of problems.*" The power that fashion companies hold, participants argued, comes with a responsibility to communicate honestly, not only about success but also about the compromises and constraints they face.

Overall, participants wish to see more than green branding, they sought system-aware communication that reflects the real-world production stakes, environmental limits, and social justice. Fashion brands could start meeting this desire for systemic realism by engaging in honest trade-offs, internal accountability, and shifting from marketing performance to transparent discourse.

4.4.2 Lifecycle Thinking and the Underrepresented Supply Chain

While environmental messaging dominated brand communications, participants consistently emphasized the lack of attention to other crucial dimensions of sustainability, in particular social justice, labour conditions, and full lifecycle accountability. This critique reflected a more holistic understanding of sustainability that challenges the narrow environmental framing often present on Instagram.

Participants identified a systemic flaw in brand narratives that fails to represent how clothes are made, who makes them, and under what conditions. Subject 6 emphasized: "*The treatment of workers, the working environment…the human rights aspect of sustainability should also be highlighted.*" Similarly, Subject 5 noted, "*if all the fast fashion brands had to post a picture of where the people that make their clothes are working and their working conditions, I feel like it would bring more awareness.*" These thoughts indicate the urgency for brands to include social sustainability in both content and strategy, rather than merely environmental claims.

Lifecycle concerns especially post-consumer waste and durability also appeared repeatedly. Participants were frustrated that end-of-life and long-term use of clothing were underrepresented in sustainability messaging. Subject 3 asked, "*What are these brands doing about clothing waste? Are they collecting waste that people no longer want to use? Are they encouraging people to buy second-hand?*" Many felt that sustainability communication focused disproportionately on material innovation or carbon offsetting, instead of promoting practices like repair, reuse, or circularity. Subject 8 stated they would opt for longevity over gimmicks: "*It doesn't have to be 100% recyclable, just put in effort to make sure the materials can last.*"

This gap was also visible in the critique of brand narratives that stressed innovation while lacked production context. Subject 3 commented: "*They're using recycled silver. But what about like the production? What about the distribution? How is the packaging?*" Subject 6 pinpointed the locality factor commenting: "*I would like for them to be produced and sourced from Denmark… local made is still an important aspect.*"

Participants further reflected on the tendency of fashion brands to default to environmental frames because they are more marketable. Subject 6 acknowledged this trend, stating, "*the trend is now still towards… protecting the earth*" but felt it came at the cost of

deeper messaging on human rights, regional production, and social equity. This created a misalignment between what brands promote and what engaged consumers value.

At last, the feedback revealed a sharp critical awareness: participants were not passive recipients of sustainability narratives but actively assessed what was neglected. This included questions of labour, circularity, and long-term impact. They urged that for sustainability be communicated not as a checklist of green promises but as an integrated and comprehensive long-term commitment, one that takes people and processes as seriously as emissions and innovative materials.

4.4.3 Affordability, Privilege and Ethical Consumption

Affordability emerged as a prominent source of friction in participants' reflections on sustainable fashion. While many expressed strong ethical commitments and critical engagement with brand narratives, they also acknowledged the constraints imposed by cost, access, and broader structural inequalities. For many, sustainability was as much about systemic constraint as it was about individual choice.

Participants frequently described ethical consumption as aspirational but not always attainable. Subject 3 noted, "*Of course, usually the price point is higher. So then, I'm only really buying like one thing every few years, just because I don't have like 200 to spend every month.*" This tension produced selective practices, such as second hand shopping or occasional investment in ethical labels, framed less as ideals than as compromises within constrained realities. Subject 4 added, "*I was gonna say a jewellery brand, but I actually cannot afford that. I'm just overspending*"

This disconnect contributed into a broader criticism of who sustainable fashion is marketed to. Several participants pointed out that majority of brand content appeared targeted at already aware, affluent audiences, rather than aiming to broaden engagement. Subject 6 explained: "*I feel like the aim should also be towards consumers that don't know a lot about the subject yet… but the audience is still my generation.*" There was a shared consensus that sustainability marketing fosters discrimination by failing to acknowledge how economic and social capital shape access to ethical consumption.

As mentioned earlier, there was also a call for localization as a solution to both ethical and affordability concerns. Several participants described local production as more

trustworthy and potentially more accessible. Participants associated local sourcing with increased visibility, lower environmental impact, and stronger community connection.

Altogether, these reflections paint a complex picture, shaped by shaped by systemic barriers, critical awareness, and a desire for more equitable, inclusive, and realistic sustainability practices. Participants did not reject sustainability ideals but they demanded that brands acknowledge and address the socio-economic factors that determine who can participate effectively in the sustainable fashion movement.

4.4.4 Beyond the Hype: Structural Change and the Degrowth Imperative

Throughout the eight interviews, participants highlighted that sustainable fashion must be understood within a broader systemic context beyond consumer behaviour to include structural accountability, global supply chains, and the inherent contradictions of the fashion industry itself. Most of them expressed a growing scepticism toward placing the weight of change primarily on individuals and instead advocated for industry-wide transformation and clearer institutional accountability. This resonates to Fletcher and Tham's (2019, pp. 8-14) "Earth logic", a model of fashion rooted in sufficiency, care, and systemic reform.

Participants urged for a more holistic and systemic understanding of sustainability, one that questions the very growth-oriented logic of the fashion industry. A prominent theme was the incompatibility between continuous trend cycles and genuine sustainable practice. As Subject 2 put it, *"I think degrowth is the big word… We're in an industry that's always seeking to create new looks, but realistically, you don't need to make a new pair of blue jeans every season."* Referencing fast fashion giants like Zara and H&M, they condemned the constant pace of production: *"They come out with a new cut every six months… and then it's ripped jeans… and now we're back to baggy."* For this participant, the wastefulness of trend-chasing directly contradicted any claim of sustainability: *"If you just made one collection of pants that are very high quality… that's what sustainability should be."*

This critique paralleled others' discomfort with globalized branding. Participants questioned how genuinely "sustainable" a brand could be when its model depends on global sales and outsourced supply chains. As Subject 3 reflected, *"If you're around the world, and people globally can buy your clothes, how sustainable is it really?"* This reinforced a collective yearning for localized, slow fashion alternatives grounded in longevity, transparency, and ethical clarity rather than perpetual reinvention for profit.

Ultimately, participants envisioned a more revolutionary approach to sustainable fashion that went beyond superficial gestures and focused on certified long-term responsibility, fundamental change and transparency. Rather than putting the burden primarily on consumers, they suggested to companies to recognize their systemic role and commit to structural reformation. This vision aligns with Fletcher and Tham's (2015, p. 265) argument that meaningful sustainability in fashion requires the creation of structural conditions that will be the foundations of an ethical and trustworthy storytelling. Participants called for clearer communication, a willingness to confront industrial paradoxes, and active efforts to eliminate detrimental practices rather than disguising them behind polished marketing aesthetics.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Key Findings and Theoretical Reflections

This study set out to explore how fashion brands textually and visually frame sustainability on Instagram, and how these messages are interpreted and decoded by young consumers. The findings show that while brands often frame sustainability through carefully curated visuals, activist rhetoric, and emotionally resonant storytelling, these strategies are increasingly decoded with critical scepticism by Gen Z audiences.

Addressing how brands communicate sustainability (sub-question 1), the multimodal analysis revealed a set of recurring framing strategies varying from nature-based imagery, circular fashion symbols, aspirational captions, ethical claims, to influencer-driven storytelling. These were used with different intensity and coherence across the four brands. For example, Patagonia emphasized systemic critique and long-term impact, while Reformation and GANNI relied more heavily on aesthetics, humour, and identity-driven narratives. Stella McCartney combined high-fashion codes with ethical claims, often mediated through celebrity influence.

When comparing these approaches (sub-question 2), differences became apparent in tone, narrative depth, and perceived sincerity. Brands with consistent activism and transparency like Patagonia were seen as more credible, while those with polished but vague messages triggered scepticism. The general absence of social sustainability labour rights, equity, and supply chain justice further deepened the distrust, echoing critiques of *green marketing myopia* Ottman (2011, p. 28-30) particularly its "social side" (Jones, 2019, 745), whereby brands prioritize surface-level environmentalism while ignoring the human costs of fashion production.

In response to how young consumers interpret and negotiate these frames (sub-question 3), A central finding of this research is the deep and pervasive scepticism that participants express toward brand communication on sustainability. Far from being passive recipients of green marketing messages, young consumers consistently demonstrated an acute awareness of the contradictions, omissions, and aesthetic strategies employed by fashion brands. Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model is strongly validated by these insights: participants rarely adopt dominant-hegemonic readings of sustainability messages. Instead, most interpret them

through negotiated and even oppositional positions, highlighting a growing critical literacy among younger consumers.

Participants described their generation not only more aware of the ecological crisis but also more burdened by its consequences. They recognize fashion's environmental toll and ethical failures, yet struggle to align their purchasing behaviour with their values due to systemic barriers particularly financial constraints, geographic inaccessibility of sustainable products, and marketing fatigue. These dilemmas address the well-documented attitude-behaviour gap (White et al., 2019), which was not simply a matter of apathy, but a deeply moral and emotional conflict.

Most participants actively resist the aesthetics of perfection in sustainability messaging. Visual rhetoric (Messaris, 1997) is met with caution when it presents overly polished or idealized narratives. Instead, participants seek brutal honesty, critical reflection, and humanized communication. They appreciate content that foregrounds activism, community initiatives, and transparency over product promotion. As one participant noted, they want brands that are not only sustainable but self-aware and openly critical of the industry's structural flaws. This confirms Entman's (1993) argument that framing is a powerful tool for setting moral agendas but also reveals that consumers are increasingly questioning who sets those agendas and why.

The distrust in brand communication is not isolated; it reflects a broader cultural and political disillusionment. Participants often framed their critical stance within a larger context of institutional distrust, referencing political instability and governmental failures. Brands were not judged in isolation but as actors within a larger system of responsibility. This aligns with Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), which views consumption as embedded in broader socio-cultural and political networks. Participants do not just want sustainable products they expect brands to take systemic action, engage in public advocacy, and collaborate with NGOs or worker movements. Patagonia stood out as the only brand perceived as genuinely trustworthy, largely due to its consistent focus on activism and informative, non-product-centric content.

The research also highlights an ongoing shift in consumption habits. Many participants reported consciously reducing their clothing purchases, increasingly favouring second-hand or vintage options. This behaviour reflects a deeper ethical and emotional perception.

Purchases must now feel meaningful, personal, and aligned with one's values. This supports recent work in ethical branding that emphasizes emotional resonance, identity work, and authenticity as key drivers of consumer trust (Fletcher & Tham, 2015).

Instagram itself was the subject of significant ambivalence. While participants criticized the platform for being consumption-driven and algorithmically overwhelming, they also recognized its potential as an educational and narrative space particularly when used to share founder stories, local activism, and behind-the-scenes processes. Visual framing and platform-specific storytelling strategies are thus double-edged: they can either build trust or reinforce scepticism, depending on how they are executed and perceived. While not explicitly addressed in the theoretical framework, this finding is in accordance with platform critiques such as Duffy's (2017, pp.120-125), who emphasizes the dual role of Instagram as both a promotional space and a site of emotional labour.

A surprising and particularly powerful insight was the intensity of participants' criticism. Despite their age, they articulated a highly developed media literacy, strong ethical convictions, and a desire for political engagement suggesting that Gen Z is not only a consumer segment but a generation in moral transition. This might reflect the broader emotional climate of uncertainty, climate anxiety, and institutional erosion that marks the current era. Their critique was not simply about clothing, but about justice, transparency, and systemic accountability.

Ultimately, this research underscores that sustainability communication is not just about what is said, but how and by whom it is said and who gets to respond. Sustainability on Instagram is framed to persuade but decoded to assess truth. Brands that seek to build trust must move beyond visual harmony and toward open communication. For Gen Z, meaningful sustainability communication must be honest, inclusive, and rooted in visible, systemic responsibility. Audiences crave honesty, not perfection.

5.2 Limitations

Despite the insights generated by this study, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the sample size of interview participants, while sufficient for qualitative analysis, is limited and may not capture the full diversity of consumer experiences, especially across

different socio-economic, national, or cultural backgrounds. All participants were based in Europe and belong to a relatively digitally literate demographic.

Secondly, the platform-specific focus on Instagram excludes other emerging platforms like TikTok, Pinterest, or YouTube, where sustainability messaging may take different forms or reach different audiences. While Instagram remains a dominant space for fashion marketing, future research could expand beyond it to capture evolving media ecologies.

Thirdly, the research was conducted during a specific six-month window in 2024, which may affect the generalizability of its findings. Sustainability narratives are dynamic and may shift in response to global events, social movements, or internal brand policy changes.

Additionally, language and platform algorithm biases may have influenced the selection and visibility of posts. Brands may target different sustainability messages to different linguistic or geographic markets, which was not within the scope of this research.

Finally, while MCDA allowed for a rich multimodal analysis, it is interpretive by nature and may reflect researcher subjectivity. To mitigate this, triangulation with interview data was used, but future work may benefit from incorporating participatory or ethnographic methods.

5.3 Future Research Directions

This study opens several pathways for future research. Firstly, a comparative analysis between platforms such as Instagram vs. TikTok could reveal how platform affordances shape sustainability framing, and whether algorithmic structures encourage or undermine ethical storytelling.

Secondly, further research could explore the longitudinal evolution of brand messaging and consumer engagement. Tracking how specific sustainability campaigns perform over time would offer insights into the durability and impact of visual and narrative strategies.

Third, future studies should prioritize the social side of sustainability examining how labour, equity, and justice narratives are framed (or neglected) in fashion communication.

This could include analysing collaborations with garment worker unions, local producers, or migrant advocacy groups.

Fourth, expanding the demographic diversity of participants across regions, income levels, and cultural contexts would provide a more holistic understanding of how values and lived experiences shape responses to sustainability messaging.

Finally, interdisciplinary research bridging fashion studies, media theory, environmental ethics, and AI-driven marketing would offer critical insights into the future of sustainable branding in increasingly digital, data-driven societies.

This thesis concludes by emphasizing that sustainability in fashion cannot be meaningfully communicated without critical transparency, systemic awareness, and cultural sensitivity. In an age of visual saturation and rising ethical demands, brands must move beyond surface-level storytelling and embrace a more accountable, participatory, and human approach to sustainability on Instagram and beyond.

5.4 Recommendations

The findings of this thesis point to an urgent need for more accountable, transparent, and participatory approaches to sustainability communication in the fashion industry. For brands, this means moving beyond polished aesthetics and instead investing in structurally embedded sustainability practices that can be communicated with clarity, honesty, and humility. As participants made clear, trust is not built through perfection but through consistent, values-driven storytelling that acknowledges trade-offs and avoids performative greenwashing. Brands should engage with consumers incorporating behind-the-scenes insights, labour transparency, and addressing the fashion industry's deep structural issues.

Policymakers also have a role to play in shaping the boundaries of ethical branding. Strengthening regulatory frameworks around greenwashing, mandating standardized sustainability reporting, and supporting local and circular production initiatives would help create a level playing field and foster genuine accountability. Meanwhile, consumers, especially younger generations, can continue to exercise their media literacy by demanding not only greener branding, but deeper structural responsibility. Rather than relying solely on

individual behaviour change, efforts should be redirected toward holding institutions to account and co-creating a fashion system that centres justice, transparency, and care.

6. References

Adeoye-Olatunde, O. A., & Olenik, N. L. (2021). Research and Scholarly Methods: Semi-Structured Interviews. *Journal of the American College of Clinical Pharmacy*, *4*(10), 1358–1367. https://doi.org/10.1002/jac5.1441

Arnould, E. J., & Thompson, C. J. (2005). Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty Years of Research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *31*(4), 868–882. https://doi.org/10.1086/426626

Belz, F.-M., & Peattie, K. (2012). *Sustainability marketing: a global perspective* (2nd ed.). J. Wiley, Dl.

Brans, L. (2023). "Who made my clothes?" How transparency apps bring politics to cultural fields. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, *23*(4), 990–1016. https://doi.org/10.1177/14695405231166875

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Coleman, R. (2010). Framing the pictures in our heads: Exploring the framing and agenda-setting effects of visual images. In *Doing news framing analysis* (pp. 249-278). Routledge.

Duffy, B. E. (2017). *(Not) getting paid to do what you love: gender, social media, and aspirational work*. Yale University Press.

Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, *43*(4), 51–58. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x

Fletcher, K., & Tham, M. (2014). *Routledge handbook of sustainability and fashion*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Ge, J. (2024). Influencers Marketing and its Impacts on Sustainable Fashion Consumption Among Generation Z. *Journal of Soft Computing and Decision Analytics*, *2*(1), 118–143. https://doi.org/10.31181/jscda21202438

Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Harper & Row.

Hall, S. (Ed.). (1980). *Culture, media, language: Working papers in cultural studies, 1972–79*. Routledge.

Jancsary, D., Höllerer, M. A., & Meyer, R. E. (2016). *Critical analysis of visual and multimodal texts*. *Methods of critical discourse studies*, *3*(1), 180-204.

Jones, E. (2019). Rethinking Greenwashing: Corporate Discourse, Unethical Practice, and the Unmet Potential of Ethical Consumerism. *Sociological Perspectives*, *62*(5), 728–754. https://doi.org/10.1177/0731121419849095

Jung, J., Kim, S. J., & Kim, K. H. (2020). Sustainable marketing activities of traditional fashion market and brand loyalty. *Journal of Business Research*, *120*, 294–301. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.04.019

Katrandjiev, H. (2016). Ecological marketing, green marketing, sustainable marketing: Synonyms or an evolution of ideas. *Economic Alternatives*, *1*(7), 71-82.

Lee, E., & Weder, F. (2021). Framing Sustainable Fashion Concepts on Social Media. An Analysis of #slowfashionaustralia Instagram Posts and Post-COVID Visions of the Future. *Sustainability*, *13*(17). https://doi.org/10.3390/su13179976

Matthes, J. (2009). What's in a Frame? A Content Analysis of Media Framing Studies in the World's Leading Communication Journals, 1990-2005. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *86*(2), 349–367. https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900908600206

Messaris, P. (1997). *Visual Persuasion: The Role of Images in Advertising*. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452233444

Milanesi, M., Kyrdoda, Y., & Runfola, A. (2022). How do you depict sustainability? An analysis of images posted on Instagram by sustainable fashion companies. *Journal of Global Fashion Marketing*, *13*(2), 101–115. https://doi.org/10.1080/20932685.2021.1998789

Nabivi, E. (2025). The Role of Social Media in Green Marketing: How Eco-Friendly Content Influences Brand Attitude and Consumer Engagement. *Sustainability*, *17*(5), 1965. https://doi.org/10.3390/su17051965

Niinimäki, K., Peters, G., Dahlbo, H., Perry, P., Rissanen, T., & Gwilt, A. (2020). Author Correction: The environmental price of fast fashion. *Nature Reviews Earth & Environment*, *1*(5), 278–278. https://doi.org/10.1038/s43017-020-0054-x

Ottman, J. A., Stafford, E. R., & Hartman, C. L. (2006). Avoiding Green Marketing Myopia: Ways to Improve Consumer Appeal for Environmentally Preferable Products. *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*, *48*(5), 22–36. https://doi.org/10.3200/envt.48.5.22-36

Pauwels, L. (2012). Conceptualising the "Visual Essay" as a Way of Generating and Imparting Sociological Insight: Issues, Formats and Realisations. Sociological Research Online, 17(1), 76–86. https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.2575

Pedroni, M. (2022). Two Decades of Fashion Blogging and Influencing: A Critical Overview. *Fashion Theory*, *27*(2), 1–32. https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704x.2021.2017213

Sandoval, V. P., Guevara, L. E. T., & Díaz, C. G. (2022). Green marketing innovation: Opportunities from an environmental education analysis in young consumers. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, *363*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2022.132509

Schlunegger, M. C., Zumstein-Shaha, M., & Palm, R. (2024). Methodologic and data-analysis triangulation in case studies: A scoping review. *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, *46*(8), 611–622. https://doi.org/10.1177/01939459241263011

Schreier, M. (2014). Qualitative Content Analysis. In *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data analysis* (pp. 170–183). SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446282243

Shen, B., Wang, Y., Lo, C. K. Y., & Shum, M. (2012). The impact of ethical fashion on consumer purchase behavior. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management: An International Journal*, *16*(2), 234–245. https://doi.org/10.1108/13612021211222842

Stafford, E. R., & Graul, A. R. H. (2020). Turning Consumers Green: From Green Marketing Myopia to Our 2020 Vision. *Sustainability*, *13*(1), 10–21. https://doi.org/10.1089/sus.2020.29178.ers

Suri, H. (2011). Purposeful Sampling in Qualitative Research Synthesis. *Qualitative Research Journal*, *11*(2), 63–75. https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ1102063

Szabo, S., & Webster, J. (2020). Perceived Greenwashing: the Effects of Green Marketing on Environmental and Product Perceptions. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *171*(4), 719–739. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-020-04461-0

Tazeen, F., & Mullick, N. H. (2023). The Impact of Social Media Platforms "Facebook and Instagram" in Influencing Purchasing Behaviour of Green Products. *Vision: The Journal of Business Perspective*. https://doi.org/10.1177/09722629221133960

Testa, D. S., Bakhshian, S., & Eike, R. (2021). Engaging consumers with sustainable fashion on Instagram. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management: An International Journal*, *25*(4), 569–584. https://doi.org/10.1108/jfmm-11-2019-0266

Thorisdottir, T. S., & Johannsdottir, L. (2020). Corporate Social Responsibility Influencing Sustainability within the Fashion Industry. A Systematic Review. *Sustainability*, *12*(21), https://doi.org/10.3390/su12219167

United Nations. (2015). *The 17 Sustainable Development Goals*. United Nations. https://sdgs.un.org/goals

van Dijk, T. A. (2023). Analyzing frame analysis: A critical review of framing studies in social movement research. *Discourse Studies*, *25*(2), 153–178. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614456231155080

Velasco-Molpeceres, A., Zarauza-Castro, J., Pérez-Curiel, C., & Mateos-González, S. (2022). Slow Fashion as a Communication Strategy of Fashion Brands on Instagram. *Sustainability*, *15*(1), 423. https://doi.org/10.3390/su15010423

von Busch, O. (2022). "What is to be sustained?": Perpetuating systemic injustices through sustainable fashion. *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*, *18*(1), 400–409. https://doi.org/10.1080/15487733.2022.2069996

White, K., Hardisty, D. J., & Habib, R. (2019). The elusive green consumer. *Harvard Business Review*, *11*(1), 124-133.

Wiederhold, M., & Martinez, L. F. (2018). Ethical consumer behaviour in Germany: The attitude-behaviour gap in the green apparel industry. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, *42*(4), 419–429. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12435

Appendix A: Interview Guide

This guide was used to conduct semi-structured interviews with participants aged 18-35, exploring their perceptions of sustainability messaging by fashion brands on Instagram. The guide is divided into five thematic sections: background, social media use, sustainability awareness, visual prompt reflection, and personal values.

Participant Background

1. Age
2. Gender
3. Occupation / Field of Study
4. Would you describe yourself as interested in fashion?
5. How do you usually shop for clothes (e.g., online, in-store, second-hand)?
6. What factors make you choose one fashion brand over another?
7. How would you describe your personal style?

Instagram Use & Brand Interaction

8. What are your general habits on Instagram? How often do you use it?
9. What kind of content do you usually engage with?
10. Do you follow any fashion brands or influencers?
11. So you are interested in fashion but do not engage with fashion brands, why would you say that happens?
12. What makes you want to follow or engage with those accounts?

III. Sustainability Messaging Awareness

12. Have you come across Instagram posts from fashion brands that talk about sustainability?

- What do you remember about them?
- Was anything particularly memorable, emotional, or confusing?

IV. Visual Comparison Prompt

Participants were shown four Instagram posts, following a Google Docs link, from the brands GANNI, Patagonia, Stella McCartney, and Reformation. These were selected from the

MCDA dataset to represent different framing types (activism, transparency, aspirational). Participants were asked to observe the images and captions for a few minutes, and then reflect on their impressions.

Visual Prompts

1. Stella McCartney

2. Patagonia

3. Reformation

4. Ganni

Visual Prompt - Follow-up Comparison Questions:

13. Which post stood out to you the most? Why?
14. Which one felt the most trustworthy or authentic to you?
15. Which (if any) felt most relatable to your own lifestyle or fashion preferences?

16. What do you think these brands are focusing on when they talk about sustainability?

17. Do you feel like any important aspects of sustainability are missing or underrepresented?

V. Identity, Accessibility & Personal Relevance

18. Do you feel sustainability messages on Instagram are aimed at people like you?

- Or do they feel targeted at a specific kind of audience?
- What are your priorities when buying clothing?
- Do you know any sustainable brands and do you think they are in your budget?

19. What does sustainability mean to you when it comes to fashion?

20. When you think about your clothing choices, does sustainability play a role?

- Why or why not?

21. Do these kinds of posts feel realistic or compatible with your lifestyle and budget?

Final Reflections

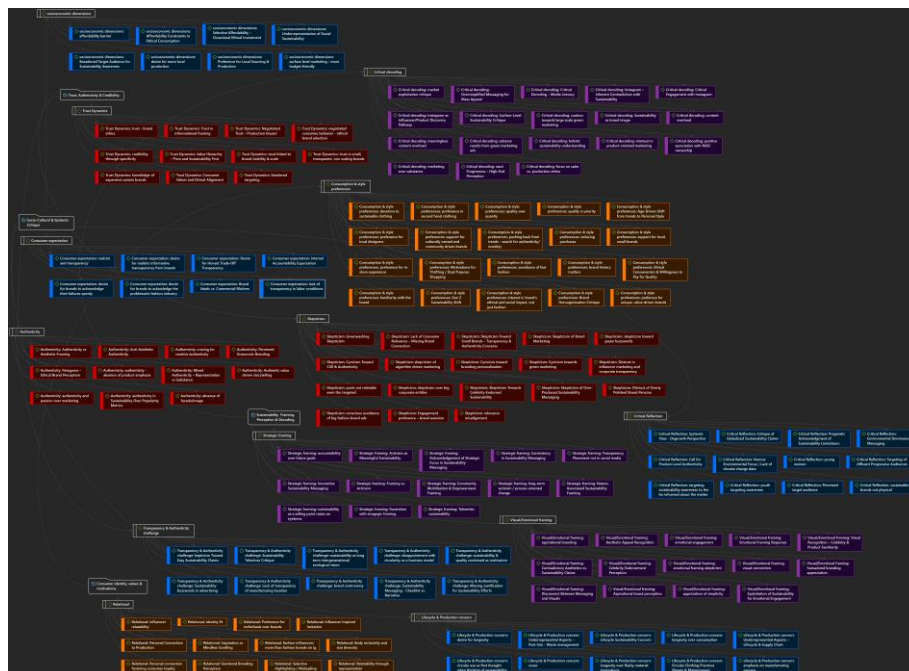22. What would you like brands to do differently when they talk about sustainability?

23. Is there anything else you'd like to add about sustainable fashion or Instagram that we haven't covered?

Appendix B: Coding Scheme

1. **Code Tree from Instagram Caption and Visual Analysis and Coding from Atlas.ti**
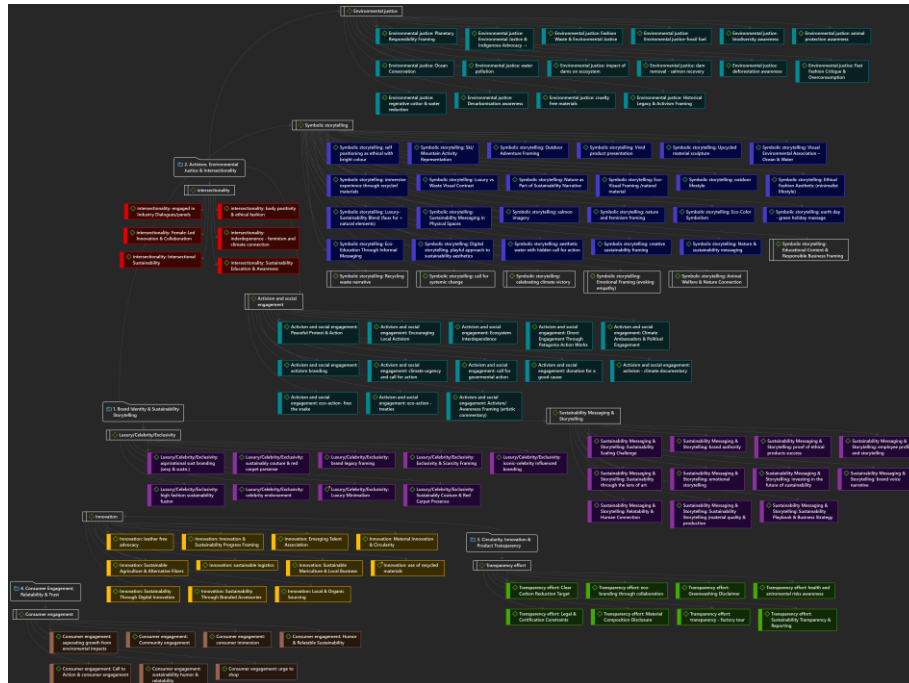
2. **Code Tree from Interviews Analysis and Coding from Atlas.ti**

Appendix C: Ethics & Consent Form

CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:

Maria Spyrelli, 698816ms@eur.nl

DESCRIPTION

You are invited to participate in a research about the way fashion brands narratively and visually represent sustainability in their Instagram marketing, and the way these elements influence consumer perceptions. This study is part of my Master Thesis in Erasmus University Rotterdam.

The purpose of the study is to understand how sustainability is framed on social media by fashion brands as part of their marketing strategy and how do consumers comprehend and interpret this.

Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to be interviewed

Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will make an audio recording of the interview.

I will use the material from the interviews and my observation exclusively for academic work, such as further research, academic meetings and publications.

RISKS AND BENEFITS

A. As far as I can tell, there are no risks associated with participating in this research. I will not use your name or other identifying information in the study. To participants in the study will only be referred to with pseudonyms, and in terms of general characteristics such as age and gender, etc.].

B. I will not keep any information that may lead to the identification of those involved in the study. I will only pseudonyms to identify participants.

You are always free not to answer any particular question, and/or stop participating at any point.

TIME INVOLVEMENT

Your participation in this study will take 35 minutes. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

PAYMENTS

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

DATA COLLECTION AND RETENTION

During the interview the following personal data will be collected from you: age, gender, audio recording, occupation, cultural background, ethnic background, sentiments and opinions about fashion sustainability on social media.

In addition, it is also possible that you will talk about your political affiliation and religious or philosophical beliefs and those of others, as these may also relate to your opinion about fashion sustainability on social media.

Your data will be retained for a minimum of 1 year. I retain the data so that other researchers have the opportunity to verify that the research was conducted correctly.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS

If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. If you prefer, your identity will be made known in all written data resulting from the study. Otherwise, your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact –anonymously, if you wish: privacy@eur.nl

Do you have a complaint or concerns about your privacy? Please email Maria Spyrelli here: 698816ms@eur.nl or visit www.autoriteitpersoonsgegevens.nl. (T: 088 - 1805250)

SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM

If you sign this consent form, your signature will be the only documentation of your identity. Thus, you DO NOT NEED to sign this form. In order to minimize risks and protect your identity, you may prefer to consent orally. Your oral consent is sufficient.

I give consent to be recorded during this study:

Name Signature Date

I prefer my identity to be revealed in all written data resulting from this study

Name Signature Date

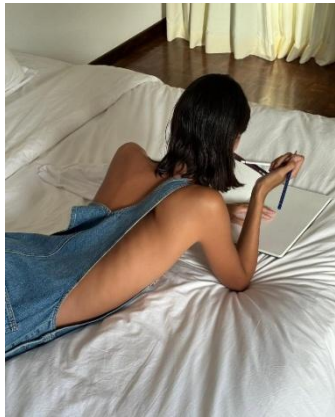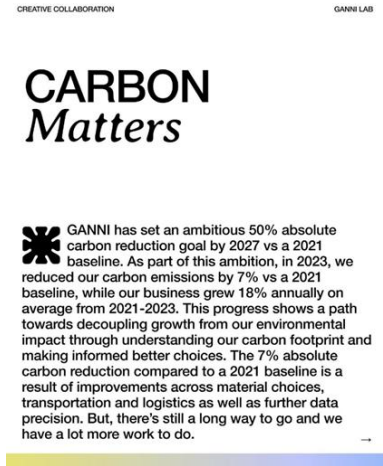This copy of the consent form is for you to keep.

Appendix D: MCDA Codebook for Instagram Post Analysis

Code	Definition	Quote Example	Brand
Sustainability Messaging & Storytelling	Narratives about ethical choices, brand mission, and sustainability values	*A hands-on guide to building a more responsible business within today's fashion landscape*	GANNI
Luxury/Celebrity/Exclusivity	Emphasis on premium identity, celebrity use, or exclusivity	*MET GALA: Revealing our Stella stars, #StellaMcCartney is joined by @CaraDelevingne, @FKATwigs and @TeddysPhotos on the red carpet, each wearing custom-made looks handcrafted from entirely sustainable materials.*	Stella McCartney
Symbolic Storytelling	Poetic or metaphorical language to evoke emotional resonance	*Everyday is like Earth Day.*	Reformation
Activism and Social Engagement	Promotes activism, community action, or	*Join us and connect with a nonprofit organization near you through Patagonia Action*	Patagonia

		Works via the link in our bio.	
	political involvement		
Environmental Justice	Raises awareness of ecological harm and justice across species or populations	*Our Autumn 2024 collection inspires new perspectives, as if from a bird's eye view. Crafted without harming a single creature.*	Stella McCartney
Intersectionality	References overlapping inequalities (race, gender, class, geography)	*Ángela is part of a community of activists, educators and artists who are turning fashion's trash into seeds for change and building the foundation for a different narrative.*	Patagonia
Innovation	Showcases cutting-edge materials, biotech, or design solutions	*Innovative materials like Celiuma,by Polybion grown by nurturing bacteria with fruit waste*	GANNI
Transparency Effort	Mentions impact reports, supply chain visibility, measurable goals	*GANNI has set an ambitious 50% absolute carbon reduction goal by 2027 vs a 2021 baseline.*	GANNI

Consumer Engagement	Encourages interaction, education, or audience reflection	*Victories this big don't come around often, but when they do, we think it's cause for celebration. They prove that when we all keep up the pressure—send the petitions, stage the actions, organize the marches—things add up and monumental wins become within reach.*	Patagonia

Appendix E: Visual Frame Codebook

Visual Frame	Description	Example
Nature Aesthetics	Use of natural landscapes, greenery, outdoor settings, or organic textures to symbolize eco-consciousness.	Figure 5. From Stella Mccartney's Instagram Post February 2nd, 2024
Minimalist Composition	Clean layouts, neutral color palettes, uncluttered backgrounds to convey simplicity, calm, and conscious consumption.	Figure 6. From Reformation's Instagram Post March 29th, 2024
Transparency Symbolism	Behind-the-scenes factory images, supply chain visuals, graphs or infographics that convey accountability and openness.	Figure 7. From Ganni's Instagram Post June 14th, 2024

Influencer & Celebrity Framing	Celebrity appearances or influencer features that lend aspirational appeal and align with luxury or ethics messaging.	Figure 8. From Stella Mccartney's Instagram Post May 7th, 2024
Activist Visual Language	Visuals referencing protest signs, political marches, or community organizing to emphasize justice and activism.	Figure 9. From Patagonia's Instagram Post February 7th, 2024

Appendix F: Interview Codebook

Code	Definition	Quote Example	Participant
Authenticity	Mentions of genuineness in brand messaging	It doesn't intend to make something seem pretty. It does want to promote the victory. But it's also more realistic towards the environmental crisis.	Participant 1
Skepticism	Expressions of doubt or disbelief toward sustainability claims or brand intentions.	Obviously, I think all companies have this element of greenwashing to them to an extent	Participant 2
Trust Dynamics	Perceptions of how trust is built, maintained, or lost in the fashion context.	I think Stella Mccartney really stressed the cruelty free, and then dropped a lot of facts. How horrible the animal industries are!	Participant 4
Visual/Emotional Framing	References to emotional reactions triggered by visual elements or tone.	"It just feels very grassroots. It feels very homey.	Participant 2
Critical Decoding	Analytical reflections where participants deconstruct the brand's message.	I'm definitely in that pool of like, they're using keywords. They're knowing how to get to me.	Participant 3

Strategic Framing	Noticing branding as a calculated or strategic act often to achieve engagement.	Yeah, I mean, all of them are trying to just tick a few boxes. That's what it feels like.	Participant 5
Transparency & Authenticity Challenge	References to doubts around transparency, honesty, and greenwashing concerns.	people are now using 10% less greenhouse gases or something. And you're like, well, there's still 90% there that you're, you know.	Participant 3
Socioeconomic Dimensions	Mentions of financial limitations, affordability, or broader economic concerns.	nothing super super within my budget. I think.	Participant 2
Lifecycle & Production Concern	Concerns about production stages, material sources, or garment life cycles.	I think it's missing the the wider kind of like context, you know. They're using recycled silver. But what about like the production? What about the waste, like I feel like it's missing some of those like steps.	Participant 3
Critical Reflection	Self-aware or critical assessments of sustainability,	I think sustainability and fashion is like, well, 1st of all, I	Participant 2

	consumerism, or brand efforts.	think degrowth is the big word	
Consumer Expectation	Expectations or standards participants believe brands should meet.	Yeah, definitely be transparent. Also about what's what's to fix in the future, like, it doesn't have to be all perfect now, because it's not.	Participant 5
Relational	References to fashion as part of social bonding, identity performance, or connection.	I wouldn't say I really engage with the brands so much as the people.	Participant 2
Consumption & Style Preferences	Individual style choices and fashion consumption behavior.	We really see a shift in our generation to become more sustainable, like buying more secondhand, like, for example, like the vinted outsold every brand in France	Participant 6
Consumer Identity, Values & Motivations	Core motivations, personal values, and identity-related reflections on fashion.	I have this principle, just for myself, that if you do want like high quality, and the brand is transparent aligns with your principles. I think it is worth it to spend a lot more	Participant 6

Appendix G: Participant Overview Table

Participant	Age	Gender	Occupation/Field	Fashion Orientation	Instagram Use	Sustainability Attitude
1	26	Male	Freelance fashion photographer	High fashion interest, vintage, second-hand	3-4 hrs/day	Critical, informed, seeks transparency
2	24	Male	Digital Content Producer	Relaxed, basic, second-hand	1-2 hrs/day	Critical of greenwashing, informed
3	29	Female	Series developer, freelance producer	High fashion and sustainability oriented	1-2 hrs/day	High awareness, media-literate
4	23	Female	Communications graduate, starting MSc in Sustainability	Y2K inspired, timeless	3-4 hrs/day	Sceptical of greenwashing
5	23	Female	Cook & PR intern	Style & quality focused	Frequent	Resonates influencer storytelling
6	21	Female	Social Sciences student with fashion minor	Experimental, vintage	3-4 hrs/day	Supports local brands, avoids fast fashion
7	22	Male	Tech consultant	Casual-formal, oversized	~1.5 hrs/day	Finds influencer content more engaging
8	26	Male	Chef	Eclectic, durable choices	Low (weekly)	Dislikes overproduced brand content

Appendix H: Instagram Post Overview Table

The Instagram post sample was selected using purposive sampling, focusing on sustainability-related content published between January and June 2024. For each brand, GANNI, Patagonia, Stella McCartney, and Reformation, the first three posts per month that explicitly referenced sustainability, ethical production, environmental issues, or social responsibility were included. If fewer than three qualifying posts were found in a given month, the next relevant posts were selected to meet the amount. This process resulted in a total of 72 posts (18 per brand), ensuring consistency and relevance across the sample.

Brand	Post Date	Main Frame Theme	Content Summary	Visual Style
GANNI	14/06/2024	Sustainability Messaging & Storytelling	Sustainability report teaser	Neutral tones, minimalism
GANNI	14/03/2024	Innovation	Introducing new eco-materials	Bright visuals, material close-ups
Patagonia	15/01/2024	Activism and Social Engagement	Call to action for local NGOs	Earthy tones, community images
Patagonia	07/02/2024	Consumer Engagement	Celebration of campaign success	Dynamic editing, activist footage
Stella McCartney	07/05/2024	Luxury/Celebrity/Exclusivity	Met Gala spotlight with celebs	High fashion visuals, dark glamour
Stella McCartney	02/02/2024	Environmental Justice	Campaign on non-violence to animals	Natural tones, symbolic birds-eye visuals
Reformation	22/04/2024	Symbolic Storytelling	Humorous, emoji-rich Earth Day meme	Bright green text message layout with emojis

Reformation	10/03/2024	Sustainability Education	Behind-the-scenes invitation to tour Reformation's sustainable factory	tactile visuals (spools of thread)

A full table with all 72 posts, metadata, and coded characteristics in the online supplementary materials.

Appendix I: AI Declaration Form

Student Information

Name: Maria Spyrelli

Student ID: 698816

Course Name: Master Thesis CM5000

Supervisor Name: Luuc Brans

Date: 26/06/2025

Declaration:

Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools

I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:

- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).
- ~~Writing improvements, including~~ grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.
- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books (e.g.,

☒ I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically ChatGTP -4o in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

☐ I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Signature: [digital signature]

Date of Signature: [Date of Submission]

Extent of AI Usage

☒ I confirm that while I utilized ChatGTP -4o to aid in my thesis process, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me.

To be more specific, my use of AI included:

- Language editing and phrasing assistance
- Checking academic conventions such as how to cite certain sources
- Clarification of complex theoretical components
- Brainstorming and section structure
- Simulation of feedback
- Creating summary tables of theoretical pillars for clarity

I did <u>not</u> use AI to automatically generate entire thesis sections that were inserted verbatim into my document. All text was reviewed, edited, and rewritten by me before inclusion in the final thesis.

<u>I have enclosed examples of AI prompts and queries in Appendix J for full transparency.</u>

Ethical and Academic Integrity

☒ I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the

course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

Signature:

Date of Signature: 26/06/2025

Appendix J: AI Prompts

In the process of writing my master thesis, I made use of the generative AI tool ChatGTP-4o (Open AI) as a supportive tool. Below, I specify in detail how I used it, the prompts and assistance I requested. I declare that I have edited and rewrote all thesis text and ensured that no paragraph was ever copied into the thesis without my review, rewriting and proper adaptation.

Purposes for which AI was used

- **Writing and Language Support**

    "Can you rephrase this sentence in more academic language?"

    "Suggest synonyms for critical decoding in academic context"

    "Check the grammar in this paragraph"

    "Give me a list of linking phrases I can use to make connections with literature statements"

- **Structure and Editing Suggestions**

    "Give me examples of how to improve flow and smooth transition between the two paragraphs"

    "How should I title a section about brand storytelling and emotional appeal?"

    "Give me a table of my main theoretical components so I can compare them with my results"

    "Give me some feedback on this section, do you have recommendations for better structure?

- **Methodological Clarifications**

    "Briefly explain why Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis is the right method for analysing the brands' Instagram posts"

    "Please explain me what triangulation means and why is it useful in my context?

    "Give me some limitation examples in qualitative research?"

- **Literature Contextualization**

    "Please summarize the main argument in Messaris' Visual Persuasion"

"How can I link Entman's framing theory to sustainability discourse on Instagram"

"how to use in text citation when there are 3 authors"

All arguments, interpretations, and conclusions in my thesis are my own. AI served only as a tool for writing support, clarity, and structural suggestions, not as a substitute for my research or critical thinking.