

## **In Pursuit of Sustainability: Challenges of Swedish Fashion Companies**

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### **Abstract**

**Problem** – With this study the authors wish to start the debate of moving away from the two existing extreme categories, fast and slow fashion, as described in the current literature. First, the authors argue that because of Swedish fashion companies are increasingly focusing and working with sustainability, a new category of fashion in terms of sustainability should be introduced to the existing literature on fast and slow fashion, namely transitional fashion. Second, the authors examine which communication strategies the Swedish fashion industry adopt in terms of communicating their corporate sustainability and which challenges different types of sustainable fashion companies are facing in terms of communication.

**Design/methodology/approach** – By way of interviews and secondary data analysis Swedish fashion companies are analyzed and categorized as slow, transitional or fast fashion companies. Categorization is based on extant literature whereby concept, product and production processes are analysed. Each category thus represents a specific type of sustainable fashion company. In addition, each category is analyzed in terms of its main focus when communicating its sustainability efforts and its major challenges.

**Findings** – The findings showed that the two existing categories, fast and slow fashion, are describing two extreme ways of working with sustainability, not providing room for many of the sustainability efforts that fashion companies are working with today. As a consequence, it can create difficulties for both the company and consumer to position a certain brand in terms of sustainability. The findings showed that this confusing positioning of corporate sustainability can create problems for a company's marketing communication. It was found that fashion companies within all three categories - fast, transitional and slow fashion – experience more or less difficulties in communication of their corporate sustainability, especially in terms of informing consumers about sustainable production processes and product materials.

**Originality/value** – The paper contributes to the literature by introducing a new term, transitional fashion, which is necessary in today's understanding and mapping of the fashion industry. The findings contribute by gaining an understanding of sustainability strategies adopted by the fashion industry of countries belonging to one of the most sustainable countries in the world, Sweden. The findings point out top Swedish fashion companies' focus and challenges when communicating their sustainability efforts to the market. As such, the findings contribute to the literature of fashion marketing and management.

**Keywords:** transitional fashion, slow fashion, fast fashion, sustainability, communication, Sweden

## **1. Introduction**

### *The Swedish fashion industry*

Since recent years, Swedish fashion has become one of Sweden's growing export commodities. Brands that are internationally recognized and that have grown the last ten years are Tiger of Sweden, Acne Jeans, Nudie Jeans, J. Lindeberg, Whyred, Gant, Filippa K., Hope, Our Legacy, Eton, Morris, Cheap Monday, WeSC, Rodebjer, Carin Wester, Ida Sjöstedt, Stylein and Odd Molly (Business Sweden, 2015).

Swedish fashion is known for its stylistically clean, minimalist notes, which has spread across the world. Its typical characteristics can be found in a long tradition of its existence. Historically, this has been anchored in the world of nature and outdoor-living, which is in line with many of the Swedish fashion brands putting a major focus on sustainability. Swedish fashion is known for its stylistically clean, minimalist notes that have spread across the world. Much is due to Sweden's most famous brand H&M, which has set the standard for collaborations between high street and high-fashion brands. However, various smaller brands are growing and gaining international recognition. Swedish fashion is internationally recognized to such an extent that Sweden has been ranked as second best-dressed nation in the world (Forgan, 2013).

In 2013, the fashion industry in Sweden had a turnover of 237 billion SEK, which is an increase of 3.4 per cent compared to the previous year. Export plays a major role for the Swedish fashion industry (62 per cent) whereby the largest portion of sales is generated through retail and wholesale trade. In 2013, the number of employees in the fashion industry in Sweden was over 56 300 people, an increase of 3.8 per cent compared to the previous year. In terms of number of employees, the Swedish fashion industry has come to play an important role for the country's economy.

### *Fashion and sustainability*

According to the literature, companies that offer sustainable fashion incorporate producing in harmony with nature, employing trained workers and providing safe and humane working conditions. Worldwide known examples of fashion brands that offer ecologically sustainable fashion clothing and accessories are Stella McCartney, Ferragamo, and Vivienne Westwood (Joy et al., 2012).

Building sustainable corporate image is found to be one of the key factors for corporate success (Amores-Salvadó et al., 2014). Meanwhile, practitioners find communicating corporate sustainability not an easy task. On the topic of corporate sustainability and communication, a recent study has shown that there are different approaches in relation to sustainable practices and communication within the Italian fashion industry (Da Giau et al., 2016). While Italy is a country that performs worse than countries in its region in terms of sustainability, the present study examines Sweden, a country belonging to the top three sustainable

countries in the world and a country that performs better than countries in its region (Hsu et al., 2016). Considering that Swedish fashion brands tend to put a focus on sustainability and the fact that there are different levels of producing and delivering sustainable fashion products, the authors argue that the existing literature does not allow for proper categorization of the variations in fashion companies' sustainable efforts. This in turn, can create difficulties for fashion companies to communicate corporate sustainability efforts.

## **2. Literature review and problem identification**

Conscious consumerism is a phenomenon that is increasingly on the rise since the 1970's (Rademaker et al., 2015). As such, sustainability has shown to be a competitive advantage within retail whereby consumers are influencing and shaping sustainable market preferences (Zabkar and Hosta, 2012). Sustainability implies continuity as its focus is on long-term environmental sustainability, social endurance and economic stability (Lloret, 2015). The fashion industry is considered slow to catch on in relation to implementing sustainability strategies, regardless of the many public debates on garment-worker exploitation and the harmful impact on the natural environment (Hearson, 2007). Moreover, the increasing rise of fast-fashion firms that encourage conspicuous consumption and impulsive buying has led to even more public debate on ethical business conduct (Joung, 2014).

According to the Environmental Performance Index (2016) Sweden belongs to the top ten most sustainable countries in the world in terms of its environmental performance based on its environmental policies. Furthermore, according to the Sustainable Competitiveness Index (2012) Sweden is among the top three ranked countries indicating that it has very stringent and well-enforced environmental policies, which are leading to positive outcomes. Meanwhile, it is found that while some fashion retailers show concern for sustainability issues, the majority still does not address similar concerns (Ritch, 2015).

The various ways fashion products are manufactured, purchased, packaged, transported, used and disposed can affect the natural environment in different ways. The demand for naturally sustainable fashion is in line with the fact that people consume more natural resources and produce more pollution than the planet can sustain. As such, companies must take action to operate within the natural capacity of the planet to justify its existence in the long run (Joy et al., 2012).

One stream dealing with environmental sustainability issues in the fashion industry focuses on replacing harmful chemical substances with more environmentally friendly materials and/or making changes to reduce waste and natural resources by way of clothing recycling. Another more recent socially conscious stream in the industry focuses on shifting consumption from quantity to quality, i.e. slow fashion (Jung and Jin, 2015). The slow fashion movement urges consumers to buy high quality items less often (Fletcher, 2010). The

fashion literature on the issue of sustainability is however limited to two extremes, that is the slow and fast fashion company (Turker and Altuntas, 2014; Ro and Kim, 2009; Beard, 2008; Barnes and Lea-Greenwood, 2006). This picture has up to now been useful for the general identification of clear problems in implementing sustainability thinking of fashion companies.

The term slow fashion focuses on both slow production by not exploiting natural and human resources to accelerate speed, and consumption by offering products with a longer lifespan from manufacturing to disposal (Fletcher, 2010). Scientific understanding of slow fashion is still limited despite an increasing interest among fashion practice. Furthermore, the literature finds that the distinction between the slow fashion and the environmentally sustainable fashion concept, remains vague (Jung and Jin, 2015). For example, luxury fashion products should be categorized as sustainable fashion considering its emphasis on authenticity and respect for workers and the environment, and its corporate values of quality and sustainability (Joy et al., 2012).

Fast fashion in the literature is defined as “low-cost clothing collections that mimic current luxury fashion trends” and “helps satiate deeply held desires among young consumers in the industrialized world for luxury fashion, even as it embodies unsustainability” (Joy et al., 2012, p. 273). Because of its nature, fast fashion being a fast-response system encouraging disposability and increasing consumption patterns, is also increasing harm to the natural environment (Fletcher, 2010).

As fashion firms are increasingly focusing and working with sustainability from production to end product as well as with communicating their brand(s), the authors argue that a better way of categorizing fashion companies in terms of sustainability should be introduced, namely a third category; transitional fashion. Today, the existing literature allows solely two categories representing two extremes of sustainability, i.e., fast and slow fashion. The risk of restricting to only these two extreme categories is that it does not seem to be in line with the fashion industry’s increasing focus on working with sustainability, especially in Sweden. This can be observed by the various ways in which the Swedish fashion industry makes sustainable efforts in relation to for example its production processes, products, packaging and when opting for more eco-friendly materials. Furthermore, the risk may exist that when restricting to only the two extreme categories, fashion companies eager to commit to conducting business in a more sustainable way experience problems in defining their sustainability strategy in a clear way, since their business’ act of conduct does not seem to be in line with either of the extreme categories. This may further have consequences for these companies’ communication strategy in terms of the company’s sustainability efforts.

In line with the latter, empirical research even shows that conservation planners responsible for

environmental planning and policy development often have difficulty with prioritizing problems because of unclearly defined objectives (Game et al., 2013). This observation is illustrating the core problem towards alternative forms of governance, which are also embedded in policy change and its complex processes that determine change and stability. Researchers such as Orach and Schlüter (2016) highlight different aspects of bounded rationality in individual behavior on different aspects of processes towards sustainability changes. For example, when observing sustainability efforts within the fast-fashion industry its focus, i.e. mass production and consumption, is a core problem according to the concept of sustainability. This can lead to complex problems with the marketing communication of such companies, despite their increasing sustainability efforts in the supply chain and/or production. In addition, it can lead to a demotivation among fashion companies to continue their sustainability efforts. Therefore, in this study it is considered crucial to include the analysis of marketing communication issues related to the circumstances of fashion companies that work differently with sustainability, i.e. slow, transitional and fast fashion.

By restricting to only the existing two extreme categories in this field, fashion companies working hard with sustainability may experience a certain complexity in terms of 1) creating an effective and focused sustainability strategy regarding their concept, production processes and products, and 2) effectively promoting themselves as such to the market. Thus, in order to explore whether the above reasoning is valid for the Swedish fashion industry, i.e. whether an alternative way of categorizing fashion companies in terms of their focus on ecological sustainability is necessary, it could be questioned how the Swedish fashion industry, known for their strong focus on sustainability, work with sustainability and how it attempts to communicate such efforts to the market. The following research questions are posed:

*RQ1: How do top Swedish fashion companies differ in terms of their sustainability strategies?*

*RQ2: How do top Swedish fashion companies communicate their sustainability strategies?*

The findings of this study aim to shed light on how Swedish fashion companies differ in terms of their sustainable actions. By doing so, it can be explored whether the two extreme groups of fast and slow fashion suffice for Swedish fashion firms to categorize and profile themselves clearly. Introducing a third category, transitional fashion in addition to the two extreme categories, i.e. fast and slow fashion, as an alternative way of categorizing fashion companies regarding their sustainability efforts a more comprehensive mapping of fashion companies in Sweden will be gained and their different approaches to sustainability. In addition, the ambition is to explore how top Swedish fashion companies communicate their sustainability efforts corresponding to the circumstances for each different category. As such, the findings contribute to the literature of sustainable fashion marketing and management, focusing on fashion companies and their work

with ecological sustainability. In sum, in the following table an overview of the main characteristics of the two extreme concepts, fast and slow fashion, is shown, as can be found in the existing literature.

### **3. Method**

#### *3.1 Target sample, measures and research approach*

To answer the research questions, data were collected in two steps. In study 1, three interviews were conducted representing fashion companies working with sustainability in different ways, i.e. a slow fashion company, a transitional fashion company, and a fast fashion company. Study 1 was considered crucial in order to study how Swedish fashion companies work with sustainability, and to explore the challenges they experience when they communicate their sustainability efforts to the market. By doing so, the authors were able to explore whether Swedish fashion companies indeed find difficulties with categorizing their companies according to the existing two extremes fast and slow fashion. And as such to provide a criteria matrix to be applied to further explore top Swedish fashion companies for the subsequent study using secondary data. Study 1 thus set the foundation for the subsequent quantitative Study 2.

In study 2, top Swedish fashion companies were categorized based on the findings from Study 1. Whereas on the topic of communication of corporate sustainability, Study 1 examined *challenges* in communicating sustainability efforts, Study 2 explored fashion companies' current *communication focus* of corporate sustainability. Data were gathered using corporate annual reports. Such corporate annual company reports are most often made public and accessible online. The target sample comprises members of the Association of Swedish Fashion Brands.

#### *Measures*

Based on extant literature, the authors developed a criteria matrix to analyse fashion companies' sustainability strategy (Table 1). Top Swedish fashion companies were analyzed and categorized using criteria as used in prior research i.e. *concept*, *process* and *product*. The literature describes a *concept* as a generalized idea about a class of objects, attributes, occurrences, or processes that has been given a name (Friedman and Thellefsen, 2011). In addition, a *process* is a set of interrelated activities that interact to achieve a result. (Majumdar, 2014), and a *product* is anything that can be offered to a market that might satisfy a want or need (Kotler et al., 2006).

*Slow fashion companies* are categorized as such when a company scores Slow on concept, process and

product. *Fast fashion companies* are categorized as such when a company scores Fast on concept, process and product. *Transitional fashion companies* are categorized as such when a company scores inconsistent regarding Fast/Slow on at least one of the three topics: concept, process or product (see Table 1).

[Table 1 about here]

#### **4. Study 1 - interviews**

To answer the research questions, an initial empirical study was conducted comprising three interviews, each representing a different type of fashion company in relation to their sustainability strategy and communication. To be explored were the fundamentals (concept, process, and product) in fashion companies' business model and to relate this to communication issues with sustainability. Anonymity was promised, as such the interviewees' names cannot be revealed.

##### **Interview #1: Slow fashion**

This case is based on a semi structured face-to-face interview conducted by the authors with one of the three founders of [brand name]. This brand has an established style but also a functioning business. This company's style is known for its "relaxed luxury" and contrasts. Advanced knitted and woven techniques characterize the brand. The company is known for its sustainability profile and its vision is to empower the younger generation women with clothes. Examples of the most crucial answers to the questions posed during the interview are presented below:

##### ***How is [brand name] working with sustainability?***

*"Already from when we started the company in 2004, sustainability was part of our core strategy, only no one talked about it and we weren't even aware of it then. Our way of working with sustainability is grounded in three pillars: High quality, eco-friendly fabrics etc. Production control over processes in EU and China, and Design: long lasting, timeless design. We follow our vision and goals at [brand name]. Our vision is: to empower the younger generation women... with clothes."*

##### ***How is [brand name] communicating its corporate sustainability?***

*"Sustainability is something new. Consumers don't care about sustainability in fashion. For example, they don't care about whether a fabric is sustainable or not. We at [brand name] are not thinking about communicating our sustainability in our communication activities. We don't tell about us being sustainable. Perhaps we should do that, but don't really know how and what. I don't think that consumers are ready to*

*hear about information about fabrics and its sustainability, at least not yet.”*

### **Discussion Interview #1**

This fashion company incorporates sustainability which is built on three pillars, i.e. design, production and high quality products. The company acts based on its core sustainable ideology and embodies long lasting and timeless design, control over processes in Europe and Asia and ensures high quality product deliverables by focusing on eco-friendly fabrics and materials. As such, this company was categorized as slow on concept, process and product. The company does not feel the need to communicate its specific efforts with regard to sustainability. Interestingly, despite the fact that this company is considered a class one sustainable fashion company it still feels that consumers do not care whether a fashion item is sustainable or not. In addition, this type of fashion company still seem to feel insecure about communication issues. Especially, this type of fashion company does not seem to know how and what to communicate when it comes to providing consumers information about their products and production processes in terms of sustainability. Therefore, the company is not deliberately focusing on communicating their corporate sustainability efforts in their marketing communication. See Table 2 for a summary of these findings.

[Table 2 about here]

### **Interview #2: Transitional fashion**

This case is based on a face-to-face interview of two hours conducted by the authors with the founder of *[brand name]*. This newly established Swedish company is the first in the world to make tights of recycled nylon. Nylon is a synthetic, and the production has been acclaimed for the use of environmentally harmful toxins. To reuse the material is therefore kinder to the environment than buying new all the time. Examples of the most crucial answers to the questions posed during the interview are presented below:

#### **How does *[brand name]* work with sustainability?**

*“By offering sustainable produced stockings, women's main throwaway garments. What many do not know is that stockings are made from crude oil, and production is environmentally harmful. Swedish congestion is the world's first eco-friendly stocking, we manufacture our stockings out of recycled nylon in a factory located in the absolute forefront regarding the environment (large parts of production are solar powered and the water used is purified and re-used in agriculture, to name a few examples). This way we try to create a greater awareness among consumers.”*



*“There may be residue from another stocking production or residues from the manufacture of, for example, casual clothing or tents. Nylon is a petroleum product, and production is carbon intensive. So it saves materials and emissions.”*

*“The inspiration came in part from the stocking’s negative class trip much due to the fact that the fashion industry’s has a development towards a business built on fast fashion consumption. For instance tights are a garment being associated with luxury and quality to now become a low-be with high environmental impact. In the 60s we were impressed by how good a pair as thin pantyhose could hold. Today, the average use at once.”*

*“[Brand name] products are manufactured in Italy and consists of 98 percent recycled materials and waste and there is a small portion new material consisting of spandex required for the pantyhose to be elastic. However, production has some limitations due to the choice of materials. For example, they do not have the thinnest variants in its range. So the thickness we refrain, which means that the idea of an environmentally friendly production will set the framework. Eventually in the future we hope that the material can be reused again, which means that the end product can be recycled as well not only the production of it.”*

**What is the main argument you tell consumers to buy [brand name] over other alternatives?**

*“It is about a buying behaviour where the customer is expecting to come back under conditions of look, feel, and be good”.*

**How do you manage such a goal for the business?**

*“It is about business processes and fashion processes including online distribution targeting conscious women not focusing on age. The main thing is to have a leading basic product of considerable high quality lasting year after year quality thinking. Add to this we also follows frequently ups and downs in exotic fashion versions to mark our professions and being a part of the changing society over time. Or you must always do something not to be boring and in the meantime you must take care not to turn into the field of pornographics, something that this industry frequently does.”*

**How does [brand name] communicate its corporate sustainability?**

*“First it is about a high quality product in terms of feeling good and to be a conscious women not connected to age. Then it is about some artistic design in terms of fashion following the trends to be modern. That is also to be innovative in terms of sustainability mostly down the production line.”*

*“Sometimes it is a hard issue to explain the benefit of sustainable production in relation to sustainable products. Stockings are not sustainable products as they become waste as plastics. A dream would be to allow the product to climb up the value chain so that we can recycle and process the materials to be included in a more expensive and sophisticated product. For example, recycled pantyhose could be material to produce for example a bag, then we really exploit opportunities. Today stockings are dumped as plastic waste and become garbage.”*

## **Discussion Interview #2**

Currently, this company attempts to address sustainability issues in production processes and not in terms of the final product. As its main product offering concerns stockings which are not sustainable products as an end-product, this company was categorized as slow/fast on both concept and product. The company’s main sustainability efforts focus on its production processes and to a great extent its supply chain. Thus this company was categorized as slow on process. Interestingly and similar to Case 1, this type of fashion company expresses difficulty in communicating its corporate sustainability efforts. Mostly, because it offers an end product which is not biodegradable/recyclable and as such not a sustainable product. Due to its sustainability focus on production processes, and its ambition to continuously work with sustainability in relation to its concept and product this company is considered an example of a class two eco-conscious fashion company, i.e. transitional fashion company. See Table 3 for a summary of the findings.

[Table 3 about here]

## **Interview #3: Fast fashion**

This interview was conducted with a representative at Stockholm Resilience Center and an expert in corporate sustainability strategies.

***What about a company like [brand name], whose mission is to sell as much as possible at low prices. Is it durable and insightful?***

*"[Brand name], is an example of a company that built its success on a fundamentally unsustainable business model. The business model has been based on that you can rely on the large planet can cope with wear and tear. Retail giant [brand name], is an example of a company that has built its success on a fundamentally unsustainable business model. Its business model has been based on believing that the planet can cope with the company’s low-cost fashion items, encouraging customers to consume in mass quantities. However, about a decade ago the company recognized that tomorrow’s business model must be circular and should*

*be based on more sustainable textiles. Since then the company has been putting many efforts into working with sustainability and into being perceived as more sustainable by the market.”*

*“The company, as many other fashion retail companies, has received much media attention whereby scandals have been pointed out that are contradicting the company’s policy on sustainability issues. As such, a main challenge for companies such as [brand name], is to create credibility in relation to their work with sustainability. A sustainable future which is circular requires serious management of existing resources so that higher quality products with longer lifespans can be offered over lower quality products with shorter lifespans.”*

In regards to implementing sustainability, fast fashion companies especially large fashion retailers also put a lot of focus on communicating their sustainability efforts to the market (Sustainability Report, 2015).

### **Discussion Interview #3**

Fast fashion is a contemporary term used in the fashion industry focusing on quick changes in society based on the most recent fashion trends. Those fast changes in fashion trends are meeting customers demanding low prices in addition to frequently new in-store items. Keeping up with fashion trends in such a manner is not in line with a sustainable business model. In order for these companies to meet customer demands, the emphasis is on the supply chain with a focus on speed in the production processes, cutting costs and competing globally (Fletcher, 2010). This philosophy of quick manufacturing at an affordable price is used in large retailers such as H&M, Zara, Mango, GAP, Uniqlo, and Topshop in the fashion industry.

The general problem with fast fashion is that it has led to an industry producing cheaply made, non eco-friendly clothing that is accumulating across the world at an increased rate (Birtwistle and Moore, 2007). In addition, the fast fashion industry has also a negative social impact in terms of the exploitation of cheap labor in low-wage countries where workers are forced to work under poor working conditions, also known as sweatshop conditions (Turker & Altuntas, 2014; Rose & Kim, 2009; Beard, 2008; Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2006). With the increase in popularity and the demand of fast fashion, these companies do many efforts to compensate such a negative image (Morgan and Birtwistle, 2009). However, as the popularity of sustainable business practices continues to grow, it is becoming increasingly difficult for apparel retailers to understand what kinds of initiatives include in terms of considering a post consumption for the garments in sale or by focusing on sustainability of manufacturing or company logistics. Finally, the fast fashion production has been for a long time monitored by media, which means that this industry has made efforts regarding avoiding the use of harmful chemicals and the improvement of working conditions.

Based on the above arguments, [brand name], represents a fast fashion company with the inherent difficulties to keep up processes and products in terms of the idea of sustainability even if such companies are outspoken in their communication of their sustainability efforts. Hence, due to the nature of its business model, [brand name] is an example of a Fast fashion company whereby its biggest challenge in communicating sustainability efforts lies in creating credibility as sustainability seems to be contradicting the core concept of fast fashion. A summary of the findings are presented in Table 4.

[Table 4 about here]

## **5. Study 2**

### **Secondary data analysis – annual corporate reports of Swedish fashion companies**

The second study is based on secondary data in the form of online annual reports representing top Swedish fashion companies. The ranking of the fashion companies are based on company revenue earned during 2014.

Similar to the findings of Study 1, Swedish fashion companies work a great deal with sustainability and as such cannot be categorized as either a Slow or Fast fashion company. In fact, from the top 20 fashion companies in Sweden, almost 50 per cent were categorized as Transitional fashion companies. This means that such fashion companies are actively and continuously working on the various aspects of sustainability. Table 5 below shows the results of the analysis. For anonymity reasons, the authors multiplied each revenue with factor x.

[Table 5 about here]

When communicating, slow fashion companies tend to focus on its sustainability as part of their ideology and do not put specific efforts in telling about their sustainable processes and materials of their products. From the interviews it could be learned that these companies do not believe that consumers wish to know about all the sustainable production processes and materials their products have gone through. Furthermore, they would not even know how to communicate this.

The transitional fashion companies tend to focus its communication on brand associations such as cooperating with other (sustainable) brands. From the interviews, we could learn that as in the case of slow fashion companies that transitional fashion companies' challenge lies in the fact that their sustainability strategy and efforts are not fully circular. For example, there may be parts in the production processes or

materials that are not fully sustainable which makes communicating sustainability efforts concerning process and product difficult. As such, communication focus is mainly on the brand as being sustainable.

The Fast fashion companies seem to put a focus on sustainability as part of their promotion and a compensation for conducting business that is in its essence contradicting the concept of sustainability. Although several retail giants have made many attempts, the biggest challenge that Fast fashion companies are forced to deal with is consumers' credibility in relation to its sustainability efforts.

Table 6 shows a summary of the findings regarding marketing communication focus of the Slow, Transitional and Fast fashion industry in Sweden.

[Table 6 about here]

## **6. General discussion and implications**

The ambition of this paper was to start the debate that the existing two extreme categories, fast and slow fashion, does not suffice to position today's sustainability efforts within the fashion industry, especially in Sweden. The authors suggest to move away from using only these two extreme categories and argue that because Swedish fashion companies are increasingly focusing and working with sustainability, a new category of fashion in terms of sustainability should be introduced to the existing literature on fast and slow fashion, namely transitional fashion.

One main reason for introducing transitional fashion as a third category to profile fashion companies and their focus on sustainability was to illustrate that the two existing categories, fast and slow fashion, are describing two extreme ways of working with sustainability and are thereby not providing room for many of the sustainability efforts that fashion companies are working with today. As a consequence, it can create difficulties for both the company and consumer to position a certain brand in terms of sustainability. Furthermore, this extreme positioning of corporate sustainability can create confusion and difficulties for a company's marketing communication, as came forth from this study's interviews (study 1). For example, it was found that fashion companies within all three categories - fast, transitional and slow fashion – experience more or less difficulties in communication of their corporate sustainability, especially in terms of informing consumers about sustainable production processes and product materials.

Transitional fashion brands are deriving from those companies that are working hard with sustainability on the core areas, concept, processes and product, but their core business cannot be completely positioned as fast or slow fashion. Furthermore, transitional fashion companies are companies that are moving towards

slow fashion, but that are not yet completely there. This proposed new category, transitional fashion, comprise many of Swedish fashion companies, as came forth from the quantitative study (study 2) among top 20 Swedish fashion companies.

One important implication from introducing the concept of transitional fashion in addition to the existing fast and slow fashion is that a fashion company's position on corporate sustainability can be more easily identified, by evaluating its core business on concept, process and product. From this assessment the company can be positioned as either slow, transitional or fast fashion. The positioning of a fashion company's core business can then act as a guide on what type of communication challenges that need to be dealt with. For example, from Study 1 it came to light that even slow fashion companies do not specifically communicate to the market about their sustainable efforts in relation to process and product. This is due because they do not seem to believe that consumers wish to know about these issues and if so, they do not seem to know how to communicate such issues to the market. Thus, in pursuit of becoming more sustainable, fashion companies should take a more pro-active step when communicating their sustainability efforts to the market such as informing consumers about their efforts in making their processes and products more sustainable. Doing so, can create more transparency and an ongoing dialogue with customers. Furthermore, communication about a company's sustainability efforts can encourage other companies to act more sustainable, which will eventually benefit nature and society at large.

### **Limitations and future research**

The ambition of this paper was merely to start a debate on moving away from the two extreme sustainability concepts fast and slow fashion, by showing that when introducing a third middle category many Swedish fashion companies seem to belong there. As such, more research is needed to develop a continuous scale on which companies can easily position themselves on their journey into becoming more sustainable companies. Such a continuous corporate sustainability scale could provide more effective ways to develop clear strategies for fashion companies in pursuit of sustainability, including marketing communication strategies.

### **Acknowledgements**

This research was funded by the Jan Wallander and Tom Hedelius Research Foundation (Handelsbanken) (W2013-0546:1).

## Tables

**Table 1: Main characteristics of Fast and Slow Fashion**

<b>Product</b>		<b>Process</b>		<b>Concept</b>	
<i>Fast</i>	<i>Slow</i>	<i>Fast</i>	<i>Slow</i>	<i>Fast</i>	<i>Slow</i>
Low cost clothing (Fletcher, 2010)	High cost (Fletcher, 2010)	Speedy production (Fletcher, 2010)	Slow production (Fletcher, 2010)	Encourages disposability (Joung, 2014; Fletcher, 2010)	Encourages high quality items less often (Fletcher, 2010)

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Items mimic current luxury fashion trends (Joy et al., 2012)	Luxury items (Joy et al., 2012)	Production focus on speed at the cost of natural resources (Fletcher, 2010; Barnes and Lea-Greenwood, 2006)	Production with focus on not exploiting natural and human resources to accelerate speed (Fletcher, 2010)	Focus on quantity of items (Jung and Jin, 2015; Joy et al., 2013)	Focus on quality of items (Jung and Jin, 2014; Joy et al., 2013)
Low quality (Fletcher, 2010)	High quality materials (Fletcher, 2010)			No or limited green/sustainable focus (Joung, 2014; Beard, 2008)	Continuous green focus from design to end product (Jung and Jin, 2015)
Short lifespan (Fletcher, 2010)	Longer lifespan (Fletcher, 2010)				

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**Table 2: Findings Interview #1 Slow fashion**

<b>Brand</b>	<b>Revenue 2015</b>	<b>Concept</b>	<b>Processes</b>	<b>Product</b>	<b>Sustainability Class</b>	<b>Communication challenge</b>
[Brand name]	37 157	Slow	Slow	Slow	Slow Fashion	Processes, Product

**Table 3: Findings Interview #2 Transitional fashion**

<b>Brand</b>	<b>Revenue 2015</b>	<b>Concept</b>	<b>Processes</b>	<b>Product</b>	<b>Sustainability Class</b>	<b>Communication challenge</b>
[Brand name]	1 050	Slow/Fast	Slow/Fast	Slow/Fast	Transitional fashion	Processes, Product

**Table 4: Findings Interview #3 Fast fashion**

<b>Brand</b>	<b>Revenue 2015</b>	<b>Concept</b>	<b>Process</b>	<b>Product</b>	<b>Sustainability Class</b>	<b>Communication challenge</b>
[brand name]	126 602	Fast	Fast	Fast	Fast fashion	Contradicting concept

**Table 5: Results for RQ1 and RQ2 - Swedish fashion companies and their corporate sustainability strategies**

Co.	Revenue 2015	Concept	Process	Product	Sustainability class	Communication focus
1	542 000	F	F	F	Fast	Promotion
2	241 000	F	F	F	Fast	Promotion
3	193 000	F	F	F	Fast	Promotion
4	117 000	F	F	F	Fast	Promotion
5	115 000	F	F	F	Fast	Promotion
6	76 000	F	F	F	Fast	Promotion
7	70 000	S/F	S/F	S/F	Transitional	Brand
8	49 000	S/F	S/F	S/F	Transitional	Brand
9	53 000	F	F	F	Fast	Promotion
10	39 000	S/F	S/F	S/F	Transitional	Brand
11	35 000	S/F	S/F	S/F	Transitional	Brand
12	31 000	S	S	S	Slow	Ideology
13	30 000	S/F	S/F	S/F	Transitional	Brand
14	30 000	S/F	S/F	S/F	Transitional	Brand
15	19 000	S/F	S/F	S/F	Transitional	Brand
16	19 000	F	F	F	Fast	Promotion
17	5 000	S	S	S	Slow	Ideology
18	5 000	S/F	S/F	S/F	Transitional	Brand
19	2 000	S/F	S/F	S/F	Transitional	Brand
20	2 000	F	F	F	Fast	Promotion

CSI: Corporate Sustainability Ideology, CSB: Corporate Sustainability Brand, CSP: Corporate Sustainability Promotion

**Table 6: Findings RQ1-2: Sustainability communication challenges and focus**

Slow Fashion		Transitional Fashion		Fast Fashion	
<i>Challenge</i>	<i>Focus</i>	<i>Challenge</i>	<i>Focus</i>	<i>Challenge</i>	<i>Focus</i>
Processes, Product	Ideology	Processes, Product	Brand	Contradicting concept	Promotion

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