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PAST RESOURCES FOR A SUSTAINABLE FASHION FUTURE:

Associating old terms, labels and categories for a new source of information and label system

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Structured Abstract

Sustainability has been one of the major focuses of fashion brands as well as fashion studies recently (Fletcher and Grose 2012; Lenne and Vandenbosch, 2017). There have been numerous fashion marketing campaigns positioning sustainability to their centers such as H&M, Marks&Spencer, Zara, and more. These campaigns use interchangeable terms as sustainable, ecological, and green. Moreover, they use complex product development and manufacturing methods for their communication such as recycled, upcycled, ethically produced, and tag their products with these details. For this reason, there is a plethora of sustainability terms, certifications, or labels attached to fashion products, many of which are confusing (Evans and Peirson-Smith, 2017; Peirson-Smith, A. and Evans 2018; Thomas, 2015), and some are even perceived as greenwashing (James and Montgomery, 2017; Cervellon and Wernerfelt, 2012). The prevalence of a variety of potentially misleading labels and visuals devalues trustworthy certifications such as Oeko-Tex and Eco-Label. At the same time, existing certifications are complex and sometimes cumbersome with their technical details. They are difficult to comprehend, even for highly involved consumers.

Based on this communication gap between manufacturer, brand, and consumer, we conducted preliminary focus group sessions with fashion consumers. Three sessions focus groups consist of 6 people each, provided that many consumers do not even expect fashion products to be sustainable. Nevertheless, when they receive a product's sustainability information, they start being engaged about the issue. Focus groups also underline the existence of a segment that values sustainability as a decision-making criterion yet is unable to utilize it because they perceive themselves to lack the ability to locate and process reliable information. This consumer segment also reports feeling unsure about which certifications and labels are trustworthy. We also documented that consumers need guidelines about consumption and product-care to use their garments and accessories longer without harming the environment.

Regarding these different fashion consumer segments and abundance of terms and certifications, we argue that providing the most relevant yet simplistic sustainable fashion label and creating trust between brand, manufacturer, and consumer is necessary. In this way, the distant consumer can be educated and concerned consumers can be communicated. Moreover, sustainable production is expected to bring financial sustainability. Vanishing resources and bad working conditions risk the future of retail and manufacturing businesses. In order to maintain the business and resources, companies and factories should choose sustainable directions and such a label system constitutes a valuable motivation and award mechanism for businesses to communicate their business partners and consumers.

There has been a similar label attempt which is Gruener Knopf from Germany. As a current pilot practice, it seals textile products as sustainable with a green button symbol based on 26 criteria. In this respect, a label system like Gruener Knopf, based on binary choice as either being sustainable or not, has two shortcomings. First, it fails to accommodate different priorities (e.g., animal rights, employee welfare) that diverse consumer segments could have. Second, it does not incentivize incremental steps that companies could take in the direction of sustainability.

Based on our preliminary research and literature review consumers prioritize certain criteria which are (1) environmental impact of production, (2) employee ethical and social welfare, (3) animal welfare (Reimers et.al 2016), (4) material details, and (5) post-purchase product care. On the other hand, there are numerous certifications used for diversified purposes (e.g. Fair Trade, Peta Vegan) which respond to the previous criteria. With respect to those findings, we claim that gathering, re-organizing, and filtering past and present (1) certifications and labels such (2) terms and (3) criteria are crucial to providing a more sustainable fashion system in future. To be able to do this we believe that using participatory approaches that involve fashion experts from academia and industry is highly important. Therefore, we aim to conduct a workshop at GFC.

Our workshop program consists of organizing, prioritizing, and filtering the pre-determined concepts such as certifications, labels, terms, and criteria with card-sorting method (Hanington, 2012). Yet 45 minutes is limited for prototyping a label design and content, we aim to hypnotize the content and design with brainstorming (Hanington) who are willing to participate in our workshops. Post-it, markers and voice recorder or video recorded are the materials we need. Designers, researchers, academicians, manufacturers, users, retailers, engineers, policymakers are suitable as participants of this workshop. Conducting this workshop in GFC is specifically important for us since the most relevant creators of this source of information will be attending there. Sustainability communication is a specific

issue that we should learn from our past mistakes to be able to not repeat them and to compensate. With this workshop platform, we will be able to discuss the shortcoming of current sustainable communication aspects as labels, certifications, and terms and we will be able to rebuild and fertilize new label content which can be used by manufacturers, brands, consumers and experts.

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