

Article

Traceability the New Eco-Label in the Slow-Fashion Industry?—Consumer Perceptions and Micro-Organisations Responses

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Abstract: This article focuses on eco-labels from the point of view of consumers and experts/owner-managers of micro-organisations. The analysis maps the 15 most common standardisations within the UK’s fashion industry and elaborates on their commonalities and differences, before exploring the perceptions held by both consumers and micro-companies. This paper presents preliminary findings of a wider research project with emphasis on the potential for future research and marketing implications. The study is interpretative in nature and provides detailed results that contribute to an understudied area.

Keywords: slow-fashion; eco-label; micro-organisation; perceptions; associations

1. Introduction

The 21st century is an era that has seen noticeable changes in the fashion landscape, by supporting and incorporating the concepts of reusing and redesigning fashion items to be in line with industry standards, regulations [1,2] and, more recently, sustainable practices, which have emerged as a “megatrend” [3]. The 1960s brought forward the sustainable fashion movement, which, at the time, had a negative connotation [4–6]. In the 1980s fur elimination became a top priority [7], whilst the 1990s saw a strong focus on unfair labour practices, which received great media attention [5]. The latter issue (unfair labour practices) has gained renewed interest with factory accidents, such as the Rana Plaza incident, putting a spotlight on the fashion industry [8]. These accidents are partially caused by a continuous decrease of price in garment collections and accessories [9]. Due to the volatile market environment with its intense competition [10], fashion designers and manufacturers are pressured to lower their prices [11],

which is absorbed by the supply chain. A reason for low pricing strategies is that some consumers demand fashion collections that are cheap and stylish [12,13], which has environmental consequences [14].

Increasingly, environmentally conscious consumers, governmental and non-governmental organisations, and the media pressure key players in the fashion industry to change their production processes and provide garments and accessories that incorporate sustainable practices [1,15]. Today, sustainable and ethical processes have a higher awareness factor amongst consumers, which helps to increase sustainable fashion sales within the UK [16]. Although some authors [17,18] highlight that the sustainable fashion sector is still relatively small in comparison to the apparel sector as a whole, and is not rapidly increasing, Lipson [19] predicts a dramatic increase of sustainable fashion within the next decade. This view is further supported by Mintel Reports stating that the ethical clothing market remains underdeveloped, accounting for less than one per cent of the whole market with a potential to grow in the future [16,20].

One way of identifying sustainable fashion is by utilising eco-labels. Ideally, if a consumer chooses to look for sustainably produced garments, it should be easy to identify these through an eco-label [21]. Within the UK there are five institutions that deal with standards in the apparel industry: the Ethical Trading Initiative, the Fair Trade Foundation, the Global Network of Fairtrade Organisations, the Fairtrade Labelling Organisation, and the Soil Association and Global Textile Standards Institution [16]. Each of these institutions awards different labels, which look at a variety of environmental areas, such as using less harming substances within the clothing production or promoting better working conditions in communities. Any company that wishes to participate in these schemes can then focus on one or more of these areas that is most meaningful to them and acquire eco-labels that fit [22], thereby promoting sustainability [23,24]. Over the past decades, eco-labels have gained importance as environmental tools within the market place [25–27]. This however proposes various challenges: within the fashion industry over 100 eco-labels are currently used [28]. Consumers may be confused, as although they may have seen and know about some standards, they may not necessarily understand what the individual eco-labels imply [29,30]. Therefore, they may not consider standards when purchasing clothes.

Eco-labels, which, in this article include labels, standards, and certifications, are a “philosophy and a way of life that is increasing in importance [...] throughout the world” [31] (p. 61). They are defined as symbols or signs, awarded to products and services that show more environmentally friendly attributes than their competition [32], with their overall goal being: “[T]hrough communication of verification and accurate information, that is not misleading, on environmental aspects of products and services that cause less stress on the environment, thereby stimulating the potential for market-driven continuous environmental improvement” [32].

Eco-labels in this article follow a loose definition and include environmental and ethical labels, such as organisational schemes, institutional and legal arrangements, as well as symbols and logos [33]. Within the context of eco-labelling various categorisations can be identified. According to the International Organisation of Standardisation (ISO) there are three “types” of labels: Type I, Type II, and Type III [34,35].

- **Type I:** awarded by third-party organisations, which can either be government supported institutions or private non-commercial entities [36,37]. They are voluntary, multi-sectorial [38], most commonly used within public procurement, and assess a product’s lifecycle on a pass/fail criteria [37]. An example of a Type I eco-label is the EU Flower.

- **Type II:** based on claims made by manufacturers, importers, or distributors regarding environmental information. This implies that the claims made are one-sided (e.g., from manufacturer) and self-declared [36,39,40]. Examples that can be mentioned are claims on product packaging.
- **Type III:** “consist of quantified product information based on lifecycle impacts” [36] (p. I), which can be compared within individual product categories [36,40]. The information is displayed in form of an environmental performance declaration or non-selective reports [39].

These categorisations highlight any products and services that see environmental conservation and protection as their primary goal [31,41], whilst at the same time encourage organisations to invest in eco-innovation keeping their products and services up to standard [42,43]. Research has indicated that eco-labelling schemes offer a “win-win-win situation” [40] (p. 25) for participating organisations, regulatory authorities, governments, and society at large [40] by acting as market-orientated tools helping organisations to fulfil their environmental goals and targets, whilst circumventing inefficiencies that are associated with mandatory standards or bans [31,44,45]. At the same time, they also act as a promotional device, allowing consumers, who plan on purchasing environmentally friendly goods and/or services, to make a conscious decision on their product choice [31,46].

Although there are positive aspects surrounding eco-labels, they have also been criticised heavily for various reasons: First, the ISO’s grouping of Type I, II, and III labels is not inclusive enough, which implies that various standards cannot be categorised within this framework [47]. Second, eco-labels have been described as complex, thereby arousing distrust and confusion among customers caused by greenwashing [48–50]. Last, these negative consequences are further enhanced by the fact that according to the Ecolabel Index [51] 445 eco-labels are currently circulating within 197 countries, spread across 25 industries. This number increased by 4.49% (20 eco-labels) between 2012 and 2014 [51–53]. Within the textile industry alone “there are close to 100 different labels addressing environmental or social sustainability” [28]. Thus far, no one single eco-label has managed to establish itself within the apparel industry [54,55].

It can be said that although the fashion industry actively seeks to reduce its impact on the environment in the upstream value-chain [56], the sector itself is still dominated by fast-fashion production with the slow-fashion movement only slowly setting its mark [57]. Whilst efforts are made in the downstream value-chain to reduce the fashion industry’s impact, Clancy *et al.* [58] emphasise that “issues regarding use, reuse, recycling and disposal have not received the same attention, but [have] large potential for improvement” (p. 1). Similarly, past research indicated that whilst eco-labels may be seen as a valuable tool, thus far they seem to only contribute in a limiting manner to tackling sustainable consumption [59]. Thus, this article seeks to contribute to the challenges faced in the industry, by examining three research questions:

- (1) What are the commonalities and differences between eco-labels used in the UK’s fashion industry?
- (2) How do consumers understand eco-labels?
- (3) How do micro-organisations respond to consumer demands?

Although research into eco-labels is not a new phenomenon *per se*, to the author’s knowledge studies investigating these certifications within the context of the fashion industry, as well as the knowledge held about these eco-labels from consumers’ and micro-organisations’ perspective lack research. Due to the fashion industry’s economic importance [10] and its reputation as one of the biggest polluters [15] it is vital to understand what consumers and micro-organisations associate with these labels to support

the sector's drive to support sustainable consumption and production [1,3]. Within this article, eco-labels are seen as communication tools that have the potential to enhance sustainable consumption and production. Thus, the theoretical underpinning of this study is based on aspects of sustainability communication, which falls into sustainability marketing. Although green and sustainability marketing have been heavily criticised in the past for not fulfilling their potential [60,61], Prothero *et al.* [62] indicate that communication is necessary to raise awareness for sustainability by not only informing consumers about options available to them, but also educate them on environmental issues, which can be achieved by utilising eco-labels. In other words, sustainability communication not only provides the basis to share knowledge, information and meaning, which can be exchanged between individuals and/or organisations [63], but also emphasises on “ecological issues of sustainable development” [64] (p. 592). Thus, by investigating the three research questions posed, this article seeks to gain a better understanding of challenges faced in the industry concerning the enhancement of sustainable consumption [59].

2. Methodology, Analysis, and Limitations

This article focuses on preliminary data that was collected as part of a wider research project that is concerned with corporate identity of micro-organisations in the slow-fashion industry. Micro-organisations are part of a wider grouping: small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) [65]. A micro-company can be defined “as an enterprise which employs fewer than 10 persons and whose annual turnover and/or annual balance sheet total does not exceed €2 million” (approximately £1.65 million) [65]. Further characteristics of micro-businesses include, but are not limited to: first, having a limited financial budget, which depends on the owner-manager's financial backing as the sole risk-taker [10]. Second, the companies are seen to be innovative in terms of their designs and production processes [10]. Third, they are sensitive to competition, especially if larger organisations provide a comparable product/service at lower cost [10,66]. Last, they seek to employ workers that have a transferable set of skills [10]. The slow-fashion industry provides the counterpart to the fast-fashion industry. Fast-fashion is often described in terms of garment collections available on the high street, which are cheap, mass-produced, fashionable, and have a fast stock turnaround [67]. Slow-fashion on the other hand, whilst being fashionable and at times “cheap” (depending on the price sensitivity of the consumer), is neither mass-produced, nor does it have a fast stock turnover [68,69]. Organisations operating within the slow-fashion industry generally produce a new collection twice a year in Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter [7]. This contrasts starkly with the fast-fashion industry, which produces approximately 20 fashion lines per annum [7]. The UK's fashion industry as a context was chosen for two reasons: First, this industry sector is a key economic contributor and part of the creative and cultural industry [70] and accounts for 5.6% of employment [70]. Second, the creative and cultural industry is an under researched field of study [71].

This article is interpretative in nature and draws on various methodological research tools: semi-structured interviews, semiology, and questionnaires. Altogether 300 questionnaires were collected, which are analysed by using basic descriptive analysis. This quantitative part was designed to provide the author with information on consumer preferences within their shopping behaviour. Participants were asked to rate nine variables (importance in the purchasing decision: quality, comfort, colour, price, design and style, locally made, Fair Trade Sign, sustainably produced, and organic) on a five-point Likert scale, which ranged from very unimportant, to unimportant, neutral, important, and

very important. Although it could be said that questionnaires do not complement the interpretative nature of this article, the opposite is argued. The primary purpose of distributing these questionnaires was to gain access to consumers and be able to follow up on their perceptions and associations with in-depth semi-structure interviews. Moreover, a majority of the questions on the survey were open-ended and thus, fit the nature of this research.

Descriptive analysis, whilst simplistic in nature, allows the researcher to gain an insight into how consumers feel about eco-labels and what they associate with these standards. For the preliminary study, six in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with consumers, which further enhanced the study. During these interviews participants were not only asked to elaborate on how they feel about eco-labels, but also which ones they have seen before in the fashion industry, and what this means to them. These questions provided the foundations for these discussions. In order to gain a more holistic approach eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted with owner-managers of slow-fashion organisations, who reveal their take on eco-labels.

The sampling method for this research followed a judgment sampling process combined with convenience sampling. Judgement sampling, which is often referred to as purposeful sampling, implies that the researcher recruits cases that help to best answer the research questions set for a project [72]. The interview analysis follows Easterby-Smith *et al.*'s [73] seven-step guide of familiarisation, reflection, conceptualisation, linking, re-coding, cataloguing concepts, and re-evaluation. This framework allows for systematic analysis of data "so as to tease themes, patterns, and categories that will be declared in the findings" [73] (p. 175). As previously indicated there are over 100 eco-labels in use globally within the fashion industry. This study focuses on only 15 of these symbols namely the SA8000, Fair Wear Foundation, EU flower, Bluesign, Oeko-Tex 100 standard, Carbon Trust, World Fair Trade Organisation, Made-By, GOTS, Labour Behind the Label, WWF, Soil Association, FSC, iVN Naturtextil, and Fairtrade. These eco-labels were chosen as they are most commonly used in the fashion industry according to Diekamp and Koch [55], which was further validated when conducting secondary desk research.

There are various limitations to this research, which need to be addressed: first, the sample chosen in this study is not a "true" representation of the population as such, but rather is strategically selected [74]. Second, the questionnaires were distributed on the premises of micro-organisations that claim to be sustainable. However, a majority of respondents indicated that they had visited the store for the first time. Third, there is a female overrepresentation within this study, which can be linked to the fact that the questionnaires were distributed in stores that predominantly sold products targeted towards females. Although these limitations cannot be neglected, the researcher feels that the findings bring forward an engaging discussion, which can be followed up with further research.

The following sections are divided into the findings of this study, which will be discussed in accordance with the literature and concludes with contributions and marketing implications.

3. Findings

3.1. Label, Label on the Garment, Which is the Most Instructive of Them All?

Prior to conducting primary data collection the researcher felt it was important to understand what the individual eco-labels stand for, what their meanings are, which environmental, social, and economic

aspects they cover, and what commonalities they share. A detailed semiotic analysis forms the basis of the findings presented in this section in form of investigating the labels themselves and the “about” section on the respective websites. The 15 labels were examined in terms of their core meaning and features relating to the fashion industry. The categories displayed on the top of Figure 1 emerged from the semiotic analysis. The sixteen attributes or categories mentioned were the most prominent key words displayed on the individual label websites. Whilst a majority of these elements have previously been associated and explored in connection with certifications, the individual categories will briefly be described and explained. Water usage reduction, energy reduction, and CO₂ emission are concerned with better management of the respective resources and their impacts on the natural environment [75,76]. Similarly, the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) is concerned with “promoting responsible management of the world’s forests” [77], thus any company certified with the FSC declares that they have purchased and used materials from well-managed forests.

The category harmful substances relates to the safety aspects of the product in terms of the impact chemicals used for dyeing processes may have on the human ecology and overall well-being [78], which is strongly linked to “sustainable textile production”. According to the Bluesign and Made-By, sustainable textile production refers to the overall production process and its ability to facilitate the reduction of harmful substances and environmentally friendly and safe end-products [79,80]. Although it could be argued that “sustainable textile production” is covered through various other categories, this aspect not only focuses on the product itself, but also on the overall production process and worldwide safety regulations [79], thus it is more inclusive and covers a wider array of aspects than other elements investigated. Similarly, “natural environmental protection” incorporates various aspects, including, but not limited to the reduction of pesticides on raw materials, land exploitation, and end-of-life impacts [80].

According to the UN Environmental Programme eco-friendly textiles are materials that are less harming to the environment, which include, but are not limited to textiles made of algae, soya, bamboo or recycled plastic bottles [81]. This links to the cultivation of raw materials, which is concerned with, for example, natural raw materials such as cotton and reducing their environmental impact by optimising water usage, reducing chemicals and toxic fertilisers, as well as providing farmers and workers with increased financial benefits [82]. The Soil Association takes these aspects even further within their raw material assessment criteria by further highlighting that genetically modified organisms (GMOs) cannot be used within any textiles that are classified as organic [83].

Aspects of human rights/working conditions are strongly interlinked with Fair Trade in that both categories are concerned with way workers along the supply chain are treated [84]. The latter takes this even further by highlighting the need to provide farmers and workers with new technologies and encourage learning new skills to enhance their standard of living [84].

The remaining categories (assesses product and production processes, life-cycle assessment, supply-chain assessment, and end-of-life treatment) investigate the various stages and bodies involved in the overall fashion production. In the following Figure 1 is further explored.

The first noticeable finding is the fact that out of the 15 labels, which are commonly used within the UK’s fashion industry [55], only six are industry specific (GOTS, Labour Behind the Label, Made-By, Fair Wear Foundation, Oeko-Tex 100, and iVN). The remaining nine labels can be found across various industry sectors and on a wide array of products and services. Although utilising a label across multiple sectors may be beneficial, due to consumers being able to recognise the certification, it could also be

argued that this may lead to confusion and distrust, whilst at the same time mislead the consumer, if they are not fully aware of the intended meaning of the individual label. It is noteworthy to highlight that out of 108 eco-labels that are used on fashion garments only a minority are industry specific, which poses various questions: why does the fashion industry rely on eco-labels used in other sectors? And how do consumers feel about eco-labels put on garments that can also be found within other industries? These questions further justify this research, which focuses on exploring consumers' associations of these labels, as well as micro-organisations' responses.

As mentioned, the top of Figure 1 provides an overview of key features associated with the individual standards. Overall, each certification covers a minimum of two and a maximum of seven aspects. Although the majority of these labels are used within different industries, the aspects these labels cover are quite limited. A majority of these certifications focus on energy, waste, and water reductions within the supply chain processes or improvements on the product life-cycle. However, only a limited amount of these standards focus on the pre product life-cycle impacts, such as planting the seeds, use of pesticides, and the actual raw material (e.g., cotton—a water draining monoculture). Data also indicate that neither of the key features is covered by all labels, nor is there one aspect that is commonly featured across the certifications. This might be explained with the fact that a majority of these labels are used across a multitude of sectors, rather than focus on one single one. This implies that in order for these labels to be applicable to a variety of products, the attributes they cover might be vague and/or more general in nature.

A majority of these labels focus on the social aspect in terms of human rights and safe working conditions. Whilst this aspect seems to be vital, it is not as obviously displayed and seemingly less taken into account by the SA8000, the WWF, the Soil Association, the FSC, the EU flower, the Carbon Trust, and the Oeko-Tex 100 standard. On the other hand, the cultivation of raw materials is only explicitly mentioned by the WWF certification. The question that arises is: what does this mean in terms of the fashion industry? Looking at Figure 1 closely, this analysis has various implications: First, each individual standard focuses on specific aspects of the triple bottom line. This indicates that it is up to the individual organisations to decide, which one of these certifications best describes their core values of their fashion production [22]. Second, although none of the eco-labels tick all the boxes, there is an opportunity for organisations to combine several of these labels and cover a range of aspects that signifies their commitment to sustainability. This however can lead to confusion amongst consumers, who may not be able to decode the information [29,30] and interpret a collection of eco-labels as an attempt of greenwashing [48–50]. Third, the analysis concurs with previous findings indicating that thus far, there is no one single label that has established itself within the fashion industry [54,55]. A key implication for retailers that emerges from the analysis thus far is that organisations and retailers alike need to be aware of not only the individual labels and their meaning, but also consumers' associations and preferences of these labels, in order to be able to cater for their consumers' needs and wants. However, a challenge that emerges is being able to identify the “perfect” mix of labels that signifies not only that the fashion product has a lesser impact than its counterparts, but also does not fall into the category of greenwashing.

In summary, the investigation of the individual labels has left the researcher with inconclusive findings: whilst eco-labels can be seen as valuable tools that guide heuristics in the decision-making process of purchasing a good or service that is more environmentally friendly, the sheer amount of

certifications available make it challenging to establish, which one is the most instructive. Moreover, due to the fact that only six out of the investigated labels are industry specific poses the question whether the remaining nine labels are generally associated with the fashion industry and in how far these are seen as being instructive. In other words, the semiotic analysis has provided the researcher with the opportunity to conduct in-depth research with consumers and practitioners, in order to gain an insight into and a better understanding of the perceptions held about eco-labels in the fashion industry.
















	Textile specific	Water usage reduction	CO ₂ emission	Deforestation	Harmful substances	Human rights/working conditions	Sustainable textile production	Cultivation of raw materials	Eco-friendly textile	Natural environmental protection	Reduced energy usage	Fair Trade	Assesses product & production process	Life-cycle assessment	Supply chain assessment	End-of-life treatment	Raw material assessment
		✓	✓		✓		✓		✓				✓				
						✓				✓		✓	✓				
		✓						✓								✓	✓
									✓	✓					✓		✓
				✓									✓				✓
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		✓			✓				✓		✓		✓	✓			✓
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	*	✓			✓	✓			✓				✓	✓	✓		
	*				✓										✓		✓

Figure 1. Summary of findings (based on researcher's view and ease of accessibility of categories on websites).

3.2. *It Is You, Dear Label...*

This section focuses on the questionnaire responses first, before moving onto the in-depth semi-structured consumer interviews. The questionnaires were distributed in two companies: Creationist (200 responses) and Dreamworld (100 responses). (Both company names as well as the consumer names are fictional to guarantee anonymity, see Table A1 for detailed list of participants). As highlighted previously, participants were predominantly female, with shoppers at Creationist being aged between 22 to 29 and either full-time employed or full-time students. In comparison, Dreamworld attracts a slightly older crowd of 41 to 55 years of age, who are either full-time employed or retired.

Participants were asked to rate nine product aspects on a five-point Likert scale according to how important they when purchasing a piece of clothing, which are product quality, comfort, colour, price, and design and style, organic, sustainably produced, locally made, or has a Fair Trade sign. Both participant groupings in Creationist and Dreamworld show similar responses in terms of the product's quality, comfort, colour, price, and design and style, which were all rated as either important or very important. This implies that these five aspects are likely to influence the decision-making process of these participants (Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1. Descriptive data Creationist.

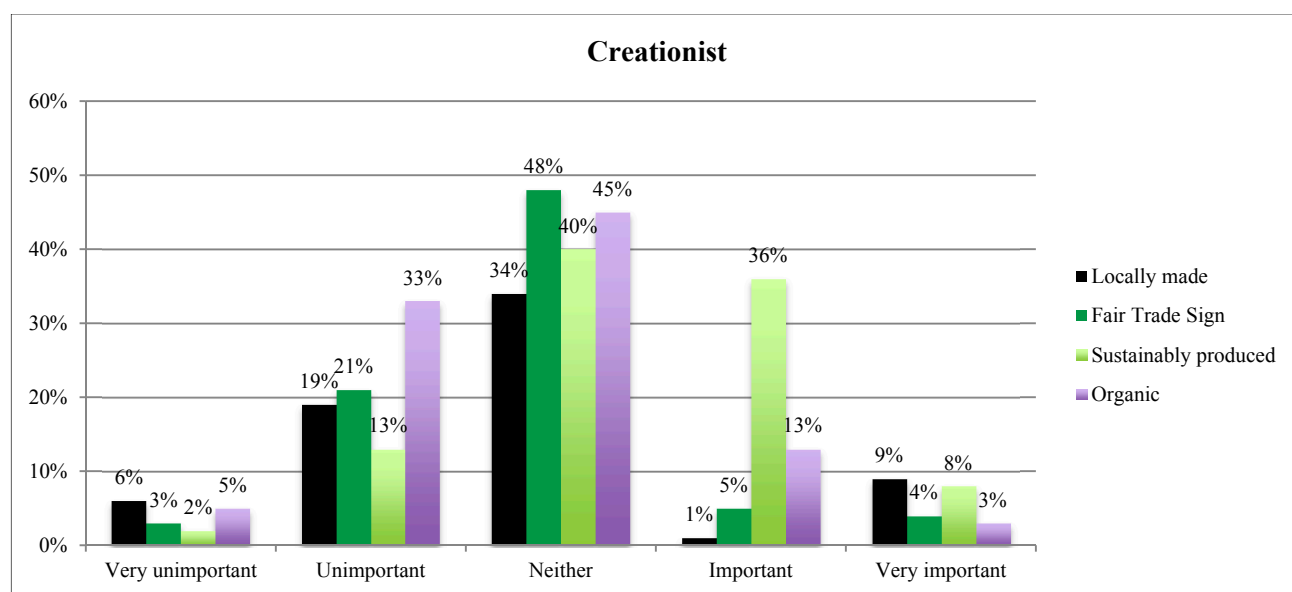
	Very Unimportant	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very Important
Quality	1%	0%	3%	54%	43%
Comfort	0%	2%	15%	51%	33%
Colour	1%	5%	22%	46%	27%
Price	1%	2%	6%	61%	31%
Design and style	0%	0%	5%	46%	49%

Table 2. Descriptive data Dreamworld.

	Very Unimportant	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very Important
Quality	1%	0%	1%	43%	52%
Comfort	4%	0%	9%	48%	39%
Colour	4%	7%	19%	48%	22%
Price	2%	1%	7%	60%	30%
Design and style	4%	1%	9%	46%	40%

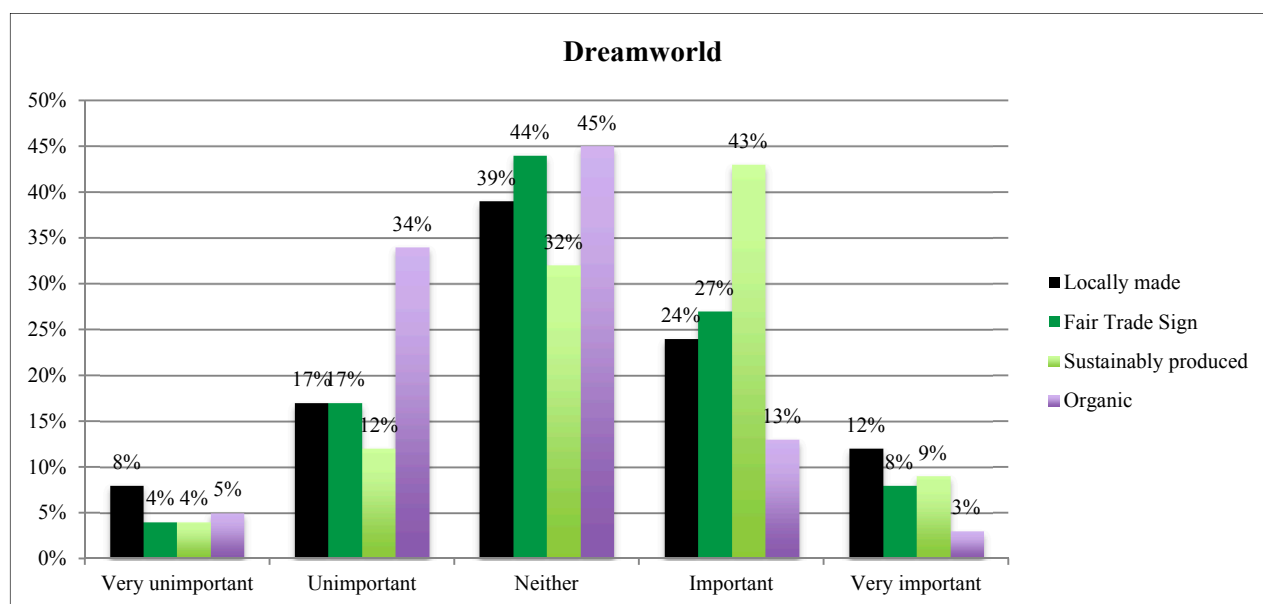
Sustainably produced as an influencer received slightly lower scoring and was rated as either important or neutral. The remaining garment features of being locally made, having a Fair Trade Sign, and/or being organic were seen as either neutral or unimportant (Figures 2 and 3).

These findings pose various questions: why do aspects of locally made, the Fair Trade Sign, organic, and sustainably produced rank comparatively lower than product quality, colour, design and style, and price? Do these product attributes score lower because consumers are unaware of their existence or meaning? Could eco-labels act as communication tools to promote environmentally friendly attributes as being important? And how do consumers understand eco-labels when seeing them on a garment? Answering these questions is vital in understand their wider implications in the consumer market.



	Locally made	Fair Trade Sign	Sustainably produced	Organic
Very unimportant	6%	3%	2%	5%
Unimportant	19%	21%	13%	33%
Neither	34%	48%	40%	45%
Important	1%	5%	36%	13%
Very Important	9%	4%	8%	3%

Figure 2. Descriptive findings Creationist.



	Locally made	Fair Trade Sign	Sustainably produced	Organic
Very unimportant	8%	4%	4%	5%
Unimportant	17%	17%	12%	34%
Neither	39%	44%	32%	45%
Important	24%	27%	43%	13%
Very Important	12%	8%	9%	3%

Figure 3. Descriptive findings Dreamworld.

Altogether six consumers volunteered to participate in a follow-up in-depth interview. Initial questions in the consumer interview focused on aspects relating directly to their questionnaire responses in order to gain a better understanding on their feelings and associations of various aspects surrounding eco-labels in the fashion industry. The first set of questions concerned the aspects of organic, sustainably produced, Fair Trade Sign, locally made. Each of the participants was asked to elaborate why they rated the individual components as neutral within their questionnaire (or why they ranked them higher/lower than the average participant). The data showed that there are various reasons for rating the four aspects in a neutral manner: knowledge, time, finances, and quality. Sumaya, a shopper at Creationist, states that *“there are so many different kinds of labels and I do not know enough about all of them for one particular sign to be more important than another”*. Marta and Agnes, who are shoppers at Dreamworld, confirm the statement made by Sumaya. Marta and Agnes highlight that they *“did not know there was a label that is specific to the fashion industry”* (Marta) and *“find them rather confusing”* (Agnes). Andrea, a shopper at Creationist, further states that although she knows what individual standards signify, they *“can be overdone”*, which was also highlighted during an interview with one of the experts saying that the supply chain can be *“overburdened”* by eco-labels. Andrea mentions that these certifications help consumers to identify products that are produced more ethically or environmentally friendly, as they cannot be *“slap[ped] on a product without complying to certain standards”*, but these certifications matter more for specific products such as *“electronics, and safety”* (Andrea) rather than the fashion industry. She emphasises that *“most people [do not] have the time or energy to spend sourcing every product they are [going to] buy”* (Andrea), which would need to be done when looking for garments with a specific eco-label. Moreover, Sumaya and Agnes highlight that they associate products that have a standardisation with higher financial costs than products without, which was also validated through the questionnaire responses.

The “locally made” aspect seems to be important for the majority of consumers, as they seek *“to put the money back into the country [they are] living in”* (Andrea). This finding is also supported throughout the questionnaire responses, which highlight that participants preferred shopping at independent stores and supporting local designers. A notable observation made was that the consumers interviewed state they prefer local goods. To the question how they identify these products they agreed that there needs to be *“a tag on it that said it was locally made”* (Sumaya) and *“it has to be a little bit obvious”* on the garment (Sumaya). This implies two key things: first, consumers interviewed do prefer local products that are sustainably produced and organic (Sumaya, Andrea), however they should have the same or a similar price point as other products (Sumaya, Agnes). Second, consumers seem to rely on eco-labels, which indicates that certifications are beneficial, nevertheless they need to be easily understandable and straightforward. These issues raised link back to the company’s overall communication strategy and how organisational messages are received (decoded) by consumers.

In order to further explore the associations and feelings consumers have about certifications, discussions in the semi-structured interviews were geared towards focusing on whether certifications on garments have an influence on their purchasing decision. During the interviews, the participants were shown 15 eco-labels analysed in the first part of this article and asked to highlight which of these eco-labels they recognise and what they mean to them. Andrea was able to identify the majority of standards. She indicated that some of these eco-labels have high brand recognition, such as the Fair Trade Sign, WWF, and the Carbon Trust, however *“the down side is that [they] do not always stand for*

the necessarily best standards [...] [and] they may not be the most instructive label" (Andrea). She further highlights that *"fair trade [...] and [...] good quality [...] [do not always go] hand in hand"* (Andrea) and that there is no *"one label now a days [that] hits all of these marks"* (Andrea). She mentions if there would be an eco-label that ticked all the boxes, she would be actively searching for this label, however the main aspects she shops for are a balance between quality and price (Andrea). Thus, she confirmed that she is currently not necessarily considering eco-labels when purchasing clothes.

Sumaya highlights that she has not seen the majority of eco-labels shown in the research, but believes if a piece of clothing had one of these standards on them, it would change her purchasing decision. *"Even though I have [not] seen them before, looking at [them] I can see [...] what they stand for"* (Sumaya). This implies that standards, for her, act as strong communication tools, which she associates with environmentally friendly production processes. This however, is slightly contradicting as it raises a philosophical question: How can you know what you do not know? Moreover, within the same part of the interview Sumaya mentions that *"if a piece of clothing was the same price [...] and had a label in it and looks the same like a high street one which did [not] have one of these, I would definitely buy the one with the label"*. This shows that for Sumaya price is a key determinant in her decision-making process, which links to observations made by various authors [80,85] highlighting that in case two products appear to be identical, consumers will choose the (in this case) fashion item that has a lower environmental impact.

Marta and Agnes mentioned that although they recognise various eco-labels they do not think they have anything to do with the fashion industry. They associated the Fair Trade Sign more with coffee and WWF with the protection of endangered species. When shopping, they are more concerned with the style of the product and the fit rather than having to seek out a product that has an eco-label, which would limit their choice. Sara states that she only recognises the Fair Trade Sign and Oeko-Tex standard in connection with the fashion industry, whilst she is aware of a couple of the other certifications, she would have not linked these to the fashion industry. She furthermore mentions that she feels some of the eco-labels are very specific to the UK marketplace; since she is foreign they are not very familiar to her. When shopping for clothes the only standard she looks for is the Oeko-Tex 100, as it indicates that the product has less harmful substances than its counter parts. Although this specific standard would influence her decision-making, she still buys fashion items, even if they do not have an eco-label (Sara). A question that arises at this stage of the research is whether the design of eco-labels plays a role in the decision-making process and the decoding process of the message conveyed.

In summary, the questionnaire responses and follow up interviews highlighted mixed feelings about eco-labels. On the one hand, participants seemed to feel that eco-labels are valuable, as they help them to identify products that are more environmentally friendly and fairly traded, but on the other hand the data also indicate that consumers are not familiar with the majority of standardisations that are used in the fashion industry. Moreover, the visual identity of these labels, their terminology and abbreviations do not seem to complement the consumers associations with the industry. A further observation made is that products, which have a standardisation, are associated with a premium price. Whilst consumers are interested in purchasing garments that have an eco-label on them, they are neither always aware of them nor willing to pay a price premium. This has various implications for marketers and academics in a broader sense: this research suggests that currently eco-labels in the fashion industry are not well recognised by consumers, thus there may be a need to develop stronger marketing communication

strategies that fill this gap. Moreover, a key question that emerged within the data analysis is whether the certification's design has an impact on the consumer's ability to decode the message. Whilst aspect of design go beyond the scope of this research, it is suggested that this aspect is investigated in the future, as signifiers could be used to further enhance the fashion industry's overall goal of promoting sustainable consumption and production.

3.3. *But There Is Something Else—Traceability May Be the New Way Forward?*

In order to gain a holistic approach to the perceptions and associations of eco-labels in the fashion industry, eleven interviews with experts/owner-managers of fashion micro-businesses were conducted. Throughout the interview process participants were asked to define the term *eco-label* and describe their associations (positive or negative) with the phrase.

Although the majority of participants agreed that there are “*quite a lot of [standardisations] out there*” (Alice), which implies that they are aware of eco-labels in their industry, some also highlight “*there are [not] any [certifications specific to our product category]. [...] There are no regulations*” (Becci). It is noteworthy to state that this participant made a distinction between the clothing industry and accessories, which include, but are not limited to shoes, jewellery, and gloves. In the same vein, Becci highlighted that they have their products tested for harmful substances on a regular basis, as their customers require an official report that analyses the exact amount of chemicals used in their products (Becci). Although this is what both the Oeko-Tex 100 and 1000 standards cover, Becci seems neither to know about these standards, nor associate them with her industry. A conclusion that could be drawn from this finding is that Becci may lack awareness of these specific certifications and knowledge of labels in more general terms.

Although a manifold of eco-labels are used within the fashion industry, some participants state that they “*can[not] think of any*” (Anna) spontaneously, whilst others identified: Made-By (Alice), Fair Trade Sign (e.g., Alice, Becci, Cathy, Dana), Organic Certification (Emma), and the Fair Wear Foundation (Naomi) as the most well-known standardisations. This implies that out of 100 eco-labels in existence in the UK fashion industry [28], four labels stand out and are known among this specific range of experts. The most commonly referenced eco-label in this research is the Fair Trade Sign, which was mentioned by all expert interviewees. A question that can be posed is why the experts seem to be most familiar with the Fair Trade Sign? Understanding this implication could enable the industry and policy makers to promote other standardisations within the fashion industry and raise awareness of their benefits.

Overall, data indicated that the opinions expressed about these standardisations are quite mixed. Several participants associate positive aspects with eco-labels, however, some contradicting statements were made. Alice highlights that an “*accredited, certified, organised mark [...] protects the consumer [as the mark tells them the organisation is] doing it properly, they are doing it right*”. She further mentions that these standardisations “*would be a really positive thing*” (Alice), as they enable the consumer to make a conscious decision when purchasing an environmentally friendly product. Although Alice was approached by a labelling body previously, she highlights that for her as the owner of a micro-company “*it [is] too expensive [...] to get involved*”. Moreover, she mentions that at the time she was approached “*they [did not] have any [certification] in the UK*” (Alice) and still do not have any now that would be recognisable in the industry. Anna, who is working for Alice, further emphasises that their

garments are sold within various European outlets, and thus she questions: “[H]ow viable [a standard] is internationally [...] as you [would] need flexibility [...] for variation in the countries the clothing is being made, [which makes it] a little difficult to have something across the board” (Anna). Throughout the interview process it became apparent that Anna sees eco-labels as standardisations reinforcing legislation and regulations on a national level, which for her implies that these certifications do not have brand recognition across national borders. She further expresses that she is unable to name any specific labels, which combined with her interpretation of eco-labels not being viable across national borders (Anna) indicates that she does not see these standardisations as powerful communication tools. To reiterate this point further, she concludes that even if there was a standard that had strong brand recognition, this eco-label would not be inclusive enough. Anna further states that it would be challenging to create an eco-label that incorporates all aspects of a sustainable business, from the sourcing process of raw materials, to manufacturing the good, and selling the finished product. This is also supported in the labelling literature and highlighted as a major drawback of eco-labels [54,55]. In other words, there is a need to establish a one-fits-all label that is inclusive and valid across multiple national borders (Anna). This has two implications: On the one hand it is a justification for the variety of eco-labels available in the fashion industry, which allows the micro-organisation to select the eco-label(s) that fit best, on the other hand however, this indirectly implies that there is a high cost involved. If there is no-one-fits-all standardisation and the company would have to acquire two or more, this suggests a financial burden, which most likely would be transferred to the consumer by increasing the garments overall price. This would reinforce consumer perceptions of environmentally friendly clothing being sold at a price-premium.

Sam concurs with Anna stating that there is no one-fits-all label. She further voices her concern that although an eco-label can highlight that a garment “*might be fairly traded, but what fabric is it made out of? If it is a poly cotton blend—the[n] it is not very environmentally friendly*” (Sam). This is the same argument made by Kim stating that just because a company might grow organic cotton, this cotton might still drain all the water resources within a country, which in turn makes it not environmentally friendly (Kim). Sam reiterates these points further, as she believes statements made about organic cotton and the fact that this raw material is not a “sustainable” resource can create distrust and confusion amongst consumers, as she believes that “*the product labelling can be misleading*” (Sam). However, in the same vein, she emphasises the need to develop a standardisation that is easily recognisable and less confusing (Sam) so consumers have a point of reference when purchasing a product.

Emma highlights that even if an eco-label would provide the perfect fit for her company, implying the standardisation would certify all the aspects she is focusing on, her organisation would not “*have the ability to actually go out and get these certifi[cations]*” (Emma), as they are too expensive and not affordable for micro-organisations. The interview conducted with Emma led to notable observations: She highlights that she is aware of various standardisations and mentioned the Fair Trade Sign as one of the key certifications. She also recalls a label certifying organic cotton, but was unable to think of the name (Emma). She feels that eco-labels are very important, but she personally is not always looking at and for them when she is purchasing raw materials for her fashion production or garments for herself. Instead she is researching the specific company or supplier she is purchasing the raw material or fashion item from and looks at feedback provided by others (e.g., fellow brands, customers) (Emma). Throughout the interview process and on various other occasions she highlights that for her

standardisations are not playing a key role in the decision-making process in terms of purchasing raw materials, but rather the suppliers' credentials and philosophy impacts her decision-making process. However, in another part of her interview she states that an advantage of these eco-labels is that *"obviously people understand the[se] certifications"* (Emma) and are seeking out products that do have these standardisations. This is contradicting her following statement mentioning that for micro-organisations, who cannot afford to acquire such a certification it would be enough to *"communicat[e] that [they] are doing all these things the right way"* (Emma). A question that furthermore arises is: what are organisations looking for when sourcing raw materials for their own production? In Emma's case her main point of reference are the suppliers' credentials and their philosophy, rather than them actually owning an eco-label. Emma justifies this by highlighting that she is able to trace all her raw materials back to the original source, thus for her a standardisation would be unnecessary. This however has various implications: first, there is an issue of control, as it is questionable if any company can indeed trace every single raw material to its original source. Second, Emma emphasises that she trusts her suppliers to produce the materials according to her own standards. Challenges that emerge are on the one hand how this *trust* can be built and on the other hand how reliable information available about the supplier is. In this sense, eco-labels could act as useful communication tools, as they could provide reassurance for the consumer.

Naomi's opinion on the subject matter provides an insight into a micro-organisation that already has acquired a standardisation: the Fair Trade Sign. Overall her attitude towards eco-labels was very positive. Naomi's reason for acquiring this specific certification is to *"g[i]ve us [as an organisation] a lot more credibility"* and because *"my particular interest was [...] on the people that were growing the cotton and make the products"* (Naomi). This statement re-emphasises what has already been said: eco-labels that are currently in use focus on specific aspects in the supply chain that are meaningful to the organisation [22]. The use of the phrase to *"g[i]ve us a lot more credibility"* (Naomi) is noteworthy, as she links this phrase back to the same challenge described and faced by green marketers: issues that concern green products and messages, and more specifically greenwashing. In other words, the eco-label provides Naomi with the opportunity to show that they are not simply *claiming* to produce Fair Trade clothes, but have been officially certified. Thus, Naomi believes that the Fair Trade Sign is a recognised brand that is trusted by consumers. She further highlights that *"there is a fair bit of confusion"* (Naomi) surrounding what consumers actually know about the individual standards, but believes that if they see a certification (e.g., Fair Trade Sign) it provides them with confidence to purchase the product (Naomi).

Contrary to Naomi, Ida emphasises that just because *"companies have been awarded a Fair Trade status [...] behind the scenes [they] are not [always] considered Fair Trade"*. This was also mentioned by Kim, who highlighted that once the eco-label is acquired and can be displayed on the products no one *"comes in and actually tests [the] garments. [...] It [is] all to do with money"* (Kim). These two statements contradict the opinion voiced by Naomi. The feel one can get from the individual interviews is that the participants have a positive attitude towards labelling and would trust the standardisation if there was a guarantee that organisations who have acquired a standardisation are checked on a regular basis, as is mentioned on their individual websites. This does not imply that organisations are not checked, as firms need to go through an application process in order to be awarded an eco-label, thereby delivering evidence that they are indeed complying with these regulations. However, Kim emphasised that personal experience has shown, once a payment for a certification is made, the awarding bodies trust

that the licensee acts according to the guidelines, as institutions issuing these standardisations do not always have time to re-check every single one of their members. This can be seen as having major policy implications and may affect the adoption and reputation of eco-labels within the fashion industry and more specifically among micro-organisations. Ida agrees with this point of view, she mentioned that she made similar observations and although her products' raw materials are sourced in Bali and could have been subject to be certified by the Fair Trade Sign, she chose to opt-out. She mentioned that she visits the factories in Bali on a regular basis and ensures that the working conditions are good, employees are paid fair wages and the environment they are operating in is safe. Whilst these conditions, as previously stated, follow the principles of the Fair Trade certification, she stated that she would not acquire this mark, due to having had an encounter with an organisation that was accredited with a label, but did not act according to the guidelines.

Mandy believes that *“official trademarks on garments, a Fair Trade Sign and their role in the fashion industry [...] are important”*, as they highlight which garments are more environmentally friendly. However, she believes that consumers in the current economy are not interested in buying sustainably produced products (Mandy), which confirms findings from the consumer interviews. She highlights that *“it is important [to] continue to educate consumers”* (Mandy). Mandy believes that in the future *“you do [not] have the need [for eco-labels]”*, as everything should be produced sustainably.

In summary, it can be said that the feeling about eco-labels remains twofold. Whilst some believe that they can have a great potential within the fashion industry, others feel eco-labels lack credibility and are too expensive. In the same vein, participants indicated that the standardisations currently available on the market are not inclusive, in terms of covering production and supply chain aspect of the company. Moreover, research has shown that there are moral indicators that need to be considered, including, but not limited to the actual raw materials used within the production process.

4. To Label or Not to Label...? What Is Next?

This research has confirmed past studies that have highlighted that consumers would like to purchase more environmentally friendly garments [1,15]. However, it was pointed out that it is challenging to identify these environmentally friendly products within the market place. Although eco-labels could help identify these garments [21], this research has confirmed that consumers are neither aware of these labels, nor do they necessarily understand their meaning [29,30]. A noteworthy observation made and a key contribution to the literature is that contrary to Pederson and Neergaard [40], who describe eco-labelling schemes as offering a “win-win-win situation” (p. 25), this was not confirmed in the data of this research on consumers and micro-organisations. To reiterate this further, even the expert who had adopted the eco-label indicated that the eco-label neither had a positive nor negative effect on the business. Overall data emphasised that for these micro-organisations eco-labels may not be a future strategy, as the experts were not convinced that eco-labels provide them with the necessary credibility or tools to communicate their sustainable practices. Instead, it was pointed out that being able to trace their raw materials back to their original resource is more beneficial and important to them. This finding supports and adds to consumer research conducted in the past, which highlights that participants distrust labels and see them as too expensive. Thus, it can be said that from this research's findings it becomes apparent that micro-organisations do not believe that eco-labels are communication tools that can enhance their

garments. Due to their production processes, their size of the overall supply chain, and their various production techniques the owner-managers indicate that no one eco-label provides the perfect fit. Whilst a manifold of these labels could be used to cover a majority of attributes within their garment production, this would be too expensive to maintain for these micro-businesses. Indirectly it was emphasised that eco-labels seem to be seen as communication tools for large organisations with large supply chains that want to certify one specific aspect in their production process that is most important to them. On the other hand, this research found that these micro-organisations deem all aspects as important, thus a more inclusive eco-label may be needed. Future research could thus focus on investigating whether a larger sample size of micro- and small-organisations is interested in a one-fits-all label and in how far this would be accepted by consumers.

This article focused on three research questions: first, what the commonalities and differences are between the 15 eco-labels most commonly used in the UK's fashion industry. The semiotic analysis indicated that whilst they are similar in nature and cover a wider range of aspects of the Triple Bottom Line, each individual certification is highly specific. Out of the 15 labels, six are industry specific. This research has only scratched the surface of these standards and more research is necessary to map all certifications used in the industry. The mapping of these standardisations is vital in terms of understanding the individual certifications and their use, which could provide the necessary information for companies to decide on the best combinations that highlight the core characteristics of the fashion garments produced. In order to eliminate confusion in the marketplace, this mapping could also identify any labels that are covering the same aspects and thus, may enable policy makers to combine standardisations, which may lead to a less complex labelling-scape.

Second, this research investigated how consumers understand the individual labels. Similar to past studies, it was found that consumers lack knowledge of these labels or find them not instructive. Multiple standards used in the fashion industry were also not associated with garments. This indicates that more research needs to be conducted, analysing how these certification could be improved, or amended in order to communicate signals that can be easily decode by consumers, thereby enabling them make a conscious decisions to purchase more environmentally friendly clothes, when searching for these items. Third, the reaction to consumer demands was investigated from a micro-company perspective. A key contribution to the literature, which thus far lacks research [86], concerns the micro-business perspective on eco-labelling. Data emphasised that rather than acquiring a label, which is seen as too expensive and a majority of experts also seem to lack knowledge and awareness of them, these micro-businesses encourage traceability. To explain, the experts seek to communicate similar values then eco-labels, without having to apply and purchase one of these standardisations.

As was highlighted, this research is in its infancy stage and will be followed up with a wider sample of consumer and expert interviews. Thus far, a noteworthy observation is the fact that both consumers and experts emphasised that they seek easily accessible information that allows them to trace the origins of raw materials. With over 100 labels in existence [28] in the fashion industry alone the questions that need to be asked are: First from a business perspective: how many labels are enough? Which ones are the most instructive and how can these support even the smallest businesses in the fashion world? Second, from a consumer perspective: how do they decode the messages and what is meaningful to them. In this manner, further research needs to be conducted that investigates how a win-win situation can be created that fulfils the needs of consumers and producers.

5. Conclusions

This article has investigated eco-labels in the fashion industry from the point of view of consumers, and owner-managers of micro-organisations. The findings have confirmed previous research by highlighting that eco-labels still lack awareness, especially within the fashion industry. A key contribution to the literature can be seen in that data emphasise that eco-labels for micro-organisations have neither a positive nor negative effect on their overall business operations, which does not concur with previous research. Moreover, due to their size, the size of their supply chain, their production processes, and production techniques the experts and owner-managers believe that none of the current labels in existence cover all their needs. Thus, as has been highlighted, future research is essential to investigate the need for a one-fits-all label in the fashion industry itself, as well as issues of design relating to the overall decoding mechanism of labels from the consumer side.

Appendix

Table A1. Summary of data collection.

	Consumer Interviews	Expert Interviews	Creationist	Dreamworld
Duration of interviews	13:33–36:22 min	10–57:22 min		
Number of interviews	6	11		
Number of questionnaires			200	100
Name of participants	Sumaya Sara Sam Marta Mandy	Alice Agnes Andrea Anna (employee) Becci Cathy Dana Emma Naomi (eco-label) Kim Ida	Cathy	Dana

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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