

# SUSTAINABILITY MESSAGING IN THE CLOTHING INDUSTRY

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A THESIS

Presented to the Journalism and Communications Honors Program Department  
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College of the University of Oregon  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

May 2017

## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

Emma Scherzer for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in the Department of Journalism and Communication to be taken on May 8, 2017

Title: SUSTAINABILITY MESSAGING IN THE CLOTHING INDUSTRY

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
Professor Kim Sheehan

The circular economy is an economic system that encourages resource productivity by eliminating waste and pollution through a design process where materials are reused. It's no secret that earth's resources are diminishing, while the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is increasing. Because of this the circular economy is becoming more popular as a new way to think about products and consumption. Many companies are trying to figure out how to rethink their products to be used again and how to design out waste. This thesis will be investigating the rhetoric behind sustainability messaging in the clothing industry. Specifically, I will be looking at the messaging strategies of Columbia Sportswear, Patagonia and H&M and evaluating how they communicate the company's "sustainable" actions. All three of these companies advertise themselves as being environmentally friendly, however, textile production has an adverse effect on the earth. Furthermore, all the companies incorporate aspects of the circular economy into production processes. This is most notable through the companies clothing recycling programs, and the messaging to reduce, reuse and recycle. I will also be conducting focus groups to evaluate how the advertisements effect the perceptions of the target audience.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express sincere appreciation to Professor Kim Sheehan, Professor David Frank and Professor Leslie Steeves for their help and guidance during the thesis process. I would also like to thank my parents for supporting my education throughout my life. Lastly I would like to thank all of the women who participated in the focus groups I conducted, which allowed me to further understand how people respond to certain messages.

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## Introduction

The global apparel market is valued at \$3 trillion, and accounts for 2 percent of the world's GDP.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile the fashion industry is the second most polluting industry on the planet, right behind Big Oil.<sup>2</sup> This is based off of measuring the amount of carbon dioxide that is expelled into the air, how much water is used during production, and the amount of waste that the industry generates. There are a variety of factors that contribute to a garment's adverse effect on the environment. Determining the carbon footprint of a single item of clothing has to take into account pesticides or pollutants that were used in the process, natural resources that were extracted, energy required for production and manufacturing, the toxic chemicals used for dyeing, pollution exerted during shipping, and more. Because people are detached from the process of clothing production "there is an enormous disconnect between increasing clothing consumption and resultant waste."<sup>3</sup> For example, cotton, which is typically considered a "pure" material that is good for the environment can have adverse effects. The "U.S. cotton crop demands 22 billion pounds of weed killer per year." The fiber is then often dyed and treated with toxic chemical baths to create color or make it softer.<sup>4</sup> The average consumer is not exposed to the production process and as a result there is an atmosphere of ambivalence surrounding clothing consumption.

Consumer detachment from the supply chain combined with falling garment prices have created a throwaway culture where people dispose of items in a relatively

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<sup>1</sup> EcoWatch. "Fast Fashion Is the Second Dirtiest Industry in the World, Next to Big Oil." *EcoWatch*. N.p., 2016. Web. 14 Nov. 2016.

<sup>2</sup> A look inside the world's second most polluting industry. (n.d.). Retrieved April 08, 2017, from <http://www.colorado.edu/business/2017/02/01/look-inside-worlds-second-most-polluting-industry>

<sup>3</sup> Cline, Elizabeth L. *Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion*. New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2012. Print. 121.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 124.

short amount of time. This is famously known as fast-fashion, which is when businesses take trends from the runways and move it to retail stores at affordable prices. The “average price of clothing has plummeted in recent decades. And cheap clothes have undergone a total image overhaul, where they no longer imply some inherent compromise in style.”<sup>5</sup> In the past half-century the fashion industry has been based on the competition of low prices that forces business to cut corners on quality. Americans now buy five times as much clothing as they did in 1980, and 85 percent of that eventually ends up in the landfill.<sup>6</sup>

The bottom line is that the fashion industry is not sustainable. However, there are ways to combat pollution in the textile industry. There are systems for production and manufacturing in place that are positive for the environment and can regulate themselves.<sup>7</sup> Companies are also becoming increasingly aware of the world’s finite resources, and are taking action to reduce its impact on the earth. With the rise of environmentally conscious businesses also comes the issue of greenwashing, which is when a company presents disinformation to the public to make the organization appear environmentally friendly. This is why it is important to educate consumers about where a product is coming from and assist them in effectively deciphering company claims about being sustainable. If we understand what type of messaging will motivate people to become more knowledgeable about where their clothing is coming from, we can help eliminate further pollution.

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Kline, Elizabeth. "Where Does Discarded Clothing Go?" *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, 14 July 2014. Web. 14 Nov. 2016.

<sup>7</sup>McDonough, William, and Michael Braungart. *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*. New York: North Point, 2002. Print. 156.

## Research Questions

- ❖ To what extent can sustainability messaging in communication outlets improve the favorability of consumer responses to the brand represented?
- ❖ How do companies communicate green and anti-consumption messages? How do consumers react to these messages?
- ❖ What information do the companies provide about their commitment to sustainability? What practices do the companies mention in the advertisements, and how do viewers respond to the messaging strategies?
- ❖ Can the practices effect change?

## Literature Review and Definitions

### *Declining Price of Fashion*

Elizabeth Kline, a journalist who investigates the environmental impact of clothes, has coined the term ‘fast fashion’ to define “a radical method of retailing that has broken away from seasonal selling and puts out new inventory constantly throughout the year.”<sup>8</sup> This production process gets clothes to the market as cheaply and quickly as possibly. This provides consumers with more opportunities to buy, which is why over the past century the way people have bought clothes has dramatically changed. People own more items of clothing and are shopping more frequently. Over the past 15 years there has been a fall in the average cost in clothing. Americans spend “less than 3 percent on their annual household budget to apparel.”<sup>9</sup> This has caused Americans to

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<sup>8</sup> Cline, Elizabeth L. *Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion*. New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2012. Print. 96.

<sup>9</sup> Cline, Elizabeth L. *Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion*. New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2012. Print. 12.

shop more, and on average Americans buy 64 items of clothing a year, which is over one piece of clothing a week.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the fact that the fashion industry is as prosperous as it's ever been, people are spending less on clothes than ever before.<sup>11</sup> That is because of the abundance of inexpensive options that are on the market, however, these options often times come with compromised ethics. People even spent a larger portion of their budgets on clothes during the depression era, and they spent more time repairing articles of clothing.<sup>12</sup> The clothing industry "is one of the few categories in the federal Consumer Price Index in which overall prices have declined — about 10 percent — since 1998 (the cost of communication is another)."<sup>13</sup> As a whole "apparel prices have gone down primarily because of two factors: the overwhelming movement of manufacturing to countries with cheaper labor, where the clothes are made, and increased competition between traditional retailers and discounters, where the clothes are sold."<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, shopping habits have changed over the years and this can be disastrous for the planet.

The declining price of fashion and its resultant way of disposal has contributed to the world's environmental problems. A "tremendous amount of clothing is in fact not getting recycled but is getting trashed, and the environmental impact of making clothes

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<sup>10</sup> Cline, Elizabeth L. *Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion*. New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2012. Print. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Cline, Elizabeth L. *Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion*. New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2012. Print. 121.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Wilson, E. (2008). Dress for Less and Less. Retrieved November 17, 2016, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/29/fashion/29PRICE.html>

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*



is being overlooked.”<sup>15</sup> Because of the fast overturn of trends and the affordability of clothes, more garments are being thrown out than ever before; 85 percent of clothing ends up in the landfill.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, approximately half of our wardrobe is made out of plastic in the form of polyester. Polyester is made out of harmful chemicals and carcinogens, and doesn’t decompose into the environment. Using cheap materials that are harmful to the environment combined with expedited manufacturing and production processes has created a throwaway consumer culture.

### *Designing Out Waste*

There are ways to combat pollution in the fashion industry. “We don’t have a nature problem, we have a design problem.”<sup>17</sup> That’s why it’s important to rethink the current production processes and look critically to find ways to design products to make them more environmentally friendly.

This type of thinking is best exemplified by William McDonough and Michael Braungart who are an architect and a chemist that have teamed up to create more eco-friendly manufacturing processes. They challenge the belief that industries can only be harmful to the environment, and instead argue that human industry can mimic the natural world. McDonough and Braungart urge humans to be more like trees because “A tree produces thousands of blossoms in order to create another tree, yet we consider its

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<sup>15</sup> Cline, Elizabeth L. *Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion*. New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2012. Print. 123.

<sup>16</sup> Outdoor Clothing, Outerwear & Accessories | Columbia Sportswear. (n.d.). Retrieved November 18, 2016, from <http://www.columbia.com/>

<sup>17</sup> McDonough, W., & Braungart, M. (2002). *Cradle to cradle: Remaking the way we make things*. New York: North Point Press.

abundance not wasteful but safe, beautiful and highly effective.”<sup>18</sup> It’s already been proven that modern technology can imitate nature people just need to invest the time and the money to make it happen. The following diagram demonstrates how companies can incorporate recycling into a product’s life cycle:



*Figure 1. Life-cycle stages with recycling (From Gabriella Akerberg, 2014.)*

One example of a company that has designed out waste is Method. Method, a line of environmentally friendly cleaning and personal-care products, is a company that has surpassed the basic eco-standards and has incorporated sustainability into every aspect of the company. The company follows the “precautionary principle: if there’s a chance it’s bad, don’t use it.”<sup>19</sup> All ingredients are non-toxic and biodegradable, which is why the products have been EPA certified with the Design for the Environment Label and the Cradle-to-Cradle (c2c) certification. This indicates that the products are safe for humans and the materials in the cleaning supplies (including the packaging) can be recycled and reused for future life cycles. Ethical ingredient sourcing combined with LEED designed buildings for production and a biodiesel-shipping program is what allowed Method to design out waste. The fashion brand Reformation, which is also a b-

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<sup>18</sup> McDonough, W., & Braungart, M. (2002). *Cradle to cradle: Remaking the way we make things*. New York: North Point Press.

<sup>19</sup> Ottman, J. A. (2011). *The new rules of green marketing: Strategies, tools, and inspiration for sustainable branding*. Sheffield: Greenleaf Publishing, 48.

corporation, has taken Method's precautionary principle and applied it to clothing. Reformation uses wind power suppliers, produces the clothing in Los Angeles, and uses "the most efficient, eco-friendly and pro-social technologies."<sup>20</sup>

McDonough and Braungart have an optimistic approach to the future of sustainability in business. They have said: "We now know how to make your product healthy and safe for the environment. We now know you can power with solar, wind power, and other renewables. We will work together to get you the best technical nutrients coming from other cycles to your factory."<sup>21</sup> The technology is there it's only a matter of a business' willingness to put in the time and money.

### *Anti-Consumption*

The most obvious ways that consumers can help reduce environmental impact is to not consume. Often times consumers report pro-environmental attitudes and beliefs but do not follow through with action; this is referred to as the "green-gap."<sup>22</sup> People tend to not undertake environmental behaviors when another option is convenient, easy, cheap, or they simply forget about sustainability. Because humans are flawed they tend to practice sustainability within their own identities and people find consumption, especially with clothes, as a form of self-expression.<sup>23</sup> Research suggests that, "one way to develop sustainable consumption is by promoting the notion that anti-consumption activities can provide citizens with more opportunities for self expression and

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<sup>20</sup> Reformation. (n.d.). Retrieved April 08, 2017, from <https://www.thereformation.com/whoweare>

<sup>21</sup> McDonough, W., & Braungart, M. (2013). *The Upcycle*. New York: North Point Press, a division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 21.

<sup>22</sup> Black, Iain. "Sustainability through Anti-consumption." *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 9.6 (2010): 403- 404.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 405.

environmental benefit than green consumption.”<sup>24</sup> This finding indicates that appealing to people’s self-interests is a more effective way to encourage friendly environmental practices than brands positioning themselves as sustainable. Furthermore, when people show interest in becoming more environmentally friendly they adopt some sustainable practices instead of becoming completely sustainable consumers. Because consumption is so engrained in people’s routines, it’s been suggested that a powerful tool for encouraging non-consumption is proscription.<sup>25</sup> This would make it necessary to create policies to restrict people from using up resources. Overall, this research suggests that there is not a lack of information that is influencing people to become anti-consumers, but personal identity and learned behaviors.

Self-consciousness has an effect on people’s inclination to adopt anti-consumption behaviors. Self-consciousness “refers to the habit, tendency, or disposition to focus on oneself.”<sup>26</sup> One research study breaks people up into two categories: self-conscious consumers and simplifier consumers. People are externally motivated to adopt anti-consumption behaviors. This means that they are more likely to implement sustainable habits if other people are aware of them. This is compared to simplifier consumers, who are focused more on their own knowledge and values. These people are internally motivated which means outside pressures don’t have as large of an impact on them. Furthermore, simplifier consumers go by the philosophy to buy higher quality items, but to buy fewer things. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs supports the assumption that self-consciousness has an impact on consumer behavior. The “low level needs

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 406.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 407.

<sup>26</sup> Iyer, Rajesh, and James A. Muncy. "Purpose and Object of Anti-consumption." *Journal of Business Research* 62.2 (2009): 160-68. 162.

(psychological, safety, belongingness/ love needs) can be met through consumption, but it is much more difficult to buy products meeting the higher level needs.”<sup>27</sup> This can lead to feelings of boredom and loneliness. Researchers rationalize that self-conscious consumers are very impacted by anti-consumption messaging because these people are concerned about how society views them.<sup>28</sup> This goes back to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs theory because it suggests that people alter consumer behaviors to satisfy their social and psychological needs. The wish “to avoid rejection and gain approval motivates people in relatively materialistic cultures to perceive buying as a means of belonging.”<sup>29</sup>

### *Effects of Green Marketing*

With the rise of environmental concerns come brands that market themselves as eco-friendly. That’s why the issue of company credibility in the environmental sector has become so important. Green consumers are now mainstream and brands must implement communications strategies that highlight a product’s value to the environment to attract buyers. Researchers advise to “align positively with third parties that perform life-cycle inventories and certify claims and award eco-seals”.<sup>30</sup> Eco-seals are a certification label given by the government or nonprofits that identify products that are environmentally sustainable usually in regards to a specific product or service category. The following are a few examples of eco- seals:

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 166.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ottman, J. A. (2011). *The new rules of green marketing: Strategies, tools, and inspiration for sustainable branding*. Sheffield: Greenleaf Publishing, 143.



*Figure 2. From left: Fairtrade Mark, The LEED certified symbol, the Forest Stewardship Council, and Cradle-to-Cradle certified.*

People will now “pay a premium for such brands as Aveda, Burt’s Bees, Method, Stonyfield Farm,” which indicates that “today’s consumers have a higher expectation for the products they buy and that environmental soundness is a new dimension of quality.”<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, people are starting to distrust businesses now more than ever in regards to being environmentally responsible. Only 3 percent of UK consumers think businesses are honest about their actions to become more sustainable, with 33 percent believing businesses exaggerate what their social responsibility is.<sup>32</sup> This suggests that people are more wary to believe advertisements or messages from companies and brands promoting themselves as environmentally friendly.

Green washing is disinformation from an organization to present themselves as environmentally responsible to the public. Green washing also relates back to how a company attempts to frame themselves. Framing theory addresses how an individual

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid 15

<sup>32</sup> Ibid 132

perceives reality. The theory observes relationships between people and the media's influence on a person's perception of words, events and more. The basis of the theory is that how something is presented to individuals effects how they view that topic. In "Setting the Agenda," Maxwell McCombs states that, "elements prominent in the media pictures not only become prominent in the public's pictures, but also come to be regarded as especially important."<sup>33</sup> This can be applied to brands because it demonstrates how pictures portrayed by a company can effect public perception.

### *Environmentally Friendly Production*

There are a variety of factors that contribute to the environmental impact of a company. A third-party assessor called Bluesign developed five principles to address this issue: "resource productivity, consumer safety, air emissions, water emissions, and occupational health and safety."<sup>34</sup> These key factors help a company address textile manufacturing, textile technology and supply chain management to reduce emissions. The five components mentioned above also emphasize the importance that businesses measure and record their CO2 emissions and conduct Life Cycle Analysis for products. Furthermore, one of the best ways to create an environmentally friendly company is transparency to customers, because it holds businesses accountable for their actions.<sup>35</sup>

The following diagram demonstrates a basic life-cycle assessment for a product:

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<sup>33</sup> McCombs, M. E. (2004). *Setting the agenda: The mass media and public opinion*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

<sup>34</sup> Fletcher, K., & Grose, L. (2012). *Fashion and Sustainability Design for Change*. London (Laurence King Publishers) 37.

<sup>35</sup> Green Business practices - patagonia.com. (2012). Retrieved November 17, 2016, from [https://www.patagonia.com/static/on/demandware.static/-/Library-Sites-PatagoniaShared/default/dw89fc0023/PDF-US/green\\_and\\_business.pdf](https://www.patagonia.com/static/on/demandware.static/-/Library-Sites-PatagoniaShared/default/dw89fc0023/PDF-US/green_and_business.pdf)



*Figure 3. A basic visualization of the supply chain of an article of clothing (from Wrap.org.)*

There is a strong disconnect between the glamour of the fashion industry and the poverty and health consequences of production. There are a variety of health hazards that can occur to people working in clothing production. Cotton plants that are treated with pesticides are linked to various types of cancer. For example, most of India's cotton comes from the Punjab region, which is one of the largest users of pesticides in the world. There has been a dramatic rise in birth defects and cancers since the introduction of pesticides in the region in the past 20 years. In the last 16 years there have more than 250,000 recorded farmer suicides in India as a result of the working conditions on the plants. That's about one farmer every thirty minutes making this the largest recorded wave of suicides in history. The production of clothing isn't only harmful to the environment, but to people's health as well. How materials are treated throughout the supply chain can have a significant effect on the environmental impact of a garment.



The output of the fashion industry has changed drastically over the past 50 years. In the 1960s, the U.S. made 95 percent of its clothing, today it only makes about 3 percent, the other 93 percent is outsourced to developing countries. It's the most labor dependent industry on earth, with an estimated 1 in 6 people working in it.<sup>36</sup> This demonstrates a disconnect between American consumers and where their clothes come from. People are so detached from the production process that it's hard to imagine the conditions in which workers are exposed to, and the carbon intense production processes.

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<sup>36</sup> Ross, M., & Morgan, A. (November, 15, 2015.) *The True Cost*.

## **Methods**

This section aims to explain the tools and concepts that were used to collect qualitative data for the thesis. In order to better understand how people perceive sustainability in the clothing industry, it is important to first research what environmentally friendly initiatives companies are implementing. Because of this, the collection of data is broken down into two categories: content analysis and focus groups. The first part of the methods section gives an in-depth analysis of the different companies studied, and the second part collects data from focus group participants.

### *Overview of Content Analysis*

I conducted a document analysis to determine the presence of certain words, concepts or phrases that are present throughout the company's websites, advertisements and digital outlets. I called this an informal content analysis because language is subjective. The three companies that I investigated were Columbia, Patagonia and H&M, because these organizations position themselves as environmentally friendly to the public. The main goal of this method was to develop questions for the focus groups, and select advertisements that may be used to get feedback from the focus group participants. In order to assure that each company is being evaluated equally I have broken down the content analysis into the following sections: On-line education resources on sustainability, communications in-store (label), recycling, manufacturing, partnerships, and reporting and evaluations of environmental impacts. By creating these sections I hoped to evenly assess each organization's sustainability efforts.

After the content analysis, I selected two advertisements from each company to use in the focus groups to see how participants responded to the messaging. In order to

evaluate an advertisement that goes beyond my own reaction to them I used the Media Education Foundation's "Deconstructing an Advertisement" document to accurately and fairly analyze each advertisement's message (Appendix A).

The other goal of the content analysis was to develop questions that could be used in the focus groups. The content analysis allowed me to better understand the sustainability practices of each company, which I translated into questions for the focus groups.

### *Overview of Focus Groups*

A focus group is a group of people that are assembled to take part in a guided discussion about a certain issue or product. It provides organizations with relevant insight and feedback about the business.

The objective of the focus groups is to assess college students' perceptions about factors influencing their choice of where to buy clothing. This form of qualitative research methodology has proven to be effective in gathering data about individual's choices.<sup>37</sup> In order to encourage independent thinking before the group discussion, participants will be asked to fill out a worksheet that is separated into three columns (Appendix B). The first column will ask them to remember the last three items of clothing they purchased, the second column will ask where they purchased the item, and the third column they will write down why they selected that item of clothing. My target audience for the focus groups is college women aged 18-22. I decided to focus on one

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<sup>37</sup> Neumark-Sztainer, D., Story, M., Perry, C., & Casey, M. A. (1999). Factors Influencing Food Choices of Adolescents. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 99(8), 929-937. doi:10.1016/s0002-8223(99)00222-9

gender because research suggests that different genders have different priorities when it comes to shopping for clothes.<sup>38</sup>

One of the benefits of focus groups is that it allows for probing, so researchers can ask follow up questions to individual responses. They also allow for individuals to tell in depth stories about their experiences with the issues. Furthermore, researchers can collect data that might be difficult to observe, because people are sharing their actual involvement with an issue. Researchers can get group feedback, and see how people react to different conflicts that are brought up.

A participant may go on a tangent, which would take time away from other participants and may not provide the most valuable information. It's also possible that participants in the focus group may choose to not speak and instead just agree with what the others are saying. Another downside to a focus group is that it is time intensive and it might be difficult to coordinate a time with all of the participants and the moderator. The preliminary questions that I asked are included in the appendix.

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<sup>38</sup> Irabatti, Parya Anand. "Men Buy, Women Shop: Gender Priorities Influencing Buying Behavior." *A Journal of Decision Making* 14.1 (2014): 29. Web.

## **Introduction to Companies Being Examined**

The research for this thesis is based on the examination of three companies: Columbia, Patagonia and H&M. The cases were chosen to reflect the clothing industry's trend to become more sustainable. Each company was reviewed by gathering data from the website, in-store observations and current popular media advertisements.

### **Columbia**

Columbia Sportswear Company is a U.S. based apparel business that manufactures and distributes sportswear and outerwear. It also produces footwear, headgear, and ski gear, hiking gear and outerwear accessories. Columbia is centered on real people doing outdoor activities. It has a strong community-based approach, and it emphasizes how the company has been in Portland, Oregon and serving Pacific Northwesterners for more than 70 years.<sup>39</sup> The website describes itself as a company that makes “no-nonsense apparel and footwear to keep you WARM, DRY, COOL, and PROTECTED no matter what.”<sup>40</sup>

Columbia's mission statement can best be summed up by a quote from the CEO Tim Boyle:

“At Columbia Sportswear, we are committed to building a company of which we can all be proud – not only of the innovative products we create and the financial results we achieve, but the manner in which we achieve them. Whether it's responsible sourcing,

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<sup>39</sup> Columbia History. (n.d.). Retrieved November 18, 2016, from [http://www.columbia.com/About-Us\\_History.html?lang=en\\_EN](http://www.columbia.com/About-Us_History.html?lang=en_EN)

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

giving back to our communities, or reducing our environmental impact, we believe corporate responsibility is a companywide effort.”<sup>41</sup>

### *Online Education Resources on Sustainability*

One of the main draws of the website is the blog that gives advice for outdoor adventures, travel, gear, and has human interest stories. Blog topics can range from “3 Must-Dos at Shenandoah National Park,” to “Picking the Perfect Outdoor Dog for Your Adventures,” to “Must-See Hollywood Ski Movies.”<sup>42</sup> Many of the blog posts are also shared through the Twitter, Instagram and Facebook accounts.

Columbia prides itself on having a strong corporate social responsibility (CSR) program. Under the CSR section of the website you can see the company’s position statements in regards to climate change, product sourcing, operations, and more. It also gives people access to the annual CSR report. In the report Boyle says, “Today, our Corporate Responsibility practices are grounded in authenticity and partnership with our employees, other brands, suppliers, industry groups, governments, NGOs and communities. We know this is an ongoing conversation and there is still much progress to be made in the years ahead.” The online report also highlights a timeline since the establishment of the CSR sector in 2001, and gives insight into future projects.

### *Recycling*

In 2015 Columbia launched the ReThreads program in partnership with I:CO (a consultancy group for shoe and clothing reuse). This initiative gives customers the

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<sup>41</sup> Corporate Responsibility. (n.d.). Retrieved November 18, 2016, from [http://www.columbia.com/About-Us\\_Corporate-Responsibility.html?lang=en\\_EN](http://www.columbia.com/About-Us_Corporate-Responsibility.html?lang=en_EN)

<sup>42</sup> S., Staff, B. C., & Contributor, B. C. (n.d.). Columbia Blog. Retrieved November 18, 2016, from <http://blog.columbia.com/>

opportunity to bring in their old products at select retail stores. These products are then collected and sorted and processed for re-wear or reuse. This helped the company eliminate 1,000 lbs. of clothing from landfills. In the U.S., “85% of clothing ends up in the landfill – that equates to almost 24 billion lbs. of waste per year or 70 lbs. of waste per person per year.”<sup>43</sup> Because of this Columbia’s new program encourages consumers to bring used clothing and shoes, from any brand, to give the product a new life. In exchange the customer will be given 10 percent off purchases of \$75 or more. Products that are collected are sent to a textile processing facility where they are evaluated and sorted for recycling.<sup>44</sup> Continuing, to help customers get the most out of the products there are care instructions on the website to extend the life of a garment.

#### *Communications In-Store*

I visited the flagship Columbia store in Portland on December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016. Right when you walk into the store there is a bin for the company’s Re-threads program. On the bin it explains the process of the Re-threads program, and emphasizes how it helps the planet. It also discusses incentives for participating, including a discount on Columbia apparel. It directs customers to a website for further information on the program. This relates back to the circular economy because it reflects the company’s “holistic, life cycle approach to managing the environmental aspects of the products [the company] makes.” Columbia is attempting to design out waste by reusing the materials that have already been used to create a product. The Re-threads program allows the company to utilize a closed-loop system of business, where fewer raw materials need to be extracted from earth’s resources to make a garment. Instead

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

Columbia can draw on the materials that are being recycled to produce an item of clothing.

When looking at the labels on tags of clothing, the company would label apparel if it were waterproof or insulated. Throughout the store there was the most recent Columbia catalogue that was filled with outdoor photos and all the clothing that the company sells. Again the catalogue emphasized the utility of the garments rather than the sustainability. There was also a section in the store for pamphlets about local outdoors activities (such as hiking trails and bike maps) and environmental causes. You could also purchase Gert Boyle's book, "One Tough Mother" in the store that tells the story of the former president of the company and how she created an international business.

Overall, the communications in store highlighted the versatility of the garments (i.e. if it helped you stay warm or dry) and focused less on the sustainability. However, it was clear through the Re-threads bin, general displays and products sold that the company is very environmentally conscious.

### *Manufacturing*

Columbia emphasizes that responsible manufacturing starts with a clear transparency of where and how products are being made. The company works with independent manufacturing partners that span over 15 different countries. On the Columbia website it reveals the list of factories that are associated with the company's products. The organization has also created "Standards of Manufacturing Practices" (SMP) based on the International Labor Organization's (ILO) and the Fair Labor Association's (FLA) guidelines.



Columbia uses the Higg Index Facility Module to reduce the environmental impacts associated with manufacturing. The Higg Index is a tool that is managed by the Sustainable Apparel Coalition, which helps businesses evaluate the environmental and social impacts of making and selling their products. The Higg Index measures impacts in the following areas: environmental management systems, energy use and green house gas emissions, water use, wastewater effluent, emissions to air, waste management, chemical management. Columbia also regularly tracks SMP performance through audits, transparency and management systems. This is updated monthly in order to make sure that suppliers are getting the support needed.

### *Partnerships*

In addition to having a large corporate donation program, Columbia partners with a number of brands and retailers who share the core value of sustainability. The partners are outlined in the following paragraphs.

Outdoor Industry Association Sustainability Working Group (OIA SWG): This organization helps brands work together with shared supply chains that have strong environmental standards. Within the OIA SWG Columbia participates in the advisory council. Additionally, Columbia participates in the Chemicals Management Working Group and the Materials Traceability Working Group.

Sustainable Apparel Coalition: Columbia was a founding member of this organization that helps increase transparency in supply chains, and also developed the Higg Index.

Fair Labor Association: This nonprofit organization improves the factory worker's conditions and monitors the factory environments to assure ethical treatment.

Companies, universities and other organizations govern the FLA. It provides a platform for these groups to collaborate on ideas regarding ethical sourcing and worker treatment.

UN International Labor Organization (ILO) Better Work Program: The ILO works to create labor standards in the global supply chains. To do this the organization builds relationships between governments, employers, worker organization and international buyers.

Business for Social Responsibility's HERproject (Health Enables Returns): This group helps create workplace programs that provide women with health education. There are many project partners from companies, hospitals, public-sector groups and health departments that help develop the HERproject.

American Apparel & Footwear Association: Columbia shares information on social responsibility, materials traceability, and product safety committees with industry peers through this organization. This allows companies to collaborate to create best practices to improve worker conditions and sustainability initiatives.

#### *Reporting and Evaluations of Environmental Impacts*

Since 2010, Columbia has been tracking energy, waste and water usage. In 2015, the company completed its first Greenhouse Gas Inventory, which is a way to track an organization's emissions. It's 2015 carbon footprint in the U.S. and Canada equaled 16,213 metric tons of CO2 equivalents. Electricity was the primary cause of the emissions with a total of 74% of all releases. The second and third main polluting factors were natural gas and business travel. 41 percent of that usage comes from the distribution center, 40 percent comes from retail facilities and 19 percent comes from the corporate offices. In 2015 Columbia partnered with the Energy Trust of Oregon to

develop the Strategic Energy Management program. It will be implemented and evaluated in 2016.

Furthermore, in 2015 the company expanded its headquarters campus by upgrading it to LEED Silver Standards. In 2009, Columbia installed a 100KW grid-tier solar powered system on the roof of the headquarters building. This helped generate 968.240 kWh of clean energy, which is equivalent to 1,381,847 pounds of carbon emissions.

### **Patagonia**

Patagonia's mission statement is: "Build the best product, cause no unnecessary harm, use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis."<sup>45</sup> Patagonia's website and social media outlets center around the environment and it has a strong values-based approach to selling apparel. The company donates employee's time to volunteer, and at least one percent of sales go to grassroots environmental groups to keep the earth clean. Patagonia originated as a small company that created tools for climbers that had a "bias for simplicity and utility," and slowly grew into a business that creates clothing and supplies for other outdoor sports such as skiing or hiking.

#### *Online Education Resources on Sustainability*

The company has a section of the website entitled The Footprint Chronicles where there is an interactive map that allows people to follow the supply chain of a product and see the environmental impact. The goal "is to use transparency about our supply chain to help reduce our adverse social and environmental impacts—and on an

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<sup>45</sup> Environmental & Social Responsibility. (2016). Retrieved November 18, 2016, from <http://www.patagonia.com/environmentalism.html>

industrial scale.”<sup>46</sup> On the website there is an interactive map where viewers can see where all the materials come from, along with where the products are produced. This transparency helps the company be held to higher standards.

Patagonia also has a program called Worn Wear. The company says: “One of the most responsible things we can do as a company is to make high-quality stuff that lasts for years and can be repaired, so you don’t have to buy more of it.”<sup>47</sup> The Worn Wear program started because the company wanted to celebrate the stories behind clothing. The website has video and articles that highlight people and the experiences they’ve had with a product. Furthermore, it created care and repair guides so consumers can become more knowledgeable about how to treat garments. The company also sells used Patagonia clothing at select stores through a trade-in program. The Worn Wear initiative uses Patagonia’s \$20 Million and Change investment fund to support the new economies that center around extending the life of already-owned products. This is one of the main ways that Patagonia incorporates the circular economy into its business model. The company strongly emphasizes to not purchase an item unless you need it, because it can have adverse effects on the earth. In addition to extending the life of a garment, and reusing old Patagonia items, the company uses recycled materials to make some of the products. For example Patagonia uses recycled to cans to help make the fleece jackets, and recycled down reclaimed cushions and bedding to make the 100 percent recycled down jackets.

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<sup>46</sup> Friedrich, A., & Barabara, M. (2012). Patagonia: Encouraging Customers to Buy Used Clothing. *University of Michigan Erb Institute*. Retrieved May 24, 2016.

<sup>47</sup> Worn Wear: Better Than New - Patagonia.com. (n.d.). Retrieved November 18, 2016, from <http://www.patagonia.com/worn-wear.html>

Patagonia has a blog entitled “The Cleanest Line.” The blog covers everything from personal stories, to why people should vote in the 2016 election.

### *Communications In-Store*

The Patagonia store was visited on December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016 at the Portland location. Upon walking into the store there was a bin for the Worn Wear program. I asked a sales associate how I would get an item mended and she said you would fill out a short form and leave the item with her, and she said she would get an estimate on when the garment would be fixed after examining it. There was also a location there to drop off used Patagonia clothing, and again you would receive a discount after filling out a form. On each clothing label it indicated if the item was Fair Trade Certified with a sticker, and clearly indicated if it was made out of recycled or organic materials. The label on the tag also informed the customer how much of the product was made from recycled materials (e.g. 100% recycled down.) There were clear large signs if the product was part of the re\\collection (see photos below.) There were even pamphlets to highlight the products that are a part of this collection.



Throughout the store the company highlighted facts on posters such as, “Almost 44% of Americans live where pollution levels are often too dangerous to breathe.” There were also fliers placed around the store about causes such as the Alaska Wilderness League that encouraged people to protect Arctic wildlife. Furthermore, throughout the store Patagonia sold books about environmental protection and the book by Patagonia’s founder Yvon Chouinard. You could also pick up the latest catalogue that detail sustainability initiatives and causes that Patagonia support, along with all of the products that the company sells. Finally, at the back of the store there was a bulletin about upcoming events and causes in the community.

### *Recycling*

Patagonia is a B-corporation, which certifies that it has met demanding standards of environmental performance, accountability and transparency. The company also partners with a number of groups to upcycle old clothing into new products. This eliminates the amount of waste that ends up in landfills and also creates U.S. based jobs. Customers can drop off old Patagonia products at stores or mail them in. The item is then evaluated and sorted where it is either donated to a nonprofit, repaired or sent to upcycle partners to make a new product, through the Worn-wear program.

### *Manufacturing*

Patagonia sources materials for its products from hemp, organic cotton, recycled nylon, recycled polyester, wool, tencel, yulex, and cashmere. The company also attempts to eliminate exhaustive dyeing by using dyestuffs that bond more easily to cotton which reduces rinsing and washing.

Patagonia does not make its own products or own the factories that produce the garments. It employs other companies to produce the fabrics and sew the clothing. Because of this the supply chain is a long one (similar to the other two companies mentioned in this thesis.) The Social/Environmental Responsibility (SER) team at Patagonia works with the sourcing and quality staff where they have joint weekly meetings about the supply chain. It attempts to verify that the farms and factories that Patagonia employs share the same values about environmental integrity. Customers can also check where the materials for a certain product come from, and what factories it was made in on the website because of the Footprint Chronicles.

Patagonia has also partnered with bluesign to evaluate and minimize the company's use of water and energy along the supply chain. It also uses the Higg Index from the SAC to work with other businesses in the clothing industry to share sustainable resources and receive information about manufacturing and the supply chain. In 2015, Patagonia created the Chemical and Environmental Impacts Program (CEIP) to specifically look at the environmental impacts of supplier facilities. This means the company follows "the strictest global chemical safety regulations and incorporating on-site environmental facility audits" environmental performances "in all areas of energy use, greenhouse gases and air emissions, water use and emissions, solid waste, chemicals management and environmental management systems."<sup>48</sup>

### *Partnerships*

Patagonia has teamed up with a number of organizations to reduce the climate crisis. These companies include: 1% for the planet, Bluesign Technologies, The

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<sup>48</sup> Environmental & Social Responsibility. (2016). Retrieved November 18, 2016, from <http://www.patagonia.com/environmentalism.html>

Conservation Alliance, Fair Factories Clearing House, Fair Labor Association, Textile Exchange, Outdoor Industry Association, and the Sustainable Apparel Coalition.

Patagonia also donates a considerable amount of money and grants to grassroots environmental groups. In 2015 the company supported 824 environmental groups, and \$38 million was invested in environmentally and socially responsible companies through its venture capital fund: Tin Shed Ventures. Patagonia also donates 1 percent of all profits to environmental groups, which in totaled to \$100 million this year.

#### *Reporting and Evaluations of Environmental Impacts*

Patagonia currently has no formal CSR reports. The website states: “We have not yet published a CSR or sustainability report that follows the guidelines of the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) or other framework used by other companies.” However, the company does acknowledge that it makes “products using fossil fuels, built in factories that use water and other resources, create waste and emit carbon into the air. We ship our products around the world in boxes and plastic bags. We consume electricity—some generated using renewable resources and some not—at our corporate offices, distribution centers and stores.”<sup>49</sup> The company says that in 2015 Patagonia’s global operations at corporate facilities totaled to 3,617 metric tons of carbon dioxide.

#### **H&M**

H&M describes itself as “fashion and quality at the best price.”<sup>50</sup> The website and social media outlets are primarily centered on being trendy, and the company advertises itself as affordable fashion. However, the company also claims to be

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid

<sup>50</sup> Inspiration, A. W. (n.d.). H&M offers fashion and quality at the best price. Retrieved November 18, 2016, from <http://www.hm.com/us/>



sustainable alternatives to other major fashion conglomerates such as Forever 21. Unlike Columbia and Patagonia it is a publicly traded company. Under the corporate social responsibility section of the website, it says: “Looking good should do good too. That’s what our sustainability work is all about. To make sure our customers wear products with pride we have to be conscious in all our actions.”<sup>51</sup> H&M has implemented their sustainable fashion initiative through the Conscious Collection. The CEO of H&M, Karl-Johan Persson, describes the new initiative as: “the challenge of ultimately making fashion sustainable and sustainability fashionable. We want to help people express their personality and feel proud of what they wear. I’m very excited to see the progress we’ve made so far and how this will help us to make you an even better offer – and create a more sustainable fashion future”

#### *Online Education Resources on Sustainability*

H&M has a separate website for sustainability, where the company highlights positive changes that it’s made to help the environment. It mainly focuses on its “Conscious Collection,” which uses organic cotton, recycled polyester, organic silk, recycled wool, hemp, and tencel. In 2015, because of the Conscious Collection, H&M has increased its sustainably sourced materials by 20 percent and reduced the company’s carbon emissions by 56 percent.<sup>52</sup>

On the separate website, the company also displays it’s 2015 sustainability report. This report largely consists of the same information on the sustainability website. One aspect that is unique to the report is that it demonstrates the impacts along the supply chain. For example it shows how the design process has a 0 percent impact on

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<sup>51</sup> Sustainability. (n.d.). Retrieved November 19, 2016, from <http://sustainability.hm.com/>

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

climate change, but the fabric and yarn production has a 36 percent impact. The climate impacts are based on the H&M value chain footprint, so people can see what stage in the production process is most costly to the environment. There is also an interactive world map on the report where people can see the different stages of the supply chain.

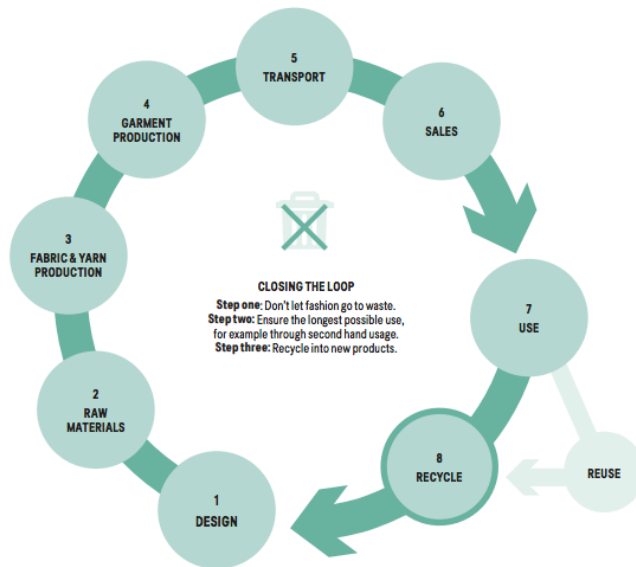
### *Communications In-Store*

The H&M in downtown Portland was visited on December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016. Near the checkout of the store there was garment-collecting box that read “Recycle your unwanted clothes at H&M and get 15% off your next purchase. We accept clothing and home textiles from any brand, in any condition, year-round.” Next to the box were brochures about H&M Conscious and the garment collecting initiative. The brochure highlighted the need to “close the loop” and how 95% of clothes could be used again. The textiles are sent to a processing plant where they are sorted for reuse. The brochure also indicates that customers can learn more about the recycling initiative at [hm.com/garment-collectionico-spirit.com](http://hm.com/garment-collectionico-spirit.com).

When I first walked into the store I could not locate the Conscious Collection. I asked a sales associate where the section would be, and he responded that they don't have the whole collection in the Portland store. He said the “trendier” items are only at flagship stores like the one in San Francisco or New York. However, there was basic Conscious Collection items placed randomly throughout the store as indicated by a green hangtag. After searching the store I discovered a few items with a green hangtag that read H&M Conscious and had an FSC label. There was no price difference between the Conscious Collection items and the regular garments.

## *Recycling*

Using the close-looped system pictured below, H&M is attempting to move towards circular business model.



This diagram was taken from the H&M Sustainability website.

To achieve this goal H&M has implemented a Garment Collection Program that is present at almost all retail stores. It gives customers the opportunity to drop off used clothes from any brand to give it a new life. The clothes that are dropped off are sorted and evaluated for reuse and recycling. In 2015 H&M collected 12,341 tons of clothing through this initiative and has made 1.3 million pieces using 20 percent of recycled cotton from the garments that were collected in-store. The company also created partnerships with I:Co and the Ellen MacArthur Foundation to further develop the recycling program. It donates money and uses their consultancy to create demand for these initiatives.

## *Reporting and Evaluations of Environmental Impacts*

The data used for reporting and evaluation is taken from within the H&M organization and from external NGOs and nonprofits employed by the company. This

information is reviewed by H&M's controlling team, in partnership with sustainability experts (from the outside parties mentioned above) to evaluate the environmental impact of the company.

Extracting and processing the raw materials accounts for 12 percent of the company's carbon emissions and 87 percent of the water impact. This indicated that using raw materials is very damaging to the environment, which is why the company is trying to move towards a close-looped system. Continuing, fabric and yarn production is 36 percent of the company's climate impact and 6 percent of the yarn impact. A large part of the impact comes from dyeing and emissions from factories. H&M does not have direct relationships with these mills but it works with groups like the Solidaridad and the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) to help mills improve their performance. Garment production accounts for 6 percent of the climate impact and one percent of the water impact. The main concern in this sector is ethical worker treatment. Transport is 6% of the greenhouse gas emissions in a garment's life. Sales make 10 percent of the climate impact due to labels, bags and advertisements. Finally use is 26 percent of the climate impact. This is due to the way that customers care for products, because washing and drying can be taxing on the environment. All of this information is available in the company's CSR report that is published online.

### *Manufacturing*

H&M has suppliers from around the world, which the company highlights with an interactive world map on the website. On the map it shows where the design process takes place, where raw materials come from, where the fabric is manufactured, where a garment is produced, how it's transported, and where the clothing is sold. Starting with

the design, H&M attempts to minimize environmental impact by choosing sustainable materials and minimizing excess materials. The company attempts to use recycled materials to create their clothing, but when they source raw materials such as cotton they buy from organic farmers. When it comes to fabric production H&M does not have direct business relationships with textile mills, but the company works with organizations like the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) to train workers and incorporate issues of sustainability. This is similar with garment production because H&M doesn't own the factories. However, they work with NGOs to improve social and environmental standards. The company does not provide much information on transport, but does describe that it accounts for 6 percent of the greenhouse gas emissions in a garment's lifecycle. When it comes to sales, H&M has almost 4,000 stores worldwide where it is one of the largest clothing retail stores. Once the product is sold it is in the hands of the consumer.

### *Partnerships*

H&M believes that sustainable innovation starts with partnering with other organizations to get a variety of perspectives and solutions. The company collaborates with local and global organizations such as the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI), Sustainable Apparel Coalition (SAC), the Fair Wage Network (FWN), Better Work and the Roadmap to Zero Discharge of Hazardous Chemicals.

H&M also implemented a new assessment in conjunction with the SAC based on the Higg Index, which as mentioned earlier allows the company to create more transparency and a better sustainability performance across the entire supply chain. H&M also signed a framework agreement with IndustriALL and the Swedish union IF

Metall to encourage industrial relations in supply chains around the world. These organizations allow companies to collaborate to find suppliers and factories that are held to high sustainability standards. H&M has also partnered with the Ellen MacArthur Foundation to further develop a circular model of retail. The EMF acts as a consultancy group to help companies develop a more sustainable economic system. With the help of EMF the company has implemented a new assessment method, the Sustainable Impact Partnership Program (SIPP) that helps monitor and audit systems.

## Advertisements for Focus Groups

For the focus groups, I thought it would be effective to get feedback from the respondents on how they respond to certain advertisements. I picked two advertisements from each company to get people's reactions from. In order to go beyond my personal reaction I evaluated them using the Media Education Foundation's Deconstructing an Advertisement method (Appendix B).

### 4.1 Columbia



Step 1: Make observations

5 adjectives that describe the ad: outdoorsy, provocative, informative, cold, people-centered.

Evaluate its aesthetics: There are eight people in the ad, and they all appear to be racially diverse and in their late twenties. They also all look happy to be out in the cold holding the jackets. The camera angle is straight on to the subjects. The lighting appears to be natural to highlight the outdoor aspect of the ad. The colors are white, blue and grey tones, with a small red label in the upper left hand corner to bring

attention to the Omni-heat aspect. The ad has minimal font in the upper corners that emphasize the warming technology that is in the jackets.

Step 2: Determine the purpose of the ad.

The product that is trying to be sold is the Omni-heat down jacket that keeps you 20% warmer. The product seems appealing because it looks like it would keep someone warm in cold weather. It appears to be appealing to young adults based off of the models in the ad. It seems that the ad is trying to evoke emotions of an appreciation for the outdoors, because all the models have pleasant expressions. I think the ad is working because it makes me want to get out and adventure.

Step 3: Determine the assumptions the ad makes and the message it sends.

The assumptions that this ad makes is that people are tough for enduring extreme conditions, and anyone from any gender or race can endure the cold with the right equipment. I think that the underlying theme of the ad is that it's easy to stay warm and enjoy the outdoors with effective garments.

Step 4: Consider the possible consequences of these messages.

The message is racy, since the models are nude with the exception of the jackets. It could promote negative body image perceptions for young people. Another consequence could be that it encourages people to get outside, but it doesn't give instructions on how to prepare for such activities. Ultimately, I believe that the ad is socially responsible because it is fostering emotions of respect for the environment.





Step 1: Make observations

5 adjectives that describe the ad: Scenic, humorous, tough, outdoorsy, and encouraging.

The “tough mother,” also known as Gert Boyle who is the chairman of the company is in the ad where she is holding a cougar on a leash. She has a stern look on her face and seems in control of the cougar. The camera angle appears to be head on, at a medium distance from Gert and the cougar. The main colors used in the ad are white, blue and green with red that stands out in Gert’s coat and the “Tested Tough” label.

The text in the center of the ad is sans serif.

Step 2: Determine the purpose of the ad.

The purpose of the ad is to get people to visit their flagship store in Portland. Gert is showcasing the apparel in what she’s wearing. Through the outdoor scenery and the clothing that she’s wearing the ad is trying to sell outdoor apparel, as well as a “pacific northwest” lifestyle. The target audience appears to be adults, attracting them

to come to the store to pursue a more adventurous lifestyle like Gert. I think that the emotion that the ad is trying to evoke is that you will be tough if you buy these products. I believe it's convincing because Gert demonstrates that there is no limit on the age for wearing the products, and the jacket Gert is wearing is accentuated against the snow.

Step 3: Determine the assumptions the ad makes and the message it sends.

The ad is suggesting that no matter what age, women can be powerful and adventurous. This is challenging stereotypes associated with age and gender stereotypes.

Step 4: Consider the possible consequences of these messages.

The ad could receive backlash for the depiction of the cougar on a leash, however it appears to be photo shopped in. Animal rights activists may still discourage this kind of depiction. It also may create unrealistic expectations that the lifestyle portrayed in the advertisement is for everyone, or easily attainable. It doesn't give any background knowledge on training that is needed to withstand certain conditions. In conclusion I would assess the ad as socially responsible because it promotes a lifestyle that respects nature.

For Columbia, I did not choose ads that focused on recycling and sustainability because there were no advertisements addressing these issues available. Although Columbia has a number of initiatives that make the company more sustainable, it does not address this in the communications strategy. However, almost all of their advertisements focus on enjoying the outdoors with durable garments.

## 4.2 Patagonia



Step 1: Make observations

5 adjectives that describe the ad: Adventurous, descriptive, creative, bold, fun.

The man in the photo appears to be enjoying himself. The camera angle seems to be from below. The left side of the ad has natural lighting that contrasts with the artificial lighting on the right side; this creates two sections for the ad. Throughout the advertisement there are natural colors used (tan, green, white, blue) which helps further contrast the two sides. The varying fonts on the right side bring attention to the different environmental attributes of the jeans that are mentioned.

Step 2: Determine the purpose of the ad.

The product that is being sold is a new line of jeans. The line seems appealing because it is more sustainable than the leading labels, and they seem sturdy since the man in the photo can use them while participating in outdoor activities. I have positive associations with the product because of this.

Step 3: Determine the assumptions the ad makes and the message it sends.

The ad makes the assumption that these jeans are for adventure seekers that care about the environment. It also makes the assumptions that most denim is not eco-friendly.

Step 4: Consider the possible consequences of these messages.

Some consequences are that the jeans are only going to appeal to a very specific demographic. It also creates expectations that consumers should care about where their clothes are coming from. I believe that this ad is socially responsible because it is encouraging people to look at how their clothes affect the environment.



Step 1: Make observations

5 adjectives that describe the ad: Responsible, simple, wordy, paradoxical, and informative.

The only image in the ad is simple blue fleece jacket. The photo of the jacket is straight on. The lighting appears artificial and the blue of the jacket is juxtaposed against the light background and the black text. The font is sans serif with the exception of the Patagonia lettering.

Step 2: Determine the purpose of the ad.

The purpose of the ad is to bring attention to the over-consumption in the clothing industry, and to get people to stop and think about where their clothes come from. The company is trying to position themselves as environmentally friendly by encouraging other people to only buy what they need. However, the ad does suggest if they do need to buy a garment Patagonia is the most ethically sound place to do so.

Step 3: Determine the assumptions the ad makes and the message it sends.

The assumptions that are made in this ad are that consumers aren't knowledgeable about the clothing that they're purchasing and that people mindlessly buy things regardless of if they need it.

Step 4: Consider the possible consequences of these messages.

Possible consequences of this message are that it might damage the company economically by discouraging people to buy from the company. It can also receive backlash from people who promote commercialism. Overall, I think that it promotes a positive social image because it encourages people to think about how much they are spending, and if it's really necessary.



### 4.3 H&M



Step 1: Make observations

5 adjectives that describe the ad: Glamorous, fashionable, beautiful, floral, green.

The center of the photo is a young woman who looks seductive and glamorous. The camera appears to be head-on, at medium distance away from the subject. Although the model is surrounded by plants, she appears to be in-doors. The colors in the photo are green, pink, white and brown, which creates the sense of a natural setting. This allows for the red H&M label at the bottom right corner to stand out. The only words in the ad highlight the Conscious Collection and sustainability.

Step 2: Determine the purpose of the ad.

The purpose of the ad is to bring attention to the brand's Conscious Collection. It is definitely targeting women based off of the model and the dress she is wearing. I think the ad seems appealing because it depicts a fashionable woman and the photo says that it's more sustainable fashion.

Step 3: Determine the assumptions the ad makes and the message it sends.

The ad seems to be portraying the idea that women will be seductive and in-tune with nature if they purchase this product. When I look at the ad I think it reinforces the gender stereotype that women have to act and dress a certain way to be considered attractive.

Step 4: Consider the possible consequences of these messages.

I think that this advertisement could receive backlash for promoting the gender stereotype mentioned above, and for greenwashing. Through my research I've learned that the Conscious Collection isn't as sustainable as it makes itself out to be. I'm conflicted when deciding if this ad is socially responsible or not. On the one hand it does promote sustainable clothing and brings attention to this issue, but on the other hand it's misleading and promotes a very specific idea of feminism.



Step 1: Make observations

5 adjectives that describe the ad: Clean, glamorous, seductive, basic, bland.

The center of the ad is a woman who is wearing a white dress that contrasts with the blue background of the sky. The camera angle is coming from below, making her look powerful and in control. Across the woman's body are words "Conscious Collection" which brings attention to H&M's "sustainable" line.

Step 2: Determine the purpose of the ad.

The purpose of the ad is to spread awareness about H&M's Conscious Collection. The model seems to be trying to appeal to the target audience of young women with her clean white dress. The ad is trying to associate the line with sustainability, but it is not



immediately obvious. People would have to read the writing to get a gist of what is being advertised.

Step 3: Determine the assumptions the ad makes and the message it sends.

The ad makes the assumption that women care about sustainability and fashion. I think that this reinforces gender stereotypes that women care about their appearance, and should put money into it.

Step 4: Consider the possible consequences of these messages.

Consequences of the ad are that it can be misleading and reinforces stereotypes about what women should wear and how they should look. The fashion industry has gotten a lot of backlash lately for having models that all adhere to western standards of beauty, and most of H&M's advertisements lack diversity. I would say that this ad is not socially responsible because there is no call to action besides buying. It does bring attention to sustainability in the clothing industry, but it doesn't inform the viewer at all. It's just claiming that the line is sustainable without any explanation or further information. This ad is doing the bare minimum to inform consumers, which can lead to misinformation and misunderstanding.

## **Analysis**

I conducted two focus groups for this research project. The first focus group took place on January 24, 2017 at 6:30 p.m. in the Knight Library room 122. There were nine participants and it lasted 45 minutes. The second focus group took place on January 25, 2017 at 7:30 p.m. in the Knight Library room 122. There were 10 participants and the focus group lasted an hour.

The type of sampling I used for the focus group was non-probability paired with snowballing. The people who ended up coming to the focus groups were friends or members of groups that I am a part of. I used convenience sampling because the audience of female college students aged 18-22 only had select availability due to their busy schedules, so I needed to use the individuals that were available at the time that was requested. I also used snowball sampling for the friends that were available and asked that they bring other friends, roommates, or people who would be interested and fit the target audience. The strengths of using these methods were that I was able to have some rapport with the subjects prior to the information-gathering sessions (i.e. giving them the worksheet before the focus groups that is listed in the appendix.) Most of them felt comfortable sharing information because they knew the person asking them questions. A limitation of that technique is that I had people from different groups and backgrounds so they may not have felt totally comfortable sharing how they felt because they feared they would offend someone else.

To analyze the findings from the focus groups, I first transcribed the recordings. I then used color-coding and context notes to identify common themes and responses in the interviews and focus groups. Context notes are broken up into frequency, intensity,

specificity, co-occurrence, and (dis)agreement. I looked through the research questions and identified which questions our audience is most interested in. Finally, I analyzed the relevant quotes in the transcripts that represent the responses as a whole. The script for the focus groups is in Appendix C.

## **Scope**

### **1. To what extent does the target audience care about sustainability when shopping for clothing?**

It's apparent that the target audience cares about sustainability in clothing; however, sustainability wasn't initially mentioned when asked what people look for when they're shopping. People mentioned in both focus groups that prefer Patagonia to other clothing companies because of their strong corporate social responsibility, but sometimes the price point discourages them from buying the products. Everyone in each focus group had shopped at Patagonia, H&M and Columbia before and they were familiar with the products that each company sells.

One participant mentioned how they try to buy sustainable clothing, but for a price. She went on to mention "as far as jackets and outerwear go, Patagonia is pretty good with sustainability and their material... I'll splurge for that, even though I know it's a more expensive brand." The target audience has a strong level of respect for companies that focus on sustainability, even if they aren't always able to afford it. It was also mentioned by three participants that they try to buy locally made items, but it's not always feasible or easy. One woman mentioned, "I do like to support locally, but if it's something that's just a basic white t-shirt I'm not going to pay a ton more for

something that I know is sustainable.” People care about sustainability, but are more likely to pay for it if it’s a special item, not a simple basic.

All the participants responded positively to the Patagonia ads that emphasized sustainability. “It’s the only one with actual information on it, about why it’s sustainable. The other ones just had a vague claim.” People took notice of the Patagonia ads and said that they would be more likely to pay attention to sustainability in clothing after viewing it. When referring to one of the Patagonia ads, a participant said, “Once you read all of that stuff, I wonder about all the other clothes I have and how it fits into this. And that would prompt me to look up what some of that even means.” People became more interested in the environmental impacts of clothes after the problem was presented to them.

In contrast, people did not respond well to H&M’s sustainability ads because they didn’t believe them. One person commented, “It says more sustainable, but more sustainable than what? Like your really, really unsustainable stuff?” People went on to say that they would not be more likely to shop at H&M because of the Conscious Collection, and said they didn’t believe that it was more sustainable.

The general consensus was that “if the brand does a good job marketing the fact that they’re sustainable I’ll be drawn to them.” If it’s emphasized in the company’s values, people are more likely to take notice and trust the message.

When talking about their likelihood to buy sustainable fashion, someone added, “when we need that ski jacket we may go to Patagonia because we know it’s sustainable and doing something good, but when it’s something like H&M or a basic t-shirt you sort of turn a blind eye and don’t ask questions because you kind of know the answer

already and you don't want to know that answer." This indicates that the target audience cares about environmental factors, but it's not always in the budget. People want to do good, but it's a matter of affordability and convenience.

## **2. What do people look for when they're buying an item of clothing?**

The factor that was mentioned the most from both focus groups is that affordability plays a huge role into whether or not people buy a garment. Another factor that was mentioned less frequently was how comfortable it was, and how often they would wear the clothing item. One student commented: "Now that I'm graduating I'm trying to find clothes that I can wear outside of college, because I can't wear like yoga pants everyday." This comment suggests that utility is a deciding factor in whether or not to buy something. A lot of people discussed how the reason they go shopping is to get something for a specific occasion (quotes stated in the motivations section.) People really want to make sure they're getting their money's worth. This idea was echoed when someone said, "Yeah like I think of clothing more as an investment now. At this point I want it to last, so I would rather spend a little more money and have it last for multiple years rather than buy something that's going to break, like from Forever 21." This indicates that the quality of the material is another important thing to think about when purchasing clothing. It also reinforces the notion that people think about utility when shopping. No one wants to spend money if they're on a budget and it's not something they need. However, a couple people did say, "But definitely if I see something that's super cheap, sometimes I'll be like oh that's super cute. So even if it's Forever 21 I'll still get it." People are aware of which brands have better quality, but are still willing to purchase garments if it fits their style and is cheap. When I asked

the question if people are willing to pay more for sustainable fashion, there were pauses around the room. Someone broke the silence and stated, “Maybe if I was shopping with my mom and she was helping me out, because I don’t know if I alone could do that. It’s usually really expensive.” There’s definitely a stigma of having a higher price point around sustainability. After viewing the advertisements people started to think more about clothes in terms of the environment. “I would buy Patagonia jeans,” one participant chimed in. “There’s no synthetic fertilizers, no GMO stuff, I would start questioning what I’m wearing....Yeah I’m wearing fabric, but what’s in the fabric? It makes me want to go and invest in a pair of Patagonia jeans.” This suggests that once people are aware of the topic of sustainability, they are more inclined to spend more.

## **Barriers**

### **1. Why aren’t people concerned about the environment when shopping?**

My main takeaway from the focus groups is that people are disconnected from where their clothes come from, and where they go after they buy it, that the environment doesn’t even come to mind. “We don’t associate clothing with sustainability, so to get us to start thinking about, they need to lay it down in front of us.” People responded really well to the Patagonia ad that listed everything that went into the making of a product. This further suggests that people lack information on the topic. One person said, “It’s not what you learn about and it’s not what you’re taught about from a young age when you learn about environmentally friendly things on earth day. What we would always be taught about was energy and food with recycling and stuff. Never was clothes or clothing production mentioned.” Initial education on sustainability is crucial to develop behaviors that last with individuals. Another person mentioned

how you never see sustainability and clothing in the news. The bottom line is that there is no information being provided to them about it.

## **2. What aspects of sustainable clothing are the most attractive to the public?**

Transparency and trust is key when it comes to selling sustainability to the target audience. One participant said, “I’m a little skeptical of like they say they’re environmentally friendly, but what does that mean? Is it all organic cotton or what?” A lot of people don’t understand the different labels, and are aware that eco-friendly can have multiple meanings. This thought was repeated throughout the focus groups. Another person commented: “Yeah because if the label is more clear also then you know the company is trying to let you know where it came from what it’s made of.” Many participants related this back to specific companies, and their communication regarding sustainability. After viewing the “Don’t Buy This Jacket” ad, one person talked about how “Patagonia does a good job of educating while also promoting that this is a great product because of these reasons, and then explaining the reasons why it’s sustainable.... But that in turn literally made me buy this jacket. I saw this campaign, and I was like I want that jacket. So I guess it works in both ways.” People respect honesty, which can make people buy sustainable clothing. People didn’t trust the H&M Conscious brand, and that made them less inclined to buy it. One participant even said that transparency from a company is really important to be willing to pay more. She went on to tell a story about her inclination to buy Fairtrade foods: “I know for Wholefoods they do Fairtrade coffee and lotions, I use their Fairtrade lotions and there’s definitely stories behind it, and you can look up where Fairtrade goes... anything specific I feel like you can trust.” She went on to say that the Fairtrade products

“actually makes you think a little bit more.” Specificity goes hand in hand with transparency; if you can share with people directly how their consumer purchases are making an impact, they’re more inclined to buy the product.

In both focus groups, after viewing the Patagonia jean ad, people became concerned about what’s going into their clothing: one participant said “And I never even thought about synthetic fertilizers being in your clothing.” This brought up questions of health consequences, and people seemed more inclined to buy sustainable clothing because of this.

Once again price was a huge factor for the target audience. One participant said, “Yeah at this stage in our life, until we have decent income, I feel like I kind of sacrifice [sustainability] for the cheaper price.” This quote suggests that people are aware of the benefits of a product being sustainable, but it’s not a realistic option for them. They want to make the eco-friendly choice, but it’s hard. Another person added, “with basics I need to replace there’s no reason to pay more.” One comment that was repeated during the two focus groups is that people go to places like H&M for basic and unoriginal clothing, like white t-shirts. What I got from this is that people are willing to pay more for a unique design, or a special item that they know will be used a lot.

Another theme of the focus group is that people don’t realize what’s being put into the clothing. “When I think of environmentally friendly when it comes to clothing, I think of what happens when you throw it away. Or what happens when you donate it.” People don’t think about the production process, which further highlights the disconnect from where it’s being made. Someone said it’s “Out of sight, out of mind.” A few



people mentioned they try to buy Made in the USA garments, but it's often hard to find garments like that.

## **Motivations**

### **1. What could convince people to buy sustainable clothing?**

Price and brand trust are the two main themes that came up when people talked about whether or not they could be convinced to buy sustainable fashion. "I feel like transparency from a company is really important, to be willing to pay more." Someone added that, "I think adding value to it, like the Patagonia stuff, of this is all the things that you're getting out of that price point. So knowing it's going to last me longer than any other jacket I'd buy, but it's also making this impact that good for the environment which is something that I care about." As discussed earlier, people were skeptical to believe the H&M ads, because it has a vague claim towards sustainability. All participants agreed that Patagonia is the gold standard for environmentally friendly clothing, and they know this because they incorporate it into every part of their business. Furthermore, someone said: "Going back to Patagonia, they really emphasize the consequence of what this means, like they're talking about CO2... it not only impacts me and my own health, but it does make a difference for others. Even though sometimes I'm reluctant to pay the more expensive price." Directly showing consumers how their purchase can make an impact can get people to buy sustainable clothing. All the participants agreed that sustainability is important, and it's something that they cared about.

Participants from both focus groups responded positively to Patagonia's "Don't Buy This Jacket" ad. One woman said, it's "just a really frank ad too, that's just in your face

about sustainability, that's not so much in the background like y'all were saying. Focusing on sustainability first then the clothing." The message was clear, and it's apparent that the company values the environment over profit. Someone added that, "any brand that's going to make the effort to really educate the consumers about sustainability, like I would actually be attracted to that." The bottom line is that "tangible evidence" of sustainability is going to convince consumers to buy something.

## **2. Why do people shop?**

From the focus groups I gathered that the main reason why people shop is because they need a specific item, or they have a special occasion they're buying for. "I would say like events where, this is super vague, but like events where my normal wardrobe won't really cover it. So maybe it's like a formal dance, or like a professional outing or something like that," said one participant. Other people mentioned that they will go shopping for music festivals, vacations or holidays. Events and special occasions were brought up multiple times in both focus groups for reasons why people shop. Seasonal shopping is also popular. It was brought up that a popular time to shop is "the beginning of the school year, I always like to get myself, treat myself, to some new clothes."

People discussed that they often go to buy clothing if they need a replacement. It was stated that: "If I have something that's getting really old, or feels like it's not serving its purpose anymore I'll go to a specific place where I think will have the best quality or a replacement." Continuing, spontaneous purchases are popular with the target audience. "A lot of times I'll go looking for one thing, and I'll come out with like four other things. I don't know... that might just be me." People laughed and were in agreement with this statement.

A lot of participants also talked about their habits when shopping. People said they like to go alone, so they can be on their own time and not be concerned about how another person is doing. One person said: “I usually feel pressured when I shop with a friend, because I want them to do whatever they want to do.” This suggests that shopping is a mission. People go in looking for something, and it’s not a leisurely day. Other people said that they go with their mom, because it’s something they’ve always done together (and because their mom pays.)

How much money someone has at the time is also a factor that people think of before they go shopping. A couple women said they “like Buffalo Exchange, because [they’ll] just go through [their] closet, sell whatever [they] don’t want and then go and shop around.” So they get money from the transaction that enables them to shop. When I asked the question: when do you go shopping, one participant said: “when I get a paycheck.” She added, “when there’s a sale” at a place she likes. So financial standing factors into whether or not people go shopping.

Friends and trends can also influence people to go out and buy. One girl said, “I saw a lot of people who went to Whistler last weekend, and they all had beanies on in their pictures on Instagram and I thought it looked really cute, so I literally went and bought one. Because everyone looked so good in them.” Her motivation to go shopping was seeing something that everyone else was wearing, and liking the style. This implies that personal taste and seasonal trends influences shopping habits.

## **Channels / Settings**

### **1. What channels do people use to get information on clothing or clothing brands?**

When I asked this question, people said they go to the internet first, because it's easy and accessible. Two people talked about learning about sustainability in a college class. "I took a freshmen year chemistry green product design class and we watched a little movie about Patagonia and their materials and stuff." I think this comment is interesting to contrast with the earlier comment about how sustainable clothing isn't something you learn about on Earth Day in elementary school. The students who took this college class choose to take it, which shows they have a level of interest. Starting the education younger could have a significant effect on people's perceptions of eco-friendly apparel.

One channel that was mentioned repeatedly throughout the focus groups was social media. People described that as being the primary spot where they find new clothing brands. One example of this is when a participant exclaimed, "Yeah it's more social media, for me. I don't really ever watch TV, and also when I do its Hulu, and those commercials are usually cars and stupid stuff like that." People referred to social media as a "black hole" and find brands that are sponsored by influencers and celebrities, or find brands on the "popular page" of Instagram.

Digital content such as documentaries and videos also prove to be effective forms of communication for the target audience. People said that they enjoy watching Netflix documentaries in their spare time. People also said that they enjoy watching videos that are shared on Facebook. One participant recalled how she had "seen a couple on

Facebook, I can't think of an exact time. But I'll see someone else share videos of Patagonia being sustainable. They're movie quality videos that are five minutes long about a story." She claimed that's how she knew about the company's sustainable practices, through videos shared on social media.

Friends and word of mouth are a popular way to find out about clothing brands. One person told a story how "the other day my friend was wearing a dress, and I was like where did you get that? So it's usually more word of mouth rather than advertising." Many people agreed with that statement and said that the main way they hear about new brands is through friends. They'll ask them where they got something, and that in turn will make them look into the company.

Labels can also be a good means of communication and consumer education. People said they would be more likely to buy something with a label they recognized. A person said that, "For fair trade production of clothing, there's a blue certification that's similar to organic food." People were aware of this and it helped the company communicate a core value and ethical sourcing.

## **2. Which settings are going to be most effective for reaching the target audience?**

When I asked the question, "what would you recommend companies to do to get consumers to care more about sustainability?" people responded that there needs to be more education on behalf of the company. One person said: "I think they need advertise more, like in stores and online." There isn't enough visibility on the issue. However, people from both focus groups seemed to understand and trust Patagonia when it comes to sustainability because they create cohesive messages across all platforms that focus on the environment.

Another suggestion was for companies to sponsor a Netflix documentary. One participant suggested that, “Someone should make a documentary about it to scare people honestly. It works for food, it works for oil. Basically anything in the news is credible to me.” She gave the example of a documentary entitled “Food Inc.” After watching the movie she claimed to change her habits of eating because she saw how the animals were treated and how much it affects people’s health. People agreed with her statement. This suggests that films and Netflix could be a solid platform to distribute information on sustainability in the clothing industry.

The target audience talked about how they’re always checking social media, and this influences trends. People mentioned how during football season, there was a trend to cut shirts in a “v-formation.” People saw people wearing these types of shirts on Instagram, and adapted the style. Also there’s the instance of the participant who bought the hat because she saw friends wearing it on Instagram. This relates back to word of mouth. A participant said, “I would say social media too. But that usually for me happens after word of mouth. So you hear about something and then look them up online and then later when you see it on Instagram or something you recognize it. People tagging on social media.” Social media was brought up multiple times throughout the focus groups. Furthermore, people commented on how they’ll get style ideas from well-known people on different media platforms. Participants said they find out about brands through “what some celebrities are wearing, like some of the ones that I actually follow on social media, they’ll tag brands.” This further suggests that influencers are an effective setting for reaching the target audience.

## **Conclusion**

This section uses the focus groups and the content analysis to answer the research questions stated in the introduction. Furthermore, it reflects on limitations to the research and suggests areas for possible improvement.

## **Research Questions**

### **1. To what extent can sustainability messaging in communication outlets improve the favorability of consumer responses to the brand represented?**

Sustainability messaging in communication outlets can have a significant positive impact on consumer favorability to the brand. However, the company's sincerity and transparency are also important when it comes people's perceptions of the brand. After viewing the various advertisement one participant commented: "Everyone is lazy, so it's like I respect Patagonia for making this effort, I respect H&M, I respect Columbia. But Patagonia is the only one that puts it out in front of me, puts the facts out in front of me, and I don't have to go research it." In both of the Patagonia ads environmental concerns were clearly conveyed, and showed how their product could help effect change. She went on to say that she doesn't "trust H&M because they're kind of iffy, and they don't put the facts on there, and they probably hashtag their conscious collection." Through her comment about the "hashtag" she's emphasizing that the collection seems more for profit and publicity than for sincere care about the environment. Her statement indicates that she trusts and respects companies like Patagonia because it's laying out the facts right in front of you, and it's tangible evidence that they're being sustainable.

One key theme that emerged was a lack of trust for H&M because of an apparent lack of sincerity. One person said, “it says Conscious Collection and more sustainable fashion, but the actual ad itself doesn’t look any different than any other fashion ad. It seems like you’re just supposed to believe it.” People often compared this with the Patagonia denim ad, because of all the information that is provided. People were more inclined to believe it because it had “more statistics you could look into or just believe. But the H&M one is just trying to get you to believe that they’re sustainable without trying to provide any information.” This goes back to the comment about people being lazy. If you provide evidence to back up a statement, people are more likely to believe it. This in turn made the focus group participants respect Patagonia more, because of the genuine care for the environment and commitment to sustainability. In the end, the H&M ads didn’t make people “believe that they’re sustainable as a reason to go shop there.”

Another major takeaway from the focus groups is that people aren’t aware of the issue, so when companies highlight aspects of sustainability it gets people thinking. Many people commented on “how it’s the first time I’m thinking about it,” when it comes to environmentally friendly clothing. When companies frame their clothing in terms of the effects on the environment, the issue becomes more salient to consumers. This in turn makes people think about a company more favorably. This happened in the focus groups after people saw the Patagonia ads, and said they thought more about what’s going into the clothes they buy. The advertisements made the issue of sustainability more salient to them, this causes people to view sustainable companies more satisfactory than companies that greenwash or have no positive environmental



aspects. The Patagonia ads force people to pay attention to what's going into their garments, and it shocked people into caring more about the issue.

It's important to note that whether or not the consumer is willing to buy the product is another question. People appreciate and respect companies that are focusing on sustainability, but it's not always feasible. People constantly referred to price as a main reason whether or not they are willing to purchase an item. One person talked about how sustainability is a nice thought, but with college students it can be hard to afford. Many participants said that they would probably be more inclined to buy sustainable fashion if they had a parent helping them out financially. My findings indicate that sustainability messaging in clothing brands improves customer favorability of the company, even if it's not an affordable option.

## **2. How do companies communicate green and anti-consumption messages?**

### **How do consumers react to these messages?**

I related this question back to the company's websites, advertisements and in-store communications. I looked at each company individually, and then related this back to what was said in the focus groups. Some commonalities through all three companies are the prevalent use of the word sustainable and the in-store recycling programs.

Columbia Sportswear emphasizes the quality of apparel on most messaging platforms. The blog on the website focuses on outdoor adventures for viewers, and activities or experiences to share with others. Columbia also has a very lengthy CSR section. Here the annual report is available to people, and it highlights sponsorships and partnerships with other nonprofit or NGO organizations. One of the few mentions of sustainability on the website is in the CEO statement, where he says they value

responsible sourcing and reducing the environmental impact. In the company store, the main mention of recycling clothing is with the Re-Threads bin, and it also directs people where to get more information on the program. Furthermore, the labeling on the clothing in-store highlights the durability and purpose of the garment rather than the materials and the sourcing of the cloth. During the focus groups, participants didn't seem convinced of Columbia's commitment to the environment. One person said, "I feel like it's more just promoting that image of outdoors, so it's gear for the outdoors, but it's not sustainable." Another person chimed in that sustainability in production seems like an afterthought for the company. Although Columbia implements more initiatives than most clothing companies, people don't see that in the messages put out. Giving back is clearly a core value of the company, however, consumers aren't ready to fully believe the company's commitment to the environment. Columbia takes a "quality" approach to sustainability. The products that the company sells are durable and made with long-lasting materials, which allow people to appreciate and explore the outdoors. The emphasis isn't on protecting the environment, but enjoying the environment with the help of Columbia's products.

Meanwhile, Patagonia incorporates sustainability messaging into every aspect of communications, it's even a part of the mission statement. Transparency is emphasized throughout the website, especially with the "Footprint Chronicles," to think about the supply chain of clothes. The blog, "The Cleanest Line" also covers people's personal stories with the products and environmental issues. Often times there will be photo stories or videos to engage viewers. In store, there are labels on the clothes to indicate if it's FairTrade, and there are posters throughout the store signifying whether an item is

made from recycled materials. Patagonia's commitment to sustainability has paid off in the eyes of the consumers. During the focus groups people were already aware of Patagonia's environmental activism even before viewing the advertisements. When asked if they were willing to spend more on sustainable clothing, someone in the first focus group responded: "as far as jackets and outerwear go, Patagonia is pretty good with sustainability and their material and stuff. I'll splurge for that, even though I know it's a more expensive brand." Another participant in the second focus group also thought this: "Patagonia I'm definitely a sucker for" because of how much they give back to the environment. People emphasized the importance of videos in both focus groups. One person said they knew Patagonia was sustainable because: "I feel like I've seen videos online of like, they always come up with these really unique ways to showcase it." The participant went on to add that she's seen videos shared on Facebook. Patagonia communicates its commitment to the environment on every platform; it takes an "all-out" approach. It's apparent through every outlet that protecting the planet is a core value of the company.

With H&M, the only mention of sustainability in H&M's messaging is through the Conscious Collection and the in-store clothes-recycling program. Most of the sustainability messaging for the company is online, where it has a whole section dedicated to the Conscious Collection and the environmental impact of clothes. In-store H&M has a garment collecting box where clothes are sent to a processing plant to be given a new life. All items that were a part of the Conscious Collection had a green tag that had an FSC label. The section was no more than a few racks in the middle of the store. People in the focus groups were not convinced by H&M's messaging, and

questioned the motives behind the company. One person in the focus group described the H&M ads as “really vague. Like what is conscious?” People don’t trust something that is not specific. People could go to the website to learn more, but as I discovered through the focus groups that is an unrealistic expectation because “people are lazy.” As mentioned earlier, people were enthusiastic about the Patagonia ads because all the information was right in front of them, and they could see the direct effects it has on the environment. H&M only uses one collection, out of hundreds that the brand carries, to communicate sustainability. H&M’s minimalist approach to communicating sustainability, and their lack of facts and statistics on advertisements may be why many of the focus group participants viewed the brand as unreliable.

**3. What information do the companies provide about their commitment to sustainability? What practices do the companies mention in the advertisements, and how do viewers respond to the messaging strategies?**

This question is relating directly to the company’s ads that I choose for the focus groups. After analyzing the ads, I related this back to the focus group participant’s comments and then drew conclusions.

Columbia puts people at the focus of their advertisements. In one advertisement I selected for the focus group, there is a line of naked people holding Columbia jackets. The largest text in the ad reads: “Omni-heat: 20% Warmer. As proven by careful research and stupid stunts.” It has smaller writing on the top left corner it explains how omni-heat works. There is no mention of sustainable practices, however, the photo takes place in a natural setting. The second ad I choose has Gert Boyle on top of snowy mountains, while holding a cougar on a leash. The only words in the advertisement are

comedic, and highlight the “toughness” behind the company. The bottom right corner has the “Tested Tough” seal of approval, which indicates the durability and quality of the item. The company uses humor and imagery in both advertisements to catch consumer’s attention, and it worked in the focus groups. One participant was excited about the ads because it incorporated comedy and was relatable. In the focus groups one participant said they don’t trust Columbia on the topic of sustainability. She emphasized how “the ads don’t really mention sustainability.” Someone else said they didn’t have confidence in Columbia’s commitment to the environment either. “They had it in the background with nature, but it didn’t really explicitly say how they were being sustainable.” Columbia has strong initiatives in place when it comes to sustainability, but it’s not mentioned enough through its communication channels for people to understand that.

Meanwhile, Patagonia puts the environment at the front of their messages. In one advertisement that I choose, there is a man enjoying the outdoors on one side, and then there is a photo of jeans surrounded by words that show all the energy the product is saving. People in the focus group responded really well to this advertisement and said that they believe it because “it has statistics.” Other people agreed with this statement because it’s “explicit” and there is not vague claim to sustainability. It is educating people while they view the ad, and also promoting an eco-friendly lifestyle. The second advertisement that I choose has a simple photo of a jacket with words over it saying “Don’t Buy This Jacket.” On the left it suggests way to reduce the environmental impacts of clothes. This caught a lot of people’s attention during the focus groups because the unconventional advertising strategies. It directly addressed the company’s

impact on the environment, which caused people to think “it’s not an afterthought for them.” This indicates that people know that the messaging is consistent with Patagonia. In regards to the jeans ad, one respondent said: “these new things are coming out with the denim, and they’re evolving.” She added that, “Patagonia hasn’t always had denim, so when they started denim they wanted to do it the way their values supported.” I think this statement emphasizes that Patagonia is clear about their core value of supporting their environment across all media channels. They consistently talk about their attempts to use no synthetic materials, reduce their environmental impact, repair clothing, and reuse any materials that can be given a new life.

H&M’s advertisements have the least mention of sustainability. In one ad there is a model wearing a white dress with a blue background with the word “Conscious Collection” scrolled across the ad. Below it explains: “Conscious Collection is part of H&M’s actions for a more sustainable future.” During the focus groups people commented that it “looks like all their other ads.” Many said they wouldn’t have even paid attention to the writing if they didn’t know to look for sustainable messaging. They commented that the writing blends into the background, and the advertisement as a whole didn’t stick out to them. Similarly people didn’t respond well to the second ad, which had a model dressed in green surrounded by flowers. It has the words “H&M Conscious Collection / More sustainable fashion.” One participant asked: “Is it sustainable because [the dress] has a bird on it?” The advertisements are too simple, and too similar to the company’s non-sustainable messaging. This makes them come off as insincere and not committed to the environment. This turns people off from their brand, because they feel like H&M is trying to trick them into shopping there.

What I learned here is that more specific messaging has a larger effect on people's willingness to believe sustainable messaging. People were most trusting of Patagonia, because the advertisement stated how the product was better for the environment. People also saw the messages from Patagonia as more sincere, because it is inline with the company's core values. In contrast, people did not trust H&M because the advertisements did not explain how the clothes were more sustainable. They also saw the ads as not genuine because they know that H&M is a fashion conglomerate and one of the largest producers of clothes that's not the best quality. I think the takeaway is that companies have to invest in sustainability to get consumers to believe their messaging. It has to be a core value of the company. Also, it's important to explain to consumers how something is better for the environment; they aren't just going to take your word for it.

#### **4. Can the practices effect change?**

I believe that sustainability messaging has the potential to change people's attitudes and behaviors towards buying clothes. Participants in the focus groups responded very well towards wanting to purchase environmentally friendly clothing, the issue is that people didn't realize it was an issue.

Many people said that it changed the way that they would shop after talking about the issues of sustainability in the clothing industry. After looking at the Patagonia denim ad, one girl commented on how it made her want to buy her jeans there in the future. Another participant said that she wanted to "start looking at labels of other clothes that [she wanted] to buy." This demonstrates that eco-friendly messaging can have a significant impact on consumer shopping habits. All the women in the focus

groups expressed that they value environmental protection, and that they respect companies that try to reduce its' carbon footprint. Towards the end of the focus group, one woman said: "I've become more educated, just sitting here listening to everyone." Simply bringing up the issue made sustainability in the clothing industry more salient in the minds of the participants. Many people did say that price influenced their decision to purchase an item, but people seemed willing to invest in a garment that lasted a long time. A few weeks after I conducted the focus groups I had a participant approach me on campus and said she had just bought a Patagonia parka. She said she saw the company was having a sale, she needed a winter parka, and she remembered people's discussion during the focus groups about Patagonia being an environmentally friendly company. Because of this she decided to buy the jacket. The messaging from the advertisements helped influence her to purchase the garment, which I believe shows the impact that sustainability communication can influence consumer behavior.

The biggest takeaway from the focus groups is that people aren't aware of the impact that clothing has on the environment. When asked why people don't think about the environment, one person responded: "You don't really see it, like you don't think about the water that's going into producing your jeans." She commented this after looking at the Patagonia ad that shows how much water goes into each pair. This indicates that there's a detachment between the product and the consumer. The messaging in the advertisement resonated with the participant, and she used it as a way to explain that this is shocking information. Furthermore, another respondent said: "I was even thinking that it's not a news story. I never even thought about sustainable clothing personally, I never thought about it sitting in a landfill. I've never even heard



of that, that's crazy." Many participants acknowledged that this is the first time they had heard about the environmental impact of clothes. This participant was horrified when she learned about these issues and it demonstrates that people care about where their clothes are going, they just don't think about it until it's laid out in front of them. People aren't intentionally trying to hurt the environment through clothing consumption; they are simply uninformed about it. The respondents' reaction is powerful information because if more consumers knew this they would demand more accountability in regard to sustainability on behalf of the clothing industry.

People's lack of information was repeated throughout the focus groups. One quote that resonated with me was when a participant said clothing is not what you're taught about on earth day in elementary school. People learn about changing to more eco-friendly light bulbs, or using less water, but never do you learn to be more conscious of what you're putting on your body. Someone added on to this idea when she said that, "I don't think people realize where everything comes from, they just look at the dress and think 'oh this is such a nice dress' or whatever. It's new to fashion." It's the concept of "out of sight, out of mind." Companies, schools and the media aren't emphasizing sustainability on their platforms and as a result the target audience is uneducated on the topic.

Sustainability messaging can effect change, but first it needs to be put on the forefront of people's minds. I believe that companies have a social obligation to educate consumers to assure they know where their clothes are coming from and how it's made. Consumers are starting to demand and expect sustainability in the products they buy, which is making environmentally friendly operations a necessity for brands.

## **Recommendations**

If clothing brands sincerely want to help the world's environmental problems, they first have to increase the saliency of the issue. It was repeated throughout the focus groups by almost every participant that they were unaware of the fashion industry's adverse effects on the planet. There is a clear disconnect between consumers and clothing production. Furthermore, participants all agreed that they view a brand more favorably if it has green practices and is socially responsible. Because of this, I think that there are a number of initiatives that sustainable companies can take to make the issue more prominent to the public, while also increasing brand favorability for the target audience. For starters, I think that it would be beneficial for a company that wants to be more "green" to sponsor and help produce a Netflix documentary about sustainability in the clothing industry. Netflix as a medium to find documentaries was mentioned a few times during the focus groups, and a recent study found that 80 percent of millennials consume media through Netflix.<sup>53</sup> Sponsoring a documentary could make the issue of sustainability in the clothing industry more prominent, and also get the company's name out there as a force that is trying to eliminate the problem. Furthermore, highlighting sustainability on the company's social media platforms could also make the problem more salient, and cause the target audience to appreciate the business more. It was reiterated multiple times through the focus groups that people get lost in the "black hole" of social media. If a company posts more often about how items are more sustainable, or what the company is doing to protect the planet, people would

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<sup>53</sup> Boland, L. B. (2015, November 16). Massive share of US millennials stream video on Netflix and YouTube. Retrieved April 09, 2017, from <http://www.businessinsider.com/massive-share-of-us-millennials-stream-video-on-netflix-and-youtube-2015-11>

be more likely to trust the company and shop there. This method proves to be effective for Patagonia; everyone in the focus groups recognized Patagonia as a leader in the sustainable apparel industry, and of the three companies looked at Patagonia was the only one that continuously posts on social media about environmental issues.

### **Limitations and Challenges**

Sustainability has been a fascinating topic to study, however, there have been a number of challenges that I've come across. I would like to acknowledge that there are a number of limitations to this study. For starters, the research only reflects one area of the United States and one demographic. The people who participated in the study were all college women aged 18-22 who were attending the University of Oregon. The campus is known to be very liberal and accepting of climate change science. Although my research indicates that people respond well to sustainability messaging, it should be noted that this can't be applied to the demographic of 18-22 year-old females as a whole.

Furthermore it's important to recognize that it is difficult to compare the three companies selected. Columbia, Patagonia and H&M have very different messaging strategies, as noted by the participants in the focus groups. Although Columbia does have a number of initiatives to make the company more sustainable, that is not reflected in its advertisements. Continuing, H&M is a huge fashion conglomerate and is the only fast fashion retailer that uses sustainability messaging. It was difficult to compare H&M to Columbia and Patagonia because the companies have very different values and demographics. I think it would be interesting to compare major fashion brands like

Reformation to H&M, and see how consumers respond to the brand and if they would be willing to buy the higher price point.

### **Future Research**

There is a lot more room for future research on the topic of sustainability in the clothing industry. As mentioned earlier, I think it would be interesting to continue to compare different company's messaging strategies in regards to the environment. In my study I only selected two advertisements, which limited what participants viewed. However, the companies chosen have a variety of different campaigns that could've been selected. I tried to choose ads that reflected the core values of the company, however it's important to note that there are hundreds of more ads to choose from. I think it would be interesting to develop advertisements based of what participants responded well to in this study, and see if consumer's perceptions of the company change based off of the message. For example if H&M developed an ad that used more statistics to show how they're more sustainable, would participants be more trusting of H&M?

Another potential area for future research is to better understand why people are aware of sustainability in the food industry, but not the clothing industry. Many participants noted that they try to buy local and organic foods, but not clothing. I think it would be interesting to study why sustainable food has gained a huge following, and take these strategies and apply it to the eco-friendly clothing movement.

## Conclusion

There is some ambiguity surrounding the definition of sustainable, especially when it comes to the clothing industry. When looking at an advertisement a focus group participant questioned, “what do they even mean by sustainable?” The meaning of a clothing item being “sustainable” can be a subjective term, but standards of how environmentally friendly a garment is will only become clearer as the issue becomes more prominent in people’s lives.

Through the content analysis it was apparent which companies put the most effort into being more eco-conscious. Patagonia, being a B Corporation, sets the gold standard for sustainable apparel. The company weaves in the environment into everything that it does and produces, and people are aware of this. Furthermore, the transparency through *The Footprint Chronicles* helps hold the company accountable for manufacturing and resource extraction as well. While H&M and Columbia have some external communications that focus on protecting the environment, it is not incorporated as often as it is in Patagonia’s messaging. It is important to acknowledge that all three companies use the SAC’s Higg Index as a standard for assessing environmental and social responsibility throughout the supply chain. Not surprisingly, Patagonia has the least environmental impact, followed by Columbia and then H&M.

My main takeaway from the focus groups is that people are not aware of the impact that clothing can have on the environment. People were shocked to learn that the fashion industry is the second most polluting industry in the world, behind big oil. People attributed this lack of knowledge from the absence of the issue being in the news, and the lack of education surrounding environmental issues. The focus group

participants seemed to sincerely care about the environment, however, no one knew the extent of the damage that clothes can cause. In order to create a larger market for sustainable apparel, there needs to be an increased presence of the issue. To encourage media coverage of the issue companies need to take matters into their own hands, and help educate consumers on how purchasing an item can impact other people and the earth.

It's apparent that the target audience cared about the issue of sustainability in the clothing industry, but it's not always a convenient option. After the discussion members of each focus groups said that they were more interested in the topic, and will keep what they learned in mind the next time they went shopping. Sustainability messaging can effect change, but first it needs to be communicated more clearly.

## Appendix A



### DECONSTRUCTING AN ADVERTISEMENT

» For a print advertisement

STEP 1: MAKE OBSERVATIONS
» Think of five adjectives that describe the ad.
» Look at the ad and evaluate its aesthetics:
■ Are there people depicted in the ad? What gender is represented? What race? What do the people look like (young, old, stylish, etc.)? What are their facial expressions?
■ Estimate what the camera angle was. Was it far from the subject or close to it? Was it above, eye-level, or below the subject?
■ Take note of the lighting used in the ad. Does it appear to be natural or artificial? Why or why not? Are certain parts of the ad highlighted while others are not? If so, why do you think this is? Are there shadows? If so, how big are they?
■ What colors are used? Are they bright? black and white? in sharp contrast to each other?
■ If the ad has text or copy, how does it look? What kind of font is used? Is more than one type of font used? How big is the text? What color is the text? Is there more than one color used? What does the text actually say? What does the large text say? The small text?
STEP 2: DETERMINE THE PURPOSE OF THE AD
» Remember that the purpose of an ad is always to sell a product!
» What product is being sold?
» Do you find the product appealing? Why or why not?
» Who is the target audience for this product? Children? Teens? Adults? The elderly?
» What feelings or emotions is the ad trying to associate with the product? Did it work? Why or why not?

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### STEP 3: DETERMINE THE ASSUMPTIONS THE AD MAKES & THE MESSAGES IT SENDS

» Assumptions may not be contained directly in the ads themselves, but in the messages that are produced from them

■ What assumptions does the ad make about gender? (*i.e. Women are powerful when they hold a hair dryer in their hands. Men like to drink beer. Women are primary caregivers, etc..*) Are these assumptions realistic? Why or why not? Do these assumptions reinforce or challenge stereotypes about gender identity?

■ What assumptions does the ad make about race (*i.e. African Americans are excellent athletes. Latinos are sensual and passionate. Etc.*)? Are these assumptions realistic? Why or why not? Do these assumptions reinforce or challenge stereotypes about racial identity?

■ What assumptions does the ad make about class (*i.e. Wealthy people are happy and trouble-free. Poor people are always looking for a handout, etc..*)? Are these assumptions realistic? Why or why not? Do these assumptions reinforce or challenge stereotypes about class?

### STEP 4: CONSIDER THE POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES OF THESE MESSAGES

» What are some possible consequences? (long-term and short-term)

» Do the messages create unrealistic expectations for people? Why or why not?

» How do the messages in this ad counter or undermine social change?

» Is this ad socially responsible? How or how not? What does it mean for an ad or a company to be socially responsible?

» In the closing comments of the video *Killing Us Softly 3*, Jean Kilbourne states that change will depend upon "an aware, active, educated public that thinks for itself primarily as citizens rather than primarily as consumers." What does it mean to think of oneself primarily as a citizen rather than primarily a consumer? Can one be both a citizen and a consumer? How? Reflect on this ad with the above statement in mind.



## Appendix B

Year in School:

Gender:

Age:

**Please list the last three clothing items you purchased:**

**Where did purchase the item?**

**Briefly explain why you purchased that item of clothing?**

## Appendix C

### Script for Focus Groups

#### Key Focus Group Questions

- What prompts you to go shopping?
- What factors influence your decision to buy an item of clothing or not?
- What would be the main reason that you would buy sustainable fashion for?  
Would a higher price point matter?
- What do you do with clothes that you no longer use?
- Looking at the advertisements from the three different companies, which ones stand out to you the most and why?
- Would this cause you to learn more about the issue of sustainability in the clothing industry?
- Would these advertisements affect your shopping habits? Would you be more likely to shop at any of these stores now?
- Out of the three companies mentioned, which would you consider the most sustainable? Why?
- Do any of the advertisements affect your thoughts on sustainability?
- Do you believe the messages that are conveyed?
- What advice do you have for brands when it comes using sustainability to appeal to consumers?

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