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Ethical Branding as Competitive Advantage How Fashion Brands Build Consumer Loyalty and Trust: The Patagonia Case

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Abstract

Title: Ethical Branding as Competitive Advantage How Fashion Brands Build Consumer Loyalty and Trust: The Patagonia Case

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This thesis analyzes how ethical branding in the fashion industry can serve as a competitive advantage by increasing customer trust and loyalty, using Patagonia as an example. With an eye on the growing demand for sustainability and ethical practices, the industry is challenged to embrace a holistic commitment that go beyond one eco-friendly production line. With the help of a qualitative research, three main questions were answered, “How do brands like Patagonia design and implement ethical and sustainable branding strategies?”, “How do campaigns focused on ethical production help position brands as leaders in sustainability?” and “How do sustainability-focused marketing strategies foster differentiation and consumer loyalty?” Next to a literature review, expert and consumer interviews revealed three important characteristics of successful ethical branding: transparency, storytelling, and community engagement. Transparency is essential for gaining consumer trust through openly communicating about a company's values, mission, and challenges. Storytelling, like Patagonia's "Don't Buy This Jacket" campaign, interacts with customers on an emotional level, matching the brand's values with its customers. Community-driven programs, such as the Worn Wear program, increase customer loyalty by engaging them in sustainability initiatives. Patagonia's approach highlights how incorporating sustainability into a brand's core can help differentiate it from competitors. Based on these findings, the research suggests that businesses increase transparency, employ third-party certifications, emphasize quality over quantity, and educate customers about the implications of ethical practices. The research highlights that ethical branding is not just a marketing tool but a necessity for brands aiming to succeed in today's value-driven market.

Sumário

Title: Ethical Branding as Competitive Advantage How Fashion Brands Build Consumer Loyalty and Trust: The Patagonia Case

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Palavras-chave: Branding ético, Sustentabilidade: Indústria da moda, Patagônia

Esta tese analisa, tendo como exemplo o caso da Patagonia, como o branding ético na moda pode ser uma vantagem competitiva, ao aumentar a confiança e a lealdade dos clientes. Diante da crescente procura por sustentabilidade, a indústria da moda é desafiada a adotar um compromisso que vai para além de uma mera produção ecológica. Por meio de uma investigação qualitativa, três questões de investigação foram abordadas: “Marcas como a Patagonia, como concebem e implementam estratégias de branding éticas?”, “Como campanhas focadas na produção ética posicionam marcas como líderes em sustentabilidade?” e “Como estratégias de marketing sustentáveis promovem diferenciação e lealdade do consumidor?”. A revisão da literatura e entrevistas com especialistas e consumidores destacaram três pilares de uma marca ética bem-sucedida: transparência, narração de histórias e envolvimento da comunidade. Transparência é crucial para conquistar confiança, comunicando abertamente valores e desafios da empresa. A narração de histórias, exemplificada pela campanha “Don't Buy This Jacket”, cria conexão emocional ao alinhar valores da marca aos dos consumidores. Já iniciativas comunitárias, como o programa Worn Wear, fortalecem a lealdade ao envolver clientes em ações sustentáveis. A abordagem da Patagonia demonstra que integrar sustentabilidade nos atributos da marca não só diferencia a empresa, como também inspira um relacionamento duradouro com os consumidores, posicionando-a como líder em práticas éticas e responsáveis.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

In recent years, the fashion industry has faced intense criticism due to its negative impacts on the environment and society. The short production cycles and emphasis on cheap clothing, particularly driven by the fast fashion sector, have made these issues worse, greatly increasing resource depletion, pollution, and unethical labor practices (Rao, 2024; Centobelli et al., 2022, Kozlowski, Bardecki, Searcy 2012). Fast fashion's price-driven, trend-focused model continues to dominate the market, even as awareness of its harmful impacts grows. However, to build long-term customer loyalty and trust, companies are now expected to go beyond symbolic gestures and show genuine commitment to ethical business practices (Aponte, N. et al., 2024).

Amid these growing challenges, one company has emerged as a pioneer in sustainable fashion: Patagonia. Widely regarded as a leader in sustainable fashion and ethical branding, Patagonia has integrated sustainability into the core of its operations. From using eco-friendly materials like organic cotton to promoting a circular economy through initiatives such as the Worn Wear program, the company exemplifies how brands can align their values with consumer expectations (The Green Muse, 2024). These efforts have not only established Patagonia as a leader in sustainability but also fostered deep consumer trust and loyalty, which are central to long-term competitive advantage (Fashion Capital, 2024). Patagonia's approach is emblematic of a larger shift within the fashion industry, where sustainability is no longer a niche concept but part of a broader global movement. This trend is fueled by growing consumer expectations and international initiatives, such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Particularly, younger consumers are demanding greater ethical transparency as they become more aware of the environmental and social impacts of their purchases (Lee & Lee, 2018). As a result, fashion companies are under growing pressure to integrate ethical practices into their models—an approach that not only addresses environmental concerns but also provides a competitive edge by fostering customer loyalty and trust (Marko et al., 2023; Centobelli et al., 2022).

As the demand for sustainable practices grows, ethical branding has become a critical strategy for companies. Ethical branding refers to a brand's ability to authentically communicate its commitment to sustainability and ethical practices, aligning with the values of environmentally conscious consumers, particularly younger generations (Fan, 2005; Marko et al., 2018).

However, maintaining authenticity in sustainability claims is challenging, as greenwashing—falsely marketing a product as environmentally friendly—remains a significant issue, threatening consumer trust (Adamkiewicz et al., 2022; Henninger, 2015).

As the fashion industry faces increasing environmental and social pressures, the integration of sustainability and ethical branding is not just a competitive advantage but an essential business strategy. With consumer expectations evolving and global awareness of these issues on the rise, brands that authentically embrace ethical practices are better positioned to lead and thrive in the marketplace.

1.2 Problem statement

In response to growing consumer demand for greater sustainability and transparency, fashion brands are under increasing pressure to adopt ethical branding practices (Lee & Lee, 2018; Granskog et al., 2020). While fast fashion continues to dominate the market, its environmental and social consequences have raised concerns about its long-term viability (Rao, 2024; Centobelli et al., 2022). Ethical branding, which involves authentic communication of a brand's commitment to sustainability and responsible business practices, has emerged as a potential solution to these challenges (Marko et al., 2023). Brands like Patagonia have demonstrated that integrating sustainability into core operations can build consumer trust and loyalty (The Green Muse, 2024; Fashion Capital, 2024). However, many brands still struggle to maintain authenticity in their sustainability efforts, facing accusations of greenwashing (Adamkiewicz et al., 2022). This study aims to explore how ethical branding strategies, exemplified by Patagonia, can serve as a competitive advantage, helping brands differentiate themselves from competitors while fostering long-term consumer loyalty and trust.

1.3 Research Objective and Questions

The primary research objective is to assess how fashion brands build consumer loyalty and trust through ethical branding strategies, with a specific emphasis on Patagonia as a leading example. The study focuses on understanding the role of ethical behavior in creating competitive advantage within the fashion industry. To achieve this, three research questions have been defined as follows:

- How do fashion brands like Patagonia develop and implement sustainable and ethical branding strategies?

- How do marketing campaigns that emphasize ethical production position fashion brands as leaders in sustainability?
- To what extent do sustainability-focused marketing strategies help fashion brands differentiate themselves and enhance consumer loyalty?

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is structured into five main chapters, each contributing to the overarching goal of exploring how fashion brands, particularly Patagonia, use ethical branding as a competitive advantage to build consumer trust and loyalty.

The first chapter introduces the background and context of the research, outlining the key issues faced by the fashion industry, such as the environmental and social challenges posed by fast fashion. The problem statement is formulated, followed by the research objective and questions. It also provides an overview of the structure of the thesis.

The second chapter reviews existing literature on ethical branding in the fashion industry. It introduces key concepts, focusing on how ethical branding differentiates brands by integrating sustainability and transparency. The chapter also examines the role of sustainability focused marketing campaigns and their impact on consumer trust and loyalty. Finally, it presents a case study of Patagonia to demonstrate how ethical branding can be leveraged as a competitive advantage. This chapter provides the theoretical framework for analyzing how sustainability and ethical behavior influence brand positioning and consumer perceptions.

The Research Methodology chapter outlines the qualitative research approach adopted in this study, including the methodology used to gather data. The research is based on semi-structured interviews with industry experts and consumers, aimed at understanding perceptions of ethical branding. The sample strategy, data collection method, and the approach to data analysis are explained in detail.

Chapter four presents the results of the qualitative analysis. It addresses each of the research question by analyzing how brands like Patagonia develop and implement sustainable and ethical branding strategies, how ethical production is communicated through marketing campaigns, and the extent to which these strategies contribute to brand differentiation and consumer loyalty.

The final chapter summarizes the main and provides recommendations for fashion brands aiming to adopt ethical branding strategies and addresses the limitations of the study. The chapter concludes with suggestions for future research.

2 Literature Review and theoretical background

The literature review will focus on the key components of ethical branding in the fashion industry and how these practices contribute to building consumer trust and loyalty, establishing a competitive advantage, and positioning brands like Patagonia as industry leaders in sustainability.

2.1 Ethical Branding in the Fashion Industry

Ethical branding involves aligning a company's operations and values with principles of environmental sustainability and social responsibility (Kumar and Kaushal, 2023). In the fashion industry, this concept has gained importance due to the industry's long-standing association with unsustainable practices, such as environmental degradation and unethical labor conditions (Henninger, 2015). The fashion industry is one of the largest global industries, generating substantial economic output but also contributing significantly to environmental and social issues. Globally, the fashion industry is responsible for approximately 10% of carbon emissions and is the second-largest consumer of water (McFall-Johnsen, 2019). Environmental concerns include high water consumption, pollution from textile production, and excessive waste, driven by fast fashion's quick production cycles and disposable nature (Mukherjee, 2015). Socially, the industry has faced intense criticism for relying on low-wage labor in developing countries, where working conditions are often poor, and wages are insufficient (Niinimäki, 2015; Henninger, 2015).

As a response to these challenges, ethical branding has become a key strategy in the fashion industry. It reflects a broader shift towards sustainability, where both ecological and social concerns are integrated into business practices. From using sustainable materials, ensuring transparency across the supply chain, and focusing on fair wages and eco-friendly production (Niinimäki, 2015; Henninger, 2015; Tarnovskaya, 2021).

What began as a niche concept is now central to corporate strategy, driven by consumer demand for greater transparency and sustainability (Joy et al., 2012; Henninger et al., 2017). Ethical branding is not just about mitigating harm but also about creating positive social and environmental impact.

Brands like Stella McCartney, for example, have built their entire brand identity around ethical fashion, promoting their use of eco-friendly materials like vegan leather (Rana, 2024, Stella McCartney, n.d.).

By adopting ethical branding strategies, fashion brands can not only address the industry's long-standing challenges but also align themselves with the growing segment of ethically conscious consumers (R, S.B., 2023). This alignment helps create a strong, values-driven relationship between the brand and its customers, reinforcing brand loyalty and trust through clear, verifiable commitments to sustainability and ethical practices (Henninger et al., 2017).

2.2 Building a competitive advantage

In the fashion industry, ethical branding has evolved into a critical competitive advantage, helping brands to stand out in a market that is increasingly shaped by consumer demands for sustainability and ethical responsibility. This shift is driven by growing awareness of environmental and social issues, pushing brands to adopt responsible practices that not only enhance their reputation but also set them apart from competitors (Tanveer et al., 2021; Palazzo & Basu, 2006). By integrating ethical considerations into their branding, fashion companies can address the concerns of ethically conscious consumers, who are seeking brands that reflect their values and not only looking for a trend piece (Cerchia et al, 2019).

Differentiation is one of the primary ways in which ethical branding provides a competitive advantage. In an industry dominated by fast fashion ethical branding allows companies to build a unique identity, positioning themselves as leaders in sustainability and responsibility (Mandarić et al., 2022). This differentiation enables brands to attract a growing base of consumers who are willing to pay a premium for products that align with their values (Kumar & Kaushal, 2023). By offering transparency and demonstrating commitment to fair labor practices or eco-friendly production, brands can separate from competitors that may not emphasize ethics as part of their business strategy (Palazzo & Basu, 2006).

This positioning also plays a crucial role in enhancing brand longevity and leadership. As the market increasingly rewards transparency and responsible business practices, brands that fail to adopt ethical strategies face significant risks, including reputational damage or consumer backlash (Fan, 2005). Conversely, companies that embrace ethical branding not only mitigate these risks but also secure a stronger foothold in the market.

Leading brands such as Patagonia and Stella McCartney exemplify how ethical branding can foster market leadership by consistently integrating sustainability and corporate social responsibility. Patagonia's focus on environmental initiatives and Stella McCartney's commitment to using sustainable materials and cruelty-free production methods have allowed them to thrive as ethical leaders in the fashion world (Palazzo & Basu, 2006). By proactively addressing societal concerns, these brands have managed to stay relevant and competitive in a rapidly changing market, with studies confirming that sustainability is an essential driver of consumer trust and brand loyalty (Wigley et al., 2013; Sailer et al., 2022).

Besides, differentiation and leadership, ethical branding strengthens market resilience (Rego et al., 2021). Brands that commit to ethical practices are often better prepared to fluctuations in fashion movements or economic shifts, as their customer base prefers sustainability over trends. As regulations on environmental and social issues tighten, companies with strong ethical branding are better able to meet these requirements, giving them an advantage over competitors who are less prepared (Tarnovskaya, 2021; Mandarić et al., 2022).

Additionally, ethical branding provides a significant competitive advantage by fostering consumer trust and loyalty. Brands that consistently uphold ethical standards are seen as more reliable and socially responsible, which strengthens their emotional connection to consumers and cultivates long-term loyalty, an essential factor in maintaining a competitive edge in a saturated market (Lee & Jin, 2019; Granskog et al., 2020)

2.3 Consumer Trust and Loyalty

Ethical branding has turned out to be one of the most important strategies for fashion brands aiming to build consumer trust and loyalty. In supporting ethical brand values, consumer's ethical perceptions are in harmony with the brand and thus establish affective psychological associations for a long-term relationship (Kumar & Kaushal, 2023).

Brands that prioritize sustainability and social responsibility resonate particularly well with younger generations, who are increasingly driven by personal values such as environmental consciousness and social justice (Petro, 2021; Rivaroli et al., 2022). This alignment enhances consumer trust, which, in the long run strengthens loyalty, making it a powerful tool for brand sustainability.

Trust serves as the foundation for brand loyalty (Howley, 2024). Trust, defined as a consumer's belief in a brand's reliability, honesty, and integrity, plays a crucial role in the fashion industry, where sustainability and ethical labor practices are key concerns (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Haseeb et al., 2024). Patagonia and Stella McCartney are examples of brands that have managed to build consumer trust through continuous ethical efforts that promote sustainable practices while being open to consumers in their sustainable efforts (Neumann et al., 2021). For example, Patagonia's environmental initiatives and Stella McCartney's cruelty-free production methods have allowed these brands to build credibility and loyalty, creating a competitive advantage (Palazzo & Basu, 2006).

One of the key drivers of trust is the transparency of a brand's operations (Flynn et al., 2024). Transparency can be described as the willingness of a brand to openly share its practices, particularly in areas like sustainability and labor conditions, directly affecting consumer trust (Pivato, Misani, & Tencati, 2008). When brands provide consumers with clear, verifiable information about their practices, they can reduce skepticism and gain trust. Another compelling factor influencing consumer trust is the brand's consistent commitment to social responsibility. Brands that visibly invest in community development, environmental protection, or social justice are perceived as more ethical, hence improving consumer trust and loyalty. Prioritizing the welfare of employees and animals further enhances this perception, helping to build stronger connections with consumers (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014; Reimers et al., 2016). Lastly, the level of consumer knowledge and awareness play a significant role in bridging the gap between ethical branding and consumer trust. Studies have shown that there is a positive correlation between consumer knowledge about eco-friendly products and their trust in sustainable fashion brands (Marko et al., 2023). Effective consumer engagement and awareness campaigns that promote ethical knowledge about the environment can serve as a major advantage for brands which, in turn, can lead to higher consumer confidence and stronger brand loyalty (Djossouvi et al., 2024).

Once trust is established, it becomes a powerful driver of brand loyalty (Howley, 2024).

Loyalty refers to a consumer's consistent preference and commitment to a brand, often characterized by repeated purchases and advocacy (Markovic et al., 2015).

In the context of ethical branding, loyalty is not only about product satisfaction but about shared values, consumers demand brands that support that align with their beliefs on sustainability and transparency (Mao, 2010). Value oriented brands like Patagonia, which integrate sustainability into their brand core, tend to enjoy higher levels of trust and loyalty compared to brands that adopt ethical practices merely as a response to consumer pressure (Park & Kim, 2016).

Loyalty is further strengthened by the emotional connection consumers feel toward a brand. In the fashion industry, many consumers view brands as an extension of their identity, meaning loyalty is based not only on the functional benefits of products but to how well the brand reflects their personal values (Mandarić et al., 2022). When consumers believe that their purchase might contribute to a positive social or environmental outcome, they might feel emotionally more attached to the brand which can foster long-term loyalty (Luján-Ornelas et al., 2020). Loyalty programs are also supposed to build consumer relationships. Brands that offer incentives for ethical behavior, such as discounts for returning used clothes or choosing eco-friendly products, promote sustainability while deepening consumer loyalty (Mao, 2010).

Next, brand consistency has also a huge effect on consumer loyalty. A brand must uphold its ethical values in every aspect of its operation, including production, marketing, and corporate behavior to avoid eroding trust and loyalty (Bolton & Drew, 1991). Building consumer loyalty through ethical branding is not just about fostering repeat purchases, it is about building brand advocacy. Loyal customers often become brand advocates, promoting the brand to others, and protecting it against competitors. This advocacy further adds to the competitive advantage of the brand, allowing it to grow in a market that is becoming more saturated (Neumann et al., 2021).

2.4 Ethical Marketing

Ethical marketing has emerged as a pivotal strategy for fashion brands reflecting their sustainability and ethical standards. With the rise in consumer awareness and increased demand for transparency, ethical marketing campaigns offer brands an opportunity to showcase their commitment to responsible practices while promoting their products (Rathore, 2017).

It's not only about promoting products but also about building deeper, value-based relationships with consumers, fostering long-term loyalty and trust (Clarke et al., 2016). By leveraging ethical marketing, fashion brands can respond to the growing consumer demand for sustainability while also driving responsible consumption (R, S.B., 2023).

One of the key strategies used in ethical marketing is green marketing, which emphasizes the promotion of products based on their environmental benefits. In the fashion industry, this means highlighting sustainable production processes, such as the use of eco-friendly materials and responsible sourcing (Gordon et al., 2011). The French footwear brand Veja, for example, put emphasize on their organic cotton and wild rubber, promoting the transparency of their supply chain, thereby gaining credibility among environmentally conscious consumers (Veja, n.d.). Similarly, fashion brands like Outerknown and Stella McCartney center their campaigns around recycled materials and ethical production processes, rising awareness about sustainability and educating consumers about the broader environmental impact of their purchases (Outerknown, n.d.;Stella McCartney, n.d.; Rana, 2024).

For green marketing to be effective, it is crucial that brands provide transparent and verifiable data to support their sustainability claims. Brands such as Eileen Fisher rely on third-party certifications, like the Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS), B Corp certification and Fair Trade, to validate its sustainability efforts and avoid accusations of greenwashing (Brach et al., 2018). As consumer skepticism about environmental claims grows, it is crucial to provide such credible information to build trust and ensure that green marketing delivers actual value (Naumova et al., 2024).

Yet another powerful tool of ethical marketing that tends to be efficient is Storytelling. It allows fashion brands to build an emotional bond with consumers by highlighting the brands journey behind their mission or product (Fog et al., 2010). Unlike traditional marketing, which focuses on top bottom approaches of a product, storytelling resonates with consumers by emphasizing the broader societal and environmental impact of their purchase decision. The Canadian brand Tentree, for instance, connects every purchase with a specific environmental action, namely planting ten trees, and thus transforming consumption into a contribution towards global sustainability (Tentree, n.d.). Likewise, Veja uses storytelling to point out the social and environmental benefits of its sourcing practices, emphasizing the human impact behind their production processes, such as supporting organic farmers in Brazil (Veja, n.d.).

This emotional connection assists in creating a story that makes consumers feel personally invested thereby fostering brand loyalty (Rathore, 2017). The fashion brand Allbirds also applied storytelling effectively throughout their "Meet Your Shoes" campaign, where they assigned each shoe a carbon footprint, further engaging consumers by educating them about the environmental impact of their purchase (Allbirds, n.d.).

Ethical marketing has also become more interactive and transparent, especially with the rise of digital platforms and social media. Brands are able to engage in two-way communication with their audience (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, LinkedIn and Facebook give brands the opportunity to provide real-time updates about their sustainability efforts, respond to questions from consumers, and build a sense of community (Macca et al., 2024). Under the claim "Transparency Tuesday," the ethical fashion brand Everlane invited consumers to ask live questions about the brand's production processes thereby building credibility and accountability through direct interaction (Everlane, n.d.; wordpress, 2017). Similarly, Patagonia leverages the use of social media to collect feedback and increase community engagement through interactive stories or polls on environmental initiatives (Patagonia, 2023). Social media also enables user-generated content, which allows consumers to become brand advocates. Allbirds, for instance, encourages customers to share their experiences with its eco-friendly products, increasing the overall reach of the brand, its message, and commitment to sustainability through authentic consumer voices (Beijk, 2021).

While ethical marketing can be considered as a strong tool for brands, it also carries the risk of greenwashing, where brands overemphasize or even misrepresent their environmental practices. Brands like H&M have received huge criticism for marketing the brand as eco-friendly just because they launched a "Conscious Collection", as the foundation of their brand contradicts sustainability principles (Brach et al., 2018). To overcome this, brands need to guarantee that their claims are supported by transparent and tangible data or certifications, as seen by companies like Eileen Fisher, Patagonia or Veja, which integrate sustainability into every aspect of its business, from offering free repairs to reselling second-hand products. This approach ensures that the brand's green claims are credible and trustworthy, helping it to avoid accusations of greenwashing (Walker & Wan, 2011).

2.5 Patagonia: A Case Study in Ethical Branding

Patagonia, founded in 1973 by Yvon Chouinard, has evolved from a small outdoor gear company into a global leader in sustainable fashion and ethical branding. Its mission, "in business to save our home planet," guides every aspect of its operations, from product design, sourcing to business practices, with a clear focus on sustainability and social responsibility. Since 1985, the brand has pledged to contribute at least 1% of its revenue to support environmental protection and conservation efforts (Patagonia, 2024). This has led not only to innovation but also to position the brand as a pioneer in ethical business models, building a strong reputation for environmental stewardship (Patagonia, n.d.; Crane, Matten, & Spence, 2019).

Patagonia's dedication to sustainability is exemplified by its holistic approach to reducing environmental impact. The brand prioritizes the use of recycled materials, such as polyester and organic cotton, in its products, significantly minimizing its ecological footprint. This strategy aligns with the company's broader commitment to sustainability, which is not only a core business strategy but also a fundamental value of the brand (Chouinard, Ellison, & Ridgeway, 2011; Elkington, 2018). By making sustainability the cornerstone of its operations, Patagonia has set itself apart from competitors, emphasizing the durability of its products over fast fashion trends.

The company's Worn Wear initiative, introduced in 2013, demonstrates its commitment to reduce waste. This initiative encourages customers to repair, reuse, and recycle garments, thereby extending the product lifecycles and promoting a circular economy (Hwang et al., 2016). Besides, offering free product repair with a lifetime guarantee, the company recycles its materials to use in the production of new products (Hegnar, 2012). Additionally, Patagonia travelled with a sustainable truck across Europe, offering on-the-spot clothing repairs to customers (Sport conrad, 2022). This not only reduced waste but also fostered emotional connection and consumer engagement as customers shared personal experiences with the brand, highlighting Patagonia's commitment to sustainability in action. This initiative was a huge milestone in enhancing customer loyalty, as it aligns with the values of eco-conscious consumers. In fact, the success of this initiative is reflected in Patagonia's commercial growth, with a 30% increase in sales following its ethical marketing campaign (Michel et al., 2019; Fletcher, 2014).

Patagonia's commitment to transparency is another key element of its ethical branding. Since the launch of the "Footprint Chronicles" website in 2007, consumers are able to trace the environmental impact of their purchases, gaining insights into the company's supply chain (Reimers et al., 2016; Searcy, 2016). This level of transparency reinforces Patagonia's credibility and strengthens consumer trust, even though "the sourcing and production of [the] products are anything but beautiful", as stated in 2012 by Lisa Polley¹.

The website has been a major factor in its business success. Between 2011 and 2013, for example, this focus on transparency contributed to a 40% rise in sales, reaching \$575 million (Stock, 2013).

This transparency has also been one of the driving factors behind Patagonia's bold marketing campaigns. In 2011, the company launched the controversy advertising campaign "Don't Buy This Jacket", urging consumers to rethink unnecessary purchases and reduce overconsumption. Paradoxically, this anti-consumerist message resonated deeply with Patagonia's environmentally conscious audience, leading to a 30% increase in sales the following year (\$543 million, Thangavelu, 2020; Michel et al., 2019). This campaign illustrated Patagonia's alignment to sustainability while simultaneously enhancing stronger customer loyalty by prioritizing long-term product use over short-term profits (Ottman, 2017). However, it is noteworthy that Chouinard thought that people are attracted to the company and its apparel primarily because of the excellent quality of its products rather than environmental issues (Gasparini, 2013).

Next, Patagonia leverages social media appropriately to develop a strong customer relationship. As of 2024, the company has reached over 2 million followers on Facebook (Facebook, 2024) and 5.4 million followers on Instagram (Instagram, 2024). The company shares stories about real-life adventures and environmentalists, highlighting how each customer contributes to achieve the company's mission. Patagonia's YouTube channel has more than 250,000 subscribers (YouTube, 2024), showing authentic narratives and environmental activism rather than direct product advertisement. This makes the brand more credible and appeals to those who respect purpose-driven brands. Patagonia has also established a presence on X (formerly Twitter) and LinkedIn to actively engage in current environmental and social issues, sharing insights, and updates that align with present events and global environmental policies (X 2024; LinkedIn, 2024).

¹ Employee of Patagonia

Through these emotional, mission-driven stories, Patagonia successfully strengthens brand loyalty and turns followers into active advocates for sustainable change.

As it's part of the brand's cross-platform storytelling strategy, it positions Patagonia as a leader in ethical branding, using the platform's unique strengths to create a unified message.

Beyond environmental efforts, Patagonia is equally committed to social responsibility. The brand has co-founded several initiatives, such as the Fair Labor Association and ZEMBA, to drive industry-wide reforms, particularly focusing on supply chain ethics (Porter & Kramer, 2011). Through its Fair Trade program, Patagonia ensures that over 75,000 workers in its supply chain get paid fairly and work in safe conditions (Patagonia, 2023). This not only improves the well-being of the workers but also solidifies the ethical brand image, thus building further trust among its consumers. Moreover, Patagonia's "1% for the Planet" initiative exemplifies its commitment to environmental activism through donating 1% of the company's annual sales to environmental causes (B Corporation, 2023). By directly contributing to conservation efforts, Patagonia deepens its relationship with consumers who value social and environmental responsibility. This strategy creates an emotional bond with customers, as they perceive their purchase as a way of giving back (Cossío-Silva et al., 2016; Thøgersen, 2010).

Patagonia's focus on activism extends beyond its direct operations. The "Patagonia Action Works" platform, for instance, not only connects consumers with grassroots environmental organizations but also encourages them to engage in the company's activism efforts (Patagonia, 2023). This initiative builds a sense of community among like-minded, environmentally conscious consumers, hence enhancing brand loyalty. By fostering this level of engagement, Patagonia transforms its customers into active participants of its mission, reinforcing the emotional bond that drives long-term loyalty.

In 2022, Patagonia took its commitment to sustainability a step further by transferring 100% of its voting stock to a purpose trust and 98% of its non-voting stock to the Holdfast Collective. This restructuring ensures that profits are directed toward environmental projects, securing the company's mission to protect the planet for future generations (Chouinard, 2022; Rattalino, 2018). However, this decision has raised criticism, as some have questioned whether it also offers financial benefits, such as the possibility of tax exemption (Friedman, 2022; Smith, 2022). Nevertheless, Patagonia defends the decision as one intended solely by its desire to protect its environmental mission (Chouinard, 2022).

By integrating sustainability into its business model, Patagonia has gained a significant competitive advantage. Rather than competing on price, the brand differentiates itself through its ethical practices and commitment to high-quality, eco-friendly products (Kumar & Kaushal, 2023). This strategy has allowed Patagonia to maintain premium pricing while attracting a loyal customer base that prioritizes sustainability. The success of campaigns like "Don't Buy This Jacket" and the Worn Wear program has demonstrated the commercial viability of ethical branding, proving that businesses can thrive while remaining true to their values (Rattalino, 2018). Patagonia's unwavering dedication to ethical practices, transparency, and sustainability has positioned the brand as a leader in the ethical fashion industry.

By aligning its business operations with the values of its target consumers, the company has cultivated deep trust and loyalty.

The case study of Patagonia illustrated how businesses can integrate social responsibility into their core operations while achieving long-term commercial success. Through its bold initiatives and transparent communication, Patagonia has set a new standard for ethical branding in the modern market.

3 Research Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

For this study a qualitative research approach was chosen to examine how ethical branding affects consumers' trust and loyalty within the fashion industry, using Patagonia as an example. The chosen qualitative technique appears suited for this research as it allows for an in-depth exploration of human beliefs, actions, and perceptions to determine the impact of branding strategies (Tracy, 2019; Foley & Timonen, 2015).

Semi structured interviews provide rich information about how ethical branding strategies are implemented and how they might impact consumer's purchase decisions. This method allows for a deeper exploration of consumers' and experts' experiences within the fashion industry, revealing the underlying factors that drive trust and loyalty.

The qualitative approach effectively addresses the research questions by allowing for a thorough exploration into why and how ethical branding affects consumer trust. It provides practical insights for brands and a more comprehensive understanding of how ethical practices contribute to building trust and loyalty.

3.2 Sample Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was employed as this approach is most appropriate for qualitative research. This approach affords the opportunity of getting participants with prior knowledge or experience relevant to the study's research questions (Etikan et al., 2016). By targeting individuals directly involved in ethical branding and sustainability in fashion, this strategy ensures that the research covers both, the experts' view on ethical branding as well as general consumers' opinion. Thus, helping to answer the research questions associated with the role of ethical branding in building consumer trust and developing brand loyalty.

The first group of respondents include four professionals who work directly in/for the fashion industry. These experts were chosen based on the following criteria:

- Consultants who work in the fashion industry, providing guidance on ethical practices and sustainability initiatives.
- Business owner, who are actively involved in promoting the brand's ethical branding strategies and sustainability campaigns.
- Marketing professionals from other companies in the fashion sector who focus on sustainability campaigns and ethical branding.

The second group of participants include three consumers with varying interests in fashion:

- Sustainability-conscious consumers, who prioritize purchasing from brands that practice ethical fashion and demonstrate a commitment to sustainability.
- Fashion-conscious consumers, who are interested in following trends and often engage with fast fashion. This group is crucial for understanding how important ethical branding is to consumers who may prioritize trends or affordability over sustainability.
- General fashion consumers, who might be aware of ethical branding but do not necessarily make purchasing decisions based on sustainability. This group helped identify the factors that could shift consumer behavior towards more ethical consumption.

Participants were recruited through LinkedIn and university network with prerequisites to their qualifications or shopping habits. The identities of the interview participants are kept strictly confidential, and thus initials are used in this study to protect their anonymity.

3.3 Data Collection Method

As a main source of data collection, the researcher employed semi structured in-depth interviews. Semi-structured interviews are particularly suitable for this study because they allow for the exploration of complex topics, such as the relationship between ethical branding and consumer trust, while providing the opportunity to ask follow-up questions and clarify responses. This flexibility helps to analyze details of personal experiences and perceptions, providing a deeper understanding into how consumers and experts perceive ethical branding in fashion (Adams, 2015). Moreover, the format enables participants to share their thoughts freely, avoiding leading questions or framing that could bias their responses.

At first, each interviewee received a brief description of the topic, followed by questions aiming to understand how brands communicate and advertise their ethical practices, as well as the challenges they face in convincing consumers of their authenticity.

The expert's perspective was crucial for understanding how ethical branding works from the company's side and its impact on the consumers.

On the other hand, the consumers offered insights into their personal values and shopping behaviors when it comes to purchasing a particular brand.

Each interview guide can be found in appendix 2 and 3. The interviews were conducted via Zoom, Microsoft Teams which allows for flexibility in scheduling and global reach. The duration for each interview ranged between 17 and 31 minutes. In addition to that, one interview was performed via audio, as the expert was not available for personal/ online meeting.

3.4 Data Analysis

This study utilized exploratory qualitative content analysis, following the Gioia et al. (2013), approach to systematically interpret the data obtained from the interviews. This approach helped to structure and analyze the insights, highlighting key themes and patterns effectively. This research is well suited for the Gioia method since it involves the generation of a set of procedures for identifying and building themes while always remaining focused on the participants' perception (Gioia et al., 2013).

The process starts with the generation of first order codes which entails manual coding of raw data by noting the participants' verbal expressions of ideas, such as views on ethical branding, sustainability, or consumer trust. These first order codes were then sorted under second order themes that refer to more general ideas or pattern.

In the final step, the second-order themes were clustered into three or four aggregated dimensions that form the main conclusion of the study. This kind of structure makes it easy to understand how ethical branding plays a role on trust and how it can assist brands to develop a competitive advantage.

4 Empirical Findings

Based on the qualitative analysis of seven in-depth interviews with experts and consumers, this chapter presents the core themes and dimensions derived through the Gioia methodology, as outlined by Gioia et al. (2013).

This approach enabled a systematic categorization of insights into 123 first-order themes, distilled into 22 second-order concepts and ultimately summarized into 11 overarching aggregated dimensions, detailed in Appendix A. The interviews helped to identify valuable insights to each research question and analyze how fashion brands create and utilize sustainability in branding, how they position themselves as industry leaders, and how they use ethical branding as a tool to differentiate themselves and enhance consumer loyalty. Each section below is organized by a specific research question, highlighting key themes that emerged from the interviews to underscore effective practices and consumer perceptions.

By structuring the analysis around these questions, this chapter sheds light on the strategic role of ethical branding in today's market, providing a nuanced understanding of its impact on brand positioning and loyalty.

4.1 How do fashion brands like Patagonia develop and implement sustainable and ethical branding strategies?

To understand how fashion brands like Patagonia develop and implement sustainable and ethical branding strategies, this section examines the perspectives of industry experts on key practices that establish credibility in ethical branding. Four main themes emerged: Transparency, Sustainability as a brand core, Consumer trust and loyalty, and community creation. Experts highlighted that effective ethical branding requires brands to be transparent about their practices, consistently communicate their core values, and foster a sense of shared purpose with consumers.

By delving into these themes, this section reveals how Patagonia's approach to ethical branding not only enhances consumer trust but also positions the brand as a leader in sustainable fashion.

The expert interviews revealed that transparency serves as a foundational component of a brand's sustainable and ethical branding strategy, directly addressing consumers' growing demand for openness and accountability. One expert emphasized that "ethical branding is all about transparency and responsibility" (TK). This illustrates how transparency is not merely a communication tactic but a deeper value-driven approach that allows brands like Patagonia to connect with its customer. It fosters a balance between honest communication and ethical responsibility (TBA; TK; KH; KM). KM highlighted, that brands "have to be transparent for the customer ... because transparency means also trust".

TBA further noted that effective ethical branding requires brands to "make it clear what the brand stands for... like sharing the why behind the brand's choices", underlining that transparency in communication builds an emotional bond with consumers. Patagonia leverages transparency as a strategic tool by honestly sharing its values, intentions, as well as setbacks, fostering consumer connection and loyalty.

Next, putting sustainability as a brand core is of major importance, given the current demand from consumers and stakeholders. "Consumers will increasingly favor brands that genuinely have a commitment sustainability" (TBA), to remain competitive brands like Patagonia not only develop sustainable and ethical branding strategies they integrate sustainability into their brand identity, thereby setting industry standards (TBA). This approach is not about showing sustainability with one product line or an eco-friendly campaign, it's about developing and implementing branding strategies that reflect a holistic commitment to sustainability practices. TK highlighted this further, stating that "sustainability is not only a marketing tool, but about integrating it into the brand's DNA." By making sustainability a core value rather than a trend, Patagonia positions itself as a leader in the industry.

The dimension of consumer trust and loyalty emphasizes that consumer loyalty grows when brands are consistent and authentic in their operations and communication. Experts said that Patagonia builds trust by openly sharing achievements and setbacks (KH). This transparency creates an emotional bond, making customers feel personally invested in the brand's journey. As one expert observed, "their product is consistent, and it's definitely got an authenticity about it... they sort of build a movement where they don't just react to trends, they actually set the standard. This is built with a deeper consumer trust for sure" (TBA).

Through openly communicating its values and motivations, Patagonia cultivates trust over time, turning ethical branding into a long-term relationship rather than a one-time purchase decision. It's crucial for brands to openly communicate their goals and practices to ensure authenticity and to build consumer trust and loyalty (KM; KH). Experts stressed that it's about consistency and shared values to foster a loyal customer base. If consumers recognize that a brand shares the same values and purpose, they feel more connected. TK proofed that by saying "consumers are values-driven and if a brand stands for something it will create loyalty".

Community creation further strengthens Patagonia's branding by transforming its customers into active participants in a shared mission. Experts noted that the brand's approach encourages consumers to see themselves as part of a community, committed to sustainability together with the brand (TK; TBA). Through initiatives like Worn Wear, Patagonia invites consumers to embrace sustainable practices, creating a movement beyond consumption. TK describes this approach as "building a community where consumers feel like they are part of a shared mission, they are not just customers, they are supporters of a larger cause." (TK). This community-oriented strategy helps Patagonia foster deeper loyalty and positions the brand as a leader in sustainable fashion, with customers who are both consumers and advocates for the brand's values.

Together, the four dimensions, transparency, sustainability as a brand core, consumer trust and loyalty, as well as community creation, outline Patagonia's holistic approach to ethical branding. These elements not only build trust and loyalty but also establish Patagonia as a pioneering force in sustainable branding, creating a deeper, value-driven connection with consumers.

4.2 How do marketing campaigns that emphasize ethical production position fashion brands as leaders in sustainability?

Since the awareness of customers for sustainability practices is rising (CW; PG; AM), fashion brands aim to position themselves as leaders in ethical production through carefully crafted marketing campaigns. This section presents insights from the consumers and the experts to demonstrate how these campaigns can deliver credibility and differentiate the brand. Four key dimensions emerged from the analysis – credibility and trust, showing proof and action, authentic storytelling, and differentiation. By focusing on these dimensions, this section reveals how brands can move beyond traditional marketing to communicate a genuine commitment to sustainability, thus strengthening and building a leadership position in the fashion industry.

In ethical branding, credibility and trust are essential as consumers seek brands that reflect their values but struggle to differentiate genuine efforts from greenwashing. All consumer interviewees noted this challenge, with PG stating, “It’s kind of hard... you don’t really know what’s true and what is not.” This uncertainty underlines the importance of honest communication for brands aiming to establish trust. Brands like Shein, Zara and H&M were mentioned as negative examples, interviewees agreed on feeling betrayed due to their sustainability or eco conscious lines, as they are just marketing not real commitment (PG; AM; CW). Expert KM emphasized, “trust is your most valued currency,” highlighting that transparency about materials, processes, and setbacks reassures consumers of a brand’s commitment (KM; KH; AM).

TBA warned that any misalignment between claims and actions risks losing consumer trust, while customer AM noted that “it’s very important that a third party takes a look at the processes” to build credibility and trust, supported by a negative example of the fast fashion brand Shein. TK agreed on that by emphasizing GOTS certifications for fashion brands to proof accountability. Ultimately, brands can foster deeper loyalty and establish themselves as leaders in sustainable fashion by prioritizing honest, values-driven communication that addresses consumers’ skepticism. Next to Patagonia brands like Armed Angels, Stella Mc Cartney, Eileen Fisher were named as leaders.

Both experts and consumers agreed that showing proof and action is a core dimension of an ethical branding strategy. This dimension, known as evidence-based marketing and genuine sustainability, emphasizes that campaigns must go beyond claims and actively demonstrate a brand’s commitment through concrete, visible actions. TBA recognized that “if you break down your product, you break down how it’s sustainable, what this costs, it really does build loyalty with the customer.” This approach helps consumers see tangible proof of a brand’s sustainability practices, reinforcing trust and loyalty. The Australian brand City Beach as well as the German brand Armed Angels were mentioned as examples, Everlane’s transparency Tuesday as well (TK; TBA). For consumers, ease of access to information is equally essential. As AM explained, “the homepage is built so you can find the information you’re looking for easily,” which supports their desire for transparency and clear, accessible proof of sustainability. From the interaction with AM, it became clear that visual evidence also plays a key role, “film the fabrics where you’re doing your clothes,” or “show elements of your production” to reinforce credibility.

This makes it easier for consumers to distinguish genuine efforts from empty claims, as AM further emphasized, “if they show what makes them sustainable, it makes it more easy for me to believe them than just talking.” By integrating evidence-based marketing and genuine sustainability efforts, brands can move beyond mere statements, enabling consumers to feel confident in the brand’s authenticity. This dimension reflects the need for campaigns to be backed by real actions, creating a lasting impact on consumer trust and strengthening a brand’s position in the competitive landscape of sustainable fashion.

“Marketing is basically the bridge between the brand’s value and the consumer... good ethical marketing makes it clear what the brand stands for and why it kind of matters,” explained TK, highlighting the power of storytelling in positioning brands as leaders in sustainability.

Through purpose-driven stories, brands can convey their ethical motivations, differentiating themselves as genuinely committed to sustainable practices. This approach allows brands to share not only what they do but why it matters, strengthening their credibility and position in the industry. AM’s example of purchasing a product “only because of the campaign” reflects the impact of a strong marketing campaign on consumer attraction. Influencer marketing further supports this positioning by building emotional connections between consumers and brands through familiar, trusted voices. AM noted that influencers are “often like part of a storytelling strategy”, which can have a powerful impact on purchasing decisions. This connection is especially strong when consumers feel they “know” the influencer, which increases their likelihood of trusting the product’s sustainability claims (PG; AM).

As AM explained, “if an influencer... says this product is very sustainable, then I’m more likely to believe them.” By collaborating with influencers who align with a brand’s values, brands can amplify their message authentically, creating a shared narrative that reinforces their role as sustainability advocates. City Beach was used as an example, relying on influencer marketing to strengthening their position and creating a bond to consumers. However, TK emphasized that authenticity is essential; without it, consumers may quickly lose trust. By creating purpose-driven narratives and engaging trusted influencers, brands solidify their position as leaders in ethical fashion.

Differentiation is essential for brands seeking to establish themselves as leaders in sustainability. TK described ethical branding as “unique... a unique way to stand out,” emphasizing that brands like Patagonia differentiate themselves by supporting environmental causes and encouraging mindful consumption.

Rather than focusing solely on sales, Patagonia positions themselves as change-makers, apart from traditional, fast-fashion competitors who prioritize volume and low-cost materials (TK; KM; TBA; KH).

A commitment to quality over quantity is a key aspect of ethical differentiation, expressed by consumers PG, CW, and AM. They noted a clear preference for sustainable products, even at a higher price. AM noted, “I prefer to make one good quality and sustainable product than a low quality and non-sustainable product,” while PG avoids fast fashion for its lack of ethics. Experts confirmed this shift, emphasizing that consumers are drawn to brands offering genuine quality and sustainability as a unique competitive edge (TK, TBA). But TK also expressed, that this business model is not suitable for all brands, as fast fashion brands rely on volume.

In sum, by building credibility and trust, showing proof and action, engaging in authentic storytelling, and emphasizing differentiation through ethical practices, fashion brands get a better chance to position themselves as leaders in sustainability, effectively resonating with values-driven consumers.

4.3 To what extent do sustainability-focused marketing strategies help fashion brands differentiate themselves and enhance consumer loyalty?

In the fashion industry brands try to differentiate themselves as much as possible to enhance consumer loyalty and set new standards. By promoting sustainability strategies and initiatives brands want to attract consumers who value sustainability. As TK noted, “Patagonia, for example, resonates with people who want to feel good about the choice and good about what they bought.” Brands have built reputations as role models by committing to transparency and ethical practices, which differentiate them from fast fashion competitors.

100% of consumers argued they would pay more for ethical fashion than for fast fashion products. “People are willing to pay more for the fashion lines with their beliefs. So it's a competitive edge that isn't easily replicated.” (TK). Fashion expert KH emphasized that ethical leadership allows brands to stand out “not just through products, but through values, attracting customers who want to make more responsible choices.” Brands that embrace bold and authentic campaigns help to build role model characteristics. Patagonia’s Don’t Buy This Jacket campaign solidify their role as industry leaders (TK, KM, TBA). This campaign was described as “super bold and subversive, which makes it memorable”, demonstrating a willingness to challenge traditional consumerist norms.

Focusing on long-term consumer trust is fundamental to enhancing loyalty, as trust becomes a “values currency” in fashion branding (KM). As all consumers shared to be more likely to repurchase from brands they trust to be ethical (PG, AM, CW). PG explained, “I often buy clothes from the same brands where I know if they are ethical or not.” This sentiment is echoed by CW who stated “Yes, I re buy things and don’t just buy it once, so I am a loyal customer if I know that the brand is sustainable.” By focusing on quality and longevity over trends, brands like Patagonia have cultivated a loyal customer base that sees sustainability as part of their identity. AM highlighted this when sharing, “I always try to better my habits and to be more ecofriendly. That’s why I like Patagonia. I like to support them and to pay a higher price for their quality.” Generational influence is another point that was mentioned as key in sustaining loyalty.

“I would say that brands are focusing more on ethical practices and sustainability recently ... especially for younger generations like Gen Z,” (PG) who increasingly demand transparency and sustainable choices. This growing trend positions sustainability not just a marketing tactic but a necessity for long-term success.

“Loyalty really comes from feeling like you’re part of something bigger than just a transaction.. it creates this sense of like community.” (TK) Consumers who feel aligned with a brand’s values often become advocates, promoting the brand within their networks. CW shared, “I definitely always try to tell my friends and family about it,” emphasizing the social impact of brands that authentically commit to sustainability. In best case scenarios extends this sense of belonging beyond individual purchases. Expert KM noted that “people want to be directly associated with the brand, but also with want’s behind the brand,” making ethical branding a way for consumers to express their values and show their identity. Adding that sustainability ratings and transparency reports further deepens trust and build a network of advocates who amplify a brand’s message.

Ethical branding also enables differentiation in competitive markets. KM observed that “ethical branding differentiates luxury startups because it gives you depth. It turns a product into statement pieces.” Consumers see these brands as more than just providers of clothing, they view them as partners in sustainability efforts, reinforcing loyalty and advocacy (CW, TBA, KH). One customer shared, “That’s why I like Patagonia. I like to support them,” underscoring the emotional connection consumers feel toward ethical brands.

By leveraging sustainability focused marketing strategies, such as transparent communication, purpose drives storytelling, and quality over quantity fashion brands not only stand out from competitors but also foster deeper consumer loyalty by aligning with shared values. These strategies are not exclusive to leaders like Patagonia but serve as a blueprint for any company seeking to lead in ethical fashion.

5 Discussion and conclusion

The information and data compiled in this chapter sum up the research of all previous chapters concerning this thesis project. Besides the main conclusion, the limitations of the study, the relation to the market, and the recommendations for further research are presented.

5.1 Discussion of the Main Findings

This section focusses on the main findings of the study, reflecting on the insights gathered from both consumer and expert interviews in light of the literature on ethical branding, consumer behavior, and sustainability. By comparing the empirical results to theoretical frameworks, this discussion aims to highlight how the research contributes to existing knowledge and provides practical implications for brands in the fashion industry.

How do fashion brands like Patagonia develop and implement sustainable and ethical branding strategies?

The findings show that successful ethical branding strategies are grounded in transparency, community building initiatives as well as integrating sustainability in the brands core. These elements align with previous research, such as Kapferer & Bastien's (2012) emphasis on transparency as a trust building mechanism, and Kotler et al.'s (2017) work in value-driven branding. Experts in this study emphasized that transparency fosters trust, with KM noting that "trust is your most valued currency."

This is reinforced in the literature, where authentic communication of sustainability efforts is linked to stronger consumer loyalty (Elkington, 2018).

Sustainability as a brand core was identified as a key differentiator. Unlike brands that treat sustainability as a secondary element as H&M or Zara (PG, AM), leaders like Patagonia integrate it into their DNA. TK highlighted this by stating, "sustainability is not only a marketing tool, but about integrating it into the brand's DNA."

One smaller brand, called Voited was as well strongly associated with sustainability as the brand's core. This reflects findings by Crane et al. (2019), who argue that sustainability embedded into a company's culture resonates more effectively with values-driven consumers. Finally, the role of community creation emerged as critical. By engaging consumers in initiatives like Patagonia's Worn Wear, brands transform customers into advocates for their mission. This finding aligns with Bhattacharya and Sen's (2003) work in customer company identification, which highlights the role of shared purpose in building consumer loyalty.

How do marketing campaigns that emphasize ethical production position fashion brands as leaders in sustainability?

This study revealed that marketing campaigns achieve differentiation and leadership by building credibility, using authentic storytelling, and providing proof of sustainability efforts. Kotler and Keller (2016) emphasize that brands perceived as transparent and honest achieve stronger positioning, a view mirrored by one consultant who stated, "if it's message doesn't align with its actions, it can lose credibility." (KH) Authentic storytelling, such as Patagonia's Don't Buy this Jacket campaign, emerged as a powerful tool. Experts described the campaign as bold and subversive, stating it as memorable. Such approaches confirm the literature's stance on storytelling as a bridge between brand values and consumer beliefs (Fog et al., 2010). Armed Angels' use of transparency reports were also noted as a best practice, illustrating the growing consumer demand for tangible proof of ethical practices. However, the study also highlighted the risks of greenwashing, where exaggerated claims erode consumer trust. Experts and consumers stressed the importance of aligning campaigns with genuine actions, reinforcing insights from Becker-Olsen et al. (2006), who caution that perceived inconsistencies in sustainability claims can harm brand reputation. Proofing that, expert KM explained a brand's strategy where the company falsely claimed labels just to attract customers, even though the products were not produced in a sustainable manner.

To what extent do sustainability focused marketing strategies help fashion brands differentiate themselves and enhance consumer loyalty?

The findings demonstrate that sustainability-focused strategies drive both differentiation and loyalty by fostering long-term trust, aligning with consumer values, and creating a sense of belonging.

PG and CW both emphasized their loyalty to brands they perceive as ethical, with PG stating, “I often buy clothes from the same brands, where I know if they are ethical or not.” This supports the findings of Kumar and Kaushal (2020), who argue that trust and ethical alignment are critical to repeat purchases. Differentiation was shown to stem from a focus on quality and values rather than trends (PG, AM, CW). KM noted ethical branding as key for differentiation which was before outlined by Porter and Kramer (2011) with their explanation on competitive advantage through sustainability. Additionally, brands that create a sense of community, such as Patagonia were noted to foster stronger emotional connections.

The research also suggests that younger generations play a pivotal role in driving demand for ethical practices (TK, AM, PG). This aligns with studies showing Gen Z’s preferences for brands that align with their values (Francis & Hoefel, 2018).

Across the three research questions, the findings highlight the interdependence of transparency, storytelling and consumer engagement in achieving brand differentiation and loyalty. Transparency builds trust, storytelling fosters emotional connections, and community building creates a sense of belonging. Additionally, influencers play a crucial role in amplifying a brand’s sustainability message, but their alignment with the brand’s values must be authentic to maintain credibility. Once trust is damaged, rebuilding it is exceptionally difficult. References such as Balenciaga or SHEIN were mentioned as cases where reparational harm had lasting effects, reinforcing that a brand’s marketing should align with its actions (KH, TK, AM, TBA, CW, PG, KM). This underscores the need for brands to ensure consistency across all touchpoints, from messaging to the checkout receipt to partnerships. The findings not only support existing literature on ethical branding but also highlight the increase complexity of maintaining trust in a value-driven market.

5.2 Recommendations for Brands

Based on the analysis, the following recommendations could provide actionable insights for fashion brands.

First, transparency must remain a cornerstone of ethical branding. Clear communication about sourcing policies and production methods as well as a brand’s sustainability issues earn trust and credibility. By sharing both achievements and failures, brands can build lasting loyalty. Having an engaging website or labels with QR codes on products could help consumers to make informed decisions while also highlighting the brand’s principal of transparency.

Second, third party certifications and eco labels are essential for validating sustainability claims and differentiating ethical brands. Certifications such as GOTS, Fair Trade, or B Corp demonstrate a holistic commitment to sustainable practices, moving beyond one off collections to a holistic brand approach. These labels also help mitigate consumer skepticism, for example by preventing label swapping. To maximize their impact, brands need to ensure consumers are aware of the meanings of these terms and why they matter.

Next, the focus on quality rather than quantity enriches the ethical identity of the brand and appeals to values-driven consumers. Instead of seeing sustainability as some kind of trend, this approach makes customers invest more into the product, thereby increasing customer loyalty and cutting down on unnecessary consumption.

But brands must keep in mind to balance sustainability with accessibility as its key to expand the audience.

Offering affordable options without compromising core values ensures inclusivity while maintaining credibility. Simultaneously, brands should highlight how purchasing sustainable products contributes to societal and environmental goals, creating an emotional connection with consumers.

Last but not the least, education and community engagement are two very important components for advocacy and identification with organizational goals. By providing resources to educate consumers on sustainable practices and building programs like Patagonia's Worn Wear or Armed Angels website, brands can deepen their connection with customers. Leveraging these initiatives to create a sense of belonging enhances loyalty and encourages consumers to become active brand advocates.

By implementing these strategies, fashion brands can differentiate themselves in a competitive market, build stronger consumer relationships, and establish themselves as ethical leaders in the industry.

5.3 Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study reveals few limitations that must be recognized. One of the primary limitations is sample bias, as participants were recruited voluntarily through online platforms. This recruitment method may have attracted individuals already interested in sustainability, which means the findings may not represent the broader population, particularly consumers who are less engaged with ethical branding or those from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

Including these groups could offer a more holistic understanding of consumer behavior and broaden the applicability of the findings to a wider audience.

Additionally, the research focused primarily on a single brand, Patagonia, known for its sustainability leadership. While it revealed a number of best practices of ethical branding, some conclusions could barely be applied to companies with less developed sustainability experience or in different positions of the market. This aspect reduces the ability of the study to generalize its findings across the wide fashion industry domain.

Methodological constraints further limited the study, particularly the reliance on qualitative methods. This approach limited the capacity to measure the effectiveness of sustainability-focused marketing initiatives, in terms of customer satisfaction, or brand success. Additionally, the lack of internal financial information of Patagonia and the other brands restricted the discussion of economic impact of their sustainability initiatives.

The role of third-party certifications, such as GOTS or B Corp, was also not directly explored, even though these certifications are pivotal in building trust and combating greenwashing accusations.

For future research, a broader quantitative analysis with a larger sample is recommended. Surveys or experiments with increased participants and more diverse subject groups could validate the qualitative findings and assess the scalability of ethical branding strategies. Quantitative models could also analyze the financial impact of ethical branding on consumer loyalty and firm performance, offering a more comprehensive understanding of its benefits.

Additionally, it would also be interesting if this study delves into the beliefs of those consumers who are not quite familiar with sustainability or ethical branding as this will give a better understanding on how brands can penetrate towards such groups of market. Cross-cultural studies could also identify how sustainability practices resonate in different geographical and cultural contexts, guiding globally tailored branding efforts. Future research could also investigate the price thresholds at which consumers are willing to pay a premium for sustainable products, providing insights into balancing affordability and ethics.

Finally, an examination of political and regulatory contexts would be valuable. For instance, understanding how shifting policies, including those following the Trump administration or current EU sustainability initiatives, might affect consumer and brand relations could provide critical context for future strategies.

5.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, the aim of this study was to analyze how fashion brands use ethical branding to build a competitive advantage with the goal of fostering consumer loyalty and trust. With a focus on the brand Patagonia, the author explored what strategies are most effective and valued by customers, in order to be seen as a leader in the industry.

The findings identified transparency, authentic storytelling, as well as community engagement as key drivers of successful ethical branding within the fashion industry. By openly sharing the brand's values, demonstrating actions, and getting consumers engaged in shared responsibilities, brands will gain consumers' trust and take the leadership role within a competitive market.

Besides the literature review, qualitative analysis also highlighted that ethical branding not only creates brand identity but also fosters brand loyalty.

Results indicated that sustainability is not seen as an option but a prerequisite, necessary for fashion brands to succeed in today's values-driven marketplace.

Furthermore, certification from third party like GOTS and B Corp has been revealed to improve customer acceptance since they complement sustainability claims with credibility.

However, the interviews also revealed that affordability remains a key consideration. While many consumers are willing to pay more for sustainable products, greater accessibility is needed to accommodate all consumers. Especially if a brand is not widely known and established yet. Ethical branding serves as a transformative marketing strategy that reshapes consumer's behavior together with setting new industry standards, as shown by Patagonia and other fashion brands. As sustainability continues to gain prominence among consumers and regulators, brands embracing authenticity, consistency, and transparency are better positioned to thrive.

While this thesis illuminates critical dimensions of ethical branding, it also revealed the potential for further research. Expanding the analysis to more diverse consumer demographics and a wider range of industries will enhance understanding of how sustainability shapes brand performance.

Concluding, this study confirms that ethical branding is not just a competitive advantage but a fundamental strategy for brands seeking to build meaningful consumer relationships and create a competitive edge.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Interviewee description

Initials	Date of Interview in 2024	Length in minutes	Nationality and Gender (F)/ (M)/ (N)	Age	Expert (E) or Consumer (C)	Company industry	Occupation	Experience in years
KM	24.10	30:29	Russian (F)	27	E	Luxury fashion	Operating director	3
TBA	26.10	26:02	Australian (M)	32	E	Consultancy for fashion brands	Sustainability Consultant	+10
TK	27.10	24:03	German (M)	35	E	Marketing Agency for sustainable fashion	Brand communication	8
KH	03.11	AUDIO	Swedish (F)	42	E	Consultancy for fashion brands	Fashion consultant and Stylist	17
AM	24.10	23:49	German (F)	24	C		Student	
PG	25.10	16:17	German (M)	22	C		Student	
CW	01.11	17:41	German (F)	29	C		Marketing and Sales	

Appendix 2: Interview guide for experts

Disclaimer: All data collected during the interviews, in particular the name of the interviewee and the company name, will be completely anonymized.

Introduction

1. Greeting & Consent:

- Welcome the participant and thank them for their time.
- Briefly explain the purpose of the interview: “I’m conducting this interview as part of my master’s thesis on ethical branding in the fashion industry, with a focus on how these strategies build consumer loyalty and trust. The insights you provide will help us understand the role of ethical branding as a competitive advantage.”
- Obtain verbal consent to record the interview and explain how the information will be used (anonymity, confidentiality).

2. Warm-Up Questions:

- Can you briefly introduce yourself and your role in the fashion industry?
- How long have you been working in the field of ethical branding or sustainability within fashion?

Main Interview Questions

1. Understanding Ethical Branding in the Fashion Industry

- Can you explain how you define ethical branding (within the context of the fashion industry)?
- What do you think are the key components of an ethical branding strategy in fashion?
- Have you noticed specific changes in consumer demands for ethical fashion? And how has the fashion industry responded to consumer demands for more ethical practices?

2. Patagonia as a Leader in Ethical Branding

- What brand comes to mind first when you think of an ethical fashion brand? And why?
- Patagonia is often considered a leader in ethical branding. How do you perceive Patagonia's approach to sustainability and ethical practices?
- In what ways do you think Patagonia's branding strategy contributes to its strong consumer loyalty and brand trust? And why?
- What do you think other fashion brands can learn from Patagonia's approach to ethical branding?
- (Are there any aspects of Patagonia's branding that you think might not work as well for other brands?)

3. Ethical Branding as a Competitive Advantage

- Do you think ethical branding can serve as a competitive advantage?
- Why? From your experience, how does ethical branding help fashion brands differentiate themselves from competitors?
- Can you share an example of a brand, besides Patagonia, that has successfully used ethical branding to strengthen its market position? And how?
- Have there been cases where ethical branding didn't work as a competitive advantage? Why?

4. Ethical Marketing Campaigns

- How important is marketing in communicating a brand's ethical values to consumers?
- What campaigns come to your mind when thinking about ethical marketing campaigns? Either in a positive or negative way?
- Have you observed any challenges in balancing authenticity with marketing in ethical branding?

5. Consumer Trust & Loyalty

- In your experience, what role does ethical branding play in building consumer trust?
- Can you describe how ethical branding contributes to consumer loyalty?
- Do you know of examples where ethical branding helped or hurt consumer trust?

6. Closing

- Looking forward, how do you see the future of ethical branding in the fashion industry?
- Is there anything else you would like to add regarding the role of ethical branding in shaping the future of the fashion industry?
- **Thank You & Next Steps:**
 - Thank the expert again for their time and valuable insights.
 - Briefly explain what the next steps are (e.g., data analysis, how their insights will contribute to the thesis).

Appendix 3: Interview guide for consumers

Disclaimer: All data collected during the interviews, in particular the name of the interviewee and the company name, will be completely anonymized.

Introduction

3. **Greeting & Consent:**
 - Welcome the participant and thank them for their time.
 - Briefly explain the purpose of the interview: “I’m conducting this interview as part of my master’s thesis on ethical branding in the fashion industry, with a focus on how these strategies build consumer loyalty and trust. The insights you provide will help us understand the role of ethical branding as a competitive advantage.”
 - Obtain verbal consent to record the interview and explain how the information will be used (anonymity, confidentiality).
4. **Warm-Up Questions:**
 - Can you briefly tell me a bit about yourself? For example, where you live, your age, and how often you buy new clothes.
 - What attributes are most important to you when you shop for fashion items? (e.g., price, trend, quality, brand, sustainability)

Main Interview Questions

1. Understanding Ethical Branding in the Fashion Industry

- When you hear the term “ethical fashion brand,” what does that mean to you? What are the first three words that come to your mind?
- Do you think more fashion brands are becoming ethical?
- Have you noticed changes in how brands talk about sustainability or ethical practices?
- Do you find it easy to identify which fashion brands are ethical? What do you look for when determining if a brand is ethical?

2. Patagonia as a Leader in Ethical Branding

- What brands come to your mind when thinking about ethical branding in fashion?
- Are you familiar with the brand Patagonia? If so, what comes to mind when you think of Patagonia?
- Have you ever bought from Patagonia? If yes, why did you choose them? If no, why not?
- Do you trust Patagonia’s ethical claims? Why or why not?

3. Ethical Branding as a Competitive Advantage

- Does knowing a brand is ethical make you more likely to buy from them? Why or why not?
- Can you think of a brand you’ve chosen to support because of its ethical practices? Why did that influence your decision?
- Have you ever stopped buying from a brand because you found out they were not ethical? What was the situation?

4. Ethical Marketing Campaigns

- Do you trust brands when they say they are sustainable or ethical? Why or why not??
- What campaigns come to your mind when thinking about ethical marketing campaigns? Either in a positive or negative way?

5. Consumer Trust & Loyalty

- Do you feel more loyal to a brand that you believe is ethical? Why or why not?
- Have you ever felt disappointed by a brand’s ethical claims (e.g., greenwashing)? If so, what happened?

6. Closing

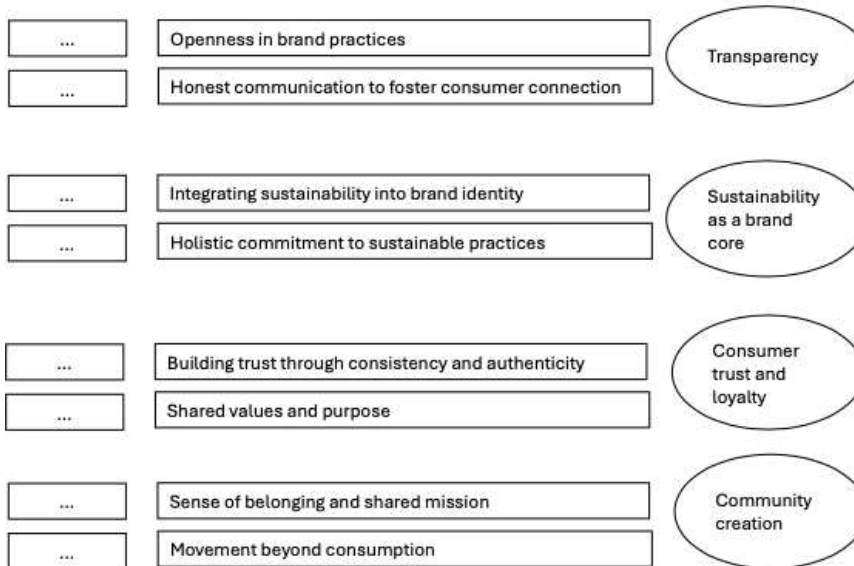
- Looking to the future, how important do you think it will be for fashion brands to be ethical?
- Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences with ethical fashion or your thoughts on ethical brands?

Thank You & Next Steps:

- Thank the expert again for their time and valuable insights.
- Briefly explain what the next steps are (e.g., data analysis, how their insights will contribute to the thesis).

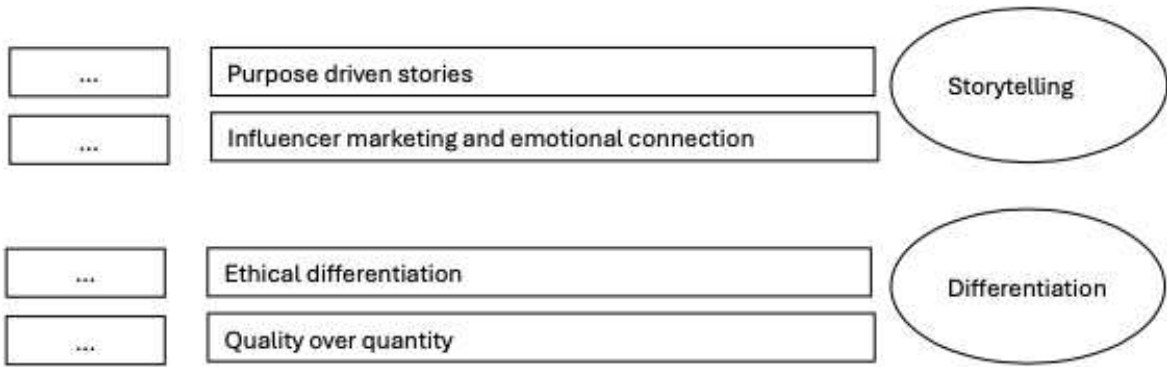
Appendix 4: Gioia method

RQ1: How do fashion brands like Patagonia develop and implement sustainable and ethical branding strategies? (only experts)



RQ2: How do marketing campaigns that emphasize ethical production position fashion brands as leaders in sustainability?





RQ3: To what extent do sustainability-focused marketing strategies help fashion brands differentiate themselves and enhance consumer loyalty?



Appendix 5: Qualitative analysis in excel

Detailed analysis of the interviews can be accessed by following the link below. In case of having issues with that, please reach out to the author of the thesis.

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