

CSR communication in an outdoor apparel brand- Patagonia.



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Introduction

These days, especially in a world ruled by an overabundance of goods, raising an awareness of sustainability issues becomes extremely crucial. In my bachelor thesis, I will exclusively focus on the concept of sustainability within the fashion industry. At first glance, in our current capitalistic times, sustainability and fashion do not seem to constitute a natural pair. The fashion industry is ruled by trends, and as we all know these tend to persuade people into buying apparel. In contrast, sustainability celebrates longevity and aims to minimize consumption as much as possible.

For several years now, the eco trend has been gaining more and more followers. In other words, being environmentally conscious has become 'fashionable'. In consequence, an increasing number of companies has started to incorporate Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) into their business model. The question arises: Do they only use CSR to ingratiate themselves to customers? Or is there a real social, economical or environmental concern behind their actions? Often, due to companies' secret policies these questions remain unanswered.

Today, there are plenty of companies that incorporate CSR actions. For this bachelor thesis I decided to focus on only one. Patagonia has been repeatedly mentioned in the literature as an example within the fashion industry of a well-applied CSR concept (Hethorn & Ulasewicz, 2009; Dickson et al., 2009). Therefore, I want to know which CSR activities Patagonia has incorporated into its business model and how this is communicated to the public. My research question is: What forms of CSR (corporate social responsibility) has Patagonia implemented and how are they communicated to the public?

In order to answer my research question, I will first analyze Patagonia's website using Archie Carroll's pyramid of corporate social responsibility. According to Carroll,

corporate social responsibility involves the conduct of a business so that it is economically profitable, law abiding, ethical and socially supportive. To be socially responsible then means that profitability and obedience to the law are foremost conditions when discussing the firm's ethics and the

extent to which it supports the society in which it exists with contributions of money, time and talent (p.608).

I will use this definition of CSR to inquire into what kind of CSR activities Patagonia has in its portfolio. For instance, is it solely focused on environmental issues or does it also bear in mind the social factors? Certainly, this methodology will not provide me with the answers whether Patagonia is truly devoted to the concept of sustainability or not, but will give me an overview on possible CSR solutions.

The proper verbal as well as visual communication of CSR activity is extremely significant. Therefore, I chose to focus on one of Patagonia's advertisements and conduct a semiotic analysis of "Don't buy this jacket", an ad that was published in *The New York Times* as well as on Patagonia's website in 2011. Semiotics is the study of meaning making developed in the late nineteenth century by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (Cartwright & Sturken, p.27). This theoretical framework involves looking at how the arbitrary relationship between signifiers and signifieds determines the meaning of 'signs'. The semiotic analysis will allow me to identify Patagonia's values that are communicated by the company to the public.

With this case study, I build on knowledge I acquired in the course "The Culture of Fashion," which is part of my pre-Master's programme in Creative Industries, using methods of analysis learned in courses such as "Visual Culture."

Chapter 1

Why is the concept of sustainability within the fashion industry so prominent nowadays? For many, the term sustainable fashion can be perceived as an oxymoron. Eventually, how could the textile business model, which is primarily focused on driving sales, be possibly associated with attaching importance to public health, environmental conditions and economical situation? After all, sustainability emphasizes durability and longevity, whereas fashion focuses profoundly on a constant change (Hethorn & Ulasewicz, p. xiii).

Fashion as an industry is extremely complex. Welters and Lillethun discussed it not only in terms of introducing style, taste and trends, but also influencing people's behaviors and the environment (p.xxvii). In other words, understanding the culture of fashion requires an interdisciplinary approach, which consists of miscellaneous perspectives that sometimes can contradict each other. For instance, economists view fashion as a system ruled by two forces, i.e. supply and demand, whereas sociologists perceive fashion as a "form of group behavior" (Welters & Lillethun, p.xxvii).

This chapter therefore intends to provide a theoretical framework, which will later on help in comprehensively explaining the nature and the source of the sustainable fashion. In order to understand the concept of sustainability within fashion, several terms will be put forward, inter alia fast fashion along with its characteristics as well as an explanation of the slow fashion practices. Additionally, this chapter brings up phenomena like sweatshops and greenwashing. All of these terms serve as a vocabulary that is essential when talking about corporate social responsibility (CSR) in the fashion industry.

1.1 The rapid rise of "fast fashion"

Sustainability is not a cutting-edge term in the fashion dictionary. In fact, this approach has already been put into practice, although in various forms, since the 1960s (Welters, p.7). The concept's current popularity is due to the overabundance of goods and a greater concern about the scarcity of resources.

In the past (1600-1860), since developing fabric was associated with a time-consuming process, garments were extremely expensive and only wealthy people could afford purchasing them. Thus, through clothing people did not

necessarily show their style, but marked their position and economical status (Welters, p.9). In those days, the role of craftsmanship was extremely valued and widely appreciated.

With time, due to a massive process of industrialization and globalization, designing and producing apparel has become significantly easier, and in order to generate more considerable profits, companies have started to produce bigger quantities of clothes. The so-called democratization of fashion gave rise to a phenomenon called fast fashion, whose prime purpose is to “accelerate consumption of trend-driven clothing, while maximizing profits for a limited number of globalized megabrands” (Cataldi et al., p.27). To put it differently, fast fashion provides millions of people an access to the latest runway trends for affordable prices. It allows low-income families and young people to follow current trends and in doing so, improve their sense of belonging and well being (Cataldi et al., p.27). From the companies’ perspective, the fast fashion business model requires shortening the design, production and distribution timeline. For most of the twentieth century, there were just two seasons in a year, allowing companies the time to develop, design, produce and distribute their collections. Since the 1990s, companies like Zara have started shortening turnover times in the garment industry. Nowadays, it takes only seven weeks for a new product to appear in the shops (McCarthy, p.542).

Unfortunately, because of the enormous amount of products, fast fashion creates a culture of rapid purchasing and disposal. These days, due to extremely low retail prices, customers purchase more than they need, which sometimes lead to addiction (Clark & Salerno, p. 181). In fact, customers mostly do not know the ‘true cost’ of particular garments, to evoke the title of Andrew Morgan’s documentary *The True Cost* (2015), about the garment industry. As the Cambridge Report (2006) on the present and future of sustainability of clothing and textiles in the UK points out, annually people tend to spend more and more money on their clothing. “In the UK in 2004 we spent on average £780 per head on clothing and textiles, of which around £625 was on clothes” (Allwood et al., p.11). According to their research, from 2001 to 2005 the expenditure on women’s clothing grew by 21% and on men’s by 14%. The figures for other western countries do not differ significantly. For instance, in Scandinavia the

situation scores slightly better, namely annually in Sweden the average Swedish woman spends \$845 (£580) and the average Swedish man \$422,5 (£290) (Ibp Usa, 2009).

Generally speaking, the price influences not only people's buying behavior, but also has effects external environmental and social factors of producing the garment. In order to deliver low-cost products, European and American clothing brands have been moving their production to cheap labor countries, for instance China, Bangladesh or India. In those countries, people do not have high salary expectations, thus a lot of employers take advantage of that and underpay their workers. Furthermore, the employees are often fairly young, ranging in age between mid-teens to mid-20s. The majority of them is undereducated, thus many times they simply do not know whether some laws regarding their rights, wages or working environment are being broken (Dickson et. al p.3-4). Also, because of the fact that people are afraid of losing their jobs, they do not form any trade unions. Dickson, Locker and Eckman have illustrated several key labor issues, which are to a large extent connected to the process of making clothes and sourcing of apparel products. The main key labor concerns are:

- Forced labor
- Low wages
- Excessive hours of work
- Discrimination
- Health and safety hazards
- Psychological and physical abuse
- Lack of awareness of workers' rights
- Lack of worker representation for negotiations with management (p.6).

All those listed issues come down to creating phenomena called sweatshops. That is to say, "crowded, dangerous, and low-paying workshop" (Ross, p.315). Usually, people who agree to those working conditions are in danger of starvation and decide to take up the job "for a pittance". The sweaters, i.e., the people who extract the labor – who, make the others sweat – take advantage of the manual workers' economical situation as well as their lack of

knowledge of legal rights. In the guise of guardianship, they manipulate and wield influence over their employees.

As was already stressed in the beginning, the true cost of garments does not only influence the economical and social factors but also causes environmental issues. Firstly, the major environmental impact of the use and production of apparel is the waste of energy that is used in laundry and essential for manufacturing the materials. Secondly, the use of toxic chemicals which can be harmful for people and the environment. What is more, very often manufacturers release all those chemicals in waste water during the process of production, dyeing, and laundering. Finally, fast fashion creates a considerable amount of waste, both during production and at disposal (Dickson et al., p. 19). In fact it comes as a surprise that water, which is one of the key ingredients in cotton production, is not being mentioned on a shirt's label. As WWF reports, it takes "2,700 liters to produce the cotton needed to make a single t-shirt" (2013). This amount is tantamount to 900 days demand for water for one person (WWF, 2013).

1.2 Slow fashion as an opposition to fast fashion

Broadly speaking, the twenty-first century can be called an era of overabundance. Most of the clothes are designed in accordance to the latest trends, which make them available at all price levels. In other words, "everyone can afford to be fashionable and to change his or her wardrobe regularly" (Welters, p.27).

Because of the fast fashion and its harmful impact on society and the environment, a new trend has arisen, to wit, slow fashion. This movement focuses on improving conditions in which clothes are made as well as reviews all aspects of the garment life-cycle, starting from fiber production and harvesting and ending up with the process of disposal. Furthermore, slow fashion introduces the concept of the "new consumer", that is to say a person who is more aware of the impact of fashion on society and the environment. The so-called new consumer wants to know how and where the clothes are made, and based on this information, makes their decision. Furthermore, it has been observed that people who subscribe to the slow fashion movement tend to pay

attention to the production's place of origin and support local markets (Cataldi et al., p.24).

Contrary to the fast fashion model, slow fashion embraces craftsmanship and has an eye for details. Some people value handmade products as more precious than the ones manufactured by a programmed machine. Within the slow movement the human factor has started to play an extremely significant role. Manual labor is reevaluated and becomes appreciated again. One example of this return to craftsmanship is the online marketplace called Etsy.com, where anyone can sell and buy handmade items. Etsy provides a platform for its customers which allows them to "understand intimately where and how their clothing was made, and by whom" (Scaturro, p.587).

Because of the fact that fashion is an extremely diversified industry, there is an on-going battle between brands for a place in customers' minds. Thus, more and more companies misuse the concept of slow fashion exclusively to ingratiate themselves to people. As Bide points out, some companies started to apply the eco-friendly approach as some sort of a marketing tool (p.578). They take advantage of people's confusion as well as of their lack of knowledge in terms of eco-production, and exploit customers' wish for eco-friendliness by using terms like "recyclable", "organic", "natural" etc. (Bide, p.578). In fact, a lot of them offer products such as a "T-shirt that actually contains 5% organic cotton and 95% normal cotton" (Black, p.219). These are dubious labeling practices, whose main goal is to persuade a customer into buying a product by communicating "catchy" slogans. Jay Westerveld describes similar advertising techniques as *greenwashing*. As he explains: "The meaning has been usurped, and it's not really about making the planet greener anymore" (Motavalli, 2011).

1.3 Sustainability in the fashion industry

The concept of sustainability has emerged as an answer to an increasing 'throwaway' attitude towards clothing. It has been estimated that from the 35kg of apparel and textiles that are annually purchased by UK customers, roughly 75% goes to landfill (de Brito et al., 2008). According to the Brundtland Report, which was written by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in 1987, sustainability is a "development which meets the needs of the

present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (p.41). It consists of two focal points:

- “the concept of 'needs', in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given;”
- “the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs.” (WCED, p.41)

The Brundtland Report’s definition of sustainability profoundly harks back to the significance of environmental and social sustainability. Nevertheless, it is advised to treat it as a multi-dimensional concept (Ashby et al., p.62). As Giddings, Hopwood and O’Brien write, the idea of sustainability operates in three different sectors, namely the environment, society and the economy (p. 187-196). An integration of those three offers a holistic view of the concept (Image 1).

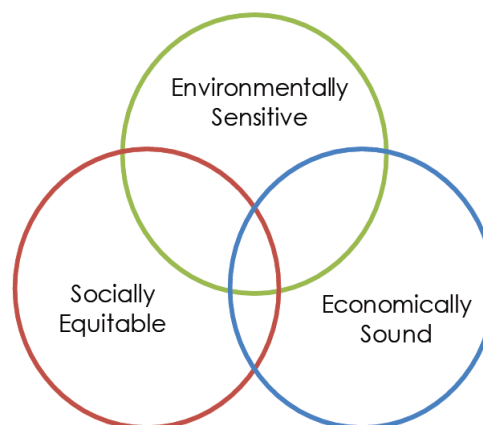


Image 1: Three-ring sector view of sustainability (BeverlyHills, 2016).

Cataldi, Dickson and Grover in their chapter on slow fashion have adopted four basic principles from a non-profit organization The Natural Steps for sustainability into the fashion industry (p.30). As they explain, to create a sustainable fashion, the actions of both individuals and brands should move towards decreasing, first, “concentrations of substances extracted from the earth,” and second, “concentrations of substances produced by the textile industry” (Cataldi et al., p.30). Third, people and companies must bear in mind that harvesting and displacing natural systems have an enormous impact on the

health of the earth and that those actions also should be downsized. Finally, the last principle talks about maximizing the benefit from the used resources in order to satisfy human needs (Cataldi et al., p.30).

Brands undertake numerous actions to make the concept of sustainability tangible. For instance, they:

- use organic fibers in their designs,
- educate their customers through raising environmental awareness via advertising,
- engage in charity work,
- recycle fabrics,
- support the Third World countries,
- “use biodegradable packaging,” and
- offer lifetime repair (Cataldi et al., p.32).

1.4 Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Sustainability in apparel production

The term sustainability has often been used in expressing CSR actions. CSR and sustainability can be viewed both as distinct and related. Broadly speaking, CSR serves as “an umbrella term” that covers practices that are associated with human rights, labor standards and certainly the companies’ economical growth. In contrast, sustainability stands for improving and accomplishing responsible practices that are upheld over the long term (Dickson et al., p.37). According to Archie Carroll (1983),

corporate social responsibility involves the conduct of a business so that it is economically profitable, law abiding, ethical and socially supportive. To be socially responsible then means that profitability and obedience to the law are foremost conditions when discussing the firm’s ethics and the extent to which it supports the society in which it exists with contributions of money, time and talent (p.608)

The pyramid below illustrates those four focal responsibilities, which are expected to be taken by companies that claim to subscribe to CSR (Image 2).



Source: Carroll (1996)

Image 2: Pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility (Carroll, 1996)

As Carroll points out, first and foremost companies need to take the economic responsibility, that is to say build up a foundation on which all the other responsibilities rest. Secondly, they need to act according to the law, so simply distinguish what is right and wrong in a given society. Thirdly, they are also expected to avoid harm and be ethical. Finally, CSR profoundly focuses on improving communities' lives, e.g. supporting charities, helping employees.

According to Patsy Perry, "The concept of CSR contributes to sustainable development in the fashion industry by promoting social goals alongside environmental goals and economic growth" (p.294). In order to achieve sustainability, companies need to incorporate social responsibility activities and then analyze these activities, so that they can pin down their influence and improve and set the activities right to obtain the desirable impacts (Dickson et al., p.37).

Chapter 2

After providing an essential theoretical framework while talking about sustainability, in this chapter I am going to focus solely on the case study. First, I will briefly introduce Patagonia and its core business, and later zoom in on the company's corporate social responsibility (CSR) activity, using Archie Carroll's CSR Pyramid. The case study I present later on in this chapter will be approached using semiotic analysis, to determine how Patagonia's CSR solutions are being communicated to the public.

2.1 Case study- Patagonia

As mentioned in the introduction, Patagonia has frequently been referenced as the leader in socially responsible apparel production and sourcing (Hethorn & Ulasewicz, 2009; Dickson et al., 2009). The company was founded in 1973 by Yvon Chouinard in Ventura, California (USA). The name Patagonia harks back to a geographic region that is located both in Argentina and Chile. According to Chouinard the name brings to mind "romantic visions of glaciers tumbling into fjords, jagged windswept peaks, gauchos and condors" (p.99). The major inspiration for the logo came from the Mount Fitzroy peaks in Patagonia (Image 3).



Image 3: Mount Fitzroy and Patagonia logo (Chouinard, 2016).

Generally speaking, Patagonia tailors its offerings mainly to people doing outdoor sports like surfing, kayaking, fly-fishing, trail running, skiing and snowboarding. The owner himself is known as an enthusiastic and highly

experienced climber, who is significantly concerned about environmental issues (Valley Uprising, 2014).

As Yvon Chouinard writes in his book *Let My People Go Surfing* (2006), Patagonia has been primarily created out of need for having good quality equipment for him and his friends as well as for earning money in order to cover the expenses connected with his outdoor activities. In the beginning he tended to spend winter months on developing his products and as soon as it got warmer, he “headed out of the heat of summer for the high mountains of Wyoming, Canada, and the Alps and then back to Yosemite in the fall until the snow fell in November” (Chouinard, p.56). After spending a lot of time in nature and observing how it was being largely ruined by human impact, he decided to create a company which would challenge the conventional capitalistic business model and strive for decreasing fashion industry’s environmental as well as social harms.

The owner and the employees in Patagonia perceive themselves as “the turtles in the fashion race” (Chouinard, p.230). Since fashion is very much focused on present and fleeting trends, Patagonia does not aim at creating fashionable products, quite the contrary; it tries to give their items a timeless status (Chouinard, p.224). Because of an eye for detail and big concern about quality, it usually takes Patagonia up to eighteen months (72 weeks) to design, develop and distribute their products to the stores (Chouinard, p.230). That is almost eleven times longer than the “fast fashion” as produced by Zara, where as mentioned previously the entire chain from production through distribution takes seven weeks (McCarthy, p.542). The long development process mainly comes as a result of the large amount of meticulous tests, starting up at a field and ending up with a fabric.

2.2 CSR actions in Patagonia- website’s data review

By analyzing the content of Patagonia’s website using the concepts from Archie Carroll’s pyramid of CSR, I will try to examine its CSR actions. By focusing on Patagonia’s communication my analysis will not provide an elaborate answer to the question whether Patagonia is truly devoted to environmental and social issues. It can only identify what Patagonia says and its CSR actions, not what it

actually does or whether there are discrepancies to be found between the two. Nevertheless, it will give an overview of possible CSR solutions.

First and foremost, I would like to quote the company's mission, which can be found on Patagonia's website. It is "Build the best product, cause no unnecessary harm, and use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis" (Patagonia, 2016). Here, the company clearly articulates its strategy towards creating a sustainable brand by placing CSR activities in its core business. Namely, Patagonia strives to make products, which excel in quality, and are environmentally friendly. Additionally, it aims at using business as a tool in minimizing the environmental harm connected with manufacturing garments. I will show in the following section how this corporate mission is taken into account throughout the company's operations. Thus, in the tab called "Our mission statement" we read that Patagonia does not repudiate its impact on the environment; on the contrary, it admits to creating pollution as a by-product and therefore it tries to work on the solutions to reduce it. What generally catches my attention on the website of Patagonia is the great amount of information and its complex layout. To a great extent, the website serves as an educational tool about social and environmental sustainability. Its transparent character sends a "We have nothing to hide" message. The website itself is divided into two sections, namely "shop" and "inside Patagonia". Within the second one I gain access to the company's activity, and there is where my focal analysis starts.

Bearing in mind Archie Carroll's theory, I will start identifying Patagonia's various corporate responsibilities, beginning with its philanthropic ones, followed by its ethical, legal and economical ones. One of the most remarkable philanthropic initiatives that is being communicated on their website is membership in a program called 1% For The Planet®. Annually, the company gives at least 1% of its net sales to community-based nonprofit groups focusing their activity on decreasing the harmful impacts of human beings. For instance, as mentioned in their website, the groups take care of the following (Patagonia 2016):

- "Taking down dams
- Restoring forests and rivers

- Finding solutions to and mitigate climate change
- Protecting critical land and marine habitat
- Protecting threatened and endangered plants and animals
- Supporting local, organic and sustainable agriculture”.

In a times when the exploitation of both human and natural resources in the fashion industry seem common, Patagonia on its website repeatedly brings up ethical issues, and how it is important for a company to confront them. The company has one separate department that is in charge of labor compliance (Dickson et al., p.212). The company’s compliance program is accredited by the Fair Labor Association (FLA). According to Patagonia’s website, FLA annually audits 5% of their supply chain unannounced. Additionally, the website offers a direct link to all of the FLA’s reports that can be found via the following <http://www.fairlabor.org/>. FLA provides companies with suggestions on how they can prop up their CSR actions in order to protect workers’ rights. The organization stresses that the companies are the ones which “are responsible for the conditions found in the workplaces making their products rather than passing responsibility to factories” (Dickson et al., p.228). According to the FLA report from 2014, in one of Patagonia’s factories in Thailand, the workspace scores above 84% in terms of employment functions (less than 100 percent indicates need for improvement), which consist of: compensation (93%); recruitment, hiring and personal development (91%); hours of work (94%); industrial relations (90%), grievance system (94%); workplace, conduct and discipline (94%); health and safety (90%); termination and worker retrenchment (93%); environmental protection (84%). Also, the report indicates several aspects which require improvement; especially the company should work on conducting trainings “for workers and supervisors on environmental risk, recycling, energy conservation and environmental awareness” doing so would provide them tools to deal with environmental related incidents (Independent External Assessment Report, 2014). I could not find the direct response to this particular report on the website. Nevertheless, Patagonia mentions on its blog *The Cleanest Line* about the cooperation with FLA. As the Patagonia’s CSR director- Cara Chacon explains, FLA is “a great source of

information and support to us regarding social responsibility, however they are also a watch-dog organization that makes sure we are walking the talk. They really held our feet to the fire.” (The Cleanest Line, 2010). She also underlines that an implementation of changes listed out in FLA’s report is pre-requisite for reaccreditation for a next year.

On Patagonia’s website, we can also read about its great amount of Fair Trade Certified™ products (Fair Trade USA, 2016). Today, Patagonia offers up to 192 items that are made in well-maintained factories and, most importantly, for decent wages (Patagonia, 2016). The company admits that these particular products are more expensive in manufacturing; nevertheless their positive impact on the society profoundly offsets the price therefore they are worth purchasing. As Patagonia explains on its website, “The funds are designated for social, economic and environmental development projects, but can also be taken as a cash bonus, which can get workers closer to a living wage”.

Another element of CSR on the Patagonia’s website is the legal responsibility. The company admits that human trafficking still remains a deeply problematic issue in the fashion industry in general as well as in their own supply chain. In Asian countries, a lot of people need to pay a large sum of money to so-called labor brokers in order to be able to work. According to Patagonia’s blog, in 2011, the social responsibility audit, which was done by Verité (Fair Labor Association), in one of their Taiwanese factories revealed some alarming issues regarding employment (The Cleanest Line, 2016). In order to work at Patagonia’s factories, some labor brokers demanded a sum of \$7,000 from migrant workers. This amount of money is well above Taiwan’s legal limits. In addition, this amount of money is problematic as it “can take a worker as many as two years to repay a labor broker” (The Cleanest Line, 2016). This is obviously unacceptable; especially considering that most of the employment contracts are usually terminated within only 3 years (Croucher, 2016). Following these findings, Patagonia together with Verité developed in 2014 comprehensive guidelines for migrant workers in Patagonia’s factories, which extensively elaborated on every aspect of employment, “including pre-hiring interactions, labor contracts, wages and fees, retention of passports, living and working conditions, grievance procedures and repatriation” (The Cleanest Line, 2016).

Also, the company displays its transparency in terms of the locations of its factories all over the world. On their website in the tab called “The Footprint Chronicles”, one gains access to an overview of all of Patagonia’s factories together with their addresses, a description of a core production and the number of workers as well its gender mix (Patagonia, 2016). Thus, Patagonia’s customers can find out where exactly their garments come from.

Finally, I looked at Patagonia’s website from the economic responsibility perspective. Unfortunately, I could not find any data on the company’s annual revenues on the website itself. Nevertheless, by looking at the website and reading about all those initiatives and projects, the impression emerges that this company must generate considerable profits. Through other sources, I have learned that “Patagonia has annual revenues of around 1,5 billion”, which undoubtedly makes it economically stable (Dickson et al., p.212). The company acquired its current position by drawing lessons from its past. In the early 1990s, because of its rapid growth, Patagonia had faced some serious financial problems and needed to conduct its first ever layoffs (Chouinard, p.157). Also, due to an immense amount of orders and diversification of production, the quality of the apparel started to suffer. In light of this, Chouinard decided to act on a smaller scale and, most importantly, to stick to the company’s core values (Chouinard, p.162)

2.3 Values of Patagonia- a semiotic analysis

In this section, I will examine how Patagonia, communicate its values to its public via advertising. I will do so by conducting a semiotic analysis of the advertisement ‘Don’t buy this jacket’ (2011).

Before I get down to the analysis itself, I will explain briefly the theory regarding the semiotic analysis. As Barthes points out, both verbal and visual forms of expression be read as speech, and most importantly, a single image can serve various of purposes as well be read in multiple ways depending on a viewer’s point of reference (p.111). Generally speaking, semiotics is the study of signs, initially developed by Ferdinand de Saussure. He came up with a semiological system which explains that a sign is a result of the relation between the signifier (e.g. words, images, shapes, sounds) and the signified (a mental

concept) (Barthes, p.113). In other words, semiotics pinpoints the way in which signs are used to represent something. In the discourse of advertising, it is usually the case of a desire, a need or a wish to have something. As Sturken and Cartwright point out,

The production of meaning involves at least three elements besides the image itself and its producer: (1) the codes and conventions that structure the image and that cannot be separated from the content of the image; (2) the viewers and how they interpret or experience the image; and (3) the contexts in which an image is exhibited and viewed (p.49).

In most cases, the advertisers have already a fixed message in mind that they want to convey via advertising (Sturken & Cartwright, p.53). Nevertheless, due to viewers' diverse points of reference, the interpretations can profoundly vary from the originally created premise. Roland Barthes calls this phenomenon "The Death of the Author", which basically means that there is no ultimate authorial meaning for viewers to decipher in the text (p.142). Thus, every advertising content leaves plenty space for a multidimensional reading.

2.3.1 'Don't buy this jacket' (2011)

As Chouinard writes in *Let My People Go Surfing* (2006), Patagonia uses advertising as its marketing communication tool extremely sparingly, "far less than most outdoor companies, let alone clothing companies" (p.329). However, whenever it does, it means that it has something crucial to convey, he admits.

Because of the fact that the company is not really active in terms of advertising, there were not many to choose from. Eventually, I chose the ad with the unusual heading 'Don't buy this jacket' (Image 4) for analysis, as I found the title intriguing due to its apparently contradictory message.

DON'T BUY THIS JACKET



It's Black Friday, the day in the year retail turns from red to black and starts to make real money. But Black Friday, and the culture of consumption it reflects, puts the economy of natural systems that support all life firmly in the red. We're now using the resources of one-and-a-half planets on our one and only planet.

Because Patagonia wants to be in business for a good long time—and leave a world inhabitable for our kids—we want to do the opposite of every other business today. We ask you to buy less and to reflect before you spend a dime on this jacket or anything else.

Environmental bankruptcy, as with corporate bankruptcy, can happen very slowly, then all of a sudden. This is what we face unless we slow down, then reverse the damage. We're running short on fresh water, topsoil, fisheries, wetlands—all our planet's natural systems and resources that support business, and life, including our own.

The environmental cost of everything we make is astonishing. Consider the R2[®] Jacket shown, one of our best sellers. To make it required 135 liters of

COMMON THREADS INITIATIVE

REDUCE

WE make useful gear that lasts a long time
YOU don't buy what you don't need

REPAIR

WE help you repair your Patagonia gear
YOU pledge to fix what's broken

REUSE

WE help find a home for Patagonia gear
you no longer need
YOU sell or pass it on*

RECYCLE

WE will take back your Patagonia gear
that is worn out
YOU pledge to keep your stuff out of
the landfill and incinerator



REIMAGINE

TOGETHER we reimagine a world where we take
only what nature can replace

water, enough to meet the daily needs (three glasses a day) of 45 people. Its journey from its origin as 60% recycled polyester to our Reno warehouse generated nearly 20 pounds of carbon dioxide, 24 times the weight of the finished product. This jacket left behind, on its way to Reno, two-thirds its weight in waste.

And this is a 60% recycled polyester jacket, knit and sewn to a high standard; it is exceptionally durable, so you won't have to replace it as often. And when it comes to the end of its useful life we'll take it back to recycle into a product of equal value. But, as is true of all the things we can make and you can buy, this jacket comes with an environmental cost higher than its price.

There is much to be done and plenty for us all to do. Don't buy what you don't need. Think twice before you buy anything. Go to patagonia.com/CommonThreads or scan the QR code below. Take the Common Threads Initiative pledge, and join us in the fifth "R," to reimagine a world where we take only what nature can replace.

patagonia
patagonia.com



TAKE THE PLEDGE

*If you sell your used Patagonia product on eBay[®] and take the Common Threads Initiative pledge, we will co-list your product on patagonia.com for no additional charge.

Image 4: 'Don't buy this jacket' ad (The Cleanest Line, 2011).

The ad consists of four parts, namely a heading, a picture of jacket, a text below and a logo and QR code at the bottom. At first glance, it looks relatively simple and well organized, but in fact it has a complex meaning. Its message

becomes untangled after taking the particular parts apart. Generally speaking, the ad's design is extremely simple. It looks nothing like an average glossy advertisement, namely it does not use flashy colors and well-worn slogans i.e., "Buy now", "Bargain" or "50% off". In this advertisement there are only two colors used, that is black and white, which make it resemble an actual article in a newspaper: an advertorial. Thus it suggests that this advertisement's main goal is to only inform people. That would explain its aesthetics, which refer to one of the modernist principles, i.e. "Form follows function". As I have previously explained, the context of a message plays a significant role in the process of making meaning. In the 'Don't buy this jacket' case, the advertisement appeared in a highbrow, American newspaper – *The New York Times*– as well as on the company's website, around Black Friday in 2011. As Patagonia explains, "We're placing the ad in the *Times* because it's the most important national newspaper and considered the paper of record." (The Cleanest Line, 2011). A text of the ad itself brings the event of Black Friday closer to its readers and exhorts readers to rethink their buying behavior.

Black Friday is "the day after Thanksgiving, regarded as the first day of the traditional Christmas shopping season, on which retailers offer special reduced prices" (Oxford Dictionary, 2016). The day shows a devious embodiment of American consumerism. Why? Because of the immense amount of bargains in the shopping malls, masses of people come there and wait in tremendously long queues, just to get the best deals (Image 5). Moreover, very often due to scarcity of some products, in order to pick up the best bargain, customers pull one another and sometimes-even fight.



Image 5: A bird's view of one of shopping malls during Black Friday (Business Insider, 2014).

This context is important for understanding the ad, as the ad itself makes clear in the text below the image of the jackets, which starts as follows:

It's Black Friday, the day in the year retail turns from red to black and starts to make real money. But Black Friday, and the culture of consumption it reflects, puts the economy of natural systems that support all life firmly in the red. We're now using the resources of one-and-a-half planets on our one and only planet.

According to Patagonia, the current growing consumption not only jeopardizes our lives, but also puts the entire world in danger. The heading of the advertisement, which is written with big black capital letters says, "**DON'T BUY THIS JACKET**". By using this title Patagonia sends a message of anti-consumerism. This strategy brings up some sort of a paradox between the company, which is inevitably oriented to drive sales, and its anti-consumerist message. I can imagine that the advertisement might have caused a little bit of confusion in the customers' minds; it certainly did for me. Nevertheless, this confusion was created deliberately. Evidently, Patagonia wanted to raise a question pertaining our rapidly changing consumer behavior. The text exhorts "We ask you to buy less and to reflect before you spend a dime on this jacket or anything else;" "Don't buy what you don't need. Think twice before you buy anything." It also compares its activities with those of other companies and positions itself in a superior light, for instance by saying, "Because Patagonia wants to be in business for a good long time – and leave a world inhabitable for our kids – we want to do the opposite of every other business today." This line basically sends the message, "We are the good ones in this cruel fashion industry". It implies that if you shop at Patagonia you do not subscribe to this consumerist fever and that you are better than those other people who indulge in Black Friday consumerism.

Interestingly, in order to win customers Patagonia confesses its harmful impact on the environment:

Consider the R2[®] Jacket shown, one of our best sellers. To make it required 135 liters of water, enough to meet the daily needs (three glasses

a day) of 45 people. Its journey from its origin as 60% recycled polyester to our Reno warehouse generated nearly 20 pounds of carbon dioxide, 24 times the weight of the finished product. This jacket left behind, on its way to Reno, two-thirds its weight in waste.

Due to an extreme competition within the clothing industry, companies have started a fierce battle for customers. In order to persuade them into buying, they use well-worn slogans and elusive promises, which they mostly cannot keep. In contrast, Patagonia manipulates its customers in a more skillful and less explicit way. Firstly, the company explains that it tries to decrease its pernicious impact on the environment, but unfortunately despite of trying it still commits numerous “environmental crimes”. Here, Patagonia indirectly begs for the readers’ indulgence. In general, people tend to be favorably disposed towards some people whenever they see that they are trying to achieve something and also talk openly about their failures; it simply makes them more human. In other words, Patagonia through its extreme transparency wants to win the trust of people.

In the middle section of the ad, the image of the R2® Jacket is placed, one of the company’s bestsellers. The garment itself looks simple and most importantly, its color is just plain grey. Usually, in Western society grey is associated with fumes and heavy industry as well as carbon dioxide, a term actually mentioned in the text. Therefore, the color might signify a pollution or harm, which could be the true environmental cost of this jacket. What is interesting, the ad does not display the product on a model as happens in the majority of the clothing campaigns. Once again, we are facing another reference to the modernist aesthetics. Namely, the ad focuses attention on the pure function of the jacket. The item is neither unique nor attractive. In this case, the color grey can also signify plainness. In fact, it looks just like a simple jacket. In combination with the copy, the image obtains multiple layers of meaning. As we observe, the picture is not neatly edited, namely we can still see the shadow of the jacket in the background. It can signify the dark side of the fashion industry in general or the immense amount of the carbon dioxide, which is emitted, whilst manufacturing this jacket, that is “nearly 20 pounds of carbon dioxide, 24 times the weight of

the finished product” (Don’t buy this jacket, 2011). Moreover, as we look closer, we can also notice some wrinkles on the fabric. This depiction indicates that this jacket’s main purpose is not to be fashionable but to be worn and serve as a sort of protection against the cold. As I read the latter part of the text, Patagonia explains “it is exceptionally durable, so you won’t have to replace it as often”.

Following these findings, as a viewer I read the central column of the bottom part, which is selectively marked as bold. This text gives me an overview of the ‘Common Threads Initiative’ introduced by Patagonia, according to which they try to reduce the harm connected with producing garments, repair the gear, reuse already used items, recycle the worn out products, and finally reimagine a world in which there is no harmful human interference. Under each of the initiatives, they list out their tasks by saying “WE” as well as give some assignments to a reader, by addressing him as “YOU”. According to Sturken and Cartwright, it is designed to make a viewer identify with the ad and create a bond between the company and the viewer (p.50). Especially, the just mentioned relation is explicit in the last initiative, which states, “TOGETHER we reimagine a world where we take only what nature can replace”. The word “together” often signifies teamwork and I think this is what Patagonia has in mind. Differently put, they send a message “We are aware of the harmful impact of the fashion industry and we cannot face it alone, we need your help”. This entire text profoundly resembles a structure of a social contract. The idea behind the social contract is that people unite against something. In ‘Don’t buy this jacket’ case, it is a pledge to mutually look after our planet and to buy environmentally friendly products, like the ones from Patagonia. They band together against thoughtless consumerism. In order to do so, the company asks at the end the reader to “Go to patagonia.com/CommonThreads or scan the QR code below. Take the Common Threads Initiative pledge, and join us in the fifth ‘R’, to reimagine a world where we take only what nature can replace.” This instruction is a marketing tool, known as *call to action*. Its main goal is to encourage an audience to respond immediately to the marketing text. Here, by going to Patagonia’s website the audience identifies itself with the Common Threads Initiative. It goes without saying, if readers agree with the copy, it suggests that they agree upon buying Patagonia’s environmentally friendly clothes. If not, the ad creates a sense of

guilt in the readers' minds. Generally speaking, it sends a message, "ONLY with us you can save the planet and divest yourself of consumerist attitudes". Finally, at the bottom of the ad we can see a line, which not only shapes Patagonia's logo in the middle but also resembles an electrocardiogram (ECG). The latter might signify a matter of life and death situation, which can emphasize the severity of the social contract.

Conclusion

This thesis has dealt with the research question: "What forms of CSR (corporate social responsibility) has Patagonia implemented and how are they communicated to the public? Through the analysis of Patagonia's website, I have learned about its broad CSR activities. Carroll's CSR Pyramid helped me to identify and group each of them into categories. The research has shown that the company fulfills its corporate responsibilities, among which philanthropic, ethical, legal and economical ones. Also, organizations like FLA, Fair Trade USA or Verité have confirmed the sincerity of Patagonia's actions and till today keep helping the company with becoming more sustainable still.

During entire process of collecting data, I have observed that Patagonia's communication presents itself as extremely transparent. Especially, the website serves as an "open book", where viewers can find information about the company's moments of glory as well as the times of failure. This strategy not only builds trust in the relationship with customers, but also provides a useful guidance to other companies. Both on the website and in the ad, Patagonia accentuated its deep connection with nature, and tried to draw people's attention to the environmental social problems of the fashion industry. In the case of 'Don't buy this jacket', even though the ad includes the copy, the communication is less straightforward than on the website. Nevertheless, thanks to the semiotic analysis its message started to become more and more explicit.

The semiotic reading has shown that Patagonia persuades its customers into buying not by using clichés slogans, but through thoughtful and relatively informative message. First and foremost, the ad mainly depicts the jacket's functions; it does not distract viewer's attention by using an attractive model.

Secondly, the company admits that in spite of trying to produce environmentally friendly garments, its harmful impact on the environment is still tremendous. In order to visualize its crime it provides information about the amount of used water and emitted carbon dioxide. Then immediately it moves into describing its sustainable jacket, which is in 60% made out of recycled polyester. This train of thoughts invites thinking about other companies which are not as eco as Patagonia is, therefore, their environmental cost must be even bigger. Taking that assumption in mind, the viewer in order to make a moral choice might unconsciously choose Patagonia's products among the others. In other words, Patagonia advertises itself as the one that saves the day. As Phoebe Maltz Bovy writes, "the genius is in convincing high-end shoppers that they're better people than the rest of us" (2015), and to my mind, Patagonia does it in a splendid way.

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Image 3

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Image 4

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Image 5

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