ALGEMENE CULTUURWETENSCHAPPEN

Staff member/supervisor: Prof. A. M. Smelik

Title of document: Sustainability in Fashion Advertisements: Decoding the “Green”

Image

Name of course: BA Thesis

Date of submission: 22 June 2017

The work submitted here is the sole responsibility of the undersigned, who has neither committed plagiarism nor colluded in its production.

Signed

Name of student: Jorien Simmelink

Student number: 4830636
Sustainability in Fashion Advertisements

Decoding the “Green” Image
# Table of Contents

1. Introduction .................................................................................................................. 3

2. Theoretical Approach and Methodology .................................................................... 6
   2.1 The Semiotic Approach ......................................................................................... 6
   2.2 Advertising as a Social Discourse ....................................................................... 9
   2.3 The Dressed Body as a Sign ................................................................................ 11

3. Semiotic Analysis ....................................................................................................... 14
   3.1 Patagonia ............................................................................................................. 14
      3.1.1 Don’t Buy This Jacket ................................................................................. 15
      3.1.2 Worn Wear Stories .................................................................................... 17
      3.1.3. Reflection ................................................................................................. 22
   3.2 H&M .................................................................................................................... 23
      3.2.1 Conscious Collection ................................................................................. 23
      3.2.2 Conscious Collection: Spring 2013 .......................................................... 25
      3.2.3 Conscious Collection: Spring 2015 .......................................................... 26
      3.2.4 Conscious Collection: Exclusive 2016 ..................................................... 28
      3.2.5 Reflection ................................................................................................. 30
   3.3 Stella McCartney .................................................................................................. 31
      3.3.1 No Leathers, Feathers, or Fur .................................................................... 32
      3.3.2 All is Love .................................................................................................. 33
      3.3.3 Deforestation .............................................................................................. 35
      3.3.4 Reflection ................................................................................................. 38

4. Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 39
5. Works Cited ..............................................................................................................41

5.1 List of Figures .....................................................................................................43
1. Introduction

My awareness regarding sustainable fashion was reinforced since I saw the documentary *The True Cost* (2013) for the first time. This film sheds light on the awful circumstances within the garment industry. It concerns both the working conditions and environmental pollution as the after effect. In addition, my background in textile design emphasized my personal value towards sustainable fashion and textiles. Since my consciousness increased towards sustainability, I started to notice that our society focuses on consuming and how it supports a “throwaway culture”. This term could not be in more contrast with sustainability.

Sandy Black argues in *The Sustainable Fashion Handbook* that “public awareness of [sustainable] issues and demand for public transparency has grown” and that this provides “an imperative for change” (8). Thus the growing emphasis on sustainability in the fashion industry is strongly evident (Black 10). This importance is noticeable in the growth of various sustainable fashion brands and their advertisements.

A fashion brand’s sustainable image can be reinforced through the way of advertising. Advertisements represent a brand’s vision, thus “it is an exposé of a corporation’s projected direction and self-image” (Neuberg 24). Public advertising also promotes the message that everyone should consume more (Neuberg 24).

According to Hilary Alexander in *The Fashion Handbook*, “[s]ustainable fashion? An oxymoron is there ever was one, given the passionate global fixation on having the hottest, the latest, the Must-Have or the It-item” (6). This statement emphasizes the paradoxes that the notion of sustainable fashion holds, specifically in today’s consuming culture (Alexander 6).
This ambivalence evoked my interest in the representation of sustainable brands in advertisements. In this thesis, I will therefore examine three sustainable brands that are all positioned in a different area of today's fashion landscape. I have chosen to analyze the following brands: Patagonia, H&M, and Stella McCartney. These brands differ in target groups and embody dissimilar aesthetics and different moral values, which I found noteworthy to analyze.

Therefore I will base my research on the following question: How does Patagonia, H&M and Stella McCartney represent a sustainable image through their advertisements? In our current society in which consumers get overwhelmed by a diversity of sustainable options, it can provide clarification when symbols and signs within advertisements are decoded.

The core method will be the semiotic analysis based on Roland Barthes' semiotic approach [1915–1980]. Barthes's work describes a way to decipher an image by distinguishing it into different signs and how to derive meaning from these. In the first chapter, I will provide the general theoretical framework according to the semiotic analysis of Roland Barthes, together with a connection towards ideological discourses in advertisements and its relation to the dressed body. The second chapter contains analyses of the three case studies. I will analyze a number of images for each brand to construct a clear impression of each brand’s approach and to understand the symbolic meaning that is depicted. A short reflection after each analysis is provided afterwards. Lastly, I will derive a conclusion from the analyses and the differences and similarities between Patagonia, H&M, and Stella McCartney will be discussed.

When the advertisements are decoded and become more approachable, it will guide the consumer to recognize signs that are only there to lure the consumer into purchasing. Furthermore, sustainability is a term often discussed within the field of
fashion studies. For example, *The Routledge Handbook for Sustainability and Fashion* by Kate Fletcher and the earlier discussed *The Fashion Handbook* by Sandy Black. Both write about sustainability from the perspective of various topics. Sustainable branding and advertising are also studied, however not as thoroughly as I will do with the support of semiotics.
2. Theoretical Approach and Methodology

In this chapter, I will discuss the theory and methods that function as the basis of the analysis. Firstly, I will give an introduction of the semiotic approach by Roland Barthes, followed by an explanation of his vision on ideology: the “myth”. Secondly, the focus will be on advertisements and I will clarify how they contain a social discourse. Finally, I will focus on the dressed body as a sign and how it is related to fashion.

2.1 The Semiotic Approach

The Semiotic approach concentrates on the study of signs, spaces, and language mutations in the system of social discourse. Therefore, when applied to fashion they provide a perspective combining various lifestyles, cultural differences, an individual meaning, and social values (Boero 303-4). Roland Barthes studied fashion in *The Fashion System* as an autonomous system with its own internal rules, which are built on semiotics (Boero 304). I will explain this more after examining the semiotic approach in general.

Within the field of fashion this approach is, for example, used in the work of Patrizia Calefato. She researches fashion and dress as signs that convey meaning and relate to the world and to other bodies (Calefato, *Fashion and Worldliness* 69). Therefore I will discuss her work more extensively in the last part of this chapter.

Roland Barthes based his method on analyzing content within the field of fashion and “the general science of signs” that was developed by De Saussure [1857 – 1913] and was called semiology (Barthes, *Fashion System* x). Since my research concentrates on fashion advertisements, the focus on semiotics in fashion and advertisements remains throughout this chapter.
According to Barthes, the signification of the image is undoubtedly intentional in advertising. Nothing is presented by accident, thus the objects within the advertisement contain a message on purpose. This message needs to be transmitted as clearly as possible (Rhetoric 152). This implies that the advertisements that will be analyzed contain intentionally signs to emphasize the brand’s sustainable character.

De Saussure was a Swiss linguist who was one of the founders of semiotics and had an important influence on the development of structuralism ("Ferdinand de Saussure"). According to this theory, three different terms can be distinguished when analyzing an image. The start of each analysis begins with the sign, which resembles the object of analysis and the meaning that is tied to it. Next, the sign can be divided into the signifier (the form) and the signified (the meaning or concept). Thus the sign is the associative total of these two. The signifier is empty until meaning is added by a signified (Barthes, Mythologies 111-12). An object in an advertisement remains a meaningless symbol until individual meaning is interpreted and attaches value to it.

Barthes introduced the concepts of denotation and connotation, which are linked to the systematical division of the sign, signifier and signified. Denotation is used when the meaning of a sign is objective, while connotation is based on meaning produced through associative elements (Rhetoric 158).

The notion of ideology is introduced after the analysis of above terms. In this thesis, I will use the following definition of ideology, according to A Dictionary of Critical Theory: “A set of beliefs, convictions or ideas which both binds a particular group of people together and determines the actions they take” (“Ideology”). Barthes uses ideology to understand and derive meaning from images. The perception of an image depends on the context in which it is published, such as a specific newspaper or magazine (Photographic 194).
For example, the reader of a sustainable advertisement perceives it as an image that consists of several connected signs that convey connotative messages (Barthes, *Mythologies* 113). Next, after these signs are recognized (Barthes, *Photographic* 206), they are distinguished into signifiers and signifieds. The meaning of the signified is connected to the signifier. The combination of these two results in a sign that contains meanings that are based on a vast set of ideas and beliefs.

These ideas and beliefs are connected to the term “myth”, which is introduced by Barthes. “Myth” is similar to ideology: it derives its meaning from social values and rules constructed by society (*Mythologies* 107). He describes “myth” as “…the notion of myth seemed to me to explain these examples of the falsely obvious” (*Mythologies* 10), which is linked to public images. “Myth” is a type of speech, a message and thus a mode of signification (*Mythologies* 107). The object itself does not define “myth”, but the way it communicates. “Myth” points out and it notifies, thus it makes its message understandable and imposes itself on the reader. Because of its strong connection with ideology, “myth” consists of material that has already been worked on to make it suitable for communication. This is because all the materials of myth presuppose a signifying consciousness (Barthes, *Mythologies* 111-15).

Barthes mentions the application of semiotics within fashion in his earlier mentioned work *The Fashion System*. This work provides “structural analysis of women's clothing…described by fashion magazines” (*Fashion System* x). A fashion photograph distinguishes two forms of clothing: image-clothing and written clothing (Barthes, *Fashion System* 3). Image-clothing represents the actual image of the garment, while written clothing is the same garment but described and “transformed into language” (Barthes, *Fashion System* 3). Although they refer to the same garment, they differ in substance. The image-clothing represents the garment’s materiality and its tactile
surface. The written clothing refers to language and is verbal (Barthes, *Fashion System* 3).

From Barthes’ point of view, every advertisement consists of ideologies and myths that communicate an underlying message and are available to be deciphered. No sign or object is accidental. They are carefully chosen instead. The explanation of the semiotic system and how signs produce myths supports my research to answer the research question: How do the fashion brands Patagonia, H&M, and Stella McCartney represent their sustainable philosophy through their advertisements? Next, I will discuss the aim of advertising in today’s culture in the following paragraphs.

2.2 Advertising as a Social Discourse

Ron Beasley and Marcel Danesi argue in *Persuasive Signs: The Semiotics of Advertising* that, “[t]he central aim behind modern day advertising is to enhance the appeal of a product or service that is promoted in the marketplace” (1). Advertisements can be defined as any type or form of public announcement intended to direct people’s attention to the availability, qualities, and cost of specific commodities or services (Beasley and Danesi 1).

Instead of the promotion of a single object, brands create an entire image for their products. This image focuses on individual consumers who have values and beliefs conform to the brand’s philosophy. This can consist of the product’s name, packaging, logo, price and overall presentation. A recognizable character is created to appeal to specific consumer types (Beasley and Danesi 12). The analysis of the case studies will reveal how this applies in the case of sustainable fashion.

Ron Beasley and Marcel Danesi also argue in *Persuasive Signs: The Semiotics of Advertising* that, “[t]he image associated with certain kinds of products is further
entrenched by an advertising technique that can be called mythologization” (12). The following fragment describes this technique:

“The thousands of ads for expensive high heel shoes that are published in magazines almost weekly are usually constructed through the process of mythologization. Typically, some attractive young woman is portrayed as wearing the shoes. She is shown with an expression that commonly conveys a kind of sensual rapture that purportedly comes from wearing the shoes. Such ads also utilize contrast effectively. For instance, many use white and black colors or shades to emphasize a contrast between innocence and sexuality (maturity). The ads are, in effect, highly suggestive of the mythology associated with feminine sexuality or "coming-of-age." The way in which such ads have been put together is, in a phrase, strongly suggestive of a ‘sexualization’ of the female body” (Beasley and Danesi 28).

The example above shows how this “mythologization” creates a specific underlying message in an advertisement. This “mythologization” is tied to the definition of “myth” by Barthes in the way that it captures a social discourse. Furthermore, it refers to the strategy of imbuing brand names, logos, product design, ads, and commercials intentionally with some mythic meaning (Beasley and Danesi 12).

The branding of sustainable fashion can be marketed towards a specific target group that feels connected with the conveyed message. This technique of mythologization taps into the unconscious desires, urges, and mythic motifs embedded in the human psyche (Beasley and Danesi 15) and emphasize the need to search for identification with a product. This identification with the product is reinforced by the brand’s way of advertisement, which is concerned with the meaning and value of the product (Bilton 141). The aim of advertising is “to construct a symbolic web of
associations around the product, allowing consumers to create their own meaningful experiences” (Bilton 141).

This implies that there has to be a connection to the brand in order to convince the consumer. During the analysis of sustainable fashion advertisements, I will examine how the brands convey their message and if they create a solid image based on their sustainable values.

2.3 The Dressed Body as a Sign

“Even in the most diverse historical, geographical, and social contexts, human beings have always had a unique relationship to clothes, to objects that cover, and to the “artificial” signs of the body...” (Calefato, Fashion and Worldliness 70). Dress functions as a projection of both a collective and individual identity, “expressing itself in signs and objects through which the human body is placed...in its surroundings” (Calefato, Fashion and Worldliness 69-70).

Since dress and the dressed body are an expression of identity, both are strongly connected to meaning. After having explained the characteristics of the semiotic approach and how it appears in advertisements, I will now examine the dressed body and its meaning.

Patrizia Calefato explains dress applied on the body as a form of language in The Clothed Body, which is related to the system by De Saussure. In this case, language refers not only to a verbal system but also to the whole systems of signs, which includes for example garments or images (Calefato, Clothed Body 5). She compares dress to language and argues that dress functions as a syntax according to a set of more or less constant rules (Calefato, Clothed Body 5). These rules “allow a garment, and body coverings in general, to acquire meaning...” (Calefato, Clothed Body 5). The various signs from a
garment are intertwined and produce meaning simultaneously (Calefato, *Clothed Body* 6).

Garments are objects that represent the desires of the wearer, “t[hey] take on social significations that draw on different communicative universes” (Calefato, *Clothed Body* 83). Humans are driven to dress according to a specific lifestyle, and therefore the object (i.e. the garment) becomes endowed with value. The garment transforms into an object of social approval (Calefato, *Clothed Body* 83).

This suggests that the meaning that is derived from garments depends on the personal preferences of both the wearer and the viewer. Boero argues that, “in the language of clothing, like in speech, each person has his or her own reserve of “words” and adopts personal changes in tone and meaning” (306).

This personalized meaning is strongly built through the advertising and branding of clothes. Sustainable branding is emphasized by the need for creativity in the consumers' minds. They aim for a unique experience that suits with their values (Carbonaro and Goldsmith 162). According to Carbonaro and Goldsmith, “[a] continuously growing number of people are rethinking their roles as consumers and starting to declare their readiness to change their purchase behavior [to a more sustainable]” (160). This reinforces that the presentation of clothing in a sustainable advertisement evokes the interest in a specific lifestyle (in this case, a more sustainable one) through a certain representation.

In this chapter I have introduced semiotics and its relation to advertisements and fashion. Every image can be distinguished into various signs that tie to myths and ideologies. The way that advertisements express an ideology by creating a certain “myth” reinforce the consumer to understand and relate to the objects that are presented. The myths embedded in advertisements are focused towards a specific target audience and
represent signs wherein the consumer can identify. For example, (sustainable) fashion
advertisements often convey a meaning that triggers personal values of the individual consumer.

In the next chapter, I will apply a semiotic analysis to three different fashion brands to examine how they convey their sustainable belief. During this analysis, I am going to decode the images and discover the myths they contain in order to study how genuine their sustainable image really is.
3. Semiotic Analysis

Kate Fletcher describes sustainable fashion as a narrative within fashion and textiles that "fosters ecological integrity, social quality, and human flourishing through products, action, relationships, and practices of use" (Journeys XVIII). In the current fashion landscape, an increasing number of established brands focus on a sustainable image and communicate this through the language of branding and advertisements (Carbonaro and Goldsmith 163).

In this chapter, I will analyze the advertisements of three recognized fashion brands by the appliance of a semiotic analysis as a method. The choice of brands is based on their contrasting position within the fashion industry, for I am interested if there is a noteworthy diversity in their message or that they correspond. For example, H&M is a worldwide known brand that offers clothing for an extensive group of people, while Stella McCartney aims towards a luxury niche and Patagonia concentrates on garments for outdoor sports.

By use of the semiotic approach I will decode the advertisements and therefore elucidate the sustainable image they try to convey. Patagonia is the first brand that I will discuss, followed by H&M, and lastly Stella McCartney.

3.1 Patagonia

Patagonia is an outdoor brand located in South America that was founded in 1973. Their underlying philosophy is based on sustainable values. The following mission statement is retrieved from the official website: “Build the best product, cause no unnecessary harm, use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis” (Patagonia.com).
First, I will analyze an advertisement of the “Don't Buy This Jacket” campaign (2011) and secondly I will examine both an image and video of the Worn Wear Stories campaign (2013) in order to derive a clear impression of Patagonia's brand image.

3.1.1 Don’t Buy This Jacket

In 2011, Patagonia launched a special campaign for Black Friday, evoking consciousness towards purchasing behavior. According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, Black Friday is known as the day after Thanksgiving and symbolizes as the start for Christmas shopping by various special offers to attract customers (“Black Friday”). Black Friday symbolizes our consuming culture and connotes the “need” of purchasing things.
The advertisement, which is shown in fig. 1, consists of a Patagonia jacket accompanied by the message “Don't Buy This Jacket”. The main signifier of the image is the jacket, while the linguistic message (“Don't Buy This Jacket”) gives meaning to it and transforms it into a signified. Both the word 'Jacket' in the slogan as the material form (the image) become a symbol of consumerism and represents all that should not be bought. With this advertisement, the brand questions the very nature of consumerism encouraging people to shop with awareness and focus only on what they really need (Carbonaro and Goldsmith 165).

The following text is placed beneath the image of the jacket: "Common Threads Initiative: Together we can reduce our environmental footprint" and beneath it a button saying, "Take the pledge" (since it was an online advertisement). The first sentence emphasizes that environmental choices are a group activity. The phrase on the button then evokes action by providing the reader a direct possibility to join. The signifier "Pledge" refers to the 'Don't buy this Jacket' campaign and signifies the reduced consumption of material goods. It offers the consumer the possibility to become a part of their campaign.

The 'Don't Buy This Jacket' advertisement contains a strong paradox. It clearly connotes a message of conscious buying behavior, while on the other hand it still is an advertisement. It introduces the brand in a remarkable way and invites the consumer to join their initiative and make them part of their brand. This community building could eventually emphasize sympathy for the brand and lead to an increase in sales.

Therefore the “myth” existing in this image is based on consumerism and the ambivalence that is created through the “Don't Buy This Jacket” slogan. It generates awareness for sustainability, while at the same time buying behavior is evoked through
their choice for an advertisement as a medium. Advertisements are designed to sell a product, even the ones that promote sustainability.

3.1.2 Worn Wear Stories

The next items to be analyzed are both an image and a video from the Worn Wear Stories campaign (2013). This campaign is developed to emphasize the focus on the sustainable character of clothing. It is about the pieces that last almost a lifetime and capture all the stories the wearer experience when wearing the garment. The repair of damaged pieces and trading worn garments to give them a new life is also part of this campaign. This philosophy stands in great contrast with our current society that is focused on mass consumption and where products do not get a chance to get broken, stained or damaged but are easily thrown away when it is of no longer use.

![Image of a person working on a garment with a sign that says: *Every patch is a memory, every tear has a tale. These are the stories we wear.*](image)

*Fig. 2*
The first object I will analyze is an image that functions as an advertisement to convey the message of the Worn Wear Stories campaign (see fig. 2). Different signs can be found within the image: the text, the orange jacket, and the background. The text within the advertisement functions as the linguistic message (Barthes, 154). It says, “Every patch is a memory, every tear has a tale. These are the stories we wear”. The words “patch” and “tear” function as signifiers and represent an experience. There is a strong relation to an actual garment and it connotes the message that damaged clothing is a positive thing. This meaning can be easily personalized and adapted to individual stories. “Patch” and “tear” signify that every worn garment, including the wearer, has its own story that can be told. The second sentence focuses on the reader, maybe even the future client, by using “we” as a signifier. This use of language suggests that the reader is already involved; it both evokes and emphasizes a communal feeling when wearing Patagonia garments.

The Worn Wear Stories campaign has its own logo, which is situated underneath the text in the image. When analyzing a close up of the logo in fig. 3 it can be noticed that...
it resembles a patch that is normally used to cover up damages on clothing. It is clearly linked to the text discussed in the previous paragraph, where the word “patch” was a distinctive sign. The stitched patch is clearly a signifier and connotes a materiality that refers to handcraft and to the patches that are often used to cover up damages on garments. Stains or holes in a garment, which are made through extensive use, add a signified of emotional value to the piece. As the text in the advertisements says, “These are the stories we wear”.

Within the logo, the image of a jacket is stitched together with the words "worn wear". The jacket, which functions as the signifier, shows a strong resemblance to the jacket portrayed in the Black Friday advertisement discussed earlier. A signified is easily created when knowing this background story. Both jackets function as a symbol that aims to influence buying behavior, therefore they signified an emphasized awareness about the garments that are already bought.

When analyzing the photo, the orange jacket worn by the model in the image stands out immediately. It has the most signifying color in the setting, which is also similar to the logo. This resemblance connotes a connection between these two signs (Williamson 24). The jacket looks completely worn out and is covered with many patches, signifying the memories and tales that are mentioned in the text. This piece of clothing has become a symbol for the Worn Wear Stories campaign, and maybe even for Patagonia's philosophy in general: it connotes reduced buying behavior and reinforces a more sustainable lifestyle.

The model has a masculine and tough appearance. He is placed in a workshop, practicing craftsmanship that includes repair. The depicted man functions as the representation of the 'Worn Wear Stories' campaign. The appearance of the model
conforms to the dominant norms regarding the appearance in the Western culture; i.e. the white, blonde, good looking and masculine male.

The Worn Wear advertisement conveys the “myth” that is based on craftsmanship and being authentic. The wearers of Patagonia garments distances themselves from the idea of fashion and the fashion industry (Hepburn 624) and does not conform to the hyper-stylized images provided by that industry. It implies that the Worn Wear Stories campaign is focused on real stories for real people. However, the appearance of the model creates a paradox. His styled “Westernized” look is in strong contrast with the rough and effortless character Patagonia claims to maintain. Therefore the image also contains a “myth” that relies on a biased Western appearance.

An additional part of the Worn Wear Stories campaign is the series of videos called The Stories We Wear, which shows a representation of the persons who wear Patagonia garments and tell the personal stories that are connected to these pieces. The garments shown in the video have been used for a number of years and have been exposed to a variety of natural influences, resulting in the reinforcement of re-use and repair of garments.

The video that I will analyze is titled “Worn Wear Stories | Presented by Patagonia” and was released in 2014. This is an introduction to the Worn Wear Stories concept and provides a concise view of the core values of this campaign. The video portrays the lives of three people who share their personal stories and challenges when using Patagonia products. The emphasis is on a general experience instead of on single commodities. This reinforces the notion that “the value of products...in the creative industries is thus determined wholly or primarily by the interpretation of symbolic meanings by [the] individual...” (138 Bilton).
The three people are the main signifiers and represent Patagonia's values throughout this video. They convey personal stories that are about challenging yourself and connote that certain goals are easier to achieve when using authentic and reliable products. The various shots of landscapes and the use of wild nature as the setting for sports emphasize this meaning (Carbonaro and Goldsmith 165). These surroundings symbolize stories that are intimately bound to the worn Patagonia clothing.

Fig. 4

The slogan at the end of the video says, “Share your story” (see fig. 4) and encourages the viewer to use the hashtag “#wornwear”. This hashtag functions as the signifier and signifies a feeling of collectivity. It represents the worn garments that have become the symbol for various stories. It also reinforces the wearer to share their own personal story with others, who also share theirs and are part of the “#wornwear” community. This speaks to the consumer directly and personalizes the message.

The “myth” in this video is built on an emphasized belief that material objects provide the wearer immaterial experiences. The video conveys the message that
Patagonia garments symbolize a way of life that is filled with adventures and new challenges. It offers the consumer a solid (material) base while having the opportunity to live their dreams and explore their boundaries.

3.1.3. Reflection

Patagonia’s advertisement strategy reinforces an image that suggests a distance from current society that is based on consumerism. Their campaigns are designed for the consumers who can identify with their free spirit and whose experiences are more valuable than a new garment. The brand provides an experience that adds symbolic meaning to the products (Bilton 138) through adding personalized stories that evoke recognition or a desire to maintain the life that is portrayed.

Patagonia’s ideology or “myth” concentrates on the act of a sustainable lifestyle based on the repair of garments and the reduction of consuming behavior. The wearers of the brands’ garments are represented as adventurous and supporters of a sustainable philosophy. This implies that buying Patagonia clothes provides the customer with a similar experience.

Remarkable is that the individual consumer becomes involved in the paradox of Patagonia’s advertisements between buying and not buying. The brand centers their campaigns around the notion of sustainable garments, while on the other hand Patagonia products are praised for their quality and stylized advertisements are created to persuade the future consumer.
3.2 H&M

Fast-fashion brand H&M was founded in 1947 and has accomplished a huge position in the global apparel market (Williams 58). Ethical and environmental values have been key aspects in the business (Williams 58) from the start. I will examine the brand’s sustainable side through their advertisements and study how they convey a sustainable image within the area of fast fashion.

3.2.1 Conscious Collection

Since 2011 H&M has launched a sustainable collection on a yearly basis: the Conscious Collection. This collection consists of clothing within an affordable price range aimed at the mass consumer. H&M claims the following about this collection on their official website:

“Making more sustainable fashion choices available, affordable and attractive to as many people as possible. That’s what H&M Conscious is all about. We want to be able to offer the latest trends and the possibility of exploring your own personal style in a conscious way” (Hm.com).

The final sentence shows a clear contradiction in the way that they claim to serve both the latest trends and at the same time provide the possibility to develop an individual style. It can be questioned how individuality can be explored when everything that is offered fits the same trends. It implies a safety zone wherein customers can explore fashion, yet it is produced in a sustainable way. Providing “easy” and popular fashion corresponds with the approachability of the brand towards the consumer.

I will now give a semiotic analysis of advertisement material of the Conscious Collection to decode their sustainable image.
The logo of this collection (see fig. 5), which is used on all of their branding material, is very simple. Both the slogan and the background color are the main signs. The vibrant green signifies a connection towards nature and constructs an awareness of sustainability.

![H&M Conscious Logo](image)

Fig. 5

The slogan “H&M Conscious, for a more sustainable fashion future” functions as the linguistic message (Barthes, *Rhetoric* 154). The word “conscious” is defined according to the *Oxford Learner’s Dictionary of Academic English* as “aware of something; noticing something” (“Conscious”). The slogan denotes awareness concerning the garments the consumer purchases and reinforces the connection between consciousness and fashion.
3.2.2 Conscious Collection: Spring 2013

During the next analysis, I will discuss an image from the Spring 2013 campaign (see fig. 6). Famous actress Vanessa Paradis has the leading role in this campaign. The actress is positioned in an interior that is completely dominated by “nature”; artificial branches and flowers are in a bewildered state all over the setting combined with a floor covered in grass and petals. This imitated greenery connotes the nature that is tied to the conscious thinking of H&M.

Fig. 6

The actress, who functions as a signifier, is positioned on a small sofa in the center of the image, which signifies power and confidence. She poses seductively and gazes straight into the camera, which emphasizes her dominant position within the image. Remarkable about her appearance is the amount of skin she shows. The female body is
transformed into an object of desire and evokes attention, while the conscious character remains superficial and shallow.

Everything in this image revolves around the flowered dress and the recurrence of the flowers in the background. They connote the message that wearing a sustainable “conscious” garment, transforms the wearer into a desirable and attractive person. Although nature and environment are one of H&M’s main topics regarding the conscious collection, the nature depicted here only seems to function as a "theatrical prop" (Carbonaro and Goldsmith 164). The image seems artificial (Carbonaro and Goldsmith 164) and lacks purity and consciousness. This evokes the question if H&M generates this fake “green” image on purpose, could it be a sense of irony? It suggests that the choice of this superficial “green” image is done in an obvious manner.

The focus has shifted from the act of sustainability to portraying it in an appealing way for the mass consumer. This corresponds with Patrizia Calefato’s point of view that garments become objects of desire, which are influenced by social significations (83). The desire to dress in a certain way often functions as a bridge to a specific lifestyle (Calefato 83).

An attractive model that represents the brand’s image wears the flowered dress and transforms the dressed body into a sign of desire. The consumer purchases the garment to aim for the same admiring position. The advertisement covers the “myth” of the desired female body. It captures the Westernized beauty standards and promises the consumer an aesthetically pleasing fantasy.

3.2.3 Conscious Collection: Spring 2015

Similar to this representation is their spring collection in 2015, where they used actress Olivia Wilde as their model for the campaign (see fig. 7). Again, the connection
between a sustainable philosophy and their garments is put together in a purposely arranged and artificial way. The presented slogan in the image says, "Style and awareness, not one or the other. Like fashion should always be" (Hm.com). This reinforces the brand’s point of view that being conscious and making sustainable choices is associated with fashion.

The signifier “Fashion” signifies the awareness of sustainability together with the notion of being “in fashion”. This reinforces the approachability for the consumer, because sustainability is subtly integrated into normal fashion.

Next to the photo of the actress, who is wearing conscious garments, is a large image representing a natural environment. The positioning of both photographs implies a reinforcement of the symbolic meaning behind the garment. Nature serves as a reminder towards the customer that there actually is a connection with sustainable values.
Although it has less resemblance to the artificial appearance of fig. 6, the photograph has a vast amount of similarities with unsustainable advertising. The appearance of the model conforms to similar standards concerning beauty as seen in fig. 6.

The advertisement clearly holds a “myth” based on a shallow natural connotation tied to trendy fashion. It presents the consumer a superficial story that maintains to present an appealing image that speaks to the consumer’s identity.

3.2.4 Conscious Collection: Exclusive 2016

More recent examples of Conscious Collection advertisements show that the presence of symbols that connote straightforward greenness has reduced. Images of the Conscious
Exclusive Collection 2016 (see fig. 8 and 9) embrace a more minimalistic and toned down appearance.

The garments function as the main signifier in both images. The prints of both dresses are derived from natural elements such as vegetation and mineral structures, which signify a distinct connection towards nature. The neutral color palette reinforces the link towards the environment and sustainability.

![Image](image_url)

**Fig. 9**

The model’s attitude expresses indifference in a cool and “effortless” way that refers strongly to the spreads published in Western fashion magazines such as Vogue. This reinforces the connection towards fashion that H&M claims to maintain with their Conscious Collection. At the same time undermines it the brand’s sustainable character.
In comparison to previous advertisements, the image lacks an obvious representation of nature (as seen in fig. 6).

The consumer is no longer exposed to excessively artificial “nature” that supposedly represents the sustainable belief. Instead, the images portray an appealing high fashion attitude that ties to the “myth” of Westernized beauty.

3.2.5 Reflection

H&M aspires towards “a corporate image of environmental responsibility” (Cox 38). The fast fashion brand aims for a “fashion forward” image and the “normal” consumer as a target audience. H&M presents their clothing through a fashion forward strategy that transforms the garments into desirable objects (83 Calefato). The garments become a social subject and communicate with both the viewer and wearer a social identity in multiple forms (84 Calefato). Kate Fletcher argues “that fashion pieces are “consumed” for their symbolic functions...[and thus] as a practice of identity formation” (Journeys 144)

Noteworthy is the transition in the visual style of their advertisements. Throughout the years the artificial “in your face” green image shifted towards a more minimal and sophisticated look. As if the brand no longer needed to prove their sustainable values. However, the underlying “myth” of (Westernized) beauty and the desirable female body remains through their advertisements.

In the end, H&M offers an ideological image that conforms to the dominant aesthetic values of today’s culture and therefore approaches the unknowing consumer who attempts to follow the latest trends.
3.3 Stella McCartney

Stella McCartney is a luxury brand that exists since 2001 and well known for its philosophy based on environmental and ethical values. According to Kapferer and Michaut, "the vast majority of luxury brands have so far remained relatively discreet on the sustainability issue" (8), but Stella McCartney is an exception to the rule.

The aim of luxury is to give objects a unique position and deliver a dream to the consumer. Such a dream should not be contaminated with the damaged idea of environmental pollution (Kapferer and Michaut 8). However, Stella McCartney has shown that sustainability can become an element of desirability in itself, and therefore it is one of the core values of such a luxury brand (Kapferer and Michaut 8).

The brand positions itself as the first and only luxury brand that refuses the use of materials made of animals. Stella McCartney claims, “[w]e are the world’s first and only vegetarian luxury brand. We do not think that any animal should give their life for the sake of fashion. We do not use and have never used leather, skins, feathers or fur in any of our products” (Stellamccartney.com). In addition, the brand has a strong belief that sustainable values can be intertwined with a modern appearance:

“We think that being modern means considering the future, not just the future of design, but also the future of the planet. We are dedicated to helping change people’s perception of eco fashion. We think that sustainability can take the form of beautiful and modern clothing and accessories” (Stellamccartney.com)

The following paragraphs contain an analysis of various campaigns released by Stella McCartney.
3.3.1 No Leathers, Feathers, or Fur

The first analysis consists of an image of their Winter Accessory 2016 collection (see fig. 10). The linguistic message “No leathers, feathers, or fur” refers to the prior discussed vegetarian philosophy of the brand. In this case, the signifiers “leathers”, “feathers”, and “fur” connote the entirety that is excluded by Stella McCartney’s sustainable philosophy. Significant is the lack of garments on the model’s body. She only wears see-through underwear and a handbag that covers the upper part of her body. The unclothed body can be interpreted as the representation of an honest and ethical approved brand concerning the slogan “No Leathers, Feathers, or Fur”. However, the sexualized female body undermines this statement. The transparent lace-like materiality of the undergarment adds a layer of sexiness and desire to the photograph.
The model’s body is presented on a sofa positioned in a passive pose. The laid down position emphasizes the appealing and vulnerable character. Similar to the other case studies’ advertisements is the model an attractive female that reinforces the brand’s dominant aesthetic and attractive values despite the sustainable and green character.

The bag, which is one of the signifiers, is made from leather-looking material and covers the upper part of the body. It symbolizes the slogan on this advertisement and becomes the symbol for sustainable, yet fashionable products. The bag has transformed in a symbolic product since it embodies more than a material function only (Bilton 138). It signifies the cultural values of Stella McCartney and connotes a fashion forward view.

Finally, all the visual signs in this advertisement communicate with the linguistic message. The use of only vegetarian and sustainable materials, which clashes with most of today’s luxury brands, does not transform the brand’s image. The “myth” of beauty and the sexualized female body remains a significant theme and offers the consumer an aesthetically pleasing image while supporting a sustainable belief.

### 3.3.2 All is Love

The next image that will be discussed belongs to Stella McCartney’s recently launched Spring/Summer 2017 campaign for women’s clothing (see fig. 11). The brand states the following about this collection, “Our latest collection is a celebration of the spirit of love and life in the ease of summer”. This sentence implies with “…a celebration of the spirit of love…” that emotional beliefs are essential and strongly connected to the garments (Stellamccartney.com).
Significant for the garments are the statements placed upon the fabrics: “No fur”, “No leather”, “Love”, and “Thanks girls”. The first two signifiers connote the corporate values regarding sustainable and ethical designs, which were also used in the image discussed previously. Secondly, the signifiers “Love” and “Thanks girls” connote the general concept of this collection, which relates to the statement discussed in the previous paragraph. Both convey a positive message towards the wearers of the garment and evoke a communal feeling. The slogan “Thanks girls”, “charges the season’s energetic and uplifting mood” (Stellamccartney.com). The brand supports love and an optimistic mindset in addition to their sustainable and ethical values.
The posing of the model is less restricted and more active in contrast with the previous advertisement. The model’s overall appearance is in strong contrast with the sexualized female body in fig. 10. The stretched pose connotes a strong and dominant character. This self-confidence is reinforced by the inspirational quotes on the garments (i.e. “Thanks Girls”).

The photograph is shot in a desert-like environment. The tropical vegetation supports the tropical character of the campaign. It emphasizes the summery and careless feeling the brand attempts to convey. The use of a natural environment can also serve to accentuate their sustainable point of view and the close relation towards the environment.

The “All is Love” campaign seems to inspire its concept on the power of the female gender combined with their reappearing sustainable values. The positive atmosphere and the emphasis on communal love both create the “myth” that focuses on femininity and self-love.

3.3.3 Deforestation

The final example is a short video called *Deforestation: a story of sustainable viscose* that was released in 2016 on the official website. The fabric viscose is originated from trees and often from endangered forests. However, Stella McCartney only uses viscose from sustainably certified forests in Sweden (Stellamccartney.com). The brand wants to emphasize the issue of deforestation and shows their awareness regarding the issue in this video.

The narrator is the famous model Carmen Kass, who tells the story of the sustainable viscose used at Stella McCartney. It is remarkable that similar to the cases of H&M, they use a well-known person as a symbol to convey this message. The model,
which functions as the signifier, signifies high-fashion since she works for various high-end designer brands. This reinforces the modern image the brand aims to maintain, even in an informative video like this. The connection to fashion is emphasized by the models' behavior. For example, she frequently poses as if she is photographed and even walks in a way that suggests she is walking down the runway (see fig. 12).

The setting represents a Swedish town in a natural environment, which signifies the step the brand has taken towards sustainable produced viscose. All of the miniature props in the video are significantly small in comparison with Carmen Kass (fig. 13). This results in an artificial atmosphere in which the human occupies a dominant position towards the environment. This is confirmed by the cause of deforestation by viscose production. However, Stella McCartney fights this notion with the deforestation initiative.
At the end of the video a close up is shown of a single gravestone (see fig. 14). The engraving says “Deforestation R.I.P.”, which signifies the end of forest exploitation and the step Stella McCartney has taken towards a more ecological production. The
gravestone is a metaphor for the “death” of deforestation and symbolizes the “myth” of human domination towards the environment. They are the ones who destroy it, but also hold the power to protect and rebuild it.

3.3.4 Reflection

Stella McCartney tries to balance their sustainable values with their fashion forward state of mind. The luxury brand provides a corporate identity based on environmental responsibility (38 Cox) and "...addresses the relationship between a product and the biophysical environment" (Cox 38). For example, the short video about deforestation presents the line between informative content and an aesthetic and fashion forward image.

Stella McCartney states in The Sustainable Fashion Handbook, "My job is to create beautiful luxurious things. I love that people come into the store and don't even know that something is organic or in faux leather. That's the biggest challenge, having people not notice" (Black 32). While the "No Leathers, Feathers, or Fur" campaign has striking slogans and transforms the nude female body into an object, the "All is Love" collection speaks in a more modest and subtle tone that is focused on an emotional message.

When reflecting on the analyzed advertisements it can be noticed that the brand uses discourses to create a “dream” for the consumer. According to Ron Beasley and Marcel Danesi, “[this] allows the consumer to believe that when they buy the advertised product, they transform into the person that is being promoted...” (145). Stella McCartney generates an aesthetically pleasing image that speaks to the luxury consumer with their sustainable belief as a fundamental core.
4. Conclusion

Sustainable fashion advertisements aim to create awareness regarding sustainability while they also reinforce the consumer to increase their buying behavior. This paradox evoked my interest in the messages the brands convey through their ads.

Throughout this thesis, the leading question was: How do Patagonia, H&M, and Stella McCartney represent their sustainable image through their advertisements? To answer this I analyzed different campaigns of each brand to derive a clear image of their sustainable brand identity. The method I applied consisted of a semiotic analysis, which was used to decode the symbols and signs within the images.

To conclude, all three case studies provide an individual corporate identity with sustainable values. There is a clear distinction visible between Patagonia and the brands H&M and Stella McCartney.

Patagonia distinguishes themselves through their representation of sustainable values that focus more on a belief or lifestyle and less on fashion. Their advertisements aim to reduce consumerism and concentrate more on an experience within their advertisements. It evokes a desire to practice the same lifestyle and use similar products as the people portrayed in the advertisement. Therefore the brand’s products have become symbols with meaning attached to them.

On the contrary, H&M is known as a fast fashion brand and thus their focus is on offering trendy pieces that suit the current fashion trends. Although H&M positions themselves within the sustainable market with their Conscious Collection, their advertisements convey a strong artificial image that places the female body into a desirable position that has no connection with sustainability. The brand uses easily recognizable symbols that create an understandable and approachable image for the mass consumer.
Stella McCartney’s approach shows resemblances with the strategy of H&M. Both brands are positioned within the fashion market and aspire a fashion forward appearance. However, Stella McCartney presents a more balanced image in which both fashion and ethical beliefs are of significant value. The brands’ main aim is to provide the consumer a luxury experience with a sustainable background.

All three brands aspire to raise awareness for environmental problems. From the analyses it becomes clear that this is done in a way to attract future consumers to their brand. Sustainability is promoted through symbols that are straightforward and recognizable for the future consumer. Besides this, major parts of the advertisements contain signs that connote a desirable image or lifestyle that the consumer wants to maintain. Authentic individuality, conformed beauty standards, and the sexualized female body are recurring myths in the advertisements.

Patagonia, H&M and Stella McCartney depict a sustainable image that is mainly built on conventional codes to draw consumers towards their products. This implies that even fashion with a sustainable “green” core, aims to create an appealing image through their advertisements.
5. Works Cited


170. Print.


5.1 List of Figures


