

The Fast Fashion Industry and Sustainability: Where is the ‘fast’ now?

How a large player in the fast fashion industry responds to a public discourse regarding sustainability – Zara case study

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Executive Summary

This study proposes an overview of the response strategies displayed by Zara regarding institutional pressure from the public debate concerning sustainability in the industry over time. The purpose of this study is to generate more empirical insights on the responses of organizations in the industry regarding sustainability matters and to identify how these responses develop over time. First, a timeline of the public debate was created, by examining all articles regarding fast fashion and sustainability in two large newspapers. Afterwards, Zara's response strategies were analyzed by performing a document content analysis annual reports, public interviews, and statements. Moreover, to increase the validity of the results, critical third-party data on Zara's response strategies has been included in this content analysis as well. The results demonstrate that Zara displays three response strategies over time: *acquiesce* consistently, and *manipulation* and *avoidance* increasingly as the pressure of the public debate intensifies. Moreover, the issue of incompatibility between fast fashion and sustainability intensifies over the years, creating a severe pressure point in the fashion industry. As the public debate is sketched by two media outlets only, and the response strategies of only one organization are examined, this research constitutes some limitations. Future research therefore could for example investigate the response strategies of other organizations in the industry. Moreover, future research could explore the severe pressure point of incompatibility, by for example investigating its impact on organizations' business strategies.

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Introduction

It is an understatement when one states that the fast fashion industry has grown intensely rapidly in the past two decades. Inditex – as the parent company of Zara and other fast fashion brands – sold for roughly 10 billion euros worth of clothing in 2009 and managed to produce a revenue of 28,3 billion euros exactly ten years later (Terra, 2019). Its largest competitor, H&M Group, has shown an increase of 11% of their revenue in the second quarter of 2019 (Nu.nl, 2019). Moreover, in 2014 60% more garments were sold than in 2000 (McFall-Johnsen, 2019). According to Caro and Martínez-de-Albéniz (2014), the fast fashion industry is characterized by three main elements: offering clothing at affordable prices; having many fashion cycles a year to produce rapidly, and offering clothing with a high fashion degree to sell garments on trend.

However, as many benefits the industry has for consumers, downsides of fast fashion have been brought to light over the last years. The fast fashion industry is for example exceptionally polluting, as it produces more carbon emissions than all flights and maritime shipping combined. This constitutes roughly 10% of all carbon emissions produced by humanity (McFall-Johnsen, 2019). The effect of the industry on the environment is undeniable and therefore causes sustainability pressure on the fast fashion industry (Oxford Analytica, 2019).

Due to the rise of the environmental awareness and the polluting business model of the fast fashion industry, the industry has been discussed in academic literature. Many articles posing different arguments and standpoints have been published on the topic, creating an ongoing debate of what is happening in the industry (Black, 2008; Garcia-Torres, Rey-Garcia, & Albareda-Vivo, 2017; Griskevicius et al., 2010; Nguyen, Le, Ho, & Nguyen, 2020; Teunissen & Voet, 2013; Widloecher, 2010).

Consequently, stakeholders have become more aware of environmental issues and therefore behave more conscious towards this matter (Cole, 2019). For example, customers increasingly prefer to purchase goods from companies that are actively allocating resources to manage to deal with their ‘footprint’ on the environment (Butler, 2018). Stakeholder demands change regarding sustainability matters due to increasing awareness, and this results in a so-called change in institutionalized rules according to the neo-institutional theory. Institutionalized rules are classifications woven into society according to Berger and Luckmann (1967). These rules determine expectation structures. An organization’s institutional environment shapes the design of the organization by institutionalized expectation structures. In this case, as expectations and demands of society change towards a more sustainability-oriented mind-set (i.e., changed

institutionalized rules), the fast fashion organizations operate in a changing environment, in which institutions create pressure on the organizations in this industry (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). An example of this is how organizations are pressured to be more aware of and sensitive to sustainability. Take the rapid upswing of the climate group Extinction Rebellion as an example. The group was originated in 2018 only, but already manages to operate in over 62 countries at this point in time. Last year, the group pressured fashion brands to cancel London Fashion Week. Moreover, they have introduced the #boycottfashion movement. The industry is under pressure due to a shift in institutionalized rules: towards more awareness and sensitivity for sustainability (Chan, 2020).

As described in the previous paragraph, the institutional pressure of the debate on organizations in the fast fashion industry has been discussed in academic literature as the industry gets under pressure. A public discourse has emerged in which attention of society has been drawn to the fashion industry and where the public has created diverse opinions regarding the fast fashion industry and its sustainability efforts, instigating an increasingly urgent debate and consequently pressure on the organizations (Binet, et al., 2018).

Media has brought to light some critical events in the industry regarding the environment over the last years, triggering the rising public criticism and thereby creating increasing pressure on the organizations (McNeill & Moore, 2015). One of the larger scandals in the industry is the Rana Plaza disaster, in which a collapse of a fast fashion production factory caused 1,134 deaths, instigating substantial public discontent and media attention (Hoskins, 2015). Another scandal has occurred in 2017, when fast fashion retailer Zara was accused of being partly responsible for the viscose factories' pollution scandal in China (Hoskins, 2017). Additionally, more recently, it has been revealed by a Danish TV station that H&M has burned 60 tons of new and unsold clothes since 2013 (Lieber, 2018).

In result, the negative public attention in addition to the changed institutionalized rules in society, cause a pressure on the industry in the form of rising public discontent. This public discontent shows for example through campaigns such as the #nonewclothes and #secondhandseptember campaigns in 2020, and the 'Friday for Future'-movement, in which millions of people protested against industries that according to them contribute to the climate change such as the fast fashion industry on September 20th 2019 (Bridgett, 2019).

These examples demonstrate the institutional pressure on the fast fashion organizations over the past years. Concludingly, the pressure of the public debate is topical, urgent, and evident. As stated by Kozlowski, Bardecki, and Searcy in 2012 (p.33) already: “The fashion industry needs to start addressing the negative aspects of apparel products. There is a responsibility with the producers, for the products in the marketplace”. Moreover, as indicated previously, for being one of the most polluting industries, the fast fashion industry faces high pressure and discontent, which requires proper responses and change by the organizations under pressure rapidly. Additionally, recent research has focused on providing suggestions for the fast fashion industry in terms of responding to the institutional pressures. For example, Neumann, Martinez, and Martinez (2020) state that companies should emphasize on the compatibility of sustainability and fast fashion in order to maintain trust from consumers. Concludingly, there has been urgency for companies to respond to the pressure for over a decade, and theoretical overviews of the debate and suggestions for organizational responses have been provided accordingly.

However, research on the actual response of fast fashion organizations to this call for change in practice and the developments herein over time, is lacking. According to a literature review of sustainability in the fashion industry by Thorisdottir and Johannsdottir (2019), there is a need for empirical studies on what strategies fashion businesses adopt regarding sustainability. Moreover, in their research, Caridi et al. (2017) have identified this need for knowledge on strategies of companies regarding sustainability as well. Empirical analyses on the response of organizations regarding sustainability issues exists however, there is little empirical analysis on the fast fashion industry (Desore & Narula, 2016). Moreover, this research adds to the need for empirical analysis on fast fashion organizations’ response strategies regarding sustainability by investigating the -developments in- response strategies over time.

The presence of the institutional pressure is recognized, as well as the increase in efforts from fast fashion retailers to operate more sustainably -or to at least address the issue (Chan, 2020). However, sufficient insights on what strategies are adopted by the organizations in the fast fashion industry over time to respond to this pressure are missing. These insights help to gain understanding of the development of the debate and the development of the responses strategies of the organization accordingly, which implies potential new aspects for academic research on the progress and future of the public debate and the response strategies of organizations accordingly. Moreover, insights in how responses evolve over time aid managers in the debate on sustainability to help reflect and advance the effective management of these issues in the

future. Additionally, consumers are to be aware of the strategies of organizations behind their sustainability efforts, enhancing their sensitivity to the debate and its implications.

The goal of this research is to be a starting point for filling the gap in literature, by providing an empirical analysis of the responses an organization in the fast fashion industry displays towards the institutional pressure of the public debate over time.

This aids to fill the discrepancy in literature and lack of empirical analysis, by helping to understand what strategies organizations in this industry use and to provide insights on how they cope with the pressure, as to how they present themselves. Moreover, this study provides insights on how the responses of an exemplary organization have shifted over time. This aids to examine the links with the public pressure on organizations and additionally, what the response strategies of these companies over the years could potentially suggest for the development of the fast fashion industry debate regarding sustainability. This is pertinent, as some authors regard the fast fashion organizations to be the ones who hold the power to be able to break the tie regarding environmental issues, as governmental regulations are habitually deficient (Na & Na, 2015).

The gap in literature on the need for empirical research as acknowledged by Thorisdottir and Johannsdottir (2019) is far-reaching and beyond the scope of this study. Therefore, this study serves as a beginning to fill the discrepancy and need for empirical research on strategies of fashion businesses regarding sustainability pressure. To match the scope of this study to this gap, a single-case study is performed on the response strategies to sustainability pressure of the largest player in the industry: Zara.

The response strategies of Zara concerning the institutional pressure from the public debate regarding sustainability are analysed over a timeframe of ten years. Moreover, as it is not realisable to get insights on how Zara truly behaves and reacts to the pressure of the public debate, this study focuses on response strategies as to how Zara represents itself and how the organization displays to behave regarding sustainability pressures.

Therefore, the research question of this research constitutes:

“What response strategies does Zara display to react to the public discourse on fast fashion and sustainability over time? “

Thus, the goal of this study is to investigate how the fast fashion industry, over time, responds to the institutional pressure of the public debate, by examining the response strategies Zara displays.

A public pressure and discourse perspective has been chosen as what occurs in society, constitutes the actual institutional pressure that organizations face. Academic literature has been

published on the discourse on fast fashion and sustainability (Black, 2008; Garcia-Torres, Rey-Garcia, & Albareda-Vivo, 2017; Griskevicius et al., 2010; Nguyen, Le, Ho, & Nguyen, 2020; Teunissen & Voet, 2013; Widloecher, 2010). Nevertheless, an accurate overview of what the debate looks like in public over the years and how it has developed, is missing. Consequently, in order to identify what response strategies the fast fashion industry displays to cope with the institutional pressure, an overview of this institutional pressure and thus developments of the debate is required.

It is essential to be able to comprehend and identify connections between Zara's organizational responses to the debate and the public debate itself over the years. To create the overview of the public debate, all news articles from two prestigious media outlets (i.e., New York Times and Financial Times) regarding fast fashion and sustainability over a specific timeframe are examined by means of a content document analysis, creating an understanding of what the public debate looks like and how it evolves over time.

In a second step, based on this overview, Zara's self-representation on sustainability is to be analyzed by investigating how the company responds to the institutional pressure of the debate and its critical moments. This is achieved by linking Zara's self-representation regarding sustainability to five different response strategies to institutional pressures that have been identified by Oliver (1991), which are to be elaborated on the next chapter.

The response strategies and changes in the self-representation of Zara regarding sustainability efforts were investigated by examining annual reports, interviews, corporate statements regarding critical events. Secondly, a case study on Zara's changes in sustainability practices due to response strategies to discourse is performed by doing a document analysis on Zara's annual reports, interviews, reactions to media and media outlets that criticize Zara's statements.

Zara is chosen to be the organization under investigation as it is one of the subsidiaries of Inditex. Inditex is one of the largest fast fashion retailers in the industry. It operates in over 200 countries online and 96 countries in stores. The company was founded in 1963 in Spain. Eight brands reside within Inditex: Zara, Massimo Dutti, Bershka, Stradivarius, Oysho, Zara Home, Pull&Bear and Uterqüe (Inditex, 2021). Zara is the leading brand, with a sales share of 69% within Inditex (Statista.com, 2019). Considering the scope of this study, this research focuses on analysing Inditex' leading brand's self-representation and response strategies only: Zara.

The subsequent chapters aid to provide an answer to the research question. In the second chapter, the theoretical basis for this research is provided. The terminologies of ecological sustainability and fashion are clarified and an overview of the discourse in literature between

the two is provided to help identify potential core aspects that aid to guide the empirical analysis of this research. Moreover, organizational response strategies and drivers for response to institutional pressures are discussed, to help identify and understand how Zara responds to the public discourse pressure.

In the third chapter, the methodology and the ‘how’ of this research is to be examined.

In the fourth chapter, the overview of the public debate and Zara’s response strategies are reviewed, links between the debate and Zara’s responses are drawn and results of the analyses as to the response strategies of Zara are to be provided. Subsequently, chapter five constitutes of conclusion, discussion, implications, and limitations sections in which this research is summarized, discussed, and reflected upon.

2. Literature review

This chapter serves to develop a thorough overview of the literature concerning the topics of fast fashion, sustainability, and organizational response strategies. The major variables in this research constitute the debate regarding fast fashion and sustainability as the independent variable, and Zara's response strategies regarding sustainability practices as the dependent variable.

In order to understand the fast fashion industry and the debate, some core elements are to be enlightened. Firstly, it is of essence to introduce the fast fashion industry and its core elements (2.1). Consequently, the definition of the term sustainability requires elucidation (2.2). Subsequently, the debate is introduced by examining existing academic literature (2.3). Examining the debate in academic literature is vital to help generate an understanding of what underlies the debate in practice/public. It helps identifying useful sensitizing concepts for the research. In 2.4, drivers for changes in organizational behaviour are discussed and organizational response strategies to institutional pressures are enlightened. The former (i.e. drivers) aiding this research by providing a theoretical link between the debate and organizational response strategies for Zara as to what potentially drives the changes in its self-representation or reactions towards pressure. The latter (i.e. organizational response strategies) by providing different response strategies to link Zara's self-representation and reactions to during the research.

2.1 Fast fashion

2.1.1 Key components and definition

The fast fashion industry is a subpart of the fashion industry. Generally, the fashion industry is divided into two mainstreams. The first is haute couture and focuses on exclusive and custom-made design wear. The second is prêt-à-porter, which focuses on standardized clothing that is ready-to-wear. However, this division can also be further divided into smaller subindustries. The market segment of the fast fashion industry within the prêt-à-porter subindustry is in between the premium ready-to-wear fashion stores and the supermarkets that sell clothing (Bruce & Hines, 2007). The largest players in the fast fashion industry at this moment are Zara, H&M, Uniqlo, Forever21 and Topshop.

As examined by Caro and Martínez-de-Albéniz (2014), the largest fast fashion companies have certain elements in common. For example, these organizations all are rather fashion followers that aim to sell for a mid-to-low price category instead of trend-setters like the 'haute couture'

companies. But, the products that are sold at fast fashion companies differ between fashion, fashion-basic and basics (Abernathy et al., 1999). At H&M, 70% of the product assortment is based on basics, whereas for Zara it is roughly 40%. Thus, even though there are commonalities, the product assortment of the two largest players show some differences. Moreover, differences in pricing strategy and positioning are also present.

Different studies that propose a fast fashion definition have focus on different important aspects. For example, Bhardwaj and Fairhurst (2010) focus on the aspect of adopting a responsive supply chain and the frequency and time frame of production. The high 'speed to market' is according to them the most important aspect of fast fashion. Sull and Turconi (2008) state that fast fashion is about bringing fashionable and affordable items to the masses. This definition focuses on the trendy and affordable aspect of fast fashion. Additionally, Cachon and Swinney (2011) propose that fast fashion supply chains do not only focus on responsiveness in time but also on strategic consumer behaviour. Therefore, it is not only important to produce quickly, but to produce according to the demand. A fast fashion supply chain is competitive when it is flexible, cost-effective, agile and responsive (Bruce et al., 2004)

Analyzing the literature, three key components are identified in the definitions provided in articles or research on fast fashion (Caro & Martínez-de-Albéniz, 2014). The first component is affordability. Fast fashion organizations bring fashion to the consumer for affordable prices. The second component is one that helps living up to the expectation of delivering items by having a responsive supply chain with many fashion cycles. A responsive supply chain allows fast fashion organizations to respond quickly to emerging trends. The third component elaborates on the latter, by focusing at the fashionability of the product offering, as fast fashion companies are to offer trendy clothing.

A definition that combines all three components in its definition is the definition of Caro and Martínez-de-Albéniz (2014), who articulate that the fast fashion industry is characterized by offering trendy clothing for affordable prices, requiring a responsive supply chain in order to be able to produce quickly and switch in their product assortment to keep it up to date.

As can be concluded from literature, the supply chain is key in the business model of a fast fashion retailer. A responsive production is required to be able to sell these products quickly at the moment these are on trend, so that more value can be captured from the customer (Muran, 2007). This production is based on a supply chain that manages to launch fashionable products within two months instead of the regular twelve months for basics (Caro & Martínez-de-Albéniz, 2013). The time consuming aspect of samples is minimized, by standardizing the process and often using the same materials and having virtual displays. The quick launch of

products is also due to the fact that for example Inditex does not make use of collections, but focuses on the item-level and can launch products solely to keep on track with trends. This implies that clothing is not launched in collections, but per item, which is time-saving as it is easier to quickly produce and follow the latest fashion trends.

Moreover, this helps to optimise fast fashion precision: being able to produce smaller batches quicker when necessary, instead of producing one large batch at a specific point in time (H&M, 2011). Consequently, fast fashion companies are able to produce more frequently and have assortment changes often.

Being able to have such a responsive and rapid production and maintain a mid-to-low price for the sale of clothing, fast fashion retailers often outsource their manufactories (Arrigo, 2020). The manufacturing in this case is offshored to a low-cost country.

2.1.2. The rise of fast fashion and key drivers

The growth of fast fashion resides in three main drivers. Firstly, globalization and its benefits such as increased mobility and technological innovations have played a significant role in the rise of fast fashion. Secondly, intense competition is a key driver of the growth of this industry. The third driver that is discussed in literature is high consumer demands, in which consumers have an insatiable demand for new products.

A large driver is globalization, as it caused large players in the fashion industry to be able to reach customers internationally and grow to multinational organizations. In terms of mobility, it became easier to establish oneself in an international environment. In terms of technological innovations, internet allowed the fast fashion retailers to reach international customers via e-commerce. These developments led to the ability for large organizations to move across borders and expand their reach. Moreover, increased mobility has allowed large retailers to offshore certain business activities such as the manufacturing to other lower-cost countries in order to save costs, which was beneficial to beat competition (Tokatli, Kizilgün, & Cho, 2019).

According to Taplin (1999), due to a rise in competition, fashion retailers started competing based on production speed of garments, causing the adoption of ‘quick fashion’ in order to meet consumer demands.

Due to the high levels of competition, consumers were assigned an increasing level of power, creating a feedback loop. The fashion industry started to produce more frequently according to the consumer demands, which in turn promotes unnecessary consumption (Christopher, Lowson, & Peck, 2004; Ozdamar-Ertekin, 2016).

Concludingly, different aspects have caused fast fashion to become such a trending and large industry according to the literature, an industry that now is under pressure due to the size of its impact.

2.2 Analysing sustainability

Whereas the definitions of sustainability have been elucidated in academic literature in the 20th century (Brown et al., 1987; Nations, 1987; Shearman, 1990), it has not been until the last decade that academic literature has been dedicated to research on incorporating sustainability into a firm's business model a lot. Awareness regarding sustainability has increased over the last few years (Buerke et al., 2017).

Subsequently, as awareness has increased, business is progressively under pressure regarding this matter. According to Porter and Kramer (2011), business is designated as being responsible for the current unsustainable lifestyle by many. Organizations are accused of making profits at the expense of development in regard to sustainability (Beschoner & Mueller, 2007).

Thus, an urgency resides for businesses to act more sustainably in order to protect their legitimacy. In the next section, this pressure on the fast fashion industry is elucidated on by introducing different standpoints regarding the debate on fast fashion and sustainability.

Sustainability is a term in research that is intensely complex and therefore it has been proven to be difficult to provide a standardized definition for the term (Moore, Mascarenhas, and Straus, 2017). A relatively narrow view of 'sustainability' is developed and used by most companies, involving only aspects relevant to the organizations' business practices (Bateh, Heaton, Arbogast, & Broadbent, 2013). There simply is lack of agreement on the definition of sustainability in literature. However, for this study, it is important to determine what sustainability is, as this term lies at the core of one of the variables under investigation: the public debate.

The article written by Brown et al. (1987) was one of the first that focused on providing a thorough definition of sustainability. According to this study, its meaning depends strongly upon the context and whether a social, ecological or economic perspective is used. Based upon these different perspectives, three different definitions arose. As in this research the focus lies on ecological sustainability, only this definition is to be provided: "*the continued productivity and functioning of ecosystems*" (p.716). However, this constitutes a rather lexical meaning, which can be found in a dictionary. A second meaning is the implicative meaning according to Shearman (1990), which is more focused on significance and concept. He states that ecological

sustainability development is a process in which a higher bar of life for people is sought by enhancing competences to live well, though recognizing that this cannot be done at the expense of environmental integrity.

Bateh et al. (2013) discovered three main elements that are vital in the definition of sustainability. Firstly, longevity is an essential element in sustainability. Secondly, the maintenance of core principles or purposes is vital for sustainability. Lastly, having a responsibility to external needs is important.

Moreover, Moore, Mascarenhas, and Straus (2017, p.7) identified five key constructs that describe sustainability after a thorough literature review on the definition of sustainability:

“(1) after a defined period of time, (2) the program, clinical intervention, and/or implementation strategies continue to be delivered and/or (3) individual behavior change (i.e., clinician, patient) is maintained; (4) the program and individual behavior change may evolve or adapt while (5) continuing to produce benefits for individuals/systems”.

However, the most frequently and broad definition is known from the Brundtland Report (Nations, 1987, p.1): *“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs”.*

Analyzing the different definitions on sustainability, it becomes clear that there is still no consensus on the term. However, most definitions focus to a certain extent on the aim to not create expenses for systems in the future, and preferably produce benefits for them. Also, the definitions focus on a continuing period of time as well. In this research, the definition of Shearman (1990, p.7) is used, as it composes an all-encompassing definition and is oriented - similar to this study- towards environmental sustainability:

“Ecological sustainability development is a process in which a higher bar of life for people is sought by enhancing competences to live well, though recognizing that this cannot be done at the expense of environmental integrity”

2.3 Sustainability in Fast Fashion

From the previous chapters can be concluded that awareness for the matter of sustainability has risen over the last years. Moreover, it became apparent that the fast fashion business model is far from sustainable, in fact, it is extremely polluting. This creates a conflict, and therefore a debate. In this paragraph, the debate in literature is elucidated, as this guides this research by identifying dimensions to focus on regarding the public debate when investigating popular press and articles regarding the matter.

Bansal and Hoffman (1997) and Sitgson (1998) were one of the firsts to address the importance of incorporating sustainability in business. They emphasized on the growing impact of environmental factors on business and that a shift should occur from experts being responsible for sustainability to managers and employees in businesses also being responsible.

As expected, since fast fashion does not particularly adopt a sustainable business model, research arose on sustainability in the context of the textile and clothing industry specifically (Heeley, 1998).

Tham (2008) states that at the point of writing, the fast fashion market is rising rapidly, without having focus on environmentally oriented practices. Black (2008) at this point even defined the fast fashion industry as to be a paradox, since there exists tension between the call for sustainability and the intrinsic nature of fast fashion. The main argument that Tham (2008) emphasizes on in his research is that a call for environmentally sustainable approaches is required to recognize and embrace the beauty of fashion. Thus, the fashion industry needs change regarding sustainability matters to be embraced by the beauty of fashion -in other words: to see fashion as a positive and beautiful matter.

More recently published work takes an approach in which tools are proposed to help overcome the challenges regarding sustainability in the fast fashion supply chains (Garcia-Torres, Rey-Garcia, & Albareda-Vivo, 2017). The argument they imply is that fast fashion certainly can and is to be improved towards becoming a sustainable industry.

However, other research proposes that fast fashion and sustainability are never to be compatible, as the nature of the business model of fast fashion thrives on unsustainability (Griskevicius et al., 2010; Widloecher, 2010). According to them, the key characteristics of the industry (low costs, on trend and quick production) that fast fashion offers to customers can only be achieved by means of an unsustainable business model. In other words, the 'greener' a fashion business operates, the less competitive their market position is (Guo, Choi, & Shen, 2020).

The last argument identified in research is that organizations actually demonstrate change in regard to dealing with sustainability and that sustainability is a prioritized matter in business nowadays (Teunissen & Voet, 2013; Nguyen, Le, Ho, & Nguyen, 2020). However, the research that proposes this argument is mostly aiming at providing overviews of the current challenges and opportunities to providing sustainability enhancement in business and not specifically focused on exploring the progress of the industry.

Concludingly, relatively earlier published research generally demonstrates that an urgency resides for businesses to act upon sustainable matters (Bansal and Hoffman, 1997; Stigson, 1998). More recent research shows that on the one hand progress is showing in the field and that sustainability is already a priority when doing business (Ho, Le, Nguyen & Nnguyen, 2020; Teunissen & Voet, 2013), and on the other hand that sustainability and fast fashion are not compatible and that a sustainable version of the business can never exist (Cho, Guo, & Shen, 2020; Griskevicius et al., 2010; Widloecher, 2010). This constitutes a discourse, as this implies that according to some researchers fast fashion is now improving on prioritizing sustainability, whilst others state that this will never be truly possible. Also, there still exists recent research that emphasizes on the significance for change and tools to change, which adds another element to the debate (Garcia-Torres, Rey-Garcia, & Albareda-Vivo, 2017).

Therefore, in literature three main arguments are identified: the urgency for better or faster change in the sector; the incompatibility of the matter, and the argument that acknowledges that progress in prioritizing sustainability has already been made.

As the standpoints in literature are identified, the next step is to empirically assess the public debate. To provide an answer to the question as to how organizations respond to the pressure created by the public and the media regarding sustainability, it is essential to know what the data on the public debate demonstrates. The arguments derived from the academic debate are to be used during the investigation of the discourse in public regarding sustainability and fast fashion in news articles by providing concepts to focus on. This theory will guide this research by serving as knowledge to build on when conducting the research and analysing the debate in practice.

2.4 A change in organizational behaviour: response strategies

2.4.1. *Key drivers for change in organizational behaviour*

This research is focused on *how* Zara responds to the public discontent regarding sustainability and how they present their practices to the public. *Why* they potentially alter their behaviour in terms of self-representation concerning sustainability, provides insights into Zara's drivers for its changes in displayed responses and are to be explained in the framework of Blanco-Portela, Benayas, Pertierra, and Lozano (2017), who identified five main components that could drive organizational behaviour changes for integrating sustainability.

The five main components are the following: internal structure of the institution; external factors to the institution; stakeholders that constitute the community; institutional framework, and resources. The internal structure of the institution constitutes the structure of the organization, the type of institution and the size of the institution including its organizational chart. If one of these elements creates friction, pressure rises to change.

The external factors to the institution driving pressure are summarized into the economic situation of the country, agreements and projects concerning the matter, certifications and rankings. The stakeholders involved in the matter have the ability to pressure institutions, as for example investors or customers can pressure organizations to act a certain way. Moreover, the institutional framework consists of policies, sustainability action plans, environmental programs, visions and missions of the institution. The last component that can potentially pressure an institution are the resources: budget allocation and personnel.

In this research, the main driver of change in Zara's self-representation is the pressure from the public debate. Argued could be that this constitutes either a stakeholder or an institutional pressure, as these expressions overlap to some extent (Herold, 2018). However, as the focus in this research is on the organization as main element instead of on the relationships of the organization with its stakeholders, an institutional perspective is adopted.

Organizations realize that goals regarding environmental issues necessitate not only internal considerations, but also a need to respond to expectations to key institutional figures (Kozlowski, Bardecki, & Searcy, 2012).

Organizations aim to conform to institutional pressure, to protect their legitimacy. According to Suchman (1995, P.574), legitimacy is "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definition". When perceived not to be legitimate, the organization risks going out of business as organizational legitimacy is an essential source of endurance (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990).

Concludingly, in this specific context of the fast fashion industry and the public discontent on their sustainability practices, the institutional focused elements of the framework are the pressuring drivers for changes in organizational behaviour (i.e., changes in displaying response strategies). The public discontent and debate serve as external institutional pressure that affects the organizations in the industry by requiring change. In the next section, a framework for response strategies to deal with these institutional pressures is to be discussed.

2.4.2. Organizational response strategies for dealing with pressure

As the reaction of Zara regarding the pressure from the public discourse on sustainability and fast fashion is to be investigated in this research, it is essential to comprehend how to categorize the reactions. A framework by Oliver (1991) provides five different response strategies to cope with institutional pressures, such as the public discourse in this research. These responses strategies serve as sensitizing concepts for the analysis of this study (see figure 2.1). This framework has been successfully used in other research to identify organizational responses to pressures regarding sustainability (Vejvar, Lai, Lo, & Fürst, 2018).

These five strategies will serve as guidelines from literature when investigating Zara's self-representation based on statements and press and will help to map out Zara's reactions to the discourse. The first strategy identified by Oliver (1991) is 'Acquiesce'. This strategy is about acceding to institutional pressures, by complying; imitating, or taking matters for granted. This is the constitutes the most passive strategy. The second strategy is 'Compromise'. Organizations adopting this strategy are usually confronted with conflicting institutional demands and therefore aim to compromise different expectations or elements. The different tactics that are used differ between balancing the different expectations; bargaining with institutional stakeholders about the matter, or pacifying and accommodating institutional elements. The third strategy adopted by organizations dealing with institutional pressures is 'Avoidance'. The issue at hand is avoided by either concealing the matter, escaping from the matter or buffering by loosening institutional attachments. The fourth strategy is 'Defying'.

This constitutes a more active method of resistance to institutional pressures. Adopting this strategy is achieved by dismissing/ignoring norms and values and challenging or attacking those norms and institutional pressures. The last strategy 'Manipulation' is the most active form of resistance to institutional pressures. Organizations adopting this strategy either influence or control the values and institutional constituents, or co-opt/import influential constituents.

Concludingly, these five different strategies differ from passive to active forms of resistance to institutional pressures and consist of tactics on how organizations respond to the issue at hand. These strategies derived from literature serve as guidelines throughout this research, in order to be able to categorize the data on Zara regarding responses to the institutional pressure of the public debate.

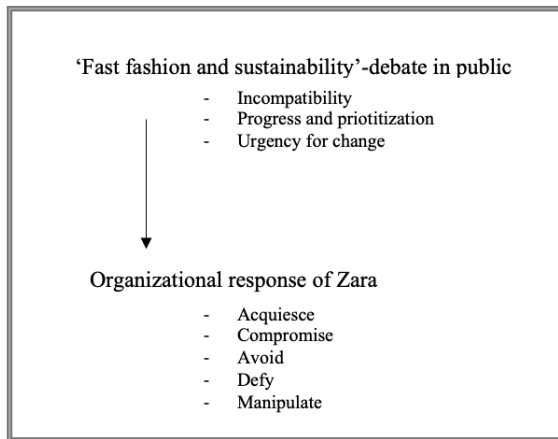


Figure 2.1: Conceptual model

This conceptual model provides an overview of the variables for this research. The independent variable is the public debate regarding fast fashion and sustainability. The dependent variable constitutes the organizational response strategies of Zara, or in other words, the reaction of the company and its changing self-representation regarding sustainability in regard to the institutional pressure of the debate. In literature, different elements of the debate have been identified that serve as guidelines for the rest of this research. For the debate, literature showed that three main arguments regarding the discourse exist: the urgency for better or faster change in the sector; the incompatibility of the matter, and the argument that acknowledges that progress in prioritizing sustainability has already been made. These arguments will help to identify arguments within the public debate in the media.

Moreover, different strategies for organizational responses regarding pressure have been identified that help examining Zara's behaviour on self-representation (see figure 1). Based on these strategies, an overview is to be provided on which strategies Zara adopts over time in reaction to the development of the public debate.

What the debate in society demonstrates and how Zara displays its responses, is to be examined in the subsequent chapters and will be guided by the abovementioned dimensions.

3. Methodology

In this chapter, the methodological aspects of this research are clarified. Characteristics concerning the methodological approach (3.1), the data collection (3.2) and the data analysis (3.3) are to be enlightened. Additionally, the topic of research ethics is discussed (3.4).

3.1 Methodological approach

As already mentioned previously, the aim of this research is to provide an overview of the public discourse between fast fashion and sustainability to be able to examine how a large player in the industry responds to this debate in regard to sustainability efforts. In order to answer the research question, it is important to focus on two different aspects. Firstly, an overview of the public debate between fast fashion and sustainability is to be sketched by investigating media. Secondly, an overview of the responses of Zara to the public debate is to be mapped out by examining Zara's statements and reports, public interviews, and critical reflections by third parties. The sketch of the public debate consists of a timeline, providing a clear indication of how events/standpoints and changes in tendencies of the public debate have developed over time. Consequently, this timeline aids to link indications between changes in pressure of the public debate, and Zara's self-representation regarding sustainability. This helps to determine what response strategies Zara adopts to respond to the themes emerging in the public debate. Concludingly, important is to first examine the public debate and subsequently consider the organizational response strategies of Zara regarding institutional pressure from the public debate on sustainability matters.

The data required for this research is generated by doing a qualitative research, as this provides an opportunity to gather in-depth information on the context of events and situations. This method is suitable for this research, as it enables the researcher to get an understanding of what the public debate looks like over the years, and moreover, what Zara displays accordingly to this public debate (Hammarberg, Kirkman, & Lacey, 2016; Walle, 2015). This is important for this research especially as a debate, concerning different perspectives and meanings, is sketched. Moreover, this research has an abductive nature, as elements to guide the researcher during the data collection have been identified while reviewing the literature. In terms of the debate sketch, literature proposes three main standpoints regarding the discourse. These elements serve as sensitizing concepts for the data collection and provide guidelines for research (Bowen, 2006).

Regarding the self-presentation of Zara, organizational strategies for responding to institutional pressure have been identified, guiding through the process of examining Zara's self-representation. These constitute sensitizing concepts also and aid to link Zara's self-representation identified in the data analysis to a certain strategy. Thus, theory is used in this research to help guide the explorative core of this research.

As this research comprises two different levels of analysis - the debate analysis and the organizational response strategy analysis-, two different types of qualitative research are used. For the sketch of the public debate, the data is collected and analyzed using a content document analysis. The strength of this type of analysis is that documents are valuable sources of data as they typically contain a significant amount of useful information (Stage & Manning, 2003). Moreover, analysing documents enables the researcher to review events that occurred before the research began, in this case: from 2010 until 2020. For interviews, it is difficult to obtain such detailed data over a time span, and additionally, interviews are relatively sensitive to bias (Quieros, Faria, & Elmeida, 2017).

This is a relevant manner of analysis for this research as the aim of this data gathering is to collect information between 2010-2020 that is as precise as possible, to develop an as-thorough-as-possible overview of developments in the debate regarding fast fashion and sustainability and Zara's self-representation regarding this institutional pressure. A timeframe of ten years is used -data between 2010-2020 is collected and analyzed. As described in the literature review, the debate has emerged rather early in literature, in the 1980's to be precise. However, as this study focuses on the debate in public, no clear point of start is to be identified in academic literature. To define such a starting point, several aspects have been considered. Firstly, the first article published by the Financial Times regarding sustainability and fashion was published in 2010 (Friedman, 2010). Secondly, this timeframe has been chosen based on the very minimal amount of search engine hits for sustainability in fast fashion in 2010, while in 2020 a peak of search engine hits has risen, as shown in figure 3.1 (GoogleTrends, 2021). This proves the intensification of relevance for this subject and indicates an increasing public awareness for the matter. Thirdly, this specific timeframe is adopted, because of the feasibility of this research. The scope of this research is not large enough to be able to look at the entire history of the public debate regarding fast fashion and sustainability.

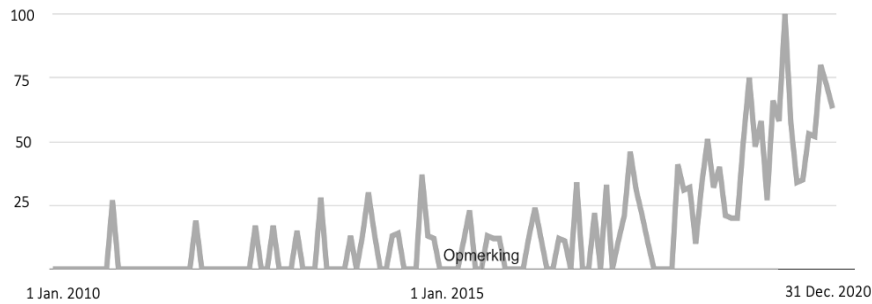


Figure 3.1: Search engine hits 'fast fashion sustainability' for 2010-2020 (GoogleTrends,2021)

When examining the organizational responses of Zara, an explorative single case study is applied as this enables the researcher to explain the complexities of situations that cannot be captured by surveys (Zainal, 2007). This method of study suits this research because the purpose is to provide an in-depth analysis of Zara's self-representation, to identify the response strategy. Zara is chosen as organization under investigation, since it is one of the largest players in the fast fashion industry (Caro & Mat3nez-de-Alb3niz, 2014). Therefore, the representativeness of the organization for the rest of the industry is high. This case study depends on content document analysis also, as it is beyond the potentials of this study to interview the relevant individuals to identify Zara's response strategies. For example, Zara has only participated in three interviews over the last ten years (Patel, 2019).

Nevertheless, the documents under investigation for this research are not only corporate statements provided by Inditex, but also third-party data on Zara's efforts. This increases the credibility of this study and provides a relatively more realistic view on how Inditex responds in regard to the debate and sustainability matters. Additional in-depth information on the type of data is collected is provided in the subsequent section.

3.2 Data collection

As both the explorative case study of Zara's response strategies and the overview of the public debate in news articles reside on document content analysis predominantly, they are discussed simultaneously.

The content document analysis is performed on data concerning the public fast fashion and sustainability discourse, as well as on data regarding Zara's organizational response strategies. For the sketch of the public debate, data is required on media articles regarding sustainability in the fast fashion industry. The selection of documents resides on the sensitizing concepts identified in literature: the incompatibility of sustainability and fast fashion; the progress of

sustainability in fast fashion, and the need for better and faster change. To be able to create a better understanding as to how the public debate has evolved over the last decade and to match the limited scope of this study, all published articles regarding fast fashion and sustainability from two media outlets are investigated over a timespan of ten years. The Financial Times and New York Times have been chosen as data targets, as these newspapers contain sufficient useful documents, with no extreme predominant political predilection. Moreover, The New York Times is one of the largest and most reliable western newspapers globally, and the Financial Times is the leading newspaper that has a focus on business affairs (Nytco, 2021; Robins, 2019). Furthermore, two outlets of media have been chosen to increase the validity of the results, instead of relying on one source of data only. Moreover, these media outlets also provide readers with columns, so that the researcher is able to identify the tendency of the debate, instead of only capturing factual news articles.

For the examination of Zara's self-representation and responses, data is required on their actions regarding sustainability matters and predominantly their reactions towards large events in the fast fashion industry. This data is selected with the aforementioned sensitizing concepts in mind, guiding the researcher to focus on documents that show the self-representation and strategy of Zara. For Zara's organizational responses, these concepts constitute: acquiesce, compromise, avoidance, defying and manipulating (Oliver, 1991).

This data is derived from Inditex' annual reports, sustainability statements, corporate statements regarding events in the debate, corporate website and other secondary data such as news articles and public interviews. Moreover, a critical reflection regarding Zara's sustainability efforts is provided by third-party media outlets. These media outlets constitute news articles published by NGO websites and by large fashion magazines/online channels. In table 3.1, the specific data outlets for the third-party investigation are mentioned. The choice of data outlets for the critical third-party reflection on Zara's self-representation regarding sustainability, is based on two different elements. Firstly, the NGO websites have been chosen, as these adopt a critical attitude towards the fashion industry and are specialized in being environmental 'watchdogs' (Deri & Wootliff, 2001). Therefore, these sources provide a controversial attitude to the statements published by Zara itself, and add to the validity of the findings. Secondly, information of large fashion channels is considered, as these provide us with a more detailed view of how Zara represents itself. These sources provide critical external information on Zara's responses, information on which Zara does not have influence -as opposed to their public statements and annual report. These sources are added to enhance the validity of the findings.

For this analysis, a timeframe of ten years is used also, so data between 2010-2020 is collected and analyzed, focused on the events/development occurring in the public debate.

Below, a table is provided with information regarding the collected data for this study.

	<u>Data on public debate</u>	<u>Data on Zara's responses</u>
<u>Type of data</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Publications on fast fashion and sustainability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Corporate statements on sustainability - Interviews regarding sustainability - Publications by third parties
<u>Sources of data</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - New York Times - Financial Times 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Annual report (corporate statements) - Corporate website (corporate statements) - Bbc.com, vogue.com and npr.org (interviews) - NGO websites: cleanclothes.org and greenpeace.org (3rd party) - Vogue.fr, businessoffashion.com and fashionunited.uk (3rd party)
<u>Number of articles/data</u>	75	36
<u>Number of pages of data</u>	263	137
<u>Search terms</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'Fashion and Sustainability' - 'Fast fashion sustainability' - 'Criticism on fashion industry' - 'Green garments' - 'Clothing sustainability'. 	For third party information: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'Criticism Zara' - 'Zara sustainability' - 'Zara green' - 'Zara responds to'
<u>Timeframe</u>	01/01/2010 until 31/12/2020	01/01/2010 until 31/12/2020

Table 3.1: Data overview

3.3 Data analysis

After the data had been collected, a thorough analysis was conducted. The document content analysis was conducted by means of coding the obtained data accordingly to the two-level coding scheme by Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2013). This abductive method of analysis corresponds with the explorative aspect of the case study and debate sketch. Gioia et al. (2013) derive overarching dimensions based on 2nd order themes and 1st order codes. The first order codes constitute quotes of the statements in the documents under investigation. The second order themes reside with terms to which the quotes are connected. Lastly, these themes combined create overviews of aggregate dimensions: the overarching dimensions. This coding procedure aids to link emerging relationships when doing abductive research.

Concretely, two coding schemes have been identified. First, the coding scheme of the public debate was created (figure 3.2). The coding process was guided by the sensitizing concepts that were recognized in literature: need for change; progress in the industry, and incompatibility of fast fashion and sustainability. These three categories have served to guide the standpoints in public over the years, and therefore form the aggregate dimensions in the analysis of the public debate. However, due to the abductive nature of this research, an additional category was identified when analysing the data: ‘rising challenges’. These constitute the challenges that emerge as the debate evolves. The themes and codes connected to this new dimension are not suitable for the other dimensions, as the codes are not about ‘recognition of need for change’ or ‘recognition of progress’ in essence. The codes and themes connected to the new dimension resemble side effects and consequences of the recognition of progress after recognizing the need to change. Thus, to provide an accurate overview of the debate, an additional overarching dimension that outlines the challenges that rise due to the debate and affect the debate is developed.

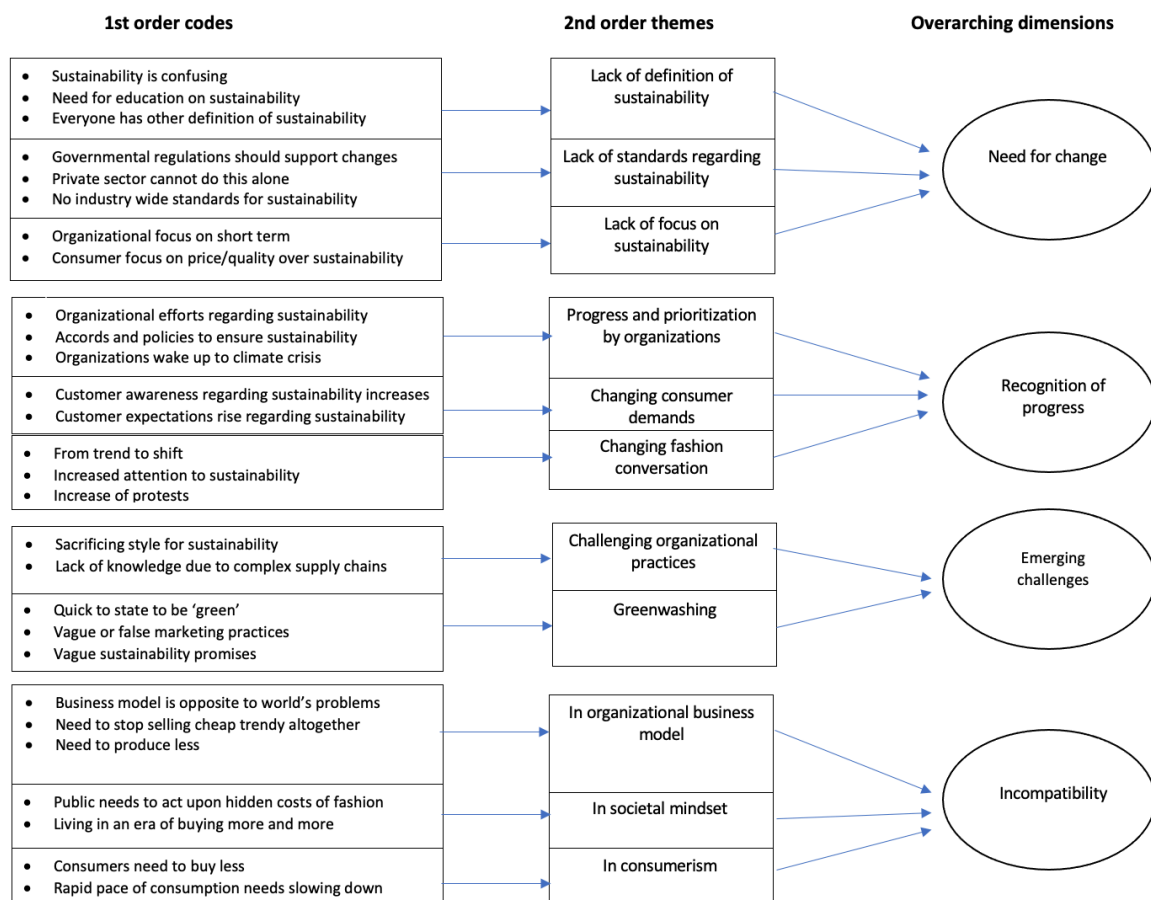


Figure 3.2: coding scheme of public debate

Figure (3.2) displays the second order themes and first order codes that are connected to the aggregate dimensions of the analysis of the public debate. The first order codes are mapped into different themes emerging in the debate over time. In turn, these themes are linked to the aggregate dimensions. For example, the first order code of ‘need for education on sustainability’, links to the second order theme of ‘lack of definition’, which in turn is part of the aggregate dimension ‘need for change’.

Hereafter, the coding scheme of Zara’s response strategies was shaped (figure 3.3). For this coding scheme, the coding was guided by responses strategies serving as the sensitizing concepts derived from literature. Oliver (1991) identified five response strategies: acquiesce, compromising, avoiding, manipulating, and defying. However, during the coding process, it became apparent that only three out of five response strategies were present to a significant extent: acquiesce, avoidance and manipulation. Therefore, these three response strategies constitute the aggregate dimensions.

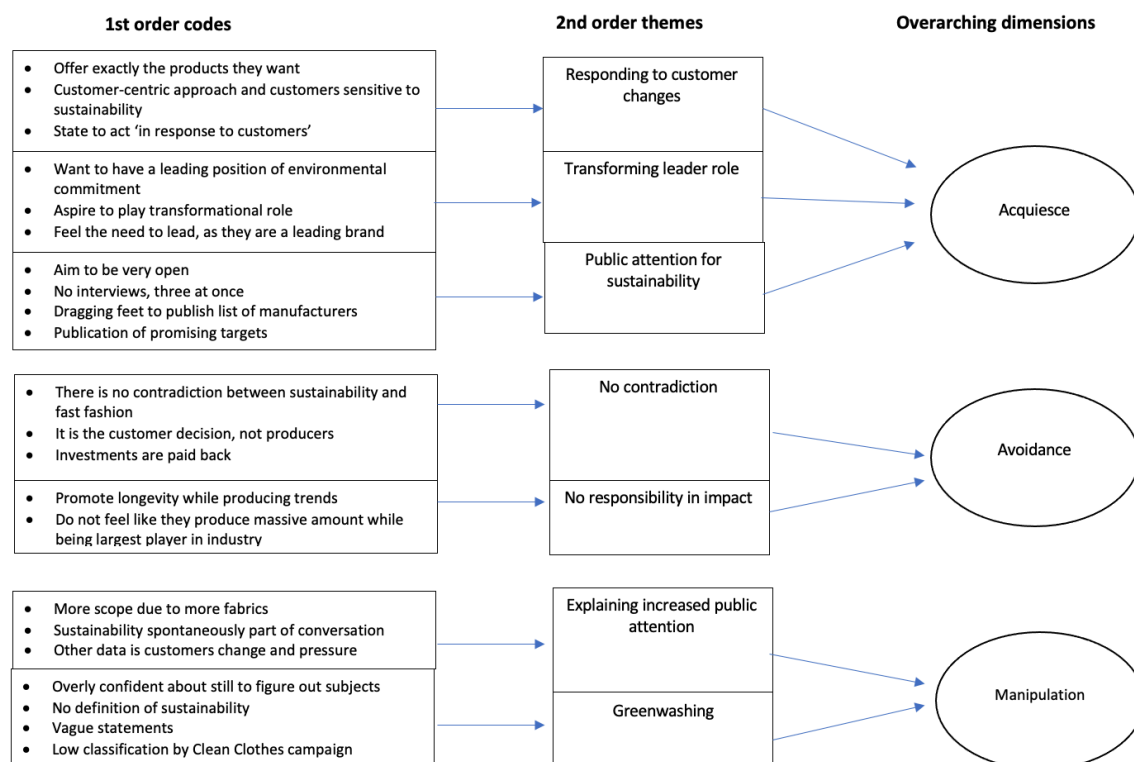


Figure 3.3: coding scheme of Zara’s response strategies

Figure 3.3 displays the second order themes and first order codes that are connected to the aggregate dimensions. The first order codes are mapped into subjects to respond to, creating

the second order themes. In turn, these themes are linked to the aggregate dimensions. For example, a first order code of ‘No definition of sustainability’, is linked to the second order theme of ‘greenwashing’, which is part of the aggregate dimension ‘manipulating’.

As the aim of this study is to provide insights into the development of the response strategies of Zara over time, using merely a coding scheme to eventually demonstrate results is not sufficient. It limits the ability to show developments over time. Therefore, timelines on the developments in the public debate and in Zara’s response strategies over time are created. These will aid to provide the findings of this study and are to be explained and elaborated on in the next chapter.

3.4 Research ethics

In this study, research ethics is a less applicable difficulty as the study contains no primary data gathering and therefore no direct interference of the researcher in research settings. There are no participants in play, so matters such as confidentiality; minimizing the risk of harm to participants, informed consent, and the right to withdraw from research are not applicable to this study (Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity, 2018)

However, by doing a document content analysis, a researcher has influence on the data analysis process too. When analysing documents, one’s mind and its perceptions play a role, therefore including a level of personal interpretation and bias (Bowen, 2009). In this research, the researcher is biased as the aim is to find interesting links and insights between the developments of the public debate and the response strategies of Zara over time. Therefore, positive conclusions of links and developments might be drawn too rapidly. However, this concern is limited by defining the intensity of the links. The focus is on the responses of Zara towards developments in the public debate and therefore links are indicated.

4. Results

To discover the response strategies of Zara regarding the pressure of the public debate over time, various documents were analyzed (see table 3.1). The following section outlines the results of this analysis. First, an overview of the public debate is sketched after analysing all publications regarding fast fashion and sustainability by the New York Times and the Financial Times between 2010 and 2020. This is presented in the form of a timeline that demonstrates developments in the debate over the years, per each of the four aggregate dimensions and its second order themes. Hereafter, the results of analysing the data of Zara's response strategies are demonstrated in the same manner, referring to timelines of developments of the three aggregate dimensions (i.e., response strategies) over time.

4.1 Overview of public debate

This section entails the results of the public debate over time. The public debate consists -as mentioned in chapter three- of four aggregate dimensions: need for change; progress; emerging challenges, and incompatibility.

These dimensions are elaborated on in the following subsections, guided by the coding scheme that has been developed while analysing (figure 4.1) and additionally, a corresponding timeline (figure 4.2) of the development of themes in the public debate. This study emphasizes on the development of the debate over time instead of merely mapping out the debate and its themes, to be able to provide a comprehensive overview of how Zara's response strategies evolve accordingly. As mentioned previously, a coding scheme limits the ability to demonstrate changes within the emergence of the second order themes over a period. Therefore, a timeline regarding the emergence of the identified second order themes of 2010 until 2020 is fostered (figure 4.1).

Before demonstrating the results of the document analysis by explaining the timeline per emerging theme, it is essential to know that not only the content of the collected articles and its themes contain significant findings. An important quantitative result of the data collection process composes the amount of data collected.

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of newspaper articles</i>
2010	7
2011	6
2012	3
2013	7

2014	3
2015	4
2016	4
2017	6
2018	10
2019	15
2020	11

Table 4.1: Distribution of NYT and FT news articles on fast fashion and sustainability per year

Table 4.1 demonstrates a significant difference in published articles on fast fashion and sustainability by the newspapers per year. The increase in published articles from 2010 to 2020 is the most significant finding in the quantitative aspect of the results: from 3 at its bottom point to 15 articles at its highest written on sustainability in the fast fashion industry per year. Moreover, a dip in articles is observed in 2011. However, this is explained by the data to be a result of the financial crisis (NYTimes, 2011). Additionally, a peak in newspaper articles of the Financial Times and New York Times occurs in 2013, which is to be linked to the Rana Plaza disaster and its effect of increased attention on the industry. Subsequently, a linear rise of published newspaper articles starts from 2017 onwards. However, a decline occurs in 2020, as a consequence of the implications of COVID-19 on the focus of media (Times, 2020). Concludingly, an increasing slope is observed within the number of newspaper articles published regarding fast fashion and sustainability since 2010, with inclines and declines that are linked to events explained by the data.

In the following sub-sections, the overarching dimensions are separated into second order themes and their corresponding first order codes, to provide an extensive overview of the development of themes within the public debate. The results of this analysis are presented below, guided by the timeline (figure 4.1). The inception of the blue line indicates the moment the theme becomes present in articles of the Financial Times and New York Times. Additionally, the end of the blue line indicates the moment the theme is not present and will not be present thereafter. The intensity of the presence of the theme is demonstrated by the intensity/thickness of the blue line. The minimum intensity (i.e., small blue line) indicates that the theme has been introduced to the debate (inception has taken place), however, is not mentioned more than once at a particular moment. The maximum intensity (i.e., fully blue) constitutes the maximum number of times the theme was identified in the articles compared to other years and themes. For example, the themes of ‘progress in consumer mindset’, ‘progress

in fashion conversation’, and ‘incompatibility in business model’ are fully blue when peaking, indicating that these themes were most identified in the texts at the peak year. Whereas for example the graphs of ‘lack of standards’ and ‘challenges in organizational practices’ do not colour fully blue at their peak, as the maximum presence of these themes at their peak is less than the abovementioned themes when peaking. To exemplify, at its peak in 2020, the theme ‘progress in fashion conversation’ emerged 11 times (i.e., fully blue line), whereas the theme ‘challenges in organizational practices’ only emerged 5 times at its peak in 2020. Whether the slope of the line increases linearly or emerges abruptly, is based on the presence of the theme over time. When a linear increase or decrease is displayed, the theme is present throughout the entire time, however, shows an increase or decrease over the years. When an abrupt increase or decrease is demonstrated, it indicates that the theme is either present (without a significant increase or decrease) or not/only limitedly discussed. An example of this is the theme ‘lack of focus on sustainability’. The theme incepted in 2010, peaks abruptly after the Rana Plaza disaster in 2013 when identified 10 times, and then is not mentioned and present until 2018.

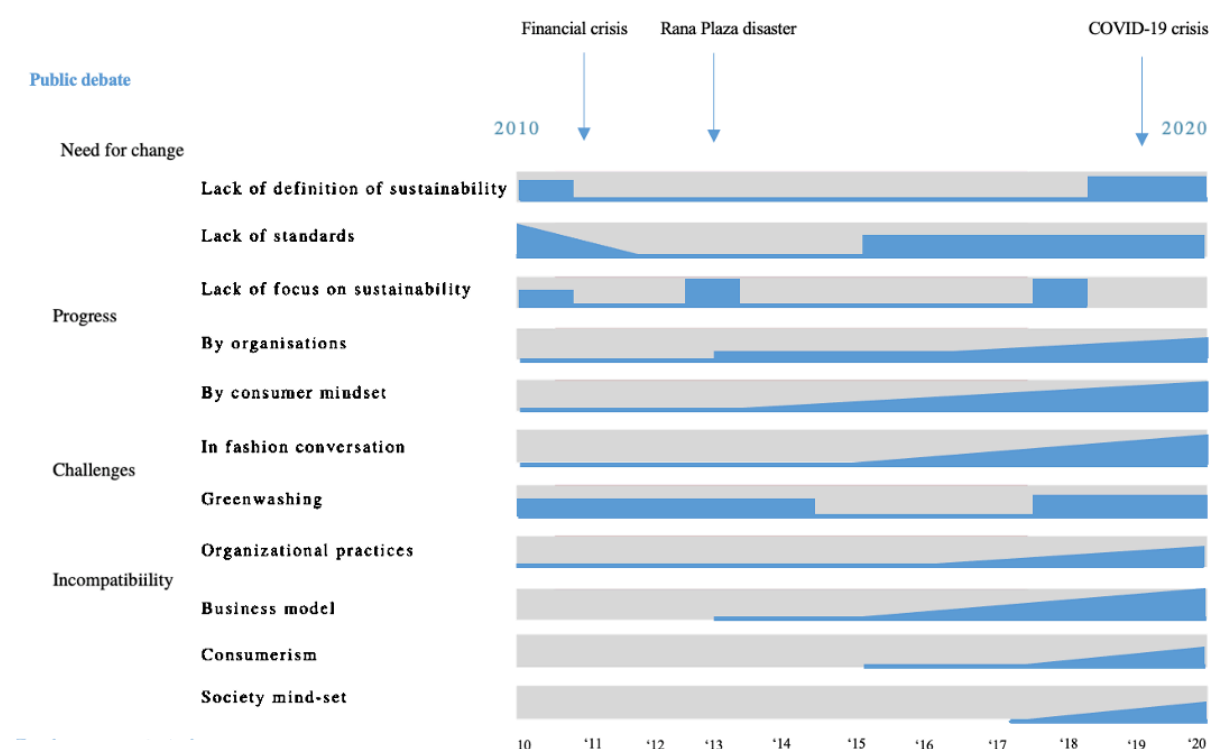


Figure 4.1: Timeline of public debate

4.1.1. Recognition for need for change

The first aggregate dimension within the public debate over time is the recognition for need for change in the fast fashion industry in regard to sustainability.

In 1997, Bansal and Hoffman already addressed the need to incorporate sustainability in business models. Tham (2008) recognized that a call for more sustainability within the fast fashion sector especially is essential, to be able to remain embracing the beauty of fashion. In the empirical data, three main themes emerged.

The first theme is the *lack of definition* of and education on sustainability. The lack of definition was demonstrated in questions within the newspaper articles such as: “What is sustainability even?” and “I can honestly answer... no one knows.” (FinancialTimes, 2010, p.2). The newspapers state that no one has defined sustainability in the fashion industry in-depth, and that there is need for a common language on sustainability, as “sustainability means ten different things to ten different people” and it gets confusing what the right thing to do is, according to the data (FinancialTimes, 2020, p.6). This second order theme of lack of definition is present mainly in 2010, when the debate emerged and was introduced, and in 2020, when reviewing what has occurred in the industry over the last years, and what the right thing to do actually is. The second theme is the *lack of standards* to which organizations have to adhere. According to the data, there are no standards for the clothing industry from the government. However, according to the debate these regulations are required, to support changes towards sustainability in the industry. This theme is present throughout the entire period of 2020 until 2020, but mainly from 2010-2011 and 2016-2020.

The third theme of the aggregate dimension for need for change is the *lack of focus on sustainability* within the fashion industry. In 2010, this for example constitutes of “organizations dipping toe, but find it hard to commit to sustainability efforts” (NYTimes, 2010, p.2). Another important example is that customer up until 2018 focused on a design, quality and price over ethical aspects. Moreover, social media supports the increase in buying clothing since 2016. This theme remains present throughout the entire period, however, slightly decrease in intensity and number of statements. Additionally, in 2018 and 2019, the statements are more detailed and focused on organizational scandals such as Burberry burning clothing to protect ‘brand value’ (NYTimes, 2019, p.4), whereas in 2011 and 2013 it is focused on the industry as a whole: ‘sustainability is a luxury’ (FinancialTimes, 2011, p.2) and ‘consumers remain price oriented’ (FinancialTimes, 2013, p.2).

Concludingly, the recognition for need for change in the fast fashion industry regarding sustainability is present from 2010- until 2019. However, its peak moments are in 2010, 2013 and from 2019 onwards.

4.1.2. *Recognition of progress*

The second aggregate dimension constitutes the recognition of progress and prioritization of sustainability within the public debate. In literature, Teunissen and Voet (2013) and Nguyen et al. (2020) state that sustainability is a prioritized matter in fashion business nowadays, and that organizations demonstrate change regarding the issue. In the public debate, three second order themes have been identified concerning this aggregate dimension.

Progress and prioritization by organizations is the first identified second order theme. This second order theme identifies the progress over time within companies. Whereas for example in 2010 a code is about ‘more manufacturers are including recyclable components’, a code in 2015 is that ‘organizations manage to combine style with sustainability’, and in 2019 ‘even the largest players in the industry face public pressure and create promising policies’ and “Vogue eliminated photoshoots in this edition of their magazine to address sustainability efforts” (NYTimes, 2020, p.1). The progress is more detailed over the years and the amount of progress identified within the data increases throughout the years as well.

Secondly, a *change in consumer mind-set* composes the second second order theme. Back in 2010, customers already expect responsible behaviour of organizations. In 2012, consumers sought for products with an eco-friendly edge already as well. However, it was not until 2015 that customers actually expect organizations to be involved with sustainability. In 2019, four-fifth of consumers find that sustainability is ought to be incorporated in organization’s business model (NYTimes, 2019). A change in consumer mindset is shown: a change towards demanding sustainability.

A *change in the fashion conversation* in society from sustainability being an introductory element in the conversation towards the embeddedness of sustainability in the conversation, is the last second order theme. In 2010, codes such as ‘sustainability increasing part of the conversation’ address this second order theme in the beginning of the analyzed period. In 2014, sustainability is seen as a ‘re-emerging trend’, and in 2015 the hottest ‘buzzword’ in fashion is sustainability (NYTimes, 2014, p.3; NYTimes, 2015, p.2). Moreover, in 2019, according to the data “public pressure has hit new highs” and “the race to be the most sustainable brand is on”. (NYTimes, 2019, p.1)

Concludingly, the change in fashion conversation is present throughout the entire research period from 2010 until 2020. However, from 2016 onwards, a shift occurred in sustainability being part of the conversation instead of merely being a trend or introductory term.

To summarize, according to the data, progress is made by organizations in the industry, a change in the fashion conversation towards the embeddedness of sustainability in society, and

a change in consumer mind-set towards demanding sustainability has emerged. The number of published news articles has increased accordingly.

4.1.3. Recognition of emerging challenges

The recognition of challenges emerging from acknowledging the need for sustainability in the debate is the third aggregate dimensions within this public debate that was created during the abductive process of analysing the data. Two second order themes have been derived. The first being facing *challenging organizational practicalities* when aiming for a more sustainability-oriented approach. In the beginning, from 2010 until 2016, this constituted of the dilemma for brands not to sacrifice style for sustainability, and to get rid of the unfashionable image connected to sustainability. Moreover, it appeared to be difficult to study their supply chain, as these are rather complex and exist of subcontracts. These challenges have been consistently present; however, the challenges have become more present and problematic since 2017.

The second theme regarding emerging challenges is the issue of *greenwashing*. Codes have been identified since 2010, when was stated by the data that ‘every organization with a little organic cotton claims to be green’ and that organizations make use of ‘green’ window dressing to increase sales (FinancialTimes, 2011, p.3). From 2015 until 2018 a dip in the amount of data regarding greenwashing is recognized. Hereafter, the issue re-emerged: “The industry’s marketing is ultra-green, but the reality is very different” (FinancialTimes, 2020, p.1).

4.1.4. Recognition of incompatibility

The fourth and last aggregate dimension in the public debate is recognizing the incompatibility between fast fashion and sustainability. Griskevicius et al. (2010) and Widloecher (2010) argue that fast fashion and sustainability are never to be compatible, as the core of the fast fashion business model is never to be sustainable. When analysing the empirical data, this aggregate dimension was visible in three main second order themes.

The incompatibility in the *organizations’ business models* and sustainability is the first second order theme. This theme emphasizes that the incompatibility between the industry and sustainability resides in fast fashion’s business model. The first code for this theme emerged in 2013: ‘World’s problems are opposite to business models’ (NYTimes, 2013, p.1). In 2016, in response to organizations publishing sustainability efforts, it was stated that ‘Not only the marketing strategy should change, but a change in the fundamental business model is also required’ (FinancialTimes, 2016, p.1). From 2018 onwards, the amount of data increased

rapidly, from ‘incompatibility in business model’ being present 5 times in 2018 to being present 12 times at its peak in 2020.

The second element is the incompatibility of sustainability and *consumerism*. This theme demonstrates that consumerism is the explanation for the incompatibility. This theme emerged in 2016, when was posed by the data that “the best thing to do is to buy less and wear more” (NYTimes, 2016, p.6). From 2019 onwards, the tendency shifted to “people need to stop consuming” and “consumers need to alter their behaviour” (FinancialTimes, 2019, p.4).

The last element is the incompatibility between sustainability and the *society’s mind-set*. This theme states that it is not merely consumerism, or fashion’s business model causing the incompatibility, but society’s mindset as a whole. This theme emerged in 2018, when data implied that “we live in an age of buying more and more” (FinancialTimes, 2018, p.3). In 2020 it was stated that the public has to start accept hidden costs of fast fashion, and act upon those. Concludingly, the incompatibility matter started in 2013, but did not rise until 2018. The main focus is on the organizations’ business model being incompatible with sustainability, however, over the last years the consumerism and societal mind-set have been in the picture as well.

4.2 Overview Zara’s response strategies

As the data of the public debate has been discussed, it is now the data on response strategies of Zara that is under investigation. Zara’s response strategies concerning the institutional pressure of the public debate are reviewed below. The five response strategies identified by Oliver (1991) serve as sensitizing concepts and therefore overarching dimensions for these responses over the years. As explained in the previous chapter, three of these strategies were present: acquiesce, avoidance and manipulation. Below, these aggregate dimensions are explained, guided by the coding scheme developed in chapter three (figure 3.3) and a timeline of the response strategies. Similar to the overview of the public debate over time, a coding scheme is not sufficient to provide insights as to how Zara’s response strategies evolve over time. Therefore, the timeline of the public debate as sketched in the previous section, is extended by adding an overview of Zara’s responses strategies over time (figure 4.2). This figure is to be interpreted similar to the interpretation of figure 4.1.

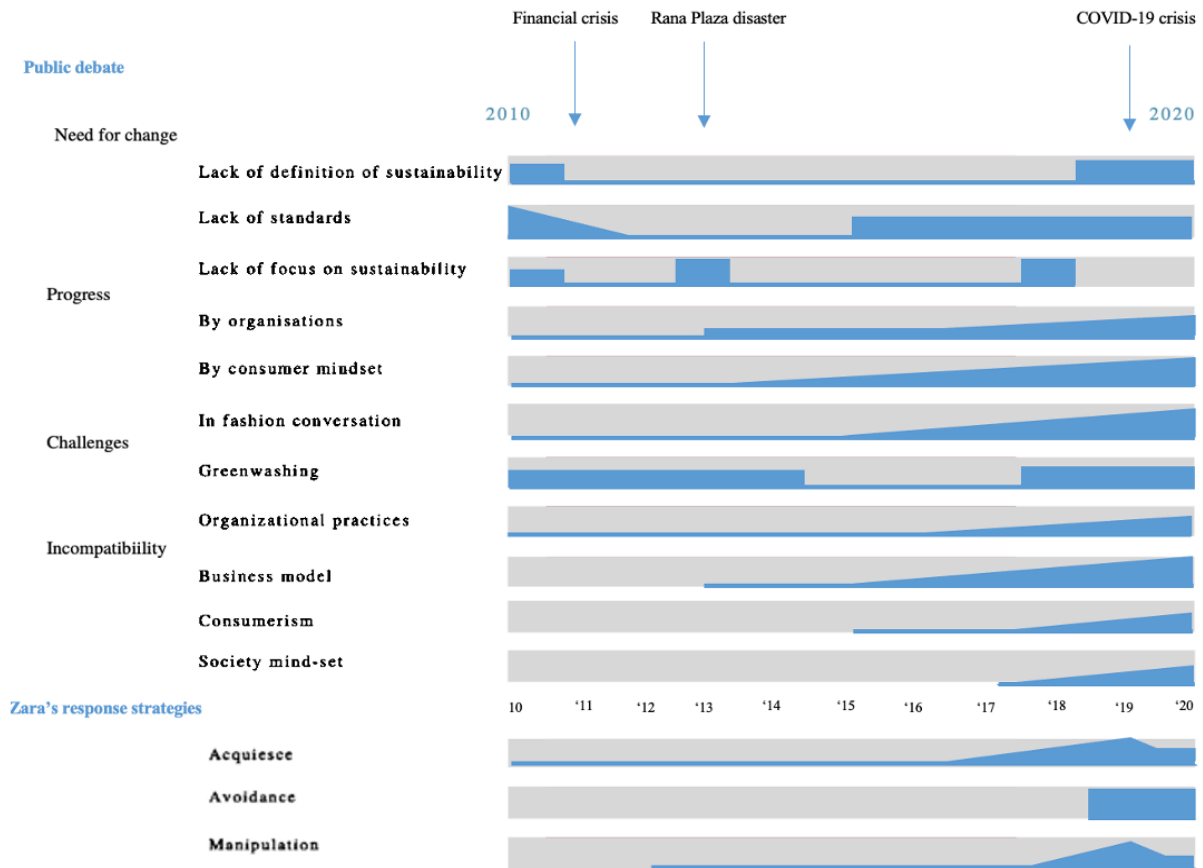


Figure 4.2: Timeline including Zara's response strategies

Below, the second order themes and aggregate dimensions (i.e., response strategies) are to be discussed, although some elements regarding Zara's approach to media attention in general and Zara's sustainability efforts are to be discussed beforehand. When collecting data regarding Zara's response strategies, it became apparent that Zara does not often give interviews or publish public statements. However, when facing public scandals, the company responds quickly. For example, after the Rana Plaza disaster, Zara was not only one of the first to sign the Accord on safety conditions, but the company was the only one donating to the victims whilst not being involved at all in producing garments in the factory that had collapsed (NYTimes, 2013). However, the sustainability issue is one with a long-term orientation instead of a single-occurring scandal, and therefore Zara's response strategies are more long-term and less intense. In the following subsections, the responses are to be elucidated.

4.2.1. Acquiescing

The first response strategy and aggregate dimension is acquiescing. When acquiescing, Zara conforms to the pressure of the public debate regarding sustainability. The institutional pressure

in this case is the pressure for fast fashion organizations to act sustainably. So, acquiesce in this context is to conform to the pressure to act sustainably. ‘Acquiescing’ is adopted by Zara on three different levels, creating three second order themes: responding to customer changes regarding sustainability, taking a transformational leader role regarding sustainability, and increasing public attention and dedication for sustainability.

This response strategy is present throughout the entire period of 2010-2020, as Zara demonstrates behaviour of conforming to pressure and focusing on sustainability constantly.

A first indication of the rise of this conforming strategy when facing public pressure regarding sustainability is Zara’s annual report. In 2010, the word ‘sustainability’ was mentioned in its annual report 26 times. In 2016, this was 103 times and in 2019 the word was used 173 times (Inditex, Annual Report, 2021).

This demonstrates a drastic increase in the attention dedicated to the topic of sustainability over the years, adding to the second order theme of ‘*increased public attention to sustainability*’. Moreover, not until 2017 and onwards, Zara acknowledges to respond to the changed consumer mind-set, by putting statements in the sustainability section of their annual report such as: “to respond to the exigent demands of our customers and offer them the products they want, we work every day to ensure the products we commercialize meet the highest standards of health, safety and sustainability” (Annual report Inditex, 2018). Thus, since 2017 Zara conforms to changes in consumers mindset: the changed ‘institutionalized rules’ as discussed previously. This finding contributes to second order theme of ‘*responding to customer changes*’.

However, the fact that the attention to sustainability and changed customer preferences has increased over the last years, does not signify that previously, no attention was dedicated to the matter. In 2012, Zara mentioned that they *aim to have a leading position* of environmental commitment in their sector, which constitutes the third second order theme of this response strategy. It is that year, that nine days after Greenpeace published a critical report on the fast fashion industry’s hazardous chemicals, Zara committed itself to a Zero Discharge aim (GreenPeace, 2012).

In 2013, after the Rana Plaza disaster, Zara was one of the first to sign the Accord and moreover, to donate to the Rana Plaza Donors Trust Fund as the only organization that was not manufacturing there (BBC, 2013). In 2014, Inditex was announced to be under the world leaders on sustainability according to the Dow Jones Sustainability World Index (NYTimes, 2013).

Throughout the years, Zara has been reluctant to public attention and the companies’ spokespeople have not given interviews before. However, in 2019 alone, three interviews were

given, all regarding sustainability matters. This occurred after the company published their new -promising- sustainability promises for the next years. As stated by CEO Pablo Isla:

“Our approach is that in the year 2025 100% of our cotton and linen will be sustainable and all our polyester will be recycled. This is an ongoing process, and we are paying more and more attention to everything” (BBC, 2019).

In the interviews was mentioned that the customer is key and that proximity is essential, so that what is produced is exactly what the customer wants. At this moment, that is sensitivity towards sustainability, according to Zara (Annual Report, 2018). In 2019 Zara declared again that they feel that they “need to be leading in the change to sustainability” (Bloomberg Markets and Finance, 2019). It is this year that remarkably much attention was dedicated to demonstrating how well Zara is doing regarding sustainability, compared to its closed stance regarding public attention previously. However, according to Pablo Isla this is because: “we just wanted to share this with you very openly”. (Business of Fashion, 2019, p.4)

Concludingly, the acquiescing response strategy is present throughout the entire period. However, from 2017 onwards, it starts to increase, with a peak in 2019.

4.2.2. Avoiding

The second response strategy adopted by Zara is avoiding the issue at hand, by either not addressing it or buffering, which is to dislocate from the issue. In this case, it is for Zara to ignore or distance itself from the public pressure regarding sustainability. Zara has adopted this responses strategy concerning two themes -the second order codes: *no contradiction* between fast fashion and sustainability, and *no big impact* on society.

This response strategy came to light in 2019, when Zara decided to give interviews about sustainability and their promising new efforts. When asked about the incompatibility between fast fashion and sustainability, Pablo Isla answered:

"There is no contradiction at all between sustainability and the profitability of the company. I think our responsibility as a company is taking care of manufacturing our products in a very sustainable way. Each customer, each person, is free to decide how much would he or she like to buy at any point in time, if this person wants to spend money going to a restaurant or buying clothes. This is the freedom that each person has." (BBC, 2019)

This is remarkable, as the data on the public debate presents that it is foremost the nature of the business model of the industry that is responsible for the incompatibility between fast fashion and sustainability. However, Zara decides to avoid the responsibility and incompatibility, and appoints the issue to the consumer. Isla emphasized that it is the customer, that decides how much they want to buy of a particular product.

The second approach in which Zara avoids the responsibility of the public pressure, is when simply denying and avoiding its impact, by actually stating:

"We do not feel like we are making a massive amount of clothes", whilst being the largest player in the industry and Inditex selling over 1.5 billion products in 2017 alone. (Business of Fashion, 2019, p.5)

Moreover, Zara ignores the impact they make by stating that promoting longevity is important for them as well, by ensuring qualities of timelessness and durability. However, the entire supply chain and business model of fast fashion are designed to produce the latest fashion trends, and the core of fashion is that it becomes obsolete rapidly (Dahlbo et al., 2020).

Since 2019, this response strategy of avoiding has emerged promptly: from not being present in 2018, to being present 9 times in 2019.

4.2.3. Manipulating

Manipulation composes the third aggregate dimension for Zara's responses towards the public pressure. Manipulation is to influence the perception of what practices the company is adopting. As for Zara, two themes of manipulation have been identified: the *explanation of increased public attention* since recently and *greenwashing* their sustainability practices.

Greenwashing is the first second order theme that was adopted in this aggregate dimension. For example, when announcing its new sustainability goals in 2019, Zara did not define what it means by 'sustainable', when it comes to their fabrics that contain viscose or are linen (Vogue, 2019). As an additional example, a question was raised in 2012 on whether Zara's commitment is merely a simple marketing technique, or a step towards addressing the real issue at hand (NYTimes, 2012). Furthermore, according to the Clean Clothes campaign, Inditex is classified to be an E-class brand towards sustainability and safety, while the company also states to be the leading brand towards safer, healthier, and environmentally friendlier garments. For a reference, Gucci was classified as a C-brand, as 25% of their workers earn a living wage. (Clean Clothes, 2021)

The subsequent manipulation theme is Zara's *explanation of increased public focus* on sustainability. When asked in an interview, about why there is more focus on sustainability over the last years, the response of Zara was: "sustainability began to spontaneously become part of those conversations", and that "there is more scope due to the presence of more recycles and organic fabrics to work with" (Vogue, 2019, p.6). It was only in one interview that it became apparent that it is due to the customer pressure, and that they are engaged in making environmentally conscious decisions. This answer corresponds with what we described previously: Zara's annual reports regarding 'responding to the customer demands' concerning sustainability.

Concludingly, greenwashing has been apparent since 2012. However, the element of explaining increased public focus on sustainability only emerged since 2019. Therefore, the manipulation response strategy is present, but peaks in 2019.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This research aims to contribute to the existing theory of fast fashion and sustainability by tapping into the need for more empirical analysis on how organizations react to the increasing institutional pressure, as to what strategies regarding sustainability are displayed by the companies in the industry. This single-case study on Zara's response strategies concerning a public debate regarding sustainability serves as a starting point to fill this discrepancy in literature. By means of content document analyses, a detailed overview of the public debate in two newspapers and an overview of Zara's responses to this debate over time has been developed.

This chapter discusses the findings of these analyses and consequently considers what new insights are generated -and what this contributes to the theory. Moreover, the practical implications and theoretical recommendations for this study are posed, as this study is a first step to fill a larger discrepancy in literature. Furthermore, the limitations that need to be taken into consideration are discussed. Lastly, the research and the researcher are subject to a critical reflection.

5.1 Interpretation of findings

In this section, the findings of the analyses are interpreted and discussed. To be able to do so, it is important to compare Zara's response strategies over time to the developments of themes in the public debate over time. First, the timeline of the public debate is examined. Hereafter, Zara's responses accordingly are discussed to demonstrate indications and links.

A clear overall development of the public debate is that, compared to 2010, in 2020 the pressure is higher. This is indicated by figure 4.2, as almost all themes are strongly present in 2020, whereas in 2010, only the 'need for change' themes are highly present. Moreover, over the years, the amount of data published on the debate increases, as demonstrated by table 4.1. This indicates more awareness for and attention to the issue of sustainability in fast fashion over the years, which indicates higher levels of pressure on organizations. These are general conclusions.

Though, looking at the various themes discussed in the public debate, some refinements are to be made to the abovementioned statement. For example, while the 'need for change' remains present in the entire timeframe, the other dimensions increase over the years. This is to be expected for the 'progress' and the 'rising challenges' dimensions of the debate, as it makes sense that as the debate evolves and intensifies, that challenges arise and that progress by

organizations and in the consumer's mindset is made. However, the 'incompatibility' between fast fashion and sustainability has emerged and rapidly increased from 2017 onwards. In 2019 and 2020, the threat of the incompatibility between fast fashion and sustainability is at its record, creating increasing pressure on the organizations, as well as on society and the consumers. To summarize, the pressure of the public debate increases over time, with a peak in 2019 and 2020, as the incompatibility in the nature of fast fashion and sustainability is brought to light.

When comparing these findings to Zara's response strategies over this last decade, noteworthy indications are revealed. Firstly, the number of times that 'sustainability' is mentioned in Zara's annual reports has increased ninefold over the last decade. Moreover, every year since 2017, in the sustainability section of their annual report, Zara states to respond to the 'exigent demand' of their customers, that call for sustainability. This corresponds precisely with the increase in data and increasing pressure on the public debate, as well as with the rise of the 'incompatibility' issue. Therefore, a link is identified between the rise of public pressure and conforming to the pressure, which is to '*acquiesce*'. Thus, an increase in the response strategy of acquiescing appears as the public pressure increases. However, this is not the only way in which Zara has displayed this strategy. For example, Zara has claimed to be the leader in the road to a more sustainable fashion industry since 2012. Moreover, Zara has not participated in any interviews over the last decade. Though, in 2019 only, at the moment that the public pressure peaked, Zara decided to partake in three interviews, all on the topic of sustainability. This indicates an acquiescing response strategy as well.

However, at the same time, other response strategies surfaced too. In 2019, the '*avoidance*' strategy emerged. At the time that the public pressure of incompatibility peaked, Zara stated that there is no contradiction at all between fast fashion and sustainability. Additionally, Pablo Isla mentioned that they do not feel like they make a lot of clothes, and that the responsibility for the incompatibility resides with the customers instead of with the organizations, as they decide how much they would like to buy of a product. Herein, he presents himself to be ignorant to the nature of fast fashion and the impact that the business and the large numbers of produced garments have on the environment. Though, according to the public debate, it is mostly the organizations that are held accountable for the incompatibility between fast fashion and sustainability, not the customers, as argued by Isla. This demonstrates a response strategy of avoidance, which becomes present in 2019 and 2020, after the emergence of the incompatibility pressure.

A third response strategy has been acknowledged in Zara's self-representation regarding sustainability: '*manipulation*', which also peaks in 2019. As mentioned previously, Zara claims to be the leader on the road to sustainability. However, when being classified for their efforts by the Clean Clothes NGO, they receive the lowest classification possible. Moreover, when asked why the company focuses on sustainability nowadays, one of the designers claimed that sustainability spontaneously became part of the conversation. While other, previously mentioned sources demonstrate that it is due to changing consumer demands and pressure.

Concludingly, Zara displays different response strategies simultaneously. The public pressure has increased over the years, peaking in 2019 and 2020, where the 'incompatibility' of fast fashion and sustainability becomes an increasingly present topic. At the same time, Zara starts to display more and different response strategies. Whereas before, Zara mainly conformed to the pressure and 'acquiesced', the company now also 'manipulates' and 'avoids' the issue of sustainability. Moreover, Zara displays more 'acquiescing' behaviour since 2018 also. What particularly stands out, is that as the pressure increases, multiple and contradicting response strategies are displayed. On one hand, Zara conforms to the pressure, however on the other hand, the core of the pressure in 2019 and 2020 -the incompatibility between fast fashion and sustainability- is ignored and manipulated. This indicates that the response strategies evolve over time, according to the pressure of the debate. Moreover, these findings indicate that Zara displays contradicting response strategies simultaneously. It is fair to say that Zara is faltering at this point. The pressure is peaking, and the response strategies are increasing and contradicting. The pressure of incompatibility is one that strikes at the core of fast fashion. Zara displays to conform and be as sustainable as possible, while avoiding the bigger issue at hand, which is at the core of their existence and cannot be solved easily. However, how tenable is this approach?

5.2 Contribution and implications

It is increasingly relevant to integrate sustainability-related efforts into the fast fashion organizations, as it is under pressure for being one of the most polluting industries in the world (McNeill & Moore, 2015). Research has been done in the debate of the fast fashion industry regarding sustainability (Thorisdottir & Johannsdottir, 2019). However, there is a lack of empirical analysis regarding fast fashion organizational response strategies to the pressure of this debate (Caridi et al., 2017). Empirical analysis on organizational response strategies been performed, however, there is a little focus on the fast fashion industry in particular (Desore & Narula, 2016). Moreover, knowledge on the response strategies of these fast fashion

organizations over time is missing. This study mainly contributes to the theory of the debate on sustainability in the fast fashion industry, by providing empirical insights as to how organizations respond to the debate over time. To be more precise: what strategies regarding sustainability a company in the industry adopt and how these evolve over time.

In this case, insights are identified on Zara's response strategies concerning institutional pressure from a public debate on sustainability in the fast fashion industry. Results show that Zara increasingly displays to conform to the pressure as it intensifies. However, at the peak of this pressure, other response strategies, that are contradictory to the acquiescing strategy, are present as well. Zara avoids the core of the issue at hand: the incompatibility between fast fashion and sustainability, an issue that has emerged over the last years and cannot be solved instantly. This knowledge contributes to the theory by identifying a critical moment in the industry. Before, the issue of sustainability was manageable by conforming to the pressure and displaying sustainability efforts. However, at this point, the pressure of the awareness of the incompatibility between fast fashion and sustainability emerges, challenging the core of the fast fashion industry. It seems to be impossible for Zara to conform to this pressure and therefore adopt different response strategies such as manipulation and avoidance.

Concludingly, first, this research contributes to the theory of fast fashion and sustainability by providing an empirical analysis of how a large player in the industry deals with the pressure over time: by consistently and increasingly conforming and sharply avoiding and manipulating the core issues. Secondly, this research contributes to the theory by identifying a critical point in the debate: the undeniable incompatibility between fast fashion's business model and sustainability. At this moment, the retailers avoid the issue at hand.

From an academic perspective, these contributions are interesting as it provides insights into the effects of the public debate on the organizations. It demonstrates that a change is indeed occurring in the industry and that organizations conform to the pressure. But moreover, these contributions are interesting as they demonstrate a critical moment in the industry, where merely conforming does not satisfy anymore and responses strategies change.

These insights help to gain understanding of the development of the debate and the development of the responses strategies of the organization accordingly, which implies new aspects for academic research on the progress and future of the public debate and the response strategies of organizations accordingly. The current literature has posed three different streams of arguments: need for change; progress of sustainability in the fashion industry, and incompatibility between fast fashion and sustainability (Black, 2008; Garcia-Torres, Rey-Garcia, & Albareda-Vivo, 2017; Griskevicius et al., 2010; Nguyen, Le, Ho, & Nguyen, 2020;

Teunissen & Voet, 2013; Widloecher, 2010). This study adds to the literature by recognizing the importance of investigating the upsurge of the issue of incompatibility between the fast fashion industry and sustainability in the public debate in the recent years.

As this study serves as a starting point to fill the gap in theory on the need for empirical analysis regarding sustainability strategies by fast fashion organizations, future research could focus on elaborating on the core of this study. By for example investigating other fast fashion organizations' response strategies, or by using a more comprehensive approach to determine response strategies of fashion companies, instead of merely focusing on their self-representation and investigating statements, interviews and promises. Moreover, future research could also investigate the intensification of the issue of incompatibility between fast fashion and sustainability, by for example investigating how this critical moment in the industry could possibly evolve over time and what this means for the future of the fast fashion industry.

As discussed in the paragraphs above, Zara conforms to the pressure of the public debate. But when the pressure of the 'incompatibility' dimension rises, it avoids the core of the problem between fast fashion and sustainability, as it simply constitutes an incompatibility and is no solved problem yet. However, how tenable is this avoidance strategy? What does the future look like for the fast fashion industry? Looking at other industries, this is not a durable situation. Take the oil industry as an example, where eventually the court of The Hague obligated Shell to lower their emissions, after they were pressured by various institutions for a longer period of time regarding the incompatibility of their business model and sustainability. In their case, the pressure regarding sustainability eventually resulted in a lawsuit, which compelled the company to change direction (BNR, 2021). Insights in how responses evolve over time and the implications when lack thereof, aid managers in the debate on sustainability to help reflect and advance the effective management of these issues in the future. Moreover, for consumers this study implies to be aware of the impact and responses of the industry, enhancing their sensitivity to organizations and their sustainability efforts. Lastly, a practical implication for the government would be to support the change in the industry more. While analysing, a lack of standards regarding sustainability practices has been identified over the last years in the fast fashion industry. By providing standards and policies, organizations are supported to act more sustainability oriented as well.

This study does not only contribute to the literature of fast fashion and sustainability, but this study also contributes to the theory of Oliver (1991), by providing potential improvements for his theory regarding response strategies. During this research, it became apparent that these response strategies are not fixed, but rather evolve over time. In this study, multiple response

strategies were adopted over time, and even simultaneously. Thus, this theory could be enhanced by acknowledging that response strategies are rather fluid than fixed, and that multiple response strategies can be present at the same time.

5.3 Limitations

It must be mentioned that this research does contain several limitations. The first and main limitation is the fact that only one organization is under investigation. Therefore, the outcomes of this study cannot be transferred to the industry as a whole. To limit the effect of this limitation, the largest player in the industry is investigated. However, more organizations must be examined to be able to provide substantive conclusions on response strategies regarding sustainability of the entire fast fashion industry.

The second limitation constitutes the fact that the public debate is outlined based on two media outlets only. Due to the scope of this research, it was not achievable to provide a more extensive overview of the public debate.

The timeframe of ten years constitutes the third limitation of this study. Again, due to the scope of this research, it was not manageable to investigate the entire history of the public debate and Zara's response strategies.

Lastly, the response strategies of Zara are based upon self-representation and secondary data only. The last limitation for this study therefore constitutes of the fact that the actual behaviour of Zara was not accessible. To make up for this limitation, third party data was used to provide a critical reflection of Zara's response strategies and self-representation.

5.4 Reflection

The process of writing this master thesis has come to an end and therefore it is time to reflect upon the process as well as my competences and role in writing a thesis. This reflection critically discusses results, limitations, and my own role as a researcher.

When reflecting on results, two aspects came to mind. First, according to the results, the peak of responses by Zara on the debate was in 2019. This corresponds with the public debate 'peak', as this also lies in 2019. However, another reason that the responses peak in 2019, is that in that year Zara decided to communicate more open. For example, by giving interviews. This indicates that simply more was displayed. This does mean that they indeed respond more when the pressure is higher (i.e., need for more open communication), however, the more is displayed, the more 'flaws' can be identified in the displaying of Zara's acquiesce strategy, leading to the rise of the other two response strategies. This leads to the second critical aspect when looking into the results. Due to the limitation of only investigating Zara's self-representation and not being able to investigate Zara's actual behaviour as well as mainly investigating documents published by Zara itself, it is challenging to state what strategy Zara actually adopts. Does the company truly acquiesce, or do they merely display themselves to be conforming, while it secretly manipulates? This element shows for example in 2019, where the response strategy of manipulation peaks, at the same time that Zara communicates more openly. This makes sense once again, as the pressure in that particular period is high, so responses are expected to be intense as well. However, one does not simply display manipulative behaviour, one is usually caught in doing so, while pretending to be conforming. This is the core of manipulation. However, that means that in this case, the manipulation strategy is not always displayed, but merely is to be identified. This was easier to do in 2019, as more was displayed.

Therefore, on a critical note, the responses strategies identified in this research are indeed present and correspond with the public debate. However, it should be taken into account that the results are to a certain extent influenced by the limitations of this research.

When reflecting upon my own role as a researcher, the main element that comes to mind is that I am biased. I chose the topic of fast fashion and its impact because it intrigues me, and therefore I already have developed an opinion of the organizations in the industry. To a certain extent, this influences the results of this study by investigating data with a biased mind-set. This is an insurmountable side effect of doing qualitative analysis. However, it does need to be mentioned. Moreover, reflecting on my role as a researcher, I discovered that I am not academically experienced enough to precisely understand at all times what the main perspectives or standard choices are when writing a research on fast fashion. For example, when

my proposal was reviewed by my second examiner, she pointed out that taking a consumer perspective when researching the fast fashion industry is not a regular. However, as I have not been introduced to writing down and doing research to a large extent yet, I simply did not have the knowledge to be aware of this beforehand. Therefore, some aspects of this research are influenced by the fact that I am a beginning academic. Think of for example the choice of demarcation of this thesis: I struggled with where to stop and what to include.

After having reflected upon the results, the limitations and my own role as a researcher, this thesis has come to an end!

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