BRANDING IN SUSTAINABLE APPAREL COMPANIES:

A STUDY ON THE BRANDING STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY SMALL-BUSINESS

APPAREL COMPANIES THAT PRACTICE SUSTAINABILITY IN CANADA

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Abstract

Branding in Sustainable Apparel Companies: A Study on the Branding Strategies Adopted by

Small-business Apparel Companies that Practice Sustainability in Canada

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Keywords: Eco-fashion, Sustainability, Cradle-to-Cradle, Identity Branding

The impact of environmental and social issues on today's global fashion industry has made some small apparel companies and big retailers realize their responsibility in setting it right. This qualitative research investigated the branding practices of small-business sustainable apparel companies in Canada. The theoretical framework guiding this research coalesced McDonough and Braungart's concept of cradle-to-cradle (sustainability) and identity-branding approaches, using a case-study methodology. A combination of literature review, web-based data and semi-structured interviews of nine participants was intended to shed light on the research questions. Key findings included more focus in branding a label with the product's aesthetics and other features compared to branding the product as "sustainable," even when the companies are not compromising their sustainability practices. In addition, there is a realization among small-business entrepreneurs who practice sustainability in rebranding to focus more on customer based branding (keeping the customer in the center of the brand).

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Introduction

In recent years, the concept of sustainability has found its way into each of the three basic necessities of life: food, shelter and clothing. Today's fashion industry has been impacted by global environmental and social issues, and as a result some small-business apparel companies as well as big retailers are realizing their responsibility in setting it 'right' (Jones & Comfort, 2005). Consumers claim to have become environmentally conscious and seem to show interest in wearing clothes that are made in a 'responsible' way (Meyer, 2001; Monget, 2007; Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang & Chan, 2012). This set notion of consumer-attitude has motivated and pressured certain companies to take advantage of sustainable concepts and use them as a competitive advantage when marketing themselves, even when they may not appear to actually be following sustainable practices (Bjorklund, Martinsen & Abrahamsson, 2012). As a result, sustainable apparel companies that are genuinely working towards environmental and social goals may find it difficult to practice and brand themselves sustainable when such efforts may be scrutinized or questioned by the masses (Joy, et al. 2012; Friedman, 2010; Thomas, 2008; Winge, 2008; Monget, 2007). Since the authenticity of such marketing approaches in sustainable fashion companies may be questioned by consumers, no company can avoid the need to address issues related to efficient use of resources and ethical procedures while making a product.

Fashion is embedded in a system of aesthetic communication, culture and an individual's identity at any given time throughout history. Fashion reflects certain fundamental features of modern social movements, social stratification and mass-produced tastes (Davis, 2007). Though a definition is difficult to formulate, sustainable fashion can be said to act as a medium to respond to the negative impacts of the environment, as well as to communicate the concept or practice of sustainability in apparel (Hethorn & Ulasewicz, 2008). Fashion allows designers,

manufacturers and consumers to participate in and think about sustainability. Hethorn and Ulasewicz provide a detailed timeline of the history of fashion in the West and show that one of the first signs of realizing social consciousness (sustainability) after the rise of Industrialization in 1860s was from World War II through 1960s. Masses demonstrated the "ability to control consumption, ergo production." (p. 18). When Paris, the fashion hub was cut off from the rest of the world, fashions by home-grown designers became more available in their home country. Consumers also became more practical in their purchases during the World War II. During the post-war period, an anti-fashion movement arose when some subcultures eschewed the production and consumption of fashion and explored options for a more sustainable future. During the 1960s, books and movies raised awareness of the damage done to the environment by extensive use and disposal of chemicals by factories. *Silent Spring*, written by Rachel Carson in 1962, gave a humanistic appreciation for nature and addressed concerns regarding nature's destruction (Hethorn & Ulasewicz, 2008, p. 20; McDonough & Braungart, 2002, p. 47). By the 1970s, the youth counterculture movement influenced fashion when it adopted the use of second-hand and casual apparel. In the book, *Sustainable Fashion: Why Now?* (2008) Hethorn and Ulasewicz show how sustainable fashion surfaces, each time taking on a different meaning, at different periods in history. This would have led to the ambiguous meanings of the term "sustainability" that exist today.

Realizing the negative impacts on the environment and social conditions caused by the apparel industry, conscientious designers who believe in leading holistic lifestyles incorporated these principles into their work. Apparel companies then adopted the concept of sustainability to create a competitive edge, countering fast-fashion and creating awareness among consumers about environmental and social concerns. Big retailers used issues relating to sustainability as a

tool to promote their brands in their advertising campaigns in order to gain the confidence of the consumers and draw them in emotionally.

Sustainability

In the book *Cradle-to-cradle: Remaking the way we make things*, the authors William McDonough and Michael Braungart (2002), who are also architects, introduce the principles of creating a sustainable model that can be incorporated into any discipline. This radical cradle-to-cradle approach derives its inspiration from elements of nature and its functioning (2002, p. 103). The authors emphasize that the Earth is a closed system and, therefore anything that is not natural and is made by humans becomes waste and cannot be disposed of in an eco-friendly manner. By contrast, the waste from nature becomes food for other elements in the environment (p. 92). Following the same principle, the authors suggest that during the initial planning and designing of a system or product, one should work with the notion that there is no option for waste and that it "does not exist" (p. 104). Even though the result of the overall transformation in the system might take time to materialize, the existing methods of eco-efficiency, or "doing more with less," work towards controlling and reducing the negative impact on the environment (McDonough & Braungart, 2002, p. 51, Hethorn & Ulasewicz, 2008, p. 18). The sustainable practices implemented by the present-day small-business apparel companies, work towards the four Rs- Reduce, Reuse, Recycle and Regulate. The concept of eco-effectiveness which fits with the cradle-to-cradle approach is incorporated into the eco-efficient practices in order to implement or bring about the implementation of best practices. Until an ultimate long-term solution of eco-effectiveness is achieved the main motto of today seems to be "to do things right" with what we have (p. 76).

Branding

The concept of branding has changed over time from a way to identify a company to a means of distinguishing a product from its competitors (Ries & Ries, 2002). According to Neumeier, "branding" is defined as "a company's effort to build lasting value by delighting consumers."(2007, p. 19) However, he also states that the consumers' perception towards a brand can be manipulated. Thus as consumers' perceptions evolve over time, and the concept of branding changes. Neumeier's *Zag* (2007) and Ries and Ries' *The 22 Immutable Laws of Branding* (2002) introduce the literature and theory of branding. Moreover, *The New Rules of Green Marketing* by Jacqueline Ottman (2011) gives a detailed explanation of sustainable branding and points out that it helps in making a difference to one's customer by providing them with products or services that are keeping with their environmental values.

Sustainable Practices in Sustainable Apparel Companies

Most of the literature available on sustainable practices is based on a sustainable supply chain. Recent literature selected for this sub-topic are "Green SCM practices" by Green Jr., Zelbst, Meacham and Bhadauria (2012), "Influences on the organizational implementation of sustainability" by Kent, Harmon and Scott (2011), and "Case studies of small medium enterprises and third party organizations" by Nielson (2012). In the first article, Green Jr. et al. explains how sustainability must be integrated into all the levels of the supply chain from manufacturing to logistics. Green-purchasing and eco-design practices should be strategically aligned with customer focus, efficiency and environment stability (2012). Kent et al. attempts to form an integrated model combining ethical, environment and product innovation, based on sustainability (2011). Nielson discusses practices such as transparency, third-party organizational support and environmental laundering which helps in branding sustainable

companies (2012). He stresses that small-businesses have an advantage in implementing some private sustainable practices due to the close proximity of suppliers and vendors.

Problem of Branding and Marketing Sustainable Apparel

Every company faces the ongoing challenge of defining the term "sustainability." Terms such as "green," "eco- friendly," "sustainable," "renewable," "recyclable" and "organic" are often used to market a sustainable brand (Rodie, 2008, p. 1). However, they are also often interchanged and the definition is easily misinterpreted to portray the same level of impact on the environment. Information Resources, Inc. (IRI) reports "roughly half [of U.S. consumers] consider at least one sustainability factor when selecting brands to buy or stores to shop. These factors include: organic development, eco-friendly ingredients, eco-friendly packaging, and fair treatment of suppliers and employees" (Rodie, 2008, p. 1). However, most of today's textile products are produced offshore in low-wage countries in order to stay competitive with other retailers. These are locations where there is little to no enforcement of environmental and social standards. This causes the consumer to become wary of the product's authenticity, as they have begun to question the company's ethical and responsible trade and manufacturing practices.

North American Sustainable Apparel Business

Research materials on sustainable apparel companies in Canada are based on case studies. However articles by Kelly Drennan, the executive director of Fashion Takes Action wrote a report on the history of sustainable apparel companies in Canada (2012). She begins by mentioning the pioneer designer, Linda Lundstrom, who developed a 'lean' manufacturing facility and used eco-friendly fabrics. Drennan goes on to mention many names of popular designers in the Canadian fashion industry today such as Preloved, Harricana and Thieves. This shows that there is an active participation of Canadian sustainable apparel companies in

promoting sustainable apparel in the market. Case studies of big sustainable apparel companies, like Patagonia, American Apparel, Noir and many others show that each one incorporates its sustainable practices according to its brand philosophy of the corresponding company. However, none of these companies are specific as to how the various aspects of sustainability come together to support a closed-loop system in their company. Hence, it becomes apparent that the concept of sustainability needs to be integrated into every part and process of the company and hence research should address sustainability with a holistic approach.

This research paper is intended to act as a guide for the managers or owners of small-business apparel companies practicing sustainability to understand recent best practices of branding while still maintaining a level of sustainability. Sustainable apparel companies face challenges while branding and these challenges are best explored when examining local areas of Canada. This research is intended to provide a better understanding of Canada's consumer choices and purchase decisions from the company's perspective, as well as offer better insight related to the validity of sustainable branding and branding techniques in small-business sustainable apparel companies.

As a multidisciplinary study combining elements of sustainability and branding theories in the context of a specific local economy, this paper will create a solid foundation for new hypotheses to be formed (Figure 1). The primary focus of the research is to understand the connections between sustainable practices and branding techniques. Hence, the critical stance that will be taken by choosing different small-business apparel companies and their approach to branding and sustainability will add strength to the existing literature on branding in sustainability. For this research, fashion enterprises were selected based on their commitment to

sustainability in the marketplace and were examined to understand the brand value of the

company.

Theoretical Framework
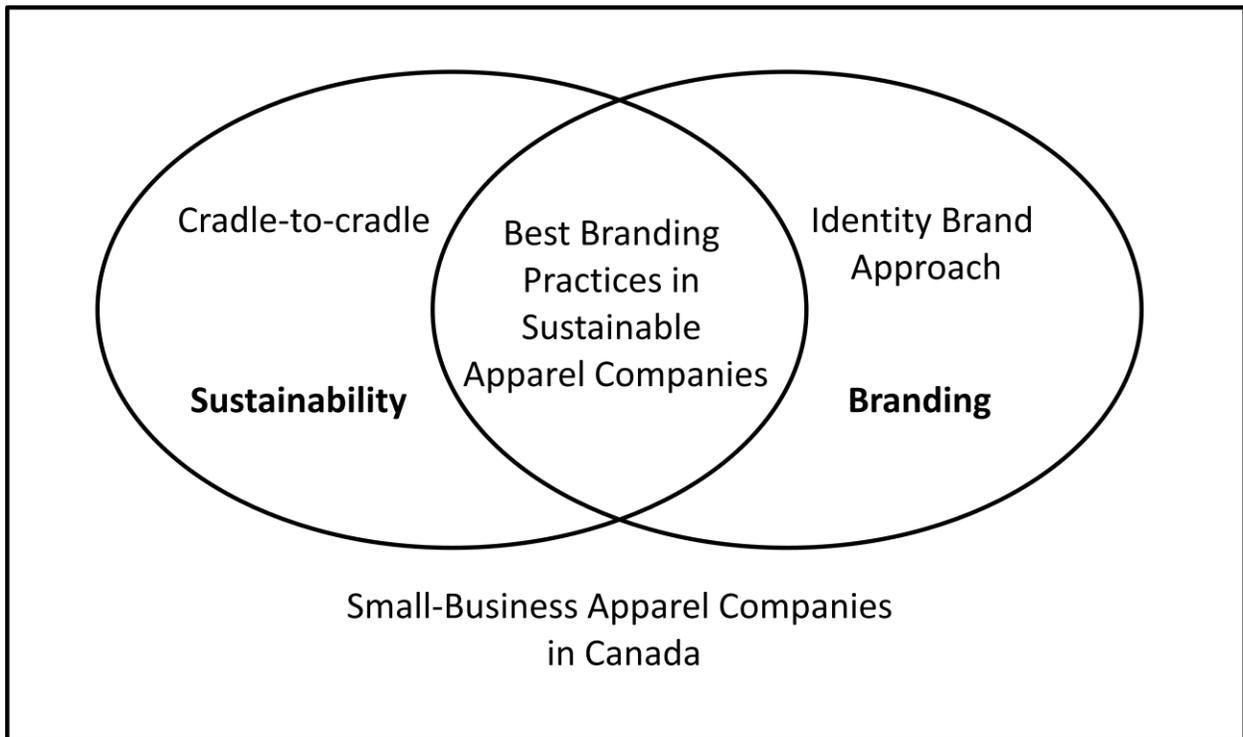
Figure 1

Literature Review

This research topic seeks to set the stage for further inquiry regarding the existing texts for branding in sustainability. The literature review will define the terms and theoretical framework used in this paper. In addition the following areas have been identified: sustainable practices in sustainable apparel companies, present challenges and risks that are known in sustainable apparel companies, current branding in sustainable apparel companies and Canadian apparel market. Due to the vast depth of these themes, the scope of the research is limited to a controlled number of factors.

Theoretical framework

Branding strategies of small-business apparel companies are explored using a combined lens of McDonough and Braungart's cradle-to-cradle concept of sustainability and the identity branding approach. A company's branding strategies have an important role to play in its success, and by using the notion of sustainability as a competitive advantage, consumers are at times apprehensive or enthusiastic when making sustainable clothing purchase decisions (Kang & Hur, 2012). Thus by applying these two approaches, this research will address the current branding strategies that are catered to the Canadian market.

Sustainable Fashion Lexicon

Sustainability in the apparel industry has various definitions and terms that may seem interchangeable when, in fact these terms have different meanings (Thomas, 2008, p. 525). Marketing materials distributed by apparel companies use particular terms related to sustainability because they assume these terms are interchangeable and convey the same concepts to the consumer (Bell, 2007). Only certain terms relevant to this study have been covered in this section.

(a) Eco-fashion is the term used for garments that are made efficiently using the resources and ethical procedures while minimizing environmental impacts (Chan & Wong, 2012; Joergens, 2006).

(b) Ethical fashion is used for clothing that takes into consideration the impact of production and trade on the environment and on the people who are manufacturing them (Cervellon, Hjerth, Ricard & Carey, 2010).

 (c) Eco clothing refers to using eco-friendly processes for the manufacturing of raw materials such as organic textiles and sustainable materials or fabric made out of bamboo or recycled plastic bottles and second-hand or recycled fabrics from vintage clothing and textiles (Cervellon, et al., 2010)

(d) Organic clothing refers to clothing that have been made using organic fiber made with a minimum use of chemicals and resulting in minimum damage to the environment (Cervellon, et al., 2010).

(e) "Fair-trade apparel is similar to ethical fashion but promotes fair wages to the workers, decent working conditions, local sustainability and fair terms for farmers and workers in the developing world" (Cervellon, et al., 2010).

(f) Green, in general refers to a product or process that has minimum impact on the environment and this term is often interchanged with eco-friendly (Rodie, 2008, p. 5). While pertaining to apparel, it is concerned with the environmental impacts of textile processing and clothing consumption (Cervellon, et al., 2010).

(g) Slow fashion is a solution to the problem of overconsumption and excess production in the current market. It is an alternative approach which involves forming a collection of durable clothing and classic styles that transition into season or even from day to night (Fletcher, 2010).

This concept also encourages small scale production, diversity using indigenous craft techniques, and local sourcing of materials.

Sustainability and Sustainability Practices

Despite being the most sought after theme in this era (Fletcher, 2010), the definition of sustainability is still vague. This research uses the United Nations' definition of sustainability which is: "the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland Commission in 1987 in Shedroff, 2009). This broad meaning for sustainability is interpreted in various ways in different disciplines (Carter and Rogers, 2008) and is also used to encompass all the different aspects of sustainability in the apparel industry. Engineering literature explains this concept by taking into consideration the impact of social, environmental and economic aspects. John Elkington referred to this as the triple bottom line- People, Planet, Profit or 3Ps (Carter and Rogers, 2008, p. 364) (fig 2). Similarly, in design, architects William McDonough and Michael Braungart uses the same concept of "ecology, equity and economy" when discussing the cradle-to-cradle approach. They explain and conceptualize a fractal design tool that enables a designer to analyze design solutions holistically and "create a value in all the three sectors of ecology, equity and economy." (2002, p. 150 - 154). They also point out that this fractal tool can be incorporated to plan a product or system in any area of study (fig 3).

Triple Bottom Line
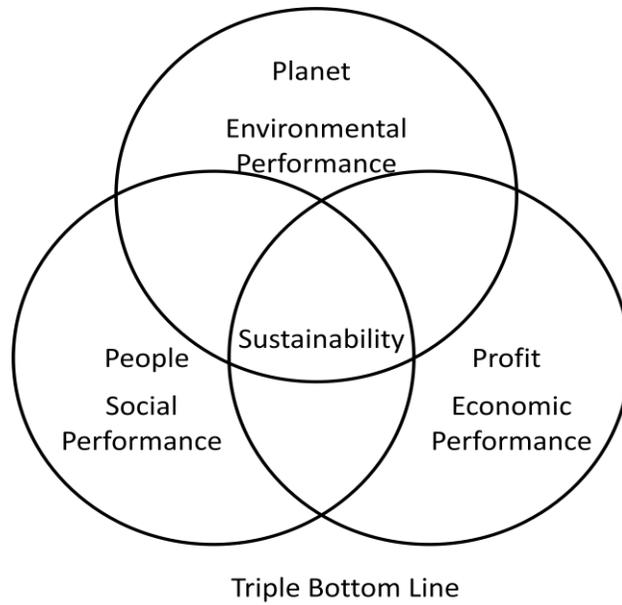
Figure 2

Reproduced from Carter & Rogers, 2008, p. 365
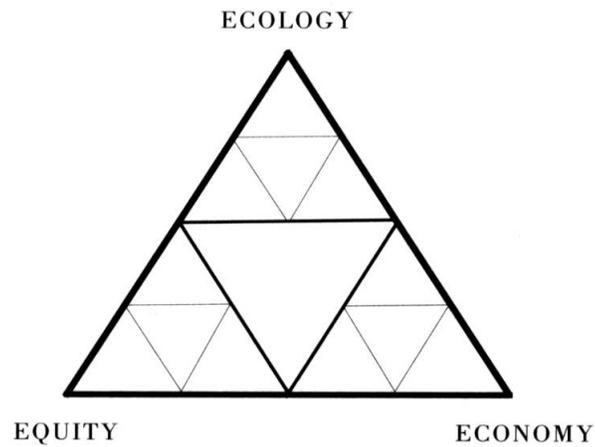
Figure 3.

Cradle-to-cradle design matrix and fractal tool

Reproduced from *cradle to cradle: remaking the way we make things,*

McDonough & Braungart, 2002, p. 150

Eco-efficiency

Since World War II, not only has the government in North America encouraged reducing waste and conserving resources, but the general public has attempted to reduce waste by controlling consumption, which is practiced to this day in the form of eco-efficiency. The concept of eco-efficiency in business was promoted beginning in 1992 by the Business Council (now called World Business Council) for sustainable development. The World Business Council, consisting of 48 industry sponsors, furnished a business perspective to the Earth Summit (McDonough & Braungart, 2002). The document explains relatively simplified methods that set the threshold to the basic principles of sustainability. It becomes a starting point to understand the new perspectives of sustainable design and development (eco-effectiveness). The basic difference between each of the 4 R's is the change in physical and chemical characteristics of the form of waste during these processes (Ho & Choi, 2012). Often, depending on the product characteristics, combinations of specific methods are implemented. Below the 4R's are defined.

Reduce, is a central tenet in eco-efficiency for resource reduction and waste prevention. In the context of apparel production, the main functions could include careful selection and ordering of material procurement such as fabric and notions (McDonough & Braungart, 2002, p. 54). It could also include local sourcing which would reduce the carbon footprint and, if sourcing is done globally, the process of reducing could involve minimizing the safety stock (material allowance) ordered to prevent fabric wastage. In the garment manufacturing process, an ideal layout of patterns can reduce fabric wastage during the cutting process (Ho & Choi, 2012, p. 168).

Reuse refers to using the same items repeatedly in their original format. Instead of discarding the items, they can be reused and thus have their usage life extended. This may

include items such as dress pins, garment packaging or sewing needles. Such products may last longer with better design solutions so that they are in good condition even while these components go through many usages. Better design and quality of components for example in garment package materials, zippers, buttons, eyelets and hooks provide the option of reuse once the garment is no longer functional (Ho & Cho, 2012, p. 168).

Regulate refers to the decisions made by governments or legislations that represent the public interest and enforce environmental requisites to the industries and the community for the purpose of safeguarding the environment (McDonough & Braungart, 2002, p 59). At times, the amount spent by the organizations to meet these requirements is an extra cost that the consumers might not be willing to pay. This is often a reason why industries move to regions where regulations are less stringent.

McDonough and Braungart mention that initiatives and certifications that assist companies trying to be sustainable offer "one-size-fits-all end-of-pipe" solutions in the concept of eco-efficiency (p. 61). They stress that this delays the disposal of waste, but does not stop it. However, realizing this flaw in the industry, local initiatives need to offer one-on-one design and marketing consultations that recommend creative problem-solving to entrepreneurs.

Sustainability certifications and initiatives

There is a need to measure the credibility of sustainable practices in order to authenticate the sustainability quotient of the companies. Every sustainable apparel company has its own sustainability criteria depending on company policy (3Ps- planet, people, profit or cradle-to-cradle) and choose from a variety of indicators which include organic certifications, Cradle-to-cradle certification, ISO certifications for production facilities, the Oeko-Tex standards, and the Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS) (Nielsen, p. 2012). Few brands have their own

initiatives and credential 'yardsticks' that suit their brand philosophy like 'Timberland' with its

Green Index. This lack of unified certification standards creates room for confusion and more

issues. However, certification is important because it creates a special trust with the consumer

and gives credibility to the company.

Some of the main initiatives implemented by the apparel industry that track and measure

the sustainability in the supply chain have been categorized as non-profit organizations (NGO),

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives and environmental initiatives (Third Party

Organizations), as reported by Nielsen (2012), which are listed in (Appendix 1). Certifications

and standards help companies demonstrate that strict criteria have been complied with and

consumers are reassured of the apparel's sustainability aspects.

Local third-party organizations

Local third-party organizations play very important roles in supporting small-business

apparel companies for successful development and implementation of sustainable fashion

strategies. The key goals of most of the textile and clothing sustainable initiatives are as follows:

(1) Develop comprehensive knowledge of environmental risks and impacts throughout the

supply chain,

(2) Create standards to measure and reduce negative impacts on the environment,

(3) Collaborate with partners to contribute to improved environmental performance,

(4) Verify compliance with standards, and set up incentives for businesses that enhance

environmental performance, and

(5) Strive for continuous improvement in environmental performance by collaborating with

the community stakeholders.

Local organizations in Canada such as Toronto Fashion Incubator and Fashion Takes Action have the knowledge and resources to help local companies or companies that are working towards incorporating sustainable strategies. These initiatives have the advantage of understanding the economy, culture and market of the region, and are able to impart expert advice and guidance. They have the ability to identify the gaps in the needs of the community and the challenges of the company. As well, they can offer valuable assistance by organizing workshops and related programs. These organizations have resources from credible suppliers, and have a track record of monitoring both the vendors and companies in their sustainability quotient. They collaborate with universities and other educational institutions to promote the concept of sustainability through educational seminars and workshops. Better understanding of the companies and in-depth market advice from these organizations will give these small-business apparel companies a competitive advantage and allow them to enter the mass-market sector (Nielsen, 2012).

Fashion Takes Action is a non-profit organization that promotes the concept of sustainability in the fashion industry as well as to Canadian consumers. They work towards enlightening the masses by prioritizing creative and positive approaches which have social and environmental impacts. Fashion Takes Action acts as a bridge that aligns industry businesses, policy makers and the attitudes of consumers. Their marketing and awareness building is done via social media, public speaking engagements, fashion shows, tradeshows, and media interviews (www.fashiontakesaction.com).

The Toronto Fashion Incubator (TFI) is an innovative non-profit organization established to support start-up entrepreneurs in the fashion industry. It promotes small-business entrepreneurs by helping them develop their business and professional skills, and by providing

an incubator-space where creative entrepreneurs can learn about marketing, sales, business

planning, exporting and cash-flow through strategic programs. They also provide resources,

one-on-one private consultations with experienced mentors, and educational seminars

(www.fashionincubator.com).

The Canadian Apparel and Textile Industries Program-(CATIP) works with Canada's

apparel and textile companies to implement new business strategies to tackle new open global

markets. Its goal is to identify and introduce best practices, incorporating leading technologies,

and to implement e-business initiatives. This program facilitates financial contributions for

approved projects (www.ic.gc.ca).

Recycle is the last principle of eco-efficiency. It is a process in which the waste end of a

product is processed into reusable forms to be raw materials for new products (Ho & Cho, 2012,

p. 169). At the same time, it reduces the quality of the material overtime. This process where

the quality gets degraded while recycling is called downcycling (McDonough & Braungart,

2002, p. 56). Two types of waste have been identified, which are post-industrial waste and post-

consumer waste. Post-industrial waste recycling is easier than recycling post-consumer waste,

because at the post-industrial level, the content and composition of the material is known and it

is easier to collect and process (Ho & Cho, 2012, p. 169).

Eco-effectiveness

Upcycle: The idea of eco-effectiveness is not only to reduce waste but also to

eliminate the concept of waste (McDonough & Braungart, 2002, p. 104). For effective

recycling, components need to be sorted and separated to find design solutions for each

component to be recycled (Shedroff, 2009).   Post-consumption waste from consumers is

difficult to dispose of, especially while reversing the life cycle. It is a demanding process to

collect all the discarded materials of apparel from the consumers and sort the materials according to its usability and material quality. Moreover, this process becomes expensive and yet does not eliminate the waste completely. The waste is transferred from one form to another and stretched to a longer life cycle. The main premise of upcycling is that the product was not designed with recycling in mind for a closed-loop system (McDonough & Braungart, 2002, p. 58).

Design: Sometimes an eco-effective approach might result in extreme innovations or it might simply result in just optimizing an existing system. Where the importance lies is in the shifting perspective to perceive the system as a whole (p. 84). "In the design stage, eco-effective designers expand their vision from the primary purpose of a product or system and consider the whole," which incorporates: the product, process of making it, consumption and post-consumption (p. 81). The goals of eco-effective approach and potential cultural, commercial and ecological effects are, "both immediate and long-term toward the environment, with respect to both time and place" (p. 82). McDonough and Braungart point out that one has to learn to imitate nature's cradle-to-cradle system in which the concept of waste does not exist and products should be designed including post-consumption (or closed-loop) from the beginning.

Zero wastage: The ultimate extension of eco-efficiency is zero waste providing maximum economic value along with zero negative ecological effects (McDonough, Braungart & Bollinger, 2006, p. 1). During recycling, as explained earlier, often the raw materials lose their material quality leading to cradle-to-grave linear flow of materials. In the cradle-to-cradle approach, used materials retain their quality and can be used to create something of equal or higher quality. Thus the remnants are resourced or used up in their entirety, eliminating the creation of waste.

Respecting diversity

The current design approach "one-size-fits-all" usually recommends a uniform set of methods as a solution. Even though it is the answer to many situations, it might not be the most effective solution for a zero negative impact to the environment. McDonough and Braungart state that "diversity of place and of culture, of desire and need, the uniquely human element" needs to be considered while designing and planning a project (2002, p. 119). The concept of "form follows evolution and not function alone" allows mass-customization of processes according to the needs, tastes, desires and traditions of the local environment (p. 104, p. 141); "All sustainability is local" (p. 123). When a business is established in a community, it indirectly caters to the local customs and requirements of the community and also recognizes a sense of interdependence and co-existence (p. 123). In a small-business apparel company, the sourcing partners (suppliers), skill-based employees (manufacturers), logistic partners, service providers (press, marketing and industry associations), retail partners (online, store, boutiques, pop ups), consultants and consumers need to collaborate and maintain close relationships for its success and sustenance as "the vitality of ecosystems depends on relationships and inter-dependency" (McDonough & Braungart, 2002, p. 121, Caniato, Caridi, Crippa & Moretto, 2012). Hence, this can be best accomplished when a company is established in the same community that it caters to, developing a symbiotic relationship (Delbufalo, 2012 and Sarkis, 2012).

Local Sourcing: "The idea of local sustainability is not limited to materials but it begins with them. Using local materials opens the doors to a profitable enterprise" avoiding the negative effects of a global carbon footprint (McDonough & Braungart, 2002, p. 123). In addition to materials, the other local sources would be skills, services and flow of

energy, such as renewable energy. One of the findings from the research conducted by Curwen, Park and Sarkar was that local sourcing and a small supply chain were the key factors for the success of a sustainable initiative and this was explained by using the example of the label started by Eileen Fischer (2012, p. 36, p. 43). However, one of the main drawbacks of local sourcing of materials can be the cost factor. The cost incurred can be expensive compared to easily available mainstream non-sustainable materials in the market (Parischa, 2010, p. 78).

Research and development

In McDonough's and Braungart's cradle-to-cradle concept, the idea of "form follows evolution" as stated earlier, is that evolution is not an activity with a "full-stop"; rather, it is continuously evolving. Just as society and culture are ever-evolving, the innovations of products and processes needs to continuously evolve with best practices by exceeding the expectations of the customer's needs in conjunction with a holistic radical approach in sustainable production (p. 178).

Eco-efficiency to eco-effectiveness

The two approaches described by McDonough and Braungart, eco-efficiency and eco-effectiveness are both solutions towards a better tomorrow. The former provides solutions of minimizing waste by "being less bad" or "doing more with less," while the latter suggests "doing it right" and eliminating the creation of waste. (p. 53, p. 76)

Though the concept of cradle-to-cradle involves designing systems which eliminate the option of creating waste (eco-effectiveness), such radical changes in apparel companies require an evolution of practices over a period of time (McDonough & Braungart, 2002, p. 104). Clearly the indigenous methods of apparel manufacturing are far removed from this new thinking, and it will require sufficient time before there is a whole systems overhaul (p. 165).

The concept of eco-efficiency involves "doing more with less" by providing a lean and resource-saving set of practices such as the 4R's – Reduce, Reuse, Recycle and Regulate which still continues to be implemented in today's sustainability focused companies. Also, sustainable apparel companies have recently started to incorporate the earlier-mentioned integrated model of ecology, equity and economy (cradle-to-cradle approach/ eco-effectiveness) into the traditional practices of reducing the negative impacts of the environment (eco-efficiency).

The shifting of paradigm from eco-efficiency to eco-effectiveness requires changing the framework and looking for opportunities in innovation. For example, an apparel company, during the process of finding solutions for the creation of zero waste, may develop new innovative product extensions that would help in the economic growth of the company. 'Continuous innovation' or 're-inventing' allows the entrepreneur to think 'out of the box' and encourages them to have an open mind towards systems change (p. 185). It is important for the entrepreneur to understand and prepare for the learning curve in order to improvise on existing innovative ideas (p. 184). In the case of small-business companies, however, this is potentially risky for entrepreneurs and they should tread carefully as "transformation to an eco-effective vision… requires plenty of trial and error time, effort, money and creativity expended in many directions."(p. 181)

Traceability, which is controlling legitimate ethical and sustainable flow of materials in the supply chain that is spread out sporadically around the globe, is a constant issue (Caniato, et al., 2012; Abbasi & Nilsson, 2011; Bjorklund, et al., 2012, Chee, Wong, Skipworth, Godsell & Achimugu, 2012; Miemczyk, Johnsen & Macquet, 2012). In an efficient local supply chain, monitoring the traceability of the product is a viable option. This helps in continuous control, development and quality checking of the product along with responsible information

sharing. Studies say that the improvement in technology has made it easier for integration, and now there is more information about a dress on the label than anywhere else through the application of Quick Response codes (QR) (Prahl, April 2012). More research can be done to know the extent of this traceability or penetration in the supply chain.

Most of the literature available on sustainable practices in today's apparel industry is based on a sustainable and local supply chain. Practices used in the fashion industry to pursue environmental sustainability objectives include the following: (i) use of organic fibers ("fibers that follow standards that nurture the soil or animal from which they come and do not use toxic insecticides, herbicides or fungicides; examples of organic fibers are organic cotton, organic wool, kapok, and silk") that reduce the adverse effects of toxins and depletion of natural resources, creating an imbalance in nature; (ii) "reuse and recycling of materials such as old clothes, manufacturing scraps, bottles, and tyres;" (iii) upcycling of vintage and second-hand clothing; (iv) implementing clean technologies such as renewable and new emission-free versions, and even information technologies; (v) green certifications (such as Global Organic Textile Standards, Ecolabel); and (vi) "green product and process design, considering the production technologies, the product characteristics, and the materials used" (Caniato, et al., 2012, p. 661). In the research article, "Environmental sustainability in fashion supply chains: An exploratory case based research," Caniato, et al., finds that in production processes, companies that tend to outsource had to select the appropriate suppliers and establish long-term relationships, as well as extensive control over their suppliers in the supply chain. Those that had an internal manufacturing unit adopted "clean and natural production processes" (2012, p. 666).

The lack of financial assistance from the government in support of establishing entrepreneurship and attaining certifications needs to be addressed first. One of the main

challenges that small-business companies face is the cost of formal certifications. Research

identifies the challenge of finding the right suppliers who have the right certifications and have

trust worthy sourcing (Nielsen, 2012; Caniato,et al., 2012). In addition, the sustainability

quotient of new and available fabric content is ambiguous, and investigating the legitimacy of its

content is time consuming and needs external resources (Nielsen, 2012). Consumers have the

same ambiguity in evaluating the fabric choices available in the sustainable market (Markkula &

Moisander, 2012, p. 110, Allwood, Laursen, de Rodriguez & Bocken, 2006; Fletcher, 2008). As

mentioned earlier, though emphasis on design, fit and aesthetics has been an important part in the

success of an apparel label, the selection of sustainable apparel products that are aesthetically

pleasing is low. The absence of adequate sustainable competitors can be referred to as one of the

reasons for this (Joergens 2006).

Branding

According to the American Marketing Association (AMA), a brand is a name, term, sign,

symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one

seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of the competition. A brand can be

defined further in terms of "creating awareness, reputation and prominence of a product or its

company in the marketplace" (Keller, Aperia & Georgson, 2012, p. 4).

A product is anything that can be offered to a market for attention, acquisition, use or

consumption that might satisfy a need or want. It can involve tangible and intangible forms such

as an idea or a place, an individual, an organization, a service, shop or a tangible object (Keller et

al., 2012, p. 4). In this paper, the definition of product encompasses any of these forms of

offerings within the apparel company. A brand differentiates one from another not by the

expected product alone, but both tangible and intangible offerings by adding other values in the

form of packaging, services, advertising, customer advice, financing, delivery arrangements, warehousing and other things that people appreciate.

The importance of branding can be understood by considering either the consumer's as well as the manufacturer's perspective (Table 1). In this paper, the consumer is defined as a person who consumes any or all of the product offerings of a particular company (p. 8). Branding gives an identity to the makers of the product and customers hold these owners responsible for the products they offer. The particular brand allows the consumer to build a relationship of trust and loyalty with that particular product because it satisfies their needs and, is in keeping with their previous experiences. Their acquired knowledge about the brand helps them in making better purchase decisions regarding its quality related to product performance, pricing, promotions and other product characteristics (p. 9).

From the owner's perspective, the basic function of a brand is to identify a product that belongs to that particular organization (p. 10). It gives the business legal protection to own the unique features of its product. It can also retain its intellectual property rights, giving legal title to its brand owner, safeguarding its registered trademarks, patents, manufacturing processes, copyrights and design. Branding makes the firm a valuable asset that is capable of influencing consumer behavior and in securing a competitive advantage over other similar products in the marketplace (p. 16). It ensures a level of quality that is being offered by the company and its future products. As well, it gives security of consistent financial returns for its stakeholders. As such, this paper investigates branding from the manufacturer's perspective so as to present the manufacturer's account of the best ways to project their brand to the customer, because ultimately, a brand resonates in the minds of its consumers (p. 11).

Branding a product demands creating a brand awareness among the consumers. This is done by educating them about the brand, about its meaning, its functionality and how it is different from the other brand-name products. It helps the consumers make proper purchase decisions and in the process creates brand value for the owner. Invariably, they recognize the differences between brands in the same product category (p. 16).

Importance of branding	
In Consumer perspective	In Manufacturer perspective
• Identification of source of product • Assigning responsibility to owner • Risk reducer • Search cost reducer • Bond with the maker of product • Symbolic device • Sign of quality	• Means of identification to simplify handling or tracing • Means of legally protecting unique features • Indicates the quality level to their customers • Means of endowing products with unique associations • Source of competitive advantage • Source of financial returns

Table 1.

Reproduced from Keller, Aperia & Georgesen, 2012, p. 8

Operational definitions in branding

Heding, Knudtzen and Bjerre introduce keywords to brand management (2009), and the branding terms below are presented for clarity in the context of this study:

(i)   Brand image refers to the consumer's impression of the brand, that is, the image created. They evaluate the brand cognitively from these perceptions and form an attitude towards the brand (p. 13). It consists of three components: brand attributes, functional value and symbolic value for the customers (Burmann, Hegner & Riley, 2009, p. 116).

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(ii)   Brand identity refers to the uniqueness of the brand. The owners or marketers attribute a set of qualities to the product or company which creates a brand value that differentiates it from the rest of the brands. It expresses a particular vision that the owner pursues to create or maintain for a long-lasting impression on its customers (p. 12).

(iii)   Brand positioning can be referred to the positioning of the brand in the consumer's mind by conveying the most consistent messages compatible and relating to that of the brand offerings (p. 14). It often distinguishes itself from other brands with similar product offerings.

(iv)   Brand loyalty is the term attributed to loyal customers of a particular brand. It is always less expensive to keep and maintain repeat customers because this approach increases the brand value when customers indirectly endorses the company (p. 13).

(v)   Brand Equity: Branding is about endowing products and services with the power of brand equity, "the value that the brand holds" (Keller, et al, 2012, p. 42). This term can be expressed in two forms: namely financial (tangible) and subjective expression (intangible). Financial brand equity is used for accounting purposes in relation to financial statements, mergers and acquisitions. The subjective expression (intangible) refers to the consumer perception of the brand and is valuable for strategic brand management (Heding, et al., 2009, p. 11). This is especially important when a consumer associates a particular 'added value' of their products or services directly to the brand (p. 11). Marketers believe that this brand equity relates to the marketing outcomes unique to a particular brand (Keller, et al, 2012, p. 42).

Identity brand approach

Creation of brand equity is the stem of brand management and hence can be comprehended through different approaches. This study uses identity branding approach for optimizing brand equity in small-business sustainable apparel companies that have sustainability as their core set of values (Stuart, 2011, p. 139). The identity approach is vital and central to the concept of branding itself as it represents the basis of brand image (Kapferer, 2004). It expresses an exact set of values, unique sales propositions (USPs), competences, vision, communication style, behavior and lays down inherent parameters of the company values (Heding, et al., 2009, 48, Burmann, et al., 2009, p. 115). A brand identity is created by the owners of the brand and sent to the consumer who is the receiver (Fig 4). To genuinely practice sustainability in a company the entrepreneurs' self-motivated belief system of sustainability translates into the company's cultural behavior (p. 115).

Company → Brand → Consumer
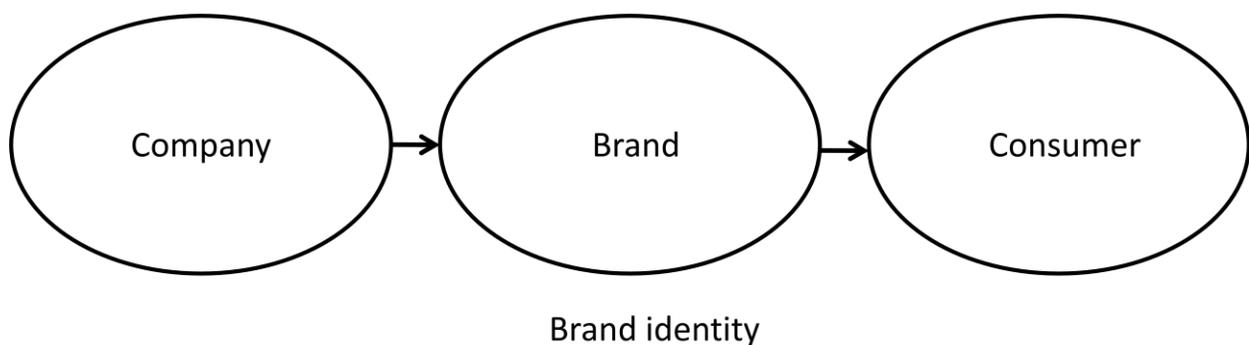
Brand identity

Figure 4

Identity Branding Approach

Heding et al. 2009

As Stuart mentions, companies that have sustainability as a key business driver can have it as an internal or external driver. As an external driver, sustainability is viewed as either a marketing tool for competitive advantage or where the company is forced to dutifully perform deeds to conform to the expectations of external stakeholders, such as investors, environmental partners and groups, and customers. In the latter case, sustainable marketing tools that are practiced to please the external stakeholders often involve "add-on" strategies to brand them sustainable (2011, p. 140). This approach is also termed as green-washing, though only if it is untrue or it is exaggerated. When sustainability is a key internal driver, "businesses are self-motivated by the belief that business should be sustainable" (2011, p. 140). Stuart also substantiates that long term commitment towards sustainability is supported by an "emotionally charged, authentic and behaviorally based" identity (p. 141). In a small-business apparel company that practices sustainability, it maybe that the company owners and employees have similar normative approaches towards sustainability. Hence, it is necessary for the supplier partners to be similarly aligned towards the practice and belief of sustainability. It is also imperative for the small-businesses to have a close and integrated relationship with their supplier and employees as well as external stakeholders (Bell, 2007, p. 47, Heding, et al., 2009, p. 51) (here internal stakeholders can be considered as employees). Thus a small-business sustainable apparel company can be characterized by following the AC2ID framework of brand identity that was developed by Balmer and Greyser (2003):

A: Actual- 'what the brand stands for',

C: Communicated- 'living the brand',

C: Conceived- brand image, 'external representation of the brand',

I: Ideal- 'what it ought to be', and

D: Desired – 'what it wishes to be' (Heding, et al., 2009, 57-63).

This strategic framework emphasizes that the sustainable practices of a company (cultural behavior) determines the brand identity rather than appearance alone (logo, signs). While having a lifestyle in the sustainability belief system ('living the brand'), the company owners and internal stakeholders (employees) act as brand ambassadors and indirectly become creators of brand value which adds to the branding tools or strategies. These strategies include 'storytelling' by creating a narrative about product and the company, and about employee branding. This kind of identity branding reflects and resonate a consistent image for the brand that is sustainable. The trust, credibility and reputation of a sustainable company are entirely dependent on its practice of sustainability over time and the way this concept is communicated (Heding, et al., 2009, p. 57-63).

Current branding practices in sustainable apparel companies

Traditionally apparel companies have used hang tags and labels to convey brand names and build brand identity at point-of-purchase (stores). This approach has been the conventional driver to educate consumers about product attributes and inform them about the company's mission and ethos. Branding helped to guide consumers' purchase decisions and in turn reinforced product labeling and self-advertising. Sustainable apparel companies have adopted the same method to emphasize and educate consumers about the company's socially responsible policies, referencing their commitment to the environment, fair labor, education and other social causes (Hyllegard, Yan, Ogle & Lee, 2012, p. 52). This has enabled these companies to reach out to the customers and attach an added-value to the product by influencing consumers emotionally (Joergens, 2006). Such hangtags include written text, symbolic imagery and third-

party certifications or logos in order to verify social responsibility marketing claims (Hyllegard et al., 2012, p. 53).

However, Hyllegard also points out that too much information on hangtags can over-whelm the consumers and is caused by too much text, overuse of jargon as well as presence of a number of illustrations for different sustainability initiatives. A precise, clear and factual representation of the company label helps the consumer understand only the necessary details and avoids confusion as illustrated by the 'Keep It Simple' principle of Ottman (2011, p. XX). Moreover, Hylegard et al., suggest that the message conveyed can be clearly structured depending on the message content, message explicitness and third-party logo (2012, p. 52-54).

As the access to the internet has become more accessible to consumers, the perception and the meaning of branding has changed. Sustainable companies communicate information about their products through websites and insist on being transparent with regards to information given to the customers (Caniato et al., 2012, p. 666). Information usually consists of price and product characteristics; as well through the entrepreneurs' personal blogs customers will get a more succinct picture of sourcing the materials and production of the product. Transparency through external sources such as press and known certifications gives more credibility to the company (Nielsen, 2012). Being transparent maintains legitimacy and builds the reputation of the company (Carter & Rogers, 2008, p. 367) and, thus, companies need to be transparent in allowing public scrutiny. The entrepreneurs create a virtual environmental and ethical community to exchange information and ideas that interest them. In addition, they disseminate teachings concerning sustainability through workshops, university lectures, and by taking part in community activities (fairs, shows) (Caniato, et al., 2012, p. 666). Transparency includes reporting to stakeholders, actively engaging with them, as well as incorporating their suggestions

of improvement on sustainability processes. As suggested by Carter & Rogers, this practice of

being transparent is one of the modes of traditional cause-related marketing and the current green

marketing strategies within a stakeholder perspective (2008, p. 367)

Challenges in branding sustainable apparel

The premium price charged for sustainably produced apparel may convey to the general

public that these are niche products targeted primarily to affluent consumers (Markkula &

Moisander, 2012, p. 110; Joergens 2006). While making a purchase decision of sustainable

apparel, consumers face the dilemma between choosing apparel produced in the home-country

(locally) and that of fair trade produced apparel from developing countries (Markkula &

Moisander, 2012, p. 110). In the apparel industry, fashion styles continuously change and this

results in the introduction of fast fashion where apparel products are churned out of factories

almost monthly. As a consequence, fast fashion has made it difficult for sustainable companies to

compete in the industry (Gam & Banning, 2011; Joy et al., 2011; Hethorn & Ulasewicz, 2008).

Entrepreneurs in small-business sustainable apparel companies have been forced to

reduce their product prices to meet market prices, which led them to steer away from the

mainstream consumers and target the niche market (Caniato, et al., 2012, p. 668). These niche

markets are comprised of people accustomed to purchasing clothing and other goods outside of

traditional distribution channels. These consumers seem to be concerned with environmental

sustainability issues. Zhang states that since companies are encouraged to employ ethical

branding, some firms are forced to choose this ethical concept due to consumer and competitor

pressure even though they implement non-sustainable practices (2006). However, Caniato et al.,

stresses that most of the time, the personal commitment of entrepreneurs towards environmental

sustainability played an important part in the company culture. Some researchers based their

study on the assumption that there is a huge market demand for eco-fashion (Joy et al., 2012).

Yet, only a minimal percentage of eco-lovers actually buy sustainable fashion products as they

'want to pay less for more' (Joy et al., 2012). Consumers give more importance to price, quality

and fit. Thus, it is more ideal to establish a competitive advantage with regards to the customer's

wants and needs and then incorporate a strategic management plan of environmental challenges

in the manufacturing of the products.

Misalignment in identity approach and consumer behavior

As discussed earlier, the identity branding approach is a concept that involves

entrepreneurs of small-business sustainable apparel companies having a perceived brand image.

However, the literature review mentioned in the previous section admits that consumers are less

likely to purchase sustainable apparel despite their positive attitude toward environmental

protection (Joergens, 2006; Chan &Wong, 2012). The attitude-behavior gap between the

consumers' values and apparel purchase consumption creates a misalignment in the identity

approach and actual branding. This affects the business of the company at large economically

and makes it difficult for the brand to survive. The researcher thus investigated current small-

business sustainable apparel companies through their recent best brand strategies.

Consumers show more commitment to ethical consumption of food products because

they believe it directly affects their health and that their choice of consumption provides

immediate benefits (Joergens, 2006; Chan & Wong, 2012). On the other hand, consumers show

less commitment towards sustainable apparel consumption as it does not directly harm their

well-being (Chan & Wong, 2012). According to Chang & Wong, the apparel consumption

decisions of environmentally conscious fashion consumers are influenced by product-related

attributes and store-related attributes (2012). While the former includes design, quality, fit and

price, the latter store-related attributes consists of store design, ambience, store's ethical

practices and shopping convenience (Chang & Wong, 2012). It is known that apparel expresses

current fashion trends, consumers' personalities, tastes, and is a form of building a perceived

identity (Chan & Wong, 2012). However, research confirms that fashion consumers do not

compromise the aesthetics of their fashion clothing to be environmentally conscious (Joergens,

2006). Thus, both product as well as store-related attributes can be argued to be responsible for

influencing sustainable clothing (Chan & Wong, 2012). Consumers preferred price and

aesthetics as their primary determinants in consumption behavior and, this was followed by fit

and quality (Chan & Wong, 2012). They are discouraged to buy sustainable clothing due to their

set perception of the poor quality of fabrics (Joergens, 2006). Positive store-related attributes

promoted the consumer shopping experience (Chang & Wong, 2012). An example of this would

be, when a heightened level of customer service and store ambience renders a satisfied and loyal

customer which may ultimately lead to product purchase (Chang & Wong, 2012).

Canadian Apparel Market

The cradle-to-cradle approach implies that a sustainable model works best when it adapts

to the place and culture. Of great importance is that, it adapts locally to benefit the local

environment (McDonough & Braungart, 2002, p. 119). This approach caters to the different

needs and requirements of the society in that region. The Canadian apparel market has been

witnessing a downward trend in local production since the year 2000 (Campaniaris, Hayes,

Jeffrey & Murray, 2011, p. 8). With the drastic market fluctuation in apparel production, this

paper focuses on Canada, in order to indirectly encourage local production and a sustainable

venture. However, this holistic approach could be used typically to analyze and research any

other region as well.

As Canada gave way to free trade in 2005 and lost its quota, apparel imports to Canada have been increasing exponentially and the apparel market has been competing with those of low-wage countries (Campaniaris, et al, 2011, p. 9; Wyman, 2006). This caused the closing down of many factories and drastic loss of jobs. Slowly, consumers have been taking advantage of the availability of surplus apparel and becoming accustomed to low prices (Wyman, 2006) and overconsumption, as well as adopting the trend of disposability which has led to excess wastage being dumped in the landfills.

In 2011, the Canadian apparel market made a gross profit of 40.1% where 51% of the industry was comprised of small-business enterprises (www.ic.gc.ca; Fig. 5). Here, small-business companies can be generally classified as companies consisting of 5-99 employees according to Industry Canada. Also, data from Statistics Canada in 2006 show approximately three-quarters of the companies still being comprised of small-businesses (Milstein & Co, 2008). The 2012 report, "A Canadian Approach to the Apparel Value Global Chain by Industry Canada," highlights that the apparel industry is highly fragmented, in that most of the manufacturing takes place in Ontario, Manitoba and British Columbia. This shows there is potential for community development with regards to apparel production skills. One of the main competitive advantages of small-business companies in the Canadian apparel market is that their size allows them to be flexible according to the fluctuating market and they are in a position to implement radical changes in their business strategies (Campaniaris, et al., 2011, p. 19; Milstein & Co, 2008). The scope for innovation and re-inventing was mentioned as one of the main strategies to survive in the global market. However, the Apparel Strategic Benchmarking Report of 2007 points out that the main challenges such companies confront was that, at that time, companies did not have the resources and could not focus on changing according to the

fluctuating markets subsequent to the elimination of the quota system. This report suggests that there was a lack of focus on narrow specialized niche markets and that by catering to the specific needs of the niche consumers companies would be able to compete with "world brands"(Milstein & Co, 2008).

Consumer behavior has changed according to shifting manufacturing trends in the apparel market. The growing impact of environmental and social awareness has motivated consumers to buy locally sourced products ("Mapping your Future," 2013). Consumers feel a connection with these products, because they are "fitting" into the local culture and environment. "A recent Canadian study showed that a locally owned business can directly re-circulate up to one-third of its revenues into the community, whereas a comparable multinational company directly re-circulated less than 20%, on an average" ("Mapping your future," 2013, p. 21). This is because Canadian consumers support local businesses as a way to foster economic development. They want companies to invest in their community by creating jobs and improving infrastructure in an eco-friendly way. By purchasing the products from the local neighborhood consumers may feel like they are directly making a difference to the community.

As a consequence of widespread municipal policies in Canada, the concept of recycling has become part and parcel of every household (p. 20). This has instilled a new sense of awareness in sustainability, and people have started to consider how their actions impact the environment and have slowly adopted the trend of living a greener lifestyle. This is substantiated by the survey conducted in 2011, where nearly nine out of 10 Canadians claim they recycle at home (p. 20).

Currently, over half of global consumers take "green" factors into account when making a purchase decision (p. 22). They scrutinize the products that are labeled "green" and then

decide depending on their level of trust with the brand. At times, while comparing a sustainable product with a non-sustainable product, consumers might opt for the less-sustainable product, due to the difference in price (p 22).

The recent destruction of garment factories in Bangladesh and the resulting death and injuries of the workers have left a negative impact on consumers (Ahmed, 2012). A series of such events have caused them to become more vigilant and watchful over product purchase. "Ethical consumption" is increasingly important to Canadian consumers. Information on unethical business and sourcing practices is more easily accessible through the internet and other media communication (p. 19). At the same time, this does not stop consumers from gauging and comparing these ethically made products with the better aesthetics and price of less-sustainable products.

Canadian companies now feel that compliance to high ethical standards is inevitable and has to be result-driven. Companies that do not produce effective results when branding their social responsibility are often referred to as "greenwashing" (p. 19). The ignorant interchanging of sustainable terms has deprived the consumer of their long standing trust in environmentally friendly product consumption, which has eventually made them skeptical regarding "eco-friendly" products. "Trust in labels has declined in recent years, as companies have begun to hijack terms such as 'green,' 'natural,' 'eco-friendly' or 'organic' to profit from the rise in environmentally friendly product consumption." (p. 22)

Number of employer establishments by employment size category and region: December 2012 Clothing Manufacturing (NAICS315)	Employment Size Category (Number of employees)			
Province or Territory	**Micro 1-4**	**Small 5-99**	**Medium 100-499**	**Large 500+**
Alberta	32	26	2	0
British Columbia	110	91	3	0
Manitoba	11	28	3	0
New Brunswick	8	6	0	0
Newfoundland and Labrador	7	4	0	0
Northwest Territories	0	1	0	0
Nova Scotia	4	4	1	1
Nunavut	0	0	0	0
Ontario	229	261	13	0
Prince Edward Island	3	3	0	0
Quebec	343	429	26	1
Saskatchewan	10	7	0	0
Yukon Territory	0	0	0	0
CANADA	757	860	48	2
Percent Distribution	45.4%	51.6%	2.9%	0.1%

Source : Statistics Canada, Canadian Business Patterns Database, December 2012.

Figure 5.

Employment Size Ratio

Research Question

The overarching aim of this research project was to conduct an exploratory study to understand and verify the level of congruity in the applications of sustainability and their branding, in a 'sustainable' apparel company. Hence, the objective is to establish that sustainability should be an integrated part of company processes rather than just a competitive advantage and also to understand the challenges preventing other companies from adopting such sustainable practices. To analyze and understand the objective, the research questions are as follows: How do small-business apparel companies that practice sustainability brand themselves? What are the current challenges these companies face while trying to brand their sustainability quotient? What strategies can be implemented to improve their branding?

Research Methodology

This study is an exploratory form of qualitative research in an effort to investigate the current branding practices of small-business sustainable apparel companies. The case-study approach was aimed at obtaining data in a three-fold manner: review of literature, Web-based data on the samples and semi-structured interviews with the same sample participants. Data was analyzed in thematic, comparative and tabular formats with the help of coding by the researcher and research supervisor which will be explained in detail.

Case Study Approach

The case study approach relies on multiple data-collection processes to create an in-depth understanding of the issues (Kathleen, 2002; Creswell, 2003). The different forms of data-collecting methods in this case study include: Web-based information and semi-structured interviews. Open-ended questions in the semi-structured interviews are intended to evoke detailed information from the participant's perspective (here, the owner of a small-business sustainable apparel company) (Appendix B; Creswell, 2003). Using different strategies of inquiry helps in triangulating the data collected in conjunction with the common themes that were elicited in the literature review and in turn establishing a coherent justification for the resulting themes (Creswell, 2003, p. 223; Creswell & Miller, 2000). Moreover, studies on a number of different cases focus on imparting insight on the issue common to all cases rather than just on an individual case (Creswell, Hanson, Clark & Morales, 2007, p. 245). Thus using multiple participants substantiates the problem under study and adds to reliability and credibility (Kathleen, 2002; Creswell, 2003). This case-study approach is appropriate for this research as it gives a "descriptive understanding about how different cases provide insight into an issue" (Creswell, et al., 2007)

Interview sample

This research focused on the data collected from small-business sustainable apparel

companies confined to the region of Canada. The criteria for selecting the sample is mentioned

in the table below (Fig. 6)

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1. Canadian Companies

2. Company size- small-business : with a minimum of 5 and a maximum of 99 employees

   (www.ic.gc.ca)

   https://www.ic.gc.ca/app/scr/sbms/sbb/cis/establishments.html?code=315&lang=eng

3. Their level of commitment to sustainability in the marketplace

4. The participants are the owners of these small-business sustainable apparel companies

5. The sample size was to be a minimum of 8 and a maximum of 12 (McCracken, 1988, p. 7)

Figure 6

Criteria for participant selection

Small-business companies are generally termed as those that hire 5 to 99 employees

according to Statistics Canada (www.ic.gc.ca). This sector of apparel business held 51 % of the

total Canadian apparel business in the year 2012, whereas the remaining companies were divided

into micro, medium and large categories of apparel companies (Canadian business patterns,

2012). Sustainable companies of such economic scale were then narrowed down to the basis of

their sustainable practice or their commitment towards sustainability. This can be determined by

the cradle-to-cradle approach by McDonough and Braungart and the 4 R's – Reduce, Reuse,

Recycle and Regulate (2002). Companies abiding or complying with two out of the 4R's were

taken into consideration for the case studies. This consensus was formed by the researcher and

the research supervisor. Following Crotty's model of research design, the researcher uses a

socially constructed knowledge claim (Creswell, 2003, p. 8) where the companies that pursued

sustainable practices may be termed as "sustainable apparel companies" collectively even though

they are not realistically 100% sustainable. Moreover, this is done because these companies are

aware and acknowledge this shortcoming. A sample size of nine participants was identified with

the help of the research supervisor, referrals and online contact information. As suggested by

McCracken, in-depth studies on a smaller sample gives better understanding to the research; in

addition, recommending eight was an apt sample size (1988, p. 7).

> ### *The interview*

The Ryerson Research and Ethics Board reviewed and approved the request for research

involving human participants prior to any interviews (Appendix C). The participants of the

interview sample were first contacted via email and then upon their consent their interviews were

recorded and transcribed verbatim (Appendix D; Appendix E). The semi-structured interviews

were in-depth one-on-one interviews with nine owners of small-business sustainable apparel

companies in Canada on separate days, time and location favorable to them. To get optimum

results from these interviews, the researcher carefully picked environments both comfortable and

convenient to the participants, "in a natural setting… of the participant," however, not excluding

the probable chances of biased participant remarks (Rossman & Rallis, 1988, p. 6; Creswell,

2003, p. 181). Two out of the nine interviews were performed over Skype video conference due

to distance issues. The interview questions were drafted with the aim of answering the research

questions. They were organized in relation to two themes: sustainability and branding.

Every company faces the inherent dilemma of defining a sustainable company (Bell,

2007). There have also been many definitions of sustainability (Joy, et al., 2012). For this

reason, for the purpose of this study the samples were asked to define the term sustainability and to create or arrive at a common consensus. Based on this definition, the cornerstone was set and was used to analyze their sustainability practices. Web-based data was taken from each participant company's website, blogs, online news, reviews, You Tube videos and television features, and other social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. This method gave substantial information that either confirmed or contradicted the interview data and was coded simultaneously along with the coding of the interview data. Further data analysis was done to validate the existing themes in the literature review and new emergent themes were explored.

Data Analysis

The interview results and Web-based information were analyzed by comparative method and thematic analysis which were to be coded into tabular formats by the researcher and the research supervisor. Data was first sorted and arranged from different data-collecting methods into tabular format for easier coding (for the purpose of this study, data was sorted within each theme) (Kathleen, 2002; Creswell, 2003, p. 219). Also, in this research in order to maintain the anonymity of the participants, the names of the participants and the names of the companies have been encoded: A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H and J (Ryerson research ethics board approval). During the initial analysis, an iterative comparison of data and theory from previous established themes and the researcher's personal hunches identified broad or generalized themes or categories, in the form of open coding (Creswell, 2003, p. 217). These codes were then further analyzed in a cross-case pattern using tabular formats to form inter connections between the categories and develop selective codes (Kathleen, 2002, p. 5; Creswell, 2003, p. 217). In this research, coding can be defined as "… a process of organizing the material into 'chunks' before bringing meaning to those 'chunks'" (Rossman & Rallis, 1998, p. 171; Creswell, 2003, p. 218). For the purpose of

this study, codes consists of (a) text data where participant opinions are edited by the researcher into his/her language; (b) segments of participant sentences to form categories; and (c) in the form of 'in-viva term,' "labeling of terms based on the actual language of the participant" (Creswell, 2003, p. 219). The participants' text had to be edited by the researcher because the constructive claims and researcher's summary of interpretation had formed the naturalistic generalization in the initial stages of the research (Creswell, 2003, p. 150). Since qualitative research is fundamentally interpretive, validity can also be checked by consistent patterns of theme development from multiple cases (Creswell, 2003, p. 223). Similarly, multiple investigators (in this study, namely, the researcher and research supervisor) analyzing the data "enhances confidence in the findings" due to concurrent observations (Kathleen, 2002, p. 12).

Emergent themes from findings were compared with the sustainability and branding practices explained in the literature review and thereupon validated or brought about new knowledge. The purpose of this study was to discover the best practices in branding sustainable apparel labels (small-business) for better brand image, brand awareness and in turn better profitability.

Findings and Discussion

The findings and discussion in this section justifies the research questions by carefully reviewing the primary data with previous literature, emphasizing the themes with a few direct quotes from participants along with interpretations of the researcher. This section is divided into the following themes:- (1) Sustainability and sustainable practices, (2) Sustainability- Moving towards a lifestyle brand, (3) The need for rebranding, and (4) Understanding the customers. Though the theme 'sustainability and sustainability practices' reports the details of the current sustainable practices and challenges these companies face while trying to be sustainable, each of the last three themes address the three main research questions. It should also be noted that there may be an overlapping of findings within these themes.

Sustainability and Sustainability Practices

Though the definition of sustainable fashion is still ambiguous, a consensus can be found in the definition of sustainability among six of the nine participants, which aligns with that chosen for this study. Participan C's generic definition of sustainability, "minimizing the negative impact on the planet and growing it in a responsible way", encapsulates the environmental and ethical aspects, and lays the foundation for sustainable practices within their label. Having adopted some of the solutions towards the attempt of being sustainable, however, all of the practices cannot be incorporated while starting a small-scale business, even though it may seem ideal.

		A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	J
4Rs	Reducing	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Recycling	✓		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
	Reusing	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
	Regulating				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Environmental	Slow Fashion- seasonal	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
	Slow Fashion- Transitional - day to		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	
	Less wastage of fabric while patterning	✓			✓			✓		✓
	Local Sourcing	✓		✓	✓			✓		✓
	Fair Trade & sustainable materials	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
	Certified Fabric/organic materials	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	
	Design				✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
	R & D			✓	✓				✓	
	Zero Wastage	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
	Alternate Resources			✓		✓				
	Innovative environmental solutions			✓	✓				✓	
	Vertically integrated business- local production- less carbon footprint	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Small production runs			✓			✓	✓		
	Packaging and marketing materials	✓				✓		✓	✓	
	Moving marketing online	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓
	Post- consumption in primary level	✓			✓					
Social										
	Supporting a cause		✓		✓		✓	✓		
	Favorable working conditions			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Fair wages			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Skill based education				✓	✓				
	Education/ creating awareness				✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
	Connected with local initiatives	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Collaboration	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Transparency	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Community development			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Table (2)

Sustainability Practices by participants of Small Business Apparel
companies in Canada

The nine brands distinguished themselves from each other with different combinations of

sustainable practices as in Table (2). The participants have attempted to follow the concept of

cradle-to-cradle (most of the participants called it the 'closed-loop') using the 4R's- Reduce,

Reuse, Recycle and Regulate in their processes (McDonough & Braungart, 2002, p. 53) along

with the social aspect. The current practices by these small-business sustainable apparel

companies in Canada will be explained in the following categories: design, sourcing and

production, post- consumption solutions, and social and ethical practices.

Design

The owners of these companies are currently aware of some of the existing sustainability

practices in the apparel industry. All participants believe in the concept of slow fashion (Table

2). However, their understanding of the same was quite limited to styles that are classic or of

high quality having a longer life so that it can transition into many seasons, styles that are trendy

but transition from day to night and smaller production runs. The definition of slow fashion also

included traditional craft techniques, localization of sourcing, production and markets, higher

product price to maintain profitability, and fair wages for better living of workers as explained by

Fletcher (2010). Even though most of the aforementioned practices were implemented by these

companies, there was a lack of alignment between their understanding of slow fashion and their

practices. Adequate background knowledge on such versions of sustainability terms will

eliminate ambiguity and help improve their branding, in turn developing their customers' trust.

Three of the participants discovered from previous sales and suggestions from local

initiative branding consultants, that there is a better market during the fall season in Canada for

essential types of clothing such as sweaters, cardigans or layering. This is one of the tenets of

eco-effectiveness, in that one needs to be aware of their 'local tastes and traditions' and adapt

their product assortments accordingly for best profits (what sells well in Canada) (McDonough & Braungart, 2002 p. 141).

Sourcing and production

Material selection dictated ingenious design solutions during production, especially for companies (Participants A, C, D, E, H and J) who used second-hand discarded clothing as raw materials (Table 2). These design solutions consisted of reusing vintage laces, producing innovative product categories, implementing creative and efficient methods of sorting and quality checking the raw materials before production, as well as maximizing the utilization of second-hand fabrics in pattern-making. In their quest to find efficient methods through their manufacturing, Participant D partnered with a university to research zero-waste pattern design using reclaimed products. Seven out of nine participants (namely A, B, C, E, G, H and J) who sourced fair trade, natural or organic fabrics, locally or internationally, always looked for fabric certifications such as fair trade certified, Oeko-tex standard 100 and GOTS, respectively, as they felt it developed trust and credibility for owners when using these fabrics for production. Other materials included recycled wool, high-quality long-lasting materials, end-of-roll waste fabrics and hemp fabrics. Even though there are new varieties of sustainable fabrics in the market, there still remain limitations in sourcing fabric and trim choices. Since there is no standardized certification for fabric content and quality, there is always an ambiguity in new fabric developments. In addition, fabrics selected need to be bought in bulk which is not ideal for small production runs. However, one of the main challenges in sourcing is the high price of material resources like packaging, fabrics and notions, which in turn affects the final cost of apparel.

Results of this study, as well as previous research, concur that customers continue to complain about price premium, quality of fabric and design of sustainable apparel. Thus,

consumers prefer a more competitive selection in apparel. In the mass market one of the main

reasons for a price premium in sustainable apparel is the higher cost of fabric due to small

production runs and sustainable production methods. The problem addressed can be mitigated if

affordable fabric choices that are sustainable can be introduced in the market. However, this can

be a difficult goal to achieve unless there is enough research completed on finding ways to

develop the best material that is less costly.

During the production stages, 90% of these companies have a holistic approach towards

the 4R's at different stages of their supply chain. For example, regulating use of energy

resources and materials such as paper, notions and other reusable materials during production;

reducing the number of apparel products produced by having small production runs with

efficient size scales; and using environmentally conscious materials and water-based dyes

includes some of the current practices. However, at this time, best practices within the industry

have not been identified. One of the main production challenges highlighted by participant D

and H was downcycling of the remaining waste output. Downcycling the waste material was not

economically viable for these companies. Participant H stated that, "Textile recycling is starting

to happen, but it would be awhile before we can properly use it….it's expensive for us to ship

waste fabric to the closest pulping mill."

Eight out of nine companies by being local in their approach to production, marketing as

well as in most of their sourcing, have more control over their supply chain (Table 2). This helps

them to manage, inspect, and develop quick and efficient solutions to sustainability-related

activities

Post-consumption solutions

Innovative solutions were being practiced to upcycle new clothing styles from used and discarded apparel as well as from scraps collected while producing clothes. One such novel solution exercised by participant D was to convert quality inefficient apparel produced by sewers who were in training, into bags, purses and other accessories. However, according to the ideal cradle-to-cradle thinking, companies need to think of means to collect or find creative ways to upcycle their used company products (disposed by their consumers) before it reaches the point of downcycling. At the moment there is an existing gap between the creation of upcycled clothes and their post-consumption stage that needs to be addressed to form the 'closed-loop'.

Social and ethical practices

Apart from sourcing of fair trade fabrics, eight of the nine participants support creating jobs locally with fair wages and favorable working conditions (Table 2). Since some of the production has been contracted out to local sewers, three of eight participants have started visiting the contractor sites to ensure suitable working conditions for their employees. The other five companies have their own manufacturing facilities, which are bound by their own company policies of treating every member 'respectfully.' The contractors are under direct supervision of these entrepreneurs who also spend most of their working hours at these sites. Two out of five manufacturing units are imparting skill-based education for their employees, especially in skilled sewing (Table 2). This provides an expertise for the employees and it promotes better quality of products and production. This holistic solution takes care of the needs of both parties, the entrepreneurs and the employees. However, just as the broader definition of sustainability defines, "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations" (Shedroff, 2009), community development programs that look into the betterment

of the employee families may also encourage the workers to look at sustainability in a holistic manner.

Participants (C, D, E, F and J) have realized the need for aligning company principles in sustainability along with those of its employees, as well as its sourcing and production partners. "People who we partner with for retail…are really selective about their values and how they approach sustainability. They are supporting Canadian designers, shopping local…they have to be connected to our overall ethos" (Participant F). The participants recognize the importance of this kind of trust, which will make them more credible in the marketplace (and add to brand value) which will be discussed later in the next section of this paper.

Sustainability- Moving Towards a Lifestyle Brand

The first research question examines the branding applications of companies that practice sustainability. The definition of branding has been changing over time. According to these participants, the definitions were diverse, "a logo, business card and website"... "the way a product is packaged"… "being a visual expression of one's values"… "how one presents themselves to their clients"… "being a lifestyle brand" and "the entire experience of the customer from discovering the brand to post purchase."

Sustainability's emotional value proposition

Looking through the lens of identity branding, six out of nine entrepreneurs started sustainable labels. Four of the six acquired the concept of sustainability through their education, while for the other two this was instilled in them through their lifestyle and experiences. The remaining three participants happened to stumble onto this concept when starting their business. This suggests that six out of nine entrepreneurs' have an inherent quality of sustainability incorporated into the culture of the company. Thus their business is connected to their lifestyle.

Participant H explained that their brand's mandate stemmed from the entrepreneur's own personal values. Another important development that was found among these entrepreneurs was that they had adopted sustainability into their company in such a way that it had laid the foundation for any kind of new process or activity in their business.

This intangible belief system has in turn become an emotional value proposition for these entrepreneurs as well as for their consumers. Participants C, F and H find that sustainability "is an emotionally controlled or sentimental concept." They feel that consumers "don't understand the urgency or importance of it in an economic or environmental way... People are switching to a sustainable lifestyle once they have children." (Participant C). Most of the consumers among the target customers are mothers who are concerned about what their children wear, eat and the surroundings where they live. "Having kids make you aware of time and future for them … and the bigger picture." Also, in a Pricegrabber.com survey, 70% of online adults, including parents and individuals preparing for parenthood, state "I'm concerned about the environment" describes their attitude (Zaleski, 2007). This just substantiates the emotional value proposition, adding richness and depth to the experience of owning and using the brand (Aaker, 2002, p. 97).

Long term company-stakeholder relationships

Participants, D, E and F felt that transparency is important factor in adding credibility to the brand and its products by enabling the customers to understand the functioning of the company. This is done by using branding tools such as word-of-mouth (indirect branding by previous customers) and the company website (transparency). All the participants unanimously find that it is important that their partners share similar values but not all of them addressed it as the most pressing situation at hand. Transcending the company's philosophy and values to their employees, and choosing similar-minded sourcing, production, logistics and retail partners helps

in maintaining the value of sustainability throughout the supply chain. Maintaining relationships with sourcing and retail partners adds to the integrity and validity of product performance (sustainability). As commented in the literature review, in identity branding, employees become brand ambassadors, becoming brand value creators, through their interaction and involvement with the company. They help to create a narrative of the brand by sharing information that can also be found on the website. This can be substantiated by a comment from Participant D, that their brand strategy is to "show the lifestyle of the brand starting with the lifestyle of what it's like in making the products… to be transparent… to make the customers understand the brand's world of functioning… To see the interaction between the customers and the brand's clothing… how the dress narrates a story." Advertising with extra tags and sharing a narrative helps to spread the sentimental value of the brand. Tags are the 'capsule-websites' for the brand at a retail space, and they become the face of the brand. Apart from the product-related attributes, information on the tag supports consumer decision making (Hyllegard, et al, 2012).

Problems of certifications

The second research question seeks information on the challenges of branding and the third question solicits suggestions on improvements on branding. Being a small-business, companies find it difficult to get certifications even though all of them feel it is important for the purpose of credibility. It was also noted that Participants A, D and H who owned a production unit were eager to secure certification in the near future. The reasons for not having one were that these certifications were expensive and there was not one comprehensive certification. There were so many trademarks and some entrepreneurs could not decide which one would be the right fit for their company. In addition, they were worried about audit fatigue. Participant D points out that "in an ideal world, we wouldn't need any certification because we assume that

business is done ethically. In my ideal world you would have to label it if you had not done it

ethically and I think that might be more beneficial than having signs say 'oh, we do it right.'"

This problem is also substantiated by the findings of the research done by Caniato et al. in 2012.

There is a lack of financial support for companies to get certifications and government

initiatives. Canada's apparel and textile sector needs to find ways to provide such monetary

assistance as incentives to these small-business companies.

The cradle-to-cradle's concept of "social market economy" (ecology, equity and

economy) in conjunction with identity branding relates to this highlighted theme, "Sustainability-

Moving towards a lifestyle brand." The underlying points include "an energetic material

engagement" of stakeholders associated with the company "and an interdependent relationship"

between them (McDonough & Braungart, 2002, p. 120, p. 150). The companies ideology and

functioning were based on the concept of sustainability as it emulated the entrepreneurs'

individual identities which were considered to be their competitive advantage in the market.

This ideology of sustainability transcended into the brand, indirectly defining their customer.

Some of these companies have now realized that they need to align themselves according to their

customer's identity in the hope of making the brand a part of their customers' lifestyle. "We are

right now making our brand reflect our personalities" and at the same time, "we have been trying

to make the brand appeal to the customer we are talking about"- Participant A.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	J
Websites	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Press Release in print/online	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
TV features/ You Tube		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Magazines articles	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Reviews/ academic articles	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Blogs/ content writing				✓	✓	✓			
Social Media									
Facebook	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Twitter	✓	✓		✓	✓				
Pinterest		✓		✓	✓	✓			
Instagram	✓			✓	✓	✓			
Customer Interaction									
One on one consultation	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
Emails	✓					✓			
Promotions						✓	✓	✓	✓
Fashion shows	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Local cultural shows	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Visuals- photoshoots	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Word of mouth	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Networking	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Retailers/ local boutiques/ shop-space		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Online retailers	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Table 3

Branding Tools

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	J
Customers not interested/ don't understand sustainability	✓	✓	✓						
Product price	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		
Stigma of sustainability	✓								
Finance to market		✓							
Time to market		✓							
Finding right avenues to market			✓						
Consistent				✓				✓	✓
Getting lost among online sellers	✓			✓	✓	✓			

Table 4

Challenges in Branding

Branding Quotient	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	J
Branding of sustainability earlier	vimp	vimp	vimp	vimp	vimp	imp	not that imp	imp	vimp
Branding of sustainability now	not that imp	not that imp	vimp	vimp	imp	imp	imp	imp	vimp
Aesthetic quotient	vimp	Imp	not that imp	vimp	imp	imp	vimp	vimp	vimp
Sustainability in practice	vimp	Imp	vimp	vimp	vimp	imp	vimp	vimp	vimp

Legend	
V. imp	7-10
Imp	5-6
not that important	0-4

Table 5

Design vs Sustainability

Need for Rebranding

Niche market to mass market

Brands can serve as symbolic devices, allowing consumers to project their self-image. Some brands are considered to be affiliated to certain type of people and thus reflect different values or traits. Consuming such products is a means by which consumers can communicate to others or even to themselves the type of person they are or would like to be (Keller et al., 2012, p. 9). Sustainable brands usually attract consumers who are either radical in their shopping; that is, someone who finds eclectic styles from the not-so-ordinary a market place, or they are selective while shopping. Participant D feels that because of fast fashion, consumers "are sick of turning up at office where seven people end up wearing the same outfit." Definitely a majority of consumers opt for easily accessible and cheap apparel options but a few remaining consumers constitute the niche market. All the participants responded that their clientele constitute mostly of a niche market and four out of nine intend to target the mass market as well. Two of the nine feel they have been catering to both the niche as well as mass market. Thus most of them are shifting to a larger market perhaps because catering to a smaller market does not give much exposure to the brand and its profits.

Branding design vs. sustainability

One of the new found challenges that entrepreneurs face is they gave more importance to branding the sustainability quotient and perceived this concept to be their USP. Table 5 shows that eight out of nine participants considered branding of sustainability extremely important. However, as discussed earlier, there is a misalignment of consumers' interest in sustainability and their basic attitudes of making purchase decisions for apparel. This realization has made these participants to focus more on improving the product attributes especially aesthetics and design of

apparel which could act as a competitive advantage for their companies. Six of nine

interviewees sampled are currently in the process of rebranding while the remaining three have

undergone a series of rebranding. Eight of them mention that even though their sustainability

practices are important and have increased, they are less likely to focus on branding the

sustainability quotient. Entrepreneurs are now giving more importance to branding the aesthetic

quotient without compromising their sustainability practices. Entrepreneurs who rebrand need to

understand the USP of the brand and its relationship to the customer's perception, as it is this

image that will be consistently attached to the brand and thus entrepreneurs will be able to

position their brand accordingly.

Competition with comparables

Entrepreneurs A, D, F, G, H and J feel that comparing and aligning their companies with

successful companies that are less-sustainable help in understanding the behavior of the target

market such as price points, customer-specific tastes and the current trends of the market in style

as well as current branding methods. Aligning with these behavioral aspects of customers

through their comparables then gives these companies the added bonus of being sustainable. The

participant companies have found this type of research very profitable and reveal to them

different means to attract, interact and cater to customers, especially during their transition from

niche market to mass market. Creating a one-on-one customer relationship through branding

tools such as internet and social media (Table 3), supports the entrepreneurs in making better and

instant entrepreneurial decisions.

 Branding sustainability can also have negative connotations instead of becoming a

competitive advantage. People may reject the brand because they do not want to be associated

with a brand that could be scrutinized by the media for its practices. Companies do not need to

change their sustainability practices in order to avoid criticism. Instead, they can continue to

practice sustainability and be transparent in information sharing. They may find better success

right from the beginning by marketing their products based on their aesthetics, quality, price and

services rather than that of advertising sustainability.

Branding is continuous

One of the solutions to the third question lies in the common connection between re-

inventing one of the rules of cradle-to-cradle and promoting identity branding through product

extensions. Seven out of nine companies have espoused the practice of zero-wastage (which is

one of the main tenets of eco-effectiveness) by incorporating it into the traditional eco-efficient

practices. Entrepreneurs are experimenting and continuously improvising on design practices

and innovating to manufacture new products from the remnants of main raw materials. These re-

inventions (new products) once aligned to the needs and desires of consumers, help in

establishing new credibility in the marketplace. In some ways, branding and introducing these

product extensions caters to a larger mass of consumers allowing them to recall the brand name

because of its repetitive appearance in the market. This, in turn, helps in developing brand

awareness. Product extensions are also among the main tenets of lifestyle branding. Creating

different categories of products enables a brand to become a part of the customers' lives

(Participant D).

During instances of changing the target clientele while rebranding, one needs to focus on

how to create brand awareness that will reach out to that special segment of people. Another

option is to have a brand extension from the same parent brand catering to the special segment of

consumers. This way the brand ends up with two types of target customers and, in the process

retains previous loyal customers.

Problem in continuous research and development

Just as McDonough and Braungart promote continuous innovation for a business, they also warn the readers of the financial costs incurred in such experimentation. Steady investments or financial backup for a company for the purpose of continuous invention can produce leading-edge products or brand extensions. However, being small-business in size and having a constricted flow of capital (as some of these entrepreneurs are still supporting themselves with a second job) can restrict the materialization of eco-effective ideas into products.

With fast fashion churning cheap products that are compromised on quality, it is difficult to compete in the market. The differentiating factors of the sustainable brand such as its aesthetic components, high quality and products that are locally produced, should then serve as the key to better sales and function. Also, occasionally some of the inventive processes that go into the production of a sustainable item will not be profitable; as McDonough and Braungart says, "If it's not profitable, do not proceed." While designing in a cradle-to-cradle vision, it is important to take into account all three factors of the triple bottom line: people, planet and profit. It is then better to opt for a more economical solution.

Collaborating and co-existing: "Surviving of the fitting-est"

A new trend has been emerging due to the downtrend of Canada's apparel market. Small-businesses in an attempt to survive and thrive are interacting locally and collaborating with each other to find means of growing their business as well as promoting this diverse culture of sustainability and local market. The sense of competition no longer takes precedence. The differential factor of these brands in their USP (other than sustainability) associates the brand to a specific set of loyal clientele. By organizing and attending fairs, conventions, pop-up shops of similar nature, these companies evoke a chance of better brand exposure and widespread reach

(Participant F). Local initiatives supported by non-profit third parties, such as Fashion Takes

Action and Toronto Fashion Incubator, establish a platform for like-minded entrepreneurs in

marketing their products, attending workshops and availing resources, and interacting with

vendors. Fashion Takes Action advocates sustainability and thus helps its members to keep track

and follow up on the activities of these brands.

Understanding Consumers:

As discussed earlier, the customers that buy products from the interviewed participants

were consistently in the age group that ranged from late 20s to mid 50s. Findings show that most

of the customers are mothers who encourage and source locally made products. However, there

is still a bias in purchasing less-sustainable and inexpensive apparel from big business retail

stores.

Consumers' ambiguity in understanding of sustainability

The second research question seeks to address the challenges while branding the concept

of sustainability. Participants A, B and C feel that either the consumers do not understand the

concept of sustainability and the price premium attached or they are not aware of it (Table 4).

The participants find that there is more business during the fall-winter season and the garments

that sell in Canada are comprised of styles that layers, such as shrugs, sweaters, cardigans,

shawls and multi-functional designed garments. Participants have addressed the challenge of

consumers' lack of understanding with respect to the concept of sustainability. Participant C

says that "People are always interested in sustainable fashion but you have to compete with what

they know…"; whereas Participant A feels that, "It might be because we are living in a culture

where the industry is more fast fashion dominated. That's the way it is. But they don't

understand why it (sustainable apparel) costs more." Consumers don't understand the raised

cost-factor behind a sustainable product, especially an upcycled product, nor do they understand

the work involved in making these products unique from the traditional approach. In addition,

the impact of greenwashing has caused customers to doubt the brands that are genuine and

scrutinize sustainable apparel companies regarding their ideology and practices.

Educating the consumers

Participant F mentions, "Education onus is on us to share about sustainability." Three out

of nine participants have blogs to inform their customers on sustainability, fashion and lifestyle.

Participant D believes that just by blogging concepts of sustainability will decrease readership

because the consumers prefer to see visual imagery and style-related topics. The consensus is

that while the Internet is an important means of providing information, too much information can

"overload" the consumers and have a negative effect. For example, Participant F mentions that

consumers might feel guilty after reading a blog on the negative impacts that humans create on

the environment. Participant E creates narratives related to fashion and sustainability connecting

their brand, personal life, community and friends. All of the participants had a page on their

websites to explain their sustainability quotient in their business, whether it pertained to fabrics

that were sustainable, design, special practices relating to the 4 R's (reduce, reuse, recycle and

regulate) or their certifications. Due to the over-emphasis on price that dominates the product

attributes, the participants now balance the price premium by improvising their design and

aesthetic components, compensating the customers for the cost.

Tools of branding

Branding is important because the company strives to make the brand real, relevant and

transparent. Repeated exposure about the brand through the Internet and other forms of social

media helps in the consumers' ability to recognize the brand from memory when given the product.

Terms that are used interchangeably by marketers in sustainability have added to the ambiguity in the minds of consumers with regards to the concept of sustainability. As Participant F mentions, though eco-fashion is a well-searched term on the Internet, consumers are not aware of exactly what it means. The Internet has become the branding tool of today but both consumers and entrepreneurs tend to get lost in this vast expanse of information. At the same time, some entrepreneurs have understood the keywords that consumers use in searching their brands and have incorporated these keywords into their website to make their brands more accessible.

Participants felt that the Internet was a cost-effective as well as widespread tool to reach out to customers. In the past, few participants had used web designers to create their website. But in order to have constant interaction with customers and continuously update the website, they found it difficult and expensive to hire a web designer on a frequent basis. New and improved portals such as 'shopify' have enabled these participants to re-design and create their own website in their liking with frequent updates and promotions for customer engagement. One of the traits that was common among participants was to own an 'etsy' account at the inception of the company. This was used to experiment and understand the online marketplace. After gaining much exposure, and building clients, they branched out and concentrated on their own websites or other online shops to market their brand. This was because there were too many shops within 'etsy' and the brand had a tendency to get lost in the 'etsy' website (Participant A).

One of the current branding strategies espoused by most of these participants was using the emotionally driven aspect of sustainability to create narratives or stories that touch the lives

of their consumers. Participant F found that having narratives of their lifestyle and current

events helps to add credibility to their brand. Participant D feels that "story telling" (narrative)

helps the customer understand and engage in the story of the company, its cause and its product

offerings. In future, Participant F is planning to use models that resemble their customer profile

in their photoshoot to give an idea as to how the brand's apparel would drape on their customers

and make it appealing.

Traditional branding strategies such as in-store experience and exceptional customer

service still play a large part in developing customer-brand loyalty. Participant H believes in

creating a very social and inviting ambience in the store, which relates to the culture of the

community and where the store is located. She adds, "People love the feeling that it's calm and

happy... The experience is important because the clients can be busy in their life but they get to

come in and relax, nurse their babies or have a talk with some of the staff." Participants E, H

and J who have been in the industry for more than six years have a loyal clientele who acts as

brand ambassadors themselves through their referrals. 'Word-of-mouth' is still considered the

best way of communicating or branding. Customers who have experienced the brand are

considered to be a trustworthy source of information as well as to promote the brand. Hangtags

are mild, yet powerful tool to inform consumers on the sustainability aspect of the product.

Clear and concise information sends the relevant messages to the consumers about the product

and what the brand stands for (brand philosophy). Aesthetics of the products attract store walk-

in customers and hangtags give additional information about the product and its brand.

Promotional activities and look-books were among other methods to engage the customers with

the brand and its sales/ saleability.

Consumers prefer 'Made in Canada' products

As explained earlier in literature review, consumers are often enamored with buying products that are local or made in Canada ("Mapping you future," 2013). In the case of locally made apparel, participants A, F, H and boutiques who promote regionally made products agree to this claim. But participants B and D specifically felt that until a local brand has made its debut outside Canada, the consumers hesitate to support the brand. Some international validation is required to make the brand presence felt.

The third research question sought suggestions on improving branding. Participants D and F suggested a new brand strategy where they would like to engage with customers where they do not necessarily expect to see these brands, especially in localities where the target cusotmers tread more frequently. They expressed an interest in having pop-up shops at downtown areas or malls where their customers are likely to frequent so that this would give their company good exposure (Participant D, F).

Conclusion

The following four themes emerged from the primary data collection and analysis:

       i) Sustainability and its practices

       ii) Sustainability: Moving towards a lifestyle brand

       iii) The need for rebranding

       iv) Understanding the consumers

The recent best practices of branding sustainable companies are highlighted in these four themes associated with the cradle-to-cradle concept of sustainability and identity branding. We are no longer in a world where sustainability is just a buzz word. Themes of sustainability surfaced as trends at different points of time in the fashion world create awareness among the masses. Now the time has come to incorporate this aspect of sustainability into every business as a way in which it should be run. Branding should focus and cater to exceed customer expectations for the current market. Companies should also concentrate on finding their unique sales proposition.

There should be more interaction with consumers to understand what works best for the brand. This could be done by taking indirect cues from them and not necessarily by asking them directly in case of biased responses. Another optimum method is to look at the consumer selection and monitor the sales to determine the styles that sell best. Getting to know the consumers' point of view of the brands' unique selling propositions enables the entrepreneurs to position their brand accordingly. Present-day branding tools, Internet and social media enable one-on-one customer interaction and allow entrepreneurs to build a customer-brand relationship.

Having a price premium for a sustainable product is a challenge and cannot be negotiated with the customers while considering the competing market (Table 4). Solutions need to be found in making garments match the competitive retail costs of the regular market or by having

exclusive designs with aesthetic qualities that compensate the price premium acceptable to the consumer. With the changing concept of branding and the changes of our evolving society, small-business sustainable apparel brands should always be ready for a strategy change and should be evolving and continuously responsive according to the changing market behavior. Their compact size gives these companies an advantage for such a systems change. Involvement of government-funded initiatives will help in the research and development of the company, giving room for moving from eco-efficiency to eco-effectiveness, and finding new methods of incorporating eco-effectiveness into the company for its success.

Limitations

The limitations of this research include scope of the region, possible biased opinions from participants, sample size and the consistency of interview questions. The main limitation of this research is the concentration on a local region and its interdependency within the community and its stakeholders. Future research can be done in the same manner but in a different location. This is because "all sustainability is local." The practices and approach begins on a local level and creates a cohesive and sustainable environment in the community, opening the potential to benefit a larger region. Another limited scope of this research is the possibility of biased opinion for the "emotional love" for sustainability from its participants during the interviews. This factor cannot be excluded from the research because of sentimental value of sustainability. Due to the time constraints in conducting interviews and research, the sample size was small though sufficient. In-depth semi-structured interviews would require more time for data collection if the sample size had been considerably larger. Also, larger sample size would have created possibility of skewed opinions and would have made the results difficult to analyze.

Though the researcher kept most of the interview questions consistent, there were a few questions that evolved as relevant topics during data collection. Due to time constraints, the researcher was unable to return and question the previous participants. This inconsistency was taken into consideration while analyzing data and, new found knowledge was explained without a statistical reference and as a finding.

Lastly, this research reports the recent branding practices that work best according to the perceived notions of the entrepreneur. However, that does not necessarily answer the optimum brand practices implemented by the companies as the best branding practices depend on how the consumer responds to these branding activities. This limitation paves the way for the consideration of future research.

Need for future research

The main tenets of the research set the stage for the second phase of the research with the customers of the same participants in order to understand current best practices of branding. There is a misalignment of identity branding and the consumer's purchase attitude towards a sustainable brand's image (explained in the literature review), which is substantiated by the findings of the interview sample. This mentions how the entrepreneurs' concept of branding has had a paradigm shift from identity branding (branding themselves as sustainable) to one that focuses on the customer (Fig. 7). Here, the consumer takes center-stage and the brand becomes a part of the customer's lifestyle. Brand equity is always defined with respect to the consumer and how they perceive the brand. This is the value added to the functional product or service by associating it with the brand name. While positioning a brand, the goal is to place it in the minds of the consumer such that the potential benefit to the firm is maximized (Keller et al., 2012). As quoted by participant F, "We let the brand step into the lives of the consumer and become a part

66

of the consumer - one entity." "The power of a brand lies in the alignment of consumer

knowledge and experiences about the brand and that of the marketing of the brand." (Definition

of consumer based brand equity, Keller, et al., 2012) This kind of consumer-based brand equity

approach embraces an "outside-in approach" - How would consumers respond to the brand?

How can the brand make consumers happy and love their product?

It is important to note that this approach is entirely different from the identity approach

(inside to out), and which is the pre-cursor to the customer-based brand equity approach. Unless

an identity was created and introduced to the consumer as a brand, an image would not be

formed by the consumer to respond. Thus, this substantiates that a continuation to this research

is eminent from the perspective of the consumer using the consumer-based brand equity

approach to analyze the best brand performance activities for each of these participants.
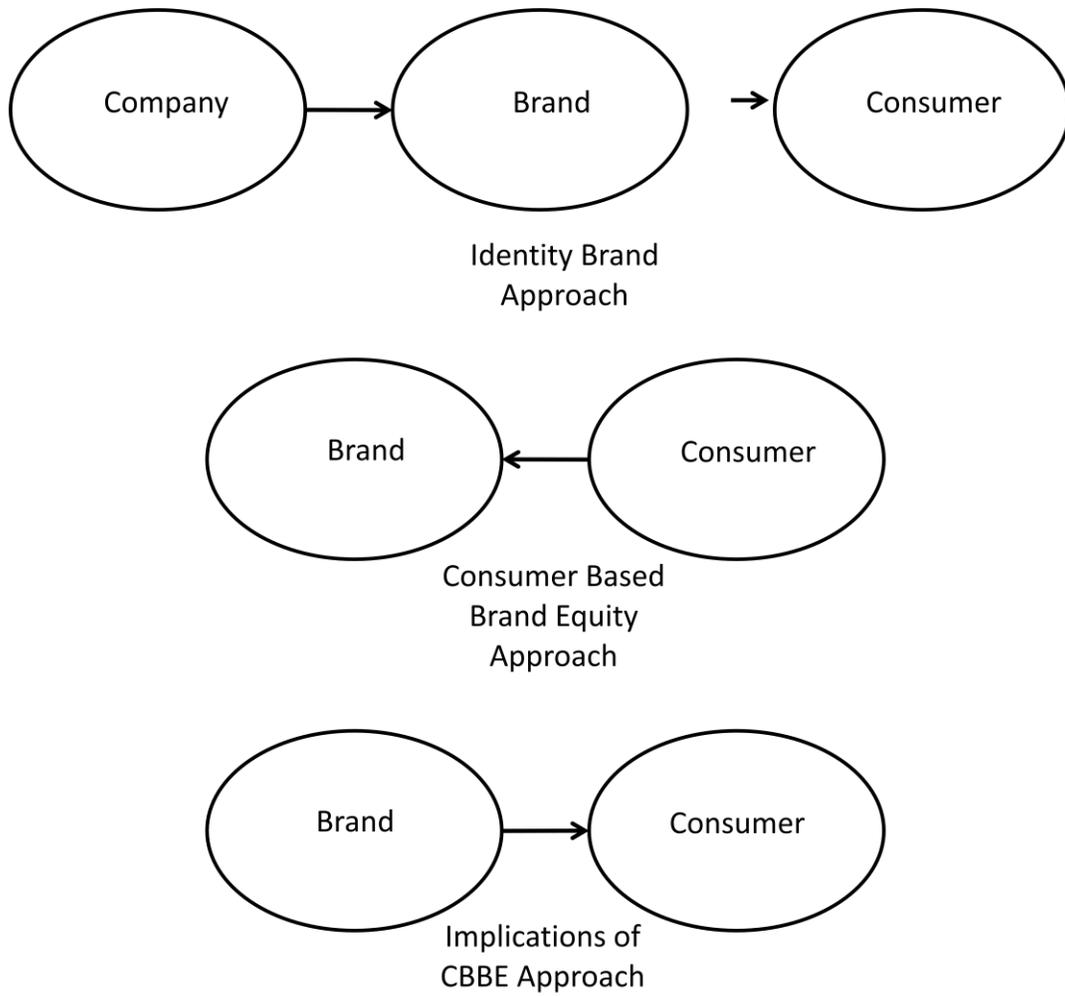
Figure 7.

Identity brand approach to Consumer-based brand
equity approach

Reproduced from Heding et al., 2009

Appendix A: Sustainability Certifications and Initiatives

Non-Profit Organizations

Textile Exchange: Textile Exchange (formerly Organic Exchange) is an international non-profit

organization, established in 2002 and based in the USA that works with principles of responsible

expansion of textile sustainability across the global textile value chain (Nielsen, 2012, p. 12).

The Better Cotton Initiative (BCI)

As a not-for-profit membership association, it aims to advocate environmental and social

improvements in cotton cultivation globally. This initiative works with organizations, suppliers,

manufacturers and retailers from all over the world in order to facilitate a solution to the

mainstream cotton industry (Nielsen, 2012, p. 13).

CSR Standards

United Nations Global Compact / NICE Fashion Code of Conduct

Businesses align operations with this strategic policy initiative that consists of ten globally

accepted principles within the areas of human rights, labor, environment and anti-corruption.

This initiative stipulates challenges, solutions and innovations of the apparel industry with a total

of 16 principles, in particular a focus on areas such as animals, models and transparency

(Nielsen, 2012).

ISO 26000 Guidance Standard on Social Responsibility

ISO 26000:2010 is a standard guide within social responsibility. It does not provide requirements

of how business and organizations (of all sizes and activities) can operate in a socially

responsible manner, and hence it cannot be used for certification (Nielsen, 2012).

SA 8000

The Social Accountability International (SAI), a non-governmental, multi-stakeholder

organization, has connoted a social accountability standard and certification, SA 8000 which

acts as a tool for implementing international labor standards and principles of child labor, health

and safety, force and compulsory labor, freedom of association and right to collective bargaining,

discrimination, disciplinary practices, working hours and remuneration (Nielsen, 2012).

Fair-trade Standards

According to Fairtrade International, these standards support the development of small producers

and agricultural workers in less-developed countries as well as tackle the challenges of poverty

through the principles of social development, economic development, environmental

development, forced labor and child labor (Nielsen, 2012).

Environmental Certifications

GOTS

The Global Organic Textile Standard is one of the most well-known leading standards

worldwide for textiles made from organic fibers under both ecological and social criteria.

It incorporates the processing, manufacturing, packaging, labeling, trading and

distribution of all textiles made from a minimum of 70% organic fibers.

This certification is internationally known among consumers as it also provides a credible

assurance to the end consumer that strict criteria have been verified (Nielsen, 2012).

Appendix B: Sample of Semi-structured Interview Questions

Qn 1. What is your definition of sustainability?

        <u>   (naming the sustainable practices that they follow)   </u> What other practices do you do to be sustainable? Or what are the practices that you follow to be sustainable?
- o So why did you choose not to mention that to your customers along with the rest of the practices?
- o Are there any specific standards/ credentials or certifications that you follow? Or do you have your own self made company policies on sustainability?
  - ▪ If no, are you interested in having one?

Qn 2. I understand that you are working towards sustainability. Acknowledging that, what are the problems you face while trying to be sustainable?

Qn 3. Do you try to distinguish yourself from companies that are making misleading sustainability claims? If so, how?

Qn 4. What are the words you use to describe your apparel?

      What is your brand's mandate/ philosophy? How did you come up with it?

Qn 5. There are plenty of definitions for branding and it changes with time as well. What is your definition of the same?

Qn 6. Who is your competition?

      If yes, how important is sustainability quotient in your branding? While advertising or marketing your brand, how much weightage would you give your sustainability quotient?

Qn 7. What strategies help in the encouraging/ contributing to your brand presence?

Qn 8. Who are your customers? Would you consider them a niche market or a mass market?

Qn 9. If you were to start this venture again, what changes if any, would you have made to your company as well as its brand strategy?

Appendix C: Ryerson Research and Ethics Board Letter of Approval

To: Elsa Mary Thomas
School of Fashion

Re: REB 2013-304: Branding in Sustainable Apparel Companies: A study on the branding and marketing strategies practiced by small business sustainable apparel companies in Canada

Date: November 13, 2013

Dear Elsa Mary Thomas,

The review of your protocol REB File REB 2013-304 is now complete. The project has been approved for a one year period. Please note that before proceeding with your project, compliance with other required University approvals/certifications, institutional requirements, or governmental authorizations may be required.

This approval may be extended after one year upon request. Please be advised that if the project is not renewed, approval will expire and no more research involving humans may take place. If this is a funded project, access to research funds may also be affected.

Please note that REB approval policies require that you adhere strictly to the protocol as last reviewed by the REB and that any modifications must be approved by the Board before they can be implemented. Adverse or unexpected events must be reported to the REB as soon as possible with an indication from the Principal Investigator as to how, in the view of the Principal Investigator, these events affect the continuation of the protocol.

Finally, if research subjects are in the care of a health facility, at a school, or other institution or community organization, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that the ethical guidelines and approvals of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of any research.

Please quote your REB file number (REB 2013-304) on future correspondence.

Congratulations and best of luck in conducting your research.

Lynn Lavallée, Ph.D.
Chair, Research Ethics Board

Appendix D: Sample Contact Letter to Invite Participants

RECRUITMENT SCRIPT 1- (email format)

Participant contact from online source

Hello,

My name is Elsa Mary Thomas and I'm currently pursuing my Masters in Fashion at the Ryerson University. I'm writing this mail to invite you to participate in my research study about "branding in sustainable apparel companies". I obtained your contact information from internet/ online sources. The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the branding practices in small-business sustainable apparel companies. I'd like to conduct an interview that will be audio recorded if you provide consent for audio recording. The time period of the interview will not be more than 60 minutes. The proposed time frame would be any timeslot between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. according to your convenience. The proposed location could be either at your office or a private room at the public library or at the Ryerson University according to your preference. You are eligible to be in this study because you are the designer/owner of a small-business sustainable apparel company. Please be assured that this study has been reviewed and approved by the Ryerson REB.

In this interview I will be asking questions related to branding and sustainability in regards to your company. I assure you that both yours as well as your company identity will be kept confidential in the study. I understand that there is no obligation to answer my questions or participate in my study. If there are any questions that you would prefer not to respond, you are welcome to simply skip the question during the interview. If you have any questions regarding the study or the interview at any given time, please feel free to email me at elsamary.thomas@ryerson.ca. If you are interested in taking part in this study, kindly let me know by a return email so that we could setup a time and location according to your convenience.

I appreciate your time and effort taken for this study in advance.

Thank you,

Best Regards

Elsa Mary Thomas

2nd year MA Fashion

Ryerson University

RECRUITMENT SCRIPT 2- (email format)

Participant contact referred by supervisor

Hello,

My name is Elsa Mary Thomas and I'm currently pursuing my Masters in Fashion at the Ryerson University. I'm writing this mail to invite you to participate in my research study about "branding in sustainable apparel companies". I obtained your contact information from my supervisor Dr. Lu Ann Lafrenz, Program Director, Ryerson University. The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the branding practices in small-business sustainable apparel companies. I'd like to conduct an interview that will be audio recorded if you provide consent for audio recording. The time period of the interview will not be more than 60 minutes. The proposed time frame would be any timeslot between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. according to your convenience. The proposed location could be either at your office or a private room at the public library or at the Ryerson University according to your preference. You are eligible to be in this study because you are the designer/owner of a small-business sustainable apparel company. Please be assured that this study has been reviewed and approved by the Ryerson REB.

In this interview I will be asking questions related to branding and sustainability in regards to your company. I assure you that both yours as well as your company identity will be kept confidential in the study. I understand that there is no obligation to answer my questions or participate in my study. If there are any questions that you would prefer not to respond, you are welcome to simply skip the question during the interview. If you have any questions regarding the study or the interview at any given time, please feel free to email me at elsamary.thomas@ryerson.ca. If you are interested in taking part in this study, kindly let me know by a return email so that we could setup a time and location according to your convenience.

I appreciate your time and effort taken for this study in advance.

Thank you,

Best Regards

Elsa Mary Thomas

2nd year MA Fashion

Ryerson University

RECRUITMENT SCRIPT 3- (email format)

Participant contact referred by referrals of supervisor

Hello,

My name is Elsa Mary Thomas and I'm currently pursuing my Masters in Fashion at the Ryerson University. I'm writing this mail to invite you to participate in my research study about "branding in sustainable apparel companies". I obtained your contact information from a referral of my supervisor Dr. Lu Ann Lafrenz, Program Director, Ryerson University. The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the branding practices in small-business sustainable apparel companies. I'd like to conduct an interview that will be audio recorded if you provide consent for audio recording. The time period of the interview will not be more than 60 minutes. The proposed time frame would be any timeslot between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. according to your convenience. The proposed location could be either at your office or a private room at the public library or at the Ryerson University according to your preference. You are eligible to be in this study because you are the designer/owner of a small-business sustainable apparel company. Please be assured that this study has been reviewed and approved by the Ryerson REB.

In this interview I will be asking questions related to branding and sustainability in regards to your company. I assure you that both yours as well as your company identity will be kept confidential in the study. I understand that there is no obligation to answer my questions or participate in my study. If there are any questions that you would prefer not to respond, you are welcome to simply skip the question during the interview. If you have any questions regarding the study or the interview at any given time, please feel free to email me at elsamary.thomas@ryerson.ca. If you are interested in taking part in this study, kindly let me know by a return email so that we could setup a time and location according to your convenience.

I appreciate your time and effort taken for this study in advance.

Thank you,

Best Regards

Elsa Mary Thomas

2nd year MA Fashion

Ryerson University

Appendix E: Consent To Participate In Research

Title of study:

Branding in Sustainable Apparel Companies: A study on the branding and marketing strategies practiced by small-business sustainable apparel companies in Canada

       You are being invited to participate in a research study. Please read this Consent Form so that you understand what your participation will involve. Before you consent to participate, please ask any questions necessary to be sure you understand what your participation will involve.

Investigators:

Elsa Mary Thomas

       This research study is being conducted by Elsa Mary Thomas, from School of Fashion at Ryerson University. The results of this research will contribute to Master's Research Project in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts Fashion.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact
Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Lu Ann Lafrenz,
Email: lalafren@ryerson.ca
Phone: 416-979-5000 ext (7077)

Purpose of the Study

       The purpose of this study to explore and examine the branding processes of sustainable apparel companies. If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will take part in an interview based on branding and sustainable practices of their company.

Description of the Study and Your Participation:

       During the interview, you will be asked few questions regarding the branding practices of your company and your perceptions of sustainability. There will be no intimate or personal questions asked during the interview. The interview will take place for no more than 60 minutes.

Use and Storage of Audio Recordings

       The audio-taped data as well as the transcribed data will be encrypted and stored electronically in a password protected portable device such as compact disc or USB flash drive. The data transcription will be done solely by the researcher. Only the researcher and the supervisor will have access to the data collected, where the data will be stored in locked filing cabinet in the supervisor's office on the university premises for 3 years. Later the data will be destroyed and not used for any other research. The consent form and interview data will be stored in separate filing cabinets so that your information and your response cannot be connected in any way. This is to protect the confidentiality of your identity as well as data.

Agreement for Audio Recording

Your signature below indicates that you have read the audio recording information in this agreement and have had a chance to ask any questions in this regard. Your signature also indicates that you agree to be audio recorded and have been told that you can change your mind and withdraw your consent from audio-recording at any time.

_____
Name of Participant (please print)

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

Potential Risks and Discomforts and Benefits of this Study:

The anticipated risks are minimal because the survey questions that will be asked by researcher are not of an intimate or sensitive nature. None of the procedures used in this study are experimental in nature. If you feel uncomfortable, you can discontinue participation temporarily or permanently.

Please note that your participation in this study is voluntary and that you may withdraw from the study at any time and choose not to answer any particular questions for any reason without penalty or negative consequences. You may also withdraw at any time up to six months after participation. There will be no personal questions asked in the interview.There is no obligation to answer any questions or to participate in any aspect of this study.

Potential Benefits to Participants and/or to Society

The interviews will help in understanding sustainable practices, corporate social responsibility and branding processes of the companies. This research informs the existing theoretical sustainable branding strategies and hopes to shed light on the recent practices of sustainable branding.

Also, it will report the challenges and obstacles companies usually face while practicing sustainability. New firms as well as companies with the intention of moving towards sustainability could consider suggestions from this research that would help understand the challenges involved in branding and the measures to be taken to mitigate them.

I cannot guarantee, however, that you will receive any benefits from participating in this study.Your participation in this study will not influence your career and your company in any way or your future relations with Ryerson University or the School of Fashion.

Payment for Participation

Please note that you will not be paid to participate in this study.

Confidentiality:

All personal data will be kept strictly confidential and the content of any discussions with the researcher will be coded so that your name is not associated with your responses. Researcher will be collecting the data via interview. The data will be stored in locked filing cabinet for three years in the researcher's offices then destroyed. The researcher and the supervisor will be the only individuals who will have access to the data. The consent form and interview data will be stored in separate filing cabinets so that your information and your response cannot be connected in any way. This protects the confidentiality of their identity as well as the data. The data transcription will be done solely by the researcher.

The researcher could use the results of this study at educational conferences or to publish papers about branding and sustainability. You will be given an opportunity to have access to the general results of this study when available.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal:

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. If you choose to withdraw from this study you may also choose to withdraw your data from the study. You may also choose not to answer any question(s) and still remain in the study. Your choice of whether or not to participate will not influence your future relations with Ryerson University.

Questions about the Study:

If you have any questions about the research now, please ask. If you have questions later about the research, you may contact.

Elsa Mary Thomas, 2nd year MA Fashion under supervision of
Dr. Lu Ann Lafrenz, Program Director, Ryerson University
Email: elsamary.thomas@ryerson.ca, lalafrenz@ryerson.ca
Phone: 416-979-5000 ext. 7077

If you have questions regarding your rights as a human subject and participant in this study, you may contact the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board for information.

Research Ethics Board
c/o Office of the Vice President, Research and Innovation
Ryerson University
350 Victoria Street
Toronto, ON M5B 2K3
416-979-5042

Agreement:

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this agreement and have had a chance to ask any questions you have about the study. Your signature also indicates that you agree to be in the study and have been told that you can change your mind and withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You have been given a copy of this agreement.

You have been told that by signing this consent agreement you are not giving up any of your legal rights.

_____
Name of Participant (please print)

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

_____   _____
Signature of Investigator   Date

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