

Article

From Sustainable to Responsible Fashion: Managing Semantic Tensions in Fashion Communication

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Abstract

In recent decades, the fashion industry has attracted mounting attention due to its considerable social, environmental, and cultural impacts. A substantial corpus of academic research has examined these issues, employing terms such as “ethical,” “sustainable,” and “responsible fashion” to describe models that transcend a solely profit-driven logic. These labels, however, are not inherently fixed in meaning and are subject to continuous evolution through public and professional discourse. What, then, do these terms mean? To address this question, the study examines how responsible fashion is defined and framed, drawing on 34 qualitative biographical interviews with Italian fashion communicators. The findings indicate that they ascribe divergent meanings to the concepts of “sustainable” and “responsible” fashion. Sustainability is commonly depicted as an unattainable or utopian objective, whereas responsibility is characterized as more pragmatic and achievable. It is linked to reflexivity and gradual enhancement rather than comprehensive transformation. Even though certain critical viewpoints have called into question the compatibility of fashion with responsibility in itself, the analysis indicates that communicators predominantly construct and negotiate responsibility through specific discursive repertoires. In this regard, responsibility is framed as a compromise, that is, a way of resolving competing demands.

Keywords: responsible fashion; sustainable fashion; fashion communication; fashion narratives; qualitative interviews; Italy

1. Introduction

Fashion has become one of the most emblematic industries through which the social, environmental, and cultural contradictions of contemporary capitalism become visible. Over recent decades, it has evolved from a primarily creative and symbolic sector into a highly globalized industrial system, characterized by complex supply chains, accelerated production cycles, and growing volumes of consumption [1,2].

Within this transformation, the rise of fast fashion—and more recently, ultra-fast fashion—has further intensified these dynamics. These models are predicated on systemic overproduction, accelerated turnover, and incessant demand stimulation, culminating in mounting environmental and social pressures [1–5]. While these innovations have contributed to democratizing access to fashion, they have also led to the normalization of disposability and a substantial exacerbation of resource exploitation.

These dynamics are reflected in the industry’s significant environmental, social, and cultural impacts. From an environmental perspective, the sector accounts for between 2% and 8% of global greenhouse gas emissions [6] and exerts significant pressure on water



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and land resources, raw material extraction, microplastic pollution, and waste generation [7,8]. Concurrently, the majority of garment production is concentrated in developing countries, where working conditions are frequently characterized by low wages, inadequate infrastructure, and the exploitation of women and child labor [8]. Beyond these dimensions, fashion also produces cultural effects, including processes of cultural appropriation, through which the creative practices of marginalized communities are appropriated by actors within the fashion mainstream (brands, designers, communicators, journalists, magazines, etc.) without adequate recognition or redistribution of value [9].

In response to these systemic contradictions, sustainability has progressively emerged as a central paradigm. The concept of “sustainable development” was initially formalized in the late 1980s in the Brundtland Report (1987) [10] and subsequently adapted across various sectors through alternative models of production and consumption, such as Fair Trade [11–13]. Concurrently, social movements and transnational activism have led to the expansion of critiques of global production systems [14,15]. A seminal event in the fashion sector was the establishment of the Clean Clothes Campaign in 1989 [16,17], which catalyzed discourse surrounding labor conditions within global garment supply chains.

Alongside these forms of activism and emerging practices, the early 2000s also saw the development of new conceptual frameworks. Among these, “slow fashion”—introduced by Kate Fletcher [18]—proposed a reorientation towards quality, durability, and more responsible consumption practices. This concept represented “a break from the values and goals of fast [...] fashion” [19], thereby explicitly challenging the growth-oriented logic underpinning the industry. Concurrently, the concept of “ethical fashion” emerged, encompassing initiatives such as eco-chic [20] and a growing integration of environmental and social concerns into design and production processes [21–23].

In the subsequent decade, public attention to the unsustainability of fashion was further intensified by campaigns such as Greenpeace’s Detox My Fashion (2011) [24]. However, it was above all the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Savar, Bangladesh, in 2013, that marked a decisive turning point: the event profoundly transformed public perceptions of fashion, framing it as a political and moral issue. It also catalyzed the birth of Fashion Revolution, a global advocacy movement calling for greater transparency and accountability in the fashion industry [25,26].

More recently, however, sustainability debates have undergone further transformation. In recent decades, environmental concerns—particularly those related to the climate crisis—have come to the forefront, overshadowing social issues. This shift has been further reinforced by institutional initiatives such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015) [27], as well as by social movements including Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion. Concurrently, more radical perspectives have gained increased visibility, challenging the compatibility between sustainability and continued economic growth. While critiques of growth-oriented models were already present in earlier debates, in recent years they have become more widespread, accompanied by a multiplication of voices—including scholars, activists, and advocacy networks.

Degrowth approaches advocate for a structural reduction in production and consumption, thereby challenging the assumption that sustainability can be achieved within the confines of existing economic paradigms [28,29].

In the domain of fashion, these perspectives have given rise to new terms such as *defashion*, which calls for critical disengagement from the fashion system itself [29]. In a similar vein, Kate Fletcher’s concept of Earth Logic [30] advocates for a fundamental transformation of fashion practices, placing ecological limits and social justice above economic value.

In this evolving landscape, the proliferation of expressions such as “ethical fashion,” “sustainable fashion,” and “responsible fashion” signifies an ongoing endeavor to introduce and accentuate social and ecological issues within the fashion industry. However, these concepts do not merely describe practices; they also contribute to framing how responsibility is understood and communicated, often privileging certain dimensions—particularly environmental ones—over others.

Among these concepts, *responsible fashion*—often associated with the tradition of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) [31]—has been widely adopted in the Italian context. The term has been employed in two distinct ways. First, it has been utilized to denote transformations within the industry [32]. Second, it has been employed to describe consumers’ behavior and their active role in shaping consumption choices [33–35]. In both cases, emphasis is placed on awareness and responsibility as principles expected to translate into concrete practices, positioning both firms and consumers as active agents in this process.

In the field of responsible fashion research, terminology is often used interchangeably. Concurrent use of the terms “ethical,” “sustainable,” and “responsible fashion” is common in both empirical studies and theoretical frameworks. With regard to the topics investigated, literature reviews reveal a predominant focus on consumers’ purchase intentions and behaviors [36–38]. A considerable body of research has also examined production processes, with a particular focus on their environmental impacts, circular design strategies, and technological innovation [39,40]. Conversely, studies on fashion communication have predominantly investigated marketing strategies, branding practices, and social media dynamics [41–43], frequently concentrating on persuasion or greenwashing.

However, limited attention has been devoted to the role of communication professionals as social actors who actively participate in constructing and negotiating the meaning of responsible fashion. Yet communication plays a pivotal cultural role in the fashion domain. It does not merely transmit information; rather, it shapes how responsibility is conceptualized, how different dimensions are prioritized, and how tensions are foregrounded or marginalized within professional discourse.

This article aims to address the aforementioned gap by exploring how various professionals involved in fashion communication—journalists, digital creators, brand communicators, researchers, and other actors—define and interpret responsible fashion. In particular, the study examines the symbolic work through which these professionals frame responsible fashion and the range of meanings associated with it.

The article is structured as follows: It begins with a review of the literature on fashion and responsible fashion communication, followed by a description of the methods. Section 4 presents the main findings, with particular attention to the representations, hierarchies, and tensions that characterize communicators’ accounts. The article concludes with a discussion of the results and final remarks.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Fashion Communication: A Complex and Evolving System

The fashion ecosystem is populated by a plurality of actors who function as cultural intermediaries, mediating between the production and consumption of symbolic goods and contributing to the construction and circulation of specific social meanings [44–48]. These actors often belong to the field of communication—such as journalists, advertisers, media professionals, and fashion producers [49,50]—and play a crucial role in selecting and legitimizing aesthetic codes and lifestyles, making them accessible to a broader public. From this perspective, they act as “gatekeepers” and “tastemakers,” shaping consumption patterns and processes of social distinction [44,45,50].

In recent decades, the field of fashion communication—and, consequently, the forms of cultural intermediation—has undergone significant transformations due to digitalization [51–54]. New figures, such as bloggers and influencers, have emerged and progressively assumed a prominent role both in communication and in cultural intermediation [54], contributing to the redefinition of its boundaries and practices.

At the same time, the rise of sustainability has further expanded and differentiated this space. As an emerging issue, also characterized by a technical dimension [55,56], it brings into play actors who are not traditionally defined as cultural intermediaries—such as researchers—but who nonetheless contribute to shaping and interpreting emerging issues, indirectly influencing processes of meaning construction.

The field of responsible fashion thus appears today as a heterogeneous space, in which a plurality of actors, with different degrees of expertise, positioning, and legitimacy, contributes to the production of multiple—and sometimes competing—narratives around sustainability and responsibility [57].

2.2. Defining Responsible Fashion: Concepts and Semantic Shifts

Academic discourse on responsibility in fashion is marked by substantial conceptual plurality. A wide range of terms has been adopted to describe efforts to address the environmental and social impacts of the industry, including “ethical fashion” [58], “sustainable fashion” [59], as well as expressions such as “conscious”, “green”, “eco-friendly”, “circular”, and “vegan fashion” [60]. In Italy, the concept of “responsible fashion” has also been widely adopted, both to describe the practices of companies—e.g., [32]—and consumers—e.g., [33,34].

These terms frequently overlap, yet they also reflect different emphases, normative assumptions, and historical moments in the development of the field. The concept of *ethical fashion* has historically been linked to labor rights, fair wages, and working conditions, drawing on earlier debates around Fair Trade and Corporate Social Responsibility [58]. Conversely, *sustainable fashion* has emerged as an overarching term, encompassing environmental, social, and, in certain instances, economic dimensions, often in alignment with the broader discourse on sustainable development [10]. However, several scholars have highlighted the ambiguity and normative tension embedded in the concept of sustainability, particularly when applied to an industry structurally reliant on continuous production and consumption [60].

The literature suggests that responsibility in fashion should not be understood as a fixed or universally agreed-upon concept, but rather as a contested and evolving set of meanings shaped by social and cultural contexts. This conceptual openness renders the role of communication particularly salient, as definitions are continuously negotiated and established through discourse.

2.3. Positioning the Present Study

Against this backdrop, the present study employs a qualitative, interpretive approach to investigate how fashion communication professionals construct and negotiate the meaning of *responsible fashion* [61]. Rather than assuming a fixed definition, the article focuses on communicators’ representations and addresses the following research questions:

(RQ1) How do fashion communication professionals define responsible fashion?

(RQ2) What terminology do they use?

(RQ3) Which dimensions do they prioritize in their narratives?

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

The study employed the biographical interview technique [62,63], a method particularly well suited to reconstructing participants' educational and professional trajectories, as well as the representations, ambivalences, and tensions that shape their professional practices as communicators.

3.2. Participants

The selection of participants was conducted in accordance with the following criteria:

- They engage in activities related to fashion communication, either as their main focus or as part of a broader set of activities;
- They are involved in communicating responsibility and sustainability, to a central or partial extent;
- They address an Italian audience, either exclusively or partially.

As the primary focus of the study is on responsible fashion communication, the majority of the participants (24 individuals) are *responsible fashion communicators*, primarily engaged in addressing the environmental and social dimensions of fashion.

In addition, two other categories were identified. The first comprises *fashion communicators* ($n = 7$), whose primary focus lies in traditional fashion domains such as haute couture, mainstream fashion, fashion as a cultural phenomenon, fashion history, or fashion studies, and who engage only marginally with issues of responsibility. The second includes *responsibility communicators* ($n = 3$), who focus specifically on sustainability, ethics, or conscious consumption across different sectors, considering fashion as only one of several areas of application.

Accordingly, subjects can be situated along a continuum ranging from fashion communicators to responsibility communicators (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Classification of interviewees by type of communication.

The sample was not intended to be representative of the fashion industry as a whole, but rather to capture how different professional categories active in the field of responsible fashion construct the meaning of the term itself. Accordingly, the marked prevalence of participants engaged in responsible fashion communication is consistent with the study's analytical focus. The perspectives that emerge are shaped by the professionals' positionality and their communicative practices. In this regard, different professional roles can be treated as analytically relevant standpoints, and the differences among them understood as variations in interpretative repertoires.

To capture the heterogeneity and complexity of contemporary fashion communication professionals, a total of 34 biographical interviews were conducted with 35 participants¹ across five categories:

- *Professional journalists* ($n = 7$), who communicate fashion mainly through journalistic and popular articles, both online and in print;
- *Digital creators* ($n = 7$), including bloggers and social media influencers, communicating across multiple digital channels (e.g., blogs, podcasts, newsletters, video platforms, and social media);

- *Researchers* ($n = 9$), engaged in academic ($n = 5$) or applied research ($n = 4$), who contribute to the production and critical interpretation of knowledge related to responsible fashion through reports, books, and scientific articles;
- *Brand communicators* ($n = 7$), working within companies who are responsible for marketing and communication activities. This group includes both individuals managing the communication of their own brand—across online and in-store contexts ($n = 3$)—and those developing and implementing communication strategies within established brand structures ($n = 4$);
- *Other fashion professionals* ($n = 4$), contributing to the fashion communication ecosystem but not fitting into the main categories. This group includes a sustainability communication expert within a prominent Italian fashion institution, a communication agency professional, a fashion photographer, and an image consultant.

This classification guided the analysis while allowing for overlaps between different professional roles. For instance, many journalists combine editorial work with a strong online presence as digital creators. Conversely, some digital creators who engage with responsible fashion also operate as designers or consultants. Communication activities may take different forms—professional, voluntary, or a combination of both—reflecting a hybrid configuration.

The sample is predominantly female, consistent with the characteristics of the fashion communication field, including its digital dimension. Nevertheless, endeavors were undertaken to incorporate male participants wherever feasible. The characteristics of the interviewees are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Database of interviewees.

Activity	Type of Communicator	Gender	Age Range ^a	Interview Code ^b
Journalist 1	Responsible fashion	F	45–54	J01_respffashion_F
Journalist 2	Responsible fashion	M	55–64	J02_fashion_M
Journalist 3	Responsible fashion communicator	F	45–54	J03_respffashion_F
Journalist 4	Responsible fashion communicator	F	35–44	J04_respffashion_F
Journalist 5	Responsible fashion communicator	F	35–44	J05_respffashion_F
Journalist 6	Responsible fashion communicator	F	35–44	J06_respffashion_F
Journalist 7	Responsible fashion	M	55–64	J07_fashion_M
Digital Creator 1	Responsible fashion communicator	F	35–44	C01_respffashion_F
Digital Creator 2	Responsible fashion communicator	F	25–34	C02_respffashion_F
Digital Creator 3	Responsible fashion communicator	F	25–34	C03_respffashion_F
Digital Creator 4	Responsible fashion communicator	F	25–34	C04_responsibility_F
Digital Creator 5	Responsible fashion communicator	F	25–34	C05_respffashion_F
Digital Creator 6	Responsible fashion communicator	F	35–44	C06_responsibility_F
Digital Creator 7	Responsible fashion communicator	F	45–54	C07_respffashion_F
Researcher 1a; researcher 1b ^c	Responsible fashion communicator	F, F	55–64; 65+	R01_respffashion_FF
Researcher 2	Responsible fashion communicator	F	65+	R02_respffashion_F
Researcher 3	Responsible fashion	M	25–34	R03_fashion_M
Researcher 4	Responsible fashion communicator	F	35–44	R04_respffashion_F
Researcher 5	Responsible fashion communicator	M	35–44	R05_respffashion_M
Researcher 6	Responsible fashion communicator	M	65+	R06_respffashion_M
Researcher 7	Responsible fashion communicator	M	65+	R07_responsibility_M
Researcher 8	Responsible fashion	F	55–64	R08_fashion_F
Researcher 9	Responsible fashion	F	55–64	R09_fashion_F
Brand communicator 1	Responsible fashion communicator	F	45–54	B01_respffashion_F
Brand communicator 2	Responsible fashion communicator	M	45–54	B02_respffashion_M
Brand communicator 3	Responsible fashion communicator	M	25–34	B03_respffashion_M
Brand communicator 4	Responsible fashion communicator	F	25–34	B04_respffashion_F

Table 1. Cont.

Activity	Type of Communicator	Gender	Age Range ^a	Interview Code ^b
Brand communicator 5	Responsible fashion communicator	F	25–34	B05_respffashion_F
Brand communicator 6	Responsible fashion communicator	F	35–44	B06_respffashion_F
Brand communicator 7	Responsible fashion communicator	F	45–54	B07_respffashion_F
Other Fashion Professional 1	Responsible fashion communicator	F	35–44	P01_respffashion_F
Other Fashion Professional 2	Responsible fashion	F	45–54	P02_fashion_F
Other Fashion Professional 3	Responsible fashion	M	55–64	P03_fashion_M
Other Fashion Professional 4	Responsible fashion communicator	F	35–44	P04_respffashion_F

^a Age range: 18–24; 25–34; 35–44; 45–54; 55–64; 65+. ^b The interview code is composed as follows: the first letter indicates the participant's main communication activity (J = journalist; C = digital creator; R = researcher; B = brand communicator; P = other professional); the second element specifies the type of communication in relation to fashion and responsibility (fashion; responsibility; responsible fashion); finally, the participant's gender is indicated (M; F). ^c This interview was conducted with two people from the same organization and was treated as a single coded case.

The sample is intentionally focused on communication professionals engaged with issues of responsibility. Accordingly, the meanings that emerge should be interpreted in light of the sample's composition. They should therefore be understood as situated and analytically representative of the specific subfield of responsible fashion communication, rather than of fashion communication as a whole.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The interviews were conducted in Italian between February 2022 and March 2025. This extended data collection period reflects a transition in the coordination of the research. Despite significant transformations in the fashion system, the period remains relatively coherent in contextual terms, encompassing the post-pandemic phase and the implementation of key policy initiatives, such as the EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles (2022) [64]. From a methodological perspective, the research design, sampling criteria, and interview protocol remained consistent throughout the data collection process. Furthermore, the analysis identified recurring interpretative patterns that demonstrated stability across interviews conducted at different times, suggesting a degree of continuity in the discursive construction of responsible fashion. For this reason, the interviews were analyzed as a single corpus, as their aggregation does not introduce significant distortions in the reconstruction of communicators' narratives.

With regard to data collection, a biographical interview approach was adopted [62,63]. A non-directive style was used to encourage free and reflective narration, including elements of participants' family background, educational trajectories, and professional development. Although the biographical method facilitates a comprehensive reconstruction of life histories, in this study, these elements were treated primarily as contextual resources. The analysis instead focused on the interpretive frameworks, ideas, and representations that participants mobilize in their professional practice.

Each interview commenced with a prompt centered on the participant's experience in fashion communication, further developed throughout the interview through neutral probing techniques [63]. This allowed interviewees to explore the themes they considered most relevant. The approach enabled an examination of how meanings associated with responsible fashion emerge within individual trajectories and how they are shaped by professional experience.

A total of 14 interviews were conducted in person, 16 via video call, and 4 by telephone. The interviews lasted between 35 min and 2 h and 15 min. All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. All participants provided informed consent after receiving information about the nature, purpose, and procedures of the study. They agreed that the data could be used for academic publications, with the assurance that all information would be treated confidentially and that no personally identifiable information would be disclosed.

The transcripts were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis [65], a flexible approach aimed at identifying recurring patterns of meaning. Codes were developed iteratively. The researchers initially coded the material independently, working on different interviews, and then regularly compared and discussed emerging codes. Discrepancies were resolved through iterative rounds of discussion and refinement, leading to the consolidation of a shared coding scheme (see Appendix A). The analysis was conducted using Taguette v1.5.0, a software program that facilitates shared coding. The coding framework was deemed stable when no substantial changes were necessary, and consensus was achieved among the researchers regarding the interpretation of the primary themes.

The analysis was guided by the research questions and developed progressively, moving from descriptive to interpretive coding. In the first phase, we identified the terms used by participants to describe responsible fashion (RQ2). Subsequently, the main dimensions of responsible fashion were reconstructed by considering both the number of interviewees who referred to each dimension and the extent to which these dimensions were elaborated in their narratives (RQ3). Although grounded in description, this step was already interpretive in nature: the different weight attributed to each dimension made it possible to identify which aspects were most salient in communicators' representations, which remained secondary, and which tended to be silenced. In a further phase, manual coding was used to examine in depth the meanings associated with the two most frequently recurring terms—"sustainable fashion" and "responsible fashion"—through a systematic comparison of the definitions provided by interviewees (RQ1). This led to the development of the concepts of "utopian horizon," associated with sustainability, and "discursive compromise," associated with responsibility. A small cluster of accounts that questioned the very compatibility of fashion with responsibility or sustainability—here termed "radical voices"—was also identified as a distinct interpretive pattern. Finally, the codes were examined in relation to interviewees' professional positioning, which served as a contextual lens for noting possible differences in how responsibility was articulated across roles.

In Section 4, interview excerpts are reported in English translation. The authors endeavored to maintain the utmost fidelity to the original language used by the interviewees, while acknowledging that translation from Italian to English may introduce subtle shifts in meaning. In particular, the term "responsible fashion" reflects its growing diffusion in Italian public and academic discourse. In English-language literature, the concept is not generally used as such, but is typically referred to through the terms "social" and "environmental"—for instance, as "socially responsible" or "environmentally responsible" fashion, e.g., [66,67]. The decision to retain the expression "responsible fashion" is nonetheless deliberate, motivated by the aim of preserving the emic perspective of the research context.

4. Results

4.1. *Defining Responsible Fashion: An Ongoing Discursive Process*

4.1.1. Brief History of the Terms

This section focuses on the vocabulary used by interviewees, treating these terms as part of the actors' own meaning-making practices. While these expressions all refer to

ways of conceptualizing fashion beyond a purely profit-driven logic, each term emphasizes specific elements.

The communicators interviewed mention a variety of terms, such as “green” (J04_respfashion_F), “ecological” (J02_fashion_M, J04_respfashion_F), “environmentalist” (J02_fashion_M, J04_respfashion_F), “conscious” (R01_respfashion_FF, B07_respfashion_F, J02_fashion_M), and “ethical” (C03_respfashion_F, J05_respfashion_F, J04_respfashion_F, B07_respfashion_F, J01_respfashion_F, J06_respfashion_F, P03_fashion_M, P02_fashion_F). The most recurrent terms, however, are “responsible” and “sustainable”, which are mentioned in 32 out of 34 interviews. This lexical variety reflects both the historical evolution of the concept and its multiple dimensions:

At the beginning, at least from our perspective, I saw a lot of use of the term “green”. So initially sustainability was simply about nature [. . .]. At first, it was “ecological”, then it became “sustainable”. Now, in my opinion, the term “responsible” is used more, because two things happened. The first is the recognition of a type of sustainability that is not only environmental, but also human. (J04_respfashion_F)

At the beginning there was a strong focus on the ecological aspect, on environmental impact, and then the social aspect became very important as well—the impact on communities. So the very concept of “fashion responsibility” has changed a lot since I started working on it. (J03_respfashion_F)

The evolution of the concept mirrors both changes in social consciousness around fashion-related issues and shifts within the fashion field. In the 2000s, early niche experiments in sustainable fashion were framed through terms such as “environmentalist fashion” or “ecological fashion”. These radical initiatives were frequently associated with a marginal aesthetic, reinforcing the perception of sustainability as requiring stylistic sacrifice:

The first fashion shops that we would now call “sustainable”—back then they were called “ecological” or “environmentalist”—were unbearably dreary. I don’t know, these shapeless hemp jackets, these horribly scratchy linen fabrics, rustic linen. . . handmade things, badly made, with clearly punitive designs. They implied renunciation and the total absence of style, right? The message was basically: you have to behave well, ethically, by buying garments made with respect for the environment, but you have to feel uncomfortable, you have to suffer! (J02_fashion_M)

In the 2010s, growing awareness of the fashion industry’s social implications led to the widespread adoption of the term “ethical fashion”. Concern for social responsibility was further intensified by the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Savar, Bangladesh, on 24 April 2013. This event represented a critical juncture in collective awareness of working conditions within the global fashion supply chain and directly contributed to the emergence of the Fashion Revolution movement:

After Rana Plaza, another major turning point was the birth of Fashion Revolution. At that time, the term “ethical fashion” was used. The focus was on workers’ rights, supply-chain conditions, and so on. (J06_respfashion_F)

The term “sustainable fashion” subsequently gained prominence, coinciding with a phase in which the field became increasingly populated by brands offering stronger aesthetic content and positioning themselves closer to mainstream fashion:

Then, little by little [. . .] sustainable, responsible brands began to appear that weren’t sad anymore. Because at the beginning sustainable fashion was like a sackcloth—it was very punitive, right? In the choice of colors, in the choice of materials. . . (J04_respfashion_F)

In the interviewees’ accounts, the shifts in the vocabulary did not occur in a linear or definitive way. Rather, they take the form of a process of semantic layering, in which

different terms coexist. The definition of responsible fashion thus emerges as the product of continuous discursive adjustment, reflecting both changes in public debate and communicators' need to make the concept communicable and socially meaningful:

Sustainable fashion arrived, more or less as a generic term. . . now, if you notice, among insiders the term “responsible” is widely used—and Fashion Revolution itself uses it. There was “ecological fashion”, “eco-friendly”, and now the term is “responsible fashion”. Those who use it believe that “responsible” is the only word that encompasses all these different facets. (J06_resp-fashion_F)

4.1.2. Sustainable Fashion as an Ideal Horizon, Responsible Fashion as a Compromise

Despite the prevalence of the terms “sustainable” and “responsible” in contemporary discourse, the interviews indicate a clear preference for the latter. The notion of sustainability is often associated with unattainable standards and is even regarded by some as an oxymoron when applied to the fashion industry (B07_resp-fashion_F). In contrast, the concept of responsibility is seen as a practical tool for negotiating between the structural constraints of the fashion system and the goal of greater sustainability.

This distinction is particularly evident in the accounts of responsible fashion communicators, who attach great importance to the choice of terminology used in their communication, whether corporate or social media-based:

We never describe ourselves that way. [Ours] is a responsible company, but not a sustainable one. [. . .] Sustainability is based on certain environmental, social and economic parameters that, for a company that produces and sells worldwide, are [. . .] simply too difficult to achieve! I mean, how can you think it's sustainable if. . .? But responsible, yes. Responsibility means knowing your impact at all levels and trying to work to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem. (B02_resp-fashion_M)

“Responsible fashion” has a broader approach. I like it more because it better conveys the idea of limits. Every time we produce something new, we have an impact, so it's impossible to be. . . what does it mean to be sustainable? It's difficult, because there's always an impact somewhere. Responsibility gives you the idea that you recognize having an impact and try to reduce it. (C03_resp-fashion_F)

Responsibility is thus represented as a dynamic process, implying a commitment to continuous improvement:

What we aim to do is not so much to comply with this or that rule or sustainability claim, but rather to say: “We are constantly on a journey to do the best we can with respect to this, this and that value” [. . .]. That's why talking about responsibility really means saying: “We take responsibility for conveying these messages and for doing so genuinely.” The label “We are sustainable” doesn't really convince us, also because there's an issue of concreteness and realism in what you can actually do—sometimes you know what should be done, but in practice it's a whole different story! (B04_resp-fashion_F)

Thus, while *sustainable fashion* represents a normative horizon, *responsible fashion* functions as a discursive device mediating between ethical aspirations and concrete constraints. In this sense, we conceptualize it as a form of *discursive compromise*. Drawing on political science literature, which defines compromise as a “malleable and multiform” mode of conflict management [68], we understand *responsible fashion* here as a form of meaning-making aimed at rendering partially compatible otherwise conflicting demands. Specifically, it operates at the intersection between sustainability imperatives and the economic and production constraints of the fashion industry. It becomes visible in discourse when normative ideals are simultaneously invoked, the limits to their realization are acknowledged, and responsibility is framed in terms of partial and incremental adjustments.

4.1.3. Responsible Fashion as a Reflexive Practice

Responsible fashion is also represented as a *reflexive* form of fashion. It is described as “*attentive*”, “*conscious*” (C07_respfashion_F), as a form of fashion that “*asks questions*” (J03_respfashion_F), and that cultivates “*an attitude of constant doubt*” (B04_respfashion_F). This reflexivity applies both to companies and to consumers and takes the form of a cognitive and moral disposition oriented towards the continuous questioning of one’s own practices:

That is why we say it is not so much about performing sustainability as a single action, but about having an attitude. I really like an expression used by our country manager, who talks about “an attitude of constant doubt”—that is, being continuously willing to question oneself. (B04_respfashion_F)

So responsible fashion, in my opinion, is fashion that asks questions. It asks what I’m buying, where it comes from, who made it. Responsibility, in this sense, is very closely connected to care. (J03_respfashion_F)

Responsible fashion is thus presented as a *thoughtful* form of fashion, one that requires time, care, and reflexivity. It is constructed in opposition to the dominant fashion model, characterized by overproduction and overconsumption and grounded in emotional, impulsive, and compulsive purchasing dynamics. Several interviewees explicitly refer to this opposition, identifying unreflective consumption as one of the structural features of the contemporary fashion system:

We buy clothes not for the use we actually need them for, but for other psychological reasons that I don’t really understand. Shopping is a pastime, shopping is a stress-reliever—but why? (C06_responsibility_F)

What mattered was buying second-hand, but I was still consumerist, [. . .] I bought a lot, compulsively, because I had the excuse that it was second-hand and looked great! (C04_responsibility_F)

Responsible fashion instead aims to slow down decision-making processes, to make the consequences of choices visible, and to foster a more conscious relationship with clothing and with the system that produces it:

It’s about restoring value to what we wear—but real value. Something we take care of. So, no longer seeing clothes as things we wear and throw away, but as part of our lives, as things we care for. I always say: “In the nineteenth century, clothes were included in wills.” (B06_respfashion_F)

4.1.4. Radical Voices in Responsible Fashion Communication

While the majority of interviewees, across different professional positionings, adopt a reformist understanding of responsibility—interpreting it as a set of incremental improvement practices within the existing fashion system—a small number of more radical voices challenge the very notion of responsible fashion, arguing that the fashion system is structurally incompatible with any form of responsibility or sustainability. Notably, these critical perspectives are articulated by a limited number of journalists and researchers—four in total. Compared to the majority of interviewees—who are more directly engaged with responsible fashion—these actors display different areas of expertise: on the one hand, fashion experts with extensive knowledge of the industry and its historical development; on the other, actors with a broader and more systemic understanding of sustainability, including an awareness of the tensions involved in reconciling its multiple dimensions with the logics of the fashion industry.

In my view, this is an oxymoron: if it's responsible, it can't be fashion. [. . .]. Let's talk about responsible clothing. Fashion, in my opinion, is a sector that should be abolished, full stop. (R07_responsibility_M)

Rather than proposing incremental adjustments, these perspectives call for a profound rethinking of fashion's underlying paradigm. Interestingly, some interviewees identify a possible way forward not in technical fixes, but in a cultural change, emphasizing creativity and innovation—understood not only in terms of products or materials, but also in terms of narratives, meanings, and cultural expression:

Fashion will become responsible, sustainable, and so on when those who work in this sector and those who study it understand that it is also a system of communication, expression, and individual and collective language that needs to be reconsidered within the broader system of creativity and art. That's when the shift will happen. As long as fashion is seen merely as an economic engine tied to ephemeral dynamics linked to luxury, we will never get out of it. (R09_fashion_F)

Fashion means innovation. And innovation is different from chasing novelty at all costs. Innovation is not only about aesthetics or materials; it is also a social and cultural narrative. (J07_fashion_M)

From this perspective, reversing the hierarchy between the aesthetic and the commercial dimensions of fashion would serve a dual purpose. On the one hand, it would preserve the expressive, symbolic, and creative qualities traditionally associated with fashion. On the other, it would counter the trend that emerged between the late 1990s and early 2000s, when fashion increasingly became a highly financialized and commodified industry:

I can give you a precise date for when everything started to slide into chaos: 1999. That is the year when a man called Monsieur Arnault decided to sweep up, for very little money—just a few tens of millions of euros—brands that were basically obsolete, completely moth-eaten, like Louis Vuitton, Christian Dior, and others, and created what we might call a kind of consortium of French brands: LVMH. [. . .]. And shortly after that, the following year, another man, Monsieur Pinault, bought Gucci—the Gucci Group—from Tom Ford, which later became Kering, and carried out the same operation with Balenciaga, Stella McCartney, Alexander McQueen, Givenchy. . . And at that moment, when finance entered fashion, that was the beginning of the end. Fashion stopped being a creative activity and became an exclusively financial one, forced to respond purely and simply to economic requirements. That really was the beginning of the end. And what does that lead to? It leads to no one wanting to take risks anymore. It leads to creativity being sacrificed in the name of safety. And obviously, if you need to reach a high overall turnover, how do you do that? With sneakers, accessories, perfumes, sunglasses. And so, in short, fashion as a purely creative form of expression has progressively lost its weight. (J02_fashion_M)

4.2. Communicating Responsible Fashion: Hierarchies and Silences

Responsibility is described by interviewees as a multidimensional concept. The analysis reveals, however, that these dimensions do not carry equal weight in communicators' representations. Differences emerge both in the frequency with which they are mentioned and in the level of depth devoted to each of them.

4.2.1. The Environmental Dimension

The environmental dimension is the most frequently—and often the first—mentioned by interviewees, being cited by 33 out of 34 participants and discussed more extensively than the other dimensions. This prominence underscores the cultural significance of

environmental issues, which serve as the primary framework for understanding and articulating responsibility and sustainability. In this sense, communicators' representations appear anchored to environmental concerns, which are more readily available, publicly debated, and communicatively codified. Consequently, the environmental dimension is delineated in a coherent manner and exemplified through specific instances. The examples and practices mentioned encompass the entire life cycle of garments, from acquisition to maintenance and care to disposal. Within the domain of consumption, particular emphasis is placed on practices related to frugality and moderation, which are presented as key practices of environmental responsibility.

For me, responsible fashion can be summed up in one word, which is "measure". You can certainly buy second-hand, you can buy items made only from organic materials in Italy—or not necessarily in Italy, but within a controlled supply chain—these are all things that should be done. That said, the fundamental thing for me is measure: buying second-hand should not become an excuse to buy a thousand things. People should go back to saying: "Okay, I won't buy many items, I'll make them last, I'll take good care of them, I'll repair them." (J05_respfashion_F)

Responsible fashion is having the right proportion between needs and the clothes in your wardrobe. We already have six times the clothes we actually need, so even just cutting that in half and trying never to throw them away—selling them, giving them away as much as possible. For me, responsible fashion means stopping being bulimic with clothes! (C06_responsibility_F)

4.2.2. The Social Dimension

In contrast, the social dimension, although mentioned by almost all the interviewees (32 out of 34), is generally introduced after the environmental dimension and narrated in a more concise and less elaborated way. This does not necessarily indicate lower importance; rather, it suggests that the representation of this form of responsibility is less structured and multifaceted than the environmental one. Some interviewees explicitly highlight the tension between the recognized relevance of social issues—such as supply-chain control and workers' rights—and the relative communicative silence surrounding them, pointing to the difficulty of translating social concerns into clear and communicable narratives.

So, it's true that responsibility, for me, includes more dimensions than just sustainability, and it's also true [...] that in recent years companies have communicated only the environmental side. On the one hand, because they started working on that due to external pressure; on the other, because it's easier to measure. What really drives me crazy is that people—the public, consumers, citizens—seem to be more affected by this kind of communication—which is actually more complex—CO₂, decarbonization, and so on, than by an issue that, damn it, is workers' rights! It's immediately understandable! These people are not paid enough to live with dignity, full stop. (J06_respfashion_F)

When the collapse in Dhaka happened, the Rana Plaza, I cried bitter tears, because it was the chronicle of a death foretold². We never managed to find out and certify which Western brands were produced at Rana Plaza. More than a thousand people died—this is something shameful. And this, I must say, is almost silenced, and that's not okay with me. (J07_fashion_M)

Issues related to diversity and inclusion also fall within the social dimension, although they are mentioned by a smaller number of interviewees. While workers' rights and supply-chain control are mainly associated with the Global South, diversity and inclusion are implicitly referred to Western contexts. These issues concern, on the one hand, labor within the industry and the distribution of power; on the other, garment production and

inclusivity in terms of size, disability, and gender; and finally, fashion communication itself, particularly regarding the representation of diversity in fashion advertising:

It's as if women and homosexuals, for example—men and women alike—stop at a certain threshold. In other words, you don't go beyond the creative director's office. Where decisions are really made, you usually find, as the norm, the Caucasian heterosexual male. And so, well, that's a problem, in my opinion. (J07_fashion_M)

In my opinion, in recent years there have been. . . well, there are some areas where there is still a big issue—for example with sizing, even among sustainable brands. Especially those with very small-scale production struggle with larger or smaller sizes, because beyond a certain range the pattern changes entirely and you have to redesign it. That's something that still needs a lot of work. From the point of view of gender inclusivity, instead, I think there has been much more progress. (C03_respfashion_F)

4.2.3. The Economic Dimension

The economic dimension is explicitly mentioned by 15 interviewees, who often refer to the tripartite model of sustainability. However, it is rarely articulated in depth and tends to be invoked as an indispensable condition for the very possibility of responsible fashion:

True sustainability has three pillars: environmental, social and economic. That is, for a project to be truly sustainable. . . okay, environmental sustainability is important, but it also has to be socially sustainable [. . .] and economically sustainable. Because if you set up something saying: "Okay, we produce everything in a hyper-sustainable way, without polluting, polluting as little as possible, guaranteeing workers the best conditions and everything else," and then it turns out that you have to triple the price of the product on the market and you no longer sell anything, that activity dies! And an activity that dies is not sustainable. (B04_respfashion_F)

The importance of the economic dimension is already embedded in the very definition of responsible fashion and in the compromises on which it is based (see Section 4.1.). Consequently, although it is not the object of extensive elaboration in interviewees' accounts, the economic dimension appears as foundational in their representations of responsible fashion, as it defines the limits of its practical feasibility.

4.2.4. The Cultural Dimension

The cultural dimension is mentioned by 9 interviewees, who draw attention to critical issues related to the predominance of a white, Western perspective within the fashion system, which is associated with phenomena such as cultural appropriation. In these accounts, cultural responsibility takes on a primarily critical meaning, questioning the ways in which the fashion system selects, reworks, and commercializes knowledge and practices originating from marginalized communities or, more generally, from groups with less power than major fashion brands:

One issue that is really emerging, in my opinion, and that will become more and more prominent in the coming years, is the issue of Indigenous communities and local communities. [. . .] The relationship with Indigenous and local communities [. . .] is a relationship of power imbalance. Whether you are an alpaca breeder—or I'm thinking of wool, but it could be any other type of community that produces something I use—in the end it is the brand that sets the rules, and these people are not part of the decision-making process. (J06_respfashion_F)

In addition to this critical interpretation, the cultural dimension is occasionally presented in a more positive light, emphasizing the enhancement of companies' cultural

heritage. According to some interviewees, this aspect could be more fully integrated into brands' communication strategies, but it remains underdeveloped.

No, in my opinion very little is said about the supply chain. And, on the contrary, as a scholar of heritage—I work a lot on fashion archives—I think brands actually make little use of this type of communication, which also relates to sustainability. I think they underestimate it! [. . .] In my view, people would be interested, and it would bring them closer to brands. (R08_fashion_F)

The examination of fashion from a cultural perspective is predominantly undertaken by journalists and researchers, while it is largely absent or marginal in the accounts of other communicators. This finding suggests that cultural responsibility is a specialized form of knowledge that has not yet been fully integrated into the prevailing discourse on responsible fashion.

4.2.5. The Relational Dimension

Finally, an additional dimension has been identified, which can be defined as “relational”. This dimension concerns the types of human relationships cultivated within the fashion system. While only one interviewee articulates this perspective in a fully developed way, elements of a relational understanding can be identified, more implicitly, in two further interviews. Notably, this perspective introduces a radical critique of the individualism and competitiveness that characterize the sector, advancing instead a vision of sustainability grounded in collaborative practices.

When we talk about sustainability, we rightly start with the environment, the social side, ethics, labor—but there is a fundamental base that is forgotten, namely the relational dimension of people. The people who work in this industry are completely out of their minds: egocentric, self-referential. . . And so, fundamentally, the damage we are doing to the planet and to others is a reflection, in my opinion, of the sickness of the people who work in this environment. (C01_respfashion_F)

This kind of openness towards others—where if I can't get there alone, maybe we can get there together—is something that is really missing in fashion. It's missing enormously. There is so much individualism, a tendency to stay within one's own circuit, to pursue one's own path. There is a lot of competition, and in my opinion it is precisely these values that have brought us where we are—and that, if worked on in the opposite direction, could really make a difference. (C01_respfashion_F)

Through this training, I realized that there are many people who share the same ethical principles that guide the way I design and create products. That is, the idea is not so much to create a product and sell it, but first and foremost to foster a sense of sharing—of a collective activity that raises people's awareness about the product they might eventually choose to buy. (B06_respfashion_F)

Despite its limited empirical frequency, the relational dimension is theoretically significant. It points toward an understanding of responsibility grounded in the restructuring of interpersonal and professional relations within the fashion system, rather than in technical or regulatory approaches. In this sense, it differs from the other dimensions identified in this study: even the social and cultural dimensions, while people-oriented, tend to frame responsibility in terms of outcomes and standards, leaving the relational quality of everyday interactions largely unaddressed. As such, this dimension opens alternative understandings of responsibility and represents a direction worth pursuing in future research.

4.3. Shared Repertoires and Professional Specificities

The results presented above underscore the presence of shared interpretative repertoires across communicators. In particular, the idea of “sustainable fashion” as a *utopian horizon* and of “responsible fashion” as *compromise* emerges across professional categories, regardless of the type of communication practiced—whether fashion communication, responsible fashion communication, or communication focused on responsibility in a broader sense. However, possible specificities also emerge, linked to professional roles and to actors’ positioning with respect to responsible fashion.

With respect to professional roles, brand communicators and digital creators tend to express a generally pragmatic and incremental understanding of responsibility, which appears consistent with the need, inherent in their everyday communicative practices, to mediate between responsibility-oriented narratives and market logics. Conversely, critical or reflexive positions emerge among some journalists and researchers—in particular among those who cannot be classified as “responsible fashion communicators”, but who deal with sustainability across sectors, or who have extensive knowledge of the fashion industry and its historical development (see Section 4.1.4). The positioning of these actors appears to allow for greater discursive autonomy, which translates into more critical and sometimes radical perspectives on the very compatibility of fashion and responsibility.

These differences in positioning also appear to be reflected in the vocabulary and framing strategies adopted by different communicators. While brand communicators and digital creators tend to favor operational and communicatively accessible terms—such as “responsible”—some researchers and journalists are more likely to interrogate the limits of existing terminology and to adopt a more distanced, analytical perspective on the concept itself.

These considerations should be understood as exploratory rather than conclusive, given the qualitative and limited empirical basis of the study. They do not allow us to claim that different professional positionings systematically correspond to distinct representations of responsible fashion, but they suggest a relevant direction for future research. Studies based on larger samples could investigate more systematically whether, and how, professional roles shape the meanings attributed to responsible fashion and the communicative repertoires through which responsibility is articulated.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that discourse on responsible fashion is characterized by marked *semantic plurality*. On the one hand, this phenomenon reflects the diversity of terms employed in academic literature [17,32,59,60]. On the other hand, it is the outcome of a process of historical layering that mirrors transformations within the fashion field and the evolution of related social sensibilities.

In the interviewees’ perception, in the early 2000s, sustainable fashion practices were predominantly described through expressions such as “ecological fashion” or “environmentalist fashion”. In this nascent phase, responsibility was predominantly linked to the environmental dimension and situated at the periphery of the fashion system. This took the form of niche and experimental practices, often characterized by an aesthetic perceived as subordinate to ethical concerns.

As time has passed, discourse on responsible fashion has undergone significant expansion and greater complexity. A key driver of this expansion was the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Savar, Bangladesh, in 2013, which has been identified as a pivotal moment that brought the social dimension of fashion to the forefront of public and media discourse, drawing attention to working conditions throughout the global supply chain. Concurrently, the dissemination of the tripartite model of sustainability [69] promoted the systematic

incorporation of the economic dimension, thereby contributing to establishing “sustainability” as the prevailing reference framework in public discourse on ethically oriented fashion. During this period, environmental sustainability emerged as a dominant concern, largely influenced by initiatives promoted within the public sphere, such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development [27]. These initiatives were complemented by bottom-up mobilizations such as the Fridays For Future and Extinction Rebellion movements, which emerged in 2018.

It is precisely in this phase that the term “sustainable” gained widespread acceptance. However, its increasing dissemination and its use in greenwashing practices appear to have progressively undermined its communicative effectiveness and credibility. This perspective is supported by both interviewees’ accounts and findings from institutional reports [55]. Sustainability is currently perceived as an inflated concept, frequently employed in a vague or inappropriate manner. Consequently, the term “responsible fashion” has emerged as a preferred expression among communicators in the field. This term is perceived as more honest and pragmatic, as it acknowledges the limits, compromises, and structural contradictions inherent to the fashion system. Interestingly, despite showing a certain reluctance towards the term “sustainability”, fashion communicators continue to articulate responsible fashion around the classic pillars of sustainability, breaking it down into environmental, social, and economic dimensions [69], to which a cultural dimension is sometimes added [59,70]. This suggests that the distinction between *sustainable* and *responsible* fashion does not lie in different substantive contents, but rather in a shift in how these elements are framed and interpreted. In this sense, responsible fashion can be understood as a discursive reconfiguration of sustainability, through which similar dimensions are reorganized and endowed with a more pragmatic, reflexive, and context-sensitive orientation.

In the context of communicators’ discourse, contemporary responsible fashion can be conceptualized as a search for equilibrium among various tensions, particularly between environmental demands and economic constraints. This balance is predominantly framed in reformist terms, with responsibility understood as a set of practices that enable the system to evolve without radically challenging its foundations. In this particular context, the concept of responsibility entails the adoption of a reflexive stance that is oriented towards the continuous improvement of production processes and consumption practices.

Alongside this prevailing orientation, a number of researchers and, to a lesser extent, journalists, have advanced more radical positions. Notably, these perspectives do not originate from specialized responsible fashion communicators. Instead, they come from individuals whose expertise lies in either fashion or sustainability across sectors. Such stances align with degrowth and critical sustainability frameworks, interrogating the feasibility of responsible fashion within the prevailing system and advocating for a systemic transformation of the sector. In this sense, they resonate with Fletcher and Tham’s notion of Earth Logic, which redefines fashion not as an industry, but as a socio-material system oriented towards ecological and social regeneration [30].

Within this theoretical framework, creativity and innovation—historically foundational elements of the fashion system—are reinterpreted as potential levers of systemic change. This extends beyond the realm of mere product creativity, encompassing—and perhaps most significantly—narrative creativity. The ability to envision and articulate alternative fashion scenarios, transcending the conventional economic and financial rationales that have come to dominate the sector since the late 1990s, is seen as central to any meaningful transformation of the sector.

A further significant finding concerns the hierarchy among the different dimensions of responsibility, as well as the emergence of less consolidated perspectives that challenge

their conventional framing. The results indicate that the environmental dimension occupies a central place in communicators' representations and manifests most visibly in the realm of individual consumption, through practices such as reducing purchases, reusing garments, and caring for clothing. However, this prominence should not be interpreted as evidence of greater intrinsic importance. Instead, it is indicative of the cognitive salience of environmental issues, which function as the prevailing frame through which responsibility is conceptualized. By contrast, the social dimension, despite its widespread acknowledgement, remains less visible and less developed in communicative terms. This imbalance is also recognized by some interviewees, who highlight the disproportion between the severity of working conditions in the supply chain and the limited space these issues occupy in public discourse. In the context of the social dimension, the Rana Plaza collapse serves as the primary symbolic reference point, while the historical memory of pivotal campaigns, such as the Clean Clothes Campaign, is only marginally present in interviewees' accounts. This finding indicates a limited historical sedimentation within the field and a tendency to privilege more recent and widely circulated events and meanings.

Finally, the cultural dimension—comprising issues such as cultural appropriation and the valorization of fashion companies' cultural heritage—emerges from the interviews as a form of specialized knowledge, articulated primarily by journalists and researchers. These issues are particularly salient in the current context, as the growing diffusion of artificial intelligence in fashion design and production further amplifies existing concerns related to cultural appropriation, authorship, and intellectual property [71–73].

6. Conclusions

This study examined how fashion communication professionals in Italy construct and negotiate the concept of “responsible fashion”, addressing three research questions concerning the definitions, terminological preferences, and dimensional priorities that characterize their narratives.

The findings suggest that responsible fashion can be conceptualized as a *discursive compromise*—a communicative device that manages the tensions between normative ideals and practical constraints. In the accounts of the interviewees, this concept appears to be shaped by market dynamics and by the professional positioning of communicators within the fashion system, although the scope of this study does not allow for broader field-level conclusions. The preference for “responsible fashion” over “sustainable fashion” reflects an acknowledgment of the limitations of sustainability as a concept and an effort to address the contradictions of the fashion system through a more adaptable and pragmatic category, one capable of recognizing constraints, trade-offs, and incremental improvements without claiming comprehensive resolution.

For the majority of communicators, responsibility is framed within a reformist logic, oriented towards incremental change rather than systemic transformation. However, the analysis also reveals the presence of counter-discourses that challenge this dominant framing. A minority of interviewees—particularly researchers and, to a lesser extent, journalists not primarily specialized in responsible fashion communication—question the compatibility of fashion with responsibility altogether, calling for a deeper transformation of the system and reframing creativity as a means of envisioning alternative forms of fashion that transcend the dominance of economic and financial imperatives. Although not sharply delineated, the variances among professional roles indicate an internal diversification within the field, with more critical perspectives being concentrated in specific roles.

The present study is not without its limitations. The sample is limited in size and scope, which is consistent with the exploratory and interpretive nature of the research design. Qualitative studies of this kind prioritize depth of insight over representational breadth;

therefore, the findings should be interpreted accordingly. Furthermore, it should be noted that the analysis does not consider the manner in which diverse audiences appropriate, interpret, and negotiate the concepts mobilized by fashion communicators—a dimension that future, audience-focused research could productively address.

Furthermore, the data were collected prior to the recent expansion of artificial intelligence in Italy, which is already reshaping both industry practices and professional roles [74]. Future research could examine more thoroughly how new technological conditions—particularly the growing diffusion of AI in fashion design and production—reshape the discursive compromise underlying responsible fashion and affect the role of communication professionals as cultural intermediaries.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Coding tree.

First Level Code	Second Level Code
Profession/activity	Journalist Digital creator Researcher Brand communicator Other
Terms	Conscious fashion Ecological fashion Environmental fashion Ethical fashion Green fashion Responsible fashion Sustainable fashion Other
Dimensions	Environmental sustainability Social sustainability

Table A1. Cont.

First Level Code	Second Level Code
Turning points	Economic sustainability Cultural sustainability Relational sustainability
	Clean Clothes Campaign Rana Plaza collapse Fridays for Future COVID-19 Other

Notes

- One interview involved two participants from the same organization, who asked to be interviewed together to provide a shared account of their approach. This interview was treated as a single coded case, as it referred to the same professional context and communicative practice.
- The interviewee alludes to the title of Gabriel García Márquez's novel *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* (1981), published in English as *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*.

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