

# Fashion industry sustainability rating systems from the perspective of fashion SMEs

## AUTHORS

Tamara Szabó\*, Dorina Körtvési\*\*

\* MA Student, Aschaffenburg University of Applied Sciences;

\*\* PhD Scholar, Budapest Business School

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## ABSTRACT

We have been hearing a lot about the sustainability of the fashion industry lately, it has become a fashionable research topic. Much of the research focuses on what information customers have, what influences their decision, and how they behave in a sustainable way when buying clothing or fashion items. The most conscious customers might be guided by the results of sustainability assessment systems for fashion companies. However, rating systems mostly focus on large companies. To our knowledge, there is no research that maps the views of small fashion companies on fashion rating systems. In this research, we used an interview method to examine how Hungarian fashion SMEs view sustainability assessment systems, how they would create their own system, and what future trends they expect in relation to these systems. The results show that SMEs consider good brand reputation more important than participating in a complex evaluation system.

**Keywords:** sustainability assessment systems, fashion industry, small- and medium-sized enterprises, CSR

## 1. Introduction

The fashion industry is one of the largest industrial players, with a global value of \$ 1.3 trillion, employing more than 300 million people worldwide (Gazzola, Pavione, Pezzetti, & Grechi, 2020). However, after steady growth in recent years, a slowdown has been projected, beginning from March 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic (The Business of Fashion and McKinsey&Company, 2019). The global lockdown and restrictions have drastically changed circumstances and consumer demand, forecasting future trends, such as green(er) production, a push towards sustainability, sharing economy, conscious recycling, etc. Why would these changes be crucial for the clothing industry? Fashion is also well-known as one of the most polluting and resource-intensive industries, hence its future success depends on reducing its environmental and social imprint across the entire life cycle of garment production. That means reducing the impacts associated with cultivating and producing textile fibres and establishing and spreading of good practices at all levels (Joy & Pena, 2017). Apparel production is a highly complex procedure, consequently resulting in environmental harm at all stages of the production from raw material cultivation to disposal of fashion items, chemicals, enormous amount of water usage aligned with energy consumption, CO<sub>2</sub> emission, etc (Islam, Perry, & Gill, 2021). Companies taking responsibility for a sustainably running business are likely to report their results, – whether it reflects on sustainability or social responsibility achievements - which also

enhances the business owners to enable sustainability objectives, advantages and results for investors and customers as well. Additionally, it might mean showing a comprehensive picture of companies' operation not only for boosting purchase but creating a positive public view, spreading and strengthening the understanding of sustainability (Chan, Creel, Song, & Yurova, 2021). While improving the sustainability level of any organization, the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) concept must be integrated into their operation, meaning they pay close attention to the business's economic, environmental and social impacts (Blagov & Petrova-Savchenko, 2021). By reviewing the literature, evidence and research were found, focusing on sustainability assessment in fashion industry at a global level. Gbolarumi et al. (2020) wrote a comprehensive review of recent studies involving research dealing with the sustainability assessment systems (Gbolarumi, Wong, & Olohunde, 2020). The tendency is that there is a general lack of knowledge on sustainability and information, especially from the consumer side. Many stakeholders believe that there is a lack of applicable and result-driven indicators. Furthermore, some of the literatures investigate just one of the three pillars of sustainability, e.g.: environmental issues only (Zhu, Chen, Wu, & Ding, 2018) or only social (Zamani, Sandin, Svanström, & Peters, 2018), or economic and environmental (Le & Wang, 2017), not emphasizing the TBL approach and the importance of sustainability. Complex and acknowledged sustainability assessment systems are existing, still there is a slight number of literatures examining them, and the context is usually a general view on large companies. Besides, evidence relating to the SMEs sector has not been found. Current research intends to map the Hungarian SMEs' general point of view on the gathered and analysed sustainability assessment systems designed for clothing industry, and reveal whether they consider it as an opportunity, exposing their notion on future fashion business trends.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

Sustainable development as an idea has emerged in the highly industrialized world, where the exploitation of the nature has constantly become more and more explicit, and a social demand occurred to slow down or stop the procedure and address the issues (Stock & Seliger, 2016). When it comes to sustainability as a definition, literature mostly refers to the Brundtland report, in 1987. The report offers two major concepts, as (a) sustainability as the population's common future, and (b) the three pillars of sustainability. Our common future is clearly defined in the report as „meeting our own (present) needs without compromising the ability of the future generation to meet their own needs” (United Nations, 1987, p. 15.). Likewise, the three pillars of sustainability were acknowledged in the report, providing a much wider context, in which economic, social, and environmental concerns are involved. The emphasis on sustainable development in research commenced with environmental issues, and later sustainable development has become associated with the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) concept based on the assumption of John Elkington in 1994. He explained that companies should align their operation with three bottom lines instead of only focusing on the profit and loss account. The methodology deliberates, that businesses must commit themselves to simultaneously taking into consideration social and environmental concerns as much as they do financial gains. It is also called the three P, as its name implies the concept refers to a company's bottom line, which traditionally would be the “profit and loss” for the company. Businesses must take into account two more factors: people and planet. The “people-account” reflects how socially responsible is an organization, while the “planet-account” measures environmental-related consciousness (Elkington, 1997).

**(a) Environmental aspect**

It is important to mention that environmental aspects are the most concentrated out of the three pillars. Manufacturing industries mostly strive to achieve immediately results for example by cutting their resources consumption, reducing packaging, waste etc.

**(b) Social aspect**

The social pillar relates to the capacity of a society, country, family and organization to function at a defined level of wellbeing and harmony for an indefinite period which must be preserved in the long term. Community, employees, stakeholder approval and supports are the basis of sustainable business. Furthermore, naturally renewed resources, also the limits of raw materials should be taken into consideration to guarantee a well-sustained society.

**(c) Economic pillar**

The ecological and social aspects are considered important in the economic movement; however, economic dimensions are the major competitive concerns of many organizations neglecting other dimensions of the TBL, which has sadly caused some organizations to lose their credibility, reputation, and corporate image. Meanwhile, it has been established that sustainable development is based on the integration of economic, social, and environmental views (Baliga, Raut, & Kamble, 2019).

Nowadays, the most comprehensive framework seeking international cooperation, involving NGOs, civil societies, governments, and individuals as well, is provided by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, launched in 2015 within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. All its 17 goals with 169 targets were adopted by each UN member states to address complex social and environmental problems at a global and local scale (United Nations , 2018). Regarding the fashion industry, human rights issues, lack of equal opportunities and fair and ethical working conditions, an enormous amount of exploitation of natural resources, children engaged in forced child labour (Brun, Castelli, & Karaosman, 2017) are only some of those global issues occurring in the fashion industry that are targeted by SDGs to improve, and to achieve this improvement, cooperation from governments, the corporate sector, NGOs and individuals is necessary (Palakshappa, 2021).

**Figure 1. – The 17 Sustainable Development Goals launched by the United Nations, 2015**



Source: (United Nations, 2021)

### ***CSR in the fashion industry***

Sustainable development and corporate social responsibility (CSR) usually walk hand in hand. The first theoretical concept was defined in the late 20th century, USA (Carroll B. A., 2008). Since then, dozens of definitions have attempted to paraphrase its concrete and specific meaning for business community. Literature considers Carroll’s four dimensions in his firstly launched book in 1979, which are the following:

- Ethical responsibility emphasizing the business firms’ role not only to ensure employees’ welfare by creating fair working conditions (e.g. no discrimination based on gender, race, political view, etc.) but also by creating principals for suppliers with fair trade standards.
- Environmental responsibility for paying close attention to reducing pollution and fighting against greenhouse gases emission.
- Philanthropic responsibility regarding vulnerable and needy people mostly in developing and underdeveloped countries, therefore companies should invest their time, money, and resources to sustain them with e.g. educational programs, donations.
- Economic responsibility as the most interconnected field with the three above- mentioned ones, recognizing the corporate sector as the economic engine of the society (Carroll B. , 2016).

In the case of fashion industry, CSR might be interpreted as an umbrella concept, covering a wide spectrum of challenges that occur as social and environmental issues, marketing concerns, management and organisational obstacles (Thorisdottir & Johannsdottir, 2020). Relevant sources in the topic can be grouped according to the following focus areas based on their research directions:

**Figure 2. Fashion business activities associated with the CSR concept**



Source: Compiled by the authors

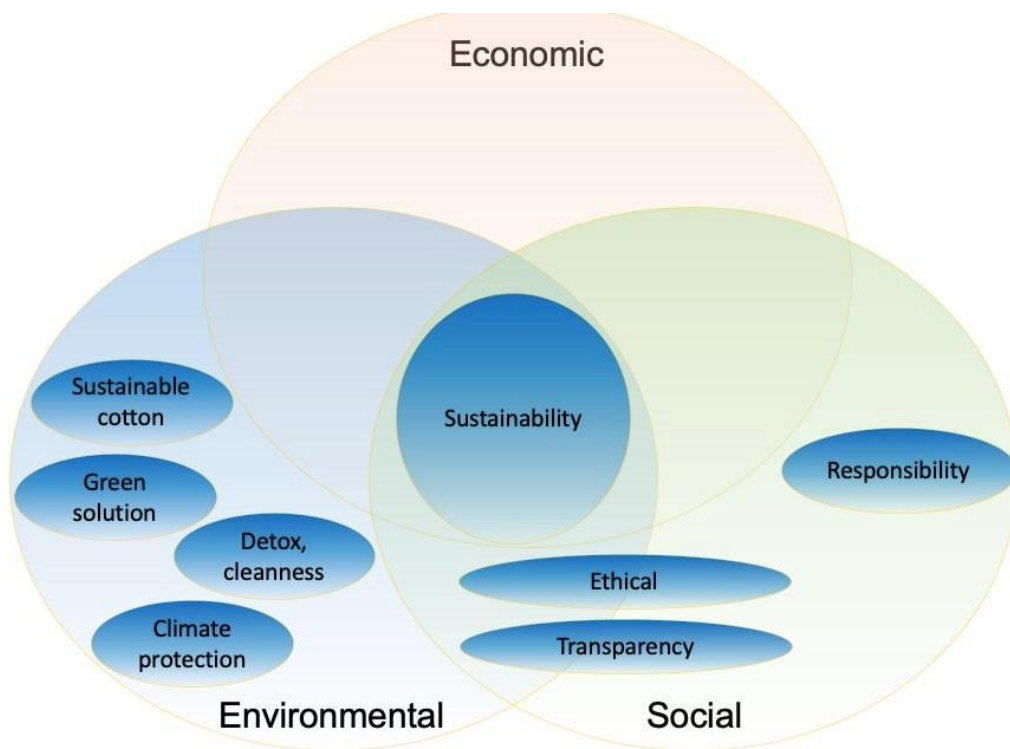
One of the main barriers when discussing sustainability and corporate social responsibility is, that these practices are mostly designed to be applied by large companies (Morsing & Perrini, 2009). However,

SMEs play a significant role in economy and have a great impact on society yet there is little research and empirical findings on how SMEs can contribute in a profitable way to a sustainable future or how are they currently acting and conducting their businesses in a responsible way. It is also observable in the fashion SME sector, that there is increasing awareness and customer demand for more ethical and sustainable fashion (Nayak, Singh, Panwar, & Padhye, 2019).

### 3. Sustainability assessment systems in the fashion industry

By applying the method of content analysis, we have reviewed literature related to the fashion industry assessing businesses sustainability. As a result, we have identified 13 sustainability assessment evaluation systems in which the sustainability of fashion companies is (also) evaluated. For further analysis, we have classified them into three main groups, namely those systems, which can be considered as (a) complex systems dealing with all the three dimensions of sustainability, (b) systems concentrating on social issues, and (c) systems putting the emphasize on environmental issues. By reviewing them, we identified several keywords linked at least to one aspect of sustainability. Figure 2. illustrates those values that were highlighted as the summarized interpretation on the assessment systems on what they evaluate specifically.

Figure 3. The 13 sustainability assessment systems aspects on economic, social, and environmental issues



Source: Compiled by the authors

The table below briefly introduces the 13 assessment systems based on the some of their features, such as year of establishment as a system, keywords forecasting their ideas about sustainably run businesses,

their main focus areas, how many industries and brands are covered and assessed by them, and also in how many categories they are evaluating companies and brands.

**Table 1. Summarizing the 13 sustainability assessment systems in the fashion industry, 2021**

System	Year of establishment <sup>1</sup>	Keyword	Evaluated companies (n) <sup>2</sup>	Categories of assessment (n)
<b>Complex systems dealing with all dimensions of sustainability</b>				
Dow Jones Sustainability Indices	1995	sustainability	-	25
Higg Index	2009	sustainable	250	23
The Fashion Transparency Index 2020	2013	transparency	250	5
Ethical Consumer High Street Clothes Shops	1995	ethical	40 000	5
Good on You	2013	ethical, sustainable	2 000	3
WWF: Changing Fashion	2017	sustainability	12	11
<b>Systems focusing on social issues</b>				
The 2019 Ethical Fashion Report	2013	ethical	130	5
KnowTheChain Apparel&Footwear Sector	2013	responsibility, transparency	42	7
<b>Systems focusing on environmental issues</b>				
Sustainable Cotton Ranking	2017	sustainable cotton	77	14
Green Supply Chain CITI (Corporate Information Transparency) Evaluation	2014	green	85	12
Filthy Fashion Climate Scorecard	2019	climate protection	45	6
Greenpeace Detox Catwalk	2013	detox, cleanness	19	3
Changing Markets: Dirty Fashion Disrupted Leaders and Laggards Revealed	2017	cleanness, sustainability	91	6

*Compiled by the authors based (Szabó, 2020)*

For the analysis we have intended to make the aspects of different systems comparable with each other by counting the similar elements of the evaluation points. During the analysis of the 13 evaluation systems, we have examined the different aspects according to the three pillars of sustainability, economic, environmental, and social pillars, therefore we have aligned both the practice of fashion industry and the theory we have reviewed. The Dow Jones sustainability assessment system was the only system, that was clearly structured around the three pillars of sustainability, so we have accepted those aspects as our main categories. For defining our further criteria (subcategories), we were trying to include all the aspects of all evaluation systems while combining the similar ones to get a manageable data set. Of course, this step included some level of subjectivity. After defining the

<sup>1</sup> Referring to the establishment of the system or scorecard, not to the organisation

<sup>2</sup> Approximate numbers, most of the data are not publicly available

categories, we performed an analysis of the 13 evaluation systems based on these criteria. After this analysis, we could make statements about the fashion sustainability assessment systems (Szabó, 2020).

#### 4. Research methodology

The aim of the research was to map the local SMEs' view and general knowledge about fashion sustainability assessment systems, with particular attention to the 13 examined one. We choose the method of semi-structured in-depth interviews, for which 4 small and medium size enterprises' owners were chosen. Semi-structured in-depth interview is a qualitative research method, applied when the interviewer prepares questions beforehand to guide the conversation with the interviewee and to keep the partner on topic. It encourages a two-way communication, where the interviewee has the chance to answer and express their own personal view or experience on the raised open-ended question. All the 4 interviews were organised via Microsoft Teams, conducted in Hungarian, later on translated into English word by word. It aimed to gain direct information from business founders about the following specific areas:

- Does the SME sector consider sustainability assessment systems important?
- What economic, social, and environmental factors would be considered when assessing the sustainability of a fashion business/company?
- What future trends are expected to occur regarding fashion sustainability assessment systems?

As the result of the above theoretical analysis, we found that most of the research focuses on what information customers have, what influences their decision, and how they can behave in a sustainable way when buying clothing or a fashion item. The most conscious customers can also be guided by the results of sustainability assessment systems for fashion companies. Based on preliminary research, there is no information mapping the views of SMEs on fashion evaluation systems, hence, as these are highly complex assessments, we intend to disclose the Hungarian fashion SMEs awareness, opinion, views, and knowledge relating to these systems.

Interview questions	
<b>I</b>	<b>Does the SME sector consider sustainability assessment systems important?</b>
Q1	Have you heard of fashion industry sustainability assessment systems?
Q2	Can you mention some of these systems?
Q3	Which of the 13 assessment systems listed have you heard of?
Q4	In your opinion, what sort of factors are examined by these systems?
Q5	What companies do you think fashion sustainability assessment systems examine?
Q6	Would you undertake an evaluation of your own company according to such a value system?
Q7	If you would do so, why? If not, why not?

<b>II</b>	<b>What economic, social, and environmental factors would be considered when assessing the sustainability of a fashion business/company?</b>
Q8	If you would create such an assessment system, what factors would you take into account?
Q9	What economic, social, and environmental factors would you consider?
Q10	Would supply chain management be part of your assessment system?
Q11	Please, indicate your answer and specify how would you integrate it into the system?
<b>III</b>	<b>What future trends are expected to occur regarding fashion sustainability assessment systems?</b>
Q12	Would it be realistic to create a standardised sustainability assessment system in the fashion industry? Please, indicate your answer.
Q13	If yes, who's responsibility would it be?
Q14	If no, what other tools would be suggested to evaluate a fashion company's sustainability level'?

## 5. Research sample

The research sample involves four small and medium size enterprises, all of them located in Hungary, three in the capital, Budapest and one in Debrecen. Based on former content analysis based on their websites, these four enterprises showed responsible and sustainably aware business profiles, therefore they were chosen as interviewees. To obtain suitable background information, our keywords were: *sustainability*, *responsibility*, and specifically *corporate social responsibility*.

Regarding their activities, they conduct diverse businesses, their production activities cover the clothing and accessories sector as well.

**Pinkponilo** is a sewing and fashion studio located in Budapest, with a designing and producing portfolio. Their green way of thinking is originated from their self-made clothing items, being open to new and innovative fashion technologies and techniques, for example, smart textile or 3D printing, putting great emphasis on education, workshops and zero waste production. They are constantly thinking in further cooperation in order to bridge the gap between fashion designers and manufacturers. Their social responsibility movements are harmonised with the business future goals according to which they attempt to address social issues, such as inequality, environmental issues, protectionism, with transparent-sustainable-trade-network and education in practice with running actual production (PINKPONILO, 2021).

**Zöld Gardrób** or Green Wardrob's business activity is based on the capsule wardrobe definition, referring to a small and compact, also personal and interchangeable clothing items, with matching styles, colours, etc. (Htef & Shaharuddin, 2019) The enterprise not only provides educational tools and background on how to create capsule wardrobe, but also purchases fashion items of international brands manufactured in an ethical and sustainable way, promoting conscious consumption, and carbon neutrality (Zöld Gardrób, 2021).



The idea of **Mancika Designs** was born in Australia where sustainability and awareness have a long tradition. The company in its present form was founded in 2019, since then, Mancika Designs has been manufacturing hand-made accessories, ensuring complete uniqueness, also striving towards maintaining a zero-waste workshop (Mancika Designs, 2021). Among their basic values, freeness, environmentalism, and individual perception are playing a key role, at the same time their vision is to produce achievable and affordable luxury and elegant fashion items (Not Just a Label, 2021).

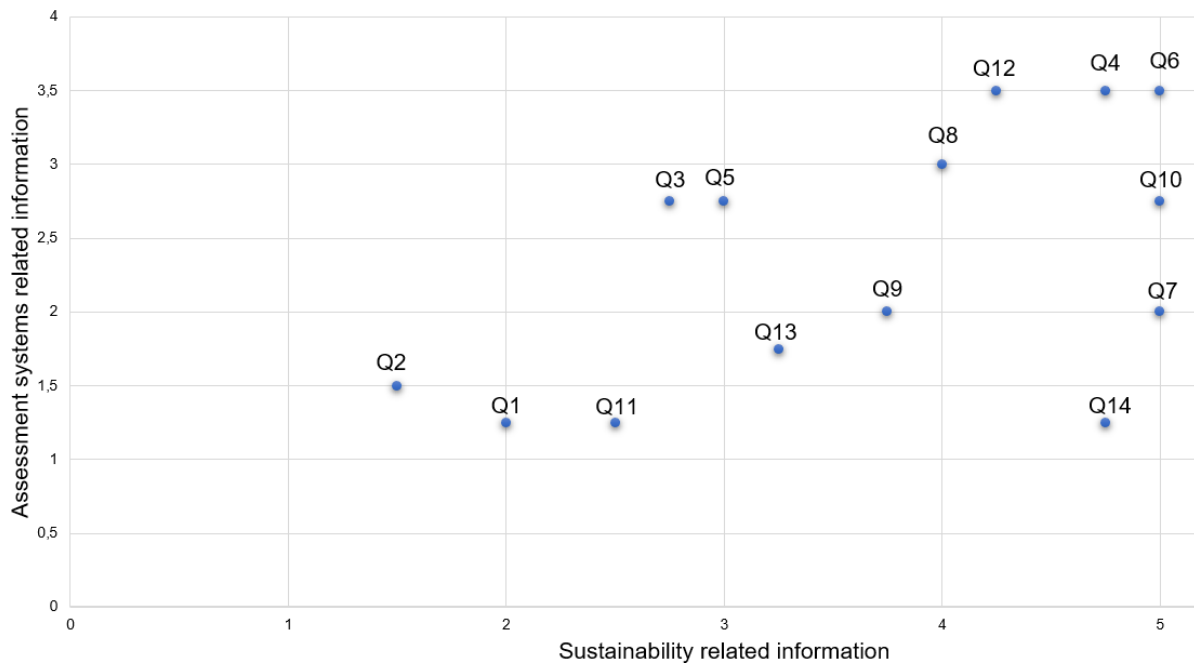
**PLANTETHICS** also deals with jewellery as an ethical, sustainable, vegan brand creating elegant, minimalist, nature inspired accessories. Similarly to the previously introduced SME, PLANTETHICS brings together the environment and humans, manufacturing home and fashion hand-made pieces to wear. They sacrifice special attention to the resources they use, recycled materials and fair-trade precious metal, furthermore real plants to create the items. The SME launched several interesting collections, such as the FOREST collection – from leaves, VEGANWEAR – bags, shirt and accessories supporting zero waste, TERRA collection – from traditional glass alloyed with plants, ZUZMO, EARTH, ESSENCE collection, etc. (PLANTETHICS, 2021)

Several criteria were taken into consideration during the selection of SME's. The SMEs' vision and mission, based on their websites is strongly linked to sustainability, recycling, preserving the nature, uniqueness, vegan lifestyle, zero waste, and education. These SMEs are also members of the Fashion Revolution, which is an international movement, being present and conducting their activities on all continent, working on cultural, industry and policy change for a more green and transparent industry with spreading and sharing best practices. In this respect, their commitment and awareness of a responsibly running business is unquestionable (Fashion Revolution, 2021).

## **6. Research results**

The interview results have allowed us to set up several statements and assumptions about the SMEs' general aspects, and some critical points were disclosed as well. The descriptive analyses of the manuscripts were conducted from two angles: sustainability related information and answers related to fashion assessment systems. The aim was to get a complex picture on whether SME owners have a unique view, general knowledge, and awareness about the matter, or they have no relevant information. To interpret the provided answers and reduce the bias, we have generated an evaluation scorecard to all 3 sections of the interviews, scoring and indicating the given point. The maximum point achievable was 5 points meaning that the owner has comprehensive, detailed information relating to the raised question, and point 1 is the lowest score, meaning the owner has no information about the question. It is important to emphasize that the evaluation does not reflect the 'right' and 'wrong' answer, it simply shows the level of information that the SME sector might access in the field of sustainability and assessment systems. The results are summarized in Table 2. As it is illustrated, the information on sustainability, its determinant elements, modern trends, technologies, and techniques are well-known by the SMEs, while the assessment systems have less importance in their operations.

**Table 2. Interview results scorecard**



Source: Compiled by the authors

**RQ (1-7): SMEs' general aspects regarding the sustainability assessment systems in the fashion industry**

- The SMEs' owners have limited knowledge about sustainability assessment systems. All SME owners heard of some of the listed ones, especially Good on You was mentioned in 3 cases out of 4 interviews as the most transparent and reliable system. All the interviewees mentioned the Fashion Revolution, which is actively engaged in various international movements and information exchange platforms, and through this mediation they have heard about some of the systems.
- All the four founders were convinced that these systems especially focus on those factors which are challenging to address and mean a complex issue at a global scale. Mostly those elements were mentioned by owners which can be identified as the negative impact areas of the industry, such as resource depletion, climate change, animal suffering, water pollution, food insecurity, air pollution, habitat destruction, human rights abuses.
- When it comes to concrete assessment, they all consider the companies' size as a determinant factor, stating that bigger companies, whether they are international or multinational with a strong market reputation, have better chances to take part in such evaluations. One interviewee indicated that smaller businesses also might be involved in these assessments in order to provide a comprehensive picture by including all segments. All four companies would undertake a sustainability assessment

on their own company, however, because of its expenses, they consider an assessment an unaffordable investment.

**RQ (8-11): Creating an own assessment system: economic, social and environmental factors**

- Diving into the sustainability aspects, the critical point was the economic pillar. 3 interviewees could not mention any economic related factors they would assess, and the social and environmental factors mostly covered the elimination of inequalities, ensuring fair wages, ethical conditions, recycling processes, eventually referring to the negative impact areas. We concluded that there is a general gap between the fashion SMEs sector commitment and business activities.
- One founder was very-well informed and highlighted factors such as, organizational form, cash flow, savings, investment in technology and innovation in new raw materials, wage growth, establishing new economic relationships and textile distributors, charity programs, measuring the water and electricity consumption, etc.
- For all the four founders, sustainable supply chain management would be crucial as part of their own assessment system, indicating its importance in terms of sustainability although they could not provide concrete suggestions on how to integrate it into the system. We also identified a dilemma between theoretical approaches and practical applications.

**RQ (12-14): SMEs forecasting future fashion industry trends aligned with the assessment systems**

- SME owners do not think it makes sense to create a unified, or one globally interpreted and applied assessment system, since they believe that there are too many influencing factors such as political and economic environment, cultural differences, climate, logistics, local prices, and these are continuously changing. Creating one system would probably put many market players on the periphery or out of competition.
- Furthermore, they have identified the general lack of data, and also the different level of governmental or other grants and financial supports as an issue from an SMEs' point of view.

## **7. Conclusion**

In the first part of the primary research, 13 sustainability assessment systems were gathered, analysed and compared with content analysis method, we found that even though these are highly complex and acknowledged systems, the traditional pillars of sustainability receive unequal attention. Social aspects are likely to be less highlighted compared to the economic and the environmental ones. In its economic dimensions, the publication of the suppliers' list and the examination of risk and crisis management dominate mostly. The most frequently investigated aspects in the field of environmental protection are climate and environmental strategies, environmental policy, management systems, and product care. The social angle covers the human rights assessment of the companies and supply chain management. The 13 fashion industry sustainability assessment systems evaluate companies from various perspectives, but this leads to differing results, therefore in the absence of a universal ranking system, it is problematic for stakeholders to get relevant and proper information about the sustainability of fashion brands. In the second part of our primary research, in-depth interviews with the chosen SME owners have highlighted a meaningful interpretation feature, rather putting the emphasis on the environmental aspect of sustainability and neglecting the economic and social ones, which are also a visible result by analyzing the fashion industry's sustainability assessment systems.

The chosen SMEs are highly committed to sustainability and are generally informed about the assessment systems; however, they feel the pressure from the large companies on the market. They consider the assessment systems important, but they would rather put more emphasis on regional cooperation, local visibility or good brand reputation than participating in a complex system.

Since this pilot research was conducted as a small-scale experimental study, further investigation is needed on the SME sector, focusing on their corporate social responsibility activities and ethical functioning.

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