Threads of Change: Environmental Sustainability and Gender Equality in Australian Fashion Organisations

by

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List of abbreviations

ABS – Australian Bureau of Statistics

AI – Artificial Intelligence

B Corp – B Corporation

BGD – Board Gender Diversity

CEO – Chief Executive Officer

CSP – Corporate Social Performance

CSR – Corporate Social Responsibility

ESG – Environmental, Social and Governance

GE – Gender Equality

GHG – Greenhouse Gas

KLD – Kinder, Lydenberg and Domini

NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation

SME – Small and Medium-sized Enterprise

TMT – Top Management Team

WGEA – Workplace Gender Equality Agency

WLB – Work-life Balance

Abstract

The fashion industry faces mounting criticism for its significant environmental impact and persistent gender inequality issues. Contributing 8% of global carbon emissions and 20% of global wastewater pollution, with 80% female workforce but only around 40% in leadership, the industry simultaneously grapples with systemic environmental and social challenges that demand urgent attention. My thesis examines how Australian fashion organisations are responding to these dual pressures through their corporate social responsibility commitments, seeking to elucidate the relationship between environmental sustainability and gender equality concerns within the industry.

Through analysis of semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and archival data, I investigate how different organisational motivations shape the approaches to addressing environmental and gender equality challenges. By examining the dynamics between organisations and their customers, as well as inter-industry relationships, my thesis reveals how power imbalances and resource disparities affect collaborative efforts towards sustainability and gender equality. I employ an integrated theoretical framework that combines institutional logics theory and The Three Spaces Framework for Sustainable Change. This synthesis leads to the development of a novel organisational typology, categorising fashion organisations as profit-led, customer-led, values-led, or product-led based on their primary institutional logics and and strategic orientations towards sustainability and gender equality.

The application of this theoretical lens offers new insights into how varying institutional logics influence environmental sustainability and gender equality approaches within the fashion industry. It demonstrates that successful change requires careful alignment of institutional logics and organisational spaces. By providing a multilayered understanding of how Australian fashion organisations are grappling with the industry's environmental and gender equality challenges, my thesis contributes to the growing body of research on corporate social responsibility. The integrated theoretical framework and organisational typology developed in my research offer a valuable tool for researchers and practitioners seeking to analyse and guide environmental sustainability and gender equality efforts in the fashion industry and beyond. By recognising the interconnectedness between institutional logics and organisational spaces, my research provides a foundation for more targeted and effective sustainability interventions.

Declaration

I declare that:

this thesis presents work carried out by myself and does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; to the best of my knowledge it does not contain any materials previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; and all substantive contributions by others to the work presented, including jointly authored publications, is clearly acknowledged.

Josephine Alice Mckenzie

..... 2nd January 2025

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The fashion industry is grappling with eroding trust due to its poor track record on environmental sustainability and gender equality (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010; Iglesias, Harverhals, & De Wee, 2020). The industry is notorious for its dependence on carbon-intensive production and distribution methods, wasteful practices, and resource depletion (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010). Given these environmental concerns, and the significant market power of the fashion industry, there is mounting pressure from stakeholders (Pedersen & Gwozdz, 2014) to examine how fashion retailers can integrate sustainable practices while also addressing other aspects of corporate social responsibility (CSR), such as gender equality. CSR is an overarching framework that encompasses both environmental sustainability and gender equality, recognising that responsible business practices must simultaneously address ecological impact and social equity to create meaningful organisational change (Carroll, 1999).

Environmental Sustainability in the Fashion Industry

The advent of *fast fashion* dramatically reshaped the global fashion industry, characterised by its rapid-response systems and enhanced design capabilities (Cachon & Swinney, 2011; Long & Nasiry, 2022). This business model revolutionised retail by quickly translating catwalk trends into affordable high-street clothing, producing garments in large volumes at low cost (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010). Fast fashion retailers employ just-in-time manufacturing and efficient supply chains to bring new styles to stores within weeks rather than the traditional seasonal cycle, whilst simultaneously keeping prices affordable to mass-market consumers (Sull & Turconi, 2008). This reshaping has further evolved with the onset of ultra-fast fashion, exemplified by companies such as SHEIN, which has revolutionised traditional fashion cycles by leveraging advanced algorithms and a vast network of production facilities (Brydges, 2024). These developments have significantly compressed the time from design

concept to customer availability, profoundly impacting both market dynamics and environmental sustainability considerations within the industry.

Critics argue the fast fashion paradigm perpetuates a cycle of over-consumption and waste, contributing significantly to environmental degradation (Niinimaki et al., 2020). The fashion industry is estimated to account for 8% of global carbon emissions, and 20% of global wastewater pollution (McCallion, Boulton & Curtis, 2021). The intensive water and chemical use in processes such as cotton cultivation and garment dyeing pose substantial environmental risks, including soil depletion and water contamination (Balch, 2013; Bick, Halsey & Ekenga, 2018). Moreover, the fast fashion business model is often criticised for its reliance on low-cost labour in developing countries, where workers face exploitative conditions and minimal labour protections (Anguelov, 2015). Reports of substandard wages, and unsafe working conditions in garment factories, highlight systemic issues within global supply chains, prompting ethical concerns among customers and advocacy groups.

In response to these challenges, sustainable fashion has gained traction, advocating for ethical sourcing, transparent supply chains, and environmentally responsible production practices (Henninger, Alevizou, & Oates, 2016; Reimers, Magnuson, & Chao 2016). Sustainable fashion initiatives prioritise using eco-friendly materials, supporting fair labour practices, and promoting longevity and durability in clothing design to reduce waste and environmental impact (Goworek, 2011; Thorisdottir & Johansdottir, 2020). Despite the growing demand for sustainable alternatives, the fashion industry faces significant hurdles in transitioning from the dominant fast fashion model. Customer expectations for affordable and trend-driven clothing conflict with the higher production costs associated with sustainable practices (Hur & Cassidy, 2019). Additionally, the lack of standardised certifications and varying definitions of environmental sustainability complicate efforts to communicate and verify sustainable claims within the marketplace (Aakko & Koskennurmi-Sivonen, 2013; Henninger et al., 2016).

The industry's complex supply chain dynamics, and the economic pressures brands face to maintain competitive pricing and profitability, challenge efforts to promote environmental sustainability in fashion (Pal & Gander, 2018). While some brands have adopted superficial environmental sustainability strategies such as using recycled synthetic fibres, or promoting limited eco-friendly collections, achieving meaningful progress requires systemic changes

across production, distribution, and consumption patterns (Desore & Narula, 2017; Mukendi, Davies & Henninger, 2020).

Gender in the Fashion Industry

Although fashion primarily targets women as consumers and employs women in the workplace (Doyle & Moore, 2023; Iglesias et al., 2020), men still dominate top jobs in the industry (Spellings, 2018), reflecting its traditionally male-dominated nature despite the gendered association of clothes shopping with women (Dholakia, 1999). Women spend nearly three times as much on clothing annually compared to men (Lai, 2021). Women make approximately 80% of all fashion-related purchasing decisions, not just for themselves but for their family and friends, including spouses and children. These decisions total up to 15 trillion USD (Brown et al., 2019). Eighty per cent of students at top fashion schools (for roles in fashion design, management and marketing) are women, and nearly 75% of employees in apparel stores are women (Brown et al., 2019).

While women are well-represented in middle management, their numbers dwindle at higher levels: only 12.5% of Fortune 1000 apparel and retail companies are led by women, compared to around 20% in the utilities, aerospace, and defence sectors (Brown et al., 2019). In the apparel industry, 75% of the 61 companies with women's clothing lines have predominantly male corporate teams and only 40.2% of senior-level designers are women (Brown et al., 2019). Younger brands show slight increases in female representation, suggesting more established organisations have yet to progress in this area (Deeley, 2021). A 2019 fashion industry analysis conducted by the accounting and consulting firm PwC revealed a significant gender disparity in career progression. While 54% of male CEOs advanced through internal promotions, only 25% of female CEOs achieved their positions through an internal pathway (PwC, 2019).

The lack of women in executive roles is not necessarily due to a lack of ambition. Brown et al. (2019) found that women often begin their fashion careers with higher ambitions than men; at the entry level, 70% of women aspire to become top executives, compared to 60% of men. However, as men advance, their ambitions grow to 91% by the Vice President level, while women's ambitions remain at 73%. This statistic suggests that women's ambitions fail to be nurtured along their career paths, leading to frustration and disenchantment at each barrier they encounter.

Women are concentrated in entry-level management positions, highlighting a systemic issue of women's difficulty advancing to higher ranks. This gender distribution contributes to the gender pay gap in the fashion industry, which persists due to unequal promotion rates compared to men. For example, in 2019, UK fast fashion brand Missguided had a gender pay gap of 46%, and UK luxury brand Burberry had a gender pay gap of 26% (Paton, 2018). The average gender pay gap among all industries in the UK is 13.1% (Office for National Statistics, 2024). Independent fashion designers encounter significant gender-related obstacles when seeking capital, often relying on personal investments from family and friends due to limited access to traditional funding from banks (Steedman & Brydges, 2023). Independent female designers are frequently overlooked in arts, culture, and creative industries funding opportunities, further exacerbating financial challenges (Steedman & Brydges, 2023).

The Australian Fashion Industry

Against this backdrop of global industry challenges, Australia's fashion industry has evolved along a unique trajectory shaped by its geographic isolation and colonial heritage. Australia historically relied on importing apparel from England and Asia while concurrently developing a local manufacturing sector focused on basic apparel like underwear and footwear (Craik, 2015; Maynard, 1994; Maynard, 2004). The early 20th century saw rapid expansion in the fashion sector due to Australian population growth, and the introduction of department stores (Fergusson & Padhye, 2024). David Jones, for example, began local manufacturing of garments styled after European fashions, making global fashion trends more accessible to Australian consumers (Miller & Merrilees, 2004). Department stores influenced fashion trends and public consciousness, supported by specialist fashion stores, dressmakers, manufacturers, wholesalers, couture houses, magazines, and newspapers. At the same time, women's increased workforce participation provided a significant rise in disposable income for retail fashion spending (Miller & Merrilees, 2004).

Initially supported by protectionist policies in the early 20th century, local apparel production struggled as these policies did not evolve to support the industry. Deregulation in the 1980s led to dismantling protectionist measures, disadvantaging local manufacturing due to reduced subsidies and high production costs. The consequences of deregulation resulted in significant job losses and factory closures (Craik, 2015). Between 1989 and 1995, over 10,000

employees were let go from an industry that employed about 30,000 people in the late 1980s (Webber & Weller, 2001). By the 21st century, the industry experienced fragmentation with many companies closing or restructuring as offshore production increased (Craik, 2015; Fergusson & Padhye, 2024). Currently, Australia's clothing demand is mostly (97%) met by imports (Australian Fashion Council, 2021; McCallion et al., 2021).

The Australian fashion industry mirrors global environmental sustainability and gender equality challenges, albeit with distinct local characteristics. Despite its smaller scale, the industry's heavy reliance on imports contributes significantly to transportation-related carbon emissions (Payne & Ferrero-Regis, 2019).

Many organisations in the Australian industry have adopted the 'fast fashion' business model, perpetuating unsustainable consumption patterns (Payne & Ferrero-Regis, 2019). While economically advantageous, the industry's offshore production model has raised concerns about supply chain transparency and working conditions, mainly affecting female workers who comprise the majority of the garment workforce in supplier countries (Fergusson & Padhye, 2024). Furthermore, the decline of local manufacturing has disproportionately impacted women workers, who historically made up 80% of Australia's textile and clothing workforce (Fergusson & Padhye, 2024).

The fashion industry is exploring various approaches to environmental sustainability, with one such initiative being the National Clothing Product Stewardship Scheme, branded 'Seamless' (Seamless, 2024). The Australian Fashion Council introduced this scheme as one of several pathways being developed to support the Australian fashion industry's transition from a linear to a circular economy. While Seamless offers a framework for organisations to consider redesigning their processes to address waste and pollution, it represents just one part of the broader industry response to environmental challenges.

The scheme proposes methods for recirculating clothing and materials within the economy, aiming to contribute to economic, environmental, and social outcomes. The Australian Fashion Council suggests that industry-led initiatives could play a role in working towards circular economy practices within the Australian clothing sector (Australian Fashion Council, 2021). To date, 58 Australian fashion organisations have joined the scheme, including Cotton On and Zimmermann (Seamless, 2024), though the long-term effectiveness of such voluntary programmes remains to be seen.

Research Questions

Research has documented global customer pressure for environmentally sustainable practices, and the industry's persistent gender inequalities (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010; Brown et al., 2019), there is limited empirical evidence of how Australian fashion organisations respond to these demands within their specific operational constraints. The tension between customer expectations for affordable, trend-driven clothing and concerns around environmental sustainability presents an especially difficult challenge for Australian organisations. Today's consumers demand cheap, stylish apparel delivered at ever-faster speeds, while simultaneously insisting that brands minimise waste, use eco-friendly materials, and ensure ethical labour practices across global supply chains.

To understand these gaps, my research aligns with an overarching research question:

'How do Australian fashion organisations engage with environmental sustainability and gender equality initiatives, both independently and in relation to one another?

To address this overarching research question, I developed four, more specific, interrelated questions:

1. How are organisations engaging with environmental sustainability in the Australian fashion industry?
2. How are organisations engaging with gender equality in the Australian fashion industry?
3. How are Australian fashion organisations communicating environmental sustainability to customers?
4. How do industry dynamics shape organisational commitment to environmental sustainability?

These four questions aim to provide a systematic investigation that will contribute to understanding how Australian fashion organisations navigate environmental sustainability and gender equality challenges within their distinct industry context, thereby advancing both theoretical understanding and practical knowledge in this field.

Thesis Structure

My thesis is structured to address the four core research questions outlined above in sequence. I have designed each findings chapter to contribute a specific puzzle piece, providing a comprehensive understanding of how Australian fashion organisations engage with environmental sustainability and gender equality.

The first research question, ‘How are organisations engaging with environmental sustainability in the Australian fashion industry?’, is addressed in Chapter 4. In answering this question, I provide an overview of how organisations in the Australian fashion industry are engaging with environmental sustainability. I categorise the types of environmental sustainability practices adopted and identify the extent of their implementation across different industry segments, offering a comprehensive understanding of the current state of sustainability within the sector.

Chapter 5 addresses the second research question, ‘How are organisations engaging with gender equality in the Australian fashion industry?’ I examine Australian fashion organisations’ strategies and practices to promote gender equality within their operations. I analyse company policies and initiatives related to gender pay gaps and the representation of women in leadership. I also consider challenges and barriers to achieving gender equality within the industry, drawing on existing literature on gender and organisational studies.

Addressing the research question, ‘How are Australian fashion organisations communicating environmental sustainability to customers?’, Chapter 6 examines the communication strategies and messaging approaches used by fashion companies to convey their environmental initiatives. It analyses how Australian fashion organisations develop and implement their sustainability communication, including their messaging frameworks and engagement tactics. To answer this question, the chapter presents my analysis of interviews with organisational members, industry stakeholders, and customer focus groups. Furthermore, this chapter investigates the effectiveness of different communication approaches and how transparency in sustainability messaging influences customer perceptions and trust in fashion brands' environmental claims.

Chapter 7 addresses the final research question, ‘How do industry dynamics shape organisational commitment to environmental sustainability?’ I move beyond individual organisational practices to analyse the broader structural factors influencing the fashion

industry’s engagement with environmental sustainability. The chapter considers the role of collaboration and competition in shaping the environmental sustainability landscape of the Australian fashion industry. By analysing these structural factors, this chapter will provide a deeper understanding of the enablers and constraints that impact organisational commitment to environmental sustainability.

By systematically addressing each research question, this thesis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Australian fashion organisations navigate the complex challenges of environmental sustainability and gender equality.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews the literature on how fashion companies engage with CSR initiatives, with a primary focus on environmental sustainability and gender equality. The fashion industry provides an ideal context for this investigation due to its global economic significance, complex supply chains, and heightened public scrutiny. This literature review is structured to address my overarching research question: 'How do Australian fashion organisations engage with environmental sustainability and gender equality initiatives, both independently and in relation to one another?'. As elaborated in Chapter 1, I have four specific research questions that enable me to address the overall research question:

1. How do organisations in the fashion industry engage with environmental sustainability?
2. How do organisations in the fashion industry engage with gender equality?
3. How do Australian fashion organisations communicate environmental sustainability to customers?
4. How do industry dynamics shape organisational commitment to environmental sustainability?

The review begins with an evaluation of management research on the fashion industry, establishing the industry context essential for understanding my research focus. This section addresses innovation, entrepreneurship, production methods, and industry evolution, as this is where most of the management literature has focussed in regard to the fashion industry. Subsequently, I examine the intersection of environmental sustainability and gender equality within management research. This integrated approach acknowledges the interconnected nature of these CSR dimensions and allows for exploration of how they influence and shape one another within organisational contexts. By reviewing literature that addresses both dimensions simultaneously, I establish the foundation for understanding their relationship in fashion organisations.

Following this integrated overview, I provide a more focused review addressing my specific research questions. I examine how fashion organisations engage specifically with

environmental sustainability (RQ1) and gender equality (RQ2), exploring the challenges, strategies, and outcomes in each domain. I then address how Australian fashion organisations communicate environmental sustainability to customers (RQ3) and how industry dynamics shape organisational commitment to environmental sustainability (RQ4).

Following the literature specific to each research question, I present the theoretical framework that underpins this research, employing institutional logics theory (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999) and The Three Spaces Framework for Sustainable Change (Kulik et al., 2022). I explain how these complementary theoretical approaches provide the conceptual foundation to address my research questions.

Review of Management Research on the Fashion Industry

The fashion industry is a dynamic sector where innovation, entrepreneurial spirit, and production methods converge to create a complex business ecosystem. This section examines management research that has illuminated our understanding of this vibrant industry. The literature reveals how the fashion sector serves as a fertile ground for investigating management theories across various contexts, from creative innovation processes to entrepreneurial ventures and evolving production methods.

Innovation and Entrepreneurship Context

The fashion industry is recognised as a hub for innovation, with early management articles highlighting its unique characteristics alongside other creative sectors (Capetta, Cillo & Troilo, 2006). Research has shown that creative innovation in the fashion industry is driven by multiple designs, with success measured by the reception of these designs upon initial release (Capetta et al., 2006). Longitudinal quantitative analysis has been employed to understand the distinct features of innovation within the fashion context, revealing that creative innovation is shaped by a complex interaction of factors, including leadership roles and the accumulated overseas experience of leaders (Godart et al., 2015). This research has demonstrated that leaders with overseas professional experience are more likely to be adaptive and creative, leading to higher levels of creative innovation (Godart et al., 2015).

Organisations' utilisation of market information plays a crucial role in fostering innovation. Cillo et al. (2010) used mixed-methods research to elaborate how radical innovation is more

likely to be achieved through informal sources such as social media. They also highlight the importance of leadership and information flows in driving innovation.

The relationship between innovation and entrepreneurship is also another area of focus, with entrepreneurs often acting as catalysts for innovative practices. Entrepreneurs (commonly organisation founders and fashion designers) can foster creativity and risk-taking in the fashion industry, enabling organisations to pursue innovative solutions that align with market pressures and social goals (DiVito & Bohnsack, 2017; Dobrev et al., 2023). Research has examined entrepreneurship within the fashion industry through event history analysis to provide insights into the micro-processes of entrepreneurial leadership (Dobrev et al., 2023).

Early Production Methods and Industry Evolution

Early research highlighted production methods prioritising local labour and small-scale operations, compared to a subsequent trend of large-scale production (Lazerson, 1995). Lazerson (1995) focused on the 'putting-out' system, using a historical case study approach. Multiple independent producers and households distributed work through this decentralised model rather than a single factory. Manufacturers offered this mode of production as an alternative to the widely adopted exploitative practices of the time, with the author arguing that it encourages higher labour standards and social mobility opportunities.

Other research examined the more widely adopted production method, consisting of vertical integration and rapid response mechanisms, granting competitive advantages to fashion organisations (Richardson, 1996). Both foundational studies utilised qualitative data to set the stage for understanding the contemporary modes of production in the fashion industry.

Review of Management Research on Gender Equality and Environmental Sustainability

This section examines environmental sustainability and gender equality as core components of CSR. Whilst my research specifically investigates the intersection of these two elements, much of the existing literature addresses gender and CSR more broadly. Throughout this section, I illuminate the connections between environmental sustainability and gender equality where possible, drawing from this wider body of research.

Research demonstrates stakeholders increasingly connect environmental sustainability and gender equality under the broader umbrella of CSR. Given this documented stakeholder emphasis on this connection, understanding the empirical relationship between these factors becomes crucial (Abraham & Burbano, 2022; Glass, Cook & Ingersoll, 2015). Gender equality in organisations is typically measured and analysed across multiple levels, focusing on board composition and senior leadership representation. These studies investigate how gender equality at different organisational levels influences various CSR outcomes, from environmental performance to stakeholder relations.

Gender and Corporate Social Responsibility

My literature search yielded seven studies, presented in Table 2.1, that broadly examine the relationship between gender equality and CSR in organisations. While these studies primarily focus on gender equality and CSR, two studies specifically illuminate the connection between environmental sustainability and gender equality. Miles (2011) established the importance of incorporating gender-related metrics into environmental sustainability reporting frameworks through consultative workshops with the Global Reporting Initiative. Building on this, Miska, Szőcs and Schiffinger (2018) demonstrated that gender equality practices positively correlate with corporate sustainability across environmental, economic, and social domains, suggesting important linkages between gender equality and environmental performance in organisational settings.

Abraham and Burbano's (2022) field experiment provided valuable insights into how CSR claims interact with leadership gender composition to influence job applicant interest, highlighting the practical implications for organisational talent acquisition strategies. The study examines how different types of CSR claims (business-focused, community-focused, or diversity-focused) interact with leadership gender to influence job seeker interest. While environmental sustainability was included, it was specifically nested within the broader 'community-focused claims' category, where companies expressed their 'commitment to the community and environment' (Abraham & Burbano, 2022).

Research has demonstrated how CSR initiatives drive and shape gender equality outcomes in organisations. Between 2011 and 2023, several studies have established causal links between CSR programs and improved gender equality through rigorous methodological approaches including case studies, quantitative analyses, and field experiments. The research spans

multiple geographic contexts with studies examining companies in Japan, Italy, and broader international settings.

Table 2.1 Studies on CSR and gender equality

Author/s	**Year**	**Study Description**
Miles	2011	The study uses a consultative workshop methodology facilitated by the Global Reporting Initiative to systematically gather international perspectives on the necessity of incorporating gender-related data into sustainability reporting. Their findings demonstrate sustainable development increasingly integrates gender equality as a fundamental component in corporate practices and reporting frameworks due to legal, ethical, and financial pressures.
Gazzola, Sepashvili & Pezzetti	2016	The article uses two case studies to demonstrate how companies can leverage CSR to promote gender equality: (1) Luisa Spagnoli, an Italian company that pioneered initiatives to support working mothers and (2) Arup, an engineering firm that has made gender equality an essential part of its CSR strategy and is recognised as a top employer for women. These case studies provide concrete examples of how two drivers of gender equality—government policies and corporate CSR—can be implemented to advance gender equality in the workplace.
Kato & Kodama	2017	The article examines how CSR and work-life balance (WLB) practices influence gender equality in Japanese firms. While all Japanese firms operate within the context of the traditional 'lifetime employment' system, adherence to this system varies significantly across organisations. Using panel data with firm fixed effects, the results suggest CSR significantly impacts gender equality, especially at the entry-level and higher management levels. This effect is particularly pronounced in firms with more participatory management systems. The positive CSR effects are directly—rather than indirectly—mediated through WLB practices.

Mun & Jung	2017	The study used a combination of event history analysis and fixed-effects models to examine the impact CSR executives on the board have on gender equality at different levels of the organisation. CSR executives on the board positively affected the appointment of female directors, and the proportion of female managers. Specifically, adding one CSR board member (about a seven-percentage-point increase) increased the rate of female director appointments by 71%, and the odds of having female managers by 7%. However, the presence of CSR executives did not significantly increase gender equality at the non-managerial or entry levels.
Miska, Szocs & Schiffinger	2018	The study used hierarchical linear modelling to examine how five cultural practice dimensions relate to corporate sustainability practices across economic, social, and environmental domains. It found gender egalitarianism practices, one of the five cultural dimensions examined, tended to positively relate to corporate sustainability practices across these domains.
Abraham & Burbano	2022	The authors used a field experiment on a major online job search platform that manipulated the gender composition of a company's leadership team, and the company's CSR claims, and then measured the effects on prospective applicants' interest in the job opportunities. They found adding CSR claims reduced applicant interest in companies with all-male leadership, especially among male applicants, whereas adding CSR claims increased applicant interest in companies with all-female leadership. Both male and female applicants showed higher interest in job opportunities at companies with female-led leadership, regardless of the company's CSR claims.

Velasco-Balmaseda, Larrieta-Rubin de Celis & Izaguirre	2023	This article reports a qualitative content analysis of gender equality (GE) standards. The study identified 26 GE certification standards with external auditing and 10 without but found a need for more consensus on terminology, definitions, missions, and structures across the 20 initiatives analysed in-depth. The analysis suggests that GE standards are often promoted more for commercial interests than for driving transformative change on gender equality, raising concerns about 'gender washing' and the need for a more robust framework to ensure meaningful implementation.

Velasco-Balmaseda, de Celis, and Izaguirre (2023) conducted an analysis of 26 gender equality certification standards, revealing significant inconsistencies in terminology and implementation approaches, while highlighting concerns about 'gender washing' in CSR initiatives. This perspective is complemented by organisational case studies, such as Gazzola, Sepashvili and Pezzetti's (2016) who report the successful implementation of gender equality initiatives through CSR programs.

Quantitative research has demonstrated that robust CSR practices lead to improved gender equality outcomes. In the Japanese context, Kato and Kodama (2017) found that CSR practices positively influence gender equality, particularly at entry and management levels. Similarly, Mun and Jung (2017) provided compelling evidence that having CSR executives on corporate boards increased female director appointments by 71%, and the likelihood of having female managers by 7%.

To summarise, a synthesis of the literature from 2011-2023 demonstrates several positive effects of CSR on organisational gender equality. Quantitative analyses show CSR directly increases female leadership appointments, while field experiments reveal how CSR claims influence talent acquisition. However, recent scholarly work raises important concerns about implementation inconsistencies and potential 'gender washing', suggesting that while CSR represents an effective mechanism for advancing gender equality, careful attention must be paid to ensuring substantive rather than superficial implementation. Within this broader literature, there is emerging but limited evidence for a specific relationship between environmental sustainability and gender equality outcomes. Research indicates first, the importance of integrating gender metrics into sustainability reporting frameworks, and second, a correlation between broader corporate sustainability performance and gender equality practices. However, with only two studies examining this relationship, and neither establishing causation or underlying mechanisms, the nature of the connection between environmental sustainability and gender equality within CSR remains an area needing further investigation.

Board Gender Diversity

My literature search identified sixteen studies published between 2010 and 2023 examining the influence of board gender diversity on environmental sustainability and broader CSR outcomes, shown in Table 2.. These studies employ quantitative methodological approaches,

including regression and panel data analysis. The research spans multiple geographical contexts including the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and various Asian countries.

Research examining environmental sustainability and board gender diversity has focused primarily on environmental governance, climate-related disclosures, and environmental innovation. Studies investigating climate-related disclosures have demonstrated positive associations between board gender diversity and firms' environmental reporting practices (Ben-Amar et al., 2017; Liao et al., 2015). Specifically, in UK firms, female directors' presence correlated positively with greenhouse gas information disclosure, particularly when coupled with board-level environmental committees (Liao et al., 2015).

The concept of critical mass has emerged as particularly significant in environmental outcomes. Through mixed-methods analysis, Bazel-Shoham et al. (2023) revealed that while one female director did not significantly impact environmental innovation, achieving a critical mass of 30% female representation was associated with higher environmental innovation scores and R&D expenditures. Their qualitative analysis suggested this relationship was stronger in countries with masculine cultural values. Research has also established significant positive relationships between board gender diversity and specific environmental initiatives, particularly in areas of environmental restoration protection and impact reduction, with environmental training and organisational partnerships serving as potential mediating mechanisms (Carvajal, Nadeem & Zaman, 2021).

In the broader CSR domain, early foundational research established positive associations between women on boards and various CSR outcomes. Bear, Rahman and Post (2010) identified positive relationships between board gender representation and CSR ratings for institutional and technical strengths. While CEO gender alone showed limited impact, board gender diversity demonstrated positive associations with improved corporate governance, community engagement, and diversity outcomes, particularly in organisations led by male CEOs (Cook & Glass, 2018). This relationship was further supported by subsequent studies demonstrating positive associations between female board representation and CSR adoption across various geographical contexts (Seto-Pamies, 2013; Yasser, Al Mamun & Ahmed, 2017).

The critical mass phenomenon, as previously observed in environmental outcomes, has also emerged as significant in broader CSR research. Studies have demonstrated that achieving a critical mass of three or more female directors correlates with enhanced CSR performance (Cook & Glass, 2018; Post et al., 2011). However, Boulouta's (2012) panel data analysis of S&P 500 companies provided another perspective, revealing that while higher board gender diversity was associated with fewer harmful social practices, it did not significantly impact overall CSR performance or positive social practices.

Recent research has begun to examine specific mechanisms and dimensions of CSR, offering increasingly granular insights. Analysis of B Corps has revealed differential effects across various CSR dimensions, with women on boards positively influencing customer and community performance but showing negative effects on environmental and worker performance (Ardito, angelico & Petruzzelli, 2021). Studies focusing on specific CSR aspects have found positive associations between board gender composition and human rights disclosure scores (Paoloni, Lombardi & Principale, 2023), while research in cross-cultural contexts has demonstrated the relationship's relevance across different geographical regions (Yasser et al., 2017).

To summarise, the research demonstrates that female board representation, particularly when reaching critical mass, has significant positive associations with environmental disclosures, innovation, and specific sustainability initiatives. In the broader CSR context, while generally positive relationships are observed, the impact varies across different dimensions and cultural contexts. These findings suggest that while board gender diversity can be an important driver of both environmental and social performance, its influence is moderated and mediated by various organisational and cultural factors.

Table 2.2 Board gender diversity studies

Author/s	Year	Outcome	Study Description
Bear, Rahman & Post	2010	CSR	The study used regression analysis to test whether CSR ratings from the Kinder, Lydenberg & Domini (KLD) database mediated the relationship between board diversity measures (including the number of women on the board) and corporate reputation. The results showed the number of women on the board was positively associated with higher CSR ratings for institutional and technical strengths.
Post, Rahman & Rubow	2011	CSR	Drawing from multiple data sources (annual reports, corporate websites, and government websites) and using both their own 26-item Environmental Corporate Social Responsibility (ECSR) disclosure measure and KLD environmental ratings across 78 Fortune 1000 electronics and chemicals firms, the researchers found boards with three or more female directors (which represented only 9% of the sample) received higher KLD environmental strengths scores. However, this gender effect was insignificant for KLD environmental concerns or their custom ECSR disclosure metrics.
Boulouta	2012	CSR	The study used panel data analysis and two-step system generalised method of moments (estimation to examine the relationship between board gender equality (BGD) and corporate social performance (CSP) using data on S&P 500 companies from 1999 to 2003. The results showed that higher BGD was associated with fewer negative social practices but did not significantly affect overall CSP or positive social practices.

Seto-Pamies	2013	CSR	The study used data from the 2011 Global 100 most sustainable corporations ranking to examine the relationship between the percentage of women on the board of directors and CSR performance, controlling for firm size, profitability, industry sector, and country of origin. A higher percentage of women on the board was positively associated with higher CSR performance, and this effect was more substantial than the influence of firm profitability on CSR.
Fernandez-Feijoo, Romero & Ruiz-Blanco	2014	CSR	The study employed principal component analysis to identify two variables related to CSR disclosure (level of information disclosed and credibility). It used linear regression to investigate the relationship between these dependent variables, and the explanatory variables (the percentage of companies with at least three women on the board of directors and the gender gap index) while controlling for industry, mandatory CSR reporting, and economic factors. The study found having at least three women on the board of directors improves reporting on CSR. At the same time, enforcement and cultural factors other than masculinity also affect the levels of reporting.
Yasser, Al Mamun & Ahmed	2017	CSR	The study examined a sample of the largest 100 companies listed on the stock exchanges of Malaysia, Pakistan, and Thailand from 2010-2014, measuring firm CSR performance using the CSRHub database, and the percentage of female board members as the independent variable, while controlling for various board, firm, and country-level factors. The study found the percentage of female board members was positively and significantly associated with higher levels of CSR adoption among the largest listed firms in Malaysia, Pakistan, and Thailand from 2010-2014.
Cook & Glass	2018	CSR	The analysis used an author-constructed dataset of Fortune 500 firms from 2001-2010 merged with the KLD corporate social responsibility dataset, and employed negative binomial regression with fixed effects to examine

			the relationship between the number of women on the board of directors, and the firm's community, corporate governance, product, and environmental strengths. The results demonstrate the presence of women on corporate boards, even at the token level of one or two women, is positively associated with improved CSR outcomes across community, corporate governance, product, and environmental dimensions. Furthermore, a critical mass of three or more women on the board leads to stronger positive associations with these CSR measures.
Ardito, Dangelico & Petruzzelli	2021	CSR	The researchers used Poisson regression analysis on data from 246-422 certified B Corps to examine how the number of women on Boards of Directors affects various CSR performance dimensions (Environment, Workers, Customers, Community, and Governance). They found women on boards positively influenced customer and community performance and overall B Score; negatively affected environmental and worker performance; and had no significant effect on governance performance.
Yarram & Adapa	2021	CSR	The researchers used a two-step systems generalized methods of moments regression analysis on data from 214 Australian S&P/ASX 300 companies from 2011-2016 to examine how gender equality on boards affects CSR performance. The findings showed while the percentage of women on boards had no significant effect on positive or negative CSR individually, having three or more female directors (critical mass) had a significant positive influence on positive CSR activities, and a significant negative influence on harmful CSR activities.
Hyun et al.	2022	CSR	The study built a dataset from multiple sources to analyse the relationship between female board representation and firms' CSR performance, controlling for various firm-level, board-level, and corporate governance factors that may influence CSR. The study found a significant positive relationship between the number and proportion of women independent directors on a firm's board, and the firm's CSR score.

Javed et al.	2023	CSR	The study used fixed effect and generalized method of moments models to analyse the impact of gender equality on CSR and its moderating effect on the relationship between sustainable board committees and CSR. Both models showed a higher proportion of women on boards positively influences CSR, and strengthens the role of sustainable committees in promoting social responsibility.
Paoloni, Lombardi & Principale	2023	CSR	The researchers used panel regression analysis on data from 660 large European listed companies from 2017-2020, analysing the relationship between board gender composition, and human rights communication using data from the Thompson Reuters EIKON/Asset 4 database. They found the percentage of women on boards positively influenced human rights disclosure scores ($\beta = 0.137$, $p < 0.01$), and this finding was confirmed through a robustness check using logit panel regression, which showed similar positive effects ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$).
Liao, Luo & Tang	2015	Environmental sustainability	The study used a probit regression model on 329 UK firms to examine the relationship between gender equality, environmental committees, and voluntary carbon disclosure. The results showed female directors and a board-level environmental committee are positively and significantly associated with a firm's propensity to disclose greenhouse gas information. At the same time, board independence is marginally significant in promoting such disclosure.
Kassinis et al.	2016	Environmental sustainability	Using a panel data econometric model on a sample of US public corporations over five years, the study found firms with a higher percentage of female directors on their boards, and those with gender-conscious policies, are more environmentally conscious.

Ben-Amar, Chang & Mcilkenny	2017	Environmental sustainability	The study examined the relationship between board gender equality, and voluntary climate change disclosure using a sample of Canadian firms. The authors employed an Instrumental Variable Probit model to analyse the data, and found the percentage of women directors and the Blau diversity index are positively and significantly related to the likelihood of voluntary climate change disclosure. This supports the hypothesis that board gender equality enhances a firm's awareness and proactive strategies regarding environmental issues.
Carvajal, Nadeem & Zaman	2021	Environmental sustainability	The authors used descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, difference of means tests, and regression analysis to show a significant positive relationship between board gender equality and biodiversity initiatives, specifically restoration protection and impact reduction. Additionally, the study found environmental training and partnerships with environmental organisations are potential channels through which board gender equality may influence biodiversity initiatives. These findings are robust to alternative measures of board gender equality and endogeneity concerns, including reverse causality and omitted variables.
Bazel-Shoham, Mook Lee, Munjal & Shoham	2023	Environmental sustainability	This research used a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, beginning with quantitative analysis using ordinary least squares regression on a large panel dataset of firms to examine the relationship between BGD and environmental investment. Researchers used qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with board members in companies across countries with varying cultural gender values (masculine and feminine) to contextualise and deepen understanding of the quantitative findings. Quantitative analysis revealed while the mere presence of one woman on the board did not significantly impact environmental innovation, reaching a critical mass (three or more women, or 30% female representation) did correlate with higher environmental innovation scores and R&D expenditures. Qualitative analysis suggested this relationship is stronger in countries with masculine cultural values, indicating that BGD may be particularly influential in these contexts.

Leadership Gender Diversity

My literature search identified 7 studies published between 2014 and 2024 examining the influence of leadership gender diversity on environmental sustainability and broader CSR outcomes, as shown in Table 2.. These studies utilise quantitative methodologies including structural equation modelling, panel data analysis and instrumental variable approaches from various databases. The research encompasses different geographical contexts including North America, Europe, and the Asia-Pacific region, building evidence regarding the relationship between female representation in leadership positions and corporate sustainability performance.

Analysis of gender reporting in environmental sustainability frameworks (Glass et al., 2015) illuminated critical relationships between gender diversity and environmental governance. Their research identified multiple factors compelling organisations to enhance their gender-related disclosures within sustainability frameworks, including international human rights frameworks, the demonstrated business benefits of gender-diverse management in environmental initiatives, and increasing pressure from investors and regulatory bodies focusing on both gender and environmental metrics.

Larrieta de-Celis et al. (2014) further strengthened this connection, revealing organisations with higher female representation in both top and middle management, particularly in sustainability-focused departments, demonstrated more sophisticated environmental and social responsibility strategies. Their findings specifically highlighted how women in leadership positions influenced the development and implementation of environmental initiatives.

Beyond environmental sustainability, the evidence consistently demonstrates female leadership significantly influences broader CSR dimensions. Research by Gala, Kashmiri and Nicol (2024) provides insights into how female CEOs approach different CSR activities. Their extensive analysis of over 19,000 firm-year observations revealed female CEOs prioritise relational CSR more than their male counterparts, though this relationship varies based on different dimensions of CEO power. This finding aligns with structural equation modelling analysis (Ali et al., 2024), which showed gender diversity in board and top management team composition positively affects CSR, enhancing organisational performance and employee productivity. Further examination of the relationship between leadership

characteristics and organisational outcomes (Mui & Hill, 2023) found the positive relationship between CSR and firm performance strengthens when female leaders are perceived as more communal.

The impact of female leadership extends beyond the executive suite. A comprehensive study of nearly two decades of data (Bose et al., 2022) confirmed female participation in strategic decision-making positively influences CSR performance across all organisational levels. Their research demonstrated female leadership consistently contributed to strengthening CSR initiatives while reducing CSR concerns.

Overall, the literature reveals a complex, mutually reinforcing relationship between environmental sustainability and gender equality within CSR frameworks. From one direction, greater gender equality, particularly at board and leadership levels, drives improved environmental performance through multiple mechanisms: boards with critical mass female representation (30% or more) show higher environmental innovation scores and R&D expenditures (Bazel-Shoham et al., 2023), female directors positively influence greenhouse gas information disclosure (Liao et al., 2015), and women in sustainability-focused departments lead to more sophisticated environmental strategies (Larrieta de-Celis et al., 2014).

From the other direction, environmental sustainability initiatives influence gender equality through reporting and organisational structures: organisations have recognised the importance of incorporating gender-related metrics into environmental sustainability reporting frameworks (Miles, 2011), while the development of environmental governance systems provides additional contexts for examining gender equality in leadership. The relationship between these domains is further strengthened by cultural practices, with research showing that gender egalitarianism practices positively relate to corporate sustainability across environmental domains (Miska et al., 2018). However, the research also indicates this relationship is complicated and influenced by various factors including masculine versus feminine cultural values (Bazel-Shoham et al., 2023), while its effectiveness is moderated by organisational power dynamics (Glass & Cook, 2017) and requires careful attention to implementation to avoid superficial ‘gender washing’ (Velasco-Balmaseda et al., 2023).

Table 2.3 Leadership gender diversity studies

Author/s	**Year**	**Study Description**
Larrieta de-Celis et al.	2014	The study used cluster analysis, discriminant analysis, analysis of variance, and multiple regression to examine the relationship between the presence of women in management positions, and the development of CSR practices. The results showed companies with more women in top and middle management positions, and women leading the CSR department, tended to have more highly developed CSR strategies, both internally and externally.
Glass, Cook & Ingersoll	2015	The paper used the Global Reporting Initiative's consultative workshop process to gather international perspectives on gender reporting, and analyse various drivers including legal frameworks, business incentives, and stakeholder demands. The study identified multiple drivers for gender reporting including international human rights frameworks, business benefits (such as improved financial performance with gender-diverse management), investor demands, stock exchange requirements, government regulations, and community relationships; all contributing to increased pressure for transparent gender-related disclosures in sustainability reporting.
Glass & Cook	2017	The study used negative binomial regression with fixed effects for panel data to examine the relationships between CEO gender, percentage of women on the board, and number of interlinks for women on the board, with various business and equity practice outcomes. The results showed while CEO gender alone had limited impact, gender equality on the board, as measured by the percentage of women, was positively associated with improved corporate governance, community, and diversity outcomes—particularly for firms led by male CEOs.

Bose et al.	2022	The study used a sample of 15,874 firm-year observations from 2001 to 2018. It employed propensity score matching, Heckman's two-stage model, and two-stage regression to find female participation in strategic decision-making roles is positively associated with firms' CSR performance. Female participation at all levels was positively linked to CSR strengths, and negatively linked to CSR concerns.
Ali, Grabarski, Ahmed & Imtiaz	2024	The study used structural equation modelling to test the relationships between board and top management team (TMT) gender equality, CSR, and organisational performance. The findings suggest both board and TMT gender equality positively affect CSR, which positively affects perceived organisational performance and employee productivity.
Mui & Hill	2023	This study used data from multiple sources to analyse 574 firm-year observations from 162 US publicly traded firms with 97 female CEOs between 2001 and 2018. The relationships between CSR, corporate social irresponsibility, and firm performance were examined through structural equation modelling, controlling for various factors, and addressing endogeneity concerns through instrumental variable approaches and robustness tests. The study found the relationship between CSR and firm performance is more positive for female CEOs who are perceived as more communal and attractive.
Gala, Kashmiri & Nicol	2024	The authors combined four databases (Compustat, Execucomp, CRSP, and KLD) to analyse 2,739 firms from 1992-2013, creating 19,969 firm-year observations. The study used generalized least squares random effects regressions to examine how female CEOs influence CSR types, while considering CEO power dimensions and firm-level controls. They found female CEOs tended to prioritise relational CSR more than male CEOs. However, this effect varied based

		on different types of CEO power - with managerial and legitimate power generally amplifying the relationship, while formal power diminished it.

Review of Management Research on Environmental Sustainability and the Fashion Industry

The fashion industry has faced mounting scrutiny regarding its environmental impact, prompting various organisational responses to address sustainability challenges. This section examines the literature on how fashion organisations engage with environmental sustainability, considering both drivers of change and specific initiatives implemented across the industry.

Environmental Challenges in the Fashion Industry

Lewis and Harvey (2001) underscore the heightened awareness among fashion executives regarding environmental issues, laying the groundwork for CSR as a core element of corporate strategy. Over time, CSR has expanded beyond social responsibilities to encompass environmental concerns, with organisations striving to balance profitability and ethical practices. Studies such as Locke (2013) emphasise the ongoing challenges in implementing these initiatives across global supply chains, particularly regarding transparency and enforcement mechanisms.

Research has documented the substantial environmental footprint of the fashion industry, with studies highlighting significant concerns across multiple dimensions (Bick et al., 2018; Peters et al., 2021). Quantitative analysis has emphasised the substantial greenhouse gas emissions of the fashion industry, significantly contributing to global climate change (Peters et al., 2021). Beyond carbon emissions, research by Bick et al. (2018) highlights that the sector's heavy reliance on fossil fuels, water pollution, soil degradation, and waste management challenges create a global environmental justice dilemma. Workers and communities near textile manufacturing facilities disproportionately shoulder the hidden environmental and social costs, especially in low- and middle-income countries (Bick et al., 2018).

The fast fashion business model, with its emphasis on rapid production cycles and cost minimisation, has particularly intensified these environmental challenges. Studies using comparative analytical modelling have examined the relationship between enhanced design capabilities and quick response systems that characterise fast fashion (Cachon & Swinney,

2011). This research reveals how such systems, while economically successful, have contributed to heightened resource consumption and waste generation. As Peters et al. (2021) demonstrate, the environmental footprint of fast fashion is substantial, encompassing water pollution, soil degradation, and significant waste management challenges.

Organisational Responses to Environmental Sustainability Challenges

Reikke, Hekkert and Negro (2022) argue that the future of fashion ultimately lies in creating value through environmental sustainability, ensuring benefits for both people and the planet. Fashion organisations implement various strategies to address environmental challenges, with approaches ranging from incremental improvements to transformative business model innovations.

Circular economy principles have emerged as a significant framework for reducing the environmental impact of fashion. Geissdoerfer et al. (2017) used a conceptual framework and literature review to propose strategies for integrating circular economy principles such as durability, recyclability, and disassembly into the fashion industry. Their research synthesises existing knowledge and sets a theoretical foundation for understanding the practical applications of circular economy strategies. One of the most important aspects of the circular economy movement within fashion is the design of products to extend their lifecycle, focusing on easy disassembly and material recovery. Such strategies are particularly relevant as fashion companies begin reimagining their product lines to reduce environmental harm (Geissedoerfer et al., 2017).

Fletcher and Grose (2012) conducted qualitative research through case studies to examine how circular models such as rental, repair, and resale are being operationalised in fashion. Their research highlights how these models can be integrated into business practices, although challenges remain in scaling them across the entire industry. These models promote a shift from ownership to access, which helps to curb waste by encouraging customers to reuse and extend the life of fashion items.

The role of technology in advancing environmental sustainability within the fashion industry has also been a focus of research. Piller (2022) examines the potential of blockchain and artificial intelligence (AI) in the fashion industry, providing valuable insights into how these technologies can enhance environmental sustainability. The findings highlight how blockchain technology enables greater transparency and accountability, allowing customers

to verify the sustainability of the products they buy. AI is being utilised to predict demand more accurately, reducing overproduction and helping companies manage their inventories in more environmentally friendly ways (Piller, 2022). Beyond blockchain and AI, technological innovation extends to material science. As Goworek et al. (2020) highlight, material innovation represents one of the most promising frontiers for reducing the fashion industry's environmental footprint.

Research Gaps in Fashion Industry Environmental Sustainability

Despite significant research on environmental sustainability in the fashion industry, critical gaps remain in our understanding of internal organisational processes. There is insufficient management research examining the specific mechanisms that create change within fashion organisations and the underlying motivations that drive organisational engagement with sustainability. While studies have documented various sustainability initiatives, they rarely provide in-depth analysis of how these initiatives are conceived, championed, and implemented within the organisation. There is a limited understanding of the internal dynamics that facilitate or hinder sustainability adoption beyond superficial commitments. Additionally, research tends to focus on outcomes rather than processes, leaving a significant gap in the understanding of how organisations translate external pressures into internal action. This leads to my first research question:

RQ1: How do organisations in the fashion industry engage with environmental sustainability?

Review of Management Research on Gender Equality and the Fashion Industry

Gender inequality remains a pervasive issue within the fashion industry, particularly in global supply chains where women constitute the majority of the workforce. This section examines the literature on how fashion organisations engage with gender equality, focusing on both challenges and organisational responses.

Gender Inequality in the Fashion Industry

Research has documented extensive gender inequality issues throughout the fashion industry value chain. A significant thread of research has focused on the lived experiences of women

workers in garment factories, documenting numerous challenges they face in terms of low wages, prolonged working hours, and unsafe working conditions (Ross et al., 2023). Ahmed (2024) used ethnographic methods to reveal wage theft as a form of violence in feminised workplaces within the global supply chain, providing a powerful indictment of the systemic exploitation embedded within the fashion industry. Critical analysis of policy documents and interviews revealed how public actors, such as the Bangladeshi government, undermined the efforts of safety compliance measures by resisting broader reforms (Bair et al., 2020). Further investigation using 98 interviews and site visits showed that exploitation stems from complex power dynamics between supply chain actors, while highlighting local context as essential to developing sustainable solutions (Uddin et al., 2022).

Complementing this, other studies examine the role of gender in shaping career trajectories within the fashion industry, highlighting the stark underrepresentation of women in leadership positions despite their predominance in the workforce (Entwistle, 2014).

The Rana Plaza disaster in 2013, which killed 1,134 garment workers and injured over 2,500, has been a focal point for research on gender and labour conditions. Studies using qualitative data sources, such as interviews, have investigated the implementation and effects of global safety compliance measures in the Bangladeshi garment sector following this tragedy (Alamgir & Banerjee, 2018; Bair et al., 2020; Schuessler et al. 2018). These studies drew on the lived experiences of workers and stakeholders to assess how such measures influence local production systems and worker conditions. Despite aiming to improve and empower worker safety, these studies showed that safety compliance measures have yet to achieve results. Instead, these initiatives have served mainly to legitimise global brands and retailers, whilethe actual conditions for workers, particularly in smaller and subcontracted factories, remaining essentially unchanged (Alamgir & Banerjee, 2018; Schuessler et al., 2018).

Organisational Responses to Gender Equality Challenges

A growing body of research has sought to examine the potential of CSR initiatives to address gender inequality within the fashion industry:

Studies have examined the effectiveness of gender empowerment programs, which aim to provide women workers with skills training, financial literacy, and leadership development opportunities (Carr, Chen & Tate, 2000). These interventions seek to address structural inequalities by enhancing women's capabilities and economic independence within the

industry. Research has also investigated the role of brands and retailers in promoting gender equality within their supply chains through initiatives such as gender audits, fair wage commitments, and zero-tolerance policies on harassment (Anner, 2019). These studies, employing qualitative and quantitative methodologies, assess the impact of CSR interventions on gender equality outcomes and identify best practices for promoting women's empowerment within the fashion industry.

Research Gaps in Fashion Industry Gender Equality

While extensive research has examined gender inequality in fashion supply chains, significant gaps exist in the understanding of gender dynamics within fashion organisation headquarters in Western contexts, including Australia. Management research has rarely considered why women in the workplace (rather than in the supply chain) within the fashion industry are underrepresented in leadership positions. Despite women constituting the majority of the fashion workforce, including in design, marketing, and retail roles, gender inequality in leadership persists even in Western headquarters (Lai, 2021). The literature has not adequately explored the mechanisms that perpetuate this inequality or the organisational cultures that may facilitate or hinder women's advancement to leadership positions. This gap leads to my second research question:

RQ2: How do organisations in the fashion industry engage with gender equality?

Review of Management Research on Customer Communication in the Fashion Industry

Customer communication regarding environmental sustainability has become increasingly important in the fashion industry. This section examines the literature on how organisations communicate their environmental sustainability initiatives to customers, focusing specifically on the Australian fashion context where possible. Research has revealed an intriguing paradox in consumer attitudes toward sustainable fashion: while interest in eco-friendly fashion continues to grow, consumers demonstrate limited willingness to pay premium prices for sustainable options (Şener, Bişkin, & Kılınç, 2019). This disconnect has prompted investigation into how sustainability communications shape purchasing decisions.

Sustainability Communication Strategies

The effectiveness of sustainability communication relies on consistent messaging across channels. Goworek (2011) conducted extensive case studies examining how brands communicate sustainability narratives to consumers. The findings suggest that consistent sustainability messaging that aligns with observable brand practices significantly enhances consumer trust. The effectiveness of sustainability labelling has also emerged as a critical focus in the literature. Strähle, Wirtz and Köksal (2016) used quantitative research to demonstrate that clear, transparent labelling plays a vital role in building consumer trust and influencing purchasing decisions. The impact of environmental sustainability symbols on product packaging shows varying patterns, with their effectiveness depending on factors such as consumers' perceived environmental proximity and their pre-existing level of environmental concern (Fani, Mazzoli & Acuti, 2023).

Additional insights have emerged from mixed-method approaches examining female consumers' relationships with sustainable fashion. Surveys and interviews have revealed high levels of awareness and responsiveness to sustainability initiatives among female customers, highlighting the strategic importance of incorporating these elements into corporate planning (Hageman et al., 2024). Qualitative research has particularly illuminated how transparent communication can foster brand trust and motivate sustainable purchasing decisions, though this relationship remains complex (Hageman et al., 2024).

The digital landscape has transformed how fashion brands communicate their sustainability initiatives. Research has examined how social media platforms, brand websites, and digital marketing campaigns are being utilised to convey environmental sustainability messages (Bertola & Teunissen, 2018; Noris et al., 2020). Studies have investigated the effectiveness of various digital communication strategies, including sustainability storytelling, behind-the-scenes content, and interactive educational materials (Esteban-Santos et al., 2018; Kaczorowska-Spychalska, 2020).

The literature also highlights significant concerns about greenwashing in fashion sustainability communications. Delmas and Burbano (2011) define greenwashing as the intersection of poor environmental performance and positive communication about environmental performance. Apaolaza et al. (2022) found that perceived greenwashing decreases purchase intention of sustainable clothing. Their study of 600 Australian consumers

demonstrated that perceived greenwashing acts as a barrier to the adoption of sustainable clothing, while environmental concern and trust in sustainable clothing brands positively influence purchasing behaviour. Policarpo et al. (2023) further established that social cynicism as a personality trait negatively affects trust in green clothing brands through increased perception of greenwashing. Their research, based on a representative Australian sample, revealed that this negative effect is moderated by conspicuous consumption, with the mediated influence decreasing when conspicuous consumption was more salient.

Research Gaps in Sustainability Communication

While research on sustainability communication in fashion has expanded in recent years, it has predominantly approached the topic through a marketing lens rather than a management perspective. There is a significant lack of research examining the internal organisational dynamics that shape sustainability communication strategies. Current literature focuses primarily on the content and effectiveness of sustainability messages but rarely investigates how these messages are developed, approved, and aligned with internal organisational priorities and values. There is a limited understanding of the management processes that determine which sustainability attributes are emphasised in communication and how these decisions reflect broader organisational commitments and tensions. This leads to my third research question:

RQ3: How do Australian fashion organisations communicate environmental sustainability to customers?

Review of Management Research on Fashion Industry Dynamics

The fashion industry operates within a complex ecosystem of stakeholders, regulations, market pressures, and cultural expectations. This section examines the literature on how these industry dynamics influence organisational commitment to environmental sustainability.

Stakeholder Pressures and Organisational Responses

Stakeholder pressures significantly influence fashion organisations' commitment to environmental sustainability. Studies have identified various stakeholder groups, including consumers, investors, NGOs, and regulatory bodies, that exert pressure on fashion organisations to improve their environmental performance.

Godart et al. (2023) examined the role of prominent gatekeepers (media, industry associations, buyers) in translating and amplifying social movement pressures for fashion organisations. These gatekeepers facilitate the adoption and diffusion of innovative practices within the industry, highlighting the critical role of external influences in shaping innovation and sustainability practices. Arena, Azzone, and Mapelli (2018) identify three distinct organisational strategies for responding to stakeholder pressure regarding CSR. These strategies comprise focusing on a single dominant logic, creating hybrid practices to balance competing logics, and implementing decoupled initiatives to address different pressures in parallel.

Market Competition and Industry Structure

The complex relationship between market competition and environmental sustainability in the fashion industry reflects a delicate balance of economic and ecological priorities. Battaglia et al. (2014) established an important connection between CSR adoption and innovation among small and medium fashion enterprises in Italy and France, though their findings on market performance remained inconclusive. This innovation-sustainability link operates within an industry landscape that increasingly pushes retailers towards prioritising cost reduction, design flexibility, quality maintenance, and rapid market entry to sustain profitability (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010).

The competitive pressures identified by Bhardwaj and Fairhurst (2010) directly impact sustainability efforts, as demonstrated analytically by Guo et al. (2020), who found that increasing market competition actually diminishes the optimal sustainability level of fashion products. Their research pinpointed specific industry characteristics that hinder sustainable development: "the underdevelopment of green fashion products is a result of fashion industry features, such as an extremely competitive environment for green product development, relatively low retail prices for fashion products, and high consumer return rates" (Guo et al., 2020; 523).

Despite these challenges, Nagurney and Yu (2012) offer a potential framework for progress through their oligopolistic competition model for fashion supply chains. By incorporating environmental concerns into a profit-maximisation approach, their network-based model provides practical guidance for companies seeking to minimise emissions throughout their

supply chains while responding to changes in demand functions, total cost, total emission functions, and environmental weighting.

On the one hand, sustainability initiatives can provide competitive advantages through differentiation and appeal to environmentally conscious consumers. On the other hand, intense price competition, particularly in the fast fashion segment, can discourage investments in more sustainable but potentially more costly production methods (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010).

Organisational Size and Sustainability Implementation

The literature reveals significant differences in how organisations of varying sizes approach environmental sustainability. Sarokin and Bocken (2024) conducted semi-structured interviews with small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the UK to examine how businesses can effectively integrate slow fashion principles while maintaining profitability. They found that SMEs are leading the way in adopting environmentally sustainable practices that align with circular economy principles. These businesses focus on ethical production, responsible supply chain practices, and smaller, limited-run collections, balancing CSR commitments with financial performance.

In contrast, larger organisations still grapple with the inherent tensions between profitability and environmental sustainability. Piller (2022) employs a case study methodology to understand how larger firms in the fashion industry navigate these challenges, critically analysing the industry's resistance to change. Fast fashion's dominance and customer demand for new, cheap products are identified as significant barriers to the widespread integration of circular practices in larger companies (Piller, 2022; Sarokin & Bocken, 2024).

Collaborative Approaches

Research has increasingly highlighted the importance of partnerships and collaborations in driving industry-wide environmental change. Dzhengiz et al. (2023) used a case study approach to investigate how firms leverage collaborations across sectors to address environmental and social sustainability challenges. Similarly, DiVito, van Wijk, and Wakkee (2021) applied a case study methodology to examine governance mechanisms in cross-sector collaborations, identifying three processes—safeguarding, bundling, and connecting—that help organisations manage tensions and create value.

The fashion industry's culture and leadership significantly influence organisational commitment to environmental sustainability. Empirical research using structural equation modelling has shown that employee sustainable behaviours and a sustainability-oriented culture can promote innovation and environmental practices within organisations (Sharma et al., 2021). This evolving body of research reveals how fashion industry innovation is shaped by a complex interplay of internal organisational culture, external gatekeepers, and sustainability concerns.

Research Gaps in Industry Dynamics

Despite significant research on various aspects of industry dynamics, gaps remain in understanding how these dynamics collectively shape organisational commitment to environmental sustainability. More research is needed to examine the interaction between different industry forces, how organisations navigate competing pressures, and how industry dynamics evolve over time in response to changing environmental concerns. These gaps lead to my fourth research question:

RQ4: How do industry dynamics shape organisational commitment to environmental sustainability?

Theory

This section reviews the literature on organisational commitment to CSR through institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999) and The Three Spaces Framework (Kulik et al., 2022). My literature review revealed institutional theory as a dominant theoretical lens in CSR research. In addition, The Three Spaces Framework offers a process perspective for examining organisational responses through the interplay of social, mental, and physical spaces. Institutional theory initially focused on how organisations within the same field tend to conform to shared norms and pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) but has evolved to acknowledge that organisations have significant agency in responding to these pressures (Durand & Jourdan, 2012). Rather than simply conforming, organisations respond in diverse ways based on their unique identity and strategic priorities (Durand & Jourdan, 2012; Hambrick et al., 2004). This theoretical development is critical in understanding how organisations navigate complex institutional environments, particularly regarding CSR concerns. This evolution in institutional theory naturally extends to

institutional logics, which provide deeper insight into how socially constructed patterns of practices, beliefs, and rules guide organisational decision-making (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999).

While institutional logics effectively illuminate how organisations prioritise their responses to external pressures, they primarily operate at an abstract level. This theoretical gap highlights the need for frameworks that address the practical mechanisms of organisational change implementation, making The Three Spaces Framework particularly valuable. The Three Spaces Framework (Kulik et al., 2022) complements institutional theory by providing explanatory mechanisms for understanding how organisations operationalise their responses to institutional pressures. This framework illuminates the dynamic relationships among the external environment (social space), internal organisational culture (mental space), and organisational policies and practices (physical space). Where institutional logics help us understand why organisations make certain decisions, The Three Spaces Framework reveals how these decisions translate into actionable change across different organisational domains. The synergy of both theories is particularly valuable in the fashion industry context, where firms must decide how to respond to CSR pressures and implement these responses across multiple operational levels, while maintaining alignment with existing institutional demands.

Institutional Theory

Institutional theorists propose organisations face similar constraints from the norms, values, and regulatory frameworks imposed on their institutional field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Because all organisations in an institutional field face the same pressures, all organisations should behave similarly (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). As it has evolved, institutional theory has acknowledged firms have more agency to act according to their identity, and what benefits them as individual organisations (Durand & Jourdan, 2012). Despite institutional theory's early emphasis on homogeneity, scholars have challenged the assumption that organisations in an industry align and become similar (Kostova et al., 2008; Oliver, 1991). While adherence to institutional norms occurs to an extent, firms' responses to institutional pressures are much more complex.

Hambrick et al. (2004) observe the forces of isomorphism have sometimes worked toward heterogeneity rather than homogeneity. Often, isomorphic pressures have encouraged managerial discretion, and increased industry heterogeneity. Decision-makers in an organisation can choose their response to institutional pressures according to the salience of a

policy or practice, and the costs and benefits of addressing the issue (Durand & Jourdan, 2012). As The Three Spaces Framework suggests, the nature of these considerations shapes how organisations evaluate and implement their responses to institutional pressures, weighing the value created for both internal and external stakeholders (Kulik et al., 2022).

Growing acknowledgement of institutional complexity led to the conception of institutional logics (Friedland & Alford, 1991). Thornton and Ocasio (1999: 804) define institutional logics as 'the socially constructed, historical pattern of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organise time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality'. These individual-level patterns of behaviour, beliefs, and practices aggregate and manifest at the organisational level, shaping the institution's collective identity, priorities, and decision-making processes. Institutional logics define what is important to an organisation (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999). Institutional logics also form the rules and the sensemaking processes that shape the organisational reality of internal stakeholders (such as organisational members and leadership) (Weick et al., 2005). Similarly, the signals sent by an organisation's commitment to an institutional logic inform the opinion of external stakeholders (such as customers, investors, advocacy groups, and the media) (Kulik et al., 2022). Institutional logics are not simply imposed but are enacted through collective sensemaking involving cognitive, political, and emotional elements (Zilber, 2024).

Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury (2012) propose seven different logics that shape stakeholder expectations: state logic, market logic, family logic, religion logic, corporate logic, professional logic, and community logic. These logics gain prominence as stakeholder preferences evolve. For instance, historical shifts have seen market and state logics rise, while earlier societies prioritised family and religion. However, it is important to note multiple institutional logics operate simultaneously within a society, competing for stakeholder attention (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008).

In many industries, organisations face multiple institutional pressures, each associated with distinct institutional logics that could guide their decisions. While organisations may initially align with a dominant logic, they must often operate within multiple, sometimes competing, institutional frameworks (Greenwood et al., 2009). Research further examines how organisations develop strategies to effectively balance these multiple logics in their decision-making and operations (Besharov & Smith, 2014). Scholars note the difficulty in establishing

unity among logics within organisations: aspects of one logic may be at odds with aspects of a competing logic. This inconsistency could affect an organisation's legitimacy in the process (D'Aunno Sutton & Price, 1991).

Organisations governed by multiple logics have been coined 'hybrid' (Kraatz & Block, 2008). Hybrid organisations selectively combine elements of multiple logics (Binder, 2007; Pache & Santos, 2012). However, scholars also observe the difficulty hybrid organisations face when combining inherently different logics (Tracey et al., 2011). Conflict within organisations arises from the presence of multiple logics, and the different ways these logics are managed at various levels (Hoiland & Klemsdal, 2022).

Arena, Azzone, and Mapelli (2018) identify three distinct organisational strategies for responding to stakeholder pressure regarding CSR. These strategies comprise focusing on a single dominant logic, creating hybrid practices to balance competing logics, and implementing decoupled initiatives to address different pressures in parallel (Arena et al., 2018). These responses to institutional logics are evident throughout the literature on organisational approaches to CSR.

The first strategy—focusing on a single logic—is demonstrated by organisations that primarily embrace community logic. Operating at societal and organisational levels, this logic emphasises commitment to community values and ideology (Thornton et al., 2012). As societal values and expectations around environmental and social responsibility evolve, organisations adhering to community logic often become early adopters of emerging CSR practices that align with these changing community expectations.

The second strategy—hybridisation—is exemplified by Sustainability-Oriented Hybrid Organisations, which successfully integrate market and community logics into their business practices. As Hestad, Tabara and Thornton (2021:655) note, these organisations 'appear to transcend unsustainable dichotomies perpetuated by traditional management theory and practice'. Battilana and Dorado (2010) further support this approach, describing how hybrid organisations create a unified identity that effectively balances both logics. While community and market logic may appear contradictory due to their distinct objectives, some scholars suggest market logic can support environmental goals through initiatives such as green investing (Yan, Almandoz & Ferraro, 2021).

Recent research highlights the third strategy—decoupling—showing how organisations sometimes adopt certain institutional logics at the strategic level while operating differently in their daily practices. This misalignment can create significant challenges in achieving environmental sustainability goals (Carmagnac, Silva & Fritz, 2024). Yet, some researchers suggest CSR engagement can be successfully integrated into the market logic, potentially advancing environmental sustainability goals more effectively by aligning with prevalent business cues (Bitektine & Song, 2022).

Within the fashion industry specifically, research on institutional logics remains limited, primarily focusing on the need for institutional transformation to address evolving customer expectations and manage multiple logics of market and community (Ertekin, Atik & Murray, 2020). The industry's rapid recognition of shifting logic prioritisation, despite varied implementation speeds, provides a unique context for examining organisational responses to emerging logics.

Three Spaces Framework

Organisations face constant pressure to adapt and change in response to shifting institutional demands. One beneficial framework for understanding organisational responses to these demands comes from Battard, Donnelly and Mangematin (2017), who conceptualise organisational change through three distinct but interconnected spaces: physical, mental, and social.

Using Battard et al.'s (2017) spatial framework as a foundation, Kulik et al. (2022) observe simultaneous engagement among the external environment (social space), internal environment (mental space) and policies and practices (physical space), creates successful and sustainable organisational change. Figure 2.1 displays the three interconnected spaces. An organisation's reputation among external stakeholders (social space) can be damaged when managers implement new policies (physical space) without first developing shared understanding among employees (mental space) - demonstrating how misalignment between these spaces can undermine organisational change.

In the social space, an organisation's reputation is crucial to how managers interpret and react to pressures (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). Fashion retailers that operate primarily under community logics, as evidenced by their reputation for responsibility, are more likely to respond to stakeholder pressures that align with these values. This phenomenon can also

occur in companies with an identity surrounding an issue, such as Patagonia. Patagonia has created a brand identity with environmental activism at its core, and will likely be more accountable to environmental activists and non-government organisations (NGOs) (Chen et al., 2021). While the social space may be influential, aligning physical space policies and practices with social space expectations requires commitment from within the organisation's mental space.

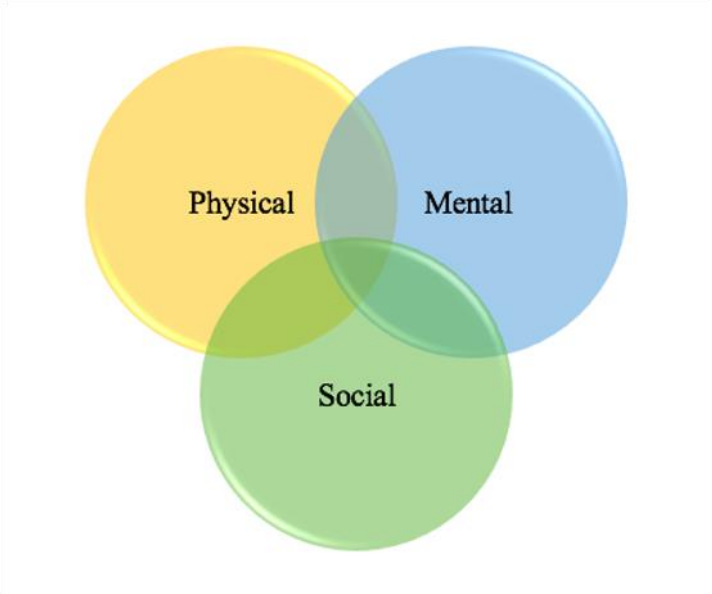


Figure 2.1 The Three Spaces Framework for Sustainable Change

In the mental space, sense-making among employees can result in varied organisational responses to institutional pressures. The policy will sometimes be aligned tightly with the field-legitimised practice (e.g., profit maximisation inherent to market logic). In other cases, the organisation may implement innovative policies that diverge from the dominant institutional norms (Kulik et al., 2022). This occurs because employees can direct the organisation's attention, influencing what is important. Individual employees may resist institutional pressures due to their professional alignments, and sense of the organisational identity (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). Specifically, employee resistance undermines an organisation's ability to block the adoption and internalisation of required changes, ultimately jeopardising its legitimacy and potential survival in the institutional field.

Malhotra, Zietsma and Morris (2020) found evidence of this disconnect in their study of elite law firms that introduced a new role to address work-life balance concerns. Many organisational members in the law industry professed concerns about the workload, and how

it affected their family and work-life balance. A new job description that allows for greater formal emphasis on work-life balance was introduced to assist members in balancing the workload with their other commitments. Organisational members rejected the change due to its clash with the expectation in law to strive for professional status over making time for family. While the social space, in this case, has successfully influenced the physical space, the physical space changes have yet to be effective due to a lack of support from the mental space.

Malhotra et al. (2020) observe employee resistance to practices, even when the employees are the beneficiaries, and the practice was introduced to address employee grievances. The resistance stemmed from employees' belief that the practice did not align with the values embedded in the profession. Alternatively, resistance can also stem from a belief that practices do not align with the reputation or identity of their organisation. Turco's (2012) study of Motherhood, Inc. (MI) observes an organisation that commercialised the support and advice for new mothers traditionally given by family and community members. MI overcame public discomfort with its commercial form by marketing its services through a euphemistic discourse that promoted its service as a 'nurturing haven for overwhelmed mothers' (Turco, 2012: 383).

Consequently, MI gained a substantial customer base but was unsuccessful in its commercial project due to employee resistance. Employees were uncomfortable with profit-motivated practices that did not align with MI's safe-haven discourse. This case is an example of employees feeling that practices did not align with organisational identity, and therefore resisted implementing these policies. This case emphasises the importance of employee support and creating a shared understanding in the mental space when introducing and maintaining policies and practices.

This section has outlined the theoretical foundations for understanding organisational commitment to CSR, drawing on institutional theory and The Three Spaces Framework. Combining institutional logics with the relationship between social, mental, and physical spaces provides insights into how organisations navigate complex pressures. This understanding reveals how organisations balance competing demands in their pursuit of profitability, and environmental and social sustainability.

Theory and the Research Questions

As previously elaborated, institutional theory and The Three Spaces Framework were chosen due to their theoretical relevance to my research questions. These theories enable me to examine the mechanisms that underpin organisational engagement with environmental sustainability and gender equality in the fashion industry.

Research Question 1: How do organisations in the fashion industry engage with environmental sustainability?

Institutional theory helps explain why organisations adopt different approaches to environmental sustainability based on the institutional logics they prioritise. Organisations prioritising community logic may be more likely to embrace environmental sustainability as core to their identity, while those prioritising market logic may approach sustainability primarily through a business case lens. The Three Spaces Framework helps explain how organisations translate external pressures (social space) into internal understanding and commitment (mental space) and ultimately into concrete environmental initiatives (physical space). It highlights potential disconnects between these spaces that may hinder effective implementation of environmental sustainability practices.

Research Question 2: How do organisations in the fashion industry engage with gender equality?

Institutional theory illuminates how different logics shape organisations' approaches to gender equality. Organisations operating under community logic may view gender equality as an ethical imperative, while those driven by market logic might emphasise the business benefits of gender diversity. The Three Spaces Framework elucidates how organisations navigate gender equality challenges by considering external expectations (social space), internal cultural attitudes (mental space), and formal policies and practices (physical space). It helps explain how effectively organisations are engaging with gender equality practices based on alignment across these spaces.

Research Question 3: How do Australian fashion organisations communicate environmental sustainability to customers?

Institutional theory explains how organisations align their communication strategies with prevailing institutional logics to gain legitimacy with customers and other stakeholders.

Different communication approaches may reflect different underlying logics guiding the organisation's sustainability efforts. The Three Spaces Framework helps understand how organisations align their external communications (bridging social and physical spaces) with internal values and practices (mental space) to build credibility with customers. It highlights the importance of consistency across all three spaces in effective sustainability communication.

Research Question 4: How do industry dynamics shape organisational commitment to environmental sustainability?

Institutional theory provides a framework for understanding how industry-level institutional pressures influence organisational priorities and practices. The concept of institutional logics helps explain how different stakeholders exert influence based on the logics they embody and how organisations navigate competing logics within the industry. The Three Spaces Framework explains how industry dynamics can influence both the social space translating into change in the mental space, and vice versa from the mental space into the social space. Both of these directions can influence the establishment of concrete policies or initiatives in the physical space. It helps identify potential points of resistance or facilitation in how industry pressures translate into organisational commitment.

The integration of institutional theory and The Three Spaces Framework provides a strong theoretical foundation for addressing my research questions. Institutional logics help explain the underlying rationales guiding organisational decisions regarding environmental sustainability and gender equality, while The Three Spaces Framework illuminates the practical mechanisms through which these decisions are implemented across organisational domains.

Summary

My literature review presents an overview of how the management literature has engaged with the fashion industry, environmental sustainability and gender equality. The chapter establishes the fashion industry as relevant context due to its economic significance, complex supply chains, and public scrutiny.

The review begins by examining management research on the fashion industry, highlighting the industry as a hub for innovation and entrepreneurship where leadership, market drivers,

and production methods influence industry evolution. I then review research on the intersection of environmental sustainability and gender equality within management research, noting that stakeholders increasingly connect these elements under the umbrella of CSR.

Research on gender equality and CSR reveals that gender equality practices are often positively associated with corporate sustainability across environmental, economic, and social domains. Studies demonstrate that adding CSR claims increases applicant interest in companies with female leadership, and CSR practices positively influence gender equality at entry and management levels.

The review then focuses on environmental sustainability in the fashion industry, presenting substantial challenges including greenhouse gas emissions, water pollution, and waste management issues exacerbated by fast fashion. Organisational responses include circular economy principles, technological innovation, and sustainable business models, though significant research gaps remain in understanding internal organisational processes.

Regarding gender equality in the fashion industry, I review management research that has documented extensive inequality issues throughout the fashion industry's global supply chains, where women constitute the majority of the workforce but face low wages and unsafe conditions. While studies have examined gender empowerment programs and CSR interventions, significant gaps exist in understanding gender dynamics within fashion organisation headquarters in Western contexts.

The chapter also reviews research on how organisations communicate sustainability initiatives to customers, highlighting the paradox between growing interest in eco-friendly fashion and limited willingness to pay premium prices. Research demonstrates the importance of consistent messaging, transparent labelling, and avoiding greenwashing practices.

Finally, I present research on how industry dynamics shape organisational commitment to environmental sustainability, examining stakeholder pressures, market competition, organisational size, collaborative approaches, and industry culture.

The theoretical framework underpinning this research combines institutional theory, particularly institutional logics, with The Three Spaces Framework to understand how organisations navigate complex pressures across social, mental, and physical spaces.T he

chapter concludes by connecting the theoretical framework to the research questions, demonstrating how institutional theory and The Three Spaces Framework provide insights into fashion organisations' engagement with environmental sustainability and gender equality.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Introduction

In this chapter, I present an overview of the research design and methodology I employed to investigate environmental sustainability and gender equality within the Australian fashion industry. I chose qualitative methods to examine how organisations in the Australian fashion industry engage with and implement corporate social responsibility initiatives, particularly focusing on environmental sustainability and gender equality, and how industry dynamics influence these approaches. Qualitative methods are well suited for exploring complicated social phenomena such as the motivations behind specific CSR practices, and the contextual factors influencing their effectiveness. Given that existing literature does not sufficiently address the underlying mechanisms driving CSR outcomes across different national and organisational settings, a qualitative approach is essential to understand how and why these mechanisms operate differently in various contexts, which quantitative methods alone cannot fully uncover (Edmondson & McManus, 2007).

Qualitative methods facilitate a detailed examination of organisational strategies, stakeholder interactions, and public perceptions regarding environmental sustainability initiatives and gender inclusivity. By triangulating insights from interviews, focus groups, archival data, and observations, my research aims to corroborate findings and provide a holistic understanding of organisational behaviours and stakeholder dynamics related to CSR implementation in the Australian fashion industry, particularly concerning environmental sustainability and gender equality initiatives (Creswell, 2014; Kirk & Miller, 1986). This rigorous approach ensures the reliability of the study's findings, and allows for the identification of divergent perspectives that can illuminate complex industry dynamics and customer behaviours (Jick, 1979).

I employ grounded theory principles to guide the iterative data collection and analysis process. Grounded theory facilitates theory development by systematically comparing and exploring emerging themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This iterative approach is crucial for uncovering novel insights into how organisational internal dynamics and external pressures shape environmental sustainability and gender equality practices (Basu & Palazzo, 2008).

Through a detailed examination of semi-structured interviews with organisational members and industry stakeholders, and focus groups with customers, along with archival data and observations, I highlight how organisational strategies align with public-facing narratives and customer expectations in the realm of CSR (Tashman, Marano & Kostova, 2019). My study aims to go beyond just filling gaps in the literature to deliver innovative and impactful research in two key aspects of CSR: environmental sustainability and gender equality (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2015; Barnett, Henriques & Husted, 2020).

Research Questions

This research seeks to address the following questions:

1 How are organisations engaging with environmental sustainability in the Australian fashion industry?
2 How are organisations engaging with gender equality in the Australian fashion industry?
3 How are Australian fashion organisations communicating environmental sustainability to customers?
4 How do industry dynamics shape organisational commitment to environmental sustainability?

Research Design and Methodology

To address the research questions, I employed semi-structured interviews, focus groups, archival data and observations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These methods were selected to uncover patterns that could provide new theoretical insights, particularly given the early stages of theory development (Edmondson & McManus, 2007) concerning the relationship between environmental sustainability and gender equality in fashion business practices. I interviewed 65 respondents: 34 organisational members (from 31 fashion organisations), 16 stakeholders (external to organisations) from the fashion industry and 15 customers across three focus groups. I also included archival and observational data sources.

The complete interview and focus group protocols, along with participant information sheets and consent forms, are presented in the appendix for comprehensive review. These documents demonstrate adherence to ethical research principles and outline the systematic approach undertaken in data collection. The protocols were designed to ensure

methodological rigour whilst maintaining consistency across all participant interactions throughout the research process.

Data Sources

Organisational Members

To investigate the processes within Australian fashion organisations that influence activities related to environmental sustainability and gender equality, I targeted organisational members such as sustainability managers, CEOs, and founders who possess comprehensive knowledge of their organisations' environmental sustainability decisions and operations (Kumar, Stern & Anderson, 2017). These individuals complemented the study's theoretical foundation by offering unique insider perspectives across multiple organisational spaces. Their contribution was particularly valuable in illuminating the 'mental space'; specifically, how internal stakeholders perceive and evaluate the organisation's engagement with environmental sustainability and gender equality (Kulik et al., 2022).

These participants are considered elite informants due to their high-level positions, decision-making authority, and understanding of organisational processes (Aguinis & Solarino, 2019; Solarino & Aguinis, 2020). Given such participants are difficult to access, I followed established best practices for identifying and recruiting elite informants including using a purposive and snowball sampling approach (Kincaid & Bright, 1957). I conducted semi-structured interviews with 34 managers, CEOs and founders from 31 organisations (see Table 3.1). This approach allowed me to examine the dynamics of environmental sustainability and gender equality within the industry, leveraging the expertise of those in leadership positions to provide comprehensive and informed perspectives (Basu & Palazzo, 2008; Kumar et al., 1993).

I chose the semi-structured interview method because it balances standardisation and flexibility, enabling me to examine emergent themes and ask follow-up questions as necessary (Kothari, 2014). This approach aligns with the principles of grounded theory, facilitating the pursuit of both recurring and emerging themes during the interviews (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Compared to unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews provide more control over the conversation's focus, emphasising relevant research issues (Brinkmann, 2013).

I utilised databases such as the Australian Fashion Council directory and International Business Information Service World to identify organisations in the Australian fashion industry. I identified potential participants from these organisations via LinkedIn, obtaining their contact information through Rocket Reach (a database of verified professionals in organisations across the globe). I emailed invitations to participate including an information sheet. I also recruited at Melbourne Fashion Week and other industry sustainability events, and followed up with email invitations.

To maximise the response rate, I implemented a strategy of contacting key informants three times. Research supports this approach, emphasising the importance of timely reminders to enhance response outcomes (Gupta, Shaw & Delery, 2000). I made initial contact with a crafted introduction to the study, followed by two reminder contacts strategically timed to maintain engagement and encourage participation. Despite these efforts, responses varied, influenced by the informants' roles and the size and type of their organisations (Gupta et al., 2000). Out of 313 organisational members contacted, 57 emails bounced back, 34 organisational members declined participation for various reasons, and 188 did not respond.

Upon agreeing to participate, I arranged interview dates and times, and sent consent forms to participants. 31 interviews were conducted via Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with three conducted face-to-face. Interviews ranged from 40 to 90 minutes, with no difference in content between face-to-face and online formats. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, with recurring themes emerging in the interviews (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Table 3.1 below presents my participants, as well as the size of the organisation they work for, their years of experience in the Australian fashion industry and their gender. IDs with 'a' or 'b' suffixes (such as ID4a/ID4b, ID5a/ID5b, and ID10a/ID10b) indicate participants from the same organisation.

Table 3.1 Description of organisational member participants

ID	Role	Organisation size[1]	Experience	Gender
ID1	Sustainability manager	Large	20 years	Female
ID2	Founder	Micro	7 years	Female
ID3	Founder	Small	20 years	Female
ID4a	Founder	Micro	12 years	Male
ID4b	Production manager	Micro	24 years	Female

ID5a	People manager	Large	3 years	Male
ID5b	Sustainability manager	Large	10 years	Female
ID6	Production manager	Large	20 years	Male
ID7	Supply chain and sustainability manager	Medium	10 years	Female
ID8	Store director	Large	12 years	Female
ID9	People manager	Large	19 years	Female
ID10a	CEO	Medium	20 years	Female
ID10b	Sustainability manager	Medium	8 years	Female
ID11	Social impact manager	Large	7 years	Male
ID12	Founder	Micro	3 years	Female
ID13	Supply chain manager	Small	7 years	Female
ID14	Sustainability manager	Medium	20 years	Female
ID15	Sustainability manager	Large	15 years	Female
ID16	Founder	Small	13 years	Male
ID17	Country Director	Large	10 years	Male
ID18	Sustainability manager	Large	9 years	Female
ID19	Social responsibility manager	Large	5 years	Female
ID20	Production manager	Micro	5 years	Female
ID21	People manager	Medium	5 years	Male
ID22	Sustainability manager	Micro	20 years	Female
ID23	Customer manager	Large	3 years	Female
ID24	Supply chain manager	Medium	5 years	Male
ID25	Supply chain manager	Medium	21 years	Male
ID26	Founder	Micro	4 years	Female
ID27	Supply chain manager	Large	21 years	Female
ID28	Creative director	Medium	12 years	Female
ID29	Supply chain manager	Large	20 years	Female
ID30	Social impact manager	Large	3 years	Female
ID31	Founder	Micro	6 years	Female

[1]Organisation size is defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) definitions. The ABS classifies businesses as: Micro (fewer than 5 employees), Small (5-19 employees), Medium (20-199 employees), and Large (200 or more employees) (ABS, 2024).

Industry Stakeholders

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the Australian fashion ecosystem (the interconnected network of designers, manufacturers, retailers, suppliers, and other industry participants who influence and depend on each other), I conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in the industry. These stakeholders included participants from organisations working on sustainable initiatives, consultants, government representatives, non-profit organisations, media personnel, and social media influencers (see Table 3.2 for detailed participant backgrounds). These interviews aimed to highlight the opportunities and limitations for Australian fashion organisations to engage with environmental sustainability and gender equality and to understand the organisational dynamics influencing this engagement. The interviews aligned with the theoretical framework guiding the research, allowing for insight into the 'social space' (the reputation of the organisation as perceived by external stakeholders) (Kulik et al., 2022).

I identified participants through LinkedIn searches using keywords such as 'sustainability,' 'fashion,' and 'gender equality', and by attending events related to environmental sustainability and gender equality in the Australian fashion industry. I emailed invitations to the participants with an information sheet detailing the research. This recruitment strategy ensured a diverse range of perspectives from different sectors within the Australian fashion industry (Denzin, 1978). Semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility and adaptability, ensuring in-depth exploration of themes (Kothari, 2014). Interviews ranged from 40 to 90 minutes, with no significant difference in content between the three face-to-face and thirteen online interviews. Table 3.2 below presents the stakeholders participants, including their years of experience in the Australian fashion industry and gender.

Table 3.2 Description of industry stakeholder participants

ID	Role	Experience	Gender
ID32	Sustainability consultant	23 years	Female
ID33	Sustainability consultant	11 years	Female
ID34	Sustainability consultant	22 years	Female
ID35	Owner of a clothing resale organisation	1 year	Female
ID36	Sustainability consultant	5 years	Female

ID37	CEO of clothing reuse organisation	4 years	Male
ID38	Advocacy lead at a non-profit organisation	10 years	Female
ID39	Social media influencer	9 years	Female
ID40	Circular economy role in local government	1 year	Female
ID41	Sustainability consultant	1 year	Female
ID42	Sustainability strategist in local government	10 years	Female
ID43	Fashion journalist	9 years	Female
ID44	Fashion journalist	6 years	Female
ID45	Founder of a clothing rental organisation	2 years	Male
ID46	Director of a circular economy organisation	17 years	Female
ID47	Founder of a clothing rental organisation	13 years	Female

Focus Groups

I conducted three focus groups to understand customer perceptions of organisations, and to determine the importance of environmental sustainability and gender equality in purchase intentions. These sessions aligned with the theoretical framework guiding the research, allowing for insight into the 'social space' (the reputation of the organisation as perceived by external stakeholders) (Kulik et al., 2022). Focus groups offered unique insights into the phenomena under study, capturing interactive dynamics and diverse perspectives (Morgan, 1997). They allowed for the observation of participant interactions, providing valuable insights into complex behaviours and motivations of customers (Morgan & Krueger, 1993).

I conducted focus groups guided by the preliminary findings and analysed emerging themes and concepts. This approach allowed for deeper exploration and validation of the identified themes (Morgan, 1997). By structuring the focus group protocols around these themes, the discussions provided further justification and enrichment of the research findings. In focus groups, participants bonded while criticising unsustainable brands, providing valuable observational data.

I conducted the first focus group with five students from the University's Business department, with the only requirement being that participants were over 18 years old. I recruited these participants via an email invitation sent to the entire department. The session lasted 60 minutes, and I conducted the session over Zoom. The second focus group took

place in a café and consisted of five participants recruited with the help of the café owners, and through social media—specifically Facebook. This focus group, lasting 70 minutes, was held in a quiet room adjacent to the café, providing a relaxed and easy-to-record environment. The third focus group involved a mixed group of five university staff and students recruited through posters around the University. This session lasted 85 minutes, and I conducted it via Zoom.

Each focus group followed a less structured protocol than the interview protocol, allowing for a flexible line of questioning related to participants' relationships with fashion, and their views on the industry. This approach facilitated open discussions and the sharing of different viewpoints, thereby enriching the data with diverse perspectives.

Archival Data

Archival data, including organisational reports, webpages, published policies, and social media posts, were collected to complement the interview and focus group data. I gathered this data from internet sources and converted it into PDF documents using NCapture software. The archival data illuminated the physical space through documented organisational policies, procedures, and structures for implementing environmental sustainability and gender equality initiatives, while also revealing the social space through how these organisations managed their external reputation (Kulik et al., 2022). By collecting this data, I could observe how organisations presented themselves to customers and the public, and whether their internal processes aligned with their outward presentation (Tashman et al., 2019).

Observations

I conducted observations to support the interview data; this allowed me to compare codes and themes across different sources (Creswell, 2016). Observations are particularly valuable in generating data that participants may not articulate during interviews, or that is not in written documents (Creswell, 2016). I attended events hosted by industry bodies that focused on incorporating responsible practices into the Australian fashion industry. Notably, some of the organisations and participants I interviewed were also present at these events. This allowed me to assess how organisations presented themselves publicly and communicated their actions in the CSR space.

The observations were used to assess organisations' public persona and communication strategies concerning environmental sustainability and gender equality. By witnessing these interactions firsthand, I could verify and expand upon the information provided during interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This information offered a more comprehensive understanding of the organisations' commitments to environmental sustainability and gender equality (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I also used the observations to understand the dynamics of the Australian fashion industry. For example, sustainability frontrunners often presented at fashion conferences; sustainability laggards were more likely to be in the audience. These observations confirmed interview and archival evidence about the organisations leading change in the industry. For a detailed list of the events I attended, and the observations I made, refer to Table 3.3.

Table 3.3 Observational data

Event	Location	Date	Research activities
Circular textiles conference	Melbourne, Australia	May 2022	Recorded and analysed panel discussions for expert perspectives on sustainability practices, policy implications, and industry standards. Documented case studies from company presentations that showcase the successful implementation of circular practices in textile production and waste management. Engaged in informal conversations with attendees including business owners, designers, and sustainability officers. Collected data from exhibits and product demonstrations highlighting the latest innovations in circular textiles including new materials, technologies, and processes.
Slow fashion September events	Adelaide, Australia	September 2022	Captured insights from designers on their approach to creating sustainable collections, sourcing ethical materials, and fostering transparency in their supply chains. Noted emerging questions or areas of interest that could inform future research or discussions.
Sustainable fashion panel discussion	Adelaide, Australia	October 2022	Identified recurring themes in customer questions such as concerns about transparency, ethical labour practices, environmental impact, and product lifecycles. Assessed customers' level of understanding and awareness about sustainable fashion practices and principles. Identified customers' expectations from brands in terms of sustainability.
Melbourne Fashion Week (MFW) events	Melbourne, Australia	October 2022	Captured detailed explanations from industry experts on sustainable practices, challenges in implementation, and future trends in sustainable fashion. Gathered insights on the barriers faced by the industry in achieving sustainability such as cost, supply chain issues, and customer demand. Documented the diverse viewpoints of panellists including designers, sustainability officers, researchers, and activists, on the state of sustainable fashion.
Adelaide Fashion Week events	Adelaide, Australia	October 2022	Same as MFW above.

Data Analysis

The analytical approach followed an iterative process, weaving between data collection and theoretical interpretation (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2012; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The analysis was conducted across three key stages: initially coding the data into empirical themes, then elevating these themes into conceptual categories, and finally synthesising these categories into theoretical dimensions through institutional logics and The Three Spaces Framework. Throughout this process, I employed NVivo software to systematically organise and analyse the qualitative data and developing codes. The analysis was complemented by ongoing engagement with relevant literature to ground the emerging findings in theoretical frameworks. Rather than following a linear trajectory, this analytical process involved continuous cycling between empirical evidence and theoretical understanding.

Step 1: Identifying first-order empirical themes

I began my analysis by thoroughly examining and re-examining the interview and focus group transcripts, and field notes. Through this process, I extracted initial first-order themes directly from the raw data, maintaining the original language and terminology used by participants wherever feasible (Gioia et al., 2012). The initial analysis yielded more than 100 first-order themes, encompassing various aspects of environmental sustainability and gender equality engagement within Australia's fashion sector. To ensure methodological rigour, I engaged in periodic consultations with my supervisory team. Following constructivist grounded theory principles (Charmaz, 2000), I then identified patterns and commonalities across these themes, consolidating them into more refined empirical categories.

Step 2: Constructing second-order conceptual categories

The next analytical phase involved collaborative work with my supervisory team to systematically evaluate patterns of convergence and divergence within the initial themes. Employing axial coding techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), I synthesised these empirical observations into broader theoretical constructs. This process entailed continuous comparative analysis between the preliminary empirical themes and the developing conceptual categories (Grodal, Anteby & Holm, 2021). To validate these emerging second-order categories, I conducted another comprehensive review of all transcripts and field notes. Additionally, I examined the observational and archival materials, documenting detailed

analytical memos to explore the distinctive features of these categories. The final step involved creating visual representations through tables and figures to illustrate how the various data sources – interviews, focus groups, archival documents, and observations – corresponded to these newly established second-order conceptual categories.

Step 3: Identifying theoretical dimensions and developing a theoretical framework

Upon establishing the second-order conceptual categories, I analysed their alignment with established theoretical paradigms, specifically institutional logics and The Three Spaces Framework. This phase focused on developing theoretical explanations for the interconnections between these conceptual categories. Through iterative pattern-matching between the emergent categories and existing literature, I identified key theoretical constructs. This analysis illuminated how institutional logics shaped engagement with environmental sustainability and gender equality. I used The Three Spaces Framework to identify contextual variations of these practices across organisational settings. The framework was used to understand the extent to which organisations in my sample had formal roles and policies on environmental sustainability and gender equality (physical space), shared understanding about these policies amongst employees (mental space) and were communicating about these issues to external stakeholders (social space).

The qualitative data structure presented in Figure 3.1 illustrates a rigorous three step coding framework consistent with the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013). The framework progresses from first-order empirical themes—comprising direct quotations from research participants—to second-order categories derived from my analysis that conceptualise these themes into meaningful constructs. These categories subsequently combine into four aggregate theoretical dimensions: Organisational Typology, Gender Dynamics, Communicating to Customer, and Industry Dynamics. The data structure displays the systematic progression of raw empirical data into theoretical constructs.

All participating organisations received a final report outlining the research findings and implications. To ensure trustworthiness through member checking, I invited the participating organisations to contact me for any clarifications or comments. Two organisations contacted me, both provided feedback to request permission to share the report with their wider teams.

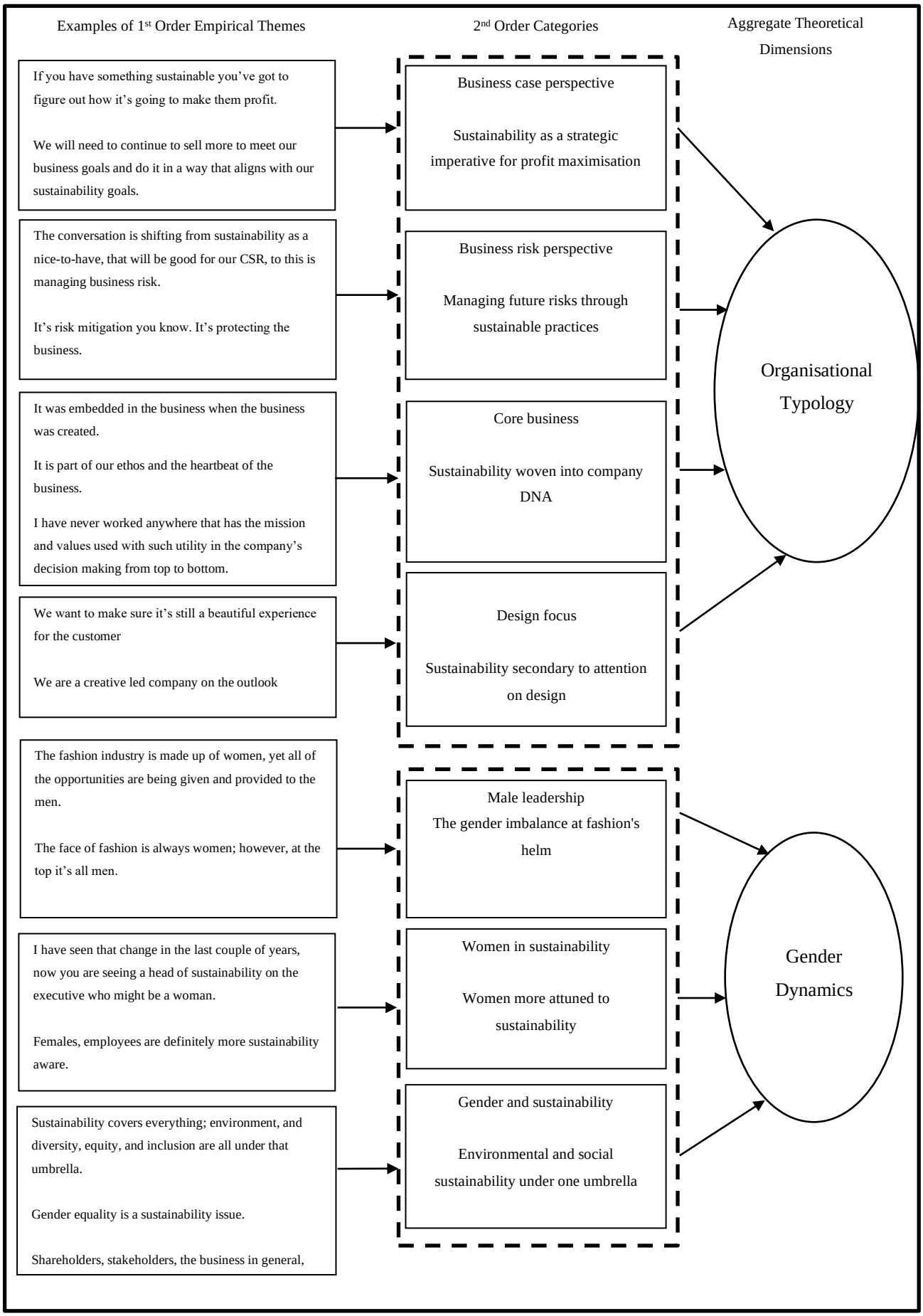
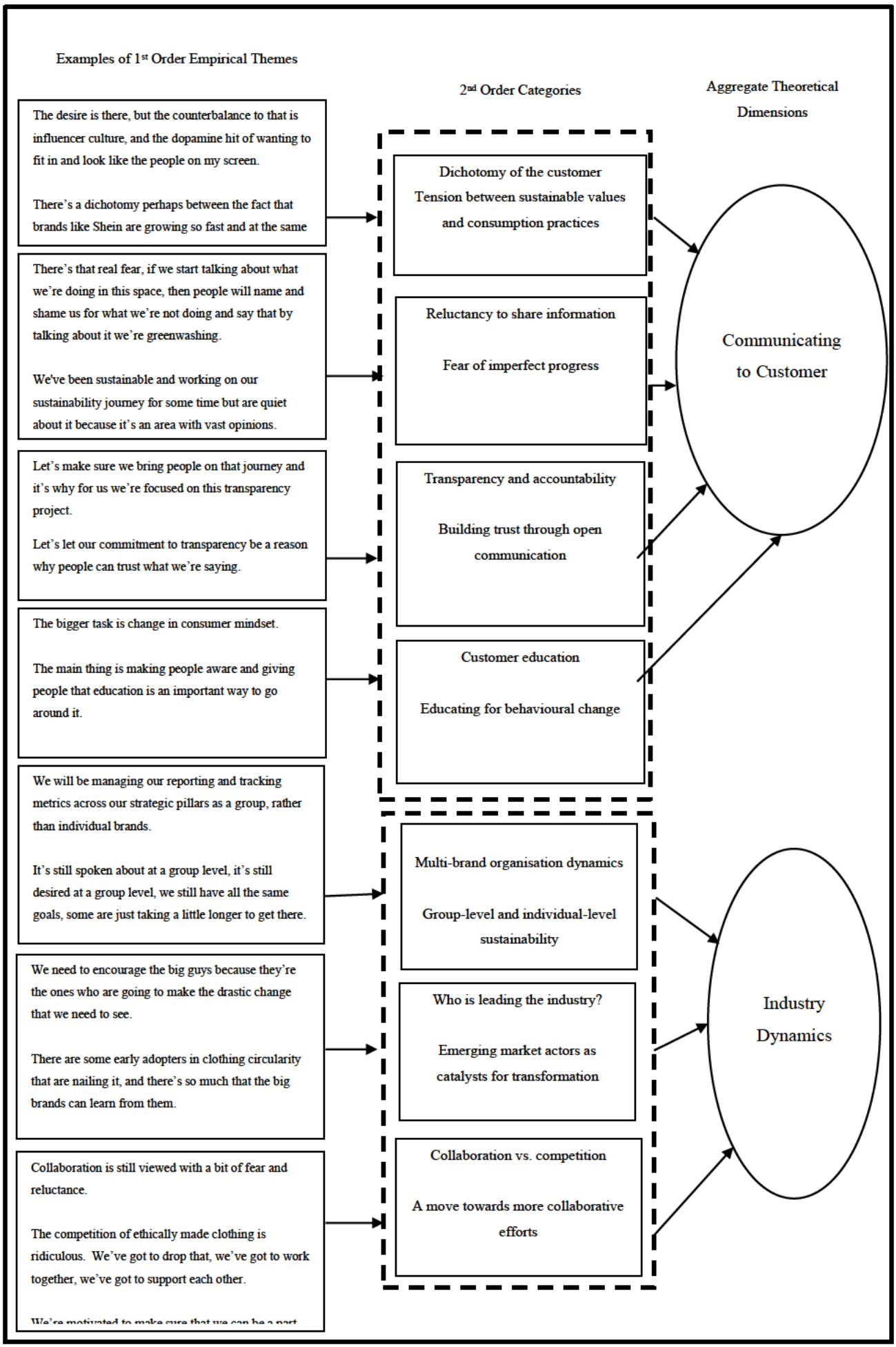


Figure 3.1 Data Structures


Examples of 1st Order Empirical Themes
2nd Order Categories
Aggregate Theoretical Dimensions
The desire is there, but the counterbalance to that is influencer culture, and the dopamine hit of wanting to fit in and look like the people on my screen.
There's a dichotomy perhaps between the fact that brands like Shein are growing so fast and at the same
Dichotomy of the customer
Tension between sustainable values and consumption practices
There's that real fear, if we start talking about what we're doing in this space, then people will name and shame us for what we're not doing and say that by talking about it we're greenwashing.
We've been sustainable and working on our sustainability journey for some time but are quiet about it because it's an area with vast opinions.
Reluctancy to share information
Fear of imperfect progress
Communicating to Customer
Let's make sure we bring people on that journey and it's why for us we're focused on this transparency project.
Let's let our commitment to transparency be a reason why people can trust what we're saying.
Transparency and accountability
Building trust through open communication
The bigger task is change in consumer mindset.
The main thing is making people aware and giving people that education is an important way to go around it.
Customer education
Educating for behavioural change
We will be managing our reporting and tracking metrics across our strategic pillars as a group, rather than individual brands.
It's still spoken about at a group level, it's still desired at a group level, we still have all the same goals, some are just taking a little longer to get there.
Multi-brand organisation dynamics
Group-level and individual-level sustainability
We need to encourage the big guys because they're the ones who are going to make the drastic change that we need to see.
There are some early adopters in clothing circularity that are nailing it, and there's so much that the big brands can learn from them.
Who is leading the industry?
Emerging market actors as catalysts for transformation
Industry Dynamics
Collaboration is still viewed with a bit of fear and reluctance.
The competition of ethically made clothing is ridiculous. We've got to drop that, we've got to work together, we've got to support each other.
We're motivated to make sure that we can be a part
Collaboration vs. competition
A move towards more collaborative efforts

Summary

In this chapter, I have outlined my qualitative research methodology for examining environmental sustainability and gender equality within the Australian fashion industry. My research design leverages multiple data sources to provide rich insights into organisational behaviours, stakeholder perspectives, and customer attitudes. Through collecting 34 semi-structured interviews with organisational members, 16 interviews with industry stakeholders, three focus groups with customers, and supplementary archival and observational data, I have achieved methodological triangulation that strengthens the validity and reliability of my findings.

The grounded theory approach that I employed, with its systematic three-step analysis process, enables the development of theoretical insights firmly rooted in empirical evidence. This methodological choice is particularly appropriate given the exploratory nature of my research questions, and the relationship between environmental sustainability and gender equality in organisational practices. Moving from first-order empirical themes to theoretical dimensions, my iterative data collection and analysis process allows for the emergence of nuanced understanding while maintaining analytical rigour.

My diverse participants—from organisational leaders and industry experts to customers—provide multiple vantage points to examine my research questions. This multi-stakeholder perspective is crucial for understanding how organisations navigate competing demands and expectations to pursue sustainable and equitable practices. My inclusion of both large established organisations and smaller enterprises ensures my findings capture the full spectrum of approaches and challenges within the Australian fashion industry.

My methodology's alignment with The Three Spaces Framework strengthens its theoretical foundation, enabling systematic examination of how environmental sustainability and gender equality initiatives manifest across physical, mental, and social spaces within organisations. This theoretical grounding, combined with the principles of institutional logics, provides a robust framework for analysing the complex relationships between organisational practices, stakeholder expectations, and industry dynamics.

CHAPTER 4: ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY AMONG AUSTRALIAN FASHION ORGANISATIONS

Introduction

In this chapter, I examine how diverse organisational motivations influence engagement with environmental sustainability. I categorise organisations based on their size (number of employees) (ABS, 2024), and level of commitment to environmental sustainability initiatives (assessed using archival data on their sustainability policies, practices, and public reports). My typology categorises then infer the varying motivations for pursuing environmental sustainability within each type of organisation. The analysis presented below explains the steps I took to develop the four types of organisations outlined in the subsequent findings – profit-led, customer-led, values-led and product-led.

Step 1: Archival Data Review

First, I reviewed archival data from all participant organisations to identify specific statements, policies and actions that signalled their commitment to environmental sustainability. I employed the B Corp Impact Assessment tool as a guide to evaluate an organisation's visible commitment to environmental sustainability because it is one of the most expansive and rigorous instruments for gauging organisational impact across diverse sectors (Lucas et al., 2022). Both interview and archival data referenced the tool's comprehensiveness, particularly in evaluating organisations' environmental dedication and broader social sustainability initiatives. However, I recognised the limitations in B Corp's current measurement methodologies, so the Impact Assessment served only as a general framework (Liute & De Giacomo, 2021; Tabares, 2021).

I reviewed archival data from company websites, reports, and social media to assess organisations' sustainability commitments. As shown in Table 4.1, this multi-source approach enabled me to consider key indicators such as setting and implementing environmental targets, integrating sustainability into mission statements, and establishing formal sustainability roles. I also examined product volumes, as large product volumes mean

lower sustainability (Tonti, 2024). I reviewed relevant environmental sustainability certifications alongside external rankings from platforms like Good On You and the Fashion Transparency Index. This comprehensive analysis led to a scoring system designed to recognise visible environmental sustainability efforts while acknowledging resource constraints faced by smaller organisations, and critically evaluating the potential exaggeration of environmental sustainability commitments in corporate communications.

Table 4.1 Sustainability indicators

Metrics	Description
Publication of targets and actions	Setting and publicly sharing goals and actions related to improving environmental performance.
Integration of sustainability in the mission	Highlighting sustainability commitment in the organisational mission or value statement displayed on the organisational website or annual reports.
Legal commitments	Incorporating requirements regarding sustainability into the organisation's legal framework (required as a B Corp).
Monitoring emissions and water usage	Tracking emissions and water consumption to assess environmental impact and taking steps to reduce impact.
Product evaluations	Assessing products for their environmental impact during their lifecycle.
Initiatives to improve environmental impact	Taking steps to reduce the environmental impact of products.
Circularity	Evidence of circular initiatives such as resale, rental, and repair services.
Supply chain transparency	Transparency and traceability in the supply chain so customers know where and how their clothes are made.
Community and stakeholder engagement	Consultation and collaboration with the community and stakeholders about sustainability efforts and decision-making.
Sustainability-related roles	Assessing the number of roles dedicated to sustainability by reviewing LinkedIn, RocketReach, or publicly available documents from the organisation.

Product quantity analysis	Reviewing the quantity of products produced by the organisation, especially regarding mass production.
Sustainability certifications	Evaluating certifications held by organisations while acknowledging the potential limitations of these certifications.
Ranking on sustainability platforms	Reviewing rankings or ratings on platforms like Good On You, Fashion Transparency Index, and Baptist World Aid Ethical Fashion Guide.

The relationship between organisational size and environmental sustainability commitment emerges as multidimensional, with distinct patterns appearing across different types of organisations.

Step 2: Typology Development

Second, considering the wide range of organisational sizes, I mapped participant organisations onto a scatter graph to identify potential relationships between size and commitment to environmental sustainability. The scatter graph produced distinct clusters of organisations, as illustrated in Figure 4.1. This analysis highlights fundamental organisational characteristics—specifically their purpose (what motivates their product offerings), historical legacy (their established brand identity and product evolution), and size—that influence their approach to environmental sustainability. For example, one cluster was characterised by large organisations exhibiting minimal commitment to environmental sustainability, shown by inexpensive production and high sales volume. I labelled these organisations as profit-led.

At the other extreme, a second cluster consisted of small organisations demonstrating a high commitment to environmental sustainability. I identified them as values-led due to their emphasis on environmentally friendly products and production processes, along with a focus on customer education. Two organisations (ID23 and ID17), as shown in Figure 4.1, emerge as outliers in this analysis. While most large organisations in the sample showed lower environmental sustainability commitment, these two have maintained strong environmental sustainability commitments despite growing into large entities.

I then identified two additional clusters: customer-led and product-led organisations. Customer-led organisations are typically well-established and mid- to large-sized, responding to environmental sustainability due to external pressure. In contrast, product-led organisations

vary in size, predominantly comprising mid-sized entities that prioritise their products and aesthetics; environmental sustainability is only incorporated when it aligns with their core purpose.

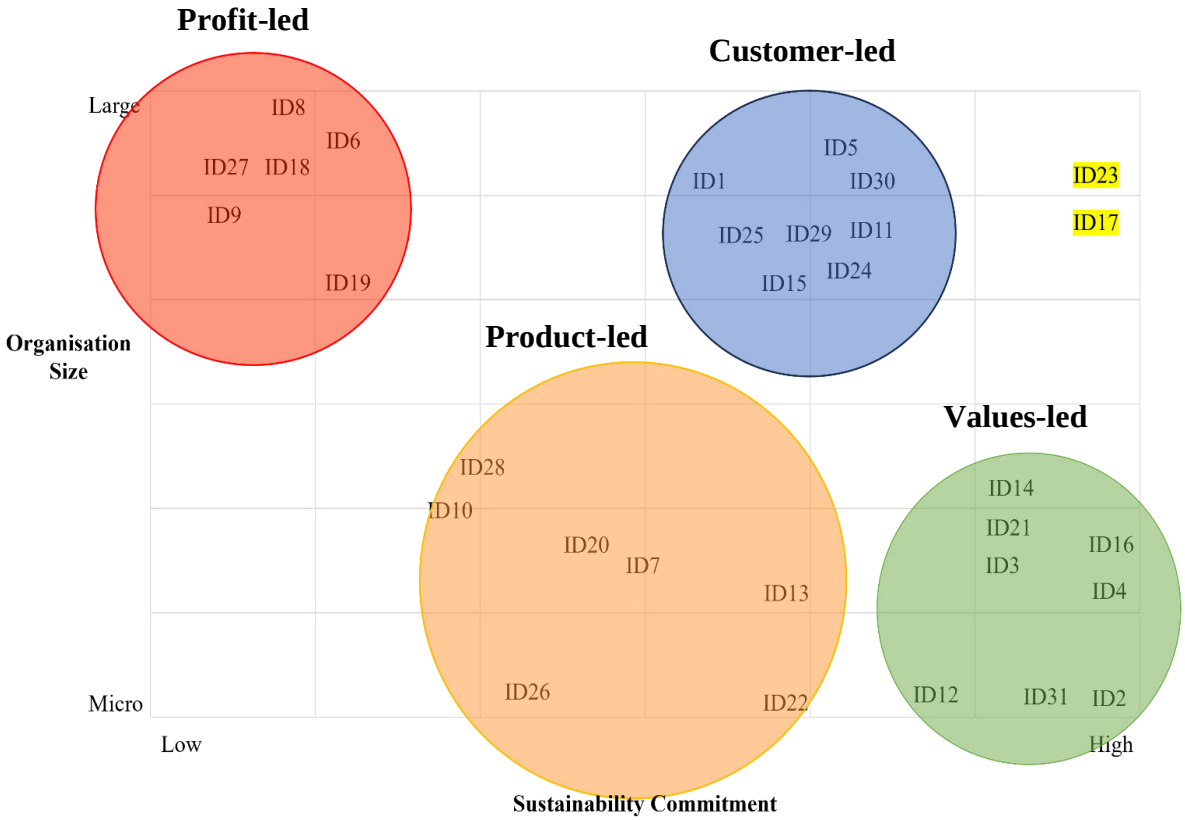


Figure 4.1 Scatter Graph of Organisations

Step 3: Interview Data Validation

Lastly, I analysed the interview data to confirm the organisational commitment to environmental sustainability. In some cases, organisations were highly committed to environmental sustainability, but did not have the resources to communicate it publicly through archival data. While large organisations with vast resources could effectively communicate their environmental sustainability practices through publicly available data, the interviews revealed varying levels of internal communication about these practices. I examined the data specifically to validate or challenge my initial assessments of organisational commitment, identity, and purpose, which were the key factors in my categorisation process.

Upon reviewing interview transcripts, it became apparent organisations within each cluster shared similar purposes and identities. Further analysis revealed these shared characteristics corresponded to organisational size, with larger organisations typically demonstrating lower levels of environmental sustainability commitment compared to smaller ones.

This analysis culminated in the identification of four distinct categories within the typology: profit-led, customer-led, values-led, and product-led. For each category, I present a 'prototype' organisation that exemplifies all the defining characteristics of that category, and clearly illustrates how businesses in that category typically operate. These prototypes help readers understand the distinctive features and patterns of behaviour that characterise each type of organisation in my framework (Rosch, 1973). The prototype organisations are not from my sample (and so are identified) and are used for illustrative purposes only.

Table 4.2 provides an overview of these categories, detailing the key characteristics, sustainability framing and sustainability engagement patterns that distinguish each organisational type. The table presents patterns across profit-led, customer-led, values-led, and product-led organisations, each demonstrating characteristic approaches to environmental sustainability implementation. While achieving substantial revenue through high-volume production, profit-led organisations typically exhibit superficial environmental sustainability engagement through minimal initiatives. These organisations often engage in greenwashing – the practice of making misleading environmental claims to appear more sustainable than they actually are (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015).

Customer-led businesses demonstrate a more balanced approach, integrating environmental considerations into KPIs whilst maintaining strong stakeholder responsiveness. Values-led organisations, generally smaller entities with limited product ranges, position environmental sustainability as fundamental to their operations, evidenced by uncompromising principles and comprehensive integration. Product-led businesses present a distinct approach where environmental sustainability considerations are secondary to design imperatives, resulting in opportunity-based engagement that varies with resource availability. These orientations, exemplified respectively by SHEIN, Bonds, Etiko, and Zimmermann, provide clear prototypes illuminating how organisational priorities fundamentally shape the framing and depth of environmental sustainability engagement.

Profit-led Organisations

SHEIN is a prototypic example of an organisation meeting my criteria for the profit-led category. Their webpage has a CSR and environmental sustainability section which states, ‘We are working hard to drive continued progress toward our sustainability and social commitments, and increase transparency as we recognise the role SHEIN can play in supporting the communities we reach and the environment we all share’ (SHEIN, 2024).

This section of SHEIN’s webpage also has sustainability targets, initiatives and statistics, giving the impression of an organisation genuinely working toward sustainability. SHEIN explains how they plan to decarbonise their supply chain and design circular systems to improve their environmental performance (SHEIN, 2024).

Despite this, SHEIN continues to produce around 35,000 new product styles every few weeks, and over a million product styles every year (Pucker, 2024). Almost two-thirds of the product selection offered by SHEIN is made of polyester (Pucker, 2024), a synthetic fibre produced from fossil fuels (Sandhu, 2024). SHEIN’s gargantuan product selection, and reliance on polyester, means it can provide cheap prices to its customers, resulting in a revenue target of 50 billion USD for 2025 (Pucker, 2024). SHEIN exemplifies a profit-led organisation relying on low-cost production and distribution methods to maximise profit, with little regard for environmental sustainability.

When examining organisations in my sample classified as profit-led, their archival data from web pages and annual reports reveals substantial product output and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. GHG emissions are predominantly in scope 3 (indirect emissions that occur in the value chain) (Hertwich & Wood, 2018), accounting for 94-99% of their total emissions. Profit-led organisations continue producing vast quantities of products through a ‘take-make-waste’ model, prioritising volume over environmental impact (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2021). This model of sustained overproduction directly undermines global climate targets, with emissions far exceeding safe levels for planetary health (Steffen et al., 2015). The wasteful cycle of creating excess inventory, much of which goes unsold, compounds the environmental impact through unnecessary resource consumption and landfill burden (Ellen Macarthur Foundation, 2021).

Table 4.2 Organisational typology

	Profit-led	Customer-led	Values-led	Product-led
Key Characteristics	• Large revenue and product volume • Focus on maximizing growth and profit via low-cost production and synthetic materials • Often well-established legacy brands	• Large and established brands • Focus on high-quality products that respond to customer needs • Brands with positive reputations and loyal customers	• Small to medium size • Focus on few products and natural materials • Often young organisations with transparent supply chains	• Variable size • Focus on product aesthetics and craftsmanship • Customer base willing to pay higher prices
Sustainability Framing	• Compliance requirement that adds production costs • Reactive to external pressures • Limited internal communication	• Competitive advantage and business necessity • Pragmatic implementation • Leadership aspiration	• Core to the business model • Long-term educational perspective • Industry change agents	• Secondary to design • Opportunity-based perspective that leverages firm creativity and quality • Variable commitment
Sustainability Engagement	• Limited strategic integration • Focus on cost-effective sustainability measures • Engage in greenwashing	• Integration into broader strategy • Balanced with business viability • Evidence-based sustainability programs	• Embedded throughout organisational DNA • Favours impact over profit • Innovation focus	• Design-integrated solutions • Selective implementation based on brand alignment • Material selection focus

Another point that distinguishes these profit-led entities is their unique interpretation of environmental sustainability: their products still primarily use materials derived from fossil fuels (polyester/nylon). Additionally, they state their products will meet a certain percentage of environmental sustainability, or have some qualifying ‘sustainable attribute’. This superficial approach often manifests in their heavy reliance on recycled polyester. This strategy is particularly problematic, as it allows them to market products as ‘sustainable’ while predominantly using environmentally harmful materials (Pointing, 2023).

Profit-led organisations often greenwash their collections by including modest proportions of marginally better materials; for instance, marketing items containing just 20% recycled polyester against 80% virgin polyester (Pointing, 2023). When that sustainable percentage is achieved through recycled polyester, it becomes particularly problematic: recycled polyester continues to shed harmful microplastics. It diverts polyethylene terephthalate bottles from more effective closed-loop recycling systems (Pointing, 2023). Such discrepancies were evident in my sample, where organisations made extravagant claims in environmental sustainability reports—despite little tangible action. Even with dedicated environmental sustainability departments, their actions suggest only a superficial commitment to genuine environmental progress.

Profit-led organisations’ main goal is commercial success. Many profit-led organisations were established when environmental sustainability was not a significant concern in the fashion industry, and they did not face the same pressures that modern organisations encounter today such as increased customer demand for ethical practices, regulatory requirements for environmental standards and the challenges of sourcing sustainable materials amid resource scarcity. Most profit-led organisations have followed a path characterised by a business model that historically prioritised growth and profit without accounting for environmental costs—a model developed when the long-term impacts of the fashion industry were less understood. While these organisations now respond to growing cultural and societal demands for environmental sustainability, their responses often remain superficial rather than addressing the fundamental environmental impacts of their operations.

In my analysis of the interview and archival data, I observed that some profit-led organisations acknowledge being at the initial stages of their environmental sustainability journey, recognising the considerable work they have yet to undertake to become sustainable. Some profit-led organisations exhibit strategic insights and adaptability. They effectively

gauge stakeholder environmental sustainability expectations and communicate accordingly, even though their commitment to environmental sustainability is vague. However, a subset of profit-led organisations maintains rigid adherence to their version of environmental sustainability, even though their definition diverges significantly from that advocated in the literature (Henninger et al., 2016) and the approaches shown in values-led organisations.

Framing of Sustainability

Many profit-led organisations are well-established powerhouses in the industry. Most of the participants from profit-led organisations I interviewed were multi-brand enterprises with global reach, and thousands of employees. They had commonly been operating for over 20 years. They were founded at a time when producing a large number of products at a low cost with primarily synthetic fibres was the norm within the fashion industry. These organisations face a mounting challenge to address their 'business as usual' attitude, and to deconstruct a business model that has made them financially successful for decades.

> We're really trying to talk more about our business model to see if we can break that a little bit. – ID19, Social Responsibility Role, Large Profit-led

> They're all big businesses that you're retrofitting a program about implementing human rights, due diligence, and sustainability practices that have not been built that way. It's different from smaller brands, where the whole philosophy is about the core of the brand. – ID27, Supply Chain Role, Large Profit-led

Some organisations have incorporated environmental sustainability into their business model, and become more responsible. However, this isn't easy to achieve, and requires passionate leadership alongside robust and effective bidirectional communication channels. A participant from a large profit-led organisation (ID9) emphasised the inherent difficulty in affecting paradigm shifts within organisations of that size. The size and complexity of profit-led entities impede quick transformation and prompt implementation of change.

> Given we are a larger business—we want the social impact, environmental impact, all of those things—but there is a level of investment that goes into it, none of it is, 'we will just do this'. – ID9, People Role, Large Profit-led

Smaller and younger profit-led organisations are still making large amounts of revenue by selling many products at a low cost, and have shown little regard for responsible practices.

Many of these organisations appeared during the e-commerce boom of the mid to late 2000s (Lissitsa & Kol, 2016). They are primarily e-commerce retailers with low overheads, further accelerating their growth. Likewise, environmental sustainability was still not commonplace in the fashion industry when they came into existence. A social responsibility manager from a large profit-led organisation (ID19) that is publicly held, and operates under the scrutiny of its stakeholders, explains shareholder demands may not consistently prioritise environmental sustainability, potentially slowing its advancement in sustainable practices.

> When I started, it was 100% owned by the CEO in Australia and then 50% owned in the US, but since then, the holding company in the US has been listed on the stock exchange. … We're in a profit-driven business, and if it [sustainability] doesn't meet our margins, then it's just not going to get accepted. – ID19, Social Responsibility Role, Large Profit-led

The participant (ID19) I interviewed in the large profit-led organisation concedes the organisation's conventional association with fast fashion, but the company website accentuates a nascent transition towards environmental sustainability.

> Don't worry about being delicate, call us fast fashion, that's fine. – ID19, Social Responsibility Role, Large Profit-led

> We are fast in that we have a high volume of styles that will arrive on the shelf within 4-6 weeks, but we buy in really small amounts. We see if something sells through in the first week. If it does, then we order more … We're making on-trend fashion more sustainable and accessible to everyone by transitioning our products to be made with lower environmental impact. – ID19, Webpage, Large Profit-led

The authenticity and depth of this shift remains to be substantiated over time, especially considering the company is in the beginning stages of their environmental sustainability journey. Future evaluations of their practices and adherence will provide a more definitive view of their commitment to environmental sustainability. The social responsibility manager (ID19) describes the unfolding strategy, initially embarking on a phase of 'catching up', and hesitating to share developments due to potential customer criticism.

> It took us about six months to build the five-year strategy, and now we're just working our way through. … The first phase we just described as the catch-up, and that was where we weren't trying to talk about our sustainability journey because we knew that it

> wasn't impressive yet; it was just run of the mill. And we could say to our customers, oh, we audit all our factories, and they would be like, but all your stuff is polyester. – ID19, Social Responsibility Role, Large Profit-led

Other large profit-led organisations I interviewed are just coming to terms with environmental sustainability; they may have one or two people working on different elements, but they lack a strategic plan. One participant (ID27) stated the need for better communication about environmental sustainability, noting their organisation has a long journey ahead. Working in a large profit-led organisation, they highlighted the inherent difficulties of dealing with team members who adhered to long-standing business practices and maintained obsolete attitudes. The challenge is not merely introducing new sustainable practices, but navigating and potentially reshaping established cultural and operational norms within the organisation. This finding underscores the importance of addressing strategic and cultural dimensions in steering an organisation towards a more sustainable future.

> There are challenges with getting team members to understand the importance of this area, shifting behaviours, shifting that mindset of we've always done it this way, and now we have to do it this way. … There is sometimes a bit of an ego thing if you have a new team coming in saying, we're now doing this. Sometimes, it can be a challenge when it's not necessarily built into a team member's role description. So, they feel this is extra work that's not part of my role. But more and more, we're talking about how we implement this as a KPI in everyone's role. – ID27, Supply Chain Role, Large Profit-led

This view, rooted in traditional practices, was also highlighted in the marketing department, which encountered difficulties in assimilating and promoting environmental sustainability. This revealed a tension between conventional promotional strategies, and the emerging trend to communicate an authentic commitment to sustainable practices.

> Marketing has a template of what they want to do in terms of how it's pictured and displayed. And we have a template of, well, what is factual? And how do we want to communicate this? But it doesn't sound very [appealing]. Then, other people want to add this, or want to add that. So I feel like that's been one of the most complex pieces we're currently working on. – ID27, Supply Chain Role, Large Profit-led

> Whilst there might be team members that I work with on a day-to-day basis in terms of what we're doing and how we want to communicate it, there are still people who have the final say. It might be more conservative in how much they want to say, and oh, we

> can’t talk about this too much in terms of its sustainability attributes because then it will show that all these products are not sustainable. – ID27, Supply Chain Role, Large Profit-led

Engaging with Sustainability

One profit-led organisation (ID19) in my sample had begun integrating environmental sustainability into their mission, representing their formal commitment to environmental responsibility. While this mission statement signals their recognition of environmental sustainability as a strategic priority, translating this commitment into operational practices is still in its early stages. The organisation’s willingness to formally acknowledge environmental sustainability in its mission represents a first step. However, implementing concrete initiatives and structural changes will be crucial for realising these stated intentions.

> Until it is integrated into the mission, I think many people were passionate, but it was viewed as a passion project within their jobs rather than a business requirement. And so, that’s been a really helpful shift for us to put it into people’s key performance objectives and make sure all teams are accountable. – ID19, Social Responsibility Role, Large Profit-led

However, some of the other profit-led organisations I interviewed engaged superficially with environmental sustainability, launching minimal infrastructure projects whilst their actual journey to engage authentically was just commencing.

> We’ve implemented soft plastic recycling in our office with a local social enterprise and are looking at textile recycling. We are looking at community partnerships in terms of donations of goods. – ID27, Supply Chain Role, Large Profit-led

> We have brown paper bags, which we have just done recently, which came from a South Australian supplier. So that was a significant initiative for us. So, looking at those sorts of opportunities as they arise. We’ve done things like the building that we are in here is green, all of those sorts of things. – ID9, People Role, Large Profit-led

These organisations demonstrated a deficiency in strategy and structure regarding genuine engagement with environmental sustainability. Their progression was characterised by gradually mapping material use and developing specific collections, such as a collection of products made with Australian Cotton, which were notably identified as sustainable.

> We have done things like Australian cotton with the [brand name] business for a few years now …, and I guess we're working through it more in terms of a framework. We think the B Corp framework is the direction there. We are doing that early piece about where we are, but we believe that will then set clear direction on what we need to focus on. – ID9, People Role, Large Profit-led

> Being more of a fast fashion business, polyester has overcome cotton sourcing just because of the price over the last few years. … We don't have a broader material strategy in moving all polyester, either phasing out where possible or transitioning to sustainable sources. But that is the team members' desire because they want to feel proud of the product they're putting in stores, and they can see that that's where the world is moving. – ID27, Supply Chain Role, Large Profit-led

However, a holistic environmental sustainability strategy was missing, so the organisation relied on isolated sustainable actions rather than a coherent, strategic approach to environmental sustainability throughout.

> We've had different initiatives that we have done over the years, but we haven't done a formal policy because we are very mindful that it's very easy to go off and say we are going to go off and do XYZ, but when you delve into its far more complex, which is why we wanted to sort of take the time. – ID9, People Role, Large Profit-led

> It is part of our plan to create a broader company strategy next year. But that is not just materials; that's everything. … So the materials piece is massive. But it's also part of a much broader piece of work that we're keen to do in terms of having some key goals that we're working towards, rather than sort of bits and pieces ad hoc. – ID27, Supply Chain Role, Large Profit-led

One participant (ID8) who had recently left one of these profit-led organisations candidly asserted that all their former employer's engagement with environmental sustainability was superficial. In an organisation with thousands of stores worldwide, the onus to implement sustainable principles fell upon store employees without an accompanying framework for measurement or accountability to ensure thorough and consistent implementation across the global retail landscape. Here, I observed a gap between organisational rhetoric and actualised, accountable practices in environmental sustainability.

> Unless we believed in it, there was no incentive as a store. There was no way to quantify if it was happening or not. It's a guess that this is what stores do. They do not believe in incentives because that's your job. – ID8, Retail Role, Large Profit-led

The participant (ID8) explains this situation emerges because the employer is not genuinely committed to environmental sustainability, but is driven towards profit. Consequently, environmental sustainability does not emerge as an intrinsic organisational value; it must be aligned with profit-led objectives.

> The companies will always seemingly change, satisfy, and tick the boxes, but they will never change. Because they are not here for the environment. They're here for the bottom line. – ID8, Retail Role, Large Profit-led

Conversely, a participant in a production role (ID6) had a comparatively positive stance towards environmental sustainability. However, the organisation's engagement with sustainable practices remained limited to initiatives that wouldn't disrupt their core fast fashion business model. I highlight here how deeply ingrained the fast fashion rhetoric is within the organisation. The participant did not provide a substantive explanation regarding their sustainability policy. While they anticipated their sustainable collection to have a lifespan of six years, it fell significantly short of perpetuity – an attribute that true environmental sustainability might arguably necessitate (Klepp, Laitala & Wiedemann, 2020). This scenario suggests a partial commitment to environmental sustainability, wherein the organisation elects to incorporate certain sustainable practices without a comprehensive, deeply rooted sustainability ethos shaping their broader organisational paradigm.

> Yeah, we do have a formal policy—well, I'm not sure they're policies—we have what we call pillars, and that's what we're striving to achieve in the sustainability area. At the moment, we're focusing on our recycled fibres, and then water saving is a big one. … Fast fashion can still be done with sustainability, and we're probably not in fast fashion. [Our organisation] sits somewhere between. – ID6, Production Role, Large Profit-led

> We're trying to create pieces in our range that are longer than a season, longer than three months, and that we want to see on your shelf for six years. – ID6, Production Role, Large Profit-led

Another profit-led organisation (ID19) I interviewed discussed the environmental sustainability targets they had published on their website, which suggested they were moving

towards sustainable materials. However, most of their products still primarily use synthetic fibres, such as polyester. Similarly, their product selection often consists of 'on-trend' styles, which are constantly rotated. High product turnover and trend-chasing mean higher production rates, and therefore higher carbon and water usage. As these organisations' products may only be relevant to their customer for a short period, there is a high potential for waste (Niinimaki et al., 2020).

> We've made good progress so far. Currently, 30% of our new arrivals are sustainably made using lower-impact materials (defined as 30% of all new styles in the last month). We're committed to making more progress, with at least 60% of our range sustainably made by 2025 and 100% as soon as possible. – ID19, Webpage, Large Profit-led

Profit-led organisations tend to adopt intermittent communication styles, in contrast to maintaining continuous communication to keep everyone informed and ingrained in environmental sustainability. Labelling their communication piece as 'sustainability trends' inadvertently contributes to the prevailing narrative of trend-driven behaviour within the organisation.

> We have a sustainability trend presentation every two months just online with new things, what we're doing, what's available, and what's coming up next in stores, and we take everyone on the journey. – ID6, Production Role, Large Profit-led

Additionally, the participant (ID6) believed reaching genuine commitment and circularity might take up to 30 years, reflecting an apathetic approach towards environmental sustainability. Such a long timeline dilutes the urgency of sustainable practices, and inadvertently signals a casual commitment to environmental sustainability. The assertion underplays the demand for immediate and effective action, suggesting a decoupling between the stated importance of environmental sustainability, and the tangible efforts towards its implementation and realisation in the near term. Consequently, the proposed duration raises further concerns regarding the authenticity of the organisation's engagement with environmental sustainability.

> My goal would be that all fashion does become circular, and all fashion that I'm involved in does become circular to some point; but when that will be, I'm not quite sure because the technology probably isn't there yet … I think that's maybe in the next ten years, but it might be in the next 20. It might be the next 30. … Change does take a long time;

> we’re not proclaiming to be perfect, but we’re doing our best to move in the right direction. – ID6, Production Role, Large Profit-led

Customer-led Organisations

The prototype organisation for this category is Bonds, an Australian underwear retailer with a strong presence in the Australian retail market through its deep understanding of customer preferences and needs. Their success stems from product quality, customer-driven innovation, and responsive customer engagement. When their customer base began showing increasing concern for sustainable practices and environmental impact, Bonds responded by integrating environmental sustainability into their product offerings. This responsiveness to customer demands is evident in their approach to environmental sustainability targets for 2025 and 2030, of which they have already achieved 50% (Bonds, 2024).

Unlike profit-led organisations that often define their environmental sustainability standards internally, Bonds has aligned their goals with externally validated benchmarks their customers trust and value—committing to 100% third-party certified sustainable materials. This customer-centric approach is demonstrated in their use of locally sourced cotton certified by respected organisations like Cotton Australia and the Global Organic Textile Standard (Bonds, 2024), directly responding to customer demands for transparent and verifiable environmental sustainability credentials.

I broadly define customer-led organisations as identifying market gaps through continuous engagement with their customers’ evolving needs and preferences. Unlike profit-led organisations prioritising revenue potential, or values-led organisations focusing on social impact, customer-led organisations build their entire business strategy around systematically understanding and responding to customer feedback and behaviour patterns. This customer-centric approach leads to pragmatic decision-making including in their environmental sustainability initiatives, which are implemented when customers demand environmental responsibility, but always balanced against business viability. Their customer orientation naturally positions them to meet broader stakeholder expectations, as they’ve developed robust mechanisms for understanding and responding to their primary stakeholders.

Customer-led organisations are characterised by their focus on a specific type of product that maintains a distinct core identity, tailored to a particular customer demographic. They

prioritise quality, and cultivate customer loyalty by responding to their needs and preferences. Customer-led organisations cater to their target audience, and adjust based on feedback. Their ability to implement changes, such as price increases for sustainable practices, depends heavily on customer acceptance.

While brand loyalty may provide some buffer for price adjustments, these organisations must carefully gauge and respond to their customer's willingness to pay for environmental sustainability initiatives. This gives them the confidence to commit to environmental sustainability, compared to profit-led organisations. Although they may not have consistently embodied the ideals of sustainable businesses, they have not become as deeply entrenched in the 'take-make-waste' model (Brydges, 2021) embraced by many profit-led organisations.

The founder of a customer-led organisation (ID12), that I interviewed, confirmed the organisation was established to address a specific industry need. The founder sees the company's ability to meet customer demands as a significant advantage. Furthermore, this participant has endeavoured to construct a business that upholds responsibility and environmental sustainability standards.

> We have a unique background because we don't come from a fashion/design background. That is our superpower because we are problem solvers by nature, and we're trying to solve problems. Traditionally, people in the fashion space don't want much to do with us because they're fashion people, right? So, we can be nimble and do things right from the outset. – ID12, Founder, Micro Customer-led

Customer-led entities identify and cater to a specific market need and maintain a deep understanding of their customers. Consequently, they adapt to customer and industry expectations. Along their environmental sustainability journey, they engage with various stakeholders, from environmental sustainability consultants to technology specialists. They strive to stay updated with industry trends, and promptly address customer demands.

> We're led by the design team, the product, and the fabrics. A lot of other retailers tend to lead in with open buys and budgets, and the buyers tend to dictate what slots need what option plans and assortment plans need filling, and then the design team will go off and fill that. Whereas we work a little bit differently. – ID15, Sustainability Role, Large Customer-led

When customer-led organisations began investigating environmental sustainability, some were pleasantly surprised that environmental sustainability was already a cornerstone of their brand. Recognising this inherent value, they saw an opportunity. However, these commitments were not always adhered to in practice. Some organisation members leveraged the existence of such commitments to ensure the organisation would reaffirm their commitment, and enhance and refocus their organisational strategies. By leveraging this existing foundation, they were well-positioned to make a deliberate pivot towards more comprehensive and responsible practices, aligning even more closely with the evolving expectations of their stakeholders and the broader industry landscape.

> When we started to move into the sustainability space and corporate social responsibility, it was pleasing to uncover what we thought we inherently had built into the DNA of the brand. … If we want to produce a premium product, then we need to have premium partnerships, they need to have premium processes, and they need to be the best in the business. So, that naturally came with this great kind of corporate social responsibility and ethical sourcing element. – ID15, Sustainability Role, Large Customer-led

> What we're lucky with in one aspect is [our organisation] is sustainable in that we make products that last a lifetime. I think that is a sustainable practice where it's not following into the fast fashion category of footwear where you buy some footwear for a season and throw it away. – ID25, Supply Chain Role, Medium Customer-led

Framing Sustainability

My analysis reveals that organisations in the customer-led category perceive environmental sustainability as a business necessity, viewing it from a risk mitigation standpoint, and seeing responsible practices as sensible for business advancement. These organisations were deeply committed to their environmental sustainability practices. Their journey in this realm has spanned a significant duration, reflecting their dedication and deep engagement over time. These organisations stood out as exemplary models, adeptly deploying their resources to cater to the evolving preferences of their customers. Several participants highlighted the increasing societal push towards environmental sustainability. This external pressure has subsequently influenced their organisations to consider environmental sustainability as a crucial aspect of risk mitigation for their business operations.

> There are not only individual customers but also a broader society. Society wants us to be more sustainable, more aware, and cognisant of that in the footprint that we leave. – ID5a, People Role, Large Customer-led

> The way the world is going globally, it has become increasingly apparent that challenges related to ESG will either make or break us. And so, it's just the news of the day, I suppose, being aware of world events. – ID11, Social Impact Role, Large Customer-led

Organisations in this category aspire to be leaders in environmental sustainability, mirroring their leadership in other industry areas. For these organisations, commitment to environmental sustainability is fundamental for thriving in the contemporary industry landscape.

> We want to be the front runners. In our industry, we have always been the front-runners in many of the initiatives, and the industry tends to follow us because we are the industry leaders. So, we are the first ones to take this initiative, and naturally, the industry will follow. – ID24, Supply Chain Role, Medium Customer-led

> Businesses are losing out if they're not thinking about this. When there was a race for online shopping, or getting yourself into online mode to do business, people who did it long back were okay during COVID, right, and people who didn't do it died during COVID. So, we are in a similar zone when it comes to this because it is happening, it will happen, the pressure will come. … People taking steps in this will be the front-runners; they will have an added advantage. People who are not doing it will perish. – ID24, Supply Chain Role, Medium Customer-led

Engaging with Sustainability

Customer-led organisations are transitioning from a superficial understanding of environmental sustainability to genuinely embracing responsible practices. In one organisation (ID15), this shift resulted from years of refining their CSR initiatives. Another (ID25) was spurred on by new leadership with a vision to meaningfully integrate environmental sustainability, aiming to establish a lasting and impactful legacy.

> It's like a wormhole once you start. But I think where we're at now is that we realise we now need to be a bit more on the front foot, so rather than going back and looking at where everything is at and what improvements we can make, we need to start putting some initiatives in place, which is going to be taking more of a leadership position, being

> more proactive, rather than reactive. …We don't want to do things just for the sake of ticking a box. We want it to be meaningful. – ID15, Sustainability Role, Large Customer-led

> Now that we're owned through private ownership and by [CEO] and [parent] group, they're investing in us for the long-term, so it's a big change. [Parent group] are huge businesses that care about sustainability and bettering this country. So that's helped shape a few of our processes going forward, and different roles in the company. – ID25, Supply Chain Role, Medium Customer-led

Both organisations highlighted their innovative partnerships within the environmental sustainability sector, furthering their commitment to bolster their ecological initiatives.

> With [parent group], they purchased stakes in a company called [company name], an alternative leather material. So, you know, we've been testing that. We've been seeing what we can do with that. – ID25, Supply Chain Role, Medium Customer-led

> But when you partner with someone like [organisation name] and lean on their expertise, you realise these things are achievable as long as you collaborate with everyone in every step of the process. – ID15, Sustainability Role, Large Customer-led

Some customer-led organisations focus on specific markets, like workwear and uniforms. These companies face growing pressure from stakeholders to become more environmentally responsible. Their high revenues allow them to work with outside experts to develop and carry out environmental sustainability programs. These organisations actively seek partnerships to improve their environmental practices.

> One thing that the industry generates is a lot of plastic as waste. So, we are trying to ensure that we are not using virgin plastic anymore, so all plastics in our organisation are recycled. That's where this company [technology name] comes into the picture. We know very clearly from where they have sourced it, and whom they're employing to get that done, and they give us all the records of end-to-end visibility, so that we know that this is impacting the environment. … All our garments go on a hanger, so all our hangers are made out of ocean waste. So [technology name], [are a] similar type of company that shows us end-to-end visibility of their supply chains and where they source their products, so it's very clear where they are getting the products. – ID24, Supply Chain Role, Medium Customer-led

These organisations desired more legitimate involvement with sustainable practices, seamlessly integrating these principles alongside their business objectives. Environmental sustainability wasn't treated as a separate entity, but merged with core operations. These organisations were driven by their need to be leaders.

> How do we deliver commercially successful, profitable organisations that can grow at the same time as delivering sustainability and do that in a sustainable way? – ID1, Sustainability Role, Large Customer-led

> We are seeking to be a world-leading responsible retailer, and recognise that sustainability isn't just this siloed approach. It has to underpin our business strategy. – ID5b, Sustainability Role, Large Customer-led

One participant (ID11) highlights the importance of prioritising environmental sustainability at the executive level for its full integration within the organisation. They metaphorically describe the shift in environmental sustainability engagement as transitioning from 'towing a trailer to taking a front-seat position in a vehicle'. This shift emphasises the transformative impact of executive commitment on the overall incorporation of environmental sustainability within the organisational framework. Another participant (ID1) acknowledges the significant integration of sustainability into executive compensation structures.

> It felt like a trailer we were towing around, whereas in the last 3, 4, 5 years, it feels like it's now got a front seat in the vehicle itself. So, it was important to us and a big part of the brand, but it didn't feel like it was leading. Whereas now, the ESG, both titles and voice, are at the executive table with the other executives. You know, this year will be our first integrated report where we will have our financial and sustainability reports as one for the first time in our history. – ID11, Social Impact Role, Large Customer-led

> So, every executive across the group. I think between 60 and 70 people globally will have a proportion of their bonus linked to the delivery of the milestones of the sustainability strategy. – ID1, Sustainability Role, Large Customer-led

In these customer-led organisations, an essential facet of their environmental sustainability journey is embedding sustainable practices into the daily responsibilities of all employees. It's not just about having a dedicated environmental sustainability team; it's about ensuring every department, from marketing to logistics, is aligned with sustainable goals and principles. For example, human resources departments may include environmental

sustainability targets in performance reviews, and provide regular environmental training. Finance teams could allocate budgets for green initiatives and track environmental metrics alongside financial ones. Even IT departments play their part by choosing energy-efficient equipment and enabling remote work to reduce commuting. While many organisations are still in the transitional phase of fully integrating this approach, there's a strong consensus among them that making environmental sustainability an intrinsic part of everyone's job description is critical. This holistic approach ensures that environmental sustainability is not an afterthought but a core tenet of their operational strategy.

> It's having ownership at that leadership level, but it's also filtering down to everybody so that in everyone's job description, there is something that speaks to it. It used to be CSR, but hopefully now, it is ESG and Social Impact. – ID11, Social Impact Role, Large Customer-led

> But the reality is that we have almost 15,000 people in our organisation. Sustainability is everybody's business, not just mine and my team. … It's about every single person who needs to come along on that journey. And that's one of the greatest challenges, as I said, around how you make that relevant to every single person. So that person in the tech team is working on literally the website. What is the sustainability interface of their role? And how can they contribute to that? And it's easier to do that in some roles than others. – ID1, Sustainability Role, Large Customer-led

Values-led Organisations

A prototype of the values-led organisation would be Etiko, a small fashion retailer with a strong visible commitment to responsibility. Etiko has a limited product range of basic clothing items made from 100% natural fibres. On their website, they label themselves 'organic, vegan, feel-good fashion' and display their award as Australia's 'best all-round sustainable retailer' (Etiko, 2024). They also display several certifications, including B Corp and Fairtrade. Etiko has a limited supply chain, and they display and discuss all of their suppliers on their website, and in their environmental sustainability report (Etiko, 2024). They also have several sustainability initiatives, such as a takeback and recycling program, a tree-planting program, and a tipping program where customers can directly tip the producers of the products they buy (Etiko, 2024).

On Etiko's website and social media, the company makes its point of difference very clear—they want to be an alternative to mainstream fashion. Their webpage states, 'In an era of fast fashion, exploitation and environmental degradation, it has never been more important to stand out from the crowd' (Etiko, 2024). Etiko want their customers to feel good about their purchase, and they see it as their responsibility to educate customers on the perils of the current fashion system. However, despite being in the market for almost 20 years, Etiko continues to be a micro-sized organisation with a small revenue and market share. This lack of growth may be intentional, as they may view scaling up as a threat to their core values. However, the lack of growth may also reflect the fact that running a business in this way is not always conducive to growth.

Values-led organisations, in contrast to organisations in the previous two categories, manifest environmental sustainability as the cornerstone of their existence. This commitment transcends profitability concerns, and their dedication to environmental sustainability is evident from the outset. Some companies willingly incur financial loss to uphold their environmental and ethical principles.

These values-led entities are distinguished by their dedication to social and environmental sustainability. They are adopting best practices or making sincere efforts in that direction. They stand in stark contrast to the unsustainable practices of many fashion counterparts, with a firm stance against compromising their ethical values for monetary gains. They view their role as suppliers and educators for customers and industry peers, positioning themselves as exemplars. However, this stance may constrain operational scalability, and thereby challenge profitability. Nonetheless, they play a pivotal role, acting as a compass for all other organisations in the industry.

Framing of Sustainability

Within the industry, these values-led organisations emerge as environmental advocates dedicated to reimagining the traditional paradigms of fashion operation. They exhibit an uncompromising commitment to environmental and social causes, driven by a belief that the fashion industry needs a significant overhaul in its production, distribution, and consumption approach.

> When we started the business, we were very clear about what sort of business we wanted to be. We didn't want to be another fashion brand; the world doesn't need that, and what

> is needed is a different way of working. Our long-term goal was to prove that there is a viable business model by doing things differently. – ID4a, Founder, Micro Values-led

> And so, our business is about creating an opportunity for customers to become the solution. Every time somebody purchases a product, they improve the lives of humanity, and they make the planet healthier, and I believe that's possible. We're not quite there; we're getting very close, but if we can get there, what could the future look like? – ID16, Founder, Small Values-led

Some of the larger values-led organisations embraced environmental sustainability before it became mainstream, achieving success mainly due to their unwavering commitment to sustainable practices. They had the good fortune of emerging when competition in sustainable business was low, enabling them to carve a niche in the market. They illustrate a feasible pathway for aligning business success with environmental stewardship. The organisations I interviewed readily acknowledge their steadfast commitment to sustainable principles has contributed to their success in the market thus far, and set them apart as distinct and unique among their peers.

> The impact that we can deliver through our conservation and philanthropic kind of efforts is the very thing that differentiates the company, and is like the unique selling proposition, why many people buy, love it, refer it to their friends, and it's becoming less unusual, but like it's still unusual where that is the core thing that people love your company for. – ID17, Country Director, Large Values-led

> They're constantly improving and finding ways to better themselves in what they're doing. But they're not steering a ship from one direction to the other. That's always been at the forefront of how they operate. – ID23, Customer Role, Large Values-led

Engaging with Sustainability

Values-led organisations systematically integrate environmental sustainability into every facet of their operations, making it an integral component of every employee's role. This approach ensures environmental sustainability resonates throughout the organisation, and can be effectively communicated to external stakeholders.

> I have never worked or seen anywhere that has the mission and values used with such utility in the company's decision-making from top to bottom. What it does is it fosters a

> culture, a culture of people with common values. – ID17, Country Director, Large Values-led

> It's really important to not only leave that work up to the sustainability department, but for everyone who's involved in the company at any level to actively engage with what we're doing. To understand it, not just know the facts—to rattle off, to sound good— but to understand what those things mean. … They [executives] want to engage with us and know how we're doing, but also understand if we feel that the work that we're doing is purposeful. – ID23, Customer Role, Large Values-led

This commitment is evident in values-led organisations' operational strategies and their hiring practices. These organisations build a foundation of change from within, starting with their workforce. By carefully selecting individuals who resonate with the company's core beliefs, they ensure their environmental and social ethos permeates every layer of the company. The founder's vision, and an employee's responses, demonstrate the company's dedication to environmental sustainability and responsibility is not just superficial, but deeply ingrained in its culture and values.

> It's one of our criteria for hiring. We're not at all quiet about what we stand for and what our values are, and it's extremely important that the people who choose to join us share in that belief because it's going to be a very, very long journey. – ID4a, Founder, Micro Values-led

> It was very obvious from the way that the job ad was written that sustainability was a key component of what was being achieved. But it was more about reengineering the way that the industry should work, and being challenged to think about how it could work differently. But climate change and climate action are the core reasons for doing this. – ID4b, Production Role, Micro Values-led

Product-led Organisations

A prototype for the product-led type of organisation would be Zimmermann, an Australian luxury fashion brand. Zimmermann primarily emphasises crafting beautiful products renowned for their creativity and aesthetic appeal, which is evident in their store displays, marketing, and employees. Leveraging their focus on luxury, they have utilised their brand's prestige to transition toward environmental sustainability, maintaining a strong emphasis on craftsmanship that aligns with their identity. Whilst creativity and aestheticism remain their

key focus and are integral to their identity as a brand, they were able to use these attributes to shift to a focus on environmental sustainability. This commitment is highlighted when they state, ‘It is our mission to make beautiful clothes in a beautiful way’ (Zimmermann, 2024), and they emphasise their use of high-quality, biodegradable materials like linen and cotton as part of their environmental sustainability efforts.

Product-led organisations are driven by an aspiration to create aesthetically pleasing, high-quality products. Although they incorporate elements from other organisational types—such as the profit focus of business-led firms, the customer engagement seen in customer-led companies, and the environmental commitments characteristic of values-led organisations—their primary motivation lies in the creative process. This motivation can either facilitate or impede environmental sustainability engagement, depending on whether creativity aligns with, or is overridden by, profit considerations.

When founding their organisations, they were guided primarily by the desire to create beautiful products rather than other business considerations. Their typically higher price points often enable them to incorporate more sustainable practices. However, creating a brand in the current industry means integrating environmental sustainability is becoming a more important requirement (Bringe, 2023), or at the very least, a sensible business decision—especially when the products have a high price point.

Framing of Sustainability

Product-led organisations frame environmental sustainability in different ways, but it is not always foundational to their existence. If environmental sustainability appears to be at their core, this may primarily reflect their pragmatic recognition of its business value—understanding that environmental commitments can provide competitive advantage, and enhance customer appeal in today’s market. These organisations especially emphasise their design-driven approach, a core aspect of their identity. However, they also emphasise that environmental sustainability has become an integral component of their operations, reflecting the evolving nature of today’s industry, where environmental sustainability is a growing imperative.

> The first thing we always focus on is craftsmanship. Our big thing is what people buy we don’t want them to throw away; we want it to be something they can either keep forever

> and hand down or they can resell, and it's going to last. – ID26, Founder, Micro Product-led

> It is [CEO]'s vision from being in her previous business wanting to do something beautiful and sustainable. Both of those things are equally important. We try to make a balance. Sometimes we're like, that is beautiful fabric, but it has elastane. There are a few things we won't go there. – ID22, Sustainability Role, Micro Product-led

While acknowledging the importance of environmental sustainability, these organisations maintain that it is not at the core of their existence; their primary focus remains on design. This focus can sometimes prioritise design elements over certain core aspects of environmental sustainability.

> Occasionally, we use polyester or something like that. Hopefully, it's something we can continue to work on. Our materials are the one thing that's the ongoing progression that we want to keep tackling, and get better and better every year. Hopefully, as we get a bit more buying power, and a bit more budget to play with, that would be good. – ID26, Founder, Micro Product-led

Participants in these product-led organisations observe environmental sustainability initiatives can originate from the personal passion of an individual employee. Alternatively, some organisations seek external assistance, such as consultancy, if they encounter internal obstacles. My findings highlight a variation in engagement within product-led organisations, wherein some derive strength from internal resources while others seek external support as needed.

> I have been trying to bring it in wherever I can, … it sometimes feels a bit tokenistic, but I am trying to do things like using up all of our fabrics. – ID20, Production Role, Micro Product-led

> The sustainability part of it is secondary except because we are so close in working together when making fabric choices, she (founder) will come and ask, can we use this fabric? And I will be like, no, let's not use that fabric, and I will help give her those limitations to work within. – ID20, Production Role, Micro Product-led

> We have a sustainability consultancy company who we work with really closely. – ID13, Supply Chain Role, Small Product-led

However, as these organisations engage with environmental sustainability, they also acknowledge the challenges of unquestioningly prioritising environmental concerns at the expense of financial economic viability. They recognise the need to balance pursuing environmental goals and ensuring their continued prosperity, as mentioned by their customer-led counterparts.

> It's important to continue to remain prosperous. We want to be a successful company, and there is no doubt about that. And it's coming back to the non-compromising values that it's so important to stick to. We don't want to cut corners; I think that's where people get it wrong. ... And there are so many non-negotiables. But there is also the fact that you still have to be in business –we still want to be here, you know? That is our greatest challenge every time we're faced with that. – ID13, Supply Chain Role, Small Product-led

Some product-led organisations have freely pursued their creative endeavours with little regard for environmental sustainability. However, they now find themselves constrained by increasing environmental regulations and growing customer expectations for sustainable practices. They are trying to engage with environmental sustainability, but have difficulties maintaining the essence of their brand identity and unique products. A participant from one of these organisations (ID10a) recognises that while environmental sustainability is important, it is not the central pillar of their brand.

> It's a real challenge for businesses to make that transition quickly and properly, and stay true to your brand, audience, and sustainability. … I could give you a convoluted response. We want to do it and promote that we're doing it, but it's not exactly the first thing that's going to come to mind when you think of our brand. It's more so we want to do it because it's the right thing to do and we believe in it, rather than you know we're going to put it out there that we're a sustainable brand and it's a marketing ploy. – ID10a, CEO, Medium Product-led

Large product-led organisations have successfully transformed their artistic passions into flourishing businesses, progressing them to an advanced phase. Some large product-led organisations embarked on their journey fuelled by a passion for creativity, but have transitioned to operate primarily with a business mindset, where design remains important. However, the emphasis heavily leans towards financial gains. The high price point of their products does not necessarily correlate with a commitment to environmental sustainability.

One participant (ID18) candidly acknowledged their organisation is primarily driven by trends, a characteristic that often presents significant challenges when attempting to engage with environmental sustainability fully. This finding represents a dichotomy within the product-led category, where some of these organisations focus on the longevity of products, and some admit they are driven by trends.

> [Organisation name] product lasts a long time, but we're very trend-driven. We're not fast fashion, but we do follow a lot of the fashion trends and try to keep up with them month by month. – ID18, Sustainability Role, Large Product-led

Engaging with Sustainability

Some product-led organisations were established when environmental considerations carried less business and social significance than they do today, focusing primarily on delivering aesthetically pleasing products. Others swiftly embraced sustainable practices, and became product-led enterprises with a substantial environmental sustainability component. Although they embody elements of pragmatism, they distinguish themselves through their pronounced emphasis on creativity, not merely producing to fulfil a need or to satisfy customer demands. These organisations leverage their product-led nature to integrate environmental sustainability, accentuating the craftsmanship and luxury inherent in their products. While participants from product-led organisations emphasised their design-led approach they also highlighted how their organisation has integrated environmental sustainability into the business through carefully selecting materials and adopting specific processes, reflecting a fusion of design and sustainable practices within their operations.

> [CEO] started the company in 2016, which was high-end fashion wholesale. We stocked in 60-70 stores globally. Then, we found it was just this cycle of not being able to adhere to any sustainability timelines. It was a high-stress environment. We just wanted to change the business, and we could only do that by working on our terms. – ID13, Supply Chain Role, Small Product-led

> When [founders] started the brand, they wanted to be, I'm not sure what words they would use to describe it, but more luxe from being natural. At that time, it was not sustainably minded; unfortunately, I don't think that was a consideration. … So, a lot of linen was the brand in the beginning, and it's just gone from there. – ID7, Supply Chain and Sustainability Role, Medium Product-led

> She (founder) worked with linen because she just liked the fibre, not necessarily because of its sustainable properties. And so, it's just interesting. I came in with this perspective of sustainability, and everything she was doing was just like this lovely happy accident, and we were like, okay, how can we do this intentionally? – ID20, Production Role, Micro Product-led

Summary

This chapter has presented a typology of fashion organisations based on their varying approaches to environmental sustainability, identifying four distinct categories: profit-led, customer-led, values-led, and product-led organisations. Each category exhibits unique characteristics in how it frames and engages with environmental sustainability initiatives, shaped by its underlying motivations, organisational identity, and historical context.

Profit-led organisations, exemplified by SHEIN, prioritise financial performance and often engage with environmental sustainability superficially, implementing minimal initiatives while maintaining environmentally intensive business models. These organisations frequently struggle to transition from their established 'take-make-waste' paradigm, particularly when their historical success has been built on unsustainable practices. Their engagement with environmental sustainability tends to be reactive and limited, often focused on meeting minimal requirements rather than pursuing genuine transformation.

Customer-led organisations demonstrate a different approach, as illustrated by Bonds, viewing environmental sustainability through the lens of market demands and risk management. These organisations have developed robust mechanisms for understanding and responding to stakeholder expectations, leading to more authentic environmental sustainability initiatives. Their ability to implement sustainable practices is closely tied to customer acceptance, and willingness to pay for environmental improvements.

From inception, values-led organisations, such as Etiko, stand apart in their unwavering commitment to environmental and social sustainability. These organisations often prioritise their ethical principles over profit maximisation, serving as industry pioneers and demonstrating alternative business models. While this approach may limit their growth potential, these organisations play a crucial role in setting benchmarks for sustainable practices in the fashion industry.

Product-led organisations, as Zimmermann exemplifies, present a unique case where environmental sustainability initiatives are filtered through the lens of product design and aesthetics. Their engagement with environmental sustainability varies significantly, influenced by whether environmental considerations align with, or compete against, their creative vision. The higher price points typical of these organisations can facilitate sustainable practices, though this is not guaranteed.

This typology reveals the relationship between organisational characteristics and environmental sustainability engagement. The findings suggest an organisation's approach to environmental sustainability is deeply influenced by its foundational purpose, historical legacy, and size. This understanding has important implications for theory and practice, highlighting how different organisational types might be better supported in their transition toward more sustainable operations.

CHAPTER 5: GENDER EQUALITY AMONG AUSTRALIAN FASHION ORGANISATIONS

In this chapter, I examine three key themes: male leadership in a female-dominated industry, the role of women in environmental sustainability, and the link between gender equality and environmental sustainability. I present findings on the current state of gender dynamics within the Australian fashion industry, highlighting the irony of male leadership in a sector where women make up the majority of customers and employees. Based on my quantitative data and qualitative insights, I examine how these dynamics manifest across different levels of organisational hierarchies, and influence environmental sustainability initiatives.

In my analysis of the data presented in Table 5.1, I identify distinct patterns in gender representation across different organisational types. Profit-led organisations demonstrate traditional male leadership structures with significant gender pay gaps, despite having a predominantly female workforce at lower levels. My examination of customer-led organisations reveals more mixed gender representation: inequality persists at higher levels, but with an emerging trend of female leadership in environmental sustainability and ESG roles.

Value-led organisations show a more integrated approach, explicitly connecting gender equality with environmental sustainability strategy, though they face challenges maintaining diversity as they scale. My investigation of product-led organisations reveals unique gender dynamics. Women's pathways to leadership typically emerge through design roles, though male figures increasingly enter leadership positions as brands grow. These varying approaches to gender representation and equality across organisational types provide a framework for understanding the complex relationship between organisational structure, leadership, and gender dynamics in the Australian fashion industry.

Building on these patterns, I examine women's roles in driving environmental sustainability initiatives and examine the relationship between gender equality and sustainable practices. Through this analysis, I demonstrate how gender dynamics influence environmental sustainability implementation, and how emerging environmental sustainability roles may create new pathways for women's advancement. To better understand the broader context of

these dynamics, I begin by presenting a fundamental paradox within the industry: the dominance of women in the workforce but an underrepresentation of women in leadership.

Table 5.1 Organisational typology

	Profit-led	**Customer-led**	**Values-led**	**Product-led**
Key Characteristics	• Large revenue and product volume • Focus on maximizing growth and profit via low-cost production and synthetic materials • Often well-established legacy brands	• Large and established brands • Focus on high-quality products that respond to customer needs • Brands with positive reputations and loyal customers	• Small to medium size • Focus on few products and natural materials • Often young organisations with transparent supply chains	• Variable size • Focus on product aesthetics and craftsmanship • Customer base willing to pay higher prices
Sustainability Framing	• Compliance requirement that adds production costs • Reactive to external pressures • Limited internal communication	• Competitive advantage and business necessity • Pragmatic implementation • Leadership aspiration	• Core to the business model • Long-term educational perspective • Industry change agents	• Secondary to design • Opportunity-based perspective that leverages firm creativity and quality • Variable commitment
Sustainability Engagement	• Limited strategic integration • Focus on cost-effective sustainability measures • Compliance-focused initiatives	• Integration into broader strategy • Balanced with business viability • Evidence-based sustainability programs	• Embedded throughout organisational DNA • Favours impact over profit • Innovation focus	• Design-integrated solutions • Selective implementation based on brand alignment • Material selection focus

Gender Dimensions	• Traditional male leadership • Significant gender pay gaps • Women concentrated in lower levels	• Mixed-gender representation in leadership • More women in middle management • Some female executives in ESG roles	• Strong gender equality-environmental sustainability link • Gender equality core to strategy • Diversity challenges during growth	• Gender representation varies by size • More male figures enter as brands grow • Some women in creative leadership roles

Male Leadership in a Female-Dominated Industry

I first analysed secondary data from the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA), which requires publicly listed organisations with more than 100 employees to disclose information on gender equality. The dataset, as listed by WGEA, contains 50 Australian fashion corporate entities. For each entity, I gathered five key data points: the gender pay gap, presence of gender equality policies, the overall percentage of female employees, the percentage of women in leadership roles (senior managers and above) and the percentage of women on the board. I then computed averages across entities to gain insights into the prevailing state of gender equality within the Australian fashion industry. Nine organisations in the WGEA dataset were also participants in my interviews. Two report to WGEA under the umbrella of their parent organisation (ID11 and ID30) so seven were standalone entities (ID5, ID6, ID10, ID27, ID9, ID18, ID29).

In my analysis of the gender pay gap data in the Australian fashion industry, as presented in Table 5.2, I identified significant variations in wage disparities across companies. I found a range from -19.8% to +52.7%, with an average gap of 8.4% favouring male employees. For these calculations, positive numbers indicate that men are paid more than women (a gap favouring men), while negative numbers indicate that women are paid more than men (a gap favouring women). In examining the distribution pattern, I observed four key groups: companies with negative gaps, those with neutral pay gaps (within ±5% of parity), those with moderate gaps (5-9%), and those with large gaps (exceeding 9%). This categorisation aligns with established benchmarks, recognising that achieving and maintaining absolute zero pay gaps is uncommon, and that gaps beyond 9% represent a significant disparity requiring focused attention (WGEA, 2024). I noted the presence of four companies with gaps over 50% contributed to the elevated industry average, despite my finding that thirteen organisations report no gap or negative gaps favouring female employees.

While some organisations have achieved wage parity, others maintain substantial disparities. This variation suggests wage inequality stems primarily from company-specific factors rather than industry-wide constraints. The presence of organisations with zero pay gaps demonstrates equitable compensation is achievable within the industry.

Table 5.2 Gender pay gap distribution in the Australian fashion industry

Measure	Value
Range	-19.8% to +52.7%
Mean Pay Gap	8.4%
Distribution Categories	
Negative Gap	7 companies
Neutral Gap (±5%)	6 companies
Moderate Gap (5-9%)	25 companies
Substantial Gap (>9%)	12 companies
Key Statistics	
Median Gap	6.4%
Mode	0%
Standard Deviation	15.2%
Sample Size	50 companies

Analysis of the WGEA dataset reveals significant gender disparities within the Australian fashion industry, as illustrated in Table 5.3. The sector averages demonstrate concerning trends, with a substantial imbalance between female workforce participation (79%) and their representation in leadership (48%) and board positions (36%). Notably, 11% of organisations maintain a workforce that is 90% female yet have no female board representation, whilst 22% of organisations have no female board members whatsoever. Furthermore, 56% of organisations have females in less than half of their leadership roles, and a striking 59% operate without a gender equality policy.

Table 5.3 Gender representation across the industry

Category	Sector Averages (N=50)
Female workforce	79%
Female leadership[3]	48%
Female board representation	36%
Organisations where the workforce is comprised of 90%, and there is no female representation on the board	11%
Organisations with no female board members	22%

Organisations where females are in <50% of leadership roles	56%
Organisations with no gender equality policy	59%

[3]Defined as senior managers and above (WGEA, 2024).

Next, I analysed archival data to examine the gender distribution across various levels within my participant organisations. Australia's Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012 requires employers with 100 or more employees to report their gender equality data to WGEA. Only seven of my participant organisations report to WGEA as standalone entities, while the others are too small or report via a parent corporation. Additionally, some of the entities are international and have a smaller presence in Australia, so they do not report. Through annual reports, company websites, and other archival data, I was able to collect relevant data for 27 of 31 organisations (the remaining 4 were ID15, ID19, ID17, ID21).

Analysis of the participant organisations in this study reveals women constitute 80.65% of the total workforce, which drops to 66.69% in leadership roles, and 39.95% at the board level (where board data was available). These findings reflect a sector-wide issue of gender disparity at higher organisational levels, though the participant organisations show better female representation in leadership roles compared to the sector average (66.69% vs 48%). However, there are exceptions within my dataset. For instance, large multinational corporations that have faced prolonged scrutiny regarding gender equality displayed better representation of females at the leadership and board levels. External pressures, such as public scrutiny and regulatory requirements, may drive these organisations to address gender imbalances more effectively. During interviews, one large organisation (ID9) also highlighted how they had built an identity around being female-owned and operated. This is an exception to the typical pattern observed in the sector, where female representation declines at higher levels.

In Chapter 4, I created an organisational typology that distinguishes four types of organisations: profit-led, customer-led, values-led, and product-led. In Table 5.4 and Table 5.5 I present data that depicts interesting patterns in female representation across the different types of organisations. In Table 5.5, I show that product-led organisations demonstrate high and consistent representation of women at both employee and leadership levels (96.17% for both), suggesting a strong culture of gender equality throughout their organisational structure.

In contrast, the other three types show a notable 'drop-off' between employee and leadership representation.

Despite having the second-highest female employee percentage (88.75%), profit-led organisations show a decline in leadership representation (55.25%), suggesting potential barriers to advancement. Values-led organisations maintain a more moderate position but show better leadership representation (62.17%) relative to their employee base (75.25%) compared to profit-led firms. Customer-led organisations show the lowest percentages across both categories (67.75% employees, 50.57% leadership), though they maintain the smallest gap between employee and leadership representation. These patterns suggest organisational type may significantly influence the attraction and advancement of female talent, with product-led organisations appearing to be the most successful at achieving gender parity across levels.

Table 5.4 Mean gender distribution by organisation

ID	Organisation type	Percentage female employees	Percentage of female leadership[4]	Percentage female board
ID6	Profit-led	86	38	17
ID8	Profit-led	78	78	45
ID9	Profit-led	100	74	100
ID27	Profit-led	91	31	0
ID1	Customer-led	61	33	60
ID5	Customer-led	89	43	20
ID11	Customer-led	61	49	29
ID12	Customer-led	100	100	-
ID24	Customer-led	56	-	-
ID25	Customer-led	53	34	60
ID29	Customer-led	58	38	40
ID30	Customer-led	62	57	29
ID2	Values-led	100	100	-
ID3	Values-led	-	100	-
ID4	Values-led	-	0	-
ID14	Values-led	81	70	-

ID16	Values-led	76	60	-
ID23	Values-led	44	43	20
ID31	Values-led	100	100	-
ID7	Product-led	100	100	-
ID10	Product-led	-	0	-
ID13	Product-led	88	100	-
ID18	Product-led	89	43	20
ID20	Product-led	100	100	-
ID22	Product-led	100	50	-
ID26	Product-led	100	100	-
ID28	Product-led	-	100	-

[4]**Defined as senior managers and above (WGEA, 2024).**

Table 5.5 Mean gender distribution by category

Organisation type (N=27)	Percentage female employees	Percentage of female leadership[5]	Percentage female board
Profit-led (N=4)	88.75%	55.25%	40.50%
Customer-led (N=8)	67.75%	50.57%	39.67%
Values-led (N=7)	75.25%	62.17%	Not enough data
Product-led (N=8)	96.17%	96.17%	Not enough data
Total (N=27)	80.65%	66.69%	39.95%[6]

[5]**Defined as senior managers and above (WGEA, 2024).**

[6]**Across the 12 organisations with data.**

While these results reveal interesting patterns across organisational types, it is important to acknowledge several data limitations. The dataset has notable gaps, with some organisations missing data for employee percentages, leadership representation, or board composition. For instance, ID19 (profit-led), ID15 (customer-led), ID17 and ID21 (values-led) lack data across all categories. Board representation data is unavailable for most values-led and product-led organisations, as these entities typically operate at smaller scales or as private companies without formal board structures. This structural difference prevents meaningful board diversity comparisons across all four organisational types. Furthermore, while my sample provides valuable insights into gender representation patterns, it represents only a subset of organisations within the industry. As such, these findings should be considered indicative rather than representative of broader industry-wide trends. The patterns observed here

warrant further investigation with a larger and more complete dataset to validate these preliminary insights about the relationship between organisational type and gender representation.

My qualitative interview data further highlights the fashion industry's unbalanced gender distribution: while women are the majority of the workforce at entry and mid-level positions, men predominantly occupy leadership positions. As one participant (ID27) from a large profit-led organisation noted, executive positions remain disproportionately male despite the fashion sector being perceived as 'feminine' due to its high female representation at lower and middle management levels. These executives play pivotal roles in shaping and executing business decisions within the industry.

> It is a very much female-dominated industry. […] At the CEO and board level, it is still very much male-dominated. – ID27, Supply Chain Role, Large Profit-led

A participant affiliated with a values-led organisation (ID14), commenting on the overall industry rather than their specific organisation, remarked that men exclusively occupy board director roles. Additionally, a participant from a large profit-led organisation (ID19) observed the substantial presence of women in the industry neither empowers women nor facilitates their progress to higher levels within the organisational hierarchy. Another participant (ID7) observed a recurring trend wherein women attain middle management positions, but cannot advance further in their careers.

> Getting jobs in the industry is probably slightly easier if you're female at the lower levels. […] The board room is male, and everyone else is female. – ID14, Sustainability Role, Medium Values-led

> More women does not necessarily mean empowered women. – ID19, Social Responsibility Role, Large Profit-led

> Typically, you'll find women will cap out at a low level. C suite [high-ranking executive level positions] typically is not women or women-led. – ID7, Supply Chain and Sustainability Role, Medium Product-led

The absence of women at higher levels of the industry is supported by insights from the founder of a micro values-led organisation (ID2), who asserts women face a lack of

opportunities within the industry. The participant points out despite the strong presence of women in the industry, they are not afforded equal opportunities compared to their male counterparts. Another values-led founder (ID4a) contends the industry would benefit from improving its efforts to give women opportunities conducive to their professional advancement.

> When it comes to looking at who has been successful, and who is provided with opportunities, the fashion industry is made up of women. Yet, all of these opportunities are being given and provided to the men in the industry. – ID2, Founder, Micro Values-led

> Fashion as an industry employs a lot of women, and we can do better, I think, by providing more opportunities for them to take on more senior roles. – ID4a, Founder, Micro Values-led

The inconsistency between women's and men's representation within the industry is particularly noticeable in larger, well-established organisations. The majority of stakeholder participants, including two sustainability consultants and a journalist (ID36, ID33 and ID44), suggest the most longstanding entities within the industry tend to offer few opportunities for women. The sustainability consultants observe these well-established organisations are predominantly owned and led by men, even though most of the workforce responsible for manufacturing their products are women. The journalist echoes the leadership of these established entities is predominantly male. She notes their organisational structures are set up in a way that makes it difficult for women to reach leadership roles, with only a few managing to break through to upper echelons.

> The face of fashion is always feminine; it's always women; however, at the top, at the executive, it's all men. – ID36, Sustainability Consultant

> The big conglomerates like Kering and LVMH are owned by men. Chanel is a private company that's led by men. Then, on the other side, approximately 80% of people who make the clothes are women. – ID33, Sustainability Consultant

> The design world has traditionally been male-run, and 95% of those top brands are owned by men. […] The Tommy Hilfigers and the Guccis. You may start to see more women within the organisational structures, but it's certainly not equal. There may be

> one or two that rise that have the drive and the ability to push through those spaces. – ID44, Journalist

This viewpoint is held by a participant in a medium-sized product-led organisation (ID28). As organisations grow, more men are introduced into leadership positions.

> As Australian brands are growing, many males are brought in from a board perspective or management perspective. – ID28, Design Role, Medium Product-led

Gender-related issues have not progressed as much as participants anticipated. A participant from a profit-led organisation (ID9) observes the gender-based discussions and concerns prevalent in the 1990s remain largely unchanged.

> I used to look after this whole area of equal opportunity, affirmative action—whatever we used to call it way back in the 1990s, and we are still having much of the same conversation today, which I feel really sad that we're this many years down the track, and for all the reasons we know, but that we haven't had as much of that shift. – ID9, People Role, Large Profit-led

> In the last 20 years, it has been tough for a lot of women; there have been a lot of issues of overwork, under-resourced, and wellbeing issues. Men at the top, women underneath all of that. – ID32, Sustainability Consultant

Participants explained the gender disparities by referencing traditional gender stereotypes: men are perceived as being more business-oriented than women. Men occupy more business and finance roles, making them more likely to advance into leadership positions. A director from a circular economy NGO (ID46) suggested men prioritise profit generation and exhibit a heightened concern for financial matters, and women adopt a 'softer approach.' These perceptions reflect deeply ingrained societal beliefs that associate men with financial acumen and leadership, while framing women's skills as less aligned with business imperatives.

> There is a business common sense that definitely leads to decision-making on the male side, and maybe not so much on the female side. – ID29, Supply Chain Role, Large Customer-led

> It comes from a skill set perspective when you look at finance and economics, as well as running a business. They tend to be males who fit those roles. General managers all tend

> to come from the finance area, which tends to be male-dominated. – ID4b, Production Role, Micro Values-led

> They put men in those positions because they may come from more of a financial background, and they're driving profit and margin, etcetera. Whereas women can be softer in that respect. – ID46, Director of Circular Economy NGO

Some participants believed women may lack interest or the ambition to reach leadership roles. A production manager from a values-led organisation (ID4b) used herself as an example, describing herself as not being 'articulate' enough to take on those roles. One potential explanation for the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles is based on female professionals' self-perceived limitations in leadership abilities.

> Women aren't as ambitious to be in those roles. I certainly know I'm not. I'm happy to lead to this level, but I'm not articulate enough to be on a board or anything like that. – ID4b, Micro values-led production role

> There is no interest in women exploring the financial world. – ID8, Retail role, Large Profit-led

Furthermore, when women aspire to ascend to leadership positions, they often must align their behaviour with traditionally masculine traits. This adaptation extends even to lower levels of management, as emphasised by a sustainability manager who recounted the need to be perceived as serious, and not as an 'emotional' woman. This adaptation is often not required by men with similar attributes who are characterised as 'passionate'. A female founder (ID31) emphasises her masculine energy to be taken seriously as an organisational leader, reminding herself occasionally to revert to her feminine attributes. Additionally, a participant in a profit-led organisation (ID8) reflects on a specific situation, noting that her gender influenced her response and suggested had she been a man, she might have acted differently.

> It is hard, in general, for women to reach certain areas in the business. There's an attitude of men being passionate and women being emotional. I think there are certain things that I've had to navigate or change about myself [because of] the perception I'd have as a female as opposed to a male. – ID5b, Sustainability Role, Customer-led

> I do focus a lot on my masculine energy because being in business is quite a masculine thing. It's taking action, and I have to remember to fall back into that femininity sometimes. – ID31, Founder, Micro Values-led

> In hindsight, though, if I was a man, I would have negotiated. – ID8, Retail Role, Large Profit-led

Women in Sustainability

The relationship between gender and sustainability leadership presents a complex and evolving picture in the fashion industry. My research reveals an emerging pathway where sustainability roles may be creating new opportunities for women in leadership, though this pattern manifests differently across organisation types and sizes.

Analysis of gender representation across my sample reveals an unexpected pattern. In values-led organisations, female representation (Table 5.5: 75.25% employees, 62.17% leadership) falls behind that of product-led organisations, showing patterns similar to profit-led entities. This finding appears to contradict existing research suggesting values-led organisations typically demonstrate stronger gender equality practices (Ennas et al., 2023). However, this comparison requires careful interpretation: my sample includes only nine values-led organisations, of which 6 were founder-operated with few additional employees, making workforce gender representation data less robust for comparative analysis.

Research demonstrates that female leaders have shown stronger commitment to environmental initiatives than their male counterparts (Larrieta de Celies et al., 2014). Studies have found that companies with women in executive positions are more likely to prioritise and implement comprehensive sustainability programmes (Bose et al., 2022). My participants describe this relationship as bidirectional: while women leaders champion sustainability, sustainability roles are increasingly creating pathways for women to enter executive leadership.

This dynamic was highlighted by participants from both profit-led and customer-led organisations, who noted the recent elevation of sustainability and ESG roles (often occupied by women) to the executive level.

> In the last couple of years, you are seeing a head of sustainability on the executive who might be a woman. – ID27, Supply Chain Role, Large Profit-led

> My newly appointed general manager of ESG on the executive is a woman. – ID11, Social Impact Role, Large Customer-led

However, this pathway to leadership appears constrained. A participant in a profit-led people role (ID9) and a fashion journalist (ID44) noted that while women often advocate for sustainability initiatives, ultimate decision-making power typically remains with men in financial or executive leadership roles.

> What I have always found interesting is we talk about this (sustainability) being really important, but it's the men around the table having the conversation around this issue. – ID9, People role, Large Profit-Led

> It's the women asking the questions and asking for the change a lot of the time. ... But perhaps the organisational culture predisposes profit and predisposes men to decision-making positions. – ID44, Journalist

An interesting disconnect emerged between perception and reality regarding female founders in sustainable fashion. One participant (ID3) perceived women as driving sustainability initiatives in smaller enterprises.

> A few male-owned businesses are leaders in sustainability in Australia, but the vast majority of them, and it's often the smaller ones that make the biggest difference because there's a lot more of them; they're the ones being founded by women. – ID3, Founder, Small Values-led

However, this perception contrasts with my sample data, where four values-led organisations were founded by men, two by a man and a woman, and three by women only. I acknowledge that my sample size of nine values-led organisations is not representative. In addition, this disparity may reflect multiple other factors. High-profile female founders in sustainability receive greater media attention and are more active in sustainability advocacy, potentially creating an impression of greater representation than currently exists in the industry (Adams & Funk, 2012). Additionally, Ibarra's (1992) research on network homophily suggests that female founders might connect more frequently with other women in the field, particularly

those who share similar values around sustainability. This clustering effect could lead to an overestimation of female representation in the broader industry.

Participants consistently attributed women's engagement with sustainability to perceived gender-specific characteristics. These ranged from practical observations about workplace dynamics to essentialist views linking women's sustainability engagement to biological characteristics.

> Working in a sustainability role, because it's very cross-functional, to be successful, you need a lot of those softer skills that women tend to have more. – ID20, Production Role, Micro Product-led

> Women naturally have that nurturing and caring; we carry a child and give birth. We're grounded; we're always looking at how we create a better home, and sustainability is a big part of that because it's where we live. – ID28, Design Role, Medium Product-led

While these perspectives reflect genuine participant beliefs, they risk reinforcing gender stereotypes and potentially legitimising the concentration of women in sustainability roles without corresponding decision-making authority.

The emergence of sustainability executive roles may represent a double-edged sword for gender equality in fashion industry leadership. While these positions create new pathways for women to enter executive leadership, there's a risk of pigeonholing women into sustainability roles while traditional power centres remain male-dominated. This dynamic mirrors broader patterns where women often lead corporate social responsibility initiatives but remain underrepresented in core financial and strategic leadership positions (Eagly & Carli, 2003).

Despite these challenges, my data suggests that sustainability leadership roles are creating meaningful opportunities for women's advancement, particularly in larger organisations. High-profile female sustainability leaders, while not yet representative of industry-wide patterns, may be establishing important precedents and creating visibility that could drive future change. This presents an indirect but potentially valuable pathway toward greater gender equality in fashion industry leadership. These findings suggest that the relationship between sustainability and gender equality in fashion industry leadership is neither simple nor unidirectional. While sustainability roles create new leadership opportunities for women,

achieving broader gender equality will likely require addressing deeper structural barriers that currently limit women's access to core decision-making positions.

Gender Equality and Sustainability

I asked participants if they felt there was a relationship between gender equality and environmental sustainability. Several respondents posited that gender equality and environmental sustainability share an inherent and interconnected relationship, often invoking the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals to support this view. However, despite the rhetoric, they failed to articulate specific dynamics or mechanisms that could substantiate or enhance this relationship, leaving the connection somewhat underexamined.

> If we can empower women, it's one of the top things you can do to address climate. … So, if you want to do anything in sustainability, empower women. – ID11, Social Impact Role, Large Customer-led

> Everything suggests that the more women are empowered, the more action comes off the back. – ID19, Social Responsibility Role, Large Profit-led

> One of the top 10 things we can do for climate change is empowering women. – ID17, Country Director, Large Values-led

Environmental sustainability and gender equality are increasingly recognised as interconnected elements of CSR initiatives (Miles, 2011). A sustainability consultant (ID32) explains how, in the years following the #MeToo movement, gender equality has become a standard pillar in environmental sustainability strategies developed for fashion organisations. Stakeholder expectations further reinforce this deliberate incorporation of gender equality into environmental sustainability frameworks. As a social impact professional (ID11) observed, both internal and external stakeholders now view gender and inclusion issues as integral components of the broader environmental sustainability umbrella. The convergence of these two areas is evident both in internal organisational practices and external stakeholder expectations, reflecting a broader understanding that gender equality is not merely a separate social issue but rather an essential element of comprehensive environmental sustainability strategies.

> In the last 4 to 5 years since the ‘Me Too’ movement, it’s understood that if you get someone in like me, and you’re a fashion brand and want a sustainability strategy, I will include that (gender equality) in one of your pillars. – ID32, Sustainability Consultant

> Shareholders, stakeholders, and the business in general would see that issues related to gender and inclusion are part of the wider sustainability movement. – ID11, Social Impact Role, Large Customer-led

The relationship between environmental sustainability and gender equality is particularly strong in values-led organisations, where sustainability is interpreted as an overarching framework that encompasses and actively promotes all aspects of environmental and social standards. These organisations actively strive to integrate and advance various social dimensions under the umbrella of environmental sustainability.

> Sustainability covers everything; environment, diversity, equity, and inclusion are all under that umbrella. – ID14, Sustainability Role, Medium Values-led

Summary

My examination of the Australian fashion industry has revealed a noticeable gender disparity: women dominate lower organisational levels but men predominantly hold executive and leadership roles, wielding pivotal decision-making authority. My participants believe men and women have, and are perceived to have, distinct characteristics. This belief underlies men’s tendency to gravitate towards business or financial roles, typically situated at the upper echelons of the organisational hierarchy. At the same time, women are more often associated with positions where their softer skills, such as sensitivity, nurturing, and caring, can be effectively employed.

Intriguingly, these softer skills align closely with the attributes often associated with environmental sustainability roles, creating a unique avenue for women to transition from middle management to leadership positions by representing environmental sustainability on the executive level. Furthermore, the discussion highlighted the dynamic relationship between women and environmental sustainability, emphasising women’s active role in advocating and driving environmental sustainability initiatives within organisational settings.

This relationship not only highlights women's influence in reshaping industry practices but also positions them as catalysts for positive change.

Finally, I observed the interconnected nature of gender equality and environmental sustainability, showcasing how these two critical dimensions mutually reinforce each other within the contemporary organisational landscape. This observation sheds light on the need for a paradigm shift within the industry, advocating for increased gender inclusivity, particularly in leadership roles, to foster a more sustainable and equitable future for the Australian fashion landscape.

CHAPTER 6: COMMUNICATING SUSTAINABILITY TO CUSTOMERS

In this chapter, I examine organisational communication of sustainability to customers. I analyse how organisational identity and motivations shape responses to these environmental sustainability demands. I then examine the evolving landscape of organisations' sustainability communication, and the drivers of the shift in communication strategies. Data from the interviews and archival materials illustrate how organisations tailor their communication strategies to reflect their motivations and identity, whilst the customer focus groups reveal how these communications are received and interpreted. I highlight organisations educating customers about environmental sustainability, illustrating the ongoing evolution in sustainability communication through both the organisational and customer lenses.

Building on the organisational types established in Chapter 4, Table 6.1 shows how profit-led, customer-led, values-led, and product-led organisations differ in their customer communication and engagement approaches. This table reveals distinct communication patterns, from the cautious stance typical of profit-led organisations to the proactive, educational approach characteristic of values-led firms. I discuss the diverse approaches taken by organisations in communicating environmental sustainability efforts, aligning these approaches with their unique identities.

Table 6.1 Organisational typology

	Profit-led	Customer-led	Values-led	Product-led
Key Characteristics	• Large revenue and product volume • Focus on maximizing growth and profit via low-cost production and synthetic materials • Often well-established legacy brands	• Large and established brands • Focus on high-quality products that respond to customer needs • Brands with positive reputations and loyal customers	• Small to medium size • Focus on few products and natural materials • Often young organisations with transparent supply chains	• Variable size • Focus on product aesthetics and craftsmanship • Customer base willing to pay higher prices
Sustainability Framing	• Compliance requirement that adds production costs • Reactive to external pressures • Limited internal communication	• Competitive advantage and business necessity • Pragmatic implementation • Leadership aspiration	• Core to the business model • Long-term educational perspective • Industry change agents	• Secondary to design • Opportunity-based perspective that leverages firm creativity and quality • Variable commitment
Sustainability Engagement	• Limited strategic integration • Focus on cost-effective sustainability measures • Compliance-focused initiatives	• Integration into broader strategy • Balanced with business viability • Evidence-based sustainability programs	• Embedded throughout organisational DNA • Favours impact over profit • Innovation focus	• Design-integrated solutions • Selective implementation based on brand alignment • Material selection focus
Gender Dimensions	• Traditional male leadership • Significant gender pay gaps • Women concentrated in lower levels	• Mixed-gender representation in leadership • More women in middle management	• Strong gender equality-sustainability link • Gender equality core to strategy	• Gender representation varies by size • More male figures enter as brands grow

		• Some female executives in ESG roles	Diversity challenges during growth	• Some women in creative leadership roles
Customer communication	• View customers as sales targets • Communicate cautiously • Engage through traditional marketing	• View customers as strategic partners • Communicate with evidence and growing transparency • Engage through continuous feedback	• View customers as change agents • Communicate openly and educationally • Engage through striving to be educational leaders and industry pioneers	• View customers as design appreciators • Communicate selectively and subtly • Engage through design storytelling

Organisation Actions on Sustainability

Profit-Led

Customers increasingly express concerns about sustainability while prioritising affordability in purchasing decisions (Hassan, Shiu & Shaw, 2014). These competing expectations create a complex landscape that organisations must traverse. Organisations need to respond to growing demands for sustainable practices; but they must balance this with the fundamental customer expectation of affordable products and services. This tension is particularly salient for profit-led organisations where sustainability is recognised, but price remains decisive. This pressure is accompanied by conflicting expectations. Customers want more sustainable products or appreciate locally made goods but simultaneously expect affordability, creating tension between these competing desires.

> Customers want more sustainable products or like something locally made, but they also expect affordability. There's a tension between those expectations. – ID27, Supply Chain Role, Large Profit-led

> There’s a bit of an ask from the customer to accept that sustainable products will be more expensive. – ID6, Production role, Large Profit-led

> We find customer pressure [for sustainability] the most pressing but also the most rewarding. … Customers want more sustainable products or like something locally made, but they also expect affordability. There's a tension between those expectations. – ID27, Supply Chain Role, Large Profit-led

The rise of fast fashion brands offering extremely low-cost items exacerbates this challenge. Profit-led organisations are aware of the dichotomy in customer preferences: expressing interest in environmental sustainability while continuing to purchase low-cost, mass-produced clothing. This complicates efforts to balance environmental sustainability and profitability. Sharing information about environmental sustainability practices can be daunting for profit-led organisations, as they fear adverse reactions or claims of insufficient efforts from customers.

> I think that our business, as well as others, is probably still a little too traditional in sharing information in the sense that we think that if you share something negative, it will be seen negatively. – ID27, Supply Chain Role, Large Profit-led

Profit-led organisations perceive that the lack of customer understanding of the complexities of environmental sustainability and supply chain management further exacerbates the challenge.

> People don't understand or don't know the work that's been done in the background. – ID6, Production role, Large Profit-led

Even well-intentioned actions may not resonate with customers, making decision-making and information-sharing particularly challenging.

> Sometimes, the best thing to do doesn't sound good to customers. – ID19, Social Responsibility Role, Large Profit-led

> We have a template of – well what is factual? And how do we want to communicate this? But it doesn't sound very [good], and then other people want to add this or add that. – ID27, Supply Chain Role, Large Profit-led

This dilemma highlights the need for careful communication strategies. In response, some profit-led organisations are adopting a more transparent approach demonstrating a shift towards openness about their sustainability journey.

> So the initial step was for us to do the right thing, to use those recycled fibres or sustainable fibres, and then work on how to tell the story about it. – ID6, Production Role, Large Profit-led

Profit-led organisations are slowly beginning to recognise the value of honesty and transparency in their communication. This approach is yielding positive responses from customers.

> We're always saying 20% and growing of our range is sustainable, but we're not saying we're the most sustainable brand out there because there's still 80% of the product there. With our customers, we try to be as vulnerable as possible when it comes to these messages... and we're getting really good responses. - ID19, Social Responsibility Role, Large Profit-led

One of the participants from a profit-led organisation (ID27) believed customers appreciate this vulnerability, and respond well to brands committed to improvement, despite imperfections.

> They're happy to see a brand that's not perfect, but is committed to improvement. – ID27, Supply Chain Role, Large Profit-led

Customer-Led

Customer-led organisations increasingly prioritise listening to their customers and embedding customer preferences and values into business strategies. This is evident in the use of customer feedback mechanisms, which are essential for aligning business priorities with customer expectations.

> Naturally, we have customer focus groups and feedback channels that enable them to say, this is what we want and what we expect. – ID5a, People Role, Large Customer-led

Customer-led organisations understand their customers are becoming more interested in the origins of products, and the ethical considerations surrounding their production.

> We know that the customer is conscious of the products that they buy, where they're sourced, how they're made, and who makes them. – ID5a, People Role, Large product-led

Two participants from customer-led organisations (ID11 and ID5a) made clear they now recognise the commercial importance of aligning with these values to ensure their organisations' long-term relevance. These participants view engagement with environmental sustainability as risk mitigation, and an essential component of market survival.

> The growing realisation commercially that our customers care about this, especially the millennial, X, Y, and Z generations. If we want to be around in the future, we have to realise they care about this more than we do. – ID11, Social Impact Role, Large Customer-led

> Without the customer buying your product, you don't exist. – ID5a, People Role, Large Customer-led

Effectively communicating environmental sustainability initiatives is critical for fostering customer engagement. Like profit-led organisations, customer-led entities face challenges in sharing their progress and vision in a way that resonates with customers.

> The biggest challenge is sharing the stories; it's so easy sometimes to drive the change, but continually sharing that story can be one of the most challenging things. – ID5b, Sustainability Role, Large Customer-led

Another common theme among customer-led organisations is the historical reluctance to share environmental sustainability efforts due to fear of greenwashing. One participant in a social impact role (ID11) notes cultural norms around humility and self-effacement can hinder organisations from promoting their achievements.

> We haven't been good at telling our sustainability story. Part of it is that Kiwi-Aussie, we don't want to blow our own horn, and so it's that self-effacing, tall poppy [syndrome]. – ID11, Social Impact Role, Large Customer-led

Furthermore, the fear of greenwashing has previously hindered publicising environmental sustainability efforts, but organisations are now adopting a more open approach, acknowledging imperfections while showcasing progress.

> I think when it comes to greenwashing, we've gone on a trajectory as an industry where people were too scared to say anything for fear of being called out; we're now in a position where people are confidently saying, hey, we're not perfect, we're not claiming to be perfect, we're on a journey, and we're going to tell you about this. – ID5b, Sustainability Role, Large Customer-led

This shift in approach reflects a desire to build trust and accountability. Companies believe customers increasingly demand evidence of action, rather than promises of future change.

> The thing is with sustainability, or anything like that, if you market it saying this is what we're going to do, customers [say] okay, you said you were going to do it, but did you do it? So, we usually get it all in place, and then we'll market it [and say] this is what we've done. – ID15, Sustainability Role, Large Customer-led

Customer-led organisations are proactively working to create transparency, recognising its role in fostering long-term trust and engagement.

> Customers respond to businesses being authentic and honest and that it's the gateway of transformation, our wound, our imperfection. – ID11, Social Impact Role, Large Customer-led

> We're focused on this transparency project, and bringing a traceability index into product pages so that we can say to people, this is where we're at on this journey, and share that this isn't linear either; we're moving and seeking to have a hundred per cent traceability across our supply chain, but one year we might go back a percentage, whereas the next year we might go up five percentages based on changing supply chains.– ID5b, Sustainability role, Large customer-led

While some organisations are in the early stages of environmental sustainability reporting, they are making notable progress. These efforts are framed as part of an ongoing journey, acknowledging both achievements and areas for improvement.

> While we are still in the early stages of our sustainability reporting, we have commenced the implementation of critical changes to our processes and policies, so that we can make the best decisions for our people and the planet. We are up for the challenge, and we are proud of what we have achieved so far. – ID24, Sustainability report, Medium Customer-led

> There are just as many areas where we are not satisfied by the pace of change – circular assortment remains nascent at 3%, and we have only completed the work to confirm that 6% of our brands are meeting our human rights standards. There is no shortage of work to do, but as you will see in this report, our hard work to define the future of fashion and influence the ecosystem in our markets remains very much in motion. – ID1, Webpage, Large Customer-led

Organisations are exploring innovative communication strategies to strengthen customer understanding of their environmental sustainability efforts. From product labelling to in-store signage, the goal is to ensure that customers perceive the organisation's commitment to environmental sustainability.

> How do we make sure that through labelling, talking cards, and in-store signage, people are on that journey, and they can't help but leave that store knowing about our focus? I think we've got some way to go there, but it's a focus for us. – ID5b, Sustainability role, Large Customer-led

Values-Led

Values-led organisations, driven by principles of responsible conduct, approach customer demands for environmental sustainability by aiming to influence customer mindsets and values towards valuing environmental sustainability, rather than solely responding to short-term market demands. This approach may lead to a situation where values-led organisations press ahead with sustainability even in absence of clear customer demand.

> We conducted customer research and realised no one cared about sustainability, or if something was made in Australia. If customers cared, we'd all be forced to change, but right now, we're not. – ID4b, Production Role, Micro Values-led

> We've done some external research, and the people we talk to outside our customer set are aware of the environment but lack knowledge about fashion production, and many simply don't care. – ID4a, Founder, Micro Values-led

> People will buy what they love at the right price, with the right fit and design aesthetic. That is the primary decision for purchasing decisions. – ID3, Founder, Small Values-led

Nonetheless, values-led organisations believe customer awareness will eventually shift. They argue while many customers do not prioritise environmental sustainability, a growing segment is becoming more conscious. By adhering to their core values, these organisations anticipate their message will resonate with a broader audience over time, particularly as environmental sustainability awareness increases.

> People are willing to pay more, seeking out those prioritising sustainability, and this trend is growing exponentially. – ID17, Country Director, Large Values-led

> Our customer base is growing as awareness of socially and environmentally conscious brands increases. – ID14, Sustainability Role, Medium Values-led

Values-led organisations have prioritised transparency and authentic communication from their inception. These organisations share the awareness, similar to other organisations, of the necessity for humility when addressing environmental sustainability matters. However, they also emphasise the importance of sharing these narratives, indicating their willingness to openly discuss their environmental sustainability efforts. A country director representing a large values-led organisation (ID17) presents their marketing strategy of 'doing good things

and then telling people'. This approach has been a consistent practice for them, which may have contributed to their growth over time.

> That idea of toeing the line of humility, and not talking about things, to talk about them and be loud about what we're doing. Then, we also identify that these are things that are important to talk about and things that people are interested in engaging in conversation with. – ID23, Customer Role, Large Values-led

> I often describe our marketing as our company should do good things, and then we can tell people about it rather than the other way around. Don't tell what we're going to do next. Let's talk when we have made an accomplishment, and then let's talk about what's still to be done as much as what's been accomplished. – ID17, Country Director, Large Values-led

A representative from a smaller values-led organisation (ID4b) highlights the purpose behind this practice, emphasising the desire to derive strength from transparency and candidly address the challenges they confront despite the prevalent fear of criticism in the industry. Additionally, the director of a large values-led organisation (ID17) emphasises the connection between this communicative approach and establishing customer trust, viewing it as a strategic means to build credibility with their audience.

> Because we communicate openly and regularly about our practices, our customers come to us expecting and seeking these elements when shopping. – ID4b, Production role, Micro Values-led

> Two of our enduring promises are always to be transparent and communicate openly, finding strength in our vulnerability. Honouring these promises means discussing the challenges we face and how we aim to overcome them. – ID4, Impact Report, Micro Values-led

> You have probably seen through our marketing, that there's a lot of detail because we believe details matter … Let's let our commitment to transparency be a reason why people can trust what we're saying. – ID17, Country Director, Large Values-led

Acknowledging the significance of customer education, values-led organisations go beyond the expected standard and extend their commitment to actively educating customers who may need more awareness. These organisations view this proactive stance as a responsibility, and

an integral part of their mission. By assuming the role of educators, values-led organisations aim to bridge the knowledge gap, and empower customers to make informed choices in alignment with environmental sustainability principles. They believe their efforts will help create a better industry by holding other entities accountable, and highlighting challenges within the industry.

> One of the big differences with us, especially on a human rights level, is that we're not there to prove everything is perfect. We're there to identify where it's not and prove that it's not and it's different. It means that we can identify issues and resolve them. Versus if we're out there to prove it is, we can probably prove it is, and therefore, we skim over the truths that are in front of us. – ID16, Founder, Small Values-led

> We like to view our roles as, myself as well as everyone in the company, as key stakeholders in the brand and educators for our community. – ID4a, Founder, Micro Values-led

This is demonstrated through their continuous external efforts to expose greenwashing practices, and position themselves as an alternative to the predominant fast fashion model.

> We call out greenwashing. We promptly call it out, or bring it to people's attention through our social media feeds. So that we're keeping it front-of-mind for people to go, it is your right to ask these questions, and yeah, come and ask us. But you should also ask other brands. – ID4b, Production role, Micro Values-led

> Fast fashion is like junk food – cheap but ultimately bad for you and the planet. It's a love-hate relationship built on exploitation and micro-trends you don't need and won't remember. But it doesn't have to be this way. [organisation name] exists to promote a healthier relationship with your clothes. – ID4, Webpage, Micro Values-led

Product-Led

For product-led organisations, aesthetics and craftsmanship often take precedence over environmental sustainability. Although they acknowledge growing customer awareness of environmental sustainability, it is not seen as the primary driver of their sustainability efforts. A sustainability manager from a product-led organisation believed customer interest in environmental sustainability was secondary to their focus on brand development. This perspective is reinforced by a participant in a design role (ID28) who cautioned against

continuously responding to shifting customer demands, highlighting the importance of maintaining the brand's identity rather than trying to respond to market trends.

> We are a creative-led company on the outlook, and I think it's about doing it for ourselves and not necessarily having a green website and a strong message. Some brands consider it important to have their brand messaging and storytelling as part of their product. I'm not saying that we won't message more, but I don't think it's where we're at in terms of our brand alignment. – ID10b, Sustainability Role, Medium Product-led

> It's not pressure from customers. One thing I've learned is that customers don't care. - ID7, Supply Chain and Sustainability Role, Medium Product-led

> We don't focus on the customer's wants because that ties you to them forever. You're constantly feeding the beast because their demands change so fast. We prefer customers to come to us because of what our brand represents. – ID28, Design Role, Medium Product-led

This focus on brand identity and values is also reflected in how product-led organisations communicate about their environmental sustainability efforts. A participant from a product-led organisation (ID26) revealed their environmental sustainability efforts have mainly remained undisclosed, due to fear of external perceptions and judgements. Consequently, their customers remain uninformed about these actions despite their adherence to responsible practices. Another participant from a product-led organisation (ID28) reinforced the prevailing concern that publicising information about their environmental sustainability practices may prompt adverse reactions, or claims of insufficient efforts from customers.

> I don't know, to toot your own horn and say that you're mastering sustainability is a pretty big claim - ID26, Founder, Micro Product-led

> We've been quite sustainable and working on our sustainability journey for quite some time, but they are extremely quiet about it. And I think that's because it's such an area with vast opinions, and there is such an aspect of being completely sustainable - ID28, Design Role, Medium Product-led

This cautious approach to communication is also driven by a desire to ensure environmental sustainability efforts are genuine and effective before they are publicly disclosed.

> As we make bigger strides in sustainability, I think we want to do the work first before we start communicating or making broader commitments. … I think we want to be ready for customers to answer all their questions across all the product categories. – ID7, Supply Chain and Sustainability Role, Medium Product-led

Stakeholder Perspectives

Stakeholder perspectives provide valuable insights into the relationship between customers, organisations, and the broader environmental sustainability agenda in the fashion industry. Several stakeholders point out brands are unlikely to proactively address these issues unless customers begin to push for more sustainable practices. This reflects a broader industry trend where environmental sustainability is not necessarily a priority unless there is clear demand from the market. This positions the customer as a key driver of change, with companies only responding once they recognise a tangible shift in customer expectations.

> I think brands won't shift unless the customers are pushing them to. They've been able to keep it under the table, not look at it, not address it. Now there's a lot more customers demanding accountability and that's where they go okay I've got to do something. – ID33, Sustainability Consultant

> I've spoken to some CEOs who said they've seen the shift, and now is the time to start acting, which is why they picked up the phone to me. Their customers, who they previously thought weren't ready, are now ready. Now, it's time for the industry to catch up. – ID47, Rental Organisation Founder

The role of the customer is crucial in this narrative, not just in terms of driving demand, but also in how their awareness and education have evolved. Stakeholders I interviewed indicated customers are becoming increasingly informed about environmental sustainability issues, asking more sophisticated questions, and demanding greater transparency from brands. However, there is still a divide between different customer market segments. A sustainability consultant (ID33) I interviewed points out that certain demographics, such as millennials, are more likely to prioritise environmental sustainability. However, fast fashion and social media trends may still heavily influence younger generations.

> Customers are becoming a lot more educated, and they are asking a lot more questions. – ID33, Sustainability Consultant

> Customers are far more aware of what many of these ethical fashion issues mean, and in much more detail than they did 10 years ago. – ID38, NGO Advocacy Role

> There are the millennials who care about change, and they'll only buy from a sustainable brand, but I think once you get younger than that at the moment, there's a huge portion of customers who only care about the new, and there's this whole fake appearance on social media that is driving this massive appetite. – ID33, Sustainability Consultant

While customer awareness is growing, the pressure to conform to the latest trends showcased by influencers can undermine efforts towards more sustainable consumption. As pointed out by my participants, social media platforms have strategically evolved into virtual shopping malls, capitalising on users' desire to emulate influencer lifestyles, while influencers themselves acknowledge compromising their integrity due to financial incentives from brand partnerships.

> The desire is there, but the counterbalance is influencer culture and the dopamine hit of wanting to fit in and look like the people on my screen, and I can. Instagram has turned into a shopping mall. Strategically, that is their goal, and it's working. – ID35, Resale Organisation Founder

> I don't know how much integrity I have sometimes when working with a brand because I'm getting paid. – ID39, Social Media Influencer

Another key theme stakeholders identify is the complexity of customer decision-making regarding environmental sustainability. A sustainability consultant (ID32) highlights how customers are caught between their desire to make ethical choices, and the practical realities of affordability and convenience.

> It's complex because it comes down to whether you want to shop your values and/or whether you need convenience and affordability. – ID32, Sustainability Consultant

A fashion journalist (ID43) supports the belief that organisations become vulnerable when they publicly commit to environmental sustainability, as customers and other stakeholders will criticise them if they perceive any missteps or inconsistencies in their environmental sustainability practices.

> There is that vulnerability of putting yourself out there to be cancelled or put down, or you've said or done the wrong thing. People can quickly jump on a comment section of an article or an Instagram post and share their two cents. – ID43, Journalist

While transparency in communication marks a significant advancement for the industry, given the increasing awareness among customers about what transpires 'behind the scenes,', another potent tool is the active education of customers. A sustainability consultant (ID33) states customers may need a clearer understanding of environmental sustainability, or the factors that make a product sustainable. Furthermore, two stakeholders in government organisations (ID42 and ID40) stress the importance of educating customers on how to care for their clothing, and what steps to take when they are done with them—an aspect that many customers may not be well-informed about.

> Companies can say it's sustainable, but what does that mean? Nobody knows, even the customer doesn't know. – ID33, Sustainability Consultant

> There has to be more information. Washing labels: Are people washing cold washing? Are you only washing when you need to? – ID42, Government Sustainability Strategist

> Customers cannot be responsible for all of that. The person who produces that product needs to be responsible for that. And educating the customer on what to do when they're finished with it rather than just not taking any responsibility as most brands do at the moment. – ID40, Government Circular Economy Role

Customer Perspectives

These themes were supported by data from focus group participants who articulated an increasing scepticism towards companies that 'shout loud' about their environmental sustainability practices. They report noticing a pattern wherein large brands often showcase their purported environmental sustainability achievements, but they are increasingly growing doubtful of the authenticity of these claims.

> If someone's shouting loud about their green credentials, I tend to think that the reality is probably inversely proportional to how loud they're being. — Participant 1, FG3

> I know, for example, that Cotton On says it's made from X amount of recycled materials or whatever. Sometimes, initially, I was misguided by those marketing campaigns, but

> now I just have such a mistrust when I see anything printed by a bigger brand claiming how sustainable it is. – Participant 4, FG3

Participants expressed a lack of trust in major brands stemming from negative media reports. Such experiences have created a broader apprehension towards environmental sustainability claims, emphasising the importance of transparent and demonstrable sustainability efforts to rebuild customer trust. Some participants believe in smaller brands, seeing them as more trustworthy and transparent.

> I don't trust any big brands anymore because I thought I was shopping at good brands, but then something comes out. – Participant 2, FG2

> I've lost so much trust that I'll start researching something, and I'll just think, oh my gosh, it's not worth it; I can't be bothered, so I would just go to an op shop or buy second-hand. – Participant 5, FG2

> I only feel like I can trust small businesses, artisans, and people who are just making homemade stuff. – Participant 1, FG2

In explaining their attraction to a particular brand, the focus group participant mentioned this brand was smaller, indicating that smaller brands tend to excel in this type of communication. They even expressed their intention to save money specifically to purchase that brand.

> It's a very small business. … And they put a lot of intention behind the materials they use. So, then I followed them [and] now I'm seeing the process of their work, you see the way they engage with their team and the content that they post, and because I followed them for a long time I kind of feel now that I trust that brand, and it is one of those brands that I am saving up for. – Participant 1, FG2

Focus group participants expressed frustration with the lack of clarity around sustainable and unsustainable practices. They struggled to identify and make sustainable shopping choices. They highlighted a notable absence of guidance on what criteria to consider, and expressed scepticism regarding the ability of store employees to provide accurate information on the environmental sustainability of products. Additionally, one participant (Participant 4, FG1) noted the average customer faces time constraints or lacks motivation to conduct extensive research, leaving them uninformed about how to shop sustainably.

> I think, as a customer, I actually don't know enough about the topic to be able to choose sustainable providers of fashion or where to get that information. – Participant 3, FG1

> I think it's quite difficult, just look at women's fashion; there's nothing there that tells me whether the fashion's sustainable or not. Even the high-end fashion, there's nothing. And I'm not even sure if I was to ask someone there whether they would know. – Participant 4, FG1

> Unless you're already aware enough that you've done your research and you're willing to dig deeper, the average customer is not going to spend that much time. – Participant 1, FG2

Participants in the focus group also noted insufficient information, particularly regarding product labels. They indicated a common reliance on labels to understand the environmental sustainability of items, yet frequently encountered uncertainty regarding their accuracy. For instance, they referenced the Better Cotton certification, perceiving it as an indicator of environmental sustainability. However, they expressed uncertainty about its true environmental sustainability implications, exacerbated by conflicting opinions from peers. This contributed to their increasing confusion surrounding sustainable consumption practices.

> As customers, we don't know anything about it, so we just look at the label because that's the easiest way to look, and I think it will be in practice for a long time. – Participant 3, FG1

> Better cotton, but I don't know if that really is better and how much better it is. – Participant 5, FG2

> When you go to Kmart, for example, there's sometimes a label like, this is a hundred per cent organic cotton and stuff. But as a customer, I have no idea about what that really means. I think that sounds good, right? There's a little plant on it, so it's likely sustainable, right? But when I discussed this with a friend who studied in this area, she said, 'Actually, it's not that sustainable'. So, I think you're not informed as a customer as well. – Participant 4, FG1

Summary

In this chapter, I have revealed distinct approaches to environmental sustainability communication across different organisational types, shaped by their fundamental orientations and relationships with customers. I found that profit-led organisations navigate a complex balance between environmental sustainability demands and price sensitivity, often hesitating to communicate their efforts due to fears of criticism. Through my analysis, I discovered customer-led organisations demonstrate increasing recognition of environmental sustainability's commercial importance, adopting more transparent communication strategies while acknowledging their imperfections. My findings show that values-led organisations take a proactive stance, viewing themselves as educators and change agents rather than mere responders to market demands. My research revealed product-led organisations prioritise brand identity over environmental sustainability messaging, often remaining cautious about communicating their sustainability efforts.

My examination of stakeholder perspectives highlights the crucial role of customer pressure in driving organisational change, whilst also acknowledging the competing influences of social media and fast fashion culture. Through customer focus groups, I uncovered growing scepticism towards corporate sustainability claims, particularly from larger brands, alongside a desire for more transparent and educational communication. My analysis demonstrates effective environmental sustainability communication requires organisations to balance authenticity, transparency, and educational elements whilst navigating complex customer expectations and market pressures.

CHAPTER 7: INDUSTRY DYNAMICS

In this chapter, I examine the industry dynamics within the Australian fashion sector, building on the organisational types established in Chapter 6. The first section examines intra-organisational dynamics, examining how different brands operate under parent organisations, and how sustainability efforts within one brand can impact others within the same parent organisation.

In the subsequent section, I examine inter-organisational dynamics across the wider industry, examining how different-sized organisations contribute to sustainability within the industry. Of particular interest is the apparent paradox between stakeholder expectations that large organisations should lead industry change (Sandhu et al., 2012; Sharma & Henriques, 2005), and the reality that smaller organisations often pioneer environmental sustainability innovations (Gonzalez-Benito, Munoz-Gallega, Garcia-Zamora, 2016). Additionally, I highlight the challenges smaller organisations face in maintaining financial viability while leading environmental sustainability initiatives, illustrating the complex relationship between organisational size, environmental sustainability leadership, and business survival.

This analysis becomes particularly insightful when viewed through the lens of my organisational typology. The dynamic between different organisational types reveals distinct patterns of industry engagement. Profit-led organisations, despite their substantial resources and market influence, often maintain rigid boundaries between brands and demonstrate reluctance in driving industry-wide change. Customer-led organisations exhibit a more complex pattern, simultaneously engaging in collaborative knowledge-sharing whilst sometimes gatekeeping sustainability information. Values-led organisations, though typically smaller, emerge as industry pioneers with a highly collaborative approach, while product-led organisations tend to maintain a more traditional competitive mindset, prioritising individual brand success over industry-wide collaboration.

Table 7.1 provides insights into these relationships, showing how different organisational types engage with industry-wide change. The findings reveal while profit-led organisations have the resources and market influence to drive industry-wide change, they often remain

hesitant to take a leadership role. Customer-led organisations demonstrate an intricate dynamic of both collaboration and gatekeeping, particularly within parent organisations where larger brands may withhold information from smaller ones despite group-level environmental sustainability initiatives. Despite their small size and financial challenges, values-led organisations emerge as industry pioneers with a highly collaborative approach. In contrast, product-led organisations maintain a more traditional competitive mindset, focusing on individual brand success rather than industry-wide collaboration.

Table 7.1 Organisational typology

	Profit-led	**Customer-led**	**Values-led**	**Product-led**
Key Characteristics	• Large revenue and product volume • Focus on maximizing growth and profit via low-cost production and synthetic materials • Often well-established legacy brands	• Large and established brands • Focus on high-quality products that respond to customer needs • Brands with positive reputations and loyal customers	• Small to medium size • Focus on few products and natural materials • Often young organisations with transparent supply chains	• Variable size • Focus on product aesthetics and craftsmanship • Customer base willing to pay higher prices
Sustainability Framing	• Compliance requirement that adds production costs • Reactive to external pressures • Limited internal communication	• Competitive advantage and business necessity • Pragmatic implementation • Leadership aspiration	• Core to the business model • Long-term educational perspective • Industry change agents	• Secondary to design • Opportunity-based perspective that leverages firm creativity and quality • Variable commitment
Sustainability Engagement	• Limited strategic integration • Focus on cost-effective sustainability measures • Compliance-focused initiatives	• Integration into broader strategy • Balanced with business viability • Evidence-based sustainability programs	• Embedded throughout organisational DNA • Favours impact over profit • Innovation focus	• Design-integrated solutions • Selective implementation based on brand alignment • Material selection focus
Gender Dimensions	• Traditional male leadership	• Mixed-gender representation in leadership	• Strong gender equality-sustainability link	• Gender representation varies by size

	• Significant gender pay gaps • Women concentrated in lower levels	• More women in middle management • Some female executives in ESG roles	• Gender equality core to strategy • Diversity challenges during growth	• More male figures enter as brands grow • Some women in creative leadership roles
Customer Communication	• View customers as sales targets • Communicate cautiously • Engage through traditional marketing	• View customers as strategic partners • Communicate with evidence and growing transparency • Engage through continuous feedback	• View customers as change agents • Communicate openly and educationally • Engage through striving to be educational leaders and industry pioneers	• View customers as design appreciators • Communicate selectively and subtly • Engage through design storytelling
Industry Dynamics	• Expected to lead but hesitant • Maintain strong boundaries between brands • Have resources but are slow to innovate	• Take inspiration from smaller brands • Use a mix of collaboration and gatekeeping • Have potential for significant industry impact due to scale	• Industry pioneers despite small size • Highly collaborative approach • Face financial sustainability challenges	• Selective industry influence through design • Limited cross-brand collaboration • Struggle with scaling while maintaining quality

Intra-organisational Dynamics

While analysing multi-brand organisations (i.e. different brands owned by the same parent company), I observed a lack of cohesiveness in their strategic direction towards environmental sustainability. Of the ten participants that were members of multi-brand organisations, this section discusses six, with two participants (ID5a and ID18) belonging to the same parent company. A primary justification for these differences lies in the varying stages of growth and development among individual brands within the same parent organisation. One participant (ID5a) explained that different brands have distinct requirements and interventions due to their unique circumstances.

> So [ID5] is in a growth phase, and we want to accelerate that growth as quickly as we can. Whereas [ID18] is more of a repositioning, growing back the base and accelerating. So naturally, those brands have different requirements, interventions, and strategies. So, overall [parent organisation] strategy has a very clear path on where we need to get to. Each of the brands provides complements to that strategy effectively. – ID5a, People Role, Large Customer-led

Another participant (ID6) echoed this sentiment, noting while the parent organisation sets a clear destination for all brands, each brand takes a different path based on its specific circumstances.

> It's still spoken about at a group level, it's still desired at a group level, and we still have all the same goals; some are just taking a little longer to get there. – ID6, Production Role, Large Profit-led

Despite these differences, I found instances where brands within the same parent organisation motivated and inspired each other to advance their environmental sustainability efforts. For example, a participant from a certified B Corp (ID30) explained how the influence of the parent organisation, and the first brand (within the group) to achieve B Corp certification, prompted them to formalise their existing environmental sustainability practices and pursue certification.

> Would we have gone for a B Corp certification were it not for being bought by [parent organisation]? Probably not. But it did allow the business to sit back and go, what are we doing in all these areas? You know what, we're doing a lot of these things, but we don't have them formally documented, and here are a few areas that we can focus a little bit

> more on to elevate an existing strategy to a higher level. – ID30, Social Impact Role, Large Customer-led

In some cases, brands even imitated each other's environmental sustainability structures and strategies. A participant (ID18) mentioned their brand created a sustainability team after noticing another brand within the same parent company had done the same.

> We've noticed they've created a sustainability team within their team, so we've also done the same. – ID18, Sustainability Role, Large Product-led

Another participant (ID19) from a different organisation highlighted their brand provided information for the parent organisation to distribute to other brands, helping to advance the group's environmental sustainability efforts.

> None of the other brands in [parent organisation] had started their sustainability journey, so it's more been a push where we're assisting then providing the work we've done to [parent organisation] to distribute. – ID19, Social Responsibility Role, Large Profit-led

Additionally, a participant (ID29) highlighted the benefits of having a group-level sustainability head, which facilitated information sharing and collaboration across brands.

> We've got a head of sustainability from [parent organisation] that's driving all these initiatives, … it's great because when we get into the forums [we are] sharing information and things like that and now we share a lot of different workshops as well. – ID29, Supply Chain Role, Large Customer-led

However, despite these positive instances of cooperation and knowledge sharing, I also observed a negative aspect of the dynamic between brands within multi-brand organisations. Larger brands often acted as gatekeepers of environmental sustainability information, withholding valuable insights from smaller brands within the same parent company, creating a competitive—rather than collaborative—environment.

> They act like a gatekeeper, [they] just want to do things for themselves. It is hard. It can get quite competitive, even though we're in the same group. – ID18, Sustainability Role, Large Product-led

This behaviour perpetuates inequities within the organisation, as larger brands with more resources can actively pursue and market their environmental sustainability efforts, while smaller brands struggle due to limited capacity.

> We've all been on the same journey for the same time; it's just that [organisation y] has had the resources. So, [parent organisation] doesn't have people to help out each brand; each brand is for themselves. So, [ID5] with the bigger budget, the bigger teams can do it, whereas [ID18] is quite small, and it's taken them a long time to invest in someone that can help them with their journey. – ID18, Sustainability Role, Large Product-led

Furthermore, another participant (ID19) from a profit-led organisation observed a similar dynamic: smaller brands, within the same parent company, were eager to engage in environmental sustainability but lacked the necessary resources to do so effectively.

> Two quite small brands in the group are super passionate, but don't have the headcount to do something like that. – ID19, Social Responsibility Role, Large Profit-led

This uneven distribution of support and resources hampers the group's collective environmental sustainability efforts, creating internal competition rather than fostering collaboration. A more unified and collaborative approach is needed to ensure all brands within a parent organisation can achieve their environmental sustainability objectives and contribute meaningfully to the group's overall environmental sustainability success. The relationship between inter-brand cooperation and environmental sustainability performance appears more complex than simple competition versus collaboration. Customer-led organisations demonstrate both collaborative knowledge-sharing and gatekeeping behaviours, while profit-led organisations tend to maintain stronger boundaries between brands.

Inter-organisational Dynamics

Beyond intra-organisational dynamics, the broader industry landscape exhibits noteworthy characteristics. Interviews with fashion industry stakeholders highlight the linchpin to fostering a more sustainable industry lies in mainstreaming environmental sustainability, which entails increasing its widespread acceptance and popularity. Consequently, this approach aims to make sustainable initiatives and resources more readily available to all industry members, ultimately leading to sustainable practices becoming the norm.

> As things become more mainstream and become the way to do things, we know it makes [sustainability] more popular, and that pushes down the price and increases demand. That will make it more accessible. – ID40, Government Circular Economy Role

> If we get enough brands and big brands genuinely trying to be sustainable, I think the costs of materials and resources will go down. The quality can remain, but the cost – because you have people buying it en masse and the people making it and working in those areas, because it's en masse, their costs of production can also go down. – ID36, Sustainability Consultant

The relationship between organisational type and size creates an interesting dynamic in driving industry change. While profit-led and customer-led organisations tend to be larger, and values-led and product-led organisations tend to be smaller, this relationship isn't absolute. In my research, I found three notable exceptions: two large values-led organisations (ID17 and ID23) and one large product-led organisation (ID18). Rather, the organisational type appears to influence how companies approach industry leadership regardless of size. This becomes particularly evident when examining how different organisational types approach the mainstreaming of sustainability practices. Profit-led organisations, despite their size advantages, often take a more cautious approach, while values-led organisations, despite their typically smaller size, tend to be more proactive in driving industry innovation.

Large Organisations as Change Agents

My findings indicate large organisations confront substantial operational and structural changes in pursuing environmental sustainability initiatives. These organisations' sustainability transformations potentially have broader market effects due to their extensive supply chain networks and market position. This observation about large organisations' influence is supported by two stakeholder participants (ID41 and ID38), who reported specifically targeting large organisations in their work due to their substantial market presence and supply chain reach.

> We know that between 10 and 30 bring in around 60-70% of the market. – ID41, Sustainability Consultant

> We focus on those larger companies because they have the biggest impact to influence the biggest amount of change. After all, they employ millions of people in their supply chains. – ID38, NGO Advocacy Role

However, the question arises: Who is responsible for spearheading the industry in this undertaking? Some participants hold the view that large organisations should assume this leadership role in mainstreaming environmental sustainability. This perspective is founded on the assumption that large organisations can first address their own internal issues, and then help implement similar improvements across the industry. Additionally, a participant (ID22) representing a micro product-led organisation argues large organisations have greater financial capacity to use sustainable materials and innovative technology. The participant points out it is the responsibility of these large organisations to ensure the accessibility of such materials for all organisations within the industry.

> I hear a lot from the industry: do you even need to do that much? H&M, Zara, and ASOS will fix things, and they'll fix your factories. – ID19, Social Responsibility Role, Large Profit-led

> If you have an influence being a bigger power in fashion to buy the fabrics that are sustainable at a lower cost, it wouldn't be as expensive [for us] … All of the really big labels that everybody knows they 100% should be at the cutting edge of this and they should be using all of the amazing technology that's being created because they should be leading the way. They lead the way in style; they should lead the way in sustainability. – ID22, Sustainability Role, Micro Product-led

> We need to encourage the big guys because they're the ones who are going to make the drastic change that we need to see. – ID20, Production Role, Micro Product-led

Participants favour larger brands as the vanguards of the industry due to their capacity for substantial change. The founder of one of the smaller values-led organisations (ID16) reiterates this sentiment, positing if larger organisations were genuinely committed to change, it would happen quickly. However, they contend the lack of desire to enact such change is the primary reason for minimal progress in the industry.

> If you had an H&M or any of these guys committed to wanting to build something like that, it could happen so quickly and to such a high standard, but again, the desire's not there. – ID16, Founder, Small Values-led

> If any of the big luxury houses say that they're sustainable, I believe that it's [more important] because they have so much more power and money and investment to make

> those changes that allow smaller brands to follow in those tracks and make those changes.
> – ID10b, Sustainability Role, Medium Product-led

While smaller industry players often suggest that large organisations should take the lead in driving change due to their extensive resources and consequent influence, these large organisations were notably hesitant about assuming a leadership role in environmental sustainability, as evidenced by their actions. As highlighted in Chapter 4, certain customer-led organisations aimed to be pioneers in environmental sustainability but have not yet achieved this status. Interestingly, small organisations often occupy the forefront of industry innovation, a topic that will be elaborated on in the following section.

Small Organisations as Change Agents

While stakeholder participants and smaller organisation representatives in my study advocate for large organisations to lead environmental sustainability efforts, my findings suggest that it is actually small organisations leading change. My findings highlight that the smaller brands are driving innovation and setting the pace for environmental sustainability in the industry, but they face significant challenges in remaining profitable and sustainable. Many struggle financially, and routinely go out of business despite their impact. Nevertheless, even as these smaller organisations fail, their efforts leave a lasting influence on the larger ecosystem, inspiring bigger brands to adopt more sustainable practices.

Two stakeholder participants highlight many smaller brands are more agile, and demonstrate a deep understanding of environmental sustainability practices, often because these values were embedded from their inception. For instance, a journalist I interviewed stated, ‘I think that awareness has come from a lot of these smaller, younger brands’ (ID44). Similarly, a sustainability consultant confirmed ‘a lot of the SMEs and independent brand owners that I deal with, they know as much as I do. They’re very articulate and they understand all the issues’ (ID32).

Several other participants across various organisations support this belief. A founder of a small values-led organisation (ID2) contends they frequently receive positive feedback from their customers, who express gratitude for showcasing the potential of businesses in terms of environmental sustainability. Their customers can then use this information to pressure other businesses to adopt more sustainable practices. Similarly, a participant representing a profit-led organisation (ID6) affirms that they frequently turn to smaller brands for guidance. This

participant acknowledges smaller brands in the industry contribute innovative products and ideas that benefit larger brands.

> I have always had great feedback from my customers, and have been able to show them what businesses are capable of, and then they can take it to other businesses that might be less sustainable. – ID2, Founder, Micro Values-led

> It's those small brands that help us bigger brands with innovative products and those ideas that push us to be better. – ID6, Production Role, Large Profit-led

While participants argue large organisations should establish environmental sustainability norms, small organisations are leading the way in practice. A sustainability consultant (ID41) observes smaller, early adopters of clothing circularity implement sustainable practices effectively. They assert large brands should learn from these smaller entities and scale up these initiatives. Similarly, a founder of a rental organisation (ID47) predicts as smaller organisations demonstrate successful sustainable practices, larger brands will begin to adopt similar approaches.

> Some early adopters in clothing circularity are nailing it, and there's so much that the big brands can learn from them to sort of be like, oh, is that how you would do that? So, how would we scale that? – ID41, Sustainability Consultant

> If everyone else is doing it, the big brands will have to do it. – ID47, Rental Organisation Founder

Some smaller organisations in my sample described efforts to influence industry practices. For example, one founder of a values-led brand (ID16) offers manufacturing services to larger brands to support responsible production practices. Other participants emphasised the importance of collaboration for industry transformation, suggesting that integrating environmental sustainability and circularity requires coordinated efforts.

> We're motivated to make sure that we can see other brands go on that journey and be that solution as well … We do provide that opportunity for brands. We now manufacture for other brands as well. The goal is to be able to go, okay, well, your brand has a huge opportunity to evangelise your message to the world; we want to give you a beautiful product made the right way. And I think that's a powerful thing to be able to provide. – ID16, Founder, Small Values-led

> Developing more circular systems needs to be a coordinated industry-wide effort involving key stakeholders such as brands, suppliers, customers, governments, and recyclers. – ID14, Sustainability Report, Medium Values-led

The concept of collaborating to reshape the industry contrasts with the traditional competitive attitude prevalent in the industry, where organisations typically withhold information to maintain their competitive advantage. Participants observed this mindset gradually evolves as individuals increasingly embrace collaboration, particularly spearheaded by smaller, environmental sustainability-focused entities.

> Collaboration is still viewed with a bit of fear and reluctance … I'd say it's still quite new; the mindset shift isn't there yet, but it's happening. Some brands are starting to push, and [with] ESG, there's an opportunity to try and collaborate non-competitively. – ID30, Social Impact Role, Large Customer-led

> There's something in fashion where people like to be the gatekeepers, but I think this sustainability conversation is what's bringing us out of that. – ID22, Sustainability Role, Micro Product-led

> We're so frustrated when people are so closed off about sharing things because everyone wants the same; let's share the right resources and flood the market with that. – ID20, Production Role, Micro Product-led

These smaller organisations may be pioneering due to their modest scale, which affords them agility and responsiveness. As articulated by two founders of small values-led entities (ID2 and ID4a), they had the opportunity to redefine the paradigm of fashion and construct their organisation accordingly, unencumbered by existing legacies.

> The beauty of having already made that decision before starting meant that there wasn't anything existing that I had to change. It was just about making the right decisions from the get-go. – ID2, Founder, Micro Values-led

> One of the advantages of being a start-up is that we don't have all these legacy things in place. We were able to start from a clean sheet of paper and just re-imagine and then re-engineer how we thought fashion could be done. – ID4a, Founder, Micro Values-led

Smaller, values-led organisations may encounter relative ease in incorporating sustainable practices owing to their agility and absence of entrenched legacy. Even so, they grapple with

expanding their operations while maintaining their commitment to environmental sustainability principles. Smaller organisations operate with limited resources, and as previously discussed, sustainable practices often entail significant costs.

> Doing things sustainably and ethically isn't cheap. – ID32, Sustainability Consultant

> For the little brands with almost nothing, it costs them so much more, and they go through so much more pain, difficulty, and effort to manufacture the right way. Whenever people mention sustainable brands, the little brands should be mentioned first because they have it way more difficult than any other brand. – ID36, Sustainability Consultant

Undertaking environmental sustainability initiatives poses a considerable burden for small companies. These small organisations face significant challenges in prioritising environmental sustainability within an industry that does not reward sustainable practices with financial stability. They contend with constrained resources, which makes it exceedingly difficult to navigate the complexities of environmental sustainability. These challenges manifest in the form of high costs associated with providing fair wages to employees, opting for sustainable materials (which often come at a premium), investing in sustainable production facilities (which incur additional expenses), and undertaking the necessary efforts to effectively communicate their environmental sustainability initiatives to customers while ensuring traceability throughout their supply chains. Participants from values-led organisations highlight the high cost of sustainable practices.

> The hardest thing is it costs more. – ID4a, Founder, Micro Values-led

> It's just about putting the resources into it, and it's challenging when we're just trying to keep the wheels turning. – ID14, Sustainability Role, Medium Values-led

Companies at the forefront of environmental sustainability have encountered severe struggles in continuing their operations, with many ultimately succumbing to financial pressures and ceasing operations. Although none of the organisations within my sample have collapsed thus far, there have been several instances within the past year of sustainable fashion enterprises shutting down due to the challenges associated with balancing environmental sustainability and profitability. I use these organisations as examples to show that having environmental sustainability as a core principle, whilst influencing the industry in many ways, can lead to economic instability and, consequently, an end to the organisation altogether.

> I have made the difficult decision to close the clothing-making aspect of A.BCH. – Courtney Holm, A.BCH – Founder, Micro Values-led

> 2023 is the final chapter and conclusion of the Arnsdorf collections. – Jade Arnott, Arnsdorf – Founder, Micro Values-led

> It's with great excitement but bittersweet feelings that VT is hibernating. This decision has been in the works for a while. …. The hibernation will be for an undefined length of time, and should I choose to come back, it will be a new chapter. – Amy Roberts, Vege Threads – Founder, Micro Values-led

The interplay between organisational types reveals a complex pattern of influence and change within the industry. The evidence indicates that smaller brands, particularly values-led organisations like ID16, may be driving innovation and influencing the industry's environmental sustainability practices. ID16 opening up its manufacturing facilities demonstrates how values-led organisations can actively share innovations and learnings to drive industry-wide change, despite their smaller size and financial constraints.

However, the lack of comprehensive data on the prevailing sentiment among larger players and the financial challenges faced by smaller sustainable brands limits the ability to draw firm conclusions about the dynamics between organisational types. While profit-led and customer-led organisations possess the resources and market presence to drive widespread adoption of sustainable practices, further research is needed to determine the extent to which they are influenced by the pioneering efforts of values-led organisations. Effective industry change might require leveraging the strengths of each organisational type: the innovation and commitment of values-led organisations, the market influence of profit-led organisations, the customer engagement of customer-led organisations, and the quality-focused approach of product-led organisations. The findings offer a promising starting point for further research into these important issues and the potential for collaboration between different types of organisations to drive transformative change towards environmental sustainability in the industry.

Summary

In conclusion, I have comprehensively examined the industry dynamics within the Australian fashion sector, examining intra-organisational dynamics within parent companies and inter-

organisational dynamics across the broader industry landscape. Through this analysis, several key insights have emerged.

Collaborative efforts among organisations within the same parent organisation have demonstrated how success in environmental sustainability initiatives by one entity can positively impact others, fostering a culture of shared responsibility and innovation. However, it is noteworthy that larger organisations under the parent organisation often receive higher priority and resources from the group, enabling them to excel in environmental sustainability practices. This dynamic can sometimes result in gatekeeping, where larger organisations may control access to valuable insights and resources related to environmental sustainability within the parent organisation network.

This interconnectedness extends beyond parent companies to encompass the wider industry, where collaboration, competition, and knowledge sharing shape environmental sustainability practices. The leadership role of small organisations in driving environmental sustainability innovation has been highlighted despite the challenges they face in balancing environmental sustainability goals with financial viability. While small organisations often lead the way in setting industry standards, the burden of environmental sustainability efforts can pose significant business risks, sometimes leading to closures. As the Australian fashion industry evolves, addressing these challenges and fostering collaboration among organisations of all sizes will be essential for advancing environmental sustainability goals. The industry can move towards a more sustainable and resilient future by recognising the interconnectedness of environmental sustainability efforts and supporting small organisations in their leadership role.

CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Using institutional logics theory (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008) and The Three Spaces Framework for Sustainable Change (Kulik et al., 2022), this chapter discusses how organisational strategies, internal cultures, and externally focused narratives shape sustainability engagement and gender equality outcomes. I organise this chapter around the key themes that emerged from my findings in the Australian fashion industry: the typology of organisations, the integration of sustainability and gender equality, communication with customers, the dynamics of industry collaboration, and the challenges and opportunities Australian fashion organisations face in driving systemic change.

These themes are examined through institutional logics, showing the influence of market, community, and creative logics on sustainability practices (Ertekin et al., 2020; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). The Three Spaces Framework (Kulik et al., 2022) offers a means to evaluate how organisations align their policies (physical space), shared values and understanding (mental space), and stakeholder engagement (social space) to deliver their organisational mission. I critically engage with these themes, positioning my research contributions within the wider conversation on environmental sustainability and gender equality in organisations. I conclude by outlining practical implications for industry stakeholders and policymakers and propose future pathways for research and practice to support sustainable and equitable actions in the fashion industry.

Table 8.1 reflects the layered complexities of institutional logics within different organisational types, showing how their dominant logics shape their approach to sustainability and gender equality. The typology illustrates how market logic dominates profit-led organisations, leading to weak coupling between physical and mental spaces, while values-led organisations demonstrate alignment with community logic and consequently achieve better integration across The Three Spaces Framework. Specifically, this manifests in their engagement with environmental sustainability and gender equality, where profit-led organisations focus on compliance and cost-effectiveness, whilst values-led organisations embed responsible practices throughout their organisational DNA, showing stronger coupling between physical and mental spaces as theorised by Kulik et al. (2022).

Table 8.1 Organisational typology

	Profit-led	Customer-led	Values-led	Product-led
Key Characteristics	• Large revenue and product volume • Focus on maximizing growth and profit via low-cost production and synthetic materials • Often well-established legacy brands	• Large and established brands • Focus on high-quality products that respond to customer needs • Brands with positive reputations and loyal customers	• Small to medium size • Focus on few products and natural materials • Often young organisations with transparent supply chains	• Variable size • Focus on product aesthetics and craftsmanship • Customer base willing to pay higher prices
Sustainability Framing	• Compliance requirement that adds production costs • Reactive to external pressures • Limited internal communication	• Competitive advantage and business necessity • Pragmatic implementation • Leadership aspiration	• Core to the business model • Long-term educational perspective • Industry change agents	• Secondary to design • Opportunity-based perspective that leverages firm creativity and quality • Variable commitment
Sustainability Engagement	• Limited strategic integration • Focus on cost-effective sustainability measures • Compliance-focused initiatives	• Integration into broader strategy • Balanced with business viability • Evidence-based sustainability programs	• Embedded throughout organisational DNA • Favours impact over profit • Innovation focus	• Design-integrated solutions • Selective implementation based on brand alignment • Material selection focus
Gender Dimensions	• Traditional male leadership • Significant gender pay gaps	• Mixed-gender representation in leadership	• Strong gender equality-sustainability link • Gender equality core to strategy	• Gender representation varies by size • More male figures enter as brands grow

	• Women concentrated in lower levels	• More women in middle management • Some female executives in ESG roles	• Diversity challenges during growth	• Some women in creative leadership roles
Customer Communication	• View customers as sales targets • Communicate cautiously • Engage through traditional marketing	• View customers as strategic partners • Communicate with evidence and growing transparency • Engage through continuous feedback	• View customers as change agents • Communicate openly and educationally • Engage through striving to be educational leaders and industry pioneers	• View customers as design appreciators • Communicate selectively and subtly • Engage through design storytelling
Industry Dynamics	• Expected to lead but hesitant • Maintain strong boundaries between brands • Have resources but are slow to innovate	• Take inspiration from smaller brands • Mix of collaboration and gatekeeping • Have potential for significant industry impact due to scale	• Industry pioneers despite small size • Highly collaborative approach • Face financial sustainability challenges	• Selective industry influence through design • Limited cross-brand collaboration • Struggle with scaling while maintaining quality
Theoretical Dimensions	• Dominated by market logic • Weak coupling; often experience decoupling between physical and mental spaces • Struggle to align sustainability with dominant logic	• Successfully navigate market and community logics • Strong coupling of social space with physical and mental space • Successful sustainability engagement due to alignment of logics	• Strong adherence to the community logic • Strong coupling, especially between physical and mental spaces • Sustainability engagement affects financial stability due to dominant community logic	• Guided by logic of art • Selective integration of spaces based on brand priorities • Logic of art sometimes conflicts with sustainability goals

Contributions to Theory

My research contributes to theory by combining institutional logics theory with The Three Spaces Framework to explain how Australian fashion organisations approach sustainability and gender equality. Institutional logics theory helps identify the underlying values and beliefs that drive organisational decisions, while The Three Spaces Framework provides a structure to examine how these values translate into organisational change. This combination offers new insights into why organisations in the same industry respond differently to similar external pressures.

The findings show that an organisation's dominant institutional logic directly influences how sustainability and gender equality initiatives are implemented across physical, mental and social spaces. Organisations whose core values align with sustainability and equality tend to implement more comprehensive changes across all three spaces. This research demonstrates that successful implementation requires both alignment with the organisation's institutional logic and consistent application across the three spaces of organisational change.

This theoretical integration explains several key patterns observed in the data. First, organisations with community or social welfare logics consistently implemented changes across all three spaces—allocating resources to sustainable materials and facilities (physical space), revising strategic priorities and performance metrics (mental space), and restructuring stakeholder relationships (social space). Second, organisations dominated by market logics typically limited their interventions to isolated initiatives that did not challenge their core operations, particularly in the mental space through policy statements that lacked corresponding changes in physical or social spaces.

The research also reveals how institutional logics create barriers to implementation. When sustainability or gender equality initiatives conflict with an organisation's dominant logic, implementation becomes fragmented and superficial. For example, the data shows that market-driven organisations often adopted sustainability practices only when they aligned with cost reduction or market differentiation goals. This selective implementation represents a form of decoupling between stated commitments and actual practices that my theoretical framework helps identify. By examining how institutional logics manifest across the three

spaces, my research provides a more nuanced understanding of why some organisations achieve comprehensive change while others maintain the status quo despite similar external pressures.

Market Logic and Partial Space Integration

Profit-led organisations, operating primarily under market logic, demonstrate how institutional priorities can fundamentally constrain environmental sustainability. These organisations subordinate CSR to financial performance (Thornton et al., 2012), resulting in a characteristic misalignment across the three spaces. In the social space, they often project environmental sustainability commitments through marketing and branding efforts (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). However, this external positioning frequently fails to translate into the mental space, where shared understanding and commitment remain limited due to the dominance of market-driven priorities.

This misalignment manifests in the physical space (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Graafland & Smid, 2016), where formal sustainability policies exist but lack meaningful implementation leading to policy-practice decoupling. The result is often symbolic rather than substantive adoption of CSR practices (Bromley & Powell, 2013; Oliver, 1991; Nejati & Shafaei, 2023), driven more by market perception than authentic commitment. This understanding helps explain why profit-led organisations consistently show the weakest performance in CSR.

Community Logic and Holistic Integration

In contrast, values-led organisations, guided by community logic, demonstrate how aligned institutional priorities can facilitate integration across all three spaces. These organisations embed responsible practice into their core identity (Banerjee, 2012), creating a strong alignment between their institutional logic and change mechanisms. In the mental space, this manifests through shared understanding and commitment to sustainability values (Sendlhofer & Tolstoy, 2022), presented in their stronger CSR performance.

The community logic enables these organisations to maintain consistency between their internal culture (mental space) and external communications (social space), fostering transparent stakeholder engagement (Groza, Pronschinke & Walker, 2011; Tang & Higgins, 2022). However, this commitment often creates tension with market demands (Besharov & Smith, 2014; Smith, Gonin & Besharov, 2015), highlighting how institutional logics can both

enable and constrain organisational change. The resources required for CSR integration often conflict with profit maximisation, creating ongoing challenges in balancing competing institutional demands (Dahlmann & Grosvold, 2017; Ebrahim, Battilana & Mair, 2014; Smith & Besharov, 2017).

Transitional Logics and Adaptive Integration

Customer-led and product-led organisations represent interesting cases of organisations navigating multiple institutional logics while working to achieve integration across the three spaces. Customer-led organisations successfully navigate institutional complexity by incorporating community and market logics (Greenwood et al., 2009; Pache & Santos, 2012). They leverage external stakeholder pressures in the social space to reshape internal practices and institutional norms (Herremans, Herschovis & Bertels, 2009) while maintaining commercial viability.

This dual-logic approach enables them to achieve a more substantial alignment between external perceptions (social space) and internal practices (mental space) (Hur et al., 2013; Porter & Kramer, 2006). Their success in building trust and legitimacy (Suchman, 1995) while leveraging CSR as a strategic advantage suggests organisations can effectively balance multiple institutional logics when supported by appropriate actions across all three spaces.

While critics may raise concerns about greenwashing (Bothello et al., 2023; Walker & Wan, 2012), many such organisations demonstrate genuine commitment to substantive change through their dual-logic approach. This integration enables them to translate external stakeholder expectations into meaningful internal practices (Herremans et al., 2009) whilst maintaining commercial viability. When challenges arise, customer-led organisations typically respond by deepening their commitment to transparency and incremental improvement rather than merely defending their position. Their institutional positioning at the intersection of multiple logics creates unique opportunities for authentic sustainability initiatives that align consumer interests with environmental outcomes. The most successful examples demonstrate that managing legitimacy across the social space can drive genuine operational changes.

Extending the work of Ertekin et al. (2020), I observed that product-led organisations are primarily guided by the logic of art. The logic of art as an institutional logic represents a system where artistic expression and creativity are valued as legitimising forces that guide

decision-making and organisational practices. Product-led organisations demonstrate how they can gradually integrate the community logic into their artistic identity (Ertekin et al., 2020). Their evolution shows how the logic of art can adapt and incorporate the community logic (Besharov & Smith, 2014; Lounsbury, 2007), though this integration is more difficult as organisations grow and encounter increased market pressures.

Agents of Change in the Fashion Industry: Women Leaders, Customers and Organisations

My findings support that gender equality in organisations, mainly through women's increasing presence in sustainability leadership roles (Glass et al., 2015; Javed et al., 2023), strengthens organisational commitment to sustainability initiatives. This enhanced sustainability commitment reflects greater engagement with the community logic, revealing women leaders as key agents of change who shape how organisations respond to different institutional logics through the mental space.

My findings on gender equality in organisations are further substantiated by Deng et al.'s (2023) research, which identifies three key factors influencing female leaders' attitudes towards CSR: emotional engagement, personal values alignment, and relationship focus. This aligns with my observation that women in sustainability leadership roles serve as crucial agents of change within the mental space, reshaping organisational responses to institutional logics. Deng et al.'s (2023) study reveals that female leaders prioritise long-term stakeholder relationships over immediate profits, directly supporting my argument that gender diversity strengthens commitment to community logic. The "virtuous circle" they identify—where pro-CSR organisations attract more female leaders who then further enhance sustainability commitments—provides a mechanism for how mental space stimulate corresponding changes across the three spaces.

Customer expectations and behaviours constitute an alternative change mechanism, primarily initiated in the social space. The well-documented gap between customers' ethical intentions and their actual purchasing decisions (Carrington, Neville & Whitwell, 2010; Hassan et al., 2014; Ronda, 2024) presents specific challenges for organisations. Different organisational types respond to these consumer inconsistencies according to their institutional logics.

Values-led organisations, guided by community logic, actively engage in customer education to promote accountability and sustainable consumption (McGregor, 2005; Gordon, Carrigan

& Hastings, 2011; Jung & Jin, 2016). This educational approach represents a deliberate strategy to transform the social space through enhanced customer awareness and engagement. Customer-led organisations leverage their market position to enhance sustainability while maintaining commercial viability, demonstrating how social space pressures can drive physical space changes through new policies and practices.

The transformation of social space through customer influence often catalyses changes in physical space as organisations develop new policies and practices in response to customer expectations (Kulik et al., 2022). This dynamic is particularly evident in small and medium enterprises, where research has shown that customer influence significantly drives CSR practices and leads to improved business performance (Nejati, Amran & Hazlina Ahmad, 2014). However, the effectiveness of these changes depends on organisational type and dominant logic, with profit-led organisations often struggling to translate social space pressures into meaningful mental space implementation.

Industry-level interactions represent a third mechanism for change, operating primarily through the social space. Industry collaboration, particularly within parent companies, can accelerate CSR initiatives through knowledge sharing and resource allocation (Karlsson & Skold, 2018; Kumar et al., 2021; Zhou, Govindan & Xie, 2020). However, my research reveals that uneven resource distribution and gatekeeping practices can hinder progress, particularly affecting small business units within large corporate structures.

Small organisations play a unique role in industry change, often serving as innovators despite limited resources (Halme & Korpela, 2013; Klewitz & Hansen, 2014; Kwak, Kim & Heo, 2023). Their ability to experiment with alternative approaches and achieve tight integration across the three spaces demonstrates new possibilities for CSR practice. These organisations face significant tensions between maintaining financial viability and upholding their environmental and social commitments while competing in a market dominated by larger players (Azmat et al., 2023). Despite these challenges, they influence the wider industry by modelling innovative approaches that larger organisations can later adopt and scale, even if the small organisations themselves are unable to maintain long-term success (Savaget, Ozcan & Pitsis, 2024).

Changes in mental and social spaces ultimately drive policy development in the physical space, though the effectiveness of these policies varies significantly based on organisational

type and dominant logic. Profit-led organisations often demonstrate policy-practice decoupling (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Graafland & Smid, 2016), where formal policies exist but lack meaningful implementation. In contrast, values-led organisations typically achieve stronger alignment between policy development and implementation (Banerjee, 2012; Sendlhofer & Tolstoy, 2022).

When gender equality initiatives transform mental space understanding of sustainability, as seen in Stella McCartney's (a leading responsible fashion brand) pioneering stance on gender-neutral fashion design and workplace policies, or when customer and industry pressures reshape social space expectations, as demonstrated by H&M's response to the Fashion Revolution movement following the Rana Plaza disaster, successful organisations respond by developing and implementing aligned policies in the physical space.

This integration across spaces is exemplified by Patagonia's transformation of its retail spaces to include repair workshops and garment recycling stations, directly reflecting their commitment to circular fashion (Chouinard & Stanley, 2013) The effectiveness of such integration is enhanced when supported by appropriate institutional logics, as demonstrated by fashion retailers like Reformation that successfully balance profit-driven demands with environmental impact through transparent supply chain practices and in-store sustainability messaging (Pedersen & Andersen, 2015).

Summary

My research advances theoretical understanding by revealing how institutional logics and organisational spaces interact through specific agents to enable or constrain CSR engagement. Integrating these theoretical perspectives offers several novel insights that extend the understanding of organisational change towards sustainability.

First, my research demonstrates that successful sustainability transformation emerges from the alignment of three critical elements (1) the fundamental institutional logic(s) guiding organisational behaviour, (2) the coupling across mental, social, and physical spaces, and (3) the specific mechanisms—gender equality, customer influence, and industry dynamics—through which change manifests. When these elements align, organisations can achieve meaningful sustainability transformation. When they conflict, organisations struggle to move beyond superficial changes.

Profit-led organisations demonstrate how inconsistencies across these elements can undermine sustainability efforts. Their market logic frequently conflicts with CSR goals, creating disconnects across the three spaces. This manifests in gender-inclusive organisational culture in the mental space, superficial customer engagement in the social space, and policy-practice decoupling in the physical space (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Graafland & Smid, 2016). Profit-led organisations' responses to change often operate at cross-purposes: their attempts to satisfy customer demand for sustainability conflict with profit-driven decision-making, limiting the convergence in the mental space around a shared meaning.

Values-led organisations exemplify successful alignment across all three elements. Their community logic naturally aligns with CSR goals, enabling integration across the three spaces. This alignment manifests through specific mechanisms: they typically demonstrate a stronger gender inclusive climate in the mental space, actively engage in customer education in the social space, and develop consistent policies in the physical space. This results in these organisations leading change within the industry, though often at the expense of rapid financial growth (Besharov & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2015).

Customer-led and product-led organisations reveal how organisations can navigate multiple institutional logics while working toward integration of the three spaces. Their experiences suggest that successful CSR engagement doesn't necessarily require full commitment to community logic but the ability to effectively balance multiple logics while maintaining coupling across spaces. These organisations demonstrate how mechanisms can work together—using customer influence in social space to drive changes in mental space, leading to new policies in physical space.

The research also reveals the cyclical dimension of these interactions. Changes in mental space can catalyse new approaches in the social space. Similarly, dynamics in the social space can create pressure for policy changes in the physical space, which then influences organisational understanding in the mental space. This cyclical interaction suggests that CSR engagement is not linear but iterative, with changes in one element influencing and reinforcing changes in others. Importantly, this integrated theoretical framework helps explain why some organisations achieve transformative change while others remain stuck in superficial initiatives. This understanding offers new pathways for research into organisational change and sustainability transformation.

The framework also highlights the role of small organisations in driving industry transformation. Despite resource constraints, their ability to maintain tight alignment across spaces makes them important catalysts for change (Savaget et al., 2024). However, their struggles with long-term viability suggest that institutional support structures may be needed to maintain commitment over time.

Practical Implications

My research findings have several practical implications for fashion industry leaders, sustainability professionals, industry peak bodies, and government policymakers. These implications span organisational strategy, industry collaboration, and policy development, offering concrete pathways for advancing CSR engagement in the fashion industry.
At the organisational level, my research demonstrates the critical importance of aligning CSR initiatives across mental, social, and physical spaces (Kulik et al., 2022). Rather than viewing CSR as an isolated strategic initiative, organisations must work to embed CSR principles throughout their operational frameworks (Sandhu & Kulik, 2019). This integration requires sustained commitment from leadership (Fujimoto, Azmat & Uddin, 2024; Nejati, Salamzadeh & Loke, 2020), alongside the development of robust mechanisms for translating CSR commitments into tangible operational practices (Wang & Bansal, 2012).

Building on Magbool et al.'s (2016) findings that responsible business practices enhance talent attraction, organisations can strategically use this advantage to cultivate a sustainability-oriented culture by attracting employees who already value and champion these practices. The findings particularly emphasise the role of organisational culture in supporting or hindering sustainability transformation. Organisations must develop a strong mental space that enables consistent translation of CSR commitments into operational practices across all levels of the organisation. This includes establishing clear accountability mechanisms, providing adequate resources for CSR initiatives, and fostering a culture that values and rewards responsible practices (Assadourian, 2010; McDonagh & Prothero, 2014; Sandhu & Kulik, 2019).

My research highlights significant opportunities for industry leaders and larger organisations to support broader industry transformation. For example, Patagonia's Tin Shed Ventures actively invests in sustainable textile innovations and freely shares their research on microfibre pollution reduction with other brands, while Kowtow plastic-free handbook (Kowtow, 2024) and take-back programme methodology is openly available to industry peers.

Through structured knowledge-sharing programmes and resource provision established organisations can play a crucial role in accelerating CSR adoption across the industry, particularly through inter-organisational influence pathways where companies can leverage successful sustainability initiatives across their supply chains and partner networks (Zhou et al., 2020).

My research presents the dynamics surrounding collaborative efforts in the Australian fashion industry, where large organisations can simultaneously enable and hinder sustainability transformation. While knowledge-sharing exemplars exist, many established brands remain hesitant to provide meaningful access to resources that could accelerate industry-wide transformation. To overcome these barriers, I recommend several practical approaches drawn from the literature on sustainability collaboration: establishing sustainability partnerships adapted to Australia's unique supply chain challenges (Valbuena-Hernandez & Ortiz-de-Mandojana, 2021); implementing graduated resource-sharing programmes where larger organisations receive regulatory incentives for mentoring smaller brands through sustainability transitions (Palmie et al., 2021); and incorporating 'collaborative advantage' metrics into ESG reporting requirements (Bitici et al., 2010). These approaches acknowledge the power dynamics within Australia's fashion ecosystem while creating structured pathways for established organisations to contribute meaningfully to environmental sustainability without sacrificing their market position.

The findings suggest the need for more regulatory frameworks that reflect fashion’s unique supply chain complexity. For example, organisations like The Renewal Workshop have helped establish protocols for textile recycling and repair that are now informing policy frameworks in several European countries, while Textile Exchange’s benchmarking system provides graduated sustainability standards that acknowledge different organisational capabilities while maintaining rigorous environmental criteria (Textile Exchange, 2024). Furthermore, my research indicates that effective governance frameworks must integrate both regulatory requirements and supportive tools. This means developing mechanisms like Fashion Revolution’s transparency index (Fashion Revolution, 2024) which combines advocacy for mandatory reporting with practical tools and training for smaller fashion brands.

The findings emphasise the importance of addressing barriers to sustainability transformation at multiple levels. This includes developing policies that support the development of sustainable supply chains, encourage transparency in sustainability reporting, and promote the adoption of circular economy principles (Tang & Higgins, 2022). Additionally, regulatory frameworks should consider how to effectively support organisations in managing the tensions between sustainability objectives and market pressures (Smith & Besharov, 2017). As highlighted in recent research, the implementation of high-performance sustainable work practices through integrated human resource systems can play a crucial role in helping organisations achieve their ESG outcomes, particularly when these practices emphasise stakeholder compassion, ethics of care, pro-environment consciousness, and social consciousness in employee development and performance management (Makhecha & Mariappanadar, 2023). Research has also demonstrated that embedding sustainability characteristics into different human resource management functions requires careful consideration of work contexts and their negative interactional effects on organisation-stakeholder relationships, with successful implementation depending on factors such as employee vigour and proactivity in synthesising work performance with resource regeneration (Mariappanadar, 2024).

Limitations and Future Research

While qualitative studies aim for transferability rather than generalizability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the findings' transferability to contexts beyond Australia should be considered carefully, given the unique characteristics of the Australian market and regulatory environment. Comparative studies across different national contexts could provide insights into how cultural and institutional factors influence sustainability transformation.

My research period (2019-2022) coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly impacted global supply chains (Ivanov & Dolgui, 2021). Within fashion retail specifically, organisations faced disrupted material supplies and operational challenges (Li et al., 2022; Majumdar et al., 2020). These circumstances directly influenced my research methodology: participant recruitment became considerably more challenging as organisations prioritised crisis management over research participation, and two planned interviews had to be cancelled due to lockdown restrictions and competing priorities among industry professionals. While some retailers experienced changes in consumer channel preferences during this period

(Das, Sarkar & Debroy, 2022), the extent and permanence of these shifts varied considerably. These limitations necessitated adaptations to my original research design and should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Methodologically, while the qualitative approach enabled deep insights into organisational processes and decision-making, it necessarily limited the sample size and scope of investigation. Additionally, my research primarily captured perspectives from organisational leaders and key decision-makers, potentially missing important insights from key organisational stakeholders, including frontline employees, middle management and other departmental heads (Bear et al., 2010; Bose et al., 2022; Kato & Kodama, 2017).

These limitations suggest several promising directions for future research. A key limitation of this study is its cross-sectional nature, as data was collected through single interviews with individual participants who reflected on organisational change retrospectively, rather than through longitudinal observation of these changes as they occurred. Future research would benefit from conducting interviews with multiple respondents across different levels in the organisation to capture a more complete perspective of the change process. To address this limitation, longitudinal studies could examine how fashion organisations maintain CSR engagement over time, particularly as they navigate growth and market pressures (Savaget et al., 2024). Such research could investigate how different organisational types adapt their approaches to CSR as they scale and face evolving market conditions, providing real-time insights into change processes rather than relying on retrospective accounts.

Future research could also investigate the role of emerging technologies in addressing the cost barriers to sustainability that this study identified. While my findings highlighted that sustainability initiatives often require significant financial investment, particularly for smaller organisations, emerging technologies may offer more cost-effective solutions. This could include examining how digital technologies support supply chain transparency, enable circular economy practices, and facilitate sustainability reporting at a lower cost than traditional methods (Kumar et al., 2021).

For example, research could explore how blockchain and other technologies might reduce the costs of supply chain verification that participants in this study identified as prohibitive, or how AI-driven waste reduction systems could make circular economy practices more financially viable for resource-constrained organisations. Future studies might also examine

how these cost-effective technological solutions influence the relationship between different institutional logics and sustainability practices, particularly for organisations that viewed sustainability and financial performance as competing priorities.

Additional research is needed to understand how different institutional logics evolve and adapt in the fashion industry, particularly in response to changing societal expectations and market conditions (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). This could include investigating how organisations successfully navigate multiple institutional logics while maintaining CSR engagement (Greenwood et al., 2009; Pache & Santos, 2012).

The gender equality dimension of CSR also warrants further investigation. Future research could examine the intersectionality of gender, leadership, and sustainability initiatives (Glass et al., 2015; Javed et al., 2023). This includes examining how women's leadership styles influence sustainability outcomes and how organisations can better support women in sustainability leadership roles (Khalikova, Jin & Chopra, 2021; Shoham et al., 2017).

The role of industry collaboration in driving CSR engagement also merits deeper investigation. Future research could examine how different forms of collaboration influence sustainability outcomes and how power dynamics within collaborative arrangements affect sustainability transformation (Karlsson & Skold, 2018). Studies might also examine how to structure industry collaboration to better support smaller organisations while ensuring meaningful progress toward sustainability goals (Halme & Korpela, 2013; Klewitz & Hansen, 2014). For example, the UK's Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP)'s Courtauld Commitment has successfully connected small food producers with larger retailers, enabling smaller organisations to implement food waste reduction strategies they couldn't achieve alone through shared logistics networks and coordinated surplus food redistribution programmes (WRAP, 2024).

Conclusion

My research advances theoretical understanding by revealing how institutional logics and organisational spaces interact to enable or constrain CSR engagement in the Australian fashion industry. Integrating institutional logics theory (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008) with The Three Spaces Framework (Kulik et al., 2022) demonstrates that successful CSR engagement from aligning institutional logics and coupling across organisational spaces.

The organisational typology developed through this research—profit-led, customer-led, values-led, and product-led organisations—provides a framework for understanding how different institutional logics shape CSR approaches. Profit-led organisations operating under market logic often struggle to move beyond superficial initiatives (Thornton et al., 2012), while values-led organisations demonstrate how strong alignment between institutional logics and objectives in CSR can drive transformative change (Besharov & Smith, 2014; Smith, Gonin & Besharov, 2015). Customer-led organisations successfully navigate multiple institutional logics (Porter & Kramer, 2006; Hur et al., 2013), while product-led organisations, guided by creative logic, demonstrate potential for integrating sustainability through design and innovation (Ertekin et al., 2020).

Women's increasing presence in sustainability leadership positions addresses historical inequities and brings new perspectives to environmental and social challenges (Glass et al., 2015; Javed et al., 2023). This highlights the importance of viewing gender equality as integral to broader sustainability initiatives (Khalikova et al., 2021). Industry collaboration emerges as crucial for accelerating sustainability transformation (Karlsson & Skold, 2018; Zhou et al., 2020), though power imbalances can hinder collaborative efforts, particularly affecting smaller organisations (Kumar et al., 2021).

The persistence of the customer intention-action gap (Carrington et al., 2010; Hassan et al., 2014; Ronda, 2024) highlights organisations' ongoing challenge in translating customer sustainability concerns into meaningful market change. This requires organisations to move beyond simple messaging to develop comprehensive strategies aligning internal practices with external communications (Brunton et al., 2015; Haugh & Talwar, 2017).

My research suggests that advancing CSR in the fashion industry requires a multi-faceted approach addressing both organisational and systemic barriers to change. Future research directions—particularly around the evolution of institutional logics, the role of technology, and the structure of industry collaboration—offer promising pathways for deepening our understanding of sustainability transformation.

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Appendix A Participant Information Sheet

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Full Project title: Corporate Social Responsibility in the Australian Fashion Industry

Dear Participant,

What is this research about?

This project examines Australian fashion retailer's engagement with corporate social responsibility practices. The project will focus on two aspects of corporate social responsibility: environmental sustainability and gender equality.

My research on corporate social responsibility (CSR) in the Australian fashion industry aims to explore the current state of CSR practices in the sector and their impact on stakeholders. I seek to examine the extent to which Australian fashion companies are adopting CSR practices, the challenges and opportunities they face, and the effectiveness of these practices in improving social and environmental outcomes.

My research will contribute to the understanding of the role of CSR in the Australian fashion industry and its potential to drive positive social and environmental change. It may also inform policymakers, industry practitioners, and other stakeholders on how to improve CSR practices and promote sustainability in the sector.

I will be conducting semi-structured interviews with people who are involved in or knowledgeable about the Australian fashion industry. You are invited to participate in an (online/face-to-face) semi-structured interview. The interview will take about 60-90 minutes of your time and will be conducted via Zoom/Skype or at a location convenient to you. I will be asking questions about your organisations engagement with corporate social responsibility activities. Primarily, I will focus on activities involving environmental sustainability and gender equality.

What will happen to the information I provide?

- Your responses will be completely confidential and only accessed by the research team. Any information which could lead to the identification of any individual will not be released.
- Excerpts from the interviews may be included in my publications, but your name, or any identifying characteristics, will in no way be connected with your comments. You, and any people or organisations you mention in the interview, will be given pseudonyms ensuring that you are not identifiable. No individuals or organisations will be identified when reporting the project findings.
- Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without adverse consequences, now or in the future. The interviews will

be digitally recorded, and a transcript will be made. Your responses will be deleted from the relevant transcript if you decide to withdraw from the study.

- The digital files and their transcripts will only be accessible to the research team and to the professional service firm transcribing the interviews. No information will be released to another party unless the researcher is legally required to do so. Interview transcripts and electronic data will be kept in a locked, secure location in the Elton Mayo building's storage room on UniSA's City West campus for a period of five years. All information collected as part of this study will be retained for five years in a secured computer server in the School of Business.

This project has been approved by the UniSA Business Negligible Risk Ethics Committee.

Will I receive feedback?

If you'd like to receive a summary of the project's findings, please send a request to Josephine.mckenzie@mymail.unisa.edu.au, providing an email address to which the report can be mailed. The report will be available after we have finished the data collection.

If you have any ethical concerns about the project or questions about your rights as a participant please contact BIS-Research@unisa.edu.au or 61 8 8302 0245.

Should you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact the following persons. Thank you for your time and cooperation.
Sincerely

Josephine McKenzie
Phone: [redacted]
Email: Josephine.Mckenzie@mymail.unisa.edu.au

Appendix B Consent Form

RESEARCH CONSENT FORM

Full Project title: Corporate Social Responsibility in the Australian Fashion Industry

Date: ……..

Researcher's name: Josephine McKenzie

Contact details: Email: Josephine.Mckenzie@mymail.unisa.edu.au Tele: [redacted]

Primary Supervisor: Sukhbir Sandhu

Co-Supervisors: Carol Kulik, Sanjee Perera

This project examines Australian fashion retailer's engagement with corporate social responsibility practices. The project will focus on two aspects of corporate social responsibility: environmental sustainability and gender equality.

I am investigating corporate social responsibility activities within Australian fashion retail organisations. The aim is to identify the different levels and types of engagement with environmental sustainability and gender equality. I am also interested in the influence of external and internal stakeholders on corporate social responsibility practices in the Australian fashion industry. I will be asking questions about corporate social responsibility activity in the Australian fashion industry, specifically focusing on activity surrounding environmental sustainability and gender equality.

In signing this form I confirm that:

- I have read the Participant Information Sheet and the nature and purpose of the research project has been explained to me. I understand and agree to take part.
- I understand the purpose of the research project and my involvement in it.
- I understand that I may withdraw from the research project at any stage and that this will not affect my status now or in the future.
- I understand that while information gained during the study may be published, I will not be identified and my personal results will remain confidential.
- I understand that the interview will be digitally recorded and transcribed. The information I provide will only be used for the purpose of the project. I understand that my responses will only be accessible to the research team and the professional transcribers. I also understand that no information will be released to another party unless the researchers are legally required to do so.
- I understand that the data collected will be stored securely at the University of South Australia for a period of seven years and destroyed in accordance with the UniSA "Ownership and Data Retention Policy" and the "Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research". Digital files will be password protected and accessible only by researchers and staff involved in the project.

- This project has been approved by the UniSA Business Ethics Committee. If you have any ethical concerns about the project or questions about your rights as a participant please contact BIS-Research@unisa.edu.au or
  61 8 8302 0245.

Name of participant……..

Signed…… **Date**……

I have provided information about the research to the research participants and believe that he/she/they understand what is involved.

Name of Researcher: Josephine McKenzie

Signed…… **Date**: ……..

This study has been approved by the University of South Australia's UniSA Business Negligible Research Ethics Committee.

Appendix C Organisational Participant Interview Protocol

Organisational Participant Interview Protocol

Purpose: Gather information about environmental sustainability and gender equality practices from key informants within Australian fashion retailers

Sample Questions

Icebreaker: Can you tell me a little bit more about your role in the organisation and how long you have been in this role? What does your role entail?

Environmental Sustainability

1. Could you tell me about environmental sustainability activities in your organisation? How long has your organisation been engaging with these activities?
2. Does your organisation have any formal policies in regard to environmental sustainability?
3. Are there any formal roles with a focus on environmental sustainability within your organisation?
4. Are there any informal champions for environmental sustainability within your organisation?
5. How does your organisation communicate environmental sustainability activities to employees? Is there a sense of commitment to these activities among employees?
6. Do you feel action on environmental sustainability is important for your organisation's reputation? If so, why?
7. Do you feel environmental sustainability is important to your external stakeholders? If so, why?
8. How does your organisation communicate sustainability activities to external stakeholders?
9. Do you feel there are difficulties in engaging with environmental sustainability? If so, could you identify them?
10. How do you think your organisation could be more effective in their commitment to environmental sustainability?

Gender Equality

1. Could you tell me about gender equality activities in your organisation? How long has your organisation been engaging with these activities?
2. Does your organisation have any formal policies in regard to gender equality?
3. Are there any formal roles with a focus on gender equality within your organisation?
4. Are there any informal champions for gender equality within your organisation?
5. How does your communicate gender equality activities to employees? Is there a sense of commitment to these activities among employees?

6. Do you feel action on gender equality is important for your organisation's reputation? If so, why?
7. Do you feel gender equality is important to your external stakeholders? If so, why?
8. How does your organisation communicate gender equality activities to external stakeholders?
9. Do you feel there are difficulties in engaging with gender equality? If so, could you identify them?
10. How do you think your organisation could be more effective in engaging with gender equality?

Linkage between Environmental Sustainability and Gender Equality

1. Do you see a relationship between environmental sustainability and gender equality in your organisation? If so, how does this present itself?
2. Do you feel that engagement with environmental sustainability leads to better engagement with gender equality? And vice versa?
3. Are environmental sustainability and gender equality equally important to your organisation? If not, which one is more important and why?
4. Do you think external stakeholders that care about environmental sustainability, also care about gender equality? And vice versa?

Three Spaces

1. Where do you feel the most effective change can be made regarding environmental sustainability and gender equality? Through policies, internal commitment or external reputation?
2. Do you feel that there needs to be alignment in these three areas?
3. Can you think of an example in your organisation of effective or ineffective action regarding environmental sustainability and gender equality? If so, what factors were involved?

Appendix D Industry Participant Interview Protocol

Industry Participant Interview Protocol

Purpose: Gather information on environmental sustainability and gender equality activities within the Australian fashion industry.

Questions

Icebreaker: Can you tell me more about your experience within the Australian fashion industry? How long have you been employed in this sector?

Environmental Sustainability

1. What is your experience with environmental sustainability in the Australian fashion industry?
2. Who do you see as the front runners in environmental sustainability within the Australian fashion industry? Can you help me understand why you see them as front runners?
3. Who do you see as laggards with regards to environmental sustainability within the Australian fashion industry? Can you help me understand why you see them as laggards?
4. Can you identify key influences on retailers' engagement with environmental sustainability within the Australian fashion industry?
5. How do you think retailers could improve their engagement with environmental sustainability?

Gender Equality

1. What is your experience with gender equality in the Australian fashion industry?
2. Who do you see as the front runners in gender equality within the Australian fashion industry? Can you help me understand why you see them as front runners?
3. Who do you see as laggards with regards to gender equality within the Australian fashion industry? Can you help me understand why you see them as laggards?
4. Can you identify key influences on retailers' engagement with gender equality within the Australian fashion industry?
5. How do you think retailers could improve their engagement with environmental sustainability?

Linkage between Environmental Sustainability and Gender Equality

1. Do you see a relationship between environmental sustainability and gender equality in the Australian fashion industry? If so, how does this relationship present itself?
2. Are the front runners in environmental sustainability also front runners in gender equality?
3. Are the laggards in environmental sustainability also laggards in gender equality?

4. How do you think retailers could become improve their engagement with both environmental sustainability and gender equality?
5. Which area do you think retailers is most significant for Australian fashion retailers – environmental sustainability or gender equality?

Appendix E Focus Group Protocol

Focus Group Protocol

Purpose: Gather information on how customers perceive environmental sustainability and gender equality activities within the Australian fashion industry.

Introduction

Introduce yourself and any other moderators or observers in the room.
Explain the purpose of the focus group: to discuss the factors that influence people's decisions to buy clothes.
Emphasise that there are no right or wrong answers, and that you're interested in hearing everyone's perspectives.
Ensure phones are off the table.

Questions

Icebreaker: Get everyone to write down three brands they categorise as fast fashion, sustainable fashion and traditional fashion and then ask why they chose these

1. When you're deciding whether to buy a piece of clothing, what factors do you consider? (Prompt for factors such as price, style, brand, quality, fit, etc.)
2. How important is sustainability to you when it comes to buying clothes? Are there any specific sustainability-related factors that you prioritize, such as eco-friendly materials, fair labour practices, or reducing waste?
    a. Do you consider gender equality at fashion retailers?
3. How much do you know about the sustainability and gender equality practices of the brands or retailers you typically shop from?
    a. Do you actively seek out information on their sustainability and gender equality efforts, or is it not something you typically consider?
4. Have you ever purchased a piece of clothing specifically because it was marketed as sustainable or eco-friendly? If so, can you tell us about that experience?
    a. Have you ever bought a piece of clothing because it was women-owned, women-made or was said to ‘empower women’? (E.g., the future is female t-shirts)
5. Do you think that sustainable clothing is generally more expensive than non-sustainable clothing? If so, does this influence your purchasing decisions?
6. How much do trends influence your clothing purchases? Are there certain fashion trends that you're more likely to follow than others?
    a. Where do you find fashion inspiration?
7. Do you think that sustainable clothing is as stylish or trendy as non-sustainable clothing? Why or why not?
8. How do you dispose of your clothing once you no longer want it anymore? (Resale/recycle/rubbish)
9. Is there anything else you'd like to add about sustainability and your clothing purchases?

Closing

Thank everyone for their participation and insights.
Let them know how their feedback will be used.
Provide contact information in case anyone has further feedback or question.