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# Argumentative misalignments in the controversy surrounding fashion sustainability

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

In light of the ongoing public controversy surrounding fashion sustainability, this paper sets out to identify misalignments that relate to the definitions of sustainable fashion. It does so by examining the discourse of different agents in this polylogical argumentation - fashion companies and the European Parliament as well as citizens, small brands and NGOs - as revealed through documents and tweets published online. Our findings show misalignments in the opening stage of the argumentative discussion at the level of explicit and implicit definitions of sustainability as well as in how the agents responsible are discursively portrayed. We argue that the existence of these misalignments may explain the ongoing controversy surrounding sustainable fashion: the different actors do not share univocal starting points and representations of this phenomenon. Methodologically, this paper also advances research on argumentative polylogues, by demonstrating a method for comparing argumentation by different actors using different data sources.
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## 1. Introduction

The debate surrounding the sustainability of the fashion industry and fashion consumption is currently very lively and, broadly, could be ascribed to the domain of *environmental argumentation.* As Lewiński and Üzelgün (2019, p. 1) observe, the public sphere is "populated by complex and dynamic interactions among various positions and, clearly, arguments on global environmental concerns and policies". In the domain of fashion sustainability, different actors hold different and competing goals and positions: fashion companies (including luxury fashion, fast fashion and others), public institutions such as, in Europe, the European Parliament, various NGOs and think-thanks who advocate for change in fashion consumption, as well as concerned citizens. Although fashion sustainability is closely connected to environmental issues, human rights and the social rights of workers in the fashion industry also form part of the debate.

The plurality of actors and positions in this debate gives rise to what has been called an *argumentative polylogue* (Lewiński and Aakhus, 2014). The polylogue around fashion sustainability has at least two striking characteristics. First, different actors advance their views in different "places" or "venues" (Aakhus and Lewiński, 2017), ranging from Twitter to official EU documents published on websites. At the empirical level, this requires collecting multiple datasets, if one wants to achieve a comprehensive view of the ongoing discussion. Second, at the level of content, this discussion revolves around the important but undefined notion of sustainable fashion. Despite what might be seen as an overwhelming consensus on the importance of

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sustainability in fashion, repeated warnings from different studies indicate that fashion sustainability is not necessarily advancing. According to a WWF report published in 2017, "The industry emits 1.7 billion tonnes of CO2 annually, is responsible for extensive water use and pollution, and produces 2.1 billion tonnes of waste annually" (Loetscher et al., 2017, p. 2); alongside this, "Global consumption of clothes doubled between 2000 and 2014" (Loetscher et al., 2017). Hibberd (2018, p. 383) observes that "every stage in the fashion world creates pollution and emissions problems: from sourcing and use of scarce water resources in the production of cotton, to farming processes in the production of leather; from the use of industrial dyes and synthetic textile fibres to the need for ships, planes and lorries to transport the final product globally". Also in other sectors where the sustainability of certain production processes is being challenged, different actors may take up very different positions, as shown by, among others, Morales López's (2012) analysis of the debate between the fossil fuel company Repsol and indigenous communities represented by Oxfam. Indeed, the mere existence of reports on sustainability or Corporate Social Responsibility indicates that issues relating to sustainability have become the object of a societal debate in which companies cannot remain silent, even though there may be differences between countries in how they construct their positions (Basanta and Vangehuchten, 2019).

In this paper, we put forward the hypothesis that the apparent impasse in this discussion might be due, at least partially, to what we call *misalignments* in the argumentative debate, particularly regarding the definition of sustainability. We assume the considerations expressed by Ludlow (2014, p. 7) who introduces the concept of "lexical warfare" to define "battles over how a term is to be understood" and notes that "our political discourse is full of such battles" (Ludlow, 2014). We build on this idea, adding that these "battles of ideas" are not only fought at the level of explicit arguments: part of the disagreement exists more subtly in unshared starting points in the discussion. Our hypothesis is that the *opening stage* of the argumentative discussion (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1984; van Eemeren, 2018, Section 2.2) is not aligned between the different actors.

The findings of this paper will make both a theoretical and a methodological contribution. At the theoretical level, we will introduce the concept of *argumentative misalignment* in the opening stage. We will identify some of the misalignments around the definition of sustainability that reduce the quality of the discussion. At the methodological level, we will propose a method to identify misalignments in discourse and argumentation and, at the same time, exemplify how to analyze argumentative polylogue empirically using a collection of different types of data.

This paper will proceed as follows. In Section 2, we discuss the debate on fashion sustainability (Section 2.1) as well as the theoretical framework that we adopt to analyze misalignments in the definition of sustainable fashion. In particular, Section 2.2 examines the framework of argumentation theory, introducing the concepts of *polylogue* and *argumentative misalignment*. Sections 2.3 and 2.4 specify different types of misalignments at the level of the opening stage. Section 3 is devoted to the collection and analysis of our empirical data, while Section 4 reports and discusses our findings. Finally, Section 5 proposes a conclusion, including openings for further research.

## 2. Literature review: contributing factors to the analysis of argumentative misalignments

### 2.1. Fashion sustainability: the background to the debate

In *A history of sustainability in fashion*, Sasha Rabin Wallinger observes that, although fashion sustainability has a long history, pivotal events took place in the 1990s that started to raise global awareness of environmental issues (Wallinger, 2015, p. 155). At the end of that decade and in the 2000s, "sustainability in fashion was popularized on the runway" (Wallinger, 2015), with the London College of Fashion's Centre for Sustainable Fashion being opened in 2008 (Wallinger, 2015, p. 156). Hibberd (2018, p. 388) reports that there is evidence "that the industry was broadly supportive of international attempts to limit the impact of climate change, most notably through the Paris climate change agreement in December 2015".

In recent years, fashion sustainability has become more of a topic of public debate, involving different actors and a broad audience. To cite a few examples of communications that contributed to making fashion sustainability an issue in the public debate, in 2015, Andrew Morgan's documentary *The true cost* exposed the environmental and human costs of the supply chain in fashion[1] while documentaries such as *Fíos fóra* ('Threads abroad') revealed the exploitation taking place in textile production in Galicia prior to massive outsourcing.[2] In 2018—2019, the London-based Victoria and Albert Museum hosted an exhibition on the manifold relationships between fashion and the environment, entitled *Fashioned from Nature* (Ehrman, 2018). At the level of human rights, the Rana Plaza accident in Savar (Bangladesh) in 2013, in which more than a thousand textile workers died, created a huge controversy that opened customers' eyes to the social consequences of fashion brands outsourcing to sub-contractors in countries in which human rights for garment workers might not be observed (Hibberd, 2018, p. 387). This accident increased the debate both scientifically (see for example Hira and Benson-Rea, 2017) and in the public sphere, for example through the establishment of an NGO (*Who made my clothes*) in the aftermath of the accident (Desideri, 2020). To give a rough idea of the breadth of the debate generated by this accident, a quick search on the aggregated

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[1] See https://truecostmovie.com/ (last visited: November 2020).
[2] See https://vimeo.com/193701763 (last visited: November 2020).

news database Factiva returns more than 10,000 articles containing "Rana Plaza" in 2013 alone, whereas, significantly, in 2012, only one article appears.[3] The data analyzed in this paper predate the Covid-19 crisis (see Section 3.1), but, because of this crisis, workers' rights in these kinds of factories have become a topic of renewed interest, leading to public initiatives that reveal the brands whichcommit to paying in full orders that are either completed or are in production vs. those who don't.[4]

Despite the rising global interest in fashion sustainability, it has been observed that fashion as an industry has been slow to implement sustainable measures (see for example Fletcher, 2014); and research into fashion sustainability is also late (Akko and Koskennurmi-Sivonen, 2013, p. 13). In this context, understanding the crux of the argumentative misalignments in the opening stage, which might lead to points of impasse in the debate, may contribute a new perspective on this important contemporary controversy. Scholars who adopt a design perspective on argumentation have argued that, if starting points that are deemed important by some actors are neither heard nor considered by others and misalignments persist, it is unlikely that the problem will be solved (Jackson, 2015, p. 240; Aakhus, 2016, p. 160).

## 2.2. Misalignments in argumentative controversies

In this section, we introduce the main theoretical concepts that will underpin our work. We start with the concept of *polylogue* before moving on to consider *controversies* as protracted and conflictual polylogues. Finally, we discuss what we mean by *argumentative misalignments*.

The concept of *polylogue* was first introduced in linguistic pragmatics[5] and then refined in argumentation studies. A special issue on this topic, published in the *Journal of Pragmatics* in 2004 and edited by Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni represents a milestone in the history of this concept. Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2004, p. 2) notes that there is a "deep-rooted tendency to associate interaction with interaction between two people, considered as the prototype of all forms of interaction", but that this does not actually represent the reality of most interactions, which are often polylogical rather than dialogical (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2004, p. 2). Polylogue is a gradable concept, ranging from trilogue (involving three participants, such as you might have in a small meeting or family discussion) to what we could call more extreme cases of polylogue, with a "virtually infinite" set of parties (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2004, pp. 3–4), as often happens in online discussions (cf. Bou-Franch et al., 2012).

Cases of "extreme" polylogue have been the focus of attention of argumentative studies that deal with public argument and public controversies (e.g. Mohammed, 2019; Musi and Aakhus, 2017). Recently, Lewiński and Aakhus (2014) conceptualized argumentative polylogue as a discussion characterized by a "plurality of actors and positions" that cannot be reduced to a two-sided dialectical discussion. Aakhus and Lewiński (2017) add a consideration with important empirical implications: polylogues happen in different "places" or "venues", which means, we may add, that data collection needs to include different, if not heterogeneous, corpora.

Before we consider what constitute the most important aspects in argumentative polylogue that might give rise to "misalignments", we introduce the concept of argumentation that underpins this paper. We assume from pragma-dialectics (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1984; van Eemeren, 2018) the idea that argumentation should be considered as a process of discussion between two or more interlocutors. In particular,

> "Argumentation is a verbal, social and rational activity aimed at convincing a reasonable critic of the acceptability of a certain opinion by advancing one or more propositions designed to justify that standpoint" (van Eemeren and Snoeck Henkemans, 2017, p. 1).

The pragma-dialectical definition of argumentation, which we assume as a framework in this paper, is a normative definition, in the sense that it defines an ideal model for resolving differences of opinion, which is called a *critical discussion*. In this sense, the model "does not represent a utopia but a theoretically motivated idealization", which "can serve heuristic and analytic functions" for the analysis of argumentative discourse (van Eemeren, 2018, p. 35). The model of a critical discussion "specifies the various stages that are to be distinguished in the resolution process" (van Eemeren, 2018, p. 35). Specifically, the model consists of four stages, each of which is "indispensable in an argumentative discourse that is to lead to deciding in a reasonable way whether or not the standpoint at issue is acceptable" (van Eemeren, 2018, p. 36): the "confrontation stage", the "opening stage", the "argumentation stage" and the "concluding stage" (van Eemeren, 2018). The confrontation stage "corresponds with the initial situation that manifests itself in those parts of the discourse in which it becomes clear that there is a standpoint that meets with real or projected doubt or disagreement, so that a difference of opinion arises or may be expected to arise" (van Eemeren, 2018, p. 36). In the opening stage, the interlocutors' commitments are identified (van Eemeren, 2018); both parties (called the *protagonist* and *antagonist* in this model) agree on what "common starting points" (van Eemeren, 2018, p. 37) they already share, which include *procedural* starting points and *material* starting points (the latter including facts and values). The argumentation stage is the moment when whoever has advanced a standpoint on

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the proposition at issue, defends it against doubts or contradiction; while a genuine concluding stage occurs at the moment in which the protagonist and antagonist "determine whether the protagonist's standpoint has been properly defended" (van Eemeren, 2018, p. 37).

In polylogue, the parties cannot be reduced to one protagonist and one antagonist as in the idealized dialectical two-interlocutors model (Lewiński and Aakhus, 2014, pp. 179–180); and this might create an enormous difference between the idealized model of a critical discussion and how the empirical counterparts of the stages are conducted in a real-life poly-logue. In particular, the opening stage requires "a more complex notion of common starting points or, for short, common ground" (Lewiński and Aakhus, 2014, p. 180), especially at the level of material starting points, because parties may have some "global common ground", which is "shared among all parties, and some local common grounds" (Lewiński and Aakhus, 2014).

Moreover, when discussing the debate on sustainable fashion, we are talking not only about a local and well-delimited polylogue (as a committee discussion might be, see the example discussed in Lewiński and Aakhus, 2014) but about a *controversy*, which is prolonged in its duration and contains an element of polarization or even conflict (Dascal, 2003). Seeking to understand why disagreement is protracted in controversies leads us to advance the hypothesis that one of the possible causes for this might be argumentative misalignments.

By this concept, we mean "discrepancies in common ground" (Clark, 1996), manifested in material starting points (facts and values) in the opening stage. The opening stage should manifest some level of agreement and mutual understanding between the interlocutors if the discussion is to proceed; misalignments in the opening stage might perpetuate discussions and fuel the conflictual element in controversies. Therefore, it is important to identify where these misalignments, possibly hidden behind cases of "lexical warfare" (Ludlow, 2014, p. 7) lie, because they may explain why polylogical discussions do not reach a concluding stage and turn into controversies. In this paper, among possible misalignments that may emerge in the opening stage, we consider two aspects related to the definition of sustainability: misalignments in implicit definitions of sustainability, as revealed in argumentation by definition (Section 2.3) and misalignments in discursive representations of agentivity (2.4).

### 2.3. Misalignments in explicit and implicit definitions of sustainable fashion

Sustainability *per se* has been described as a "fuzzy and wide" concept (Niinimäki, 2015, p. 1; Farrer, 2011). Therefore, a promising way of identifying misalignments in the opening stage is to look at how sustainability is *defined*, to reveal potential semantic ambiguities. In particular, we might expect two types of discursive procedures to be used to define sustainability. First, we might have *explicit* definitions of sustainability, linguistically formulated as "sustainable fashion means x"; arguably, we will find this type of definition, for example, in public documents or reports in which authorities need to neatly define the scope of their interventions. Second, we might find *implicit* definitions of sustainability, for example as they appear within *arguments from definition* (Rigotti and Greco, 2019; Greco et al., 2016) that are present in the debate, of the type "This product/service is sustainable, because it is/does x". The argument "because it is/does x" presupposes a cultural-contextual premise (an *endoxon*, see Rigotti and Greco, 2019) that contains an implicit definition of sustainable fashion. This premise might be formulated as "sustainable fashion means x".

Misalignments in the definition of sustainability may be particularly problematic in a situation of polylogue. Normally, there is no explicit moment that marks the opening stage in a discussion (cf. van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1992, p. 149): participants will start by assuming that they share some (often unexpressed) material starting points, and then discover in the course of a discussion that misalignments exist. If they want to determine "whether a proposition that was initially not agreed upon can be accepted in the second instance" (van Eemeren, 2018, p, 55), they will need to open a *sub-discussion* (van Eemeren, 2018). However, while this process might run relatively smoothly when two participants who have a difference of opinion discover that their starting points are not the same, it might become much more complex in the case of a polylogue, due to the complexity of the actors and due to the different venues in the discussion; incidentally, not all the venues may be equally accessible to the different actors at all times.

### 2.4. Misalignments related to agentivity in the discourse

As mentioned above, there is a plurality of actors involved in the debate surrounding sustainable fashion. In addition, these actors tend to differ in their opinions of the role different actors play, which has consequences for material starting points. In other words, actors have different views on who is the main cause of the environmental and human rights problems linked to fashion production, as well as on who holds the key to solving these problems. Therefore, the representation of agentivity in the discourse concerning sustainable fashion is paramount for a better understanding of the portrayals in terms of who or what is considered responsible for the problem itself; and who is considered a potential innovator who will contribute to solving this problem. Indeed, the analysis of agentivity, which is understood as the causal link between an agent entity, an intentional action and the condition of who/what suffers as a result of an action (De Cock and Michaud Maturana, 2014, p. 126), has been shown to be fruitful in the analysis of other societal debates, such as reports on human rights violations (De Cock and Michaud Maturana 2014, 2018; De Cock et al., 2019), and debates around abortion (Pizarro Pedraza and De Cock, 2018) or HIV transmission (Avila and Gras, 2014). Based on these studies, the expression of agentivity is then analyzed here through examining expressions that refer directly or indirectly to the agent of an action and/or by examining verb predicates that imply intentionality on the part of the actors involved.

In an analysis of the marketing of ethical food shopping, Ledin and Machin (2020) suggest that personalized marketing should be linked to the idea that we make choices in our consumption behavior as individuals in a market rather than as part of a collective, thus making consumers agents and attributing them an individual responsibility. Through our analysis of agentivity in sustainable fashion discourse, we aim to see whether we observe a similar pattern in the brands' discourse on environmental and ethical choices related to fashion.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Data collection

We collected data from different sources because the different actors taking part in the polylogue express their views in different venues (Section 1). Perhaps not surprisingly, fashion companies report their views on sustainability through various channels but, importantly, in their annual reports; the last available report at the time of our analysis (relating to 2018) was thus chosen for the analysis. Institutional actors - in our case, the European Parliament - have their own methods of issuing public documents, which are then published on their website; we considered a briefing published in 2019, entitled "Environmental impact of the textile and clothing industry: What customers need to know" (Šajn, 2019). Finally, we accessed the voices of concerned citizens, NGOs and smaller (independent) fashion brands through tweets. To this end, we collected tweets that used the hashtag #sustainablefashion between 1 and 19 January 2020; this resulted in a collection of 246 tweets, which were for the main part in English although some tweets were written in French, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, German, or a combination of languages (see Table 1 for an overview) (see Naets, 2018 for a description of the collection tool).[6] This collection of tweets sharing the same hashtag can itself be considered a polylogue if we adopt the approach to social media polylogues taken by Bou-Franch et al. (2012). Indeed, the polylogue of tweets that use this hashtag has an "open, public

**Table 1**
Actors and types of data in the dataset.

| Actors | Types of data |
| --- | --- |
| Policymakers, institutions | European Parliament Briefing (Šajn, 2019) |
| Fashion companies | H&M sustainability report 2018 |
| | Inditex annual report 2018 |
| Citizens, smaller companies, NGOs | 246 Tweets from 1 to 19 January 2020 |

nature" (Bou-Franch et al., 2012, p. 503) and is flexible and unstable. Moreover, it has a double articulation, including active senders and a potentially much larger group of passive readers.

The choice of a social media platform, such as Twitter, is justified because it has been shown that "technology has amplified the voices of independent fashion businesses" (Tuite, 2018, p. 411), providing "new opportunities for small-scale designers to engage with a broader audience" (Webster, 2016, cited in Tuite, 2018, p. 411). This is true for commercial messages; but technology can also help independent brands and NGOs to reach a broad audience in relation to an issue such as sustainability. Twitter posts have been considered in previous studies relating to micro-companies and NGOs that contribute to fashion sustainability (see for example Bly et al., 2015; Henninger et al., 2016).

It goes without saying that it would be possible to consider more documents and more actors to broaden the view of the ongoing polylogue on fashion sustainability. However, for this first study, which also includes a methodological component as it sets out to define a method for analyzing argumentative misalignments, the current selection of actors and data provides sufficient material.

### 3.2. Data analysis

The analysis of our dataset follows the steps that we identified as important aspects in the positioning of the problem (in Sections 2.3 and 2.4 respectively). First, we searched for misalignments at the level of the definition of sustainable fashion. In order to do so, we coded the discourse of different actors in different types of documents (European Parliament, companies, NGOs and citizens on Twitter) looking for explicit and implicit definitions; the latter were identified through studying implicit cultural premises (endoxa) in definitional arguments. Second, we looked for misalignments in the representation of agentivity by coding who was represented as agentive in creating either problems or solutions to those problems.

With regard to the analysis of the 246 collected tweets, before proceeding with the steps described above, we manually coded these into three categories. We included tweets that were explicitly argumentative as well as those that were not. The first category of our coding encompassed the tweets that explicitly or implicitly included a definition of sustainable fashion;

ultimately, this category accounted for 20.7% of our data. The second encompassed tweets that did not include a definition of sustainability but still contributed to the discussion on fashion sustainability (35.7%); for example, because they promoted initiatives on fashion sustainability, because they linked the hashtag *#sustainablefashion* to other hashtags that related to sustainability or because they labelled a given practice (e.g. swapping) as "sustainable".[7] Finally, the third category included purely commercial tweets, which were often posted by companies that sell their products using the hashtag *#sustainablefashion* as a characterization (arguably, a potential argument in favor) of these products. The commercial tweets, which accounted for a significant 43.1% of the total, were not included in our analysis, because they were not relevant to the research question at the heart of this paper. Both authors coded the data separately. The interrater reliability was substantial (Cohen's Kappa of 0.757) and cases on which there was disagreement were further discussed until a consensus was reached.

In the tweets that included an explicit or implicit definition, we then coded for the presence of an explicit (1) or implicit agent (2), and whether the agent was presented as the cause of the problem or rather as an actor for change leading to possible solutions. Example (1) below was coded as having an explicit agent since there is the explicit − if referentially somewhat vague - subject *on* ('one, we'). Example (2), by contrast, does not have an explicit subject or other agent expression. However, following frame theory (Fillmore, 2003), verbs such as *purchasing* evoke a specific type of agent, namely customers.

(1) *Quelle est l'empreinte carbone du contenu [sic] votre placard? Cet outil-test mesure l'impact environnemental de la façon dont **on achète** et **prend soin** de nos vêtements. #sustainablefashion #moderesponsable #numérique*http://thredup.com/fashionfootprint ... (Twitter)

'What is the carbon footprint of the contents of your wardrobe? This test tool measures the environmental impact of the way in which we buy and look after our clothes. #sustainablefashion #moderesponsable #numérique http://thredup.com/fashionfootprint'

(2) ***Purchasing*** timeless pieces and ***not buying into*** fast fashion is an important aspect of #sustainablefashion (Twitter)

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Misalignments concerning explicit and implicit definitions

A first level of misalignments in the opening stage can be found in the explicit definitions of sustainability. Almost all actors acknowledge that sustainability includes an *environmental* level (pollution and waste generated by the industry) and a *social* level (human rights in the supply chain). Both levels are also included in the description used by the UN Alliance for Fair Fashion, composed of various UN agencies: "Sustainability encompasses social issues, such as improvements in working conditions and remuneration for workers, as well as environmental ones, including the reduction of the industry's waste stream, and decreases in water pollution and contributions to greenhouse gas emissions" (UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion homepage https://unfashionalliance.org/). While the EU overall follows the UN definition of sustainability as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: our common future, 1987, part 3, §27, http://www.un-documents.net/our-common-future.pdf), no detailed explicit definition of sustainable fashion was found in EU documents. The Sustainable Apparel Coalition also mentions both levels, stating that it aspires to "an apparel, footwear, and textiles industry that produces no unnecessary environmental harm and has a positive impact on the people and communities associated with its activities" (Sustainable Apparel Coalition homepage).

Moreover, the relative weights given to types of sustainability in the different texts that we analyzed are significantly different. For example, whereas H&M's sustainability report (109 pages) addresses both environmental and social sustainability in detail, the European Parliament (henceforth EP) briefing "Environmental impact of the textile and clothing industry: What consumers need to know" (10 pages) explicitly focuses on the environmental impact, although it mentions the social problems as being the object of other EU initiatives (see Šajn, 2019, p. 9, footnote 5). Tweets, which are by definition short texts, tend to consider (parts of) either the environmental or the social aspect. In lexical pragmatic terms, one could say then that sustainability is used as an *ad hoc* concept accessed through a pragmatic process (Carston, 1997). While these divergences are not problematic *per se*, if we consider the dimensions of the public debate in this polylogue, the different accents given to the different elements may obviously create misalignments in the opening stage, which are not necessarily clarified through explicit sub-discussions.

A second, and perhaps more subtle, type of misalignment concerns implicit definitions of sustainability in fashion, which are material starting points. In these cases, what is taken for granted by one actor is not taken for granted by another: it is either ignored or considered something to be debated (i.e., a proposition at issue). In order to discover what was taken for granted, we coded the tweets, and identified all *arguments from definition* that were present. In performing this analysis, we found two distinct *argumentative patterns* (Van Eemeren, 2016), which are represented in Table 2 below. On the basis of the

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[7] In some cases, implicit definitions of sustainability through arguments from definitions could be reconstructed even for this category of tweets. However, this required greater interpretation of the original text in the tweet; this is why we did not include these tweets in the first category.

**Table 2**

Argumentative patterns on Twitter.

| Prescriptive variant | Evaluative variant |
|---|---|
| 1 We/you should buy this product/support this initiative | 1. This product/initiative is good/appreciable |
| 1.1 Because it is sustainable/advances sustainability | 1.1 Because it is sustainable |
| 1.1.1 And this is because: [definition of sustainable] | 1.1.1 And this is because: [definition of sustainable] |

type of (often implicit) standpoint reconstructed,[8] we distinguish between a prescriptive variant and an evaluative variant of the pattern.

Often, in both cases, the argument "because it is sustainable" or "because it advances sustainability" is linguistically expressed by the hashtag *#sustainablefashion.* In general, juxtaposing the hashtag invites the reader to try to infer the relationship between the hashtag and the rest of the message, appealing to the cooperative principle. It has been noted that hashtags "activate certain assumptions" that guide the reader's interpretation (Scott, 2015, p. 19). Hashtags perform a wide variety of functions (see Wikström, 2014) but most of the uses of *#sustainablefashion* seem to adhere quite closely to the initial use of hashtags, namely labelling a message in order to integrate it into a conversation on a given topic, also termed a 'topic tag' (Wikström, 2014: 132).

An example of the prescriptive variant of this pattern can be found in the following tweet (3), published on 12 January 2020:

(3) *"Fashion production makes up 10 per cent of our carbon emissions - check out these 14 books about fashion for more info on the challenges of maintaining a healthy environment in the current fashion tradition #fashion #sustainablefashion #climatecrisis* http://ow.ly/viwd50xTn3o*"* (Twitter)

We have reconstructed the argumentation in this example (standpoint 1, and arguments 1.1 and 1.1.1); in this specific case, there is a further subordinate argument (1.1.1.1) that is additional to the argumentative pattern.

1  You should check out these 14 books about fashion
1.1  Because they advance sustainability
1.1.1  Because they explain how to maintain a healthy environment
1.1.1.1  And this is needed in the context of the current fashion tradition, which currently produces 10 percent of our carbon emissions

If we consider the relation between 1.1 and 1.1.1, we find that 1.1.1 supports 1.1 by means of a *definitional argument*: in other words, 1.1.1 implicitly defines what it means "to advance sustainability". This definition is realized within an implicit endoxon that "Being sustainable means maintaining a healthy environment".

The example discussed above illustrates how we proceeded to analyze implicit definitions of sustainable fashion in the corpus of tweets. We then compared these implicit definitions provided by Twitter users with the definitions implicitly or explicitly provided by the EP and the two companies considered in our corpus. We found that some implicit definitions by

**Table 3**

Examples of misalignments in the opening stage in the controversy surrounding sustainable fashion.

| Tweets (selection) | *Endoxa Implicit from Twitter (selection)* | European Parliament briefing | H&M/Inditex reports |
|---|---|---|---|
| Each piece is made from 100% vintage and recycled fabrics down to the buttons, lace and closures. Designed by urs truly link in bio #sustainablefashion pic.twitter.com/NzvTdeyRfJ | "Being sustainable means being made from 100% vintage and recycled fabrics down to the buttons, lace and closures" | Vintage is not mentioned, although second-hand is mentioned | While recycled materials are mentioned, the word "vintage" does not appear in the 109 pages of the H&M report or in the 434 pages of the Inditex report |
| Louis Vuitton's Autumn Winter 2020 collection showcased during #PFWM, featured SO many furs! Swipe to see them. @louisvuitton #AW20 #LouisVuitton #sustainablefashion pic.twitter.com/1l8L1yY7LH | "Being sustainable means using fur" | Not mentioned | Not mentioned in H&M. By contrast, Inditex (p. 154) explicitly says that they are part of the "Fur free alliance", thus *de facto* going against the endoxon mentioned in Twitter. However, this discussion is never opened explicitly (there is no mention of opponents' viewpoints) |
| | | Mentioned | Not mentioned by the companies. |

*(continued on next page)*

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**Table 3** (*continued*)

| Tweets (selection) | *Endoxa Implicit from Twitter (selection)* | European Parliament briefing | H&M/Inditex reports |
|---|---|---|---|
| We have suits, shirts and ties to borrow, free of charge, for senior proms, P7 leavers parties, grad balls and other formal occasions. #sustainablefashion pic.twitter.com/D2NmX70x9W | "Being sustainable means borrowing clothes" | | |
| Tweet 1: Yellow and orange bead earrings handmade recycling paper. Info and photos here #zerowaste #sustainablefashion #upcycle #BetterTogetherpic.twitter.com/MbqXqDBEdV | "Being sustainable means hand-making products using recycled materials" | "Handmade" not mentioned, recycled materials are mentioned. | "Handmade" not mentioned, emphasis on recycled materials |
| Tweet 2: Lovingly #handmade by an #artisan in the Andes.<br>Get yours here: http://artisansintheandes.com/beaded-necklaces-bib-necklace-chunky/beaded-necklaces-blue-brown-acai-long-chunky …<br>This beaded #necklace is made with organic acai nuts, sustainably harvested in the Amazon rainforests of South America.<br>#ecofashion #sustainablefashion #ethicalfashion #ecofriendly #epic.twitter.com/39UruRJcYh | | | |
| I've got out my 15ish year old coat to wear again because it's so comfortable and I can't find a new one like it. It looks a bit worn but I can now just say I'm all for clothes sustainability (which I am) without being thought weird.<br>#sustainablefashion | "Being sustainable means continuing to use old clothes (i.e. the clothes that a person has owned for a long time)" | EP uses the word "reuse" 7 times. In 3 cases, "reusing" collocates with "reusing or recycling"; the semantics of "reusing" for EP seems to be "selling as second-hand clothes" | In the H&M report, reusing is not mentioned as a practice. There is talk about customers not being able to mend clothes/needing to learn how to keep clothes for longer. Reuse is part of Inditex's commitments; but Inditex does not refer to the long-term reuse of the same clothes but to recycling ("reusing") textile materials. Explicitly questioned |
| Sustainable Jewellery Edit.<br>=https://fabricforfreedom.co.uk/collections/accessories?page=1 …<br>Rings for every style and you can guarantee workers and the environment have been protected.<br>#sustainablefashion #slowfashion #ethicalfashionpic.twitter.com/2zsy94P1ID | "Being sustainable means guaranteeing that workers and the environment have been protected" | Mentioned | H&M declares that protecting workers is not easy in their production countries (due to a series of reasons independent of the will of H&M). The issue becomes: how is it possible to guarantee that workers have been protected? How long does this take? What measures does it take? For Inditex, social sustainability means that in the manufacturing countries they are in "constant dialogue with all stakeholders (unions, NGOs and institutions), which means everyone must be constantly open to learning". |

Twitter users are simply not mentioned (i.e. are ignored) by the companies; the position of the European Parliament varies, dependent on the case. Table 3 presents some selected examples of these misalignments between the different actors.

As we can see from the examples in Table 3, Twitter users, the EP and the two fast fashion companies we considered are not aligned in what they consider to form part of a definition of sustainability and what they explicitly question. Specifically, we can detail the misalignments in their opening stage as follows.

First, there are cases in which some components of sustainability are mentioned by some actors and completely ignored by others: for example, "borrowing clothes" is mentioned by some Twitter users (but not all) and the EP while, unsurprisingly, it is not mentioned at all by the companies. In other cases, implicit definitions of sustainable fashion given by Twitter users are clearly not shared by the companies: this is the case in the tweets that refer to "using fur" as part of a sustainable fashion approach, whereas Inditex explicitly declares (p. 154) that being part of the "fur free alliance" represents an element of sustainability in their companies. This misalignment concerning the use of fur could become an explicit discussion, if the different actors took up the opposing standpoints "using fur is sustainable" and "using fur is not sustainable"; however, this

discussion does not explicitly take place in our dataset (there is no critical testing, no counter-argument, different views are simply juxtaposed). To borrow a metaphor proposed by Greco et al. (2017, p. 207), we might say that the discussion is "similar to a tree in which some branches are not fully flourishing, while others are". The non-flourishing branches are potential sub-discussions (to redefine material starting points) that are not really developed.

Second, although some implicit definitions of *social* sustainability given by Twitter users (and supported by the EP) are explicitly questioned and turned into issues for sub-discussion in the discourse of the companies, these sub-discussions do not reach a concluding stage. Social sustainability is considered by several Twitter users and the EP to be important. H&M devotes a large part of its report to social sustainability, listing all the different factors and strategies that they intend to employ in this area (pp. 60–98); Inditex also discusses this point at length (pp. 59–146). However, both companies declare that this problem is caused by the conditions in the countries in which production is located. For example, with H&M, while the reasonableness of outsourcing production is not discussed, what is discussed is how to improve the local situation. This might be viewed as a strategic choice about what issue to put at the center of the discussion: this formulation of the propositions at issue allows a discussion of what H&M is doing rather than why they are not doing what people demand, which is considered to be impossible in the local situation. This choice also entails a positive representation of the agentivity of H&M (see Section 4.2). From the viewpoint of argumentation, a misalignment in implicit premises might be identified here: for several Twitter users, respecting social sustainability should be a "given", something that is taken for granted as an objective; the EP also positions itself along similar lines. The companies, however, question what for Twitter users and the EP is a shared starting point, thus opening a sub-discussion. Sub-discussions are not negative *per se*, because they might help to clarify unshared premises. However, in the context of a polylogical public debate such as this one, the presence of sub-discussions that rediscuss material starting points without reaching a concluding stage reveals that the opening stages of the different actors are not aligned. Moreover, because these sub-discussions do not seem to reach a concluding stage they do not contribute to a clarification of the opening stage.

Third, we found an instance where the same verb *to reuse* and the adjective *reusable* are employed by different actors with different semantics. As reported in Table 2, in some of the tweets, "reusing" clothes means wearing and re-wearing one's own old clothes, looking after them and mending them over time. In EP discourse, "reuse" often collocates with "recycle"; the semantics of "reuse/reusable" is, in this case, "sell as second-hand clothes", a practice which the EP encourages. Finally, in the case of the two companies analyzed, reusing clothes is either not mentioned (H&M) or mentioned with the meaning of "recycling textiles", which are brought back to the stores. In this case, the misalignment relates to the use of the same word with a different semantics that is not clarified — a practice that is indicated as a fallacy of *equivocation* as early as in Aristotle (for a review, see Walton, 1996). From a discursive viewpoint, this gives the appearance of a consensus, which is actually not present.

*4.2. Misalignments in the attribution of agentivity: consumers and companies*

Misalignments in the opening stage equally appear if we consider the discursive representations of agentivity (Who caused the problem? Who is solving it?). In the first instance, we focus on the actors represented as responsible for the problem. These are entirely absent from the H&M and Inditex reports. In other words, the problems related to the fashion industry are mentioned in these corporate reports but with no attribution of agentivity. Thus, they seem to have originated without the intervention of any human agents, which might be viewed as an astute strategy to reduce the companies' own instrumental role in causing some of the environmental and ethical concerns related to fashion production and consumption. The EP briefing and Twitter data likewise avoid implicating human agents as being responsible for the issues related to fashion production, but do mention *fast fashion* as a cause. In example (4) this is even the subject of the phrase *ruining the planet*.

(4) *When talking about fast fashion and all the ways it's ruining the planet, we can't leave out talking about clothing choices for the little ones, can we?* https://buzzonearth.com/making-your-little-ones-clothing-eco-friendly/ … (Twitter)

Since *fast fashion* is an abstract concept, its agents again remain unnamed and unspecified. While one might consider this a diplomatic ellipsis in the case of the EP briefing, this is not necessarily the reason behind the absence of a concrete agent in the Twitter data. This may rather be due to the fact that the format of tweets and the specificities of Twitter as a platform strongly encourage tweets with a clear link to the here-and-now, rather than reflections on past processes and the historical causes of problems. Indeed, this has also been observed in the analysis of tweets by Members of the European Parliament (Roginsky and De Cock, 2015). The EP briefing does refer to past causes but mentions those it presents as agentive in causing the problem as also agentive in solving the problem. Thus, whereas the rise of fast fashion is presented as a problem (5), it is also presented later on as part of the solution (cf. infra). This paragraph does mention *European apparel companies* as part of the fast fashion industry, naming explicitly H&M and Zara (which is part of Inditex).

(5) *The other significant trend was the rise of fast fashion. Epitomised by the multinational retail chains, it relies on mass production, low prices and large volumes of sales. The business model is based on knocking off styles from high-end fashion shows and delivering them in a short time at cheap prices, typically using lower quality materials. Fast fashion constantly offers new styles to buy, as the average number of collections released by European apparel companies per year has gone from two in 2000 to five in 2011, with, for instance, Zara offering 24 new clothing collections each year, and H&M between 12 and 16. This has led consumers to see cheap clothing items increasingly as perishable goods that are 'nearly disposable', and that are thrown away after wearing them only seven or eight times.* (Šajn, 2019, p.2).

Overall, we see then a low incidence of actors being presented exclusively as agentive in causing the environmental and social problems related to fashion production.

Let us now turn to the conceptualization of agentivity in solving these problems and in evolving towards fashion sustainability. As a discourse, the report by H&M includes the most varied list of actors who are presented as agentive in creating the necessary change. This list includes a wide range of actors such as the fashion industry and professional organizations related to it, but also transport organizations, partner companies, and the technology industry. It thus takes into account the various stages of production, ranging from producing fabrics to producing garments, and packaging and transporting them to shops and customers. Among the actors beyond the fashion industry, the H&M report mentions NGOs working on environmental and human rights issues, but also regional and national authorities as well as international organizations such as the ILO (International Labour Organization), UNHCR and the UN (mainly through its Sustainable Development Goals). This leads H&M to state that the variety of actors involved may complicate the implementation of certain norms since national legislations e.g. concerning child labor may differ considerably. The wide variety of actors presented as agentive in the conditions of production in fashion means that they are each at different points, which is also presented as a complexity that may hamper the implementation of the norms set out in company codes (6). This is also a means of to some degree reducing the responsibility of H&M.

(6) *Creating the required alignment within the fashion and design industry is taking longer than we expected. We have been pushing for this alignment from the beginning but, as with other collaborations, bringing many actors together is a significant challenge. Nevertheless, we are confident that the Higg Index* [a tool to help create a more transparent and sustainable fashion industry] *will become a trusted tool for consumers.* (H&M Group Sustainability report 2018, p. 26)

Finally, H&M also mentions consumers as an active participant in the sustainability process, since the way they use and buy clothes is another factor in the chain. The Inditex report, by contrast, mentions very few agents, namely suppliers, third sector organizations and universities (in the context of research and development collaborations) and 'stakeholders', who are defined only in a very broad sense. This shows that two companies that have a lot in common in terms of size, structure and market, have very different representations of agentivity in increasing the sustainability of fashion and offer very different discourses in their sustainability reports.

The Twitter users we analyzed focus mainly on consumers and companies as agents for change but much less on policy makers. The users tweeting with the hashtag *#sustainablefashion* are mainly users with a strong commitment to environmental and/or human rights issues, or companies (claiming to be) producing sustainable fashion, which might explain their focus on consumers and companies rather than policy makers. In (7) the author presents the link to an article on five companies who use innovative methods to contribute to sustainable fashion, thus emphasizing the agentivity of companies who contribute to sustainable fashion through innovation.

(7) *#Reuse, #recycle: 5 #brands show how it's done.*
*5 pioneering companies are using innovative methods to reuse and recycle textiles and other products that would otherwise go to landfill - @raconteur*
*By          @SustMeme*
https://bit.ly/36mu1RC   #SustainableFashion   #CircularFashion   pic.twitter.com/S9h9JN9D9o (Twitter)

In (4), reproduced below as (8), consumers are called upon to make different choices in their purchasing of children's clothes, representing them as agentive through the choices they make. The agent is expressed by means of a 1st person plural form. While *we can't leave out talking about clothing choices* could still be considered an inclusive use, that is, a use that includes both the speaker and the hearer (in this case reader) in the reference and portrays both of them as agents, it becomes clear in the remainder of the utterance that the use of *we* is hearer-oriented (see De Cock, 2011). The question tag *can we*, which solicits the reader's approval, and the interrogative structure show that the utterance is mainly addressing the reader rather than referring to the speaker, as would be the case in a prototypical reading of a 1st person plural form. While this utterance is then hearer-oriented, choosing a 1st person plural agent, rather than a 2nd person singular or plural one, allows the author to create a group feeling and joint responsibility with the addressee, which may seem less patronizing than the equivalent 2nd person form.

(8) *When talking about fast fashion and all the ways it's ruining the planet, we can't leave out talking about clothing choices for the little ones, can we?* https://buzzonearth.com/making-your-little-ones-clothing-eco-friendly/ ... (Twitter)

Overall, while most tweets containing some sort of definition of sustainable fashion featured an implicit or explicit agent, the tweets that contained information that contributes to defining sustainable fashion - without explicitly defining it - did not feature explicit or implicit agents, showing the importance of the attribution of agentivity.

Finally, we will address the construction of agentivity in the EP briefing. This briefing mentions the role of companies, member states and consumers. As shown in (9), the introduction of the document already enumerates a variety of actors involved, with some implicit agents (businesses, as those designing products and steering consumer behavior) and some explicit ones (consumers buying clothes):

(9) *Various ways to address these issues have been proposed, including developing new business models for clothing rental, designing products in a way that would make re-use and recycling easier (circular fashion), convincing consumers to buy fewer clothes of better quality (slow fashion), and generally steering consumer behaviour towards choosing more sustainable options.* (Šajn, 2019, p.1)

This already shows a strong orientation towards steering consumer behavior, which also appears in the rest of the document. Example (10) shows how the fashion industry is presented as agentive in the solution, namely *leading the way* and *making improvements*, two actions that imply deliberate intent.

(10) *According to the 2018 Pulse of the Fashion Industry report, large sports apparel companies and big fashion brands are leading the way in investing in new technologies and ways of doing business, but companies in the mid-price segment are also making big improvements and even fast fashion is becoming more sustainable.* (Šajn, 2019, p.5)

The utterance *even fast fashion is becoming more sustainable* may seem somewhat contradictory since the term *fast fashion* is often used to describe an inherently unsustainable model of fashion production. By adopting this formulation, the briefing suggests that the system relating to fast fashion production is becoming more sustainable, thus including those who have caused some of the problems in the fashion industry in its projects for a solution.

Consumers are represented as agents of possible future solutions. Indeed, the subtitle of the document "Environmental impact of the textile and clothing industry" is "what consumers need to know", again placing emphasis on the consumers' responsibility, in line with the findings of Ledin and Machin (2020) with regard to ethical marketing.

The EP does offer in addition an extensive enumeration of relevant directives and initiatives, both from the European Commission and the European Parliament. While other international organizations such as the ILO or the UN are mentioned in the H&M report (although not in the other texts in our corpus), EU institutions are only given an agentive role in documents produced by the European Parliament, and not in the discourse of fashion companies nor on Twitter. While this is on the one hand striking, since the EU has competence in various areas related to fashion sustainability (e.g. environmental issues, water quality, transport), it is on the other hand in line with the EU's more general problem of being recognized as an important actor and interlocutor. This is also considered by the EU itself as one of its major challenges (European Commission, 2017).

## 5. Conclusions

Our study has shown how different actors involved in the discussion around sustainable fashion conduct different discourses regarding what is fair fashion and who is responsible for the problems related to current fashion production as well as for the potential solutions to the ecological and human rights issues raised by the production, transport and retail of fashion. In an argumentative polylogue, one might expect differences that involve different positions and arguments. However, in this paper, we have introduced the concept of *argumentative misalignments* in the empirical counterparts of the opening stage, which potentially hinder the progress of the discussion; specifically, the analysis in this paper has referred to definitions of sustainability as material starting points of the discussion. In particular, in our empirical analysis, we found different instances of argumentative misalignments in the opening stage, relating to explicit and implicit definitions of sustainability. In addition, there are misalignments in the identification of which actors are agentive in the problems related to fashion production and in their possible solutions, showing a misalignment in the understanding of the responsibilities that relate to fashion production. Pursuing the line taken by Lewiński and Aakhus (2014), we suggest that this type of analysis contributes to advancing the notion of polylogue theoretically, illustrating potential misalignments in the opening stage that typically hinder argumentation in polylogues, turning them into controversies. Methodologically, our analysis might equally offer suggestions as to how to collect a composite dataset to analyze a public polylogue that is taking place across different venues (Aakhus and Lewiński, 2017). Finally, at a more empirical level, the identification of discursive misalignments might contribute to the identification of existing communication problems within current societal controversies, such as the debate on (fashion) sustainability and, potentially, many others.

In considering argumentative misalignments in this paper, we have focused our analysis on those misalignments that relate to the definition of *sustainability* in sustainable fashion. There may be other types of misalignments in the opening stage, which we have not considered. To mention just one example, it would be interesting to consider whether *persuasive definitions* - namely, definitions based on emotive words (Macagno and Walton, 2010) — are used by the different actors in this debate; and, more broadly, whether emotions are related to misalignments in this controversy. Moreover, our analysis has not considered the possible reasons that participants in argumentative discussions might have for constructing the opening stage in ways that are not aligned with other participants, or for opening sub-discussions or living with ambiguity; to this end, further research should consider investigating arguers' rhetorical motives, for example by systematically incorporating the analysis of *strategic maneuvering* (van Eemeren, 2018).

To conclude, one could integrate our argumentative analysis by considering this public controversy from other discursive analytic perspectives. In fact, the different positions in the debate and the different starting points are of course also related to the actors' different positions in the production system and to ideological differences as to the values of both ecological and human resources. In this sense, in future research, our argumentative and linguistic analysis could be complemented by other discourse analytical perspectives. Given the asymmetry of the different interlocutors in this polylogue for example (big players in the fashion market and small brands, political institutions and individual citizens), it would be important to study how power inequalities emerge and are negotiated in discourse (for example, see Fairclough, 1989) and what role misalignments play in this process.[9]

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