The aesthetics of alternative fabrics

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1. This report, as part of the graduation project aimed at attaining the BA title from the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, has been written and/or compiled solely by me.

2. This project report (or any amended form of it) has never before been submitted by me or anyone else in the framework of a learning assignment aimed at the attainment of a certificate or degree, within the AMFI programme or elsewhere.

3. The work that was necessary for the realisation of this project was performed entirely by me. All the data that have been collected are original.

4. All quotes from other sources are recognisable in the report by quotation marks and the sources of all my information have specifically been indicated.

Date: 06 April 2016
Place: Amsterdam
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PREFACE

When starting this graduation project, I wondered: what is the most interesting that I learned during Amsterdam Fashion Institute (AMFI). I came to find out that both my minor Textiles and specialisation Fashion Retail and Marketing were the most exciting for me. Not only did I learn a lot in professional matter, but I also grew as a person. This led to the decision to pick a topic that was relevant nowadays and also connected to both my minor and specialisation. Eventually, I made the choice to go with ‘the aesthetics of alternative materials’ and to process this topic from a consumer’s perspective. This made sure I found a topic I am sincerely excited and enthusiastic about. I hope that as a reader, you notice this throughout my research report.

This research report shows the data collected over the last five months of this semester. During this final project, I had a lot of support from my supervisors and councillors Marco Mossinkoff and Anja Köppchen. I would like to take this opportunity for a special thank you for Marco Mossinkoff, who not only helped me during graduation, but also took time to help with my next step after AMFI.

Sincerely,

Sandra Verwei
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nowadays, sustainability has become an important issue in the world. The influence of the fashion industry is significant. Companies are aware of this and they want to start using alternative fabrics as a solution. Alternative materials often have an ecological advantage compared to mainstream fabrics and besides that, they can be used as a substitute for those mainstream fabrics. Because these materials are most of the time more eco-friendly, this is a trend that is being encouraged by governments. We are aware of the perspective of companies and governments, whom are willing to proceed using alternative materials. But we lack knowledge from the consumer’s perspective. Do they like it? Would they buy it? This research is about the aesthetics of alternative fabrics.

The aim is to give companies tools to influence the consumer’s choice and let them create an aesthetic value for the consumer concerning products made of alternative fabrics.

For this research, it was necessary to consult both primary data and secondary data. To find supporting theories, online and offline secondary data was used. The theories were proven relevant during an experiment that was conducted pending this research. However, it also occurred that the primary data suggested something and to understand more, secondary data was consulted. In doing so, this turned out to be a circular process. Further, it was important to be in touch with the consumer and to know and understand their thoughts. To get this information, several interviews have been performed. At last, focus groups were composed to create a dialogue between various consumers.

Several findings stood out during this research and influenced the eventual conclusion of the project:

1) As written before, alternative fabrics mostly have an ecological (or technological) advantage compared to mainstream fabrics. Companies are eager to use alternative fabrics. However, consumers cannot really identify alternative materials. This is a lack of knowledge that should be taken into consideration.

2) Consumers decide to buy something on various levels. Aesthetic is an important factor and is influenced by levels of product appreciation. The decision-making process concerning the attraction of alternative fabrics is also controlled by the way people perceive an object. Noticeable is that consumers are more eager to like or choose alternative fabrics when it is not immediately clear what it is made of. This is because they can understand the item better. The communication around the product cannot be neglected in the decision-making process of consumers too. The communication of the information regarding the product must be in balance. It is important for the consumers to realize that they buy an unique product, but a company should be careful with further elaboration on the product.

3) Concerning alternative fabrics, people do not recognize the material immediately. This is crucial in their choice between alternative fabrics and mainstream fabrics. Again, this shows the importance of the perception of the consumer in this research. Consumers might be more eager to choose an object made of an alternative fabric, when they cannot tell what it is made of.

Overall, it is important to realize in this research about aesthetics of alternative fabrics that the aesthetic value is more than ‘only’ the outward appearance of a product.
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1 – INTRODUCTION

1.1 – Relevance

Nowadays, we see more and more alternative fabrics in stores. Giusy Bettoni, CEO and founder of Class, mentions in The Guardian that those materials have yet to “take off” but their introduction into the market has definitely started. She says: “In the years to come, we will finally have a new material portfolio” (Hannah Gould, The Guardian, 2015). Joyce Boonders, owner of Fameuz Design, also notices that these materials, for example cork, are upcoming in the fashion world (Appendix 1, Process Book).

This is indeed visible in companies, since they make use of alternative fabrics more often. Good examples in this case are the jeans of G-star, which are made from recycled ocean plastic (G-star, 2016). Most of the time, these alternative materials are more sustainable than conservative materials. They can even be used as substitutes for current fabrics. For example, leather can be replaced by cork, but cork is more sustainable (Jelinek Cork Group, 2010). This is also acknowledged by Joyce Boonders among others (Process book, appendix 1).

Because these materials are more eco-friendly, this is a trend that is being encouraged by governments. They constantly have to think about new, sustainable ideas after new agreements were made during the Climate Conference in France last year (COP21, 2015). The Dutch government, for instance, introduced a law that stores are not allowed to hand out plastic bags since the beginning of 2016. In this case, companies are even pushed to think in alternative materials (Rijksoverheid, 2016).

From the above, we can assume that companies and governments are willing to use alternative materials. They are already quite busy trying to make this happen. We are very much aware of the perspective of governments and companies on this subject. However, we almost seem to forget the consumer, which is in my opinion the most important factor. Without the consumer buying the products, the entire idea would fall apart. We lack knowledge about how consumers think and perceive alternative fabrics. That is why I did this research on what consumers think of these fabrics. Would they buy it?

1.2 – Aim

The aim of this research is to understand the consumer’s perspective on the aesthetics of alternative fabrics. This is an important factor for this subject, because, as mentioned before, if consumers do not buy the products, there is no success to this concept.

Companies that want to be more sustainable, can use this research to compose the ultimate alternative fabric strategy. They will have a better understanding of how to influence the consumer’s choice and how to create an aesthetic value for the consumer. The product of this research will therefore be an alternative fabric strategy for sustainable companies using alternative materials. This strategy uses the outcome of this research report.
1.3 – Questions

This research exists out of a research question and several sub-questions. The sub-questions are to help answering the research question and create a structure within the research.

The research question is:

What is the aesthetic value of alternative fabrics in fashion from the consumer’s perspective?

This question is answered by using the following sub-questions:

1. What is the definition of mainstream fabrics and alternative fabrics and to what extent is it being used?
2. What is the decision-making process of consumers concerning the attraction of alternative fabrics?
3. What are the consumer’s preferences on an aesthetic level when given a choice between alternative and mainstream fabrics?

1.4 – Methodology

In order to get the answers it was necessary to consult both primary data and secondary data. To find supporting theories, online and offline secondary data was used. The theories were proven relevant during an experiment that was conducted throughout this research (Research Report 1.4.2, p. 7). However, it also happened that the experiment suggested something and to understand more, secondary data was used. In doing so, this turned out to be a circular process. Further, it was important to be in touch with the consumer and to know and understand their thoughts. To get this information, several interviews have been performed. Hereby, there is chosen to use semi-structured interviews, in order to have some direction by using subjects (Research Report 1.4.1, p. 7). However, it was still possible to elaborate on the answers of the interviewee. As last, focus groups were composed to create a dialogue between various consumers (Research Report 1.4.3, p. 7).

The first sub-question is answered using secondary literature of both online and offline platforms. Since in this question it is also important to find out the way consumers think, I composed three focus groups. More information about the focus groups can be found in section 1.4.3 (Research Report 1.4.3, p. 7). With this sub-question I want to find out what people mean by mainstream fabrics and alternative fabrics. What is the general conception? Further it is important to explain what I mean with those terms in my research. So what is the operational definition for this research report? It is important to clarify this, because these are keywords in the research.

For the answer to the last two sub-questions, an experiment has been conducted. In section 1.4.2, the form of this experiment is explained (Research Report 1.4.2, p. 7). The information received from the experiment, is complemented using secondary literature and interviews with consumers. The structure in these interviews is discussed in section 1.4.1 (Research Report 1.4.1, p 7). These questions give more insight in how consumers perceive and think about alternative fabrics. The results from the focus groups are taken into account during writing as well. The information in these sub-questions is important to answer the main question in the conclusion.
1.4.1 – Interviews
For the interviews, I used the concept of semi-structured interviews (Bernard, 2006). With a semi-structured interview, it is possible to give direction during an interview. However, it is still possible to go deeper into something the interviewee says. By using this concept, it is possible to find out how the interviewee thinks, without giving the conversation to much direction by creating questions in advance. This is why it is the most convenient form for this research in my opinion.

The semi-structured interviews are based on four topics. The general topics for the interviews are:
- Definition of mainstream fabrics and alternative fabrics
- Feelings and thoughts when presenting the first object
- Feelings and thoughts when presenting the second object
- Decision-making process

1.4.2 – Experiment
In this research I also conducted an experiment. In this case it is about combining quasi-experimental design and exploratory research. Quasi-experimental design is a form of research to test theories (Reichardt, 2009). Doing exploratory research, for example interviews and focus groups, resulted in a theory that I wanted to proof using a small experiment. Devin Kowalczyk mentions: “Exploratory research is where a researcher has an idea or has observed something and seeks to understand more about it” (Kowalczyk, 2016). By using both quasi-experimental design and exploratory research, I hope to not only get the statistics, but also to understand them. Then it is possible to write a proper answer to the questions.

For the experiment I looked up a crowded location, in this case the cafeteria of the Amsterdam University of Applied Science. There, three bags were presented: one clearly of the material cork, one dyed black (therefore you don’t immediately see what material it is), and one bag made of leather. I asked just one question: what do you think is the most valuable bag? I chose to ask only one question in order to have more people participate.

Participants would write down the number that corresponded with the bag of their choice and drop that in a jar. New participants were not able to see what others chose, so that they were not influenced by the answers. This forms the quantitative data of the experiment. Besides that, it is important to pay attention to the behaviour of people. That is why I observed the participants and wrote down quotations. This formed the qualitative data. Eventually, 47 people participated in the experiment. After that, I was able to draw conclusion based on the answers they gave. With the information received from this small experiment, I was able to see if the theory I had was correct. The entire results of the experiment can be found in Appendix 6 of the Process Book.

1.4.3 – Focus group
Besides interviews and an experiment, I composed three focus groups. The focus groups gave answers to the more general questions. Whatever the people in the focus groups thought of, they were allowed to say and give their opinion. A focus group is the best way to do this, because “... sometimes it take listening to the opinions of others in a small and safe group setting before they form thoughts and opinions. Focus groups are well suited for those situations” (Eliot & Associates, 2005).
The three focus groups deviated in some way, based on the demographics of the participants. The first group is quite young and just finished high school. Most of them study at the University of Applied Science in Amsterdam. The second focus group is a bit further when it comes to their studies. Some of them already finished, or are now obtaining their master degree at the University. They are also a bit older. Most of them have a bachelor degree. The third group is composed on the direction of their study. All of them study or studies in the direction of fashion. By composing the focus groups in this way, I was able to compare the answers of the different focus groups. For my research it was important to compare the answers in order to draw certain conclusion. The analysis of the focus groups and the full description of the groups are shown in Appendix 2 of the Process Book.

1.5 – Structure

The structure is basically following the order of the questions introduced in section 3 of this chapter. After giving a short preface and the introduction, I start off with the first question in chapter 2. The second question will be answered in chapter 3 and the last question in chapter 4. Eventually, the conclusion answers the main research question.

Chapter 2 answers the first question: what is the definition of conservative fabrics and alternative fabrics? This is mostly used as a theoretical framework in order to get two important keywords clear within the research.

Chapter 3 answers the question: what is the decision-making process for consumers concerning the attraction of alternative fabrics? Answering this question, I will make use of the results from the experiment and in addition secondary literature and interviews. Here we find out how important the appearance of a product is for a consumer and in what way it influences their choices and to what extent extern variables influence this. Chapter 3 also includes a deeper look in how the communication of a brand influences the decision-making process of a consumer.

Chapter 4 eventually answers the last sub-question: what are the consumer’s preferences on an aesthetic level when given a choice between alternative and conservative fabrics? This question takes the second chapter to the next level. First I try to find out to which extent it influences the buying behaviour of the consumer. In this question I look deeper into what they will choose when given a choice. Do they stick with the conservative, well-known fabrics, or do they choose alternative fabrics? Important here is to find out the reason behind their choice as well.

At last, in the conclusion, the main research question is answered: what is the aesthetic value of alternative fabrics from a consumer’s perspective? To answer this question, the information retrieved during the research will be used.

1.6 – Limitations

Each research has its limitations, which is no different for this research. First of all, international theories are used. These theories contain information that can be applied on consumers in the entire world. This research therefore has an international starting point. However, during this research, only people of Dutch nationality participated. Further, even though the participants were both male and female, the results of this research are not considered different for both genders. At last, the interviews were not done in similar areas. Although I do not think this fact changes the results of the research, this cannot be ruled out.
2 – WHAT IS THE DEFINITION OF MAINSTREAM FABRICS AND ALTERNATIVE FABRICS AND TO WHAT EXTENT ARE ALTERNATIVE FABRICS USED?

To start off with this research, it is important to get the definitions clear concerning mainstream fabrics and alternative fabrics. These are keywords within the research and therefore it is important to clarify this for myself, the participants but also the reader. Further, in this chapter I write about the perception of the two types of fabrics, mainstream and alternative, in the consumer’s mind. How do they think about it? At last, it can assist the research to find out to what extend alternative fabrics are already used.

Given this information, the sub-question can be divided in three separate questions:
- What is the definition of mainstream fabrics?
- What is the definition of alternative fabrics?
- To what extent are alternative fabrics used?

2.1 – What is the definition of mainstream fabrics?

Mainstream fabrics can also be called ‘classic’ or ‘conservative’ fabrics. Cambridge Dictionary Online (2016) states that mainstream is “… considered normal, and having or using ideas, beliefs, etc. that are accepted by most people” (Cambridge Dictionary Online, 2016).

In this research, the term mainstream will be applied as written before. Because, in this research I use this term to refer to the well-known conventional fabrics we see a lot in fashion for a long time now. They are not altered to have extra functions or additional value. In books such as Clothing Technology, these sorts of materials are described (Eberle, H. et al., 2008). They explain the characteristics from a certain mainstream fabric for instance. Examples of these fabrics are cotton, wool, linen, viscose and man-made fibres like polyester and nylon.

2.1.1 – Consumer’s perception on mainstream fabrics

Denise Bottse, graduated from the Amsterdam Fashion Institute in February 2016, mentioned in an interview that she considered mainstream fabrics to be: “Accepted, prevailing fabrics. Like if I would go shopping for obvious, old school fabrics” (Appendix 3, Process Book).

Noticeable from the focus groups is that most of the people agree on the meaning of mainstream fabrics. For example Iris Zechut mentioned it is about accessible, average fabrics (Appendix 2, Process Book). She says: “I think mostly about fabrics that are accessible for everybody” (Appendix 2, Process Book). This is similar to what Rosanne Rijff says. Rosanne Rijff participated in the same focus group as Iris Zechut and talked about: “… actually fabrics that everybody knows” (Appendix 2, Process Book). Other people I talked with, such as Jasmine van Vugt, were referring to comparable meanings. Jasmine immediately asked: “mainstream, like regular” (Appendix 7, Process Book)? This shows she thinks in terms of ‘regular’ and ‘normal’. Referring to the definition of mainstream from earlier, these quotes endorses this.
2.2 – What is the definition of alternative fabrics?

After looking into the meaning of mainstream fabrics, this section will look into the definition and perception of alternative fabrics. With the term alternative fabrics, I refer to new or renewed materials within the fashion industry. With renewed materials I mean fabrics that were used in the past for fashion, but disappeared and now make their comeback. Alternative fabrics can be used as a substitute for mainstream fabrics and most of the time they have an advantage compared to the classic materials. This advantage can both be technological and sustainable, but for this research I focus on alternative fabrics with a sustainable advantage towards mainstream fabrics. One of the definitions given in the Cambridge Dictionary Online is that “... alternative is something different from something else, especially from what is usual, and offering the possibility of choice” (Cambridge Dictionary Online, 2016). Examples of these materials are: hemp, cork, fabric from algae (Dongen, 2016), fabric from soy, bamboo, oak leather (Appendix 4, Process Book), jute, nettles, and much more (ran.org, 2016) (Spector, 2013) (Gould, 2014).

Most of these alternative materials are not yet discussed in textbooks, which is an interesting point. This could mean that books stick with the mainstream fabrics. Since institutes, for example schools, often use the same sort of books for a while, this can lead to a lack of knowledge among consumers. This was also shown in the research (Appendix 2, Process Book).

2.2.1 – Consumer’s perception of alternative fabrics

Remarkable from the focus groups is that most of the people do not have a clear answer to what ‘alternative fabric’ actually means. Chantal Offerman said: “for me, it is hard to know what to think” (Appendix 2, Process Book). This is a quote that proves that people do not know what to think of alternative fabrics. Further, it was interesting that participants started to think of extraordinary, unwearable things. Paola van der Sluis referred to “... materials that are an eye-catcher, such as metal or paper” (Appendix 2, Process Book). People in the third focus group, with a fashion related study, had a better idea of alternative fabric. A nice example here are the thoughts of Iris Zechut: “I think of a substitute fabric, so it can replace another fabric, but the substitute fabric has better characteristics or functions as the usual fabric. That could be a technological advantage, such as a waterproof fabric, but also a natural advantage, such as more sustainable” (Appendix 2, Process Book). It is obvious that people with a fashion-related study have a better idea to what it means. After all, they are often educated on the subject of textiles as well. However, when generalizing the outcome, it would mean many consumers do not always have a clear idea to what alternative fabrics are. I expect this to influence their buying behaviour in a way, but further research has to prove this.

It is important to look into the perception of people when it comes to alternative fabrics. Perception is about identification and interpretation of sensory information, so that people understand the environment (Schacter et al, 2011). This means that if we cannot perceive it, we cannot understand it. Taking it a step further, if we cannot understand it, we will not buy it, because it is considered ‘weird’. After talking to several people, I conclude that people do not really understand alternative materials. Jasmine van Vugt, for example, connects the alternative material cork to wine and not to clothing or accessories (Appendix 7, Process Book). And Anja Köppchen referred immediately to a pin-up board. This point will be further explained in chapter 4 of this research.
2.3 – To what extent are alternative fabrics used?

Many fashion businesses are very interested in using alternative fabrics. When new inventions are made, companies often show their interest in these innovations. For example shoe companies that want to make use of leather made from fruit waste, created by Hugo de Boon in his project Fruitleather Rotterdam (Venema, 2016). But the interest in these materials does not stop in the fashion industry. Also businesses in for instance the car industry are looking more into the possibilities of alternative fabrics (Venema, 2015). The interest is often high, because of the ecological or technological advantages those materials have.

There are also research centres trying to make the alternative fabrics even more desirable, such as Texperium and StexFibres in the Netherlands. Texperium is creating an even better hemp fibre by combining that fibre with others and by testing how these fibres can best be produced. They do this in collaboration with StexFibres (Texperium, 2016) (Appendix 5, Process Book).

Further, among award winners are now also people from the industry of alternative materials. A good example here is Tjeerd Veenhoven, winner of the prestigious Global Change Award (Dongen, 2016). He won this award for creating fabric from algae. Veenhoven also notices that various companies show interest in these new types of materials (Dongen, 2016).

More prove of this is the fact that there are alternative fabrics showed on one of the biggest fabric fairs in the world: Première Vision. In February 2015, I experienced this myself. Then, there were for instance materials that were able to disappear in nature and feed the soil instead of harming it (Première Vision, 2015) (Appendix 4, Process Book). Image 1, on the left, shows how this material works.

The interest of the market in the type of materials is unfortunately too low. Meaning that there is a lack of interest among the consumers (Schelfaut, 2016) (Heuvel, 2013). This lack of interest could come from the fact that people perceive the materials in the wrong way due to little knowledge about the materials.

What can be concluded so far is that alternative fabrics mostly have an ecological or technological advantage. Companies are eager to make use of alternative materials. However, within the focus groups, most of the people didn’t know what was meant by alternative materials. Of course this is only within the focus groups, but I think that this outcome counts for most of the consumers. But despite this lack of knowledge we could wonder: why don’t we all buy these products?
3 – WHAT IS THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS OF CONSUMERS CONCERNING THE ATTRACTION OF ALTERNATIVE FABRICS?

In the previous chapter, I came to find out how the term alternative fabric is used in this report and how people perceive alternative fabrics. It is important as well to find out what aesthetic means. Henry Nelson Goodman, one of the most influential figures when it comes to aesthetics, defines an object as aesthetic “… only insofar as it signifies, means, refers, symbolises is some way” (Elliott, 2004, p. 121). Goodman suggests here that aesthetic is not only the visible appearances. He takes into the hidden or latent meanings of a product into account as well. That is an interesting point. In Appendix 6 of the Process Book, the analysis of an experiment is written. Noticeable from the observations made during that experiment, is indeed that people do not only observe the items, but connect other meanings to them as well. Several participants mentioned for example: “I think this bag is more valuable, because this could be a vintage item” (Appendix 6, Process Book). This could prove the point of Goodman relevant for this study.

Jack Elliott (2004) writes: “… aesthetic is examined in terms of the object and the qualities it must possess to initiate an aesthetic response” (Elliott, 2004, p. 120). This quotation of Elliott supplements the previous definition of Nelson Goodman. It suggests that it is important not only to look at the aesthetic level of an item, but also the qualities an object possesses to initiate an aesthetic response.

3.1 – Aesthetic qualities

Looking further into the qualities that Elliott mentions, Creusen and Schoormans found out that six roles of product appearances for consumers can be identified (Creusen and Schoormans, 2005). According to them, these roles are:

1. Communication of aesthetic
2. Symbolic
3. Functional, and
4. Ergonomic information
5. Attention drawing; and
6. Categorization
(Creusen and Schoormans, 2005).

They state that the roles were proven relevant for consumers during a large, qualitative experiment (N = 142) (Creusen and Schoormans, 2005). According to me, the experiment is quantitative and 142 participants is not a very large experiment. Due to these errors in their research report, I would like to apply their findings on my experiment in order to find out if the concept of six roles of product appearances can be used. This is shown in table 1 below.
The table above proves that the way people judge or decide on something, can indeed be divided in the roles Creusen and Schoormans write about (Creusen and Schoormans, 2005). The findings of experiment 1 of this research can mostly be classified in the categories ‘aesthetic’, ‘symbolic’ and ‘categorization’. This also proves the point earlier made of Nelson Goodman is relevant.

According to Blijlevens, “... Identifying what product appearance attributes consumers perceive in product design, provides designers with guidelines on how to communicate pre-specified meaning in product design” (Blijlevens et al, 2009). This concept implies that understanding the way they perceive, is important to communicate meaning as a designer. This concept can be used in my research as well. From the information so far, it is clear that it is important to understand the way people perceive in this research. Designers can take the consumer’s thoughts into account when designing and when choosing what fabric to use.

The concept op Blijlevens also implies that the design cannot be excluded in my research. This fact already became clear when talking to Denise Bottse. When I asked if she could picture herself with the material of the bag she said: “... if it was a different design though. Maybe the material would have looked differently then as well” (Appendix 3, Process Book). This suggests that the aesthetics of the material can be influenced by the design.

### 3.2 – Results

The above proves that it is important to realise that aesthetics are not only based on the visible characters. People perceive a product on various levels. The concept of Creusen and Schoormans offer roles of product appearances that can be taken into account. But also the way consumers perceive both material and design, influences their buying behaviour.
After talking to several people, it became clear to me that most of them find it a bit odd to have clothes or accessories made from alternative materials such as cork. As Jasmine van Vugt says: "I only know cork from wine" (Appendix 7, Process Book). However, by then, the people I talked to did not have a visual of what the items could look like. Showing some examples, could change their perception.

Some very important quotes during the interviews and experiment are stated below:

"It doesn't have the colour that I associate with cork, so that doesn't make it really odd. It is very funny or unexpected to make or have a bag from this material" (Jasmine van Vugt, Appendix 7, Process Book).

"I like that you don’t obviously see what material it is from. The label says cork, and I didn’t expect that. I like that sort of surprise" (Denise Bottse, Appendix 3, Process Book).

"This bag could be a designer vintage item" (Appendix 3, Process Book).

The quotes above and other observations made during the interviews and experiment, suggest that people are more eager to like alternative material when they do not immediately see what it is made of. This could be for different reasons. The first reason is because the consumer is in some way surprised, because he did not expect it.

Another reason could be that the consumer will not associate the alternative material with its normal use. For example how Jasmine van Vugt associates cork with wine. This could mean that people are better in perceiving an object made from an alternative material, when it is not clear what it is made of. This is a really interesting thought. Looking back to the concept of perceiving discussed in chapter 2, if people will not associate it with the original use of the material, they can understand the item better.

Above, two bags are shown, which were also used as examples during the experiment and the interviews. Image 2 shows the first bag. This one is made of cork, but dyed black. Therefore, you do not immediately see that the material of the bag is cork. The other image shows bag 2, which is also made of cork. However, here you can clearly tell the material is cork. From the observations during the experiment, I came to find out that in bag 2 people did recognize the material cork, but in bag 1 they did not (Appendix 2, Process Book). With the information above, it is likely to assume that people are better in perceiving, thus categorizing, bag 1 compared to bag 2. This is important information, since “… understanding how product attributes influence product categorization is important for marketing decisions about product development, brand extension, and product positioning” (Viswanathan, Childers, 1999).
Dr. Daniel Kahneman, an important pioneer in economics and psychology, developed a theory where two systems can be distinguished. Each consumer, acts on these systems when they are buying an item (Kahneman, 2011).

**System 1**— in this system consumers make decisions on autopilot. It is automatic and quick and mostly based on impressions, intuitions and desires. This system can be linked to the theory of Creusen and Schoormans, discussing the roles of product appearances. These six roles are also based on impressions, intuitions and desires (Creusen and Schoormans, 2005).

**System 2**— here, it is about the conscious attention of a person. It is based on the rationale of a consumer. This system costs energy, because it takes self-control. System 2 can eventually suppress the system 1.

According to this theory, system 1 is dominating in most cases when the decision-making process of consumers is analysed (Kahneman, 2011). This suggests that consumers don’t need the information to make decisions about products. That contradicts with what people say in surveys. For instance, 68% of the participants of a research from the agency Goodbrandz say that they are willing to buy sustainable clothing. However, few of them know where to buy it (Goodbrandz, 2012). Yet, this is a decision made based on system 2 of the theory of Kahneman. That would mean that consumers are not so much aware of how they decide to buy an item or not. This can be a chance for a company, since it can use communication as an important tool to make consumers appreciate a product and influence their decision-making process. It is important to give consumers enough information to make them appreciate the product, but to realise as well when crossing the line of too much information.

Knowing that, there are several ways for a company to communicate to the consumer. Clearly, the marketing around the product is very important. How much do you want to share with the consumer about the product? However, it is also important to take hang tags and care labels in consideration, since these are ways to communicate information about a product too. As Anja Köppchen justly said: “I would want to know if I have to treat these products in a different way compared to a product from a mainstream fabric”. This suggests that the information given on hang tags and care labels are equally important.

But how exactly should a company that uses alternative fabrics communicate with these tools? Should a brand broadcast this, or keep the buyer guessing? Looking at Kahneman’s systems and findings, it is important to find the right balance between product appearance and the information around the product, since otherwise the consumer has to put in too much energy in order to buy something (Kahneman, 2011).

### 3.3.1 Example G-star

As mentioned in the introduction, G-star produces jeans with yarns made from recycled ocean plastic (G-star, 2016) (Introduction, page 5). Even though the yarns are not yet fully made from this material, this idea fits with the operational definition of alternative fabrics in this report.
In their marketing communication, G-star is really active with the promotion of the jeans of recycled ocean plastic. First of all, they presented the concept during New York Fashion Week in 2014, offering a lot of publicity. G-star also connected this line to a popular celebrity: Pharrell Williams. And besides him, they got other celebrities, such as Raury, Afrojack and Sarah Jessica Parker, wearing the jeans for promotion. On the website of G-star, an entire page is devoted to this line of the brand. There is a special logo created for this line, to see in image 4, which is also presented on the hang tag. Further, they try to let consumers connect more with the subject by creating a game which is linked to the recycled ocean plastic jeans (G-star, 2016) (Oskam, 2014).

3.3.2 – Example Netl
The company Netl produced and sold clothes made of nettles until 2013. There were too few consumers interested in buying nettle fashion, causing the company to go bankrupt. According to Nienke Feddes, spokesman of Netl, everything possible has been done to prevent this. For example, trends and fits were taken into account. Nevertheless, this unfortunately didn’t help the company. Bom, owner of the online store watMooi.nl, indicates that the role of communicating influenced the bankruptcy of Netl. He says: “… we notice that it takes about three years for consumers to accept a new label. If a new brand appears on the market, people say they are going to buy, but rarely actually do so” (Heuvel, 2013).

Bom further states that starting a fashion brand is hard, let alone if the label wants to use a new type of fabric, like Netl was pioneer in using nettles for fashion. According to Bom the bankruptcy is not only due to the fabric, but also to the way the company communicated. As a brand using a new type of material, this is crucial to reach the consumers and make them appreciate that product. Bom thinks Netl should have thought greater as regards communicating. Definitely, since the product is so unique compared to other fashion labels.

Altogether, the conclusion for this chapter is that people decide to buy something on various levels. Aesthetic is really important and is influenced by the levels of product appreciation. The decision–making process concerning the attraction of alternative fabrics is also controlled for a big part by the way people perceive the object. Noticeable is that people are more eager to like or choose alternative material when it is not immediately clear what it is made of. This is because they can understand the item better. Further, the communication around the product cannot be neglected, since this influence the buying behaviour of a consumer as well. The communication of the information regarding the product must be in balance; not too much, since this costs the consumer energy, neither too little, because the consumer wants some information about what they are buying. It is important for a consumer to realize that it is about a unique product, but to be careful with further elaboration on the product.
4 – WHAT ARE THE CONSUMER’S PREFERENCES ON AN AESTHETIC LEVEL WHEN GIVEN A CHOICE BETWEEN ALTERNATIVE AND MAINSTREAM FABRICS?

As we have seen before in chapter 2, companies do show interest in alternative fabrics, but the market is still too small for it (Schelfaut, 2016). However, there is a certain urge to start using these types of materials. David Orr, a well-known environmentalist and professor in environmental studies, mentions that we need to change in order to live the next century and make life capable for coming generations (Orr, 2002). This is something consumers are aware of. The question therefore is, as Elliott writes in his article: “… what explains the resistance to change; despite the knowledge of environmental issues; despite the valuation of our children’s futures” (Elliott, 2004, p. 116)?

4.1 – Scenarios

There are several scenarios that could answer Elliott’s question in the area of alternative fabrics. Firstly, Elliott writes about the paradox of informed negligence (Elliott, 2004, p.116). Even though consumers are aware of the situation of the environmental issues, apparently they choose to neglect it.

But this is not the only answer that could apply for the questions. Another option is that people do not realize the ecological advantage from alternative fabrics towards mainstream fabrics. For example Jasmine van Vugt does not connect an alternative material to sustainability. She mentions: “… It is not the first thing I think about” (Appendix 7. Process Book). Also in the analysis of the focus groups, terms as sustainability or ecological were rarely used. This could mean that the lack of knowledge makes people reconsider the material or the item.

The last scenario takes consumer’s perception into account. I already cited it before in chapter 2, but the way people perceive is important when it comes to alternative fabrics. To explain this a bit further, two examples are described.

Leather is a well-known material for clothing and accessories. It is often used and even though it costs animal lives, people are eager to buy it because of the quality. People can perceive this material. Consumers ‘understand’ the material, since it is often used in the fashion world. Because consumers know the material and connect it to the fashion industry, they can categorize it in their minds. That makes them either like or dislike the materials and eventually buy the item or not (Fleming, 2014).

Cork is not a well-known material for clothing and accessories. People might know it from shoe soles, but often do not connect this material to fashion items. That causes that consumers cannot perceive this material very well. This is due to the fact that people cannot categorize it in their minds. Eventually, consumers are less likely to understand this material. When we look at materials, we identify it and their properties (Fleming, 2014). When people cannot connect the properties in the way they were used, people consider it ‘weird’. Of course, it is important to remember that this does not count for each individual. But in general this is the response consumers could have (Fleming, 2014).
Connecting the last scenario to the conversations with several people, I came to find out that people indeed do not immediately connect cork to clothing. In fact, Jasmine connects the material to wine, since that is where she knows the material from (Appendix 7, Process Book). Anja Köppchen associates the material with a pin-up board. That could mean that the third scenario, about people perceiving the material wrong, is indeed applicable on the situation nowadays.

In my opinion, all the scenarios above are accurate to the situation we live in today. It is a combination of these scenarios that could cause the lack of interest in alternative materials. The question is though: how can we make these materials more attractive that people will choose them over the mainstream fabrics? This research mostly takes the last scenario into account. Further research should show how the other scenarios can be solved.

4.2 – Possible solution

My research has shown that people do not recognize the alternative material when it is in some way hidden. For instance when the object is dyed. Denise Bottse, who did a fashion-related study, did not recognize the material of the dyed cork bag shown previously in image 2. Besides that, she finds the bag more interesting, because it is not immediately clear what it is made of. She says: "… The structure is more special and pretty. And besides that, the black one is not immediately what you think. You need to give it a closer look, which makes it more special to me … I like that you don’t obviously see what material it is from. The label says cork, and I didn’t expect that. I like that sort of surprise" (Appendix 3, Process Book).

Further, Jasmine says about this topic: "… Because you don’t immediately see it is cork. It doesn’t have the colour that I associate with cork, so that doesn’t make it really odd. It is very funny, unexpected to make or have a bag from this material" (Appendix 7, Process Book).

From the experiment I found out that people estimated that bag to be more valuable too. Half of the people that participated thought that bag was the most valuable (Appendix 6, Process Book).

Also interesting in this case is the interview with Fameuz owner Joyce Boonders. When asking her what response she received on her cork bags, she said: "… Some consumers pity the fact that the bag really has the colour of cork. They rather have a bag in another colour or with a relief in it" (Appendix 1, Process Book).

However, it is important to take into account that the design matters too. Fabrics might look different if the design was different as well. Denise Bottse: "… If it was a different design though. Maybe the material would have looked differently then as well," (Appendix 3, Process Book). Further research has to show what a designer has to take in consideration when applying an alternative fabric in the design.

Al together, this shows that it is important when it comes to alternative materials, that people do not recognize the material immediately. Again, this proves that the way people perceive is important for this research. Consumers might be more eager to choose an object made from an alternative fabric, when they don’t necessarily see what it is made of.
5 – CONCLUSION

The conclusion takes the entire research in consideration and eventually answers the main research question:

*What is the aesthetic value of alternative fabrics from a consumer’s perspective?*

During this research, I came to find out that the aesthetic value of alternative fabrics is influenced by:

1) The perception of the consumer.
2) The levels of product appreciation.
3) The communication of a company to the consumer

Altogether, these three components influence the aesthetic value the most.

1) *The perception of the consumer*
   The way people perceive cannot be neglected in this research. Remarkable was that people were more enthusiastic about an item that was not clearly made from an alternative material. This was due to the fact that people were more able to categorize the material. We learned from Viswanathan and Childers (1999) that this is also important to make marketing decisions about product development, brand extension and product positioning. A smart decision for a company could be to ‘hide’ the alternative material, for instance to dye the item as shown in image 2. Thereby, the product still has an ecological advantage compared to a mainstream material, but the problem of consumers perceiving the product wrong, can be eliminated.

2) *The levels of product appreciation*
   Aesthetic is not only the obvious appearance of a product. When consumers judge an object on an aesthetic level, they take other things in consideration as well. Nelson Goodman therefore says that an item is only aesthetic insofar it symbolises something. Creusen and Schoormans (2005) found out that six levels of product appreciation can be distinguished, which were proven relevant during this research. These six levels are: 1) communication of aesthetic, 2) symbolic, 3) functional information, 4) ergonomic information, 5) attention drawing and 6) categorization.

3) *The communication of a company to the consumer*
   Dr. Daniel Kahneman’s research (2011) taught us about two systems in consumer’s buying behaviour. These systems proved that a consumer does not want every bit of information a company can provide, since that costs the consumer too much energy. Brands should consider what they want to let the consumer know and how to communicate that. In fact, the communication should be aesthetic as well. With that, a company should not only acknowledge marketing, but they should consider hang tags and care labels too. Moreover, communication influences the levels of product appreciation and aesthetic value.

Overall, the most important outcome of this research is that aesthetic value is more than ‘only’ the outward appearance of a product. Each point influences this and is important to influence the consumer.
6 - SOURCES


G-star (2016). Raw for the ocean is a purpose made into a clothing line. [ONLINE] Available at: http://rawfortheoceans.g-star.com/. [Accessed on 4 February 2016].


Graduation project – Sandra Verwei

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7 – ATTACHMENT

Dutch translation executive summary
Nederlandse management samenvatting

Tegenwoordig is duurzaamheid een belangrijk kwestie in de wereld. Daarin is de invloed van de mode-industrie erg groot. Alternatieve materialen hebben vaak een ecologisch voordeel ten opzichte van de standaard materialen. Daarnaast zijn de standaard stoffen vaak te vervangen door alternatieve stoffen, als een substituut. Bedrijven realiseren zich dit steeds meer en willen graag deze materialen gaan gebruiken. Omdat deze alternatieve materialen vaak milieuvriendelijker zijn in vergelijking met de reguliere materialen, is dit een trend die wordt aangemoedigd door overheden. We kennen het perspectief van bedrijven en overheden, zij willen alternatieve materialen graag gaan gebruiken. Maar we missen kennis vanuit het perspectief van de consument. Vinden ze het mooi? Zouden ze het kopen? Dit onderzoek gaat daarom over de esthetica van alternatieve materialen.

Het doel hierbij is om bedrijven handvaten te geven om de keuze van de consumenten te beïnvloeden. Deze bedrijven kunnen hiermee een esthetische waarde creëren voor de consumenten op het gebied van producten gemaakt van alternatieve stoffen.

Voor dit onderzoek was het belangrijk om zowel primaire als secondaire data te raadplegen. Om ondersteunende theorieën te vinden, zijn online en offline secondaire bronnen geraadpleegd. Deze theorieën werden relevant bewezen tijdens een experiment dat is uitgevoerd tijdens dit onderzoek. Het gebeurde echter ook dat de primaire data een uitkomst suggereerde die werd getoetst aan de hand van secondaire data. Het onderzoek werd daardoor een circulair proces. Verder was het belangrijk om veel met consumenten te praten om te weten en te begrijpen wat ze dachten. Om deze informatie te krijgen, zijn er verschillende interviews gehouden. Tot slot zijn er ook focus groepen samengesteld om een dialoog te creëren tussen verschillende soorten consumenten.

Er zijn een aantal invloedrijke bevindingen gedaan tijdens dit onderzoek die de conclusie vormde voor dit project:

1) Zoals eerder beschreven, hebben alternatieve materialen vaak een ecologisch (of technologisch) voordeel ten opzichte van de standaard, reguliere materialen. Bedrijven staan te popelen om alternatieve stoffen te gaan gebruiken. Echter blijkt uit het onderzoek dat de consument moeilijk deze materialen kan identificeren. Dit gebrek aan kennis dat bij de consument heerst, moet in overweging worden genomen.

2) Consumenten beslissen om een product te kopen op verschillende niveaus. Esthetica is een belangrijke factor hierin en wordt beïnvloed door niveaus van product waardering. Het beslissingsproces wat betreft de aantrekkelijkheid van alternatieve materialen wordt ook sterk beïnvloedt door de manier waarop consumenten de stof waarnemen. Opmerkelijk hierbij is dat de consument eerder alternatieve stoffen mooi vinden of kiezen als het niet direct duidelijk is waar het product van gemaakt is. Dit komt omdat ze het product dan beter kunnen begrijpen en categoriseren in hun hoofd.
De communicatie rondom het product kan wat betreft het beslissingsproces van de consumenten niet vergeten worden. De communicatie van informatie met betrekking tot het product moet in balans zijn. Het is belangrijk dat de consument zich realiseert dat het gaat om een uniek product, maar het bedrijf moet hierbij opletten met verdere uitleg rond het product.

3) Wat betreft alternatieve stoffen, herkennen mensen het materialen niet direct. Dit is cruciaal in hun keuze tussen alternatieve materialen en standaard materialen. Ook hier is opnieuw het belang te zien van de perceptie van de consument binnen dit onderzoek. Consumenten zijn eerder geneigd een product van alternatief materiaal te kiezen als ze niet direct zien waar het van gemaakt is.

Alles samengenomen is het belangrijk om te realiseren in dit onderzoek over de esthetica van alternatieve materialen, dat esthetische waarde meer is dan enkel het uiterlijk van een product. Het wordt beïnvloedt door meerdere elementen die meegenomen moeten worden als bedrijven de keuze van de consument willen beïnvloeden.