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Collaborative Consumption: A Study of Sustainability Presentation in Fashion Rental Platforms

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Abstract: Despite the increased research into the business potential and environmental impact of fashion renting, no previous research has studied the sustainable presentation of fashion (apparel, textiles, shoe, accessory, or jewelry) rental company platforms, which is the purpose of this study. The triple bottom line framework and content analysis methods were used to identify themes in their communications. An open coding method was applied to develop first-level concepts and sub-categories, followed by a calculation of the frequency of the aspects addressed on each website. A total of 56 active fashion rental businesses in the U.S. were identified and analyzed. A total of 11 main themes and 27 sub-themes emerged. The companies with the overall most mentioned sub-themes were REI and The Lauren Look by Ralph Lauren. The results indicate that sustainability information on company websites needs to be more organized for clear presentation and easy access to the public. Many companies can make simple adjustments such as educating consumers on the sustainable nature of their business model and providing data-related evidence for determining the social and environmental impacts. Companies must also provide more detailed information on COVID-19 cleaning/sanitizing practices to reduce the perceived risk while promoting consumers' willingness to try fashion rental services.



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1. Introduction

It has now been over two years since the COVID-19 pandemic began, which caused major disruptions to industries and supply chains worldwide, especially in the fashion industry. The pandemic initially brought the world and supply chain to a screeching halt, followed by decreased/halted production, input shortages, price increases, quarantining at home, and job losses, which have reduced consumer demand and spending and ultimately caused many consumers to focus on essentials and reduce discretionary purchases on apparel [1–4]. Apparel sales reported the largest category spending decline in the U.S. economy in 2020 [5]. This also caused many consumers to pause or cancel their apparel rental subscriptions [2,3]. While many apparel subscription companies suffered financial and subscription losses, a handful of popular fashion brands or retailers such as American Eagle, Ann Taylor, and Bloomingdales discontinued their newly established rental platforms [6–8]. In an effort to save their profits, many brick-and-mortar fashion retailers temporarily and permanently closed a significant number of physical stores [2].

Despite such disruption and gloom, the rollout of vaccines allowed many parts of the economy to reopen and returned some sense of normalcy in 2021. The ability for consumers to leave their houses and socialize again inspired an economic surge in spending, especially in the fashion sector [9]. Apparel sales in the U.S. reached US \$198 billion in 2021, which reflects a 47% and 1.5% growth from 2020 and 2019, respectively [10]. There is also evidence that apparel renting companies have regained their footing and are steadily growing in popularity again. One example of this growth is the popular and successful fashion rental

firm called Rent the Runway, which successfully launched its IPO on NASDAQ in October 2021. Despite losing a substantial number of subscribers in 2020, they have recently reached their pre-COVID-19 subscription numbers. They strongly believe that apparel rental, despite being significantly damaged by the pandemic, will be the future of the fashion industry as more consumers become aware of their carbon footprints, sustainability issues, and their wardrobes. By going public, they now join other popular sustainable fashion retailers such as Poshmark and Thredup on NASDAQ. The company attributes this growth to an increasing awareness of sustainability issues and increased online shopping, as well as the continued normalization of apparel rental and resale buying habits [11,12].

Rent the Runway is not the only apparel rental company that is experiencing a resurgence. Nuuly reports that they have seen a resurgence of memberships again, while Armoire reports having maintained a very strong base of loyal, tenured customers. A brand-new company called ELOQUII Unlimited which officially launched in August of 2021, despite an initial hesitation because research indicates that customers desired apparel rental subscription options, especially for plus-sized women [13]. In addition, Ralph Lauren became the first luxury brand to launch an apparel rental service in 2021 [14]. These companies claim that their ability to survive the worst period of the pandemic was due to their flexibility and ability to appropriately respond to consumer needs and trends. For example, Armoire launched a digital dressing room where members can upload photos of themselves in rented clothing to share with other members, while ELOQUII Unlimited updated their inventory to include more at-home relevant styles such as loungewear. Similarly, Nuuly re-evaluated their inventory and began expanding their categories to include plus-size and maternity options. Renting apparel continues to be seen as a great alternative to purchasing apparel because it offers consumers the chance to wear designer clothing that might be otherwise unaffordable [13].

Despite recent bumps in the road, apparel renting continues to increase in popularity and is likely to become more common in the future [15]. Previous research has indicated that rental apparel models are more sustainable than traditional consumption models [15–17]. The reasons for this greater sustainability include being able to extend the life of products through use intensification and item repair; designing more durable products that last longer to avoid creating unnecessary waste; the need to create fewer products that satisfy more people, which reduces resource, water, electricity, and material consumption; the opportunity to reduce water and energy usage while better preserving garments through more professional cleaning services and technologies utilized by clothing rental companies; and helping consumers reduce overconsumption [18–20]. Even though renting apparel can provide all of these environmental benefits, it is not a guarantee that apparel rental companies will achieve all of these sustainable practices or publicly orient themselves as sustainable. For example, Geissinger et al. [21] examined 121 sharing economy platforms (i.e., transportation, hospitality, apparel, gardening, energy, and toys) operating in Sweden, in which only 35 presented themselves as sustainability oriented. It was discovered that smaller, newer platforms tended to be more sustainably oriented because they received less media interest, but increasingly moved away from sustainability and focused on other issues as they developed and attracted more attention [21].

Although there is increased traction in research regarding collaborative fashion consumption and its contribution to sustainability, no study has specifically examined the sustainable presentation of fashion rental companies. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to determine the sustainable presentation of online fashion rental company platforms (i.e., apparel, outdoor textiles, shoes, and accessories) using the triple bottom line (TBL) framework. Content analysis, a qualitative research method, was applied to collect and analyze the available secondary website data from the rental platforms. Specifically, this study aimed to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the major topics and underlying themes related to sustainability that are presented on the websites of fashion rental companies, (2) how are these sustainability messages communicated on their

websites, and (3) how are the rental companies' websites aligned with the TBL framework (people, planet, and profit)?

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Triple Bottom Line (TBL)

Sustainability is generally a concept that addresses the balancing act of human society and the planet's well-being. Specifically, it is about how to protect natural resources from being over-manipulated by corporations and manufacturers to the point that the needs of future generations are not met, and the planet is destroyed [22]. In other words, it is a holistic equilibrium-based approach for businesses and the human ecosystem created by sustainable development. For corporations, this system of measuring and achieving equilibrium is often known as corporate social responsibility (CSR) [23].

When addressing CSR, it is well known that the general public and non-governmental organizations (NGO) have a great deal of power, influence, and pressure on corporations, even though these may not be legislated. In other words, corporations create and change policies largely based on these external demands. The Global Reporting Initiative is one type of NGO that sets standards for reporting and has been very impactful in the field of CSR. The United Nations Global Compact is another very influential reporting standard. Aside from these pressures, corporations often use corporate social contracts to ensure that all the involved parties (stakeholders, suppliers, manufacturers, NGOs, and employees) respect the law, behave responsibly, and surrender some self-interests to benefit the greater good. Social contracts also help motivate corporations to become involved with their communities, engage in philanthropy to fight issues such as hunger and poverty, and promote transparent reporting to challenge bribery and corruption. Corporations are considered equal partners with general society because they produce necessary goods; therefore, not only are they expected pay taxes, but they are expected to assist with solving social issues. This responsibility is becoming especially pertinent due to the growing threat of global warming, as all companies of any size should care for and protect the natural environment. These standards are important because they also help promote decent working conditions, higher standards of living, and demolish gender–salary gaps [24].

One of the best known and widely applied operationalizations of sustainability and CSR has been the triple bottom line (TBL) theory proposed by John Elkington in 1994. It is composed of three main pillars: economic, social, and environmental aspects (also known as people, planet, and profit). It is meant to be a supporting tool to help companies design and practice their sustainable supply chain strategies, which results in long-term economic benefits and competitive advantages [25–28]. The profit aspect is fairly straightforward, as it is the mandatory requirement for a company to develop, survive, and provide value to their shareholders. In regard to CSR, profit is not just about generating revenue, but it is also about how that profit is used. Socially responsible corporations consider long term plans that are both profitable and cost saving. Responsible profiting is measured by a corporation's involvement in creating positive living standards, the amount of local people that work for the company, the salary rates, amount of taxes paid, and aversion to any activity that is dishonest and harmful such as bribery and corruption [29]. When a corporation evades responsible profiting practices by engaging in behaviors such as tax evasion, bribery, and outsourcing, they are in effect detracting from local economies, not positively contributing to society, and shattering the trust and reputation of their corporation [24].

The people aspect of TBL is about the relationship between an enterprise and society, i.e., their lifeblood, which has to do with social standards. Generally, employees are hired from the local area in which the corporation operates, identifying them both as employees and the local community. The local community also includes other companies, organizations, and groups operating within the area. In other words, social responsibility encompasses all people affected by or affecting a corporation, placing the responsibility of well-being assurance in the corporation's hands. Therefore, a socially responsible

corporation guarantees that they do not engage in child labor, that their employees and subcontractors are not exploited, and that their employees and subcontractors are treated fairly and given reasonable wages. They also ensure that they are utilizing their employees' strengths and best skills, taking care of their well-being, respecting and following all safety measures, providing education and training courses to boost motivation, practicing employee diversity and inclusion, and not discriminating against gender, age, or ethnicity [24,26,29].

Regarding community responsibility, it is important for corporations to engage in activities such as fundraisers, donations, local recruitment, and sponsorships. One example is a corporation engaging in local sponsorship opportunities such as paying for a local football sports team's attire. Such actions benefit local communities, positively boost the image of the corporation, and create competitive advantage. Therefore, it is also important to examine the percentage of pre-tax earnings that are donated to the local community annually [24,30].

In addition to employees and communities, the people aspect also encompasses responsibility towards a corporation's customers. When purchasing products, customers want to place their confidence in a company that cares for them because they are already aware that their purchase is what keeps the company profitable. The internet is making it increasingly easier for consumers to stay well informed and aware of all global matters, including the way corporations operate. Therefore, consumers seek authenticity, higher quality products and services, improved standards of living, socially and responsibly produced goods, excellent customer service, and the transparency of company operations and CSR information. Otherwise, consumers now have the power to boycott and destroy a company's reputation with negative reviews [24,29].

The planet aspect of TBL is about a corporation's environmental impact both globally and within the local habitats of their operations. Everyone on this planet should be responsible for caring for the environment, but especially corporations, because they cause the most damage. Examples of such damage includes the irresponsible and overuse of natural resources, pollution from emissions, and the production of waste [26,30,31]. Unless greater action is taken by corporations to reduce pollution and environmental destruction, the Earth will possibly become uninhabitable. To reduce or eliminate detrimental environmental damage, corporations can produce goods that do not cause harm to the environment, that reduce CO₂ emissions, reduce waste, diminish the toxicity levels of unavoidable waste, reduce water and energy usage, and they can frequently measure their environmental impact using CSR reporting measures [24].

Despite the numerous advantages of TBL and its widespread contributions, this CSR measuring method is not without criticism. Since it is such a broad concept with no specific item measurements or generally applicable standards, it can be hard for companies to measure non-financial impacts in reports. Additionally, since it is a voluntary tool, companies can essentially cherry pick the items that they want to report while leaving others absent to improve their image and appease the government and the public. The aspects they do choose to report may be vague information that fails to elaborate how each aspect contributes to CSR or how it is integrated into the company. Such issues can essentially make a corporation's CSR reports misleading, exaggerated, and possibly even described as a greenwashing tactic. In other words, TBL-inspired reports do not challenge corporations beyond traditional accounting models [32].

While there has been some progress made regarding sustainability, the planet's climate, biodiversity, water resources, soils, forests, and oceans are all still increasingly threatened. The whole point of the TBL was not just to measure the economic (financial) aspects of a business, but also the environmental and social aspects. It was supposed to inspire deeper thinking about capitalism and its future by promoting a balanced approach. Many businesses have collectively failed to benchmark true progress regarding real-world impact and performance, and such failures have been driven by loosely followed TBL measures and reporting practices. However, a new wave of TBL innovation and deployment spurs

better pace, scale, and intent regarding business operations that do not overshoot planetary boundaries [33].

In summary, while there is no commonly accepted type of CSR measurement used, TBL is a concept that has been largely growing in popularity, with more retailers adding certain types of CSR communications to their websites and social media channels over the past two decades [33,34]. Most CSR reports from socially responsible companies do not look the same but have similar purposes and achieve similar results. Despite being invented almost 30 years ago, the TBL model can still be generally applied to any corporation's CSR evaluation because it contains most of the crucial elements. This means that TBL may be one of the most useful CSR frameworks when compared to other classifications, though corporations should still incorporate more elaborate models with specific and up-to-date business developments [35].

3. Methodology

3.1. Content Analysis

The purpose of the qualitative research is to achieve a deeper understanding of the human condition in different situations or contexts [36]. Among many qualitative research methods, content analysis serves well for analyzing and interpreting the meaning of data by focusing on the subject and context [37]. Content analysis aims to examine a phenomenon systematically and objectively for the purpose of clearly organizing and defining data according to specified rules and procedures so that inferences may be formulated. The steps involved with this methodological approach include the aim or preparation, the sample unit of analysis, the method of data collection, the method of analysis, and the practical implications [38,39].

There are two different types of content analysis that include an inductive or deductive approach. The inductive approach, also called the data-driven or text-driven approach, focuses on abstraction, open coding, patterns, finding similarities or differences, and creating new categories or themes. The risk associated with this approach is becoming stuck or caught up in general summaries and surface level descriptions instead of delving deeper. The deductive approach, also called the concept-driven approach, focuses on reviewing and coding content to determine correlations with identified categories. In other words, researchers seek to test the implications of already existing models or theories regarding the phenomenon being studied against collected data. This method starts with an already existing theory or abstracted position and moves towards a more specific and concrete conclusion. The risk with this method involves deciding how to deal with leftover data that does not fit into a model, categories, or theory [40,41].

Either method, especially the inductive approach, must aspire to provide trustworthy results through authenticity, credibility, conformability, dependability, and transferability. Authenticity can be achieved by providing an objective, faithful, and fair range of results or possibilities. Credibility can be achieved through ensuring that participants or data sources are accurately identified and described. Conformability can be achieved through objective coherence between two or more researchers regarding the meaning, accuracy, or relevance of data. Dependability can be achieved through data that remains stable under various conditions and periods of time. Finally, transferability can be achieved through providing findings that are sufficiently generalizable for application to other groups or settings [40,42].

While there are no specific studies that have used content analysis to measure the sustainability of fashion rental companies based on the TBL framework, there has been similar research that applied content analysis in the context of fashion businesses and apparel renting. Kovács et al. [43] sought to examine research articles on the topic of platform-based collaborative consumption economies within the last decade to define and classify the collaborative economy. Mann et al. [44] sought to examine the social media communications of B-level certified corporations (B Corps) specializing in apparel, footwear, and accessories to analyze how they aligned with TBL and evaluate their social

performance using industry benchmarks. Content analysis was used to identify themes in their communications. Once the themes were identified and organized, they were aligned with the TBL according to the three main pillars (environmental, social, and economic) and their four intersections. Messages related to COVID-19 were organized into a special case category to illustrate how these B Corps coped with sustainability despite the crisis.

3.2. Company Selection

Apparel, outdoor textile, shoe, and accessory rental companies were searched using key words through Google. As of December 2021, there were 45 apparel and shoe rental businesses, 5 accessory rental businesses, and 6 outdoor textile rental businesses actively operating within the United States. To be included, companies had to specifically mention that they were operating using a rental model, which therefore excluded businesses such as Stitch Fix or Trunk Club because they use a subscription box model. In other words, the only difference between subscription box model companies and traditional retailers is the method of item delivery. Most often, companies require customers to complete an online questionnaire to receive a curated box of products, and many have allowed customers to permanently keep pieces they liked while sending back the rest. One apparel rental business was excluded because their apparel rental business was not available to the general public, but only to private fashion and film industries. The company profiles are included in Table A1.

3.3. Data and Coding Analysis

This study used content analysis to identify themes on the websites of apparel, outdoor textile, shoe, accessory, and jewelry rental companies. Only their main rental business websites were examined for information, which thusly excluded third party or parent company websites if applicable. An open coding method was applied to develop first-level concepts (i.e., main themes), followed by sub-categories (i.e., sub-themes). The coding scheme was expanded and revised multiple times as new information and categories were discovered. Once themes and sub-themes were identified, frequency was used to compute how many aspects each company addressed on their websites.

4. Results

4.1. Sample Profiles

Among the 56 apparel, outdoor textile, shoe, and accessory rental platforms, the total sub-themes addressed on each website ranged from zero mentions to 23 mentions. In total, there were three overarching TBL categories and one COVID-19 category, with 11 main themes and 27 sub-themes (see Table A2).

The company with the overall most mentioned sub-themes and in the outdoor textile rentals group was REI (23 overall sub-theme mentions, all 6 sub-themes in the sustainability/planet category, 4 sub-themes in the financial/profit category, all 9 sub-themes in the community/people category, and 4 sub-themes in the COVID-19 category), followed by The Lauren Look by Ralph Lauren in the clothing and shoe rental group (18 overall sub-theme mentions, 4 in the sustainability/planet category, 3 in the financial/profit category, all 9 sub-themes in the community/people category, and 2 in the COVID-19 category). GORE-TEX also tied in second place (18 overall sub-theme mentions, 4 in the sustainability/planet category, 2 in the financial/profit category, 8 in the community/people category, and 4 in the COVID-19 category). In the accessory rental group, the company with the most mentioned sub-themes was RocksBox (6 overall sub-theme mentions, 0 in the sustainability/planet category, 1 in the financial/profit category, 3 sub-themes in the community/people category, and 2 in the COVID-19 category). The details are presented in Table A3.

4.2. Thematic Analysis

To answer research question 1, the websites of apparel, shoe, accessory, and outdoor textile rental brands were analyzed to determine the major topics and underlying themes. Within the triple bottom line and COVID-19 overarching categories, there were a total of 11 main themes. For the sustainability/planet category, the main themes were (1) sustainable business principles, practices, and methods, and (2) recycling, upcycling, and smart/eco-friendly packaging. Three sub-themes under main theme one were (a) renting saves time, money, resources, and maximizes item usage while reducing waste and pollution; (b) garments are mended, cleaned, and repaired for longer life; and (c) sustainability measures such as CSR assessments and partnerships improve energy efficiency, responsible and traceable sourcing, certifications, and more eco-friendly materials, methods, and cleaning processes. Three sub-themes under main theme two included (a) retired products are up-cycled, repurposed, donated, recycled, traded-in, or sold; (b) packaging is improved through reusable totes and materials or using more eco-friendly materials, using less materials, and recycling them; and (c) shipping efficiency is increased and physical pick-up/drop-off hubs.

For the financial/profit category, the main themes were (3) financial benefits for consumers, (4) financial benefits for business, and (5) philanthropy, support, and partnerships. Two sub-themes under the main theme three were (a) consumers save money on clothing and products while gaining cheaper access, and (b) consumers can generate income through peer-to-peer platforms from existing clothing/products or through business-to-consumer membership dividends. Two sub-themes under the main theme four were (a) businesses generate more profit per item at a lower cost and (b) businesses were more focused on members than finances and sought to build more loyal customers by allowing them to try products. Two sub-themes under the main theme five included (a) supporting the community through financial, event, product, and labor contributions, and (b) creating foundations, charities, scholarships, and grants.

For the community/people category, the main themes were (6) supply chain ethics and transparency, (7) ethical employer, and (8) diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and cultural awareness. Two sub-themes under the main theme six were (a) having a code of conduct or policies to mitigate unethical working conditions and practices; (b) partner with programs and associations to teach, elevate, grow, and empower manufacturers. Three sub-themes under the main theme seven included (a) provide competitive benefits; (b) to provide company sponsored career and learning opportunities, coaches, workshops, and events; and (c) to give employees flexible schedules. Two sub-themes under main theme eight were (a) having a partnership or DEI/women board to conduct audits, strategies, training, and reporting to address structural/systemic barriers and achieve leadership position parity; (b) providing a diverse representation of brands, products, and marketing/photography models; (c) embracing a diverse workforce while advocating, recognizing, respecting, and celebrating cultures and backgrounds; and (d) providing accessibility on all web communications, applications, interviews, and employment.

Finally, for the COVID-19 category, the main themes were (9) workplace sanitation and safety, (10) public safety, and (11) community support. Two sub-themes under the main theme nine were (a) products, apparel, and packaging materials are thoroughly cleaned and sanitized; (b) employees follow CDC guidelines and keep physical locations sanitized. Two sub-themes under main theme 10 included (a) store website/locations are reduced or paused, have changed hours, and/or limit the number of customers; (b) customers are required to follow CDC guidelines for being in public. Finally, two sub-themes under the main theme 11 were (a) providing financial grants to employees facing pandemic related circumstances and (b) financial or PPE supplies donated to COVID-19 related organizations or frontline workers.

To answer research question 2, the main themes and their underlying sub-themes are described in depth in the following sections to illustrate how these sustainability concepts were presented. Most rental company websites did not present information collectively;

instead, it was often scattered throughout different pages on the websites. Only seven company websites specifically had a page dedicated to sustainability (i.e., Ralph Lauren, Nuuly, Armoire, Rent the Runway, Tulerie, Switch, and REI).

To answer Research Question 3, the frequency for the mentioned main themes and sub-themes was conducted to create theme scores. When comparing specific theme scores (i.e., Sustainability/Planet, Financial/Profit, Community/People, and COVID-19), the sustainability/planet category yielded the highest amount of mentions for 41 companies (86 combined sub-theme mentions), followed by the financial/profit category with the second-highest amount of mentions for 53 companies (80 combined sub-theme mentions). The people/community category, the last aspect for the triple bottom line, yielded the least amount of mentions for the 28 companies (74 combined sub-theme mentions), while the COVID-19 category had the least amount of mentions overall for 19 companies (43 combined sub-theme mentions). Therefore, the most prominently mentioned category was sustainability/planet related information while the people/community and COVID-19 categories were the least mentioned.

4.2.1. Category 1: Sustainability/Planet

The Sustainability/Planet category is about a corporation's environmental impact globally and locally. The main themes included (1) sustainable business principles, practices, and methods, as well as (2) recycling, upcycling, and smart/eco-friendly packaging.

Theme 1: Sustainable Business Principles, Practices, and Methods

Website content that discussed matters relating to a company's sustainability practices and eco-friendly efforts was the most salient theme with the most sub-theme mentions. This included a wide variety of messages such as reducing textile waste, creating less pollution, and maximizing item usage through their business model. Sometimes, statistics regarding fashion industry pollution, consumer behavior, or the amount of textile waste were provided as justifications for renting instead of buying. For example, The Mr. & Ms. Collection website front page listed many facts such as: "Have you heard that the average American throws away 70 pounds of clothing and other textiles each year?"

Other sustainability related messages included information about how the company was assessing and measuring their environmental impacts, the current efforts being made to change their business practices, and goals to improve their sustainability. This included actions such as creating sustainability committees, training all corporate teams about sustainability targets/design/practices, educating and training overseas suppliers, tracking and eliminating hazardous chemicals, using more eco-friendly materials, creating higher quality clothing, obtaining ethical and sustainable certifications, eliminating or using more ethically sourced animal products, using less harmful and more efficient cleaning processes and supplies, switching to less harmful apparel manufacturing processes, establishing waste management systems, utilizing more renewable energy sources, and increasing the energy efficiency in company owned facilities. Ralph Lauren, the creators of the Lauren Look, annually publishes a sustainability report that describes all of their company assessments, current impact, and future goals. For example, their report states that they, "Set science-based greenhouse gas reduction targets for our operations and supply chain by 2020", with a detailed list of each goal.

Theme 2: Recycling, Upcycling, Smart/Eco-Friendly Packaging

Another commonly mentioned and important aspect relating to sustainability was how companies described their practices regarding shipping, recycling, and material sourcing for their products and shipping/packing supplies. Regarding apparel, some companies detailed the process of how apparel items were managed once they reached the end of their life cycle, which included donating to third party companies, selling them through their own second-hand store, upcycling them into new garments or other materials, or recycling them. REI states that they sell their used gear through their Used Gear Program

and pop-up shops to continue extending the life cycle of garments. Gwynnie Bee has a similar policy and stated what happens to apparel taken out of circulation: “If an item is retired from the collection due to light wear and tear but is still in good condition, we donate it to a local charity.”

Regarding shipping and packaging supplies, the companies practiced several different methods which included using packaging and materials made from recycled materials, reusing their materials as much as possible, posting How2Recycle guidance on materials, and recycling materials after use. Wardrobe is an example of a company that uses carefully sourced materials, stating, “Our shipping boxes are carefully sourced while noting our carbon footprint; the packing boxes are primarily made of recycled paper and after the rentals, we recycle 100% of boxes, making our process completely circular.” Rent the Runway has found innovative ways to recycle their materials, such as all of their plastic materials, which are, “. . . recycled into wood-alternative building and decking materials . . . ” through their partnership with Trex. Jim’s Formal Wear is an example of a company that aims to not only recycle, but also establish, “. . . in-company recycling programs that re-purpose and re-use corrugated boxes, paper, plastic, and aluminum.”

4.2.2. Category 2: Financial/Profit

The Financial/Profit category is about the revenue a company generates and how that profit is used, especially regarding their involvement in creating positive social change, support of the surrounding community, the salaries of all employees, and their aversion to dishonest financial activities. The main themes included (3) financial benefits for customers, (4) financial benefits for business, and (5) philanthropy, support, and partnerships.

Theme 3: Financial Benefits for Consumers

Consumers are the ultimate driving force in the world of commerce because they generate supply and demand to satisfy survival, entertainment, and hedonic needs. However, one’s income greatly dictates and determines what products or services a customer prioritizes. Therefore, consumers are always looking for ways to save money while gaining the most value and return on services and products. Saving money has previously been identified by numerous research studies as one of the key factors in the adoption of products or services. In addition, the economy has faced great adversity within the last two decades during the 2007–2008 financial crises and the recent COVID-19 pandemic that caused a temporary GDP drop during the lockdown. An economic downturn makes it hard for many consumers to afford their essential needs while reducing their expendable income, which especially impacts their access to luxury items. It is not surprising that the most mentioned sub-theme found across rental service websites was about saving money. On the Charlotte’s Closet website, one of the main front pages’ highlights to entice money conscious consumers is, “Save Money: Designer fashion that fits your budget. Who said looking stylish can’t be affordable?”. La Belle Bump is another example of a company that promotes saving money through a slogan: “Rent Stylish Maternity Clothes. Save money and feel great with high quality styles delivered to your door.”

Sometimes, the purpose of a company is to provide a function, service, or platform for consumers to generate their own profit. These are usually considered peer-to-peer platforms and examples include Etsy for selling vintage and handmade goods, eBay for selling new and used items, Poshmark for selling used apparel, etc. There are now a handful of apparel rental companies that serve as a platform for consumers to rent their items to peers. Style Lend is one example, which serves as a platform for consumers to rent out luxury apparel items. For consumer lenders, they have a chance to “Keep 80% [of their profit] and get paid out through Venmo or Paypal” by renting out their closets. The borrowers can “. . . feel fabulous in a new dress for each event without breaking the bank and harming the environment.” Tulerie is another example, which promotes the renting of all kinds of apparel from maternity clothes and chic ski gear to hardly worn dresses and beach attire. For lenders, they state: “Let the community help make your closet more

sustainable by sharing the number of wears. Bonus: you'll be making extra money for your next closet investment."

There is also one additional company, REI, which operates as a co-op and provides dividends to their members. For just \$20, consumers can become a lifetime member which gives them 10% back annually on purchases, access to the used gear trade-in program, access to bike and ski shop services, and a discount on renting. Thus, REI customers can rent apparel at a lower price and earn cash back.

Theme 4: Financial Benefits for Business

The purpose of running a business or company is generally always about gaining profit by providing a product or service. Therefore, it is essential that businesses operate in the most efficient, cost-effective, and productive manner. The outdoor textile and gear rental service called Kit Lender is an example of a company that describes their business model benefits in depth. They not only operate as a rental platform, but also as a logistics "Lend-as-a-service" business for others. On their Rental-As-A-Service page, they list numerous benefits for starting a rental business that improve one's bottom line. These benefits include: attracting new and diverse customers who experience greater product variety at a lower cost; greater loyalty from customers because they are able to try products before deciding to buy; research and development along with promotions for high ticket-limited run items, increased revenue, and profit due to the greater generated profit per item; consumer rental conversion into purchases; greater sustainability; deepened customer relationships through more frequent interactions; and participation in the growing rental market.

However, other businesses claim that they are more focused on growing and satisfying customers and memberships instead of focusing strictly on profit. For example, the jewelry rental company called Switch claims "We're still a young company so we're more focused on growing and satisfying our membership base than making money. And we're trying to change the way people shop for jewelry!". REI is another example of a business more focused on their members than profit, as they claim "Being a member-owned co-operative allows us to focus on shared values, not share value." REI also reveals that "Annually, more than 70 percent of our annual profits are invested back into the outdoor community through dividends to REI members, employee profit-sharing and retirement, and investments in nonprofits dedicated to the outdoors." Ironically, it is very likely that focusing on satisfying their customers and community increases loyalty and therefore profit because the customers feel more valued and satisfied with the products and services.

Theme 5: Philanthropy, Support, and Partnerships

As businesses grow and increase their revenue, they may choose to invest in the welfare of others through philanthropy. This is a good practice for a variety of reasons, such as supporting the communities where a company is based, supporting non-profit organizations, fostering better employee engagement, increasing business value, painting a more positive public image, creating a positive work environment, and enhancing relationships with customers. There are numerous philanthropy-related opportunities such as supporting non-profits, medical institutions, and educational institutions through financial, supplies, or volunteer hour donations. For example, Rainey's Closet provides free clothing rentals for community outreach campaigns, such as fantasy photo shoots for children who are currently fighting medical battles such as brain cancer or fashion shows for families that have lost a child. Other companies such as Fashion to Figure (owned by New York & Company, New York, NY, USA) or Bag Romance make financial donations to organizations such as St. Jude Children's Research Hospital and Dress for Success Houston.

Companies may also choose to create or contribute to scholarships, employee grants, member dividends, school fundraisers, cash back programs, and school group sales. Al's Formal Wear offers an annual scholarship for students, a prom giveback and group fundraising program, and the ability to become a prom rep influencer and receive discounts and free rentals. The Lauren Look by Ralph Lauren provides "... financial grants through

the Emergency Assistance Foundation for Ralph Lauren employees facing special circumstances such as medical, eldercare or childcare needs." In addition to financial and product donations, a company may also physically engage in volunteer work. In the 2020 fiscal year, Ralph Lauren donated more than 14,000 h of volunteer work, a 50 percent increase from 2018.

Furthermore, some companies go above and beyond by creating their own charities, foundations, and medical institutions. Ralph Lauren created the Ralph Lauren Corporate Foundation which provides financial grants, contributes to organizations such as the World Health Organization COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund, and supports cancer institutions. They also commit inaugural gifts " . . . to the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) and Vogue Fashion Fund to support the American fashion community affected by the pandemic.", work to ensure access to clean water, donate to wildfire relief efforts, fight for LGBTQIA+ equity, partner with foundations to donate masks and isolation gowns to healthcare and frontline workers, and donate clothing, meals, and other critical supplies to non-profit organizations and frontline workers around the world. Furthermore, they created the Ralph Lauren Center for Cancer Care (RLCCC) " . . . to reduce healthcare disparities in New York City by providing high-quality cancer prevention and treatment for underserved populations." Similarly, REI has what it has termed the REI Cooperative Action Fund, which has invested over \$6.3M 400+ nonprofit partners that tackle issues such as women's leadership in the outdoor industry, caring for outdoor places, and tackling inequality and injustice in the outdoors.

4.2.3. Category 3: Community/People

The Community/People category is about the relationship between an enterprise and society regarding their social standards. After reviewing the available website content, the main themes included (6) supply chain ethics and transparency, (7) ethical employers, and (8) diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and cultural awareness.

Theme 6: Supply Chain Ethics and Transparency

A supply chain is defined as the activities required by companies to deliver goods and/or services to customers. It focuses on the core activities required to transform raw materials and component parts into finished products and services. In the textile and apparel industry, this involves the designing and planning of a product, the production of textiles from raw materials, producing the textiles into apparel and other items, distributing the items to warehouses and retailers, and the product's sale [45]. On average, a single shirt in production has passed through the hands of 24 to 35+ people along 13 different stops, not including shipping [46]. Most of the steps are completed at overseas manufacturers in China, Bangladesh, Vietnam, and India, the four largest garment exporters in the world. It is cheaper to import garments from these countries because they have lower labor costs and larger workforces. The problem with using lower-cost labor in less developed countries is the risk of unethical conditions. Garment factories may exploit and mistreat their workers to meet production goals, such as the 2013 Rana Plaza Collapse, which highlights the absence of a well-functioning labor inspection system, as well as poor labor conditions, low wages, the exposure to unsafe work environments, high incidences of work-related accidents and deaths, and occupational diseases [47].

Therefore, it is pertinent that textile and apparel manufacturers work towards establishing and maintaining transparent, ethical supply chains. A good foundation starts with creating and upholding a code of conduct or policies that help mitigate these unethical working conditions. Four of the analyzed rental companies had a supply chain disclosure/transparency page in accordance with the California Transparency in Supply Chains Act Disclosure Statement. These companies included Fashion to Figure, Rebecca Minkoff, The Men's Wearhouse, and REI. The Lauren Look by Ralph Lauren did not have a website section specifically called The CA Transparency Act but it is addressed in their Global Citizenship & Sustainability report.

A code of conduct often addresses many aspects related to workplace safety and employee well-being, management, and training/education. First and foremost, companies should be dedicated to paying fair wages and providing consistent working hours to employees overseas, such as Armoire, Ralph Lauren, and REI. According to Ralph Lauren and REI, companies should also have zero-tolerance for non-transparent record keeping, employee monetary fines, locked emergency exits, unhealthy working conditions, unauthorized sub-contracting, abuse, harassment, discrimination, and bribery.

Another way to reduce stress and unethical working conditions is to consider the capabilities and capacities of the supply chain by placing orders early enough in a manner similar to that of Ralph Lauren. Products should also be traceable to ensure ethical manufacturing/working conditions, as guaranteed by Nuuly, Ralph Lauren, and REI. Ralph Lauren has even become, “... committed to increasing women in factory leadership by 25 percent by 2025.” Similarly, Ralph Lauren coordinates “... with factories to improve the overall well-being and career progression of workers through our Better Life programs. We aim to make these empowerment and life-skills programs available to 250,000 workers across our supply chain by 2030.” Some companies, such as REI and Ralph Lauren, are also investing in the well-being and advancement of overseas workers through programs and projects such as the HERhealth Program. According to Ralph Lauren, it “... provides information on women’s health topics such as healthy eating, personal and menstrual hygiene and maternal health.” Finally, similar to REI, companies should be transparent with their customers by notifying them of any product recalls.

Theme 7: Ethical Employer

The lifeline of a company is the hardworking, dedicated employees that run and conduct all the company operations. The number of employees ultimately depends on the success, longevity, and progression of the company. As a company becomes more successful, growth necessitates more roles and positions. At the most basic level, this harmonious relationship provides the company with a person’s skills and knowledge in exchange for compensation. Company benefits fall into two categories, which are those required by law and ones that are offered voluntarily by the company. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, federal mandatory employee benefits include social security and Medicare (retirement income and medical care), unemployment insurance (to help reduce economic hardship as a result of not working), worker’s compensation insurance (to help reduce economic hardship as a result of liabilities caused by workplace illness and injury), and the Family and Medical Leave Act’s (FMLA) protections (unpaid, unprotected leave for family and medical reasons) [48].

Therefore, other benefits such as paid time off, medical benefits, life insurance, and tuition reimbursement are extra benefits that companies offer to attract and retain good employees, minimize employee turnover, boost employee morale and health, and keep the workforce healthy [49]. These benefits also add to the ethical image of a company and how well they treat their employees.

Giving employees flexible schedules is especially important for reasons related to pregnancy, medical, disability, and travel. COVID-19 has tested the limits of company policies and flexibility because many people have needed time off to recover from COVID-19, to take care of someone with COVID-19, or to take care of children/other variables related to COVID-19. Le Tote offers generous flexible vacation while New York & Company provides paid time off. Armoire’s culture also promotes a flexible environment and schedule.

Furthermore, some companies seek to provide company sponsored career and learning opportunities, invite third party coaches for training, create workshops, and host events. Ralph Lauren offered instructor-led training, independent e-learning, expert guest speakers, experiential learning, and provided tools and resources. REI did something similar, namely, educational outdoor experiences for communities, immersive training on their products, and local outdoor knowledge for retail employees.

Theme 8: Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Accessibility, and Cultural Awareness

Despite the rapid expansion of companies implementing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs and the cultural awareness caused by the limelight of recent movements, the DEI profession has existed for much longer. These social movements were driven by events such as George Floyd's death and discrimination against Asian Americans during the spreading of COVID-19. Diversity training in the workplace first began in the 1960s following equal employment laws and affirmative action to help employees adjust to more integrated offices. Companies also used hiring tests to fight bias by selecting candidates based on technical knowledge and qualifications rather than their socioeconomic/racial backgrounds. Unfortunately, many of these past programs have still failed to provide substantial improvements and effectiveness. Currently, companies are societally expected to improve diversity in order to be perceived as ethical. In addition, companies who rank the highest for racial and ethnic diversity are more likely to have greater profits above the industry medians [50].

Accessibility did not have an easy pathway either. While accessibility is currently a legal right and strongly compelling principle, many employees throughout history have faced community-based discrimination, social oblivion, and unfair dismissal due to physical and mental disabilities [49]. Accordingly, it is thereby expected that businesses learn, engage, teach, and uphold business values and practices that promote cultural competency and accessibility to be perceived as ethical. Furthermore, studies have shown that these actions increase business profits and creates a healthier, happier workforce. Which companies are taking these topics seriously and publicly promoting their efforts? To start, some companies have developed partnerships with organizations or created their own DEI and women-led boards to conduct audits, create strategies, provide training, and report their findings to address structural and systemic barriers and achieve leadership parity within companies. Ralph Lauren wanted to achieve leadership gender parity and reports that they "... achieved our 2023 gender parity goal for equal representation in leadership positions at the VP level and above three years ahead of schedule." They also formed a Diversity & Inclusion Synthesis Board, Diversity & Inclusion teams, and established Ralph Lauren Communities that are global and employee-led regarding gender parity, pride, disability and mental health, and wellness. REI similarly sought to update their racial equity commitments.

Creating DEI and gender parity boards greatly helps with creating a more dynamic workforce at a company, but the visual materials and products they procure have a greater visual impact on the rest of society. Companies have begun to understand that representation is extremely important, whether it is a person seeing someone on TV that looks very similar to them or being able to buy toys and books that show people with similar features, because it helps fight and break down stereotypes that are harmful and limiting. In other words, it allows minorities to feel comfortable in their existence, valued for expressing their opinions, and validated. It also shapes how minorities are viewed by society and themselves. In the fashion industry, representation means offering products that fit a variety of body shapes and sizes, creating garments that are suitable for all skin complexions, creating marketing materials that have inclusive wording and pictures, and including a diverse range of product models of various sizes, shapes, complexions, and abilities.

For example, Gwynnie Bee originally began as an apparel rental service for sizes 10–32 but expanded to include sizes 0–32 as a size inclusive service. Nuuly is focusing on growing their selection of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) owned brands available for rent while also "Ensuring diverse representation of models in race, size and age." Reportedly, Armoire is focusing on "... discovering and elevating local, women-owned brands." Ralph Lauren has focused on their design awareness, reporting that "In the last year, we formally established an internal council with team members that brings diverse perspectives and expertise to inform and advise on the guidelines, and ensures that cultural awareness is integrated from concept design through to marketing campaigns." Meanwhile, REI is tackling the inclusivity of their apparel products by claiming that "REI

expects that all wearable products supplied to us be available in colorways appropriate for a range of skin tones and complexions by spring 2023. This includes all apparel and accessories intended to give the impression of bare skin.”

DEI also means advocating, respecting, recognizing, celebrating, and recruiting a diverse workforce. The Men’s Wearhouse boasts that “Our Company celebrates diversity and provides equal employment opportunity to all applicants and employees without regard to race, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, national origin, religion, veteran or military status, age, physical or mental disability, marital status or any other protected status under the law.” Ralph Lauren reports “In FY20, we updated our recruitment and retention tactics to increase the gender and ethnic diversity of our workforce.” Fashion to Figure asserts “We hire world-class talent who love fashion and drive success. We pride ourselves on our collaborative work environment that celebrates diversity in people and ideas.”

Finally, it is important for companies to ascertain their commitment to accessibility in all aspects of their business. None of the company websites discussed accessibility in terms of their employees or physical locations, but many provided their Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). For example, on the Banana Republic Style Passport website, there is an accessibility statement link at the bottom of the landing page. When accessed, the page affirms that they have “. . . taken careful measure to ensure an excellent user experience, regardless of the assistive technology being used to access this site or the specific abilities of those individuals seeking access to this site.” They do this by using “. . . AudioEye, a third-party provider of Web Accessibility testing and monitoring.” A total of 19 companies provided a web content accessibility guidelines page, which include VINCE Unfold, Banana Republic Style Passport, Express Style Trial, Eloquii Unlimited, Haverdash, Scotch Select by Scotch & Soda, Rebecca Taylor RNTD, The Black Tux, Jim’s Formal Wear, The Men’s Wearhouse, Motherhood Rental, The Lauren Look, The Box by The Stylist LA, Nicole Miller Reserved, Teacher Style Box, RocksBox, Bag Borrow or Steal, REI, and the Friar Tux.

4.2.4. Category 4: COVID-19

Even though COVID-19 is not originally one of the three main pillars of the TBL theory, it is important to include how companies are addressing their response to the pandemic. It was included for analysis because many aspects of COVID-19 overlap with other dimensions of TBL, such as philanthropy efforts and how employees and customers are being kept safe. The main themes included (9) workplace sanitation and safety, (10) public safety, and (11) community support.

Theme 9: Workplace Sanitation and Safety

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), it has been found that COVID-19 not only spreads through the air but can also land on surfaces. Therefore, this indicates that it is possible for individuals to become infected if they come into contact with these contaminated surfaces and immediately touch their nose, mouth, or eyes afterward. In most cases, the risk of infection from surfaces is relatively low, but still of concern. Therefore, the CDC recommends that businesses use a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) List disinfectant to clean germs from surfaces. The cleaning protocol should be performed in high traffic areas that many people frequent, places with poor ventilation, places that do not have access to hand washing and sanitizers, and that are occupied by people who are at an increased risk of severe illness. In addition, they also recommend cleaning soft surfaces such as rugs and carpets with soap or detergent, launder items at the warmest appropriate water and dryer settings, disinfect electronics, wear masks and gloves, wash hands frequently, and maintain social distancing [51].

Therefore, workplace sanitation is very important to keep staff and customers safe and healthy. For online customers, especially when they are renting products that have been previously used by someone else, it is pertinent that businesses describe how they are sani-

tizing their items. Thirteen companies described their process for cleaning and sanitizing products in between customers. Express Style Trial has a section dedicated to COVID-19 which states: “As always, we are taking steps to make the rental process safe. All garments go through a high-heat steam tunnel that is at least 240 °F. CDC guidance provides that flu viruses are killed by heat above 167 °F. We have also enhanced our cleaning and sanitization efforts, including frequently disinfecting equipment, work stations and common areas on a daily basis and having our associates wear gloves.” Similarly, Bag Romance says that “All our handbags are meticulously cleaned each time they are returned to us. Our cleaning agents and practices are designed to kill viruses such as the common cold and flu.” In addition to describing clothing sanitation processes, Eloquii Unlimited and Teacher Style box have posted the same statement that describes their facility sanitation process, proclaiming that “In light of the flu season and the ongoing Coronavirus, we’ve enhanced our cleaning and sanitization efforts by increasing the frequency of disinfecting of equipment, common areas, and all workstations.” Arrive Outdoors also has a statement professing that “All gear is thoroughly cleaned by our staff with cleaning solutions that are CDC-recommended. Any gear or apparel that goes through our commercial laundry systems are treated with CDC-recommended laundry additives to fight viruses (including COVID-19) and bacteria. All product surfaces are cleaned with the appropriate disinfectant.”

Besides product sanitation, the way employees are trained to handle COVID-19 protocol is also important. Xscape Pod has an entire page dedicated to their COVID-19 Prevention Plan, which details the sterilization of their gear, delivery and pick-up protocols, and staff guidelines such as wearing gloves, masks, social distancing, and monitoring for any illness symptoms. Kit Lender has a similar page with a detailed plan, which states that “Only Fulfillment and Cleaning staff Employees are working at the HQ. All other non-essential employees are now working from home . . . Staff is limited to 1–2 people in the fulfillment and cleaning facility at one time. Only 1 person in each area of our fulfillment facility with >50 ft between them at all times. All staff is required to use disposable gloves and use sanitizer in between stations.” REI is similarly requiring employees to wear masks, practice social distancing, clean high-touch services, wear gloves, and check for COVID-19 symptoms and temperature before each shift. Rent the Runway has enhanced their cleaning protocols through “Multiple professional cleanings per day, weekly deep cleaning and widely available hand sanitizer stations to ensure a clean working environment for all.” They also implemented social distancing measures such as “Rearranged workstations, common spaces and staggered scheduling to abide by social distancing recommendations for all employees.” They also seek to accommodate their employees during this difficult time through an extended attendance policy.

Theme 10: Public Safety

Product and high-touch surface sanitation is important, but ultimately the best way to keep customers safe is through more cautious and cleanly store policies. Some companies have decided that it is best to reduce the number of customers allowed inside, reduce the number of physical stores, reduce the physical store hours, or pause some services altogether. For example, The Black Tux has decided to limit “ . . . the appointments we take each hour to minimize the number of people in our spaces at any given time . . . We are unable to accommodate group fittings during this time.” The Men’s Wearhouse has decided to permanently close some of their stores because more people are staying home and shopping online, which is safer during the pandemic. Parcel22 has decided to temporarily pause their apparel renting services altogether due to COVID-19, with no information on when they will continue.

Many stores are also requiring their customers to follow CDC guidelines and store mandated protocols to keep staff, other customers, and themselves safe. The Black Tux states on their website that “If an unvaccinated customer is unwilling to wear a mask (or a customer is unwilling to wear a mask in a location where local mask requirements are in effect), we will respectfully ask that the appointment is rescheduled. Face masks

will be provided for anyone in need.” REI decided to create the Recreate Responsibly coalition to “... establish clear guidelines on how to get outside and create an inclusive environment, while aiming to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus and minimizing impact on outdoor places.”

Theme 11: Community Support

Many companies have decided to support their communities during COVID-19 through philanthropic efforts. To help employees, Ralph Lauren is “Providing financial grants through the Emergency Assistance Foundation for Ralph Lauren employees facing special circumstances such as medical, eldercare or childcare needs.” They have also contributed financially to the World Health Organization COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund, and have provided an inaugural gift to the Vogue Fashion Fund and the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) to support members of the fashion community affected by the pandemic and partnered with “... the CFDA Foundations and U.S. manufacturers to donate 250,000 masks and 25,000 isolation gowns for healthcare and frontline workers.” Furthermore, they donated 1.5 million units of clothing, 25,000 meals, and other critical supplies such as hand sanitizers and face masks to non-profit organizations and frontline workers. Kit Lender has committed to donating “... ski goggles to healthcare workers in need of PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) in partnership with Berkshire East and Mansfield Ski Club.” Similarly, REI partnered with HealthEquip to provide funding for a PPE exchange and donation platform.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic which has caused supply chain disruptions, price increases, business closures, job losses, and consequently consumer demand and spending reduction, fashion rental continues to become the retail model of the future. Many fashion subscription companies suffered financial and subscription losses while some closed entirely during the pandemic. However, vaccines, massive government stimuli, and businesses’ reopening have inspired economic surges and a collaborative consumption business model, which have accordingly allowed fashion subscription companies to quickly regain their footing.

This is one of the very first studies to examine the sustainable presentation of U.S.-based apparel, outdoor textile, shoe, and accessory rental platform websites using the TBL framework. Due to phenomena such as climate change, global warming, and the COVID-19 pandemic, consumers are becoming more knowledgeable about sustainability. Therefore, it is becoming increasingly important for companies to be transparent and communicate about their performance, assessments, plans, and goals related to sustainability for all internal and external stakeholders. This qualitative study contributes to the research and literature regarding sustainability communication by presenting the importance of aligning public communications within the TBL framework towards a goal of creating greater public transparency and accountability. It also provides more efficient ideas and strategies for policy makers that can be used to facilitate and support renting practices regarding sustainability.

This study adds to the growing body of TBL framework and CSR assessment research, especially in the fashion industry. Sustainability continues to be a key topic for this industry since it is one of the most polluting industries in the world. The TBL framework is a good starting point for CSR analysis and assessment because it is broad and unspecific in nature, making it widely applicable. However, the results from using the TBL framework must be interpreted with caution because most companies use the framework loosely. Without any true sustainability policies or laws, measuring and reporting practices remain mostly unregulated and are subject to inflated results. Many companies might have stated facts and figures to appear greener, but have failed to show true, real-world progress and outcomes. Companies may also choose to omit any facts that paint them in a negative light or attempt to redefine sustainability in their own manner.

This study examined all the available rental businesses related to apparel, outdoor textiles, shoes, and accessories. The rental model has become increasingly more popular in a variety of other sectors, such as transportation and hospitality, but has taken longer to gain traction in the fashion industry. For several decades, tuxedos and suits were the only readily available apparel items that people could rent; now, renting has extended into every clothing category from baby clothes and maternity-wear to formal dresses and casual-wear.

The findings from this study describe how sustainability reporting and transparency are being handled and affected by large scale, uncontrollable, and external events such as COVID-19. It is difficult to ascertain how communication about sustainability has changed on rental company websites before the pandemic compared to 2021, since this type of study has not been previously carried out. This also means that it is difficult to determine if the pandemic has changed how and which types of communication these companies are willing to disclose publicly. However, it was possible and relevant to assess the current communication strategies regarding COVID-19. A very small handful of companies mentioned COVID-19, while even fewer had a website page dedicated to discussing their strategies for keeping their staff and customers safe. Many aspects of COVID-19 fall within the TBL categories, such as providing financial support and item donations to frontline workers (philanthropy) and giving employees more flexible schedules due to circumstances related to COVID-19 (ethical employer/community support). Communication about this topic is critical to stakeholders for developing and maintaining trust that companies will set aside profit aspirations to support their community and the world during a crisis. It is important on every level, even if it means just protecting their employees and customers. In summary, these findings emphasize the obligation of companies to reveal and address the three pillars of TBL and COVID-19. It also reveals the ways in which companies can use the TBL framework as a starting point for CSR, which can be later transformed into other assessment methods such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) or the Higg Index by the Sustainable Apparel Coalition.

6. Implications

The purpose of communicating sustainability strategies on company websites and social media is to give stakeholders a greater understanding of a company's vision, mission, and initiatives. It also helps companies overcome consumer-related barriers by conveying the benefits and incentives of renting. In other words, the transparency towards and engagement with sustainability can further drive and support consumer decisions and inspire sustainable actions. Companies' transparency regarding sustainability can and should be as detailed as possible but can also be implemented in smaller ways. This may include communicating about what the company is already practicing in terms of their business model and supply chain, financial benefits for consumers, ethics in their supply chain, their ethicality as an employer, and their current COVID-19 strategies. To go beyond this level, companies should seek third party organizations and assessment tools such as the Higg Index or GRI to evaluate their current strategy towards developing future goals. Regardless of whether the strategies are simple or complex, they should all be transparently communicated to stakeholders.

One simple implementable action is to discuss the business model. Despite the fact that operating as a rental model already makes these companies more sustainable than traditional retail models, many are missing out on utilizing this as a simple, yet strong, marketing tool. Also, consumers are used to traditional retail models and ownership, making this consumer-related barrier hard to overcome. Particularly, it is a simple technique that can be used to simultaneously educate the consumer and persuade them into renting their textile and apparel products rather than buying them. This can be achieved by adding simple yet straightforward statements such as "Renting your clothing rather than buying is more environmentally friendly and saves you money," or "Save money renting maternity/children's clothing that you'll only use for a short period of time while diverting textile waste."

Other easy adjustments include creating separate sustainability pages and creating pages dedicated to COVID-19 strategies. Whether a company chooses to create a simple sustainability page with information and research that has already been conducted by external organizations such as the EPA or McKinsey & Company, or a page dedicated to conducting their own studies, both goals and assessments are important for increasing transparency, authenticity, honesty, and customer loyalty. Having a page related to transparency about COVID-19 strategies is critical for other reasons, such as product sanitation strategies. Research has shown that many consumers are already wary about using and wearing clothing that has been previously used by other people due to hygienic and health concerns. COVID-19 has escalated this concern, making it harder for rental companies to attract and retain customers. Not only should there be a dedicated, detailed page that describes how products are cleaned and sanitized, but they must also address how these methods are effective against killing the virus with credible citations to the CDC or similar reliable source.

It is also extremely pertinent to discuss the community aspect of a company ranging from their ethics in the supply chain and towards their employees to creating a DEI strategy and making web communications accessible. Consumers are increasingly demanding greater diversity to feel represented, respected, and to break down stereotypes. Realistically, companies should already be diverse in terms of leadership and general employees. Many companies have realized that their strategies were flawed or biased and have sought to create DEI boards or hire external organizations for assistance. If this has been overlooked, companies should be transparent about why and how they plan to remedy the issue. Marketing materials must also be evaluated because these represent the brand image for consumers. Many companies have begun to realize that a stereotypical tall, skinny, pale complexioned, and airbrushed or Photoshopped model is an unrealistic expectation for many that damages self-esteem and leads to physical and mental disorders. By using more realistic, naturally represented models of varying sizes, ages, complexions, and abilities, a company will stand out in marketing. Brands such as the Girlfriend Collective and Thirdlove are examples of apparel companies creating inclusive products for varying body shapes, sizes, and skin tones as well as using a diverse representation of models that have made them successful. As for the supply chain, it can be difficult to ascertain which manufacturers are the most ethical overseas. This could be resolved by hiring a sourcing agent or researching what manufacturers other sustainable/ethical brands use.

Finally, previous research has warned that communicating externally about sustainability can also invite more skepticism from stakeholders, consumers, and the media, leading larger companies to participate in greenwashing or green-hushing. While it is important to be transparent about sustainability, it should be done in a credible and verifiable manner through third-party assessments and endorsements, external advisory groups, certifications, by partnering with leadership organizations to foster collaboration, and collaborating with other companies. Companies can also strive to become a B-certified corporation, which is granted to those who meet the highest standards of sustainable practices and gives them a credible, stronger position rooted in transparency.

7. Limitations and Future Research

This study had several limitations which provide directions for future research. First and foremost, this study only focused on the websites of the rental companies and did not include any other forms of web communication such as social media. Sometimes, social media channels have additional information pages such as sustainability and the California Transparency Act. Each platform has different types of characteristics that make them better for different types of information and functions. It is possible that some information relating to a company's sustainability was presented in a different place than their main website. Therefore, future studies could explore the sustainability presentation across all of their channels. Furthermore, a cross-examination of the difference between their

main website and social media communications regarding sustainability would provide more insight.

Second, this study only focused on the rental business model and did not include traditional retail, second-hand retail, subscription box models, or other forms. The study should be duplicated and compared to other types of retail models to understand if different types of retail models are more transparent than others.

Third, for the sake of scope, rental businesses located outside the U.S. were excluded. It was found that there are many other apparel, shoe, accessory, and outdoor textile rental businesses globally, such as My Wardrobe HQ, which is a popular apparel, shoe, handbag and accessories rental business in the UK, and Glam Corner, which is a popular apparel rental business in Australia. Future research could analyze the sustainable presentation of businesses outside of the US and compare the results to see if there are any differences.

Fourth, this study used a qualitative approach via the TBL framework. The themes were based on secondary data provided by the rental company websites. Therefore, it would be beneficial to conduct larger-scale, quantitative studies with primary, empirical data to provide more reliable results and recommendations. Other studies may choose to utilize other different and more beneficial frameworks such as the Higg Index or GRI.

Finally, this study only focused on how the platforms presented themselves, which may not be an accurate measurement of their true sustainability efforts or how they actually behave. Companies may be performing assessments and actions that they have not publicly revealed or may be extending the truth of their implemented actions. Additionally, there is no singular, concrete way to measure sustainability in the apparel and textile industry, making it hard to generalize results across the board. Future studies could research and examine CSR reports and sustainability assessments to obtain a better idea of what practices companies are actually implementing versus just examining how transparently their information is displayed.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Rental company profiles.

	Company Name	Type	Public/Private	Website
1	Nuuly	Apparel Rental	Private	https://www.nuuly.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
2	Rent the Runway	Apparel Rental	Public NASDAQ:RENT	https://www.renttherunway.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
3	Armoire	Apparel Rental	Private	https://www.armoire.style/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
4	Le Tote	Apparel Rental	Private	https://letote.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
5	VINCE Unfold	Apparel Rental	Public NYSE:VNCE	https://www.vinceunfold.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
6	Gwynnie Bee	Apparel Rental	Private	https://closet.gwynniebee.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)

Table A1. Cont.

	Company Name	Type	Public/Private	Website
7	Rainey's Closet	Apparel Rental	Private	https://www.raineyscloset.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
8	Banana Republic Style Passport	Apparel Rental	Private (GAP INC) GPS on NYSE	https://www.brstylepassport.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
9	Fashion to Figure	Apparel Rental	Private	http://www.fashiontofigurecloset.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
10	New York & Company Closet	Apparel Rental	Private	https://www.nyandcompanycloset.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
11	Style Lend	Apparel Rental	Private	https://www.stylelend.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
12	Wardrobe	Apparel Rental	Private	https://www.wearwardrobe.co/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
13	Express Style Trial	Apparel Rental	Public NYSE:EXPR	https://women.expstyletrial.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
14	Tulerie	Apparel Rental	Private	https://tulerie.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
15	Eloquii Unlimited	Apparel Rental	Private	https://www.eloquiiunlimited.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
16	Haverdash	Apparel Rental	Private	https://www.haverdash.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
17	Rebecca Minkoff	Apparel Rental	Private	https://www.rebeccaminkoff.com/collections/borrow (accessed on 12 June 2022)
18	Scotch Select by Scotch & Soda	Apparel Rental	Private	https://www.scotchselect.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
19	The Mr. & Ms. Collection	Apparel Rental	Private	https://www.themscollection.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
20	Rebecca Taylor RNTD	Apparel Rental	Public NYSE:VNCE	https://www.rebeccataylorntd.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
21	The Black Tux	Apparel Rental	Private	https://theblacktux.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
22	Rent a Romper	Apparel Rental	Private	https://rentaromper.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
23	Evita Leto	Apparel Rental	Private	https://www.evitaletto.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
24	Fashion Pass	Apparel Rental	Private	https://www.fashionpass.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
25	Jim's Formal Wear	Apparel Rental	Private	https://www.jimsformalwear.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
26	Mine for Nine	Apparel Rental	Private	https://www.minefornine.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
27	Al's Formalwear	Apparel Rental	Private	https://www.alsformalwear.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
28	Men's Wearhouse	Apparel Rental	Private	https://tuxedo.menswearhouse.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
29	Janet Mandell	Apparel Rental	Private	https://janetmandell.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
30	Motherhood Rental	Apparel Rental	Private	https://www.motherhoodrental.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
31	KYX	Shoe Rental	Private	https://www.kyx.world/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
32	Eternal Style	Shoe Rental	Private	https://eternalstyleshoerental.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
33	Luxury Swop	Shoe Rental	Private	https://www.lswop.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
34	Rent My Wardrobe	Apparel Rental	Private	https://www.rentmywardrobe.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
35	The Lauren Look	Apparel Rental	Public NYSE:RL	https://www.thelaurenlook.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
36	LaBelle Bump	Apparel Rental	Private	https://labellebump.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
37	The Box by The Stylist LA	Apparel Rental	Private	https://www.stylistlabox.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
38	Nicole Miller Reserved	Apparel Rental	Private	https://www.nicolemillerreserved.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
39	Teacher Style Box	Apparel Rental	Private	https://www.teacherstylebox.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
40	RocksBox	Jewelry Rental	Public (Signet Jewelers) SIG on NYSE	https://www.rocksbox.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)

Table A1. Cont.

Company Name	Type	Public/Private	Website
41	Bagromance	Private	https://bagromance.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
42	Switch	Private	https://joinswitch.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
43	Bag Borrow or Steal	Private	https://www.bagborroworsteal.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
44	Vivrelle	Private	https://www.vivrelle.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
45	Kit Lender	Private	https://www.kitlender.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
46	Arrive Outdoors	Private	https://arriveoutdoors.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
47	LowerGear Outdoors	Private	https://www.lowergear.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
48	Outdoors Geek	Private	https://www.outdoorsgeek.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
49	XscapePod	Private	https://xscapepod.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
50	REI	Private	https://www.rei.com/stores/rentals (accessed on 12 June 2022)
51	Friar Tux	Private	https://www.friartux.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
52	Charlotte's Closet	Private	https://charlottes-closet.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
53	Parcel22	Private	https://www.parcel22.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
54	Mama Bump Rentals	Private	https://mamabumprentals.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
55	Lending Luxury	Private	https://lendingluxury.com/ (accessed on 12 June 2022)
56	GORE-TEX	Private	https://www.gore-tex.com/experience/rentals (accessed on 12 June 2022)

Table A2. Triple Bottom Line and COVID-19 Categories, Main Themes, and Sub-Themes.

Main Themes	Sub-Themes	Frequency
Sustainability/ Planet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Renting saves time, money, resources, and maximizes item usage while reducing waste and pollution. 	1, 2, 3, 7, 11, 12, 14, 19, 22, 23, 26, 35, 36, 42, 45, 46, 50, 52, 53, 56
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Garments are mended, cleaned, and repaired for longer life. 	1, 2, 3, 7, 21, 22, 25, 32, 41, 50, 51, 55, 56
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainability measures such as CSR assessments and partnerships, improving energy efficiency, responsible and traceable sourcing, certifications, and more eco-friendly materials, methods, cleaning processes. 	1, 2, 3, 12, 21, 22, 23, 25, 35, 42, 50, 51, 53, 55, 56
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retired products are up-cycled, repurposed, donated, recycled, traded-in, or sold. 	1, 2, 5, 6, 8, 15, 16, 18, 20, 22, 25, 26, 30, 35, 37, 38, 39, 45, 50, 53, 56
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Packaging is improved through reusable totes and materials or using more eco-friendly materials, fewer materials, and recycling the materials. 	1, 2, 3, 7, 25, 35, 50
Recycling, upcycling, smart/eco-friendly packaging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shipping efficiency is increased, physical pick-up/drop-off hubs. 	2, 7, 12, 25, 34, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51

Table A2. Cont.

	Main Themes	Sub-Themes	Frequency
Financial/ Profit	Financial benefits for customers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consumers save money on clothing and products while gaining cheaper access. 	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They can generate income through P2P platforms from existing clothing/products or through B2C membership dividends. 	11, 12, 14, 34, 50
	Financial benefits for business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Businesses generate more profit per item at a lower cost. 	45, 46
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More focused on members than money, build more loyal customers by letting them try products. 	42, 50
	Philanthropy, support, and partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support community through financial, event, product, and labor contributions. 	1, 3, 7, 9, 10, 12, 22, 25, 27, 35, 41, 45, 50, 51, 53, 56
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create foundations, charities, scholarships, and grants. 	27, 35, 50
Community/ People	Supply chain ethics and transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have a code of conduct or policies to mitigate unethical working conditions and practices. 	3, 9, 10, 17, 28, 35, 50, 56
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partner with programs and associations to teach, elevate, grow, and empower manufacturers. 	35, 50, 56
	Ethical employer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide competitive benefits. 	1, 3, 4, 9, 10, 21, 25, 27, 35, 40, 50, 51, 56
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide company sponsored career and learning opportunities, coaches, workshops, and events. 	35, 50, 56
	Diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and cultural awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Give employees flexible schedules. 	3, 4, 9, 10, 21, 25, 27, 35, 50, 51, 56
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have a partnership or DEI/women board to conduct audits, strategies, training, and reporting to address structural/systemic barriers and achieve leadership position parity. 	35, 50, 56
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide a diverse representation of brands, products, and marketing/photography models. 		1, 3, 6, 35, 50	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Embrace a diverse workforce while advocating, recognizing, respecting, and celebrating cultures and backgrounds. 		6, 9, 10, 28, 35, 40, 50, 56	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide accessibility on web communications, applications, interviews, and employment. 	5, 8, 13, 15, 16, 18, 20, 21, 25, 28, 30, 35, 37, 38, 39, 40, 43, 50, 51, 56

Table A2. Cont.

	Main Themes	Sub-Themes	Frequency
COVID-19	Workplace sanitation and safety	• Products, apparel, and packaging materials are thoroughly cleaned and sanitized.	1, 2, 3, 4, 13, 15, 39, 40, 41, 45, 46, 49, 56
		• Employees follow CDC guidelines and keep physical locations sanitized.	1, 2, 3, 4, 9, 10, 13, 15, 16, 21, 39, 40, 45, 46, 49, 50, 56
	Public safety	• Store website/locations are reduced or paused, have changed hours, and/or limit number of customers.	21, 28, 45, 50, 53
		• Customers are required to follow CDC guidelines for being in public.	21, 50
	Community support	• Provide financial grants to employees facing pandemic related circumstances.	35, 56
		• Financial or PPE supplies donated to COVID related organizations or frontline workers.	35, 45, 50, 56

Table A3. Rental Company Scores.

Apparel/Shoe Rental Businesses Score		
1. Nuuly: 11	16. Haverdash: 4	31. KYX: 1
2. Rent the Runway: 9	17. Rebecca Minkoff: 1	32. Eternal Style: 2
3. Armoire: 12	18. Scotch Select by Scotch & Soda: 3	33. Luxury Swop: 1
4. Le Tote: 5	19. The Mr. & Ms. Collection: 2	34. Rent My Wardrobe: 3
5. VINCE Unfold: 2	20. Rebecca Taylor RNTD: 3	35. The Lauren Look: 18
6. Gwynnie Bee: 4	21. The Black Tux: 9	36. LaBelle Bump: 1
7. Rainey's Closet: 6	22. Rent a Romper: 6	37. The Box by The Stylist LA: 3
8. Banana Republic Style Passport: 3	23. Evita Leto: 3	38. Nicole Miller Reserved: 3
9. Fashion to Figure: 7	24. Fashion Pass: 1	39. Teacher Style Box: 5
10. New York & Company Closet: 7	25. Jim's Formal Wear: 10	51. Friar Tux: 8
11. Style Lend: 3	26. Mine for Nine: 3	52. Charlotte's Closet: 2
12. Wardrobe: 6	27. Al's Formalwear: 5	53. Parcel22: 6
13. Express Style Trial: 4	28. Men's Wearhouse: 5	54. Mama Bump Rentals: 1
14. Tulerie: 3	29. Janet Mandell: 0	55. Lending Luxury: 3
15. Eloquii Unlimited: 4	30. Motherhood Rental: 3	56. GORE-TEX: 18
Jewelry and Accessory Rentals		
40. RocksBox: 6	42. Switch: 4	44. Vivrelle: 1
41. Bagromance: 4	43. Bag Borrow or Steal: 2	
Outdoor Textile Rentals		
45. Kit Lender: 9	47. LowerGear Outdoors: 2	49. XscapePod: 4
46. Arrive Outdoors: 5	48. Outdoors Geek: 2	50. REI: 23

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