Sustainability as Distinction: Discourse, Identity, and Elite Fashion in Shanghai

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Abstract

In Shanghai's high-end fashion sector, sustainability has become more than an ethical ideal; it is now a marker of elite distinction, blending global eco-conscious narratives with local notions of prestige. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of distinction and concepts of habitus, taste, and capital, this thesis investigates the discursive mechanisms behind this phenomenon. Specifically, it examines how sustainable fashion is constructed as an exclusive form of cultural capital within post-reform Shanghai, where luxury consumption and sustainability converge.

To explore these issues, the study adopts an innovative ethnography-led, corpus-validated mixed-methods approach. The analysis combines multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork across Shanghai's sustainable fashion industry with a corpus-assisted discourse study of fashion branding and communication texts. This integration of qualitative and quantitative techniques captures both lived practices and linguistic patterns, enabling triangulation of data for a nuanced understanding of how language and practice jointly construct value and social meaning.

The analysis shows how the discourses of authenticity, trust, and moderation articulate the value of sustainable fashion and reinforce elite distinction. The discourse of authenticity emphasises quality craftsmanship, uniqueness, local heritage, expert endorsement, and natural materials to frame sustainable products as exclusive and indicative of refined taste. The discourse of trust builds consumer confidence through transparency initiatives and educational engagement (such as workshops and storytelling), inclusively fostering an exclusive community of ethically-minded consumers and thereby reinforcing class boundaries. The discourse of moderation frames ethical consumption as an act of moral self-restraint and minimalist aesthetics, portraying sustainable minimalism as an elite virtue and status symbol.

Together, these discourses construct sustainability as a privilege for Shanghai's elite consumers, demonstrating how ostensibly egalitarian sustainability ideals are repurposed to entrench social hierarchies. The findings also illustrate the value of integrating ethnographic insight with discourse analysis to unpack the complex links between consumption, language, and elite identity in contemporary China.

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Acknowledgements

As I write these words, I feel as though I have reached a quiet clearing after a long journey through the woods. I vividly recall stepping off the high-speed train from Hangzhou to Shanghai for my very first fieldwork session, anxiously reviewing interview prompts and mentally rehearsing my self-introduction. That day, I walked into WeWork on Hunan Road—a chic, minimalist, and tech-savvy co-working space—where I met Ash, the first participant willing to engage with my project. Since that initial meeting, every site visit, field note, reflection, and moment of trial and error has woven together the narrative of this scholarly journey.

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my original work and has not been submitted in part or whole for the award of another degree at this or any other university.

Chapter 1 Introduction

Assume you only see a few photos of a minimalist-style garment. Although the photos do not display any unique features, this clothing is still much pricier than what you would find at a high-street retailer. In that case, you probably would not consider buying such clothes. What if there is some introductory text above the photos, as is shown in Figure 1.1? The description was taken from the official website of a fashion brand in China. The brand is called *Norlha*, a social enterprise located in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau whose products target domestic and global high-end markets. It tells you the products are made of "100% yah khullu" and produced with "natural hand-applied processes", which might give you a few reasons to believe the clothing is worth more than the higher-than-average price. The added value of this vest lies in its naturalness by proudly foregrounding 100% of the natural material and its authentic name in Tibetan. Such naturalness and authenticity (or "honesty", as described by the text producer) are further embodied through the metaphorical language that portrays the feelings when you "touch or wear the fabric". The clothing product is compared to "a little part of the plateau", where symbolic meaning and value are crafted. Further into the website from which this description was taken, it is claimed that the brand's mission concerns "balancing modern technology and traditional knowledge to create lasting, beautiful pieces while supporting our local community". The added value of this vest may be heightened by your belief, as a consumer, that your purchasing behaviour reflects not only your distinct taste in product quality and style but also your support for altruistic motives, such as environmental protection, fair wages, or the livelihoods of women from ethnic minority groups.

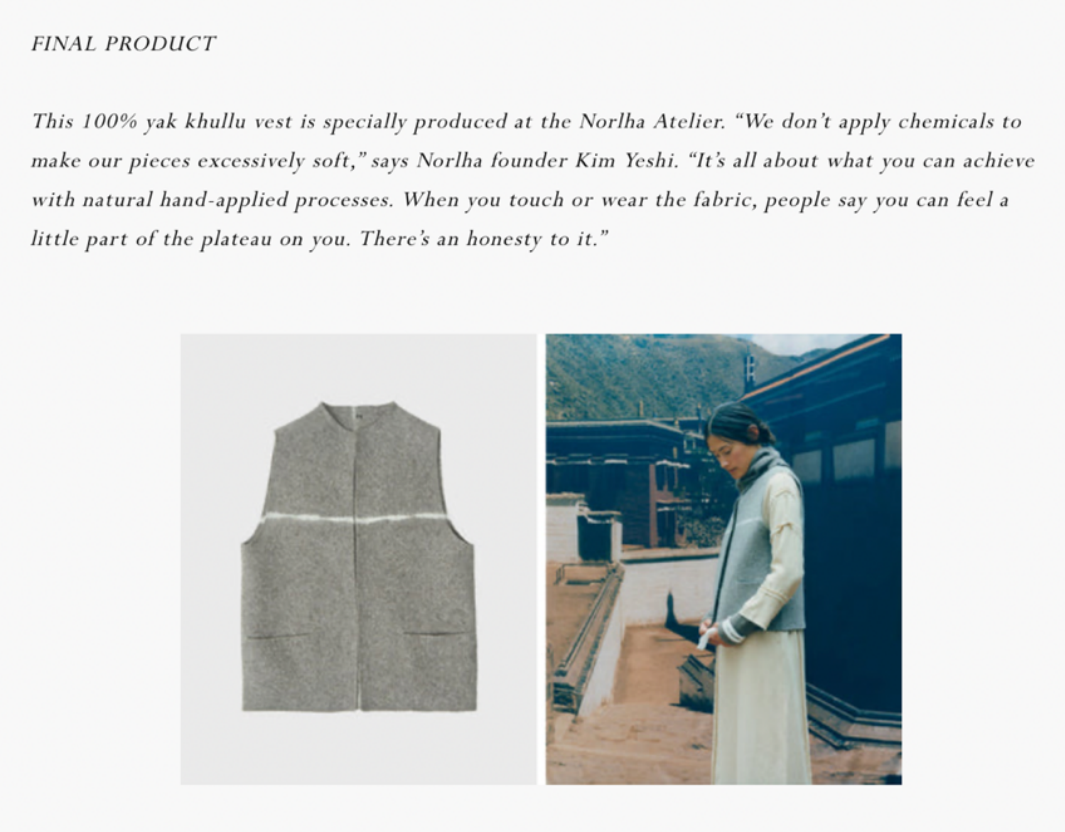

Figure 1.1. Screenshot from *Norlha*'s official website[1]

The description of the final product in the screenshot above illustrates how language can enhance the perceived value of a commodity—in this case, sustainable, ethically made fashion. Situated within an industry styling itself as globally connected yet locally engaged, my research investigates how "sustainable fashion" is constructed and circulated textually in Shanghai's high-end market and how added value is discursively created through linguistic choices made in the commodity chain process. Here, drawing on Appadurai's (1986) notion of "commodity fetishism", value is not simply determined by an object's utility or cost of production but is also shaped by the cultural and social meanings associated with the commodity. In *The Social Life of Things*, Appadurai (1986, p. 3) notes that "commodities, like persons, have social lives", and emphasises that the commodity phase in an object's life is not fixed but culturally constructed. From this perspective, a commodity chain is a cultural trajectory in which objects move through various symbolic and economic registers, shaped by both material production and discursive framing. Research has shown that the language used within the commodity chain process is not only limited

[1] Source: https://www.norlha.com/blogs/life-at-norlha-blog/the-making-of-felt-vest

to its descriptive function for the production, circulation, and/or exchange of products but can also be considered an essential constitutive part of the entire process (see, e.g. Heller, 2010; Heller et al., 2014; Lorente, 2012; Shankar & Cavanaugh, 2012).

As Heller (2010) explains, in the context of late capitalism and increasingly saturated markets, language becomes central to: "(a) managing the flow of resources over extended spatial relations and compressed space-time relations, (b) providing symbolic added value to industrially produced resources, (c) facilitating the construction of and access to niche markets, and (d) developing linguistically mediated knowledge and service industries" (2010, p. 103). This expanded role of language aligns with Barthes's (1990 [1967]) view of fashion as a system of meanings shaped through language. In fashion, language assigns symbolic value to clothing, making it not just functional but socially and culturally expressive (Barthes, 1990 [1967]). Miller (2001, 2005) similarly argues that material possessions are vital to meaning-making and relationships, stating that "the things people make, make people" (2005, p. 21). Mapes (2021) builds on this, framing the "making of people" through dual materiality: both the practical function of objects and their symbolic or artistic significance. In this project, clothing exemplifies this duality: it provides bodily protection while communicating identity, taste and status. Fashion intensifies this by embedding aesthetic and cultural meaning, transforming clothing into a form of art and a performance of class. In this process, language plays a crucial role in shaping meaning, reflecting what Cavanaugh and Shankar (2017) describe as "language materiality", where language and material objects co-construct value and significance.

These insights from linguistic anthropology and cultural studies regarding language's role in assigning symbolic value to material objects are also relevant to Fairclough's critical discourse framework. Both perspectives collectively highlight the complex ways in which language mediates social practices and shapes social meaning. Fairclough's foundational works, *Language and Power* (1989) and *Discourse and Social Change* (1992), provide a comprehensive lens for understanding the intricate relationship between language and discourse. He posits that language serves as the primary medium through which discourse is realised, emphasising that discourse encompasses socially situated language use that both constructs and reflects social realities (Fairclough, 1989, p. 23). Discourse, in Fairclough's view, is not merely a passive reflection of societal structures but actively participates in their formation and transformation. He asserts that "discourse is a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the

world in meaning" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 64). This perspective underscores the constitutive role of discourse in shaping ideologies, social identities, and power relations. Furthermore, Fairclough highlights the dialectical relationship between discourse and society, where discourse both shapes and is shaped by social structures, making it both a product and a producer of society (Fairclough, 1992, p. 65). Meanwhile, Burr's (1995) perspective on discourse as pluralistic and interpretive complements Fairclough's (1989, 1992) emphasis on discourse as embedded within power structures and social practices. Burr (1995, pp. 48-49) conceptualises discourse as "a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events". Rather than presenting discourse as singular or fixed, she emphasises its pluralistic nature, arguing that multiple discourses often coexist around the same object, event, or person, each framing it differently. According to her, each discourse highlights distinct aspects, evokes different questions, and suggests varied implications for action. This perspective underscores discourse as dynamic and contested, actively shaping perceptions and influencing social practices by foregrounding specific versions of events or identities while simultaneously obscuring alternative interpretations.

This project starts with a foundational perspective of discourse as "the ways individuals construct and navigate their social realities through diverse semiotic systems" (John et al., 2015, p. 3). In this view, discourse is inherently multimodal, extending beyond linguistic boundaries to include various systems of meaning-making, such as visual, spatial, auditory, and embodied modes (c.f. Machin & Mayr, 2012). Building on this multimodal understanding, Ledin and Machin (2019) critique Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)-based approaches for oversimplifying multimodal communication by imposing linguistic frameworks onto non-linguistic forms. Instead, they emphasise the materiality and affordances of different modes—specifically, the potentials and constraints of various media—showing how sensory and material characteristics shape meaning. Their approach advances the argument that multimodal texts should be analysed as culturally situated wholes embedded within established "canons of use", highlighting the need to examine discourse as an interplay of material, semiotic, and social practices (Ledin & Machin, 2019, p.501).

The aim of analysing discourse could be perceived as uncovering the often implicit and unconscious rules that shape how knowledge and meaning are produced (see Foucault, 1972). Foucault's concept of "discursive formation" is important to my discourse analysis approach, which he describes as structured patterns governing the production and circulation of knowledge

within specific historical and cultural contexts. These formations emerge through systems of dispersion, encompassing regularities among statements, concepts, objects, and thematic choices, and determine who may speak, what can be said, and how knowledge is legitimated. In this sense, discursive formations reflect deeper underlying rules and relationships, ultimately shaping social identities, power relations, and societal understandings (Foucault, 1972, p. 38).

Therefore, the central motivation of my study on discourse in Shanghai's high-end sustainable fashion is to examine how these discourses are patterned and predictable, and where they resist such regularity. To better understand the "discursive formations" at play, it is essential to focus on two key concepts: *rhetorical strategy* and *theme*. Both are fundamental to discourse analysis and offer complementary insights into how meaning and ideology are constructed and conveyed. For *rhetorical strategies*, I adopt Van Dijk's (1998, p. 208) definition, which emphasises their role as key means of controlling information, manipulating attitudes, and reinforcing power relations. These strategies include stylistic devices or figures used to organise discourse at various levels, such as rhyme or alliteration at the phonological level, parallelism at the syntactic level, and metaphor, comparison, or irony at the semantic level. These structures are primarily persuasive, meant to attract attention, manage recipient comprehension, and influence how recipients evaluate and interpret events. Consequently, rhetorical strategies are significantly linked to ideological manipulation, as they can emphasise or diminish specific meanings aligned with particular ideological positions. While rhetorical strategies focus on the *how* of discourse construction, the concept of *theme* in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) provides insight into the *what*—the content focus or topical point of departure within a clause. As defined by Halliday (1994, p. 38), the theme marks the beginning of a message and reflects the speaker's framing. Broader qualitative discourse studies further conceptualise themes as semantic patterns or categories that emerge across texts and contexts, often serving as units of analysis in thematic or narrative discourse analysis (Riessman, 2008). Thus, a theme could be understood as a recurrent or dominant idea, topic, or proposition that organises and gives coherence to a text or discourse. It reflects what the speaker or writer presents as "given" or "topical" information, and it often signals the ideological or communicative focus of the discourse. Together, rhetorical strategies and themes function interdependently to shape both the form and content of discourse, revealing the communicative, ideological, and persuasive dimensions that are particularly relevant in analysing corporate discourses on sustainable fashion.

Objectives and research questions

Building upon the previous literature, my research aim is to investigate how language adds value to high-end fashion products by associating them with "sustainable" and "authentic" forms of production and by embedding them in specific social relationships. Specifically, this study is guided by two overarching objectives. The first is to examine the discursive means by which stakeholders within the fashion industry in and around Shanghai's high-end market construct added value around their products. The second is methodological: to develop an ethnography-led mixed-methods approach that combines ethnographic and corpus linguistics perspectives on discourse analysis, in order to address the first objective. On this basis, the research questions to be answered in this thesis are formulated as follows:

- **RQ1: Where and how do sustainability-oriented businesses in Shanghai's fashion industry under analysis disseminate their corporate communications?**
- **RQ2: How is value conceptualised through language within the sector of Shanghai's high-end sustainable fashion?**

    RQ2-1: What major discourses are used to establish social distinction in the corporate communications of sustainability-oriented businesses?

    RQ2-2: What rhetorical strategies are appropriated in each discourse identified from the data?

- **RQ3: How effectively does the mixed-methods approach address the second research question?**

Through an ethnography-led mixed-methods approach that combines ethnographic and corpus linguistics perspectives on discourse analysis, this study builds on and aims to provide new insights into the relationship between language use and political economy in terms of economic system, ideology and public policy in contemporary global capitalism. Moreover, it hopes to contribute to a better understanding of the pivotal role that language plays in the evolving consumption patterns influenced by global neoliberal economic reforms and urban revitalisation in and around the 'first-tier cities' in China, such as Shanghai. It also aims to examine how the burgeoning middle- and upper-middle class is portrayed in discourses produced and circulated within the local fashion industry. To illustrate how fashion products can become a valuable commodity for specific social

groups, I draw on Bourdieu's (1984) notion of *distinction*. According to Bourdieu (1984, p. 231), the producers who are guided by the logic of competition with other producers and by the specific interests associated with their position in the field of production produce distinct products to meet different cultural interests that the consumers attribute to their class conditions and position. I argue that high-end sustainable fashion can be related to what Bourdieu refers to as "restricted production" (1993), a concept aligns with strategies observed in cultural or artistic fields, where practitioners reject the influence of the market and focus on producing work that embodies their vision of pure art or cultural expression. Here, I assume that value is drawn through *distinction*, capitalising on an image that denounces industrial-, exploitative- and delocalised forms of production or at least positions itself as an alternative to mass-produced fast fashion (Binet et al., 2019).

Building on this assumption, the study investigates how stakeholders attribute distinct value to ethically sourced and produced fashion in post-reform Shanghai, a city transformed by China's economic liberalisation policies since the late 1970s (Song, 1996; Chen, 2009). The data to be analysed consists of field notes, interview transcripts, material texts collected from the field (e.g. promotional pamphlets, posters, exhibition boards) and online communication texts (i.e., posts and articles published on social media websites) related to sustainability within the fashion industry. I adopt ethnographic and corpus linguistics perspectives on discourse analysis among the businesses in promoting "sustainable fashion" for elite consumers in China. The focus on Shanghai stems from its status as one of the most affluent cities in the country, exemplifying shifting consumption patterns among a growing middle- and upper-middle class oriented towards fashion products perceived as 'ethical', 'sustainable' and 'authentic' (Delong et al., 2018; Zhao et al., 2018; Jung et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2023).

The ethnographic component of this research comprises participant observation and semi-structured interviews aimed at uncovering the underlying relationships among stakeholders and mapping a commodity chain that connects lobbying groups, think tanks, recycling initiatives, garment traders, production cooperatives and fashion brands. These actors are all involved in the creation of added commodity value within the domain of sustainable clothing. The ethnographic data is analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Byrne, 2022) to identify the discourses through which the value of sustainable fashion is constructed. The corpus-analytical component of the research examines stakeholders' social media articles on WeChat (a widely-used

social networking platform in China) to explore how they contribute to the discursive construction of added value.

Specifically, coding was conducted iteratively, with codes being refined and expanded as patterns emerged. This study followed an integrated "ethnography-led, corpus-validated" model, which unfolded through a recursive, four-phase process. The process began with immersive ethnographic discovery, employing a hybrid coding strategy (descriptive, analytical, and process coding) to generate initial insights from field data. Ethnographic and corpus data were then analysed in a dialogic manner, moving to a phase of corpus validation and expansion where field-derived insights were tested through systematic analysis of keywords and their context in the source texts. This allowed contextual insights from fieldwork to inform the interpretation of corpus keywords, while corpus analysis provided quantified textual evidence to support and clarify coding decisions. Subsequent iterative interpretation created a comparison between linguistic patterns and ethnographic records, refining initial codes based on the convergence of evidence. This reciprocal approach enhanced theme development by grounding them in both contextual and empirical data. Final codes illustrated how discourse is shaped through semiotic choices functioning as rhetorical strategies aligned with ideological positions (Van Dijk, 1998). The final synthesis phase integrated both strands of evidence to build multi-layered arguments. In this phase, themes, are perceived as discourses that are not merely descriptive, but rather as discursive constructions revealing how meaning is strategically produced and reproduced within social contexts. Combining ethnographic and corpus linguistics perspectives on discourses, this study hopes to reveal how those different yet interrelated stakeholders establish, maintain, and reaffirm economic relations and, together, discursively create added value for sustainable fashion products.

Thesis overview

This thesis consists of eight chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the research context and outlines the rationale for examining sustainable fashion as a marker of elite distinction in contemporary Shanghai. Chapter 2 contextualises the research within China's post-reform socio-economic landscape, tracing the emergence of a new middle class and elite consumer base whose cultural practices and tastes are shaped by global influences as well as local socio-political structures. Chapter 3 draws on Bourdieu's theoretical framework, particularly the concepts of taste, habitus, and distinction, to analyse how class-based preferences and embodied dispositions shape

perceptions of sustainability and ethical consumption in contemporary China. It also explores how language constructs class through practices of taste and consumption, drawing on Shankar and Cavanaugh's notion of language materiality and Barthes' conception of fashion as a system of signs. The chapter shows how discourse shapes value and desire, with insights from sociolinguistics and cultural studies illuminating the role of language in the performance of class identity. Chapter 4 outlines the study's methodological design, detailing an ethnography-led, corpus-validated mixed-methods approach that integrates multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork with corpus-assisted discourse study to examine how sustainability is constructed and circulated through textual and social practices.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 form the analytical core of the thesis, each focusing on a specific discourse identified within sustainable fashion branding: Authenticity, Trust, and Moderation, respectively. Chapter 5 analyses how "authenticity" is discursively constructed, focusing on the linguistic and visual strategies brands use to present their products as genuinely sustainable and ethically produced. Chapter 6 examines the discourse of trust, demonstrating how organisations leverage informal learning, such as lectures and workshops, to build communities of like-minded consumers and frame sustainability as shared knowledge. Chapter 7 explores the discourse of moderation, analysing how minimalist aesthetics and moral restraint function as markers of elite taste and social distinction. Finally, Chapter 8 synthesises the study's main findings, offering critical reflections on its implications, methodological strengths and limitations, and outlining avenues for future research into elite sustainability discourses and their political-economic impacts.

Chapter 2 Contextualising sustainable fashion in Post-reform Shanghai

2.1 Post-reform Shanghai: The development of marketisation since the late 1970s

On January 11, 2023, about one month following the government's announcement that the "Zero-COVID" policy was to be relaxed, I took a high-speed train from Hangzhou to Shanghai. Due to the pandemic and local restriction policy, it had been over a year since my last on-site field trip in Shanghai. Few people were on the streets, and most were still wearing facial masks. My plan for the morning was to visit *klee klee*'s new store, which opened in March 2021. The location is Columbia Circle, an internet-famous spot in recent years, frequently featured on various social media platforms. The most iconic spot in Columbia Circle is the site of the former Navy Club and its affiliated swimming pool. Many top international brands, such as *Bulgari*, *Gucci*, and *Louis Vuitton*, have hosted new product launches, pop-up shops, or exhibitions there. Interestingly, the name "Columbia Circle" is not a literal translation from its Chinese version "上生新所". Those two names originate from several different historical stages of this place. Columbia Circle itself was the name of a residential project in the 1920s led by a Hungarian-Slovak architect named Hudec. It later developed into a new residential area on the outskirts of Shanghai during that time. The Columbia Country Club, established in 1923, became a sports and social gathering place in the western suburbs of Shanghai. In 1951, after the Chinese Communist Party came to power, Shanghai's then-mayor, Chen Yi, decided to move the Shanghai Institute of Biological Products (known as 上生所-"Shàng shēng suǒ" in Chinese) to the location. The goal was to create a sizeable medical research base. Over the next 60 years, the site saw the construction of research office buildings, laboratories, factories, pharmaceutical warehouses, etc. In 2016, the Shanghai Institute of Biological Products relocated to a new place, and China's real estate developer, Vanke, took over the site. After two years of restoration and redevelopment, it opened again to the public in 2018, renamed "Columbia Circle" or "Shàng shēng Xīn (new) suǒ". In Vanke's promotional documents, the site is now positioned as a "vigorous international cultural and artistic life circle" (Vanke's billboard, see Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1. Vanke billboard at Columbia Circle, 11 January 2023

This same place has witnessed different stories from different periods in Shanghai's history, like a microcosm of the city's development. Being in the park, surrounded by Spanish-style villas, Chinese courtyards, and Soviet-style matchbox-shaped office buildings, I felt a sense of time and space intertwining. Imagine that this place once hosted social parties exclusively for American expatriates in Shanghai. One of the villas was once inhabited by Sun Ke, the son of Sun Yat-sen (the founding father of the Republic of China). During the socialist era in China, this area was a key site where leading biomedical researchers developed state-of-the-art vaccines, including those for diseases such as polio and hepatitis B. These vaccines were crucial for public health campaigns and disease prevention in the early years of the People's Republic of China. History happened here. After the 1980s, it underwent renaming and restructuring. In 1999, it separated from the Ministry of Health. In 2011, the institute was restructured as Shanghai Institute of Biological Products Research Co., Ltd. More recently, in 2016, the production workshop was relocated, and the original site was leased to Shanghai Vanke. This prompted a redevelopment project that culminated in Columbia Circle.

Change is the theme of this chapter. The changes after the 1980s in Columbia Circle reflect both the role of state-owned enterprises in China's privatisation reforms and urban land

commercialisation, as well as the part played by property developers in leading these transformations within the broader context of the country's Reform and Opening-Up Policy[1]. Announced by the Chinese leadership under Deng Xiaoping in December 1978, this policy has led to tremendous changes in urban class relations, public cultures, the emergence of private property, and institutional reforms (e.g., He & Wu, 2009; Rofel, 2007; Wang, 2003; Zhang, 2012). Since then, according to Harvey (2005), a unique market economy has emerged in China that blends neoliberal principles with centralised authoritarian control, termed a "Socialist Economy with Chinese Characters" from the narratives of the party-state.

The transition from a centrally planned economy to a socialist market economy has been geographically uneven. In 1979, the establishment of experimental special economic zones led to the development of a vast, export-oriented production economy in cities like Shenzhen on the south coast. This was achieved by combining cheap labour with Hong Kong and Taiwanese capital and know-how (Buck, 2007). Shanghai was not one of the cities that were initially developed and had lagged in obtaining a similar level of municipal autonomy from the central government for years (Wu, 1999). The shift towards marketisation appeared later in the city. This change was ultimately driven by marketing through collective ownership, especially with the rise of township and village-owned enterprises (TVEs) in the lower Yangzi River delta during the late 1990s (Li & Rozelle 2000, 2003). The TVEs had strong links with state-owned enterprises (SOEs) owned by the municipal governments of the region's cities, particularly Shanghai, through subcontracting partnerships (Buck, 2007). Moreover, China experienced an influx of foreign capital in the 1990s, gradually integrating with both the TVEs and SOEs. This made the private sector more significant through direct ownership and indirect stockholding, resulting in a shift of the entire economy towards a neoliberal-oriented structure (Harvey, 2005).

[1] China's Reform and Opening-Up—initiated in 1978—marks a historic transformation from a centrally planned economy to a socialist market economy. According to Liu (2020), this process unfolded in four major phases. Phase 1 (1978–1984) marks the initial stage of economic reform, beginning in rural areas following the 3rd Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC). The major initiative during this phase was introducing the household responsibility system. Phase 2 (1984–1992) shifted focus to urban reform, aiming to revitalise enterprises and reform the price system, beginning with the 3rd Plenary Session of the 12th Central Committee and culminating in the 14th National Congress. Phase 3 (1992–2001) involved establishing a socialist market economy, with significant reforms in macroeconomic regulation achieved in 1994, structural adjustments in ownership from 1997 to 1999, and China's accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001. Phase 4 (2001–present) focuses on improving the socialist economic system, with ongoing efforts in areas such as social security, environmental sustainability, and abolishing the agricultural tax to support long-term growth and social harmony.

As Lee and Zhu (2006) note, “The linchpin of China’s economic reform policy is the belief that the market, properly regulated and liberated from all forms of unnecessary interventions, represents the optimal mechanism for economic development” (pp. 44-45). Shanghai’s economic development since the 1990s has been fundamentally anchored in urban spatial restructuring through housing commodification and industrial relocation. The 1998 national housing reforms, implementing full privatisation and introducing mortgage financing, spurred real estate growth (Pow & Kong, 2007). Locally, Shanghai’s revival was fuelled by central-area redevelopment and the creation of Pudong New Area as a special economic zone (Wu, 1999). While these policies achieved remarkable economic outcomes, they simultaneously displaced millions, causing cultural loss (Li, 2014; Shao, 2013) and dissonance among native Shanghainese (Xu, 2020), which reveals the contested nature of Shanghai’s urban redevelopment and globalisation project. These spatial transformations were further compounded by emerging market imbalances. As housing commodification intensified, speculative investment dramatically inflated property values, exceeding state-mandated affordability benchmarks (Pow, 2009). Recognising both the economic potential and the need for oversight in this evolving landscape, the Chinese government formally institutionalised the sector by authorising the first cohort of real estate development companies. Vanke (who transformed the former site of Shanghai Institute of Biological Products into Columbia Circle) is among these early developers, becoming one of China’s—and the world’s—most prominent real estate firms.

China’s housing reforms cultivated a new class of status-conscious consumers who value conspicuous consumption (O’Cass & Frost, 2002), such as property ownership as a marker of social distinction (Pow & Kong, 2007). Developments like Vanke’s Garden City, one of the first commodity housing estates in 1994, exemplify how commercial housing became a status symbol. These aesthetically curated spaces employ deliberate exclusion tactics, such as gated designs, surveillance systems, and fortress-like security features, to maintain privileged environments while reinforcing social stratification (Pow, 2009).

This culture of exclusionary consumption aligns with Shanghai’s government-led commercial gentrification, where historic urban spaces are similarly transformed into exclusive enclaves. Commercial gentrification is a novel approach to rejuvenating neighbourhoods, which involves repurposing historic homes as sites for high-end shopping, dining, and cultural experiences (Smith, 2002). Take Columbia Circle as an example; apart from the use of fences and security personnel

at each entrance (see Figure 2.2), which clearly illustrates the strategy of spatial exclusion, the area's past as a restricted space also gives it special status today. Historically, only certain privileged groups, like American expatriates, children of important politicians, or top scientists, could enter. Now, the previous exclusivity of the location enhances its prestige, adding value for current visitors and businesses. While such redevelopment boosts economic value, it exacerbates social divisions through rising rents, displacement of low-income residents, and eroded neighbourhood identities (Wang, 2011). The state's emphasis on economic growth at the expense of equity conceals these disparities beneath narratives of urban revitalisation.

Figure 2.2. The entrance gate of Columbia Circle, 11 January 2023

To summarise this section, post-reform Shanghai has implemented various marketisation policies, including promoting local entrepreneurship, privatising public sectors, commodifying housing, enhancing the city's appeal for residents and businesses, and developing property-centred programmes. These changes have reshaped urban environments to both enhance economic growth and respond to the evolving consumption habits of wealthy demographics. The following section examines how these economic shifts influenced social identities and consumption behaviours of middle- and upper-middle-class residents through increased disposable income and purchasing power.

2.2 Social class, Shanghai's middle class[2] and their consumption

The language of social class in China both reflects and influences social realities, consistent with Fairclough's (1989) view of the dialectical relationship between language and society. The meaning of social class in contemporary China has experienced significant changes since the Reform and Opening-up. In today's China, the term "shehui jieji" (社会阶级) for social class seems to be rarely used in daily conversations, although social classes still exist. Based on my personal observations, while those born in the 1950s and 1960s, like my parents' generation, still recognise the concept of "class struggle" ("jieji douzheng", 阶级斗争 in Chinese), many of them avoid talking about "jieji". As Guo (2012) explains, this is probably due to the traumatised history associated with the past experience of "class struggle". This decline of the Marxist class discourse began in the late 1970s with economic reforms and the emphasis on productive forces over class struggle, as mentioned at the third session of its 11th Congress in 1978 by Deng Xiaoping (Deng, 1993, p. 269). Deng's famous quote, "What does it matter if it is a ginger cat or a black cat as long as it catches mice", gained popularity after his tour in the southern region in 1992 (Harvey, 2005, p. 125). This quote reflects the party-state's emphasis on promoting efficiency in pursuit of economic growth, regardless of people's social origins. The class-based term "jieji" (阶级) had been replaced by the more neutral "jieceng" (阶层), meaning "stratum" (Cartier, 2013). Still, changes in China's social structure continued, with significant shifts by the mid-1990s, as shown in Dong's research (Dong, 2009, 2013, 2017, 2018): traditional binary class divisions (one was either a peasant or a worker) blurred, giving rise to new groups such as the nouveaux riches ("tuhao", 土豪) and petty bourgeoisie ("xiaozi", 小资). Meanwhile, the working class's prestige declined with many laid-off workers ("xiagang gongren", 下岗工人), and rural-to-urban migrants ("nongmin gong", 农民工) contributed to the emergence of a new urban lower class.

The economic reform changed the social structure. Wealth inequality and increased privatisation created a new social group with a growing purchasing power (Harvey, 2005). According to

[2] In this section, the term "middle class" follows its common usage in contemporary Chinese discourse, where it broadly encompasses both middle- and upper-middle-class groups. This reflects how the term is used not only in everyday conversation, media narratives, and official documents, but also in some academic research. Crucially, the argument here is that the "middle class" functions more as a discursive construct than as a clearly defined social demographic.

Goodman (2014), a public discourse surrounding the rise of the middle class has been ongoing for over a decade. Rather than a social structure, he argues that within the PRC, the prevalence of middle-class ideas and practices is more of a discourse of social change (Goodman, 2014). The official discussion of this new group dates back to 2002, when the state-sponsored discourse of the "harmonious middle class" appeared at the 16th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Goodman, 2014). By announcing that the goal was to "control the growth of the upper stratum of society, expand the middle, and reduce the bottom", then-president Jiang Zemin described the centrality of developing the middle-propertied stratum (Jiang, 2001, p. 169). In addition to the CCP's recognition of this emerging group, several of China's leading social scientists at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) have characterised them as the "new middle stratum" ("xin zhongchan jieceng", 新中产阶层) (Anagnost, 2013; Li, 2011). However, accurately determining the size and financial standing of the middle class is challenging, with population estimates ranging from 5% to 68% of the national total, and income thresholds varying from 60,000 yuan per *household* per year to 60,000 yuan per *individual* per year (e.g. Zhou, 2005; NBS, 2012; McKinsey, 2013). To complicate the picture further, the economic situations of Chinese families can vary significantly based on whether or not they have dual incomes (Dong, 2018).

Nevertheless, scholars at CASS agree on the significance of consumption and lifestyle, particularly housing and property ownership, in defining the middle class (Goodman, 2014). This aligns with the political discourse of the "China Dream", introduced by the current President, Xi Jinping, at the National People's Congress in March 2013. A vital aspect of the China Dream is to create a well-off and comfortable society by significantly increasing the size of the middle class (Goodman, 2014). Echoing Goodman's (2014) view that the "China Dream" is a discourse of social change, I argue it reflects and shapes neoliberal-oriented social transformations in China, promoting middle-class aspirations which tend to link to specific lifestyles and are achieved through consumption (Fussell, 1992; Savage et al., 1995; Currid-Halkett, 2017). Complementing this, the CCP advances discourses such as *suzhi* (素质, citizen quality), *cutinisation*, and *self-governance*, which emphasise non-economic indicators like education, behaviour, and cultural capital (Tang, 2022). These frameworks reconfigure social stratification in ways that facilitate governance while avoiding overt references to class conflict (Tang, 2022, p. 65).

In recent decades, the Chinese government has mobilised middle-class discourses to advance a shift from a production-led to a consumption-led economy, where private household spending drives GDP growth (Cartier, 2013). Shanghai, with the nation's highest GDP per capita, has been at the forefront of the transformation (Yusuf & Brooks, 2009). Rapid urban growth and economic restructuring have accelerated this process. The 2006 closure of the Xiangyang Road Fashion and Gifts Market, once a hub for low-cost goods and counterfeits, illustrates this shift ("Shanghai's knock-off paradise shuts down", 2006). Replaced by the Shanghai International Commerce Centre (Shanghai ICC), the site now hosts national and global brands targeting affluent consumers. As Cartier (2013) notes, this redevelopment symbolically marked Shanghai's move toward a consumption-oriented urban economy and a rebranding aligned with middle- and upper-middle-class lifestyles.

The transition from a production-led to a consumption-led model shapes both aspirations and constraints for its emerging middle class (Cartier, 2013). Early middle-class culture centred heavily on consumerism (Zhu & Zhu, 2017), branded goods and their associated symbols (Cartier, 2013). Conspicuous consumption serves as a key marker of social distinction. As Zhang (2015) explains, this reflects both practical and psychological needs. Luxury goods visibly signal status where wealth origins may be sensitive, particularly for the newly rich. Additionally, consumption behaviours facilitate the construction of lifestyle and cultural identities, thereby mitigating social insecurities in a competitive society. Property ownership, especially in gated communities, exemplifies this performative class identity (Zhang, 2008). Yet these consumption-driven status markers obscure growing stratification within the middle class itself. Shanghai's professional middle class (Abercrombie & Urry, 1983), comprising managerial, technical, and professional workers, has expanded over the past three decades but remains internally stratified, with many excluded from gentrified central districts due to earlier residential redevelopment (Wang & Lau, 2009). As Wang and Lau (2009) explain, newly prosperous individuals must navigate a highly competitive housing market, which limits their access to the central city. Despite spatial inequality in property ownership, shared concerns over environmental degradation, homeownership pressures, and political-economic uncertainty have fostered a shared sense of anxiety among the group (Zhu & Zhu, 2017). Recent years have seen an "inward turn" in Shanghai's middle-class culture, characterised by increasing environmental consciousness and cautious conservatism (Zhu

& Zhu, 2017, p. 641), which is also visible in both consumer attitudes and corporate engagement in the elite sustainable fashion examined in this project.

In this project, my understanding of class is based on Thompson's (1978) idea that class should be treated as an ongoing process of "happening" in human relations rather than being viewed as a "structure" or "category". Therefore, the formation of the middle class in China is not fixed but is in progress. Meanwhile, I also draw on Bourdieu's approach to social class, which centres on cultural processes. Bourdieu (1984) maintains that class is a "universal principle of explanation" (p. 114). He notes that "a class is defined as much by its *being-perceived* as by its *beings*, by its consumption—which need not be conspicuous in order to be symbolic—as much as by its position in the relations of production (even if it is true that the latter governs the former)" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 483). Therefore, one's social status is partially produced through class performances, in which capital plays an important role. *Capital* can be economic, social, symbolic and cultural. The concept of cultural capital is widely recognised as significant in Bourdieu's theories on social class (Smith & Riley, 2009, p. 132). Cultural capital refers to a range of things, including a person's understanding of cultural activities like art, music, and cuisine. It can also encompass specialised abilities or qualifications (such as university degrees or other forms of schooling) and the capacity to distinguish between valuable or valueless cultural forms (Bourdieu, 2006).

My research combines Thompson and Bourdieu's theories to examine social class construction through cultural practices and consumption behaviours within Shanghai's high-end sustainable fashion sector. I argue that middle-class identity in this context is predominantly shaped by the cultivation of distinctive tastes and the accumulation of cultural capital. These dynamics mirror broader global patterns of class formation, particularly what Currid-Halkett (2017) conceptualises as the "aspirational class", a cultural elite defined by knowledge acquisition rather than income. This group signals status through cultural capital, including shared values, informed consumption (e.g., farmers' markets), and progressive discourse, rather than material goods. Their class position manifests in everyday choices (food, parenting, environmentalism), revealing how knowledge-based practices replace traditional conspicuous consumption as markers of distinction in contemporary society. Several studies illustrate this trend among China's emergent middle class. Ong (2018) points out that consumption of experiences, leisure, education, and gastronomy has all given rise to new modes of showcasing status and riches in recent years. Wang and Somogyi's (2020) analysis of luxury seafood consumption demonstrates how symbolic values (status display,

face consciousness, and networking) outweigh practical food value. Similarly, Ning and Chang (2022) document how aesthetic appreciation and art consumption have become new markers of distinction. Notably, even young professionals without property ownership qualify as middle-class because they have the "cultural competence to decode and appreciate an urbane lifestyle" and an aspiration to live in gentrified neighbourhoods in the future (Wang & Lau, 2009, p. 58).

This thesis examines Shanghai's sustainable fashion as a site for the discursive construction of class through consumption and cultural capital. The following section details the development of the fashion industry within Shanghai's post-industrial "creative economy", with a focus on its recent turn towards sustainability.

2.3 "Creative economy", local fashion industry and sustainable fashion—a niche market in Shanghai

The end of the 20th century marked a significant turning point in the economic development of many advanced capitalist countries. Guided by neoliberal economic principles and policies, this development involved a shift from Fordism to post-Fordism, moving from material labour (i.e., manual production of goods) to immaterial labour (i.e., the creation of new ideas). Due to increased competition and routine production automation, companies in post-industrialised countries advocate a creative economy that prioritises creativity and generates new knowledge to differentiate the products (Leslie & Rantisi, 2012). Those niche goods and services gain value by differentiating from mass-produced offerings through their unique image or symbol (Lash & Urry,1994; Scott, 1997). According to Leslie and Rantisi (2012), the concept of the creative economy is centred around producing signs and symbols, emphasising the importance of knowledge and creativity as critical resources. Moreover, they suggest that in the post-Fordist era, knowledge holds greater value than physical assets. In essence, the creative economy, or cultural industries, relies on the integration of knowledge and commerce.

Zooming in on China again, the creative economy has also emerged during recent decades nationwide, despite some differences compared with countries where capitalism developed much earlier. The Chinese government has embraced the creative economy and cultural industries as part of its transition from manufacturing to high-value-added economic activity, from "Made in China" to "Created in China" (Potts, 2010; Hartley & Montgomery, 2009; Keane, 2007). According to O'Connor (2011), such thinking of the Chinese government stemmed from an

anxiety that the decline of the labour-intensive manufacturing industry has left a significant vacuum in many post-industrial cities. The government has become an advocate for the economic potential of a knowledge-intensive industry and linked it to urban regeneration and economic development agendas (Gu, 2020).

Shanghai led the way in embracing creative industries in Mainland China (Shanghai Creative Industry Centre, 2006). Since the late 1970s reform era, the manufacturing sector within Shanghai's inner city has declined due to outdated industrial practices. During urban regeneration, the Shanghai Municipal Government (SMG) implemented market reforms on the state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and industrial restructuring programmes, focusing on finance, trade, and other global city functions. SMG aims to revamp outdated industrial zones into a global economic hub with towering skyscrapers in the Lujiazui Financial Centre (Zhong, 2013). Several new policies were announced concerning redeveloping industrial land and repurposing it as cultural and creative industries (CCIs) clusters. As previously mentioned, Vanke's Columbia Circle (the Shanghai Institute of Biological Products, an SOE, which was formerly situated there during socialist China and was relocated to a suburban industrial area in 2016) is an example. Shanghai's CCIs have been central to its urban rebranding. The closure of Xiangyang Market in 2006 highlights the city's efforts to enforce intellectual property laws and promote upscale retail. By 2010, UNESCO designated Shanghai as a "City of Design", accelerating urban regeneration projects like Tianzifang (Ning & Chang, 2022), which repurposed industrial spaces into commercial CCI clusters that target the middle class and creative professionals (Florida, 2002). However, although these developments have improved Shanghai's cosmopolitan image, critics argue that these projects often prioritise real estate profits over genuine cultural development (c.f. He, 2019; Zheng, 2016; Zhong, 2013). Case studies reveal that "cultural-led" regeneration frequently benefits property interests, as seen in Shanghai Sculpture Space, where artistic programming is subordinated to commercial objectives (Zhong, 2013).

Among Shanghai's CCIs, fashion consumption has emerged as one of the predominant categories over the past decade (He, 2019). Having said that, the fashion industry is unique compared to other knowledge-based CCIs because it values not only innovation and creativity but also the speed at which they are implemented (Wilson, 1985). According to Lu and Dickson (2015), the Chinese textile and apparel industry underwent restructuring due to declining export figures, rising labour costs, and competition from cheaper labour countries in Asia. This resulted in a

stronger focus on high-value-added production and expanding domestic consumption (Lu & Dickson, 2015). Despite Shanghai's status as China's largest textile and garment manufacturing city, the industry has experienced a significant decline since the 1990s due to the relocation of production to neighbouring Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces with lower labour costs (Zhang et al., 2013). As previously noted, SMG's proposed strategy involves relocating industrious yet environmentally problematic or visually undesirable sites, such as Xiangyang Market, to inland areas, while developing CCI clusters in the central business district that focus on core, value-added, creative service sectors. According to Gu (2020), Shanghai's fashion industry has thrived again in recent years due to its proximity to flourishing consumption and manufacturing sectors, benefiting from the global flow of knowledge, skills, and trade. However, in Gu's view, local fashion designers in Shanghai struggle to balance their roles as cultural tastemakers and entrepreneurs (Gu, 2020). Drawing on two case studies of Shanghai-based fashion designers Wang Yiyang (founder of *ZUCZUG*) and Cai He, she argues that designers, regardless of their brand size or reputation, consistently face the challenge of competing in both local and global markets. Without a distinct value system to guide their work, many opt to collaborate with high-street fashion retailers and adapt their designs to suit a broader customer base (Gu, 2020). Gu (2020, p. 116) critiques the Chinese development model for prioritising the economisation of culture, while overlooking its counterpart—the "culturalisation of the economy". In other words, she contends that such a model only emphasises using culture as a tool to boost economic growth and development, without adequately considering how culture and cultural factors can benefit from the economy. Gu (2020) calls for a more balanced approach that acknowledges the reciprocal relationship between the culture and the economy in Shanghai's creative industry, such as fashion.

Although still emerging, the data I gathered from Shanghai's high-end sustainable fashion community offers a potential counterpoint, or at least additional insights, into recent developments in the city's fashion industry. Gu (2020) argues that the local industry lacks alternative value systems and relies exclusively on market logic. In her study, the case of *ZUCZUG* shows the compromise the designer (and founder) of the brand made to the market when negotiating his role as a tastemaker and entrepreneur (Gu, 2020). Coincidentally, this project uses *klee klee*, a sub-brand of *ZUCZUG*, as an illustrative case to examine the alternative values and tastes that designers and members of the "creative class" seek to construct. In this project, I argue that high-end sustainable fashion products pertain to what Bourdieu (1993) termed "restricted production", the

operation of a cultural or artistic field as a rejection of "the market" and an elaboration of "pure art". Within this niche market, stakeholders under investigation have adopted the concept of sustainable fashion to remove the negative connotations that come with the "Made in China" label of the industry, which is typically associated with mass production and inferior quality. Instead, the focus is on highlighting exceptional craftsmanship and utilising high-quality materials from local suppliers. Moreover, as Scott (2010) points out, a significant aspect of the creative industry is the formation of social networks among like-minded individuals who share similar values and identities. He notes that these individuals greatly emphasise incorporating social and cultural values into their business practices, which is integral to the creative nature of their work. In this sense, Shanghai's sustainable fashion community is not bound by physical locations like the CCIs clusters supported by the local authority, but rather strengthened by the common values shared among its stakeholders.

The concept of sustainability has been perceived as ambiguous, lacking a precise definition (Markusen, 2003). Therefore, sustainability can be defined in various ways and may encompass environmental, economic and social aspects. To further emphasise, sustainability is a concept that is subjectively interpreted and dependent on context and the individual (e.g. Gunder, 2006; Henninger et al., 2016). Arguably, the concept's ambiguity and subjectivity have allowed tastemakers in the fashion industry to shape its underlying principles and values. Sustainable fashion has been previously defined as "fashionable clothes that incorporate fair trade principles with sweatshop-free labour conditions while not harming the environment or workers by using biodegradable and organic cotton" (Joergens, 2006, p. 361). The term has evolved to include more flexibility in its conceptualisation. According to Gowerek et al. (2012, p. 938), sustainable clothing "incorporates one or more aspects of social or environmental sustainability, such as Fair Trade manufacturing or fabric containing organic-grown raw material". According to this definition, sustainable or ethical fashion refers to a broad category of products designed and produced to minimise environmental impact and/or maximise social benefits. This includes, for example, items made from biodegradable or recycled materials, as well as those manufactured through environmentally and socially responsible sourcing, production, and distribution.

Growing environmental awareness has created a nascent but uneven market for sustainable fashion in China (Zhang & Lang, 2018). In Shanghai, consumers prioritise style, artistry, colour, and brand name when purchasing casual wear (Zhang et al., 2002), with income being the main

factor influencing their decisions, followed by gender and education level (Liu et al., 2001). The expanding middle-class (Cartier, 2013; Zhang & Yao, 2016; Zhu & Zhu, 2017) is driving demand for high-end sustainable clothing, particularly among Gen-Z consumers. Recent research shows Gen-Z consumers, especially women, who value uniqueness, sustainability awareness, and classic styling, are willing to pay premiums for sustainable items and often purchase second-hand clothing in physical stores (Zhang et al., 2023). Business campaigns such as workshops, lectures, and forums have effectively promoted environmental education and sustainable purchasing behaviours (Zhang & Lang, 2018), helping shape a high-end eco-conscious fashion market that appeals to Shanghai's middle and upper-middle classes.

China's high power-distance culture (Hofstede, 2001, as cited in Wang et al., 2010) fundamentally influences how status is expressed through consumption. In such societies, where hierarchical relationships are emphasised yet overt displays of inequality may provoke tension (Mulder 1977, as cited in Wang et al. 2010), elite sustainable fashion has emerged as a culturally nuanced form of status performance. Unlike traditional luxury goods that rely on conspicuous branding, sustainable fashion allows China's middle and upper-middle classes to signal distinction through aesthetic discernment. It prioritises the cultural capital by highlighting design sophistication, colour harmony, and uniqueness while avoiding overt displays of wealth and inequality (Jung et al., 2020), which reflects a strategic adaptation to cultural norms. Jung et al.'s (2020) finding that conspicuous values weaken sustainable purchase intentions confirms this shift—what presents itself as individual aesthetic preference becomes a new marker of elite status, one that aligns with China's cultural values by disguising hierarchy under shared ideals of refinement and sustainability.

In this sense, the fundamental assumption of this project is that aestheticism is inextricably associated with systems of social, economic, and political power, challenging Kant's view (1987 [1790], pp.10-17) that considers aesthetic judgment as disinterested and solely involving a "purposiveness without purpose". In the context of elite sustainable fashion, the ostensibly altruistic aesthetics of high-end eco-products mask their exclusivity, effectively turning class privilege into virtuous consumption. As Harvey (1989, p. 6) demonstrates through the hidden "imperialism taste" of post-modernism, dominant groups systematically redefine aesthetic standards to legitimise new social hierarchies. Ultimately, the preferences that appear to be individual, whether for minimalist design or ethical consumption, function as a cultural apparatus

for maintaining power. In the discussion on the role of aestheticism, Eagleton highlights its dual nature and notes that:

"The aesthetic, then, is from the very beginning a contradictory, double-edged concept. On the one hand, it figures as a genuinely emancipatory force—as a commodity of subjects now linked by sensuous and fellow-feeling rather than by heteronomous law, each safeguarded in its unique particularity while bound at the same time into social harmony.....… On the other hand, the aesthetic signifies what Max Horkheimer has called a kind of "internalised repression", inserting social power more deeply into the very bodies of those it subjugates and so operating as a supremely effective mode of political hegemony" (Eagleton, 1990, p. 28).

This study does not seek to dismiss the emancipatory or progressive potential of aestheticism and the creativity it entails. Rather, from a discourse-analytic perspective, the aim is to critically examine how aesthetic preferences in Shanghai's sustainable fashion industry as a creative sector intersect with class dynamics and consumer culture—and how these connections are constructed through language within the context of post-reform, neoliberal-oriented Shanghai. As a major city in China, Shanghai has embraced the creative economy as a key component of its economic growth. The apparel sector in Shanghai increasingly prioritises high-end, eco-conscious products for its expanding middle and upper-middle classes. I argue that sustainability emerges as both a market trend and a mechanism of social distinction, reinforcing taste hierarchies through ostensibly progressive aesthetics.

2.4 Summary

In this chapter, I have examined the impact of marketisation policies and urban restructuring in Shanghai, focusing on how these developments have shaped social class dynamics, consumption patterns, and the expansion of the fashion industry, particularly in relation to sustainable fashion. Importantly, these socioeconomic influences are both reflected in and constructed through discourse. This chapter has established the contextual background for a more in-depth discourse analysis of how nationwide socioeconomic reforms—influenced by global neoliberalism—have shaped social class, consumption behaviours, and the development of Shanghai's fashion industry, especially concerning sustainability and cultural identity. Furthermore, it has provided the socioeconomic foundation necessary to understand how commodity value is constructed within the city's high-end sustainable fashion sector.

Chapter 3 Linking sustainable fashion to a distinctive taste

At the end of Chapter 2, I discussed the relationship between aesthetics and ideology. I argue that aesthetic judgment is not free of ideology, as Kant proposed; instead, it is associated with a larger socioeconomic background. This chapter develops the theoretical framework for analysing how aesthetic practices naturalise social inequality in Shanghai's elite fashion market. The analysis is anchored by two central theoretical pillars: Bourdieu's theory of distinction and Shankar and Cavanaugh's concept of language materiality.

First, I draw on the Bourdieuan theory to explain how seemingly innocuous aesthetics obscure the unequal distribution of various types of *capital* among the upper classes, who have the capacity to encode and decode this aesthetics. *Habitus*, *taste*, and *class* function in a cyclical relationship, wherein each reinforces the others through consumption patterns and cultural participation. Then, to develop a more nuanced understanding of how taste operates in the context of sustainable fashion, Shankar and Cavanaugh's framework of "language materiality" provides a crucial lens for understanding how language functions as both a symbolic resource and a material practice. This approach illuminates how taste and class are not merely reflected in but are actively constituted through discourse, which is embedded in political and economic structures. While peripheral to these central theoretical frameworks, Barthes' semiological approach offers a crucial perspective on conceptualising fashion as a system of signs, where discourse, rather than clothing itself, creates meaning and value, thereby driving consumer desire and reinforcing class-based distinctions. Besides, to understand how sustainable fashion brands construct elite identities, this chapter introduces organisational styling (Wee, 2015) as the mechanism through which corporations curate taste, and the discourse of elitism (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2009) as the performative process through which exclusivity and superiority are asserted. Furthermore, select insights from sociolinguistics, anthropology, and cultural studies help illustrate the performative aspects of class identity through language, consumption, and taste.

By integrating these interdisciplinary perspectives, this chapter provides a critical lens on how language, as a material and discursive practice, and fashion—especially concerning sustainability—reinforce social stratification and material injustice. This theoretical foundation sets the stage for analysing how taste is constructed, circulated, and embodied in high-end sustainable fashion within the post-reform (neoliberal) era of Shanghai.

3.1 A Bourdieuan framework for understanding taste in sustainable fashion

3.1.1 Taste

Bourdieu rejects the Kantian notion of aesthetic judgment. When talking about aesthetic disposition, he argues that:

"Any legitimate work tends in fact to impose the norms of its own perception and tacitly defines as the only legitimate mode of perception the one which brings into play a certain disposition and a certain competence. […] all agents, whether they like it or not, whether or not they have the means of conforming to them, find themselves objectively measured by those norms" (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 28-29).

In this regard, aesthetics, defined as the "legitimate mode of perception", is imposed by the dominant class and often shapes how people perceive things, implicitly establishing a particular form of seeing as the only valid one. He proposes that it is the members of the ruling class, the very top bourgeoisie, who control the strategies for "transforming the basic dispositions of a lifestyle into a system of aesthetic principles, objective differences into elective distinctions, passive options (constituted externally by the logic of the distinctive relationships) into conscious, elective choices" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 57). As for the members of the lower class, the proletariat, they only admire the works of art but remain ignorant about them, for they have limited access to the cultural capital that is necessary to decode those works. They are less likely to acquire and display the "legitimate mode of perception", even though they naturally consider the work as "good taste", implying that cultural capital is unequally controlled by different social classes.

Here, *taste* refers to personal or collective patterns of aesthetic choices and "manifested preferences" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 56). Bourdieu notes that:

"Whereas the ideology of charisma regards taste in legitimate culture as a gift of nature, scientific observation shows that cultural needs are the product of upbringing and education: surveys establish that all cultural practices (museum visits, concert-going, reading, etc.), and preferences in literature, painting or music, are closely linked to educational level (measured by qualifications or length of schooling) and secondarily to social origin" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 1).

In essence, one's taste cannot be solely attributed to the recognition of beauty in an essentialist sense. Instead, Bourdieu (1984) argues that *taste* is a marker of distinction influenced by the ingrained dispositions shaped by family, schooling and social environment. Higher levels of

education expose individuals to dominant cultural values, refining aesthetic preferences and fostering appreciation for "legitimate" art, literature, and fashion. Meanwhile, social background determines access to cultural capital, as elite groups pass down taste preferences reinforcing class boundaries. In short, taste is a socially constructed tool of distinction, reflecting one's social position. He categorises *taste* as either being driven by basic needs (for the lower classes) or by extravagance (for the upper classes). Furthermore, according to Bourdieu, individuals belonging to the lower classes may not consider their preference for practicality as a deficiency in taste but rather as a deliberate decision to prioritise function over form. Therefore, *taste* is "a practical mastery of distributions which make it possible to sense or intuit what is likely (or unlikely) to befall—and therefore to befit—an individual occupying a given position in social space" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 466).

At its core, *taste* involves unconsciously and naturally embracing one's social position. As economic constraints lessen, one's taste for luxury becomes more refined and can even be seen in mundane products. Bourdieu points out that one of the most noticeable differences in class behaviour is the "capacity to constitute aesthetically objects that are ordinary or even 'common' (because they are appropriated, aesthetically or otherwise, by the 'common people') or to apply the principles of a 'pure' aesthetic in the most everyday choices of everyday life, in cooking, dress or decoration for example" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 40). As he argues, this ability to appreciate aesthetics is seen as a marker of distinction in the upper classes, who often view their choices as morally superior, even though their capacity for aesthetics is tied to the capital they possess. The concept of "taste" holds particular significance for the upper classes. As my analysis progresses, it becomes clear that taste is a crucial means by which businesses in sustainable fashion both conceal and reveal the privilege of their elite consumers.

3.1.2 Habitus

The classification of *taste* is linked to the concept of *habitus,* a central component of Bourdieu's sociological approach. He points out that *habitus* is vital to the "materialisation of class taste" (1984, p.190). Bourdieu gradually developed the concept, emphasising its embodied characteristics, its function in social reproduction, and its potential for transformation.

Initially, Bourdieu introduced the term *habitus* in his early ethnographic research on Béarn farmers, where he described their ingrained practices and physical behaviours (Bourdieu, 1962).

Although not yet fully developed as a theoretical concept, *habitus* was already being used to explain socially conditioned actions. A similar idea appeared in *The Inheritors*, where Bourdieu and Passeron (1979 [1964], p. 43) analysed educational inequalities. The study revealed that middle-class students were more likely to attend university, whereas working-class students self-excluded, perceiving higher education as "not for the likes of me". This research laid the foundation for Bourdieu's later argument that social structures become internalised as dispositions that guide behaviours. Subsequently, in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977a [1972], p. 72), Bourdieu formally defined *habitus* as a "structured and structuring structure". He proposed that *habitus* is structured by social experiences (e.g., family upbringing and education), and it structures future perceptions, behaviours, and aspirations. The concept functions as a system of dispositions that generate social actions in a patterned and transposable manner (Bourdieu, 1977a [1972]). In regard to the tension between structure and agency, Bourdieu (1994, p. 65) emphasised in his later work that *habitus* effectively elucidates how social norms and hierarchies are reproduced without necessitating conscious adherence to rules.

By the 1980s, *habitus* became fully integrated into Bourdieu's (1986, p. 101) three-part framework of *habitus*, *field*, and *capital*, encapsulated in the equation:

(*habitus* × *capital*) + *field* = *practice*

This formulation suggests that individual *practice* (i.e., action) results from the interaction between *habitus* (i.e., internalised dispositions), *capital* (i.e., economic, social and cultural resources), and *field* (i.e., structured social spaces with their own rules and power relations). The combination of *habitus* and *capital* shapes how an individual perceives opportunities, acts, and interprets social situations. For instance, a child raised in an academic family (*habitus*) with access to books, elite schools, and intellectual conversations (*cultural capital*) is more likely to feel naturally inclined toward higher education. Meanwhile, *field* determines which forms of capital are valued and what strategies individuals can use to navigate power structures. For example, the education system favours those with high cultural capital, reinforcing class advantages. The equation reveals that social action is neither purely determined by external structures (like class or institutions) nor by individual free will; rather, it results from the complex interplay among *habitus*, *capital* and *field*.

Furthermore, Bourdieu expanded *habitus* to include bodily dispositions, introducing the concept of *hexis corporal* (Bourdieu, 1985; 1990, pp. 80-97). The embodied dimensions such as posture, gait, speech patterns, and taste in art, music, or food reflect social conditioning and reinforce social distinction (Bourdieu, 1985, 1990). Also, he rejected the idea that social actions were purely rational or rule-based, arguing instead for a "feel for the game", a kind of practical mastery acquired through experience (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 64). Meanwhile, by emphasising the "hysteresis effect", Bourdieu and Passeron (1977, pp. 78-79) recognised that *habitus* is not entirely fixed and can evolve in response to social change but often lags behind. A case in point is his studies on Algerian peasants under French colonialism (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979; Bourdieu, 2000), which showed that their traditional economic practices persisted despite the imposition of capitalist structures. Bourdieu contended that peasant dispositions were not irrational or resistant to change but deeply rooted in a shifting social world. As this transformation progressed faster than these ingrained habits, a period of *hysteresis* emerged, during which adaptation occurred through gradual innovation rather than mere passive adjustment (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, p. 4). As Maton (2005) observes, Bourdieu's conception of the relative autonomy between *habitus* and *field*—our dispositions and material conditions—enables him to move beyond traditional dichotomies such as individual versus social, thereby enhancing the analytical depth of his studies on social agents in real-world contexts.

3.1.3 Taste, habitus and social class

The concepts of taste, habitus, and social class mutually reinforce one another, meaning they collaborate to shape individual experiences and maintain social structures. By understanding how these three concepts interact, one may have a more comprehensive analysis of social inequality, cultural consumption, and the mechanisms that perpetuate class divisions in modern society. The connection between them could be summarised as follows:

a) **Social class determines habitus;**
b) **Habitus shapes taste;**
c) **Taste reinforces social class distinctions**

As discussed in sections 3.3.1 and 3.3.2, within Bourdieu's framework, social class serves as the primary determinant of habitus, which in turn shapes perceptions of what is considered tasteful and what is not (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1984). The relationship between habitus

and social class ensures that individuals tend to consume culture in ways that align with their class identity. This reinforces social reproduction, whereby children inherit not only wealth but also tastes, dispositions, and cultural practices from their parents. Thus, the transmission of cultural preferences across generations fosters the continuity of class-based distinction.

Since habitus is shaped through early socialisation, it produces tastes that seem natural and self-evident to individuals, even though they are socially determined. Previously, I mentioned that taste involves the subconscious and naturalised acceptance of one's social position. Such naturalness emphasised by Bourdieu can be better comprehended through the notion of habitus. Bourdieu (1984, p. 170) defines habitus through two key capacities: the ability to produce classifiable practices and the ability to differentiate and appreciate them as taste. These capacities shape both an individual's actions and their perception of those actions, reinforcing their social world and identity. Also, he stressed that habitus operates subconsciously, sustaining social norms and making one's position and preferences feel inevitable (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 466). In their later work, Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992, pp. 127-128) describe that habitus is "a socialised subjectivity" and "the social embodied". In other words, it represents the internalisation of social structures and norms, making the objective social world a part of an individual's subjective experience. As an internalised structure, habitus transforms social position into an inherent personality trait, shaping one's taste preferences to be as natural and subconscious as if one would not choose any alternative. Nonetheless, the socially structured nature of habitus suggests that taste is not a seemingly natural choice but is embedded within social hierarchies. Individuals from different social classes develop distinct tastes corresponding to their life experiences, available resources, and learned expectations, all influenced by their access to cultural resources and the social environments in which they are cultivated.

Bourdieu (1984) argues that taste is a key mechanism through which social class distinctions are maintained and reproduced. Rather than being a matter of individual preference, it is socially conditioned and shaped by one's habitus, which reflects an individual's class position and access to cultural capital. Those possessing high cultural capital—which includes formal education, aesthetic sensibilities, and familiarity with elite culture—define their tastes as legitimate and superior, positioning themselves above those with lower cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 56). Institutions such as schools, museums, and media outlets reinforce these distinctions by establishing dominant cultural norms as the objective standard of good taste, thereby marginalising

the preferences of lower social classes (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Furthermore, Bourdieu (1984) explains how social hierarchies are internalised through the notion of symbolic struggle. Those excluded from elite culture often perceive their tastes as inferior, accepting dominant aesthetic standards as natural and legitimate. This self-exclusion from high-status cultural spaces reinforces class divisions and limits social mobility (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 470- 471). Consequently, taste operates as a system of social closure, ensuring that access to prestigious cultural capital remains concentrated among the privileged, thereby maintaining class inequalities (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 251-252). According to Bourdieu (1984), for those from lower social backgrounds, achieving upward mobility through cultural assimilation involves rejecting their origins and experiencing a "civilising" process that creates internalised shame and distance from their roots. Meanwhile, the elite, constantly threatened by the popularisation of their cultural distinctions, engage in an endless pursuit of new markers of exclusivity. This dynamic creates an insatiable demand for distinction, ensuring that cultural hierarchies remain intact through symbolic struggles over prestige, recognition, and legitimacy. This mechanism of taste in reinforcing social class distinctions paves the way for understanding how consumer taste forms around concepts of sustainability.

3.1.4 Consumer taste formation in "sustainable consumption"

There is a close relationship between taste and consumption. In contemporary consumer culture, taste preferences have become a pivotal factor in determining the choices made by individuals when selecting goods such as food, clothing, and automobiles. Bourdieu conceives of the consumption realm as a *field* of power relations. *Field* is a "network, or a configuration of objective relations between positions" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 97). Within this network, individuals compete to control resources or interests unique to the specific field. The competition can involve occupying existing positions or creating new ones. In the realm of the consumption field, the primary struggle is defining legitimate, middlebrow, and popular culture. In this regard, the dominant class with large amounts of economic and cultural capital seeks to impose its hierarchy of taste and preference on those with less capital, known as the "dominated". Bourdieu (1984) argues that tastes are socially conditioned, and the objects of consumer choice reflect a symbolic hierarchy determined and maintained by the socially dominant to enforce their distance or distinction from other classes of society. In the conclusion to *Distinction*, he notes that "the representation which individuals and groups inevitably project through their practices and

properties is an integral part of social reality. A class is defined as much by its *being-perceived* and by its *being*, by its consumption—which need not be conspicuous to be symbolic – as much as by its position in the relations of production" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 483).

In recent decades, green consumption has gained recognition for its potential to contribute to environmental sustainability (Testa et al., 2020). Many consumers perceive green consumption as a way to protect the environment and mitigate climate change. For instance, studies (e.g., European Commission, 2018) show that European consumers believe their sustainable purchases help reduce climate change effects. Similarly, surveys like Nielsen (2015) highlight that over 45% of global respondents prefer products with reduced environmental impact. Within China, green consumption has also increasingly influenced consumer behaviour by fostering environmental awareness and shaping pro-sustainability attitudes. Chan (2001) found that Chinese consumers with higher environmental concerns are more likely to support green products, suggesting that environmental awareness directly impacts attitudes and purchasing decisions. In addition, cultural factors further reinforce this trend. Muralidharan and Xue (2016) note that in collectivist cultures like China, social norms and peer influence significantly shape green consumption. Their study reveals that personal networks and media significantly influence youth adoption of green consumption. Chinese millennials are particularly responsive to their social surroundings when making green choices, as conformity and face-saving behaviours are deeply embedded in the culture (Muralidharan & Xue, 2016).

Meanwhile, some scholarship on green consumption challenges the viewpoints of researchers regarding pro-environmental consumption behaviour, particularly in discussions of greenwashing. Synthesising definitions from various scholars, greenwashing involves selectively disclosing positive environmental information while omitting negative aspects (Lyon & Maxwell, 2011), creating a gap between symbolic claims and actual environmental performance (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Walker & Wan, 2012). This often represents a deliberate, strategic form of symbolic corporate environmentalism, where superficial changes are made to give the impression of being environmentally responsible while failing to implement substantial sustainability measures (Bowen & Aragon-Correa, 2014). In emerging Asian markets, greenwashing arises from weak environmental regulations, minimal sustainability competition, and increasing consumer demand for green products (Yang et al., 2020). Yang et al.'s study (2020) indicates that multinational companies take advantage of lax oversight to promote misleading green claims

without taking substantial action. With few local competitors prioritising sustainability, these firms lead in green branding. The rising consumer interest in eco-friendly products further encourages superficial green messaging, while insufficient verification and limited public awareness allow such practices to continue (Yang et al., 2020). I argue that the greenwashing of multinational firms in emerging markets could be understood through Bourdieu's (1984) sociological framework. In this context, greenwashing can be seen as a strategy in the consumption *field* where multinational firms, with their substantial economic and symbolic capital, engage in it to maintain control over the definition of "green consumption". They project symbolic values of sustainability to appeal to eco-conscious consumers while lacking concrete environmental action. This allows them to preserve their dominance in the consumption field by aligning with elite environmental tastes without altering their practices.

In addition to criticism of greenwashing, research from various empirical and theoretical perspectives further challenges the effectiveness of personal choice in consumption and questions the role of information in promoting more sustainable behaviours (e.g., Hobson, 2002, 2003). While some work underscores the significance of governmental bodies and other institutional actors in shaping consumption structures (e.g. Shove, 2010; Southerton et al., 2004), other research (e.g. Shove, 2006; Spaargaren, 2011; Warde, 2005) introduces a "practice-based approach" that shifts the focus of analysis towards the activities that generate and mutually shape individuals and their values, knowledge, and abilities. Scholars in these disciplines now acknowledge the importance of socially derived variables in shaping purchasing behaviour and promoting sustainable practices. Of these variables, social status has emerged as a critical factor in recent studies on green consumption.

In those studies, social status is defined as an achieved state where individuals are respected and admired by others. In an experiment conducted by Griskevicius et al. (2010), it was discovered that when "status motives" were triggered, participants were more inclined to choose environmentally friendly products over more extravagant non-environmentally friendly options. Sexton and Sexton (2014) identified a statistically significant phenomenon called the "conspicuous conservation effect" in vehicle purchases, where individuals were willing to pay extra for a "green" symbol, which they attributed to a desire to display frugality rather than extravagance, driven by a motivation for social status. In a broader context, the act of environmentally friendly consumption has been re-evaluated as a form of "competitive altruism"—a means of showcasing prosocial

behaviour primarily to enhance one's social status (for more on "competitive altruism", refer to Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006; Van Vugt et al., 2007).

Hardy and Van Vugt (2006) argue that consuming green products extends beyond environmental awareness and values, as they also demonstrate social status through sustainable purchases. Individuals connect their status and reputation to green consumption, but these connections rely on the ability to showcase their social standing visibly. For instance, Griskevicius et al. (2010) emphasise that to leverage the power of status motives for the greater good, pro-environmental actions must be visible to others, thereby influencing the public image of those who do good. In other words, status is perceived as a motivator at the individual level. It is something actively and visibly conveyed through tangible goods and behaviours. It works when others observe evidence of green consumption and interpret it as a sacrifice for the common good, elevating one's social status. According to Griskevicius et al. (2010), status and green consumption are connected through their demonstration effects—green consumption not only showcases one's pro-social behaviour but also demonstrates their capacity to invest resources like time, energy, money, or valuable assets for the common good without negatively affecting their well-being. Unlike rational and compassionate consumers who consider green products' costs and environmental impact, the expressive consumer focuses on displaying their self-expression through conspicuous consumption that holds social significance to them.

The literature above explores the relationship between green consumption and social status. To thoroughly grasp the relationship between social status and green consumption, it is essential to expand our understanding and analysis of these concepts by applying Bourdieu's theoretical framework. Green consumption varies in terms of its ability to signal status, with some green products having more obvious status implications than others, such as the local high-end products targeting elite consumers or what Bourdieu (1993) terms the "sub-field of restricted production"—production not aimed at a large-scale market. The rise of local elite sustainable businesses signifies an effort to establish new positions within the consumption *field*, directly challenging the symbolic dominance of larger entities like multinational corporations (MNCs) that practice greenwashing. In this *field*, actors compete to define what counts as legitimate taste—in this case, authentic sustainability. Local high-end sustainable brands, though often with less economic capital, leverage cultural capital to assert new definitions of green legitimacy. They embody and perform

sustainability as a genuine practice rather than a symbolic representation, seeking distinction through emphasising authenticity.

In the consumption *field*, competition over high-end green consumption often centres on the authority conferred by recognition, consecration, and prestige. As Bourdieu (1984, p. 282) notes, such authority is primarily symbolic and does not necessarily reflect increased economic capital. Rather, this form of consumption signals "symbolic power", a concept central to Bourdieu's theory of practice, grounded in various forms of capital, including cultural and social, which extend beyond mere economic wealth (Bourdieu, 1991). Utilising Bourdieu's theoretical underpinnings as a foundational framework, Elliott (2013) posits the necessity of re-assessing social status as a non-deliberative positioning attained through the natural expression of tastes. In her research, Elliott contends that green consumption is more attractive to those with higher education. Moreover, the author underscores that the link between status and green consumption is context-dependent and shaped by time and type of goods. Rather than defining a fixed "green consumer identity", green consumption is viewed as a relational act of social distinction—what Bourdieu calls "position-taking"—where choices reflect one's social position relative to others (Elliott, 2013, p. 312). Simply put, status signalling in green consumption is implicit and subconscious rather than, in some cases, conspicuous and deliberative.

3.1.5 The cultural omnivore

The inconspicuous consumption of green products illustrates a new trend in the contemporary taste formation of the upper classes. According to Elliott's (2013) research, it is crucial to understand the "combinatorial logic" concept suggested by Van Eijck (2001, p. 1167). This is because high-status consumers may combine both green and non-green consumption in various ways and for various purposes (Elliott, 2013). As per Van Eijck (2001), the dynamics of combinations play a significant role in how people consume music, suggesting that individuals of high social status do not necessarily possess identical preferences. Instead, some may lean towards sophisticated and exclusive tastes, while others may exhibit a more diverse and inclusive appreciation for music, blending elements of both highbrow and popular culture. In contemporary society, individuals regarded as elite can confidently engage with diverse cultural mediums. This current trend of consumerist practices is defined as "cultural omnivore" by Peterson and Kern (1996). Their study highlighted that individuals with high social status tend to be omnivorous in

their musical preferences, appreciating both sophisticated and popular music genres. Moreover, Peterson and Kern found that people with higher social status are more inclined than those with lower social status to partake in such varied consumption. According to their research based on American culture, when individuals with refined tastes embrace non-sophisticated art forms, they tend to seek out those created by socially marginalised groups such as Blacks, youths, and isolated rural folks while still maintaining a disdain for commercially popular middle-brow art forms (Peterson & Kern, 1996, p. 901). This trend suggests that cultural appropriation remains pertinent nowadays. As Kwon and Kwon (2013) argue, individuals are encouraged to adopt inclusive, tolerant, and open-minded attitudes while belonging to an exclusive society that promotes a sense of superiority. In other words, being omnivorous allows one to maintain an elite identity without appearing elitist.

Nevertheless, the emergence of the "cultural omnivore" has been seen as blurring cultural lines. Some scholars argue that the diverse aesthetic preferences of the middle- and upper-middle classes signal a breakdown of traditional class-based cultural distinctions (for a comprehensive view, refer to Peterson, 2005; Warde et al., 2007; Hazir & Warde, 2016). However, as Flemmen et al. (2018) argue, the current inclination toward embracing various cultural interests and navigating across various symbolic hierarchies does not contradict Bourdieu's (1984) notion of *distinction*. Their research demonstrates how 168 lifestyle items in Norwegian society in 2011 align with the social space model presented in *Distinction*. They argue that in contrast to specific misconstrued interpretations (for instance, Chan & Goldthorpe, 2010; Peterson & Kern, 1996), having diverse tastes and bridging these divisions are actually essential characteristics of what Bourdieu identifies as a "taste of freedom" and a "sense of distinction" commonly found among individuals with abundant cultural capital (as described in Bourdieu 1984, pp. 261-317). As per Bourdieu (1984, pp. 282-283), playfully engaging with "vulgar" cultural products is a socially profitable capacity for the dominant class, as they can transform the social meaning of cultural products. Indeed, such capacity is regarded as a distinctive characteristic of the aesthetic disposition within the higher status.

An insightful illustration of the cultural omnivore can be found in Khan's (2013) ethnographic investigation of an elite boarding school (St. Paul's School) in New York. Khan characterises the culture of the elite as one centred around "personal self-improvement" (Khan, 2013, p. 140), particularly characterised by the ability to effortlessly "navigate various social situations" (Khan,

2013, p. 141; also referenced in Bourdieu, 1977b). This enables the privileged students at St. Paul's boarding school to enjoy both extravagant dining experiences costing "$1,000 per person" and "cheap authentic" Szechuan restaurants in Queens (Khan, 2013, p. 137). All of this is done in the pursuit of expressing their individual preferences, consistent with the tendencies of neoliberal individuals. In practice, it becomes nearly impossible for individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to embrace these same preferences. For elites, however, they present their individual preferences as entirely natural, and the core of this privilege practice is ease—"feeling comfortable in just about any social situation" (Khan, 2013, p. 141). As Khan notes:

"Embracing the open society, they display a kind of radical egalitarianism in their tastes. Privilege is not an attempt to construct boundaries around knowledge and protect such knowledge as a resource. Instead, students display a kind of omnivorousness. Ironically, exclusivity marks the losers in the hierarchical, open society. From this perspective, inequality is explained not by the practices of the elite but instead by the character of the disadvantaged. Their limited (exclusive) knowledge, tastes, and dispositions mean they have not seized upon the fruits of our newly open world" (Khan, 2013, p. 141).

The danger of "ease" proposed by Khan is that it can create a sense of effortless integration between different cultural preferences without drawing attention to the underlying power dynamics. The dominant class often presents this as something inherent, as habitus, but in reality, it adds complexity to current class politics and consumer actions. Conceivably, omnivorousness in cultural preferences could shape everyday consumption, such as individuals' fashion choices, especially when the products are infused with cultural meanings and values beyond their mere utility. Moreover, products' cultural significance and classifications are not static but are subject to re-evaluation, renegotiation and competition with other discourses and new commodities. In their investigation of public participation in the Arts within the US context, DiMaggio and Mukhtar (2012) suggest that taste patterns can reveal changes in the classification of cultural capital. The definition of what is deemed as prestigious taste is likely to change over time and differ depending on the social circumstances (DiMaggio & Mukhtar, 2012).

Similarly, this holds true for sustainable fashion, as the concept itself is ambiguous and subjective, as argued in Chapter 2. According to Bourdieu (1984, p. 231), producers driven by competition and shaped by their own habitus create culturally distinct products that resonate with the class-based tastes of consumers. In turn, consumers select products that reflect and reinforce their social position, creating a cycle of mutual reinforcement between production and class-based

preference. Thus, this project investigates how social status is constructed and circulated by local high-end sustainable fashion businesses and how it is performed by their targeted elite consumers. By analysing both marketing narratives and consumer practices, I examine how taste is expressed and embodied through different forms of sustainable fashion. To better understand this market, I explore both the products and the actors promoting them (i.e., producers and consumers alike), thereby uncovering the social dynamics that connect products with consumers and shape the convergence of supply and demand (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 73).

3.2 Unpacking the discourse of taste

Taste and consumption are not direct indicators of social class. Rather, it is through language that social meanings and hierarchies are constructed. This project builds upon the foundational work of Williams (1977) and Bourdieu (1977b) by drawing upon a materialist analysis of language, where both linguistic and material aspects are given equal consideration. Williams (1977, p. 38) views language as "a distinctive material process", while Bourdieu (1977b) incorporated language into his framework of class formation and maintenance, positioning it as a form of capital within the marketplace. Relatedly, Shankar and Cavanaugh (2017, p. 1) insightfully argue that language is a material practice that is "embedded within structures of history and power, including class relations and markets, but also having physical presence". In the context of this project, I perceive language as both reflecting and shaping social meanings and values. Additionally, I recognise that taste and consumption, particularly in fashion associated with "sustainability", "eco-friendliness", or other similar labels, operate as an intertwined, dual process of materiality (the object itself) and discursivity (the meanings attached to it). This dual nature makes taste formation a practice situated within both linguistic discourse and tangible goods. Thus, sustainable fashion is a site where discourse and materiality converge, enabling individuals to perform and communicate class, identity, and ethical alignment through consumption. In exploring these dynamic relationships, I aim to understand how both language and fashion products contribute to shaping added value, reinforcing social stratification, and perpetuating material injustice.

3.2.1 Materiality

Materiality refers to the ways in which humans engage with and experience the physical world, with particular attention to the relationship between perception, the body, and the environment. In

this sense, materiality is not merely the physical presence of objects but rather how these objects are perceived, interacted with, and interpreted in social contexts (Shankar & Cavanaugh, 2012). According to phenomenological perspectives, particularly the work of Merleau-Ponty (2013), materiality is understood as an active process of perception, where the body itself plays a central role in shaping human experience. Merleau-Ponty contends that perception is not a passive absorption of external stimuli but an active engagement with the world, suggesting that the relationship between the self and the world is not a simple dichotomy but a unified process of embodied experience. He asserts that "the unity of either the subject or the object is not a real unity, but a presumptive unity on the horizon of experience" (Merleau-Ponty, 2013, p. 228). This perspective challenges traditional notions of separation between subject and object, positing that humans experience the world through their bodies in sensory and meaningful ways. Heidegger (1971) further expands this understanding of materiality through his concept of "dwelling", which frames human existence as an active engagement with space and place. For Heidegger, *dwelling* refers to how humans create meaning through their actions within specific locations, a process that extends beyond physical interaction to include memory and imagination. Thus, materiality is not solely about direct physical engagement with the world; it also encompasses how these interactions are imbued with social and historical significance. In this sense, materiality refers not only to the physical presence of objects or spaces but also to how humans interact with and ascribe meaning to these physical entities. This interaction is influenced by both sensory perception and social processes, and materiality itself is inseparable from the socio-political contexts in which it is experienced. Therefore, materiality is central to understanding how human practices are both embodied and socially situated.

3.2.2 Language

Language is regarded as both a symbolic and material practice, essential to human interaction with the material world and social structures. Heidegger's (1971) concept of "dwelling" frames language as a means of actively engaging with places and people. In this sense, language connects subjects with their environments, enabling shared understanding and social interaction (Basso, 1996). This view highlights language's referential role, bringing the material world closer to experience through description and interaction (Carnap, 2014). However, language's role extends beyond this referential function, as contemporary linguistic anthropology seeks to broaden its

analysis to include language's non-referential dimensions, such as its material and performative aspects.

Both symbolic anthropology and structuralism examine how humans make sense of the material world but diverge in their theories of meaning. Structuralists, such as Lévi-Strauss and Barthes (Lévi-Strauss, 1966; Barthes, 1972), who were inspired by the work of Saussure, argue that meaning is constructed through language-like structures, where phonological contrasts create universal meanings. They view materiality as related to these structures, but it remains secondary to the system of meanings. In contrast, following Geertz (1973), symbolic anthropology emphasises the culturally specific nature of meaning, where meaning emerges from human interactions and cultural contexts. The material world is essential in the symbolic approach, but it is the subjective experiences and cultural frameworks that shape meaning.

In the Chomskyan linguistic tradition, language is seen as a formal, abstract system detached from cultural and environmental contexts (Chomsky, 2002). This contrasts with materialist approaches, which focus on how human actions and material conditions shape meaning. For materialists, what people do (i.e., how they work, interact with their environment, and live) is more significant than what they say. Drawing on Marx and Engels, the materialist perspective asserts that language is integral to the "material intercourse" of everyday life and is shaped by political and economic conditions (Marx & Engels, 1972 [1845-1846]). Scholars like Williams (1977) and Bourdieu (1977b) have focused their analysis on the ways in which language operates within and contributes to political and economic systems, emphasising its role in shaping ideology and social class. Thus, language from the materialist perspective is both a medium of communication and a constitutive force in social and material processes.

3.2.3 Language materiality

Although Marx and Engels did not focus specifically on language as a material practice, their materialist framework influenced later scholars to examine how language both reflects and shapes hierarchical power structures and class relations. Subsequent theorists, including Sapir and Whorf, highlighted the relationship between language and objects, along with perceptions of the physical world (e.g. Sapir, 1921,1927; Whorf, 1940; 2012 [1956]). In the 1950s and 1960s, linguistic anthropology examined how language categorises reality through taxonomies and kinship structures (e.g. Kroeber & Kluckhohn,1952; Geertz, 1976; Lévi-Strauss, 1963). Since the 1960s,

linguistic anthropologists have examined how communication contexts are shaped by social interactions, with a specific focus on the ethnography of speaking and ethnomethodology (e.g. Hymes, 1962; Schegloff, 1968; Gumperz & Hymes, 1972; Bauman, 1975; Silverstein, 1976). For example, Silverstein's (1976) foundational work in linguistic anthropology explores the concept of "indexicality". This concept describes how certain linguistic elements, known as "shifters", derive meaning from the context in which they are used. In his later work (Silverstein, 2003), he underscores that linguistic signs "point to contexts of occurrence structured for sign users in one or another sort of way" (p. 195). Language holds evolving cultural meanings beyond the basic definitions of words, which is crucial for communication and interaction. He exemplifies indexicality through the concept of "oinoglossia" (or wine talk). According to Silverstein, those who partake in this practice engage in what he terms "cooperative performance art", showcasing features like "educated connoisseurship" (2003, p. 222). The indexical nature of language implies that words serve as tools for social actors to create identities based on class, thereby shaping the performance and reinforcement of social stratification.

Scholarship in linguistic anthropology by Gal (1989), Woolard (1985), Irvine (1989), and Heller (1988) evaluated the limitations of their predecessors and suggested that the multifunctionality of language is the key to determining the way language and political economies are linked. More recently, sociolinguistics has focused on how language interacts with context, including social variables like class (e.g. Rampton, 2003; Labov, 2006; Block, 2013; Snell, 2018), race (e.g. Baugh, 2007; Rosa & Flores, 2017; Hudley, 2020; Cushing, 2023), and gender (e.g. Bucholtz & Hall, 2004; Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2008; Cameron, 2012; Costes, 2015). Research conducted during this period explores the intersection of language and political economy through materialist approaches, focusing on how language ideologies and practices influence the distribution of social power and wealth accumulation. For instance, Wolof griots' speech, as recognised by Irvine (1989), illustrates how linguistic signs are embedded within a political economy. Irvine introduces the concept of "linguistic value", drawing parallels between linguistic exchanges and economic transactions, suggesting that just as goods and services have value in a market, speech acts possess value within social interactions. She emphasises that this value is not inherent but is shaped by social hierarchies and power dynamics, with certain forms of speech being privileged over others based on the speaker's social position. By linking language to political economy, Irvine demonstrates how linguistic practices both reflect and reinforce broader structures of inequality.

More recently, integrating language and materiality has gained scholarly attention, highlighting that language is not just an immaterial system of symbols but a material practice within social, political, and economic structures. Considering the economic conditions of late capitalism, the explanation of processes based on language and materiality persists (e.g. Cavanaugh, 2016; Duchêne & Heller, 2012; Heller, 2003; Cavanaugh & Shankar , 2014, 2017). Take Cavanaugh's (2016) study as an example; by examining the linguistic labour of small-scale entrepreneurs, she investigated talk in direct marketing contexts (i.e., farmers' markets) as a form of economic sociability. This involves interaction between people and objects throughout the processes of production, circulation, and exchange, which builds connections while also creating meaning and value. Similarly, Duchêne and Heller (2012) examined the transition of language from a source of community pride to a potential driver of financial profit. The linguistic practices highlighted in those studies illustrate the connection between language and materiality, which play a significant role in the global economy.

Influenced by the materialist perspective grounded in the work of Williams (1977) and Bourdieu (1977b), Shankar and Cavanaugh (2012) introduced the term "language materiality", arguing that to gain a better understanding of language, it must be regarded as both a social and material phenomenon—one that interacts with physical objects, environments, and forces. As previously discussed, Williams (1977, p. 38) conceptualises language as a "practical material activity", linking it to political-economic structures and specific meaning-making moments. Materialist approaches emphasise how language is embedded in these structures, while studies focusing on aspects like sound or orthography emphasise the physical presence of language as a crucial element in how it is experienced and interpreted. Williams contends that language requires physical forms and actively participates in political-economic relations, thereby providing important insights for Marxist analyses of human experience. Bourdieu (1977b), also adopting a Marxist perspective, developed the concept of the linguistic market to explain how language(s) both reflect and perpetuate social hierarchies and power imbalances. Drawing on the insights from the previous scholars, Cavanaugh and Shankar (2017) point out that language's materiality includes not only its physical forms, such as sound and shape but also its role in political-economic relations. From this perspective, language functions not just as a tool for creating meaning but also as a constitutive force within capitalist systems, both projecting and producing value, power, and social hierarchy.

Building on the contributions of linguistic anthropology to discussions regarding materiality, Cavanaugh and Shankar (2017) underscore the necessity of examining language as a medium that traverses various channels, including voice, text, and digital platforms. This focus on mediality is crucial for understanding language's role in the modern world, especially as technological advancements and globalisation reshape communication. As per Cavanaugh and Shankar, mediality denotes the qualities, nature, and characteristics inherent in the connections facilitated by a specific medium. It encompasses how these connections are mediated through particular defining traits and conditions. Foregrounding the mediality of linguistic practice involves examining the connections between events, contexts, people, and objects while considering the material aspects of language use (Cavanaugh & Shankar, 2017). They first termed "Linguistic materiality" to explore how the medium and form of language shape its meaning and function (Cavanaugh & Shankar, 2014). Subsequently, the concept of language materiality expands this viewpoint, emphasising the medium, mediality, and various interactions between the linguistic and the material (Cavanaugh & Shankar, 2017).

Moreover, they advocate for a shift in ethnographic methodologies, urging linguistic anthropologists to broaden their focus beyond face-to-face interaction to include the material conditions shaping language production and circulation in a globalised world (Cavanaugh & Shankar, 2017). The authors propose a thorough analysis of how language evolves and the methodologies used to study it in anthropology, thereby expanding the scope of linguistic anthropology and materiality studies and offering new pathways for understanding the complex relationships between language, technology, and global power structures. For example, in their volume, Thurlow and Jaworski (2017c) provide an in-depth exploration of the semiotic markers associated with elite travel. Through the framework of multimodal social semiotics, the authors investigate the interplay between the "thingification of words" and the "wordification of things" (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2017c, p. 186). Drawing on comprehensive research into super-elite travel, they identify material symbols of privilege and hierarchy, such as luggage tags, birthday cards, and red carpets, alongside the linguistic practices that articulate this exclusive world. Similarly, Coupland and Kelly-Holmes (2017) critically examine how material objects produced in bilingual regions serve as mediums for cultural branding and identity construction. They analyse two case studies: the Melin Tregwynt woollen mill in Wales and the Louis Mulcahy pottery in Ireland. Through these examples, they illustrate how businesses utilise marketing strategies to promote

localism, partly by selectively incorporating "small languages" and traditional iconography. The authors argue that using Welsh and Irish in these marketing discourses, and occasionally in the products themselves, adds value. Their analysis suggests that globalisation, mediatisation, and commodification are not always detrimental to small languages despite their broader negative consequences. Those studies illustrated in the volume examine how language materiality is rooted in sociohistorical contexts and situated within particular locations. Simultaneously, global dynamics and influences shape how language manifests materially or interacts with physical objects to create meaning and value.

In social semiotics, Ledin and Machin (2019) emphasise the necessity of incorporating materiality and affordances into multimodal critical discourse analysis, critiquing the dominance of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)-based frameworks. They argue that traditional multimodal analysis, heavily reliant on linguistic metafunctions, tends to overlook the physical, sensory, and embodied characteristics—or materiality—of communicative artefacts. According to the authors, meaning-making occurs not only through abstract semantic categories but significantly through tangible elements such as shape, texture, colour, and spatial design. They also highlight the importance of affordances, the inherent possibilities and constraints of media forms, which shape how meaning is produced and interpreted. For instance, a photograph, due to its affordance of capturing a moment in time, expresses meaning distinctly from language, which unfolds sequentially. Ledin and Machin (2019, p. 501) propose shifting analytical attention toward these material and expressive features, viewing texts as products of culturally established "canons of use". This approach positions semiotic materials within concrete social practices, enhancing the capacity of multimodal analysis to critically engage with the ideological and institutional contexts that shape discourse.

An illustration can be found in Ledin and Machin (2020), demonstrating through a detailed case study of food packaging. They argue that semiotic materials, such as packaging, must be understood as meaningful wholes rather than isolated design elements. For instance, their analysis of the *Innocent* orange juice bottle highlights how the rounded, carafe-shaped plastic container, combined with minimalistic white labelling and gentle typography, communicates ideals of simplicity, naturalness, and ethical consumption. This materiality, including the texture and shape, does not merely reflect aesthetic choices but actively shapes consumer perceptions and interactions within specific social practices and discourses related to health and ethics. Similarly, by contrasting

packaging types such as the handmade appearance of paper-wrapped *Bounce Energy Bars* versus mass-produced plastic *Mars Bar* wrappers, they illustrate how the physical properties of materials carry culturally embedded meanings, shaping ideas about authenticity, health, and consumer identity. Therefore, Ledin and Machin (2020) advocate starting analysis with the tangible properties and affordances of semiotic materials. This approach reveals how materiality is strategically used to communicate specific ideologies, reinforcing or contesting broader social narratives and power relations inherent in consumer culture.

3.2.4 Consumption, materiality and language

According to Miller (2001, 2005), consumption practices are essential not only to human identity but also to the formation of social connections and culture. In this project, I contend that the material aspects of fashion and taste are crucial to the consumption processes, utilising language materiality (Cavanaugh & Shankar, 2017) as an analytic framework to investigate the dynamics between consumption, materiality, and language.

Researchers in consumption and material culture studies have long been intrigued by the symbolic value of objects and their circulation, particularly regarding social significance, with materiality as a lens for exploring this topic. Previous studies of conspicuous consumption (e.g. Veblen, 2017 [1899]) typically did not focus exclusively on the commodities themselves. Instead, they examined the social and material contexts that conferred prestige upon these objects (Bourdieu, 1984). Appadurai (1986) argues that commodities have "social lives", while Gell (1986, 1988) and Latour (1993) emphasise the inherent agency of material culture and its circulation. Scholars of the Birmingham school of cultural studies adopt a materialist and Marxist viewpoint on social reproduction (Willis, 1977) and highlight the significance of commodities in forming social categories. They emphasise the study of culture in everyday life, particularly how cultural artefacts and practices relate to power dynamics, identity, and resistance. They consider the production and consumption of media, subcultures, and other cultural forms as sites for negotiating and contesting social meanings. For instance, Hebdige (2013 [1979]) explores how youth subcultures in employing style as a form of resistance to dominant cultural norms. He analyses subcultural phenomena such as punk, reggae, and mod cultures, arguing that subcultures convey their resistance to mainstream values through distinctive styles, including clothing, music, and language. These styles are both symbolic and political, embodying critiques of societal structures,

class, and identity. However, Hebdige also emphasises how subcultural styles are often commodified and reabsorbed into mainstream culture, thereby diluting their rebellious potential (2013 [1979]). While these studies were not centred on language, some viewed consumption as a system of communicative signs (e.g. Baudrillard, 1988). Baudrillard's (1988) notion of sign does not refer to real objects or meanings but to other signs that signify social status, desire, and difference. In this regard, meaning is simulated, or what Baudrillard termed hyperreality: a condition where signs no longer reflect reality but instead replace it (Baudrillard, 1988). Nonetheless, the sign system in Baudrillard's sense is similar to language, as both are socially constructed and used to express identity. Despite being a "nonverbal medium" (Douglas & Isherwood, 1996), the semiotic processes of consumption, including iconicity and indexicality, highlight its communicative potential, a theme further developed by scholars in the field of semiotic anthropology (e.g. Parmentier,1994; Miller, 1998, 2001, 2005; Keane, 2003).

Since the 1990s, anthropology has broadened its focus from commodities to material culture, influenced by archaeological ideas of materiality, especially through Miller's work (1998, 2005), and perspectives from art worlds and exchange theory. Material culture studies explore the value and agency of objects in both social exchange systems and capitalist markets (e.g. Hauser, 2014). While "consumption" remains central in fields like communications and marketing, material culture offers a broader analysis of objects beyond mere commodities. Miller (2005) critiques the divisive and problematic aspects of "materialism" and commodification, yet he also argues that consumerism ought to be viewed as "an intrinsic good" (2001, p. 323). In his view, the human inclination towards material possessions goes beyond mere desire for ownership; it serves as a tool for meaning-making and fosters connections with both people and objects. He emphasises, "We need to show how the things people make, make people" (Miller, 2005, p. 21).

This process of "making of people", as suggested by Mapes (2021), needs to be understood from two interconnected levels: firstly, the fundamental, mundane materiality, and secondly, its refined, artistic materiality. In this project, clothing also signifies this form of dual materiality -one must wear clothing daily for its two main functions: practical and social. Regarding practical function, clothing provides protection and comfort, shielding the body from environmental factors such as weather, injury, and harmful substances while ensuring physical ease during daily activities. In contrast, social function refers to clothing serving as a means of communication and expression, reflecting identity, status, cultural norms, and aesthetic preferences while adhering to societal

expectations of modesty and style. In modern-day society, clothing often goes beyond its practical function or mundane materiality, especially when fashion is considered. Fashion builds upon clothing by incorporating design, aesthetics, and cultural expression, transforming functional attire into a statement of style, which can be regarded as the social function of clothing or artistic materiality. Thus, clothing can be considered an art form, both as a tangible object and in its various discursive representations, such as photographs or descriptive writing. In specific contexts, clothing transcends from a survival necessity to a form of aesthetic expression or performance of social class, in which language or discourse plays a significant role in this transition. The social value of clothing relies on the discourse surrounding it. Consequently, the language used derives significance from the physical items it references. This connection exemplifies the concept of "language materiality" (Cavanaugh & Shankar, 2017) discussed in the previous section.

3.2.5 Fashion as a language

In *The Fashion System* (1990 [1967]), Roland Barthes introduces a semiological framework to analyse fashion, shifting focus from the physical reality of clothing to its symbolic meanings. Barthes argues that fashion operates as a self-contained system that assigns significance to clothing through written discourse, particularly in fashion magazines such as *Elle* and *Les Jardins des Modes* (Barthes, 1990 [1967], p. 3). He conceptualises fashion as a "system of signs" where individual garments are not merely objects but signifiers of "Fashion" itself. Barthes states, "Fashion presents itself immediately as Law" (1990 [1967], p. 269), highlighting that fashion's power is rooted in its presentation as an unquestionable authority. For Barthes, this system of fashion is governed by "a finite reserve of elements" that replicates itself through language (1990 [1967], p. 101).

Barthes employs a semiological method, influenced by Saussure and Hjelmslev, to deconstruct the language of fashion magazines. A critical component of Barthes' argument concerns the role of fashion writing, which he terms "written clothing" (Barthes, 1990 [1967], pp. 3-4). He argues that written descriptions of clothing are not intended to convey physical attributes but to reinforce the concept of "Fashion" as a cultural and ideological force. As Barthes notes, "If a magazine describes a certain article of clothing verbally, it does so solely to convey a message whose content is: Fashion" (1990 [1967], p. 8). This reveals how fashion discourse operates on a level removed from the actual garments themselves, elevating them to signs that point toward the concept of

“Fashion” as a self-replicating system. For example, a simple white dress, described as “timelessly elegant”, acquires a connotation of sophistication and refinement beyond its physical attributes. Fashion writing acts as an intermediary, assigning abstract qualities like “modernity”, “romance”, or “rebellion” to clothing. Barthes critiques this arbitrariness of fashion, noting that its meanings are not inherent but constructed and reinforced through social consensus and marketing. He observes that the image system, influenced by trends beyond clothing, aims to fulfil the desire. Further, he notes that the substance of the image system is “essentially intelligible: it is not the object but the name that creates desire; it is not the dream but the meaning that sells”(Barthes, 1990 [1967], p. xii).

The central idea of fashion as a “law” that defies questioning is explored through Barthes’s structuralist analysis. He critiques previous approaches, particularly those from sociology and linguistics, for not sufficiently capturing the ideologically driven nature of fashion. In the Foreword to the book, Barthes reflects, “The unavoidable presence of human speech is not an innocent one. Why does Fashion utter clothing so abundantly? Why does it interpose, between object and its user, such a luxury of words?” (1990 [1967], p. ix). This “luxury of words” functions as a veil that masks the economic reality of fashion, wherein its primary purpose is to drive consumption rather than express creativity or individual style. Barthes further argues that “a simulacrum of the real object must be created, substituting for the slow time of wear a sovereign time free to destroy itself by an act of annual potlatch” (1990 [1967], p. xi), emphasising how fashion’s cyclical nature is designed to prompt new purchases and reinforce continual consumerism.

In the Foreword, Barthes explicitly acknowledges the economic imperatives underlying the fashion system, noting, “Calculating, industrial society is obliged to form consumers who do not calculate; if clothing’s producers and consumers had the same consciousness clothing would be bought (and produced) only at the very slow rate of its dilapidation” (1990 [1967], p. xi). Thus, fashion does not merely present trends but manipulates consumer behaviour by creating a sense of urgency and obsolescence around clothing. Barthes argues that fashion, as an economic system, serves to “blunt the buyer’s calculating consciousness” (1990 [1967], p. xi), positioning fashion as a tool that sustains capitalism through the perpetual renewal of desire and consumption. This insight into the commercial origins of fashion reveals its role in promoting a worldview where change and novelty are valorised while deeper cultural or social meanings are obscured.

Barthes highlights Fashion's unique temporality—its perpetual present tense—that creates a paradox. As he asserts, "Fashion is recorded at the very moment it is announced…such is the trajectory Fashion follows in order to transform into fact at once its cause, its law, and its signs" (Barthes, 1990 [1967], p. 272). Through his rigorous semiological method, Barthes highlights how fashion is not merely an aesthetic phenomenon but a deeply embedded system of meaning that shapes both culture and consumption. In this regard, the meanings assigned to fashion products, shaped by the language employed in their description, actively generate value. This highlights that language is intrinsically connected to material objects while simultaneously deriving its meaning from the very material forms it describes. In other words, language and materiality are mutually constitutive, each shaping and being shaped by the other. Building on this interdependence, this thesis will elaborate on how fashion encompasses both "things" and "discourse". In this context, fashion and language, being both material and discursive, engage with processes of semiosis and politics. Therefore, adopting an analytical perspective grounded in language materiality allows a deeper understanding of how meaning is constructed and how power relations are maintained through the interplay of objects and language.

3.3 Organisational styling and the discourse of elitism

While Bourdieu provides a foundational sociological perspective on taste and the previous section has established the semiotic nature of its expression, this thesis investigates how taste is not just possessed but is actively constructed and communicated within specific socio-economic contexts. To analyse this process, it is necessary to identify the key agents involved in shaping taste distinctions. The following section, therefore, introduces the concept of organisational styling (Wee, 2015), which positions corporations as active, stylising actors in the discourse of taste.

3.3.1 Organisations as styling actors

Organisations have become increasingly prominent in modern society, continually evolving in both number and diversity. These entities are established with specific objectives in mind, contributing significantly to the fabric of contemporary social life (Wee, 2015; Blau & Scott, 2004; Parsons, 1956). Wee (2015) examines the concept of organisations acting as unified entities, or corporate actors. He focuses on the anthropomorphisation of organisations, discussing how they are often attributed with actions, intentions, and responsibilities similar to individual persons (Wee,

2015). This perspective allows organisations to be analysed as actors that can make decisions, exhibit behaviours, and influence their environments in a manner akin to individual social actors.

Crucially, Wee redefines "style" as a dynamic and agent-driven process, coining the term "styling" to underscore its continuous nature (Wee, 2015). Traditionally, style research focused on individuals rather than organisations. As Wee summarised, in the course of the reconceptualisation of style, it has been defined as the performance enacted by speakers (Baumann & Briggs, 1990), the micro-interactional activities within corporations (Cameron, 2000a, 2000b), and the negotiation of different socio-cultural frames by individual speakers (Coupland, 2007). However, Wee shifts the spotlight to organisational styling, which is distinct from branding and corporate communication, highlighting that styling is a broader and more inclusive concept.

According to Wee (2015), organisational styling refers to how organisations shape their identities through language, semiotic choices, and communicative practices. It encompasses both internal (employees) and external (customers and stakeholders) communication. Compared with branding and corporate communication, styling is not always highly reflexive; some styling activities are routinised and not deliberately constructed. By contrast, branding is a subset of styling activities focused on creating a strategic and consistent organisational image (Wee, 2015, p. 36). It is always externally oriented, focusing on shaping customer perceptions (Wee, 2015, p. 37). Additionally, he argues that branding is highly reflexive, as organisations carefully manage their branding strategies, and it can be affected by external regulations. As far as corporate communication is concerned, he notes that it is a broader term than branding, but narrower than organisational styling (Wee, 2015, p. 37). Corporate communication focuses on the structured and systematic dissemination of information to both internal and external stakeholders, including corporate advertising, internal communications, crisis management, investor relations and public affairs. Further, Wee (2015, p. 37) argues that corporate communication inherently involves self-reflection, focusing on overseeing and coordinating messages that could influence the organisation's public image (citing Cornelissen, 2011, p. 5).

Overall, based on Wee (2015)'s definitions, organisational styling is the broadest concept, encompassing both branding and corporate communication. While branding is a deliberate effort to shape external perceptions, and corporate communication focuses on structured messaging to

stakeholders, organisational styling includes all ways an organisation expresses its identity, even those that may not be consciously managed as part of a branding or communication strategy.

3.3.2 Styling distinction: The discourse of elitism

The process of organisational styling becomes particularly significant when it is deployed to construct and signal elite status. Jaworski and Thurlow (2009, p. 2) define elitism as "an individual's inclination or assertion of exclusivity, superiority, and/or distinctiveness based on factors such as status, knowledge, authenticity, taste, erudition, experience, insight, wealth, or any other quality that would justify the speaker/author assuming a higher moral, aesthetic, intellectual, material, or any other form of standing in relation to another subject (individual or group)." They argue that elitism entails the consistent assertion of an identity position, demanding continuous, transient, and interactive performance. This performative view of elitism directly complements Bourdieu's theory, illustrating how distinction is not a static possession but an ongoing discursive construction.

Identity stylisation involves the strategic (re)presentation, promotion, and imposition of specific ways of existence (or styles) through language, image, social practices, and material culture. Communication, as illustrated by Thurlow and Jaworski (2012), plays a pivotal role in creating various forms of privilege. In their study, they reveal how discursive mechanisms are purposefully employed to structure and endorse luxury travel semiotically, highlighting that communication serves as an ideological force by shaping identities and power dynamics, reproducing dominant systems of values (or "good taste" as they added in the parentheses, see Thurlow & Jaworski, 2012, p. 491), and upholding unequal structures of privilege. Thurlow and Jawaski have conducted research (e.g. 2012, 2014, 2017a) that delves into the intricate role of discourse in shaping status. Their argument suggests that the creation of elite status does not solely depend on economic disparities; instead, it is a multifaceted process that becomes evident through structuring culture and the social semiotic landscape.

Moreover, Jaworski and Thurlow (2009) note that diverse identificational meanings through repetition and routinisation (as cited in Giddens, 1991, p. 196) may become ingrained and structured into a more comprehensive self-narrative and lifestyle. They contend that this process can subsequently mould and reshape one's habitus (as cited in Bourdieu, 1990). It could be related to Wee's (2015) idea of styling, which also highlights an agent-driven process. In the context of

organisations, Wee (2015) maintains that while attributing a habitus to an organisation may be debated, the notion could be associated with "organisational culture". Organisational culture refers to the shared values, beliefs, norms, and practices within an organisation (Wee, 2015). Aligning with Harvey (2012), Wee (2015, as cited in Harvey, 2012) argues that organisations, just like individuals, face pressure from market competition to enhance their symbolic capital and distinguish themselves. This is particularly relevant in contemporary business environments where brand identity, public relations, and the overall image of an organisation are vital for market success.

For instance, Mapes (2020) analyses a multimodal dataset of food texts from a Swiss cured meats producer who promotes itself as a leader in contemporary food culture. She argues that the "progressive" discourse glorifies and idealises rural living and regional languages, all while strategically "(dis) avowing the privilege" (Mapes, 2020, p. 8). Ultimately, this marketing strategy allows middle-class consumers to reject mass production while displaying cultural capital and refined taste, as Bourdieu (1984) highlighted. Thurlow and Jaworski (2017a) state that being an "elite" is not necessarily something one has or is, but rather something that one does. In the context of this thesis, organisations *do* elitism through their styling practices, adding cultural value to their products and, in turn, stylising their customers as elite through consumption.

This perspective also shapes the analytical focus of this study. I follow the suggestion of Thurlow and Jaworski (2012) that social research can achieve greater efficacy by investigating both the recipients and beneficiaries of inequality. Here, it is essential to emphasise that inequality is not only material, but is also discursively constructed through ideologies and cultural practices embedded in class performance. Therefore, echoing Thurlow and Jaworski (2012, p. 490), I examine the agents and structures (i.e., the discourse producers of elitism) that originate the inequality rather than solely focusing on its victims (i.e., the discourse consumers).

3.4 Language, taste, and social distinction: Bourdieu's legacy

A substantial body of sociolinguistic literature aligns with Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984), emphasising language, taste, and consumption as pivotal indicators of social distinction. In particular, the works of Rampton (2003, 2010) resonate with Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic capital and social distinction. Rampton (2003) explores how hegemony and social class are interwoven through language, focusing on the concept of "stylisation" as a key mechanism by

which speakers negotiate their identities within different social contexts. This idea of stylisation, or the deliberate modification of speech to align with particular social identities or class positions, underscores how linguistic choices are integral to maintaining or challenging social hierarchies. Rampton (2010), in a broader examination of social class and sociolinguistics, argues that class is not merely a background factor in language use but is actively constructed through linguistic practices. He emphasises that sociolinguistic studies must pay closer attention to how language use both reflects and produces class distinctions, noting that class-based identities are not static but are continuously shaped through social and linguistic interactions. This view echoes Bourdieu's assertion that language practices are integral to social stratification and reproduce societal hierarchies.

Other sociolinguistic studies further examine the interplay of language, consumption, and social class, placing emphasis on branding, commodities, and aesthetics. For example, Woodward (2003) investigates how middle-class consumers use language and aesthetics to define their social status, mainly through the concept of "home" and its symbolic boundaries. He shows how the material culture of the home (e.g., furniture, decor) is intertwined with linguistic choices to construct comfort and a sense of belonging to the middle class, illustrating the dual role of language and material objects in signifying social distinction. Bucholtz (2007), in contrast, examines "shop talk" among American middle-class youth, exploring how brand preferences and language usage in consumption contexts contribute to constructing gendered and classed identities. Lizardo (2008) examines the cultural preferences of high-status groups and their impact on social stratification. He argues that consumption practices reinforce class boundaries within the broader system of social reproduction. By critiquing the notion that cultural consumption is purely symbolic, he illustrates how preferences in music and fashion play a crucial role in maintaining social distinctions, thereby connecting cultural consumption to the processes of class formation and reproduction.

Bourdieu's notion of "cultural production" posits that language and media act as key sites for the production of social distinctions. Machin and Van Leeuwen (2005) explore how global media use language to construct lifestyles directly tied to class. Their study examines how lifestyle magazines, through their visual and linguistic semiotics, construct and convey idealised representations of the upper-middle class. They contend that media language is crucial for shaping class identities through specific linguistic and visual strategies that engage with and construct

social distinction, emphasising the media's significant influence on social stratification. Similarly, Jaworski and Thurlow (2017) examine how media portrayals of the super-rich normalise privilege in the context of rising global inequality and neoliberal capitalism. They explore how newspapers, television, and digital media depict elite lifestyles through luxury consumption and refined taste. These media portrayals, while sometimes ironic or critical, often glamorise wealth and turn it into aspirational "edutainment" (coined with "educational" and "entertaining" by authors). This reflects a broader ambivalence in popular culture: it simultaneously critiques and celebrates elites. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1984) theory of distinction, the authors show how media discourses reproduce class hierarchies by associating wealth with cultural superiority, reinforcing symbolic boundaries and legitimising elite status in ways that obscure structural inequalities.

Other studies focus on the role of language in commodifying goods and experiences. For example, Cotter and Valentinsson (2018) analyse how the language of speciality coffee in North America simultaneously indexes both elite and working-class identities. They introduce the concept of bivalent class indexicality, where the same linguistic and discursive practices (e,g, technical coffee cupping language, marketing materials) allow consumers to align with cultural sophistication and ethical authenticity. Utilising Bourdieu's (1984) theory of distinction, they show how speciality coffee consumers use refined sensory language to perform elite taste while discursively aligning themselves with marginalised coffee producers through narratives of fairness, direct trade, and exoticisation. This dual positioning allows privileged consumers to ease class anxieties and portray themselves both as refined and socially conscious, thereby strengthening symbolic class distinctions under the pretence of ethical consumption. This relates to Bourdieu's idea of "symbolic capital", where non-elite commodities hold class significance in cultural contexts. Järlehed and Moriarty (2018) extend their analysis to the wine industry, showing how language and material objects like wine serve as markers of cultural and social capital. They explore the "semiofoodscape", a term that captures how food-related discourse functions as a form of social and cultural communication. Their work highlights how food and drink are not only objects of consumption but also powerful social symbols, reinforcing class distinctions through language and material culture. Similarly, Mapes (2021) explores the role of language within elite food discourse, especially in the field of gastronomy, where such discourse serves as a means of creating "elite authenticity". Her study examines how food language reflects cultural distinction, allowing elites to maintain a sense of authenticity and exclusivity in consumption. This aligns with

Bourdieu's concept of distinction, highlighting how elite groups use consumption to differentiate themselves from lower classes.

In contemporary China, research shows that individuals assert their social positions through cultural practices that signal their affiliation with social strata. As China's middle- and upper-middle class continues to expand and redefine itself, the interplay of taste, identity, and consumption remains central to the ongoing formation and transformation of class.

For instance, Zhang (2017) explores how linguistic practices in contemporary China are reshaped by globalisation and socioeconomic transformation. The study examines how "Cosmopolitan Mandarin", a linguistic form that aligns with global and urban cultural trends, functions as a tool for distinction within the urban middle class. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1977b, 1991) theory of language as a form of capital, Zhang illustrates how language use in contemporary China is not neutral but a form of symbolic power that contributes to the social positioning of individuals. The adoption of Cosmopolitan Mandarin by urban elites serves as a cultural distinction that identifies individuals as belonging to a globalised, cosmopolitan middle class, distinguishing them from rural populations or lower-status urban groups. This practice illustrates Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital, as the rise of Cosmopolitan Mandarin reflects how language has become a crucial resource for class mobility and social distinction in urban China. In a similar vein, Li (2021) examines how China's younger urban elites are shifting from conspicuous, parvenu-style consumption to refined, "highbrow" cultural tastes, reflecting a broader transformation in the expression of elite status. This shift is underpinned by intergenerational privilege, as wealthy parents convert economic capital into cultural capital through elite education, global exposure, and structured upbringing. The new elites distinguish themselves through embodied cultural markers such as classical music, English fluency, and familiarity with Western media. Drawing on Bourdieu's (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) theory on cultural capital as elite social reproduction, Li demonstrates how cultural capital functions similarly in China's post-socialist context, reinforcing and intensifying class boundaries across generations.

Consumption of goods and experiences that signify social prestige allows individuals to actively construct and redefine their class identity and boundaries within Chinese society. Dong (2018) analyses the discourse surrounding taste and identity through ethnographic research on "Chinese

Saabists", a group of individuals who adopt a specific type of Western lifestyle through the consumption of the Swedish car brand Saab. This study closely mirrors Bourdieu's (1984) theory of taste and distinction, where the consumption of high-status goods functions as a symbolic marker of class identity. She argues that these consumers employ Saab ownership to communicate their middle-class status, defined not only by material wealth but also by consuming goods that signify cultural capital. In this way, Dong's study emphasises the performative aspect of class identity, which is continuously constructed and negotiated through consumption practices. Similarly, Xu and Ng (2023) explore China's emerging coffee culture, particularly how it serves as a new field for social distinction among the urban middle class. Their study utilises Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus* and *capital* to illustrate how speciality coffee consumption serves as a form of identity expression. Via WeChat articles and lifestyle content, digital tastemakers curate narratives around connoisseurship, authenticity, and creativity, enabling consumers to express cosmopolitan identity and aesthetic taste. Additionally, offline activities, such as artisanal brewing and knowledge-sharing, reinforce this new taste, positioning speciality coffee consumption as both a symbolic marker of status and a practice of class reproduction in contemporary Chinese society. To give another example, Gao et al. (2022) analyse the consumption behaviours of young, middle-class Chinese tourists, focusing on outbound tourism. The study situates these consumption practices within a framework of social practices, which Bourdieu defines as a combination of dispositions, practices, and contexts. Gao et al. highlight how tourism shapes middle-class identities, enabling individuals to showcase their cosmopolitanism. As part of a broader trend in leisure and cultural consumption, tourism serves as a prominent arena for individuals to express social distinction. The authors note that middle-class Chinese tourists engage in a global consumption culture, striving for status while seeking prestigious destinations, luxury services, and elite experiences. The practices mentioned in the above studies reinforce Bourdieu's assertion that cultural consumption mirrors and perpetuates existing patterns of social stratification.

As discussed in Section 3.2, language plays a crucial role in shaping the materiality of fashion items within corporate branding. Scholars such as Arvidsson (2006) and Lury (2006) have already examined the evolving role of brands as powerful cultural, social, and economic forces, highlighting how they shape identity, meaning, and value in global media and consumer society. However, my focus is specifically on how fashion organisations discursively create value throughout the entire commodity chain, from production to consumption. Drawing on Bourdieu's

concept of distinction (1984), this study investigates how stakeholders in the high-end fashion industry in Shanghai cultivate distinct tastes and enhance product value by positioning fashion items within particular social relationships while also linking them to sustainable, ethical, and "authentic" forms of production and consumption. Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on either producers or consumers and their respective performances of classed identity, taste, and value, this research examines the collaborative efforts of multiple stakeholders across the commodity chain. The distinct taste constructed through various linguistic practices and resources has enabled corporations to target a niche market, capitalising on the potential to appeal to the affluent new middle- and upper-middle classes in Shanghai.

3.5 Summary

This chapter has first explored the relationship between aesthetics, social status, and sustainable fashion through the lens of Bourdieu's sociological framework. Aesthetic judgment is not devoid of ideology but rather influenced by socioeconomic backgrounds. Bourdieu's concept of habitus, which denotes ingrained dispositions influenced by upbringing and education, plays a crucial role in forming individual tastes. Social status is intimately tied to taste, as individuals often use their preferences to signal their societal position. In the context of sustainable consumption, I have discussed how green/sustainable products could serve as status symbols, particularly among the elite. The taste for "green" as a social distinction can be better understood in relation to the concept of the "cultural omnivore", where individuals of higher social status exhibit diverse and inclusive tastes, blurring traditional divisions of class and culture.

The second section has examined how language interacts with materiality and social structures, both reflecting and reinforcing social hierarchies. Building on the works of Williams (1977) and Bourdieu (1977b), it posits that language functions as both a symbolic and material practice, shaping class relations and power dynamics. The concept of "language materiality" proposed by Shankar and Cavanaugh (2012) has been introduced, stressing how language, as both a practice and physical entity, shapes social and economic realities and how technological and global shifts influence its forms and functions. Moreover, drawing on Miller (1998, 2005) and Barthes (1990 [1967]), I have explored how consumption practices shape identity, culture, and social connections. As both a material object and a system of signs, fashion operates through language to construct meaning and reinforce cultural norms. Barthes's semiological analysis emphasises that fashion is

not merely a commodity, but a discursive force in which the language employed to describe clothing enhances its value and generates desire. The interplay of materiality and language in fashion underscores its role in shaping consumption behaviours and sustaining capitalist systems.

The third section has introduced the concept of organisational styling (Wee, 2015), which re-frames corporations as active, stylising agents that construct their identity and that of their consumers through semiotic resources. Then, I have further detailed how styling is instrumental in producing a discourse of elitism (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2009), a performative process where communication is strategically used to assert exclusivity, superiority, and distinction. Together, these concepts provide the crucial analytical lens for understanding *how* the sustainable fashion brands under investigation actively *enact* social distinction, moving beyond Bourdieu's framework to explain the discursive construction of taste and privilege in a corporate context.

The fourth section has evaluated sociolinguistic studies regarding the relationship between language, consumption, and taste in shaping social distinction, all grounded in or inspired by Bourdieu's theories of distinction and symbolic capital. Studies indicate that language reinforces class boundaries through consumption, branding, and cultural preferences, particularly among China's urban elite. In this context, fashion branding uses language to add value and appeal to affluent consumers. This research, therefore, examines how stakeholders across Shanghai's high-end sustainable fashion commodity chain collaboratively employ linguistic recourses to construct distinction and value, specifically targeting the city's elite classes through discourses around sustainability.

While the primary theoretical framework for this thesis has been established in this chapter, the findings chapters employ specific conceptual lenses that proved particularly salient during the data analysis. Concepts such as "elite authenticity" (Mapes, 2018, 2021), "synthetic personalisation" (Fairclough, 1989), "environmental gentrification" (Checker, 2011, 2018, 2020), etc., were not initially conceived as primary analytical tools but emerged as powerful explanatory frameworks for interpreting specific rhetorical strategies of the case studies. Therefore, those concepts will be introduced at the beginning of their respective findings chapters (Chapters 5,6, and 7) to establish the specific analytical vocabulary for the analysis that follows. This approach ensures that the discussion of these concepts is immediately relevant and grounded in the empirical data presented.

Chapter 4 Research design and methodology: An ethnography-led mixed-methods approach

This chapter outlines the research design and methodology for this study, detailing an ethnography-led, mixed-methods approach that integrates multi-sited ethnography with a corpus-assisted discourse study (CADS). To briefly recap, this research explores how stakeholders in Shanghai's high-end sustainable fashion market use language to enhance the value of their products. The central question focuses on how value is discursively constructed in this specific context. This question is inherently complex, as it demands a deep, contextual understanding of social practices alongside a systematic validation of the precise linguistic patterns used.

This complexity necessitates a mixed-methods approach. I argue that combining multi-sited ethnography and corpus linguistics provides a more thorough and triangulated picture of the discourse under analysis. As per Baker and Egbert (2016), corpus linguistics benefits from computational procedures that mitigate human biases, offering a broad, quantitative view of linguistics patterns. Meanwhile, contemporary ethnography, which has evolved to connect context-sensitive explorations across different social contexts (Krzyżanowski, 2018), provides the essential depth to interpret these patterns. It captures the lived experience and nuanced social dynamics in which discourse is embedded.

The synergy of these methods is central to this project. Specifically, I conducted a corpus-assisted discourse study (CADS) (Partington et al., 2013) of online communication alongside multi-sited ethnographic research (Bryman, 2012) involving online and offline participant observation and interviews. While these traditions have differing epistemological assumptions (a point discussed in the next section), their combination is a strategic strength. It allows the research to encompass both the breadth of recurrent discourses and the depth of their contextual meaning.

This chapter introduces the reasoning behind this integrated methodology, detailing the research context, data sources, and analytical procedures. It will critically evaluate the rationale for this mixed-methods approach, beginning with a discussion of the research paradigm and the integrated framework that guides the entire study.

4.1 Research paradigm and philosophical justification

4.1.1 Triangulation and the mixed-methods rationale

The integrated design of this study is guided by the principle of methodological triangulation. Derived from land surveying, where two known landmarks locate a third point, methodological triangulation supports the validation of hypotheses, establishes a stronger foundation for interpretations and explanations, and enables researchers to adapt to unexpected issues and aspects of their research (Layder, 1993). This practice, employed for decades by social scientists, involves utilising multiple data sources, methods, and perspectives to enhance the reliability and validity of research findings, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding by examining different dimensions of the same issue (e.g. Cohen et al., 2017; Glaser & Strauss, 2017 [1999]; Layder, 1993).

In corpus linguistics, scholars like Baker and Egbert (2016) systematically analyse different methodological approaches by comparing a series of parallel empirical studies. These studies utilise the same corpus dataset, and ten esteemed experts contribute separate analyses, each employing distinct methods to address the same overarching research question from diverse perspectives. They demonstrate that while different methodological approaches to the same data rarely yield outright contradiction, single methods often present an incomplete picture. They consequently recommend triangulation as a practical strategy for obtaining more comprehensive and valid answers to research questions. This thesis heeds that recommendation. The combination of multi-sited ethnography and corpus-assisted discourse study is a form of triangulation, where the deep, contextual insights from fieldwork and the broad, systematic patterns from textual analysis are brought into dialogue. The goal is to ensure that the interpretation of how value is discursively constructed is not limited by a single method, but is instead a robust finding strengthened by the convergence of different analytical perspectives.

4.1.2 Methodological precedents and a gap in philosophical justification

A review of previous studies that integrate corpus linguistics and ethnography reveals a spectrum of methodological justification, often leaning towards implicit practicality rather than explicit philosophical engagement.

The study by Jaworska and Themistocleous (2018) exemplifies a technically grounded approach,

They justify their combination of a corpus-assisted discourse study and a survey primarily through the principle of "triangulation", arguing it leads to a "more comprehensive" and "rigorous" understanding of public discourses on multilingualism in Britain (Jaworska & Themistocleous , 2018, p. 84). While effective in demonstrating how each method compensates for the other's blind spots, the paper does not engage with the underlying epistemological tension between the interpretive nature of discourse analysis and the post-positivist leanings of statistical surveys. The philosophical underpinnings remain an unaddressed matter, with the combination justified solely by its effectiveness. Similarly, Hocking (2016) adopts a purely problem-driven, pragmatic approach without explicit philosophical discussion to reconcile the epistemologies of corpus linguistics and ethnography. Instead, the integration of quantitative corpus analysis and qualitative ethnography is justified through the established concepts of "ecological validity" (Cicourel, 2007) and "interdiscursivity of method" (Candlin & Crichton, 2012). Exploring how language, particularly "conversation words", is used in art and design practice to mediate collaboration and creativity, the author compellingly argues that the complexity of the social practices demands multiple methodological lenses to reveal what one method alone cannot. However, this rationale is based entirely on analytical outcome, sidestepping epistemological debate.

In contrast, a more explicit engagement with paradigm tensions is found in Puupponen et al. (2025). The study enriches the Corpus of Finnish Sign Language (Corpus FinSL) with linguistic ethnography to better understand the use of *constructed action*, a depictive strategy where signers enact the actions, thoughts, or feelings of discourse referent. The authors directly frame their work as bridging corpus linguistics, with its post-positivist emphasis on empirical patterns, and linguistic ethnography, rooted in interpretivist traditions. Their justification is pragmatically grounded in complementary strengths: corpus methods "tie down" generalisable patterns, while ethnography "opens up" the contextual and agentive reasons behind them (Puupponen et al., 2025, p. 9). By citing Rampton's (2007) linguistic ethnography, they provide a theoretical anchor that asserts language cannot be fully understood without its social context, thus making a philosophical case for the necessity of their mixed-methods approach.

Likewise, Georgakopoulou (2024) provides a sophisticated, albeit implicit, pragmatic framework. Framing her methodology as "technography", she draws on concepts of "remix" and "bricolage" (Kozinets, 2015; Markham, 2013), which prioritise practical utility and problem-solving over epistemological purity. Her methodology is driven by a "recursive synergy" where

ethnography and corpus analysis continuously inform one another to achieve a “thick description” of online stories (Georgakopoulou, 2024, p.2). While the paper does not explicitly name pragmatism, its entire rationale, rejecting qualitative-quantitative binaries and letting the research problem dictate the methods, is fundamentally pragmatic in spirit.

Overall, a brief review shows that while the practical benefits of combining ethnography and corpus linguistics are well-articulated, an explicit philosophical justification is often absent or only lightly sketched. Many studies rely on an implicit pragmatism without fully articulating the paradigm that makes such a combination coherent.

4.1.3 A pragmatic foundation for an integrated methodology

To address this gap and provide a coherent foundation for the present study, this research is situated within the pragmatic paradigm. Pragmatism, as applied in social research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Morgan, 2007), rejects the forced choice between competing epistemologies like positivism and interpretivism. Instead, it prioritises the research problem itself, advocating for the selection of methods that most effectively lead to actionable insights and solutions (Biesta, 2010). From this viewpoint, the value of an inquiry lies in its practical consequences and its utility in addressing the problem at hand.

This philosophical stance directly informs the “ethnography-led, corpus-validated” model of this thesis. The pragmatic paradigm justifies the integration of interpretive ethnography and the more positivist-leaning techniques of corpus linguistics by focusing on their complementary strengths in solving the research problem. Ethnography offers the contextual depth and sensitivity to discover and qualitatively interpret social practices and emergent discourses. Corpus linguistics then provides a systematic, empirical mechanism to validate, quantify, and refine the prevalence and precise linguistic patterns of these field-derived insights. The division of labour is not arbitrary but is designed to deploy the unique analytical power of each method in a sequential, iterative process.

4.1.4 Addressing epistemological differences as a strategic strength

A key consideration is the apparent epistemological divide between these methods. It is acknowledged that interpretive ethnography, which seeks deep, contextual meaning, and corpus linguistics, with its empirical analysis of language patterns, originate from different philosophical

traditions. However, following a pragmatic stance, this difference is not a weakness but the very source of the study's analytical power.

The combination is a deliberate strategy of triangulation. By integrating methods that approach the discursive value construction from different angles—one from the inside-out (ethnography) and the other from the outside-in (corpus analysis)—the research builds a more robust and multi-layered argument. The potential for contradiction between the datasets is not a failure but a valuable source of analytical insight, prompting deeper investigation. In the end, this integration allows the research to provide a more complete and convincing answer to its questions, as it is grounded in both rich, lived reality of the context and the empirically verifiable, recurring patterns of its discourse. The convergence of evidence from these distinct pathways significantly enhances the validity and credibility of the findings.

4.2 The integrated methodological framework: An ethnography-led, corpus-validated model

This study is guided by an integrated "ethnography-led, corpus-validated" model, a framework designed to orchestrate the two methodological strands into a purposeful and iterative dialogue. This approach is operationalised through a recursive process comprising four key phrases: ethnographic discovery, corpus validation and expansion, iterative interpretation, and final synthesis.

The process is initiated by Ethnographic Discovery, where the primary objective is general, open-ended inquiry. Immersive fieldwork through participant observation and interviews serves to identify the emergent themes, social practices, and rhetorical strategies that are salient within the research context. This phase is fundamentally inductive, allowing the research priorities to be shaped by the field itself rather than by pre-defined categories. The insights generated here form the foundational hypotheses and analytical directions for the subsequent phase.

These field-derived insights then directly guide the phase of Corpus Validation and Expansion. The concepts and strategies identified from ethnography are translated into specific linguistic queries for systematic investigation within the corpus. This involves searching for related keywords, analysing collocational patterns, and examining concordance lines. The function of the corpus here is twofold: first, to assess the consistency and patterned nature of the ethnographically discovered themes across a larger body of text, thereby validating their generalisability beyond

isolated instances; and second, to add linguistic precision by uncovering the exact collocations, lexical patterns, and quantitative frequencies that constitute these discursive strategies in practice.

A critical and defining step of the model is the Iterative Interpretation that follows. The quantitative and linguistic patterns revealed by the corpus are not taken as self-explanatory but are brought back to the rich, contextual depth of the ethnographic data. This qualitative interpretation is important for explaining the social meaning and strategic function of the linguistic patterns. It answers the "why" behind the "what", grounding the corpus findings in the lived experiences, material arrangements, and unspoken norms observed in the field. This back-and-forth movement ensures that the analysis remains contextually grounded and that linguistic evidence is not misinterpreted in a social vacuum.

The model culminates in the Synthesis, where the strands of evidence from both methods are woven together to build a cohesive argument. The final analysis demonstrates how the deep, contextual understanding from ethnography and the systematic, linguistic evidence from the corpus converge to provide a more complete and credible answer to the research questions.

This specific division of labour, with ethnography leading discovery and interpretation, is a deliberate response to the nature of the research problem. The social and discursive construction of value is deeply embedded in specific socio-material contexts and tacit knowledge. Ethnography is uniquely equipped to access this lived reality and generate insights that are emergent and contextually-dependant. Reversing this order by beginning with the corpus would risk imposing pre-existing categories, potentially missing the field's own emergent logics and misinterpreting strategic linguistic simplicity as insignificance. The corpus, in its validated role, provides the necessary scope and analytical rigor, ensuring that the deep , contextual insights from ethnography are not just compelling anecdotes but are representative of broader discursive patterns.

Combining ethnographic and corpus linguistics perspectives, this study aims to illuminate how the diverse yet interrelated stakeholders in Shanghai's high-end sustainable fashion market negotiate and maintain economic relations, thereby collectively constructing added value for their products. To contextualise this analysis, the following section introduces the specific brands and actors that constitute the field of this inquiry.

4.3 Research context and site selection

The research focuses on Shanghai's high-end sustainable fashion market, a niche defined by an intersection of significant economic capital and specific cultural discourses. The classification of the investigated brands within this "elite" niche is established on two primary grounds. Firstly, their price positioning places them in the luxury segment; apparel from these brands typically ranges from 500 to 5,000 yuan, with *Norlha*'s yak wool products reaching 5,000 to 10,000 yuan. To contextualise these figures, the price of a garment from these brands can approximate the monthly per capita disposable income of a Shanghai urban resident, which was about 7,070 yuan in 2023 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). In comparison, the national average for urban residents is 4,318 yuan, and for rural residents, it is 1,808 yuan (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Secondly, this study adopts Appadurai's (1986) conceptualisation of luxury goods as items that function primarily as social and rhetorical signs, operating within a specialised "register" of consumption. Similar to linguistic registers that vary based on social context, audience, and purpose, this "register" of luxury goods is characterised by exclusivity, semiotic complexity, and a requirement of specific knowledge for appropriate use, all attributes that align with the branding and consumption patterns observed in this field.

The selection of six key stakeholders was strategic, designed to capture the core network of Shanghai's elite sustainable fashion to enable rich and triangulated data generation. The chosen cases represent a diverse yet focused sample across three important segments of the industry:

- Product brands (*klee klee*, *Norlha*, *Reclothing Bank*): These three brands represent a spectrum of value-creation strategies, from *klee klee*'s minimalist localism and *Norlha*'s heritage craftsmanship to *Reclothing Bank*'s urban upcycling, providing insight into direct consumer-facing discourses.
- Facilitators and governance institutions (*Green Initiative, R.I.S.E*): The two sustainability consultancies were included to analyse the behind-the-scenes discursive frameworks, authentication, and strategies that shape and legitimise sustainable practices for brands in the market.
- Circular economy platform (*Déjà Vu*): The inclusion of this second-hand trading platform allows the research to investigate the discourses of value extension, re-circulation, and alternative consumption models within the high-end segment.

This multi-faceted approach ensures the research captures a more comprehensive view of how value is discursively constructed, not just by brands, but by the interconnected network of organisations that establish, define and maintain the elite sustainable fashion market in Shanghai. Profiles of these six core stakeholders are detailed below (also refer to Appendix 3 for a stakeholder-relationship map).

klee klee

klee klee belongs to *ZUCZUG*, a Shanghai-based prêt-à-porter fashion brand founded by designer Wang Yiyang in 2002. Prêt-à-porter refers to ready-to-wear branded products that are better quality and more expensive than fast fashion (Zhao, 2018). *klee klee* was the brand's environmentally conscious series/line (环保系列) before it became an individual brand in 2016. The brand's name is originally in lowercase alphabets with no Chinese character version. According to the brand's brochure, "klee klee" means "slow down" in spoken Tibetan, and the logo of the brand is the gesture used in sign language, representing "slow". The implications here are straightforward: the brand frames itself as an advocate for a slow-living attitude. By "slow", it emphasises "reconnecting with natural rhythms" (*klee klee*'s Instagram profile), in contrast to fast-paced mass production. The brand claims to be dedicated to a low environmental impact production chain by utilising organic materials and sustainable manufacturing methods. In the interview with my informant (who worked in the brand communication department), she mentioned that the brand's ultimate goal is "to help people find clothing they truly like and reduce the frequency of purchases and daily usage of clothes". According to her, there are two primary focuses in the brand's efforts on sustainability: the first is researching and recycling textile materials, and the second is searching for raw materials that are more environmentally friendly and sustainable so that they can "reduce the environmental debt from the very beginning of the production process"[1].

As per Zhao (2018), who interviewed Wang Yiyang, the brand director, *ZUCZUG* is defined as an "original designer brand", and the design philosophy of the brand is centred on equality and authenticity (Zhao, 2018, pp. 55-57). Wang emphasised that the brand is "horizontal" with their

[1] My interpretation of this comment is that it refers to minimising ecological impact as early as possible in the product lifecycle—specifically by sourcing environmentally friendly raw materials—to ensure that the ecological footprint remains minimal from the outset.

customers—the setup of the stores does not look "flashy or luxurious", and rather than professional models, they use "common smiling customers" as their models. Moreover, Wang believes fashion inspiration should come from real life instead of the runway, reflecting natural moods and lifestyle orientations not defined by age or occupation (Zhao, 2018). I have visited *klee klee* stores multiple times in their two locations and noticed that the store's design is indeed approachable and welcoming to shoppers. It is distinct from high-end designer brands that usually rely on posh storefronts to capture shoppers' attention and convey a sense of luxury (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2). The brand's stores are called "*klee klee* & friends", which serves as "a platform to encourage the public to share knowledge about sustainable lifestyles" (as stated in *klee klee*'s brand brochure). They communicate with their clients through this platform and provide information on topics such as proper washing methods for clothes and non-polluting products. The store space and products look simple, organised and modern with a minimalist design (as illustrated in Figures 4.3 and 4.4). Moreover, the two stores in Shanghai are located in historic districts that have been regenerated into creative cultural spaces. Despite its egalitarian and authentic brand image, the price of *klee klee*'s products is by no means cheap: so far, *klee klee* only operates in Beijing and Shanghai, the two most prominent and wealthiest cities in the nation. Most items offered by the brand are priced between 1,000 and 5,000 yuan, which would be considered expensive for white-collar workers[2] in China.

[2] According to a news report published in 2019 on *People's Daily* Online, China's most significant state media outlet, the average salary of a white-collar worker in China is 8,542 yuan per month in 2019, while a white-collar worker in Shanghai may earn well over 10,000 yuan per month ("Average salary in 37 major Chinese…", 2019).

Figure 4.1. Storefront of the *klee klee* Anfu Road store, 11 January 2023

Figure 4.2. Storefront of the *klee klee* Columbia Circle store, 11 January 2023

Figure 4.3. Inside the *klee klee* Anfu Road store, 11 January 2023

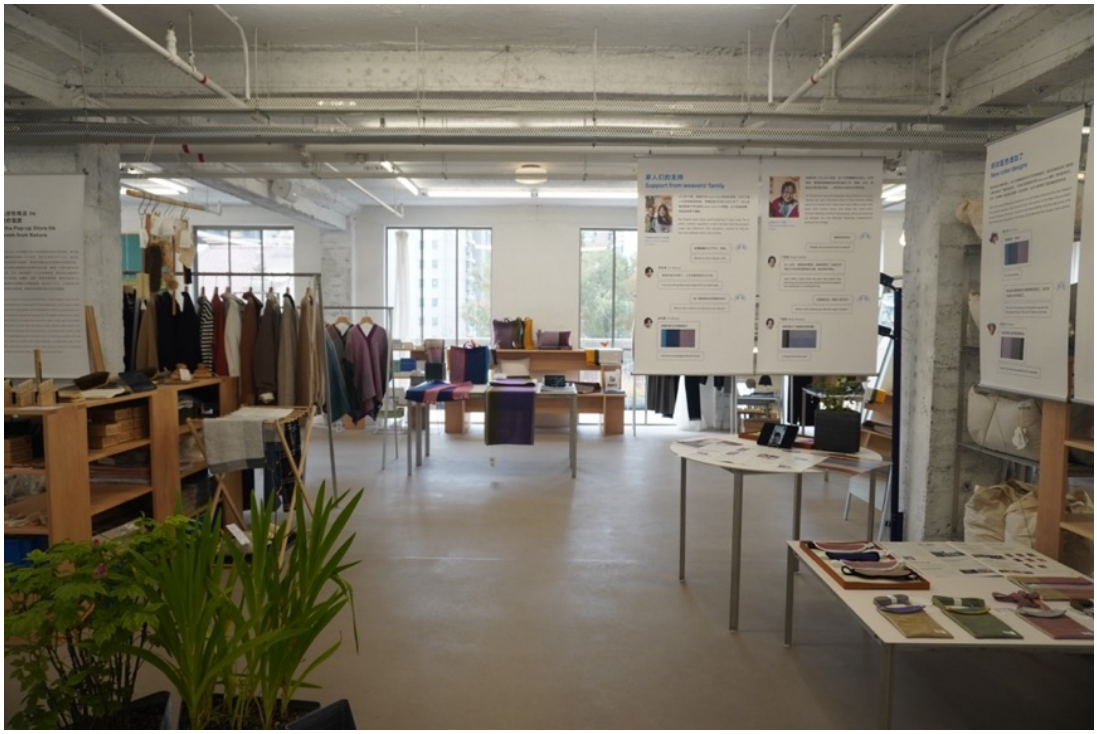

Figure 4.4. Inside the *klee klee* Columbia Circle Store, 11 January 2023

Norlha

Norlha[3] is a social enterprise in Ritoma village, Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Ganan, Gansu province. According to its website, the brand aims to redefine luxury by making it synonymous with high-quality materials, careful craftsmanship, ethical conscience, and a passionate workforce. Furthermore, *Norlha* is dedicated to celebrating Tibetan culture. The very name, "Norlha", holds significance in Tibetan, meaning "wealth of the Gods", and is used by local nomads to refer to their yaks, one of the most essential resources in Central Asia. In 2006, three French co-founders started the *Norlha* project, with two businesspeople and an anthropologist specialising in Tibetan culture and Asian textiles (Guesné et al., 2012). One of the businesspeople had prior experience in creating a sustainable business. The pilot project was initiated in Ritoma, a small village located on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, which has a population of 1,500 inhabitants spread out over a wide area of pasture (Guesné et al., 2012). Local employees, formerly herders and farmers, were trained in the traditional Tibetan processing of yak wool; some were sent to Cambodia and Nepal, and later, they trained others. In November 2007, following staff training, the workshop establishment, and the successful yak wool collection, *Norlha* officially began producing fine accessories and textiles. Since then, it has grown into a luxury brand with a business-to-business model[4]. Despite originating from the inner land of China, *Norlha* has successfully established a global presence in the luxury market from the outset. The company's target customers include major luxury brands, custom-made tailors, high-end shops, luxury representative companies, architects, and interior decorators domestically and globally (especially in France) (Guesné et al., 2012).

In recent years, with the popularity of social media and online shopping, *Norlha* has increased its connections with major cities nationwide, particularly Shanghai, which is the wealthiest metropolitan city in China. The brand has held many pop-up stores and exhibitions in big cities in China; for example, during Winter, products from *Norlha* are displayed at *klee klee*'s two Shanghai stores annually. Over that period, an exhibition showcased the brand's history and Tibetan culture

[3] Source: https://www.norlha.com/

[4] A business-to-business (B2B) model refers to a commercial transaction where products or services are exchanged between two businesses, rather than between a business and individual consumers. B2B models are common in supply chains, manufacturing, and wholesale trade, where companies provide goods, components, or services to other companies for further production, resale, or operational use (Chaffey et al., 2019).

to customers interested in its values. Besides promoting through pop-up stores and social media, *Norlha* also tries to attract customers to visit its workshop on the Qinghai-Tibetan plateau. During my interview with *Norlha*'s brand manager, he mentioned that their brand promotion is also at *Norden Hotel* in Xiadan, *Norlha*'s sister brand. *Norden Hotel* is a high-end hotel that advocates environmental protection and sustainability. All hotel products, such as blankets, carpets, and slippers, are provided by *Norlha*. My informant stated that customers could experience environmentally friendly products in person and tour their workshop to better understand Tibetan culture and the brand. As stated on the brand's WeChat account, the objective is to attract customers from major global cities, encouraging them to continue purchasing *Norlha*'s products online and become a stable part of the brand's customer base.

Reclothing Bank

Reclothing Bank is a sustainable fashion brand founded in 2010 by Zhang Na, who is described as one of the country's first sustainable fashion designers by China Daily (He, 2023, May 6). According to media reports, for the past 13 years, the brand has showcased over 1,000 sustainable items made from upcycled fabrics and materials at the Shanghai Fashion Week. As stated in its brochure, *Reclothing Bank* defines itself as a "remaking brand" by emphasising the process of upcycling used textiles. The brand's name underscores this concept, where "reclothing" signifies the remake and redesign of second-hand garments, and "bank" describes as a platform for storing, circulating, and exchanging these repurposed items. Through its independent research and development, *Reclothing Bank* claimed to have formed a unique closed-loop system of recycling, regenerating, selling and public welfare. The social impact of the business can be exemplified by its cooperation with the American public service organisation, 1% FOR THE PLANET. According to the brand's brochure, it donates 1% of sales revenue to public environmental protection programmes in China and annually discloses its social responsibility practices and figures on its official website. In 2023, *Reclothing Bank* opened its flagship store at The Inlet, a regentrified retail and lifestyle complex in Shanghai's Hongqiao area that aims to attract "cultural consumption" with its unique historical architecture (see Figures 4.5 and 4.6) (Zhou, 2021, November 30). The price of essential clothing items like T-shirts, hoodies, and coats ranges from 1000 to 4000 yuan, arguably not easily accessible for an average-income customer in Shanghai.

Figure 4.5. Storefront of *Reclothing Bank* at The Inlet, 11 January 2023

Figure 4.6. Interior design of the store, 11 January 2023

R.I.S.E. Innovation Platform for Sustainable Consumption (*RISE*)

RISE, an initiative once called *R.I.S.E Sustainable Fashion Lab,* was launched by *Impact Hub* Shanghai in 2020. *Impact Hub Company*[5], headquartered in Austria, is owned and governed by a global network that combines co-working spaces, innovation labs, and incubation programmes dedicated to fostering social innovation and entrepreneurship. Each local hub is uniquely tailored to its community's needs, cultivating a sense of inclusivity and collaboration while aligning with the broader network's global mission. Impact Hub Shanghai's official website shows that the organisation's mission is to practice the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals with an innovative business model. As the first hub in Mainland China, the organisation claims to promote sustainable ecological development by supporting industrial innovation, systematic innovation labs, entrepreneurial communities, and data platforms with their business partners. Specialised in the fashion industry, *RISE* mainly works with individual opinion leaders and practitioners from brands, manufacturers, retailers, etc., to help promote sustainable development in the industry through "Insight", "Connection", and "Advocacy" (*RISE*, 2021 report). The first Weibo post of the organisation, published on July 29, 2021, introduced the acronym *RISE*, which stands for "rational", "inclusive", "smart", and "eco-friendly". This acronym also represents the organisation's mission of promoting sustainability in the fashion industry.

Specifically, to target potential customers, *RISE* launched the "RERISE Sustainable Fashion Guidance Platform" in 2021, a third-party evaluation system and information platform for consumers purchasing sustainable products. They believe consumers can use their platform to make informed decisions that positively impact business, the environment, and society. To target potential businesses, *RISE* organises the "RISE UP Sustainable Design Challenge" annually to integrate sustainable development in all supply chain sectors and initiate change in fashion design, starting at the beginning of the chain. In addition, the organisation holds industry summits and forums for designers to actively collaborate with all supply chain parties to participate in sustainable development. Based on industrial insights from the above practices, *RISE* conducted reports on Chinese consumers' perceptions and consumption behaviours on sustainable fashion in 2020 and 2021. The organisation also published a guide for sustainable actions in the fashion industry in 2022, which aims to promote sustainability by providing practical suggestions and

[5] Source: https://impacthub.net/our-story/

guiding practitioners to take action.

Green Initiative (GI)

Green Initiative (GI)[6], founded in Shanghai in 2009, partners with businesses to promote waste recycling, staff engagement programmes, and sustainable solutions. GI defines itself as a sustainability consultancy that works closely with businesses in their transition to being carbon-neutral and waste-free. Since establishing the organisation, GI has grown a network of academics, consultants, researchers, and solution providers who are experts in climate change. The primary services GI provides consist of education, consulting and creative communication. GI collaborates with businesses, schools, and institutions to promote environmental awareness. They provide businesses with expert opinions, analyses, and recommendations for developing sustainability strategies, planning net-zero, measuring and analysing carbon footprints, and more. The organisation also specialises in sustainability branding by designing trade shows, booths, signage, and art installations.

GI launched the "RE: FORM Project"[7] on 16 February, 2017 to "not only recycle textile waste but also raise awareness on the growing textile consumption and encourage conscious consumption". The programme collaborates with logistics company Crown Relocations, the community service organisation Community Centre Shanghai, sustainable fashion brand *klee klee*, international secondary schools like Dulwich College Suzhou, and other global companies such as Citi China. According to the introductory article on WeChat, the project aims to collaborate with various stakeholders to drive change towards conscious fashion. They advocate that reusing and recycling used textiles are alternatives to producing new clothes, which can have an immediate positive environmental impact.

Specifically, GI holds awareness-raising events to educate its stakeholders about the environmental impact of clothing and provides collection boxes to prevent textiles from reaching landfills. *Crown Relocations* handles clothing collection and storage in a local warehouse. Participants from GI's collaborative partners classify items as wearable (in excellent condition, some new) or unwearable (torn, damaged clothing, plus textiles like bed linen, curtains, or

[6] Source: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/XixgQOfkk5hCC28acb81VQ
[7] Source: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/eOWsdy8QPG6rmqvhvBHNw

underwear). Wearable clothes are sorted by gender, age, season, and function. The items are reused in three different ways. Firstly, some are sent to community clothes swap events. Secondly, some are resold either domestically or exported. Lastly, the remaining items are donated to various charities, including *Blue Sky for Children* and *The Renewal Centre*. The donated items are then distributed to rural areas in China to help children in need. Unusable textiles are processed in partner factories and shredded into industrial insulation materials. Some are upcycled into practical items, like bags from old denim pants, and sold through initiatives like *Clara DIY* to fund underprivileged children's education. The remaining excess fabrics, trimmings, production samples, and textile waste fall into the unwearable category. GI believes this process provides project participants with first-hand insight into the issue of excess clothing in society.

Déjà Vu

Déjà Vu (transliterated into Chinese as "多抓鱼", duō zhuā yú, meaning "catching more fish") is a second-hand goods trading platform established in Beijing in May 2017. In December 2020, *Déjà Vu* opened its first physical recycling store in Shanghai. The online platform and offline stores primarily collect and sell second-hand books and clothing. The brand has chosen to open a physical store on Anfu Road, which is known for its social media popularity. This road is less than 900 meters long and is home to various boutique shops, bars, cafes, and bakeries (*klee klee*'s store is also located on this road). The shop's ground floor serves as an interactive exhibition space (see Figure 4.7), while the first floor houses the bookstore and the second floor the clothing store (as illustrated in Figures 4.8 and 4.9). The brand's name is derived from the French word "déjà vu", which means "a feeling of having seen it before". As stated in the brand introduction on the ground floor, the initial goal of *Déjà Vu* is to promote the circular use of goods and reduce the burden on the Earth. The brand's slogan is "good stuff worth buying twice". They highlight that high-quality goods can provide the highest value in reuse, extending the lifespan of these products and offering a more rational allocation of resources. *Déjà Vu* aims to change people's quality of life and consumption patterns by maximising the utility of quality goods in society through the circular economy model.

Figure 4.7. Exhibition space on the ground floor of the *Déjà Vu* Anfu Road store, 8 August 2021

Figure 4.8. Clothing section at the *Déjà Vu* Anfu Road store, 8 August 2021

Figure 4.9. Accessories section at the *Déjà Vu* Anfu Road store, 8 August 2021

4.4 Multi-sited ethnography: Design and operationalisation

4.4.1 Ethnographic approach and philosophical underpinnings

This research employs multi-sited ethnography as its primary qualitative methodology, operating within the pragmatic paradigm that prioritises methodological choices based on their capacity to address complex research problems effectively. The multi-sited approach represents a deliberate departure from traditional single-site ethnography, reflecting the distributed nature of contemporary fashion consumption and discourse production across physical and digital spaces. As Bryman (2012) notes, multi-sited ethnography acknowledges the interconnectedness of social fields in globalised contexts, requiring researchers to trace cultural phenomena across multiple locations rather than treating communities as isolated entities.

The philosophical foundation of my ethnographic approach drew from critical sociolinguistics and the ethnography of communication (Hymes, 2013), which emphasises understanding language use within its full social context. This alignment is particularly relevant for investigating how value is discursively constructed, as it enables me to examine both linguistic practices and the social, material, and spatial contexts in which these practices are embedded. Furthermore, I incorporated principles from critical ethnography (Anderson, 1989), maintaining awareness of power dynamics

within the field of sustainable fashion, including how certain discourses become privileged while others are marginalised.

The multi-sited approach was particularly suited to this research for several compelling reasons that emerged during my preliminary investigations. First, the phenomenon I examined, the construction of value in Shanghai's high-end sustainable fashion market, inherently spans multiple physical locations (boutiques, offices, event spaces) and digital platforms (WeChat, Weibo, corporate websites). Second, practical constraints, including my status as a part-time researcher and the COVID-19 restrictions in China from March 2020 to December 2022, necessitated a flexible methodology that could adapt to changing access conditions. Third, the temporal dimension of this research, conducted over more than four years, enabled me to document evolving practices and discourses within this dynamic field, capturing both stability and change in discursive strategies.

4.4.2 Research design and implementation

The ethnographic research was strategically designed to capture the network of Shanghai's sustainable fashion market through deliberate site selection and longitudinal engagement. The research followed a staged approach (as detailed in Table 4.1) that allowed for progressive focusing while maintaining sensitivity to emergent themes and relationships within the field. This sequential design enabled me to build understanding cumulatively while remaining responsive to the field's complexities.

Stage 1: Familiarisation (September 2019 - December 2020)

In this initial stage, I focused on mapping the field and establishing foundational contacts. This process began with comprehensive online research to identify potential stakeholders, followed by the use of snowball sampling (O'Reilly, 2009) to recruit participants. The research commenced with Green Initiative (GI), an organisation positioned at the centre of Shanghai's sustainable fashion network. The project manager at GI provided not only an initial interview but also recommendations for other relevant brands and actors, helping me map the field from an insider perspective.

During this stage, I conducted participant observation at two fashion brand events and one clothing swap initiative, providing exposure to various forms of sustainable fashion practices.

Simultaneously, I commenced digital ethnography (Murthy, 2008) through systematic observation of organisational websites, WeChat official accounts, and Weibo profiles. This approach, integrating physical and digital fieldwork, recognises the link Varis (2016) describes between online and offline practices in modern social life, especially relevant due to the growing digitalisation of fashion communication.

My initial interviews followed a semi-structured format, with guiding questions focused on understanding how organisations conceptualised and communicated value within sustainable fashion (see Appendix 4). However, in line with O'Reilly's (2009) approach to ethnographic interviewing, I treated these questions as flexible guides rather than rigid protocols, allowing participants to introduce unanticipated themes and concerns. This flexibility proved crucial in capturing the emergent nature of value construction practices.

Stage 2: Detailed insights (January 2021 - June 2023)

Building on the foundational understanding I developed in Stage 1, the research deepened its engagement with specific sites, particularly focusing on *klee klee* while maintaining connections with other stakeholders. This stage saw an intensification of participant observation, with twelve online and offline events documented in detail. The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated significant adaptation during this period, as organisations shifted their activities online. This presented both challenges and opportunities: while direct physical access was sometimes limited, it enabled me to observe how organisations negotiated "context collapse" (Varis, 2016) on digital platforms where commercial, social, and educational functions converged.

An important development at this stage was the establishment of a WeChat group by *klee klee*, which comprised customers and potential visitors to its offline stores. This digital space became a significant field site, allowing me to observe how the brand cultivated community and managed relationships with consumers between physical events. My position in this group evolved from peripheral observer to recognised participant, enabling natural interactions and follow-up conversations that enriched my understanding of consumer perspectives. I maintained social media contact with informants, which allowed me to ask further questions after participating in events (see Appendix 8 for an example of follow-up messaging exchanged with the brand on social media).

My interview methodology also evolved substantially during this stage. As relationships with participants deepened, the formal semi-structured format gave way to more spontaneous conversational interviews (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2010) that occurred on-site: during store visits, after events, or through follow-up messages on social media. This approach aligned with what Heyl (2014) identifies as distinctive to ethnographic interviews: they are conducted within established relationships and informed by ongoing fieldwork. I found that being familiar with the context and participating in events held by stakeholders in the sustainable fashion sector helped me ask critical questions based on my observations.

I expanded data collection to include a broader range of materials during this stage, including physical promotional materials (brochures, lookbooks), corporate documents (industry reports, sustainability guidelines), and artefacts purchased from the brands. This multimodal approach suggests that meaning is constructed not only through language, but also through material objects and visual representations (Dicks et al., 2006; Pink, 2021). I obtained permission to photograph during the events and store visits, mainly to document the textual information and physical objects shown to participants, particularly the introductory statements on sustainable fashion displayed in stores.

Stage 3: Confirming findings (July 2023 - December 2023)

In the final stage, I focused on integrating ethnographic findings with the corpus-assisted discourse analysis, using each method to interrogate and enrich insights from the other. The ethnographic data provided context for interpreting linguistic patterns identified in the corpus, while corpus findings helped assess the pervasiveness of themes observed ethnographically. This iterative process exemplifies the “ethnography-led, corpus-validated” model that guides the overall research design, ensuring that both depth and breadth of understanding are achieved.

	Stage 1: **Familiarisation**	**Stage 2:** **Detailed insights**	**Stage 3:** **Confirming findings**
Aims	Gain an in-depth contextual perspective; Select research sites; Create connections and obtain a preliminary understanding of how stakeholders construct the value.	Focus on *klee klee* and participate in their events; Expand other research sites; Deepen understanding of how various stakeholders co-construct the value.	Triangulate the findings with corpus data;
When	Sep. 2019-Dec. 2020	Jan. 2021-Jun. 2023	Jul. 2023-Dec. 2023
How and Where	A browse of the stakeholders' website and other social media web pages; Interviews with organisational members at the company office or store; Participant observation on offline events and social media group chats (two from fashion brands and one from a clothes swap initiative)	Follow stakeholder's social media updates; Store visits of various other sustainable fashion brands and casual talks; Interviews and some follow-up talks with organisational members at the store, on phone calls and by social media messages; Participant observation on offline and online events and social media group chats	Analyse the corpus data and enrich the interpretation of ethnographic findings.
What data	Websites, WeChat articles, Weibo posts, photos, field notes, interview transcripts	WeChat articles, Weibo posts, physical promotional materials (i.e., brochures and posters), research articles and reportage from news media regarding to the businesses under analysis, corporate documents (two analysis reports on sustainable fashion consumers in China and one guideline for sustainable action in the fashion industry), artefact, photos, videos, field notes, interview transcripts/notes	Four sub-corpora compiled from WeChat articles

Table 4.1. Research stages of multi-sited ethnography

4.4.3 Data collection procedures and fieldwork practices

Participant observation strategies

I conducted participant observation across multiple physical and digital sites, with my role evolving along the insider-outsider continuum (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). In physical spaces such as retail stores and event venues, my observation focused on spatial organisation, material arrangements, interpersonal interactions, and the multimodal communication of value. I adopted what Spradley (2016a) describes as "moderate participation", engaging in activities without fully adopting the role of community member, which allowed me to maintain both engagement and critical distance.

In digital spaces, I adapted my participant observation to the specific affordances of each platform. On WeChat, this involved monitoring official accounts, participating in group chats, and observing how organisations managed the convergence of different social spheres (Varis, 2016). I maintained what Hine (2008) describes as an "adaptive" ethnographic presence, matching my level of engagement to the norms of each digital context. For example, during live-streamed events on WeChat, I left 弹幕 (danmu), a form of real-time, on-screen commentary that scrolls across the video interface, distinct from the static comments section found below a post. Additionally, I sometimes resorted to reviewing video recordings of previous live-streamed events to ensure accuracy in documenting details that might have been missed during real-time observation.

Field notes were recorded using a systematic approach informed by DeWalt and DeWalt (2011). This approach involved making immediate "jottings" during or after field activities, followed by comprehensive write-ups that included detailed descriptions, initial interpretations, and reflexive commentary. Following Hymes' (2013) emphasis on the ethnography of communication, these notes paid particular attention to the language used by participants. I brought my field journal to all participants' observations because, as Walford (2009) notes, field notes serve as the foundation upon which ethnographies are built.

Interview methodology evolution

My interview approach evolved significantly throughout the research, reflecting the deepening relationships with participants and my growing understanding of the field. Initial interviews followed a semi-structured format with predetermined questions, but as O'Reilly (2009)

recommends, I remained open to deviations and emergent topics. Early interviews focused broadly on understanding organisational approaches to sustainability and value communication.

As the research progressed, interview conversations became more specific and informed by previous observations. For example, after observing the *naze naze* project exhibition at *klee klee*, my follow-up conversations explored how staff members understood and explained the representation of the Dulong weavers. This iterative process that moves between observation and conversation illustrates the hermeneutic nature of ethnographic understanding, which Agar (1997) describes as fundamental to the ethnographic project.

All interviews were conducted mainly in Chinese, with one exception in English, reflecting the linguistic context of the field. When participants consented, I audio-recorded the interviews using a device with auto-transcription features, and the transcripts were subsequently verified against the original recordings. When recording was not possible or participants declined, I took detailed notes and shared them with participants for verification—a practice that enhanced methodological rigour while respecting participant preferences. I transcribed and analysed all interviews in their respective source language, taking notes primarily in Chinese as it felt more natural to engage with the data in my native language.

Positionality and reflexivity

I adopted a reflexive stance throughout the fieldwork, acknowledging my complex position as both an "insider" with interest and knowledge about sustainable fashion and an "outsider" as a critical researcher. This "space between" (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 60) was not a limitation but a source of analytical insight, enabling both empathetic understanding and critical distance. Upon reflection, I observed occasional ambiguity surrounding the delineation of roles between the researcher and the participant, which posed challenges in maintaining a balanced perspective, a point articulated by Agar (2006). Nevertheless, I found it limiting to position myself strictly as an insider or an outsider. I carefully managed my positionality across different contexts. In physical retail spaces, my appearance as a potential customer facilitated observation but sometimes made the research role less visible. In digital spaces, I was more explicit about my research identity while still participating genuinely in conversations. This strategic navigation of roles reflects what Novoa (2015) describes as the mobile and situated nature of contemporary ethnographic positionality. Being both an "insider-outsider" greatly enriched my insights, allowing me to develop the capacity

to observe and understand realities from the perspective of sustainable fashion consumers while critically assessing my comprehension and view on discursive value creation.

Following Hammersley and Atkinson's (2010) recommendation to treat personal responses as analytical data rather than contamination, I maintained regular reflexive writing as part of my field note documentation. This practice helped me identify how my own assumptions, reactions, and social positioning influenced the research process and interpretation. I understood that my questioning and probing may have introduced certain predetermined concepts, such as "sustainable fashion", "value", "taste", and "high-end market". Consequently, I made conscious efforts to consider how my influence impacted the direction of discussions and the expressed views while analysing the data.

4.4.4 Data management and documentation

A comprehensive system was developed to manage the diverse ethnographic data collected throughout the research. This system recognised the particular challenges of multi-sited research, including varied data types and temporal distribution across multiple field sites.

Field note protocol

Field notes followed a structured yet flexible format that included:

- Descriptive accounts of physical settings, participants, and activities
- Verbatim documentation of significant conversations and utterances
- Observational notes focused on specific research questions about value construction
- Methodological notes documenting decisions and challenges in the field
- Reflexive notes capturing the researcher's responses and interpretations

I created digital field notes using a standardised template in ATLAS.ti, with consistent tagging of dates, locations, participants, and preliminary themes. Physical notes were digitised promptly to ensure integration with the digital archive. As soon as I left the field, I utilised the "raw" notes (Emerson et al., 2011) and recordings to create more detailed entries in my journal. Concerning the construction of the field notes, I adopted the format proposed by DeWalt & DeWalt (2011), drawing and describing the physical settings, people involved, interactions, behaviours, and my impressions and thoughts (see Appendix 7 for sample field notes).

Multimedia documentation

The research employed systematic photographic documentation to capture visual aspects of the field, including:

- Retail environments and spatial arrangements
- Exhibition designs and visual merchandising
- Textual materials displayed in stores and at events
- Product presentations and material qualities
- Event setups and participant interactions

All photographs were tagged with metadata, including date, location, and context, and were organised in ATLAS.ti alongside corresponding field notes. Where appropriate, I used photographs in follow-up conversations with participants to elicit further commentary on observed practices. I removed all identifiable information from the photographs to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Furthermore, I obtained some artefacts from the field sites, including a small cell phone bag purchased from *klee klee* as well as some brochures and lookbooks provided by the informants, which were all photographed to digitise for subsequent investigation.

Digital data collection

Digital materials were systematically collected to capture the full spectrum of corporate communication and public discourse, comprising:

Core data:

- WeChat official account articles serving as the primary channels for brands to introduce their values, launch products, and promote events

Supplementary data:

- Extended digital platforms content from Xiaohongshu (Rednote), Weibo and organisational websites.
- Interactive data including WeChat group conversations and live-stream event recordings
- Corporate publications such as *RISE*'s annual consumer analyses and sustainability guide

- Third-party discourse from reputable news sources in China (ChinaDaily.com, Xinhuanet.com, Sina.com) gathered via Baidu searches, and scholarly works such as a journal article profiling *Norlha*'s business model

I established a regular schedule for monitoring digital platforms, with new content documented and archived on a weekly basis. This systematic approach enabled the tracking of discursive developments over time while capturing the ephemeral nature of digital communication. Following Goldstein & Reibolt's (2004) emphasis on the importance of online information in contemporary ethnographic research, I viewed these digital materials as crucial for understanding organisational styling (Wee, 2015) and contextual information. Besides the main focus on social media content (especially on WeChat), I also analysed other media discourses influenced by Fairclough's (1995) viewpoint, considering them important channels for ideological influence. This allows me to uncover the subtle discipline imposed on consumers, steering them towards elite consumption. These materials were thus integral as supplementary ethnographic data, providing essential context for understanding the broader discursive landscape in which the brands operate.

Interview data processing

My interview data management adhered to a strict protocol:

1. Securely recording and storing audio files
2. Transcribing in original languages, mainly Chinese
3. Verifying transcripts against recordings
4. Translating selected excerpts analytically for reporting
5. Conducting member checks of notes when recording was not possible.

I maintained awareness of the interpretive nature of translation (Van Nes et al., 2010), particularly when moving between Chinese and English. While I made efforts to ensure the accuracy of the translations, I acknowledged that my English proficiency is limited, and that "translation is also an interpretive act, meaning may get lost in the translation process" (Van Nes et al., 2010, p. 313). Selected transcripts are provided in Appendices 5 and 6 to demonstrate my approach to data documentation and translation.

4.4.5 Analytical procedures for ethnographic data

The analysis of my ethnographic data followed an iterative and reflexive process that began during fieldwork and continued through systematic coding and thematic development. My approach integrated traditional ethnographic sensitivity to context with structured thematic analysis, creating a robust framework for identifying patterns of meaning while maintaining the contextual richness essential to ethnographic understanding.

Reflexive positioning and analytical subjectivity

I adopted a deliberately reflexive approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2019) that recognised and integrated my subjectivity as an analytical resource rather than viewing it as a source of bias. My personal position as a Chinese Millennial who came of age during China's Reform and Opening-Up period necessarily shaped my engagement with the field. Having grown up in Hangzhou near Shanghai, I witnessed firsthand the rapid urbanisation and consumer culture development that form the backdrop to this research. While I maintain an interest in fashion and sustainability discourses, I have also developed a critical distance from the premium pricing and potential contradictions in sustainable fashion business models. This dual perspective, both insider and outsider, enabled me to engage empathetically with participants while maintaining necessary critical distance, a position that Dwyer and Buckle (2009) identify as particularly productive for ethnographic insight.

Initial analysis during fieldwork

Following ethnographic principles (Krzyżanowski, 2017), I conducted preliminary analysis concurrently with data collection. As Krzyżanowski (2017) notes, ethnography is an approach that guides researchers throughout their work, where data collection and analysis are ongoing and iterative (Agar, 1997). Field notes included emerging interpretations and analytical ideas, which informed subsequent data collection decisions. This iterative process allowed the research to adapt to discoveries in the field while maintaining focus on the core research questions.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2010) emphasise the analytical importance of personal feelings in fieldwork, and integrating field notes and personal reflections provided me with diverse insights into the events, helping me understand problematic aspects and relationships. I maintained regular analytical memos that documented the development of my interpretations throughout the fieldwork.

These memos tracked how initial understandings were confirmed, complicated, or transformed through continued engagement with the field, providing an audit trail of the analytical process.

Systematic coding and theme development

The coding process evolved dynamically throughout the analysis, with codes being added, refined, and revised as my understanding of the data deepened. This approach aligned with Emerson et al.'s (2011) description of ethnographic analysis as a movement from concrete description toward abstract conceptualisation while maintaining grounding in the empirical realities of the field.

Following the completion of data collection, the formal analysis proceeded through several interconnected phases. First, I immersed myself in the complete dataset, including field notes, interview transcripts, photographs, and collected documents. Following this familiarisation, I began systematic coding using ATLAS.ti. This involves applying both semantic codes that capture explicit meanings and latent codes that identify underlying assumptions and ideological positions (Byrne, 2022). This coding approach allowed me to remain open to emergent themes while maintaining focus on my research questions about value construction.

As my analysis progressed, I moved iteratively between different types of data by comparing observational notes with interview transcripts and visual materials with documentary evidence. This process of constant comparison enabled me to identify recurring patterns while situating them within their specific contextual frameworks. This integration of ethnographic and thematic approaches addressed what Holloway and Todres (2003) identify as a traditional divide between descriptive depth and thematic organisation. Following O'Reilly's (2009) guidance that ethnographic data can be organised "thematically or descriptively or both", I used thematic analysis to identify patterns across the dataset while preserving the contextual specificity that gives these patterns meaning.

Through this comprehensive analytical process, I identified aggregated patterns of meaning that revealed the discursive construction of value in Shanghai's sustainable fashion market. These themes were not merely topical categories but represented dynamic processes of meaning-making that reflected the broader discursive practices through which stakeholders constructed, negotiated,

and communicated value. The rich contextual understanding generated through this ethnographic analysis provided an essential foundation for my research, capturing the nuanced relationships between practices, meanings, and social contexts that constitute the discursive construction of value in this field.

4.5 Corpus-assisted discourse study (CADS): Design and operationalisation

4.5.1 Corpus approach and role in the research design

In this study, I employed a Corpus-Assisted Discourse Study (CADS) approach, as defined by Partington et al. (2013). CADS refers to "a set of studies into the form and/or function of language as communicative discourse which incorporate the use of computerised corpora in their analyses" (Partington et al., 2013, p. 10). This methodology served as the systematic, quantitative complement to the qualitative ethnographic component. According to Partington et al. (2013, p. 11), the primary objective of CADS is to uncover "non-obvious meaning" that "might not be readily available to naked-eye perusal." My application of CADS sits on the continuum between corpus-based and corpus-driven approaches (Baker, 2023 [2006]; Tognini-Bonelli, 2001). It was guided by initial insights from the preceding ethnographic phase, yet remained open to inductive discovery of unexpected linguistic patterns.

The primary role of the CADS component was twofold: first, to provide empirical validation and quantification of the discourses initially observed ethnographically; second, to uncover the precise linguistic mechanisms through which these rhetorical strategies were realised in corporate communications. This approach enabled me to balance the key strenghs of corpus methods as identified by Baker (2023 [2006]). I combine empirical breadth—the capacity to analyse large volumes of text systematically—with interpretive depth by subjecting the quantitative findings to a rigorous qualitative discourse analysis that considered social and historical context.

The CADS methodology was particularly suited to this project for several reasons. It enhances analytical objectivity by grounding interpretations in observable linguistic patterns, thus mitigating the potential for selective or intuitive text interpretation and reducing researcher bias (Baker, 2023 [2006]). Furthermore, it has an inherent commitment to methodological transparency and replicability (Partington et al., 2013). As Partington et al. (2013) emphasise, when data collection

and analysis processes are transparent, it allows claims to be tested and analysed from different ideological viewpoints. By combining corpus-derived statistical findings with qualitative, context-sensitive interpretation, the CADS component enabled a robust form of methodological triangulation, significantly strengthening the validity of the overall research findings.

4.5.2 Corpus compilation and description

The compilation of the corpus was a deliberate and systematic process designed to capture the core discursive practices of the key stakeholders in my study. This process evolved through several stages, beginning with a pilot study that informed the design of the final corpus.

Pilot study and platform selection

From August to December 2021, I conducted a pilot study using a small corpus of 299 Weibo posts from *klee klee* (October 2016 to October 2021), totalling 13,632 words. This pilot revealed several important findings that shaped the subsequent corpus compilation: first, that English posts showed no significant discursive differences from Chinese content; second, that Weibo activity had significantly decreased since 2022 while WeChat publication remained stable; and third, that individual WeChat articles tended to be substantially longer and more detailed than Weibo posts. These observations, combined with ethnographic findings that stakeholders primarily used WeChat for regular brand communication, even during the COVID-19 restrictions in Shanghai when other platforms saw reduced activity, led to the selection of WeChat as the primary data source for the corpus compilation.

Sources of texts and timeframe

I sourced all texts from the official WeChat accounts of the two primary stakeholders: the sustainable fashion brand *klee klee* and the consulting firm *RISE*. The data collection period spanned from the inception of each WeChat account (July 2017 for *klee klee* and September 2020 for *RISE*) until December 2022, which marked the end of the corpus data collection phase for this project. This timeframe ensured comprehensive coverage of each organisation's public communications during a period of significant growth and development in Shanghai's sustainable fashion market.

Selection criteria and rationale

The decision to focus on *klee klee* and *RISE* was based on the ethnographic findings. *klee klee* served as the primary ethnographic field site, providing rich contextual data through extensive participant observation, interviews, and document collection that could deeply inform the interpretation of corpus findings. *RISE* was included to add a layer of insight from a consulting and industry perspective, representing the discourse of a key intermediary organisation that shapes sustainable fashion practices. The other four stakeholders (*Green Initiative*, *Norlha*, *Reclothing Bank*, and *Déjà Vu*) were excluded from the corpus as they were deemed peripheral sites based on the depth and intensity of ethnographic engagement, following the principle of strategic focus in multi-sited research (Bryman, 2012).

Text classification framework

As shown in Table 4.2, texts were categorised into four sub-corpora based on their communicative function, reflecting the key aspects of corporate communication I had identified ethnographically:

Text types	**General description**
Promotional	Includes brand profiles, product descriptions, and sales promotion.
Event communication	Includes the project brief, pre-event messaging and post-event summaries.
Profile feature	Includes, but is not limited to, interview articles on brand managers, fashion designers, business partners, etc.
Popular science	Includes articles introducing the concepts related to sustainable fashion.
Note: Job postings and other administrative communications were excluded from the corpus as they were not directly relevant to the research questions concerning value construction and represented only a minor portion of the overall data.	

Table 4.2. Text types of WeChat articles

Corpus compilation process

The technical process of corpus compilation involved multiple stages to ensure data integrity and analytical robustness:

1. **Data collection:** All WeChat articles from the specified period were downloaded as PDFs directly from the official accounts to preserve original formatting and content.
2. **Data cleaning:** I implemented a rigorous cleaning protocol:
    - All photographic, graphical, and non-linguistic elements were removed to create plain, machine-readable text files
    - Formatting codes and special characters were standardised or removed
    - I manually standardised inconsistent renderings of proper names (e.g., "naze naze" vs. "Naze Naze", "再造衣银行" vs. "Reclothing Bank") to ensure that orthographical variations did not skew frequency-based analyses
3. **Metadata tagging:** Each article was systematically tagged with metadata indicating:
    - Source organisation (*klee klee* or *RISE*)
    - Publication date (YYYY-MM-DD)
    - Text type classification (promotional, profile, event, or popular science)
4. **Linguistic processing:** The corpus is predominantly monolingual in Chinese, with only 14 articles from *klee klee* featuring parallel Chinese-English text. For computational analysis, the Chinese texts were processed using the Stanford Tagger within the *Sketch Engine* platform (the web-based corpus tool employed in this project), which performs word segmentation and part-of-speech tagging based on the Chinese Penn Treebank POC tag set. This processing was essential for the accurate analysis of Chinese, a language that does not use spaces between words.

The final compiled corpus comprised four sub-corpora with the specifications detailed in Table 4.3 below. The complete corpus represents a substantial collection of organisational discourse that enables both quantitative analysis of patterns and qualitative examination of specific discursive strategies.

Sub-corpus	Stakeholder	Number of articles	Types	Tokens
Promotional	*klee klee*	122 (from *klee klee*)	68,142	83,678
Profile Feature	*klee klee* & *RISE*	53 (33 from *klee klee* and 20 from *RISE*)	64,632	77,683

Event Communication	*klee klee & RISE*	197 (85 from *klee klee* and 112 from *RISE*)	164,580	203,175
Popular Science	*RISE*	43 (from *RISE*)	71,133	86,884
TOTAL		415	368,487	451,420

Table 4.3. Corpus information

4.5.3 Analytical procedures and technical specifications

The corpus analysis was conducted using the web-based corpus tool *Sketch Engine* (Kilgarriff et al., 2014). All analyses were conducted between September 2022 and December 2023 using *Sketch Engine*. The analytical process moved systematically from macro-level theme identification to micro-level linguistic pattern analysis, with each step building upon the previous one in an iterative fashion that allowed quantitative findings to inform qualitative investigation and vice versa.

4.5.3.1 Keyword analysis: Identifying salient themes

The keyword analysis served as the initial exploratory phase, aiming to identify statistically significant words in each sub-corpus compared to a general reference corpus. As Baker (2004) and other studies (e.g. Johnson et al., 2003; Rayson, 2008) have demonstrated, keyword lists provide an efficient entry point for understanding the "aboutness" of a specialised corpus. The specific parameters and steps were as follows:

Reference corpus

I used the Chinese Web 2017 Simplified (zhTenTen17) corpus as a benchmark. This corpus contains approximately 10 billion words from diverse web sources, including web pages, articles, forums, blogs, and other online content. It represents contemporary simplified Chinese usage across multiple digital genres and platforms, making it an appropriate benchmark for comparing the specialised discourse in WeChat articles published between 2017 and 2022. The size and diversity of zhTenTen17 ensure that it captures general language patterns without being skewed toward any particular domain.

Keyness calculation

Keywords were identified using Kilgariff's (2009) Simple Maths measure, configured with a constant of 100. No frequency cut-off points were applied at this stage to allow for the potential identification of significant but lower-frequency terms that might be discursively important.

Operational steps

1. Accessed each sub-corpus individually through the *Sketch Engine* interface
2. Selected the "Keywords" tool from the analysis menu
3. Set zhTenTen17 as the reference corpus with the above statistical parameters
4. Exported results as CSV files containing: keyword, frequency in sub-corpus, frequency in reference corpus, and Simple Maths score
5. Repeated this process for all four sub-corpora
6. Conducted manual semantic categorisation of keywords to identify overarching themes and topics

Output

For each sub-corpus, I extracted the top 100 positive keywords (words significantly more frequent in the sub-corpus than in the reference corpus). These lists were then qualitatively reviewed and grouped into semantic categories (e.g., materials, places, practices) to capture the dominant topics and themes characterising each text type. The complete keyword lists for each sub-corpus, including both single-word and multi-word terms, are archived in Appendix 10. This comprehensive documentation ensures transparency and enables future replication or verification of the analysis.

4.5.3.2 Collocation analysis: Uncovering discursive patterns

Building on the keyword analysis, the collocation analysis investigated the usual lexical combinations of chosen node words to reveal the discursive patterns and semantic associations that define the sustainable fashion discourse. As Stubbs (2002, 2005) argues, collocations reveal recurrent lexical preferences that reflect established practices and community perceptions. The technical specifications were established to ensure consistency and reliability.

Node words selection criteria

The selection of node words for collocation analysis followed a multi-tiered criteria system. Primary selection was based on terms ranking within the top 20 positions of keyword lists that

demonstrated high semantic relevance to the core research questions. Additionally, I incorporated node words identified as ethnographically significant through preliminary analysis of field data. To ensure comprehensive coverage of key concepts, I also examined multi-word terms to identify semantically relevant units that might constitute distinctive rhetorical foci within the discourse.

Collocation analysis parameters

Span: The collocation analysis was conducted with a span of -5 to +5 words from the node. I set a minimum frequency of 5 for the collocate in the entire corpus and a minimum frequency of 3 for the collocation itself to ensure the patterns were reasonably established.

Statistical Measure: The strength of the collocational relationship was measured using the Mutual Information (MI) score. An MI score indicates the strength of association between two words, with higher scores suggesting a stronger, more significant bond. All reported collocations meet a minimum MI score of 3.0, indicating a strong association.

Minimum frequency threshold: Collocate must appear ≥5 times in the entire corpus to ensure stability of patterns

Collocation frequency: Node-collocate pair must co-occur ≥3 times within the specified span to establish reliability

Sorting: Results ranked by MI score in descending order to identify the strongest associations.

Operational steps:

1. For each node word, used the "Word Sketch" tool with grammatical relations set to "all" to capture diverse collocational patterns
2. Applied frequency filters as specified above to ensure meaningful results
3. Exported complete collocate lists with: collocate, frequency, and MI score, for comprehensive analysis
4. For manual verification and pattern identification, used the "Concordance" tool with the same node words and examined collocates within the L5-R5 span
5. Cross-referenced strong collocates (MI > 3.0) with ethnographic data to identify connections between linguistic patterns and observed practices

4.5.3.3 Concordance analysis: Interpreting meaning in context

The final and most qualitative step involved the close reading of concordance lines, which display all instances of a search term (e.g., a keyword or a strong collocate) embedded in its immediate context (Key Word in Context or KWIC). As Gillings and Mautner (2024) emphasise, concordance analysis provides the essential link between quantitative patterns and discursive interpretation, though it requires careful handling of contextual factors and potential ambiguities.

Operational steps:

1. Initial scan of 50-100 concordance lines (or all if fewer than 50) to identify obvious patterns and develop initial coding categories.
2. Systematic coding of semantic patterns using a standardised framework:
    - Semantic preferences (systematic meaning relations between node and collocates)
    - Semantic prosody (positive/negative evaluative meaning conveyed through typical collocations)
    - Discourse functions (e.g., justification, evaluation, description, legitimation)
3. Pattern verification through examining the original sentences
4. Cross-referencing with ethnographic field notes, interview transcripts, and visual materials for contextual interpretation and explanation of patterns
5. Iterative refinement of categories based on emerging evidence

This iterative process, moving from keywords to collocations to concordances, ensured that my interpretation of the discourses was firmly grounded in reproducible linguistic evidence, while being nuanced by the deep contextual understanding afforded by the ethnography. The integration of these corpus findings with ethnographic insights is a core feature of the "ethnography-led, corpus-validated" model. This will be elaborated upon in Section 4.7, which provides a concrete, step-by-step example of how the CADS procedure was woven together with the ethnographic analysis to develop a robust, multi-layered argument about the discursive construction of value.

4.6 Overview of research participants and datasets

By the end of data collection, the overall datasets comprise:

1.) Four recorded/unrecorded semi-structured interviews (depending on the informant's preference), with a total duration of approximately 180 minutes;

2.) Interactional data (i.e., casual conversations with informants on-site, follow-up conversations via WeChat message, and comments left during the live-streaming events);
3.) Participant observation on twelve online/offline events, including lecture talks, workshops, exhibitions, store visits, online store tours and chatting;
4.) Visual material, including 253 photos and 14 videos;
5.) Written materials including brochures, social media articles for corpus building, social media posts, organisation websites, research articles, reportage from news media and corporate documents (two analysis reports on sustainable fashion consumers in China and one guideline for sustainable action in the fashion industry, published in 2020, 2021 and 2022 respectively).

The participants in this project were selected as individuals who are engaged in shaping and disseminating value in and around sustainable fashion products. Three sets of participants were identified at the research sites:

1) The project manager of *Green Initiatives*, who takes charge of the *RE: FORM* project;
2) Staff members of *ZUCZUG*, specifically those working in the marketing, sales and social media branding department of its sustainable brand called *klee klee*;
3) The sales manager of *Norlha* and a sales staff member for *Norlha*'s pop-up store at *Yudinst*.

For the purpose of this thesis, I selected the following datasets to present in the findings chapters (see Table 4.4):

	Chapter 5	**Chapter 6**	**Chapter 7**
Ethnographic data	1.Field note from store visits to *Yudinist*, where *Norhla*'s pop-up store was held; 2.Transcript of a semi-structured interview with an informant from *klee klee* who worked in marketing and social media communication; 3.An article published in ELLE, a fashion and lifestyle	1.Field notes and photos from the participant observation of the training workshops called "Gathering Like Water" event series organised by *klee klee*; 2.Field note and photos from the participant observation of the brand activation event called "Lights-out	1.Field note from the participant observation of an experiential brand campaign called "Rewilding the City" Project organised by *klee klee,* with photos from my follow-up store visit and transcripts of my social media contacts with the staff member participated in the project;

	magazine, featured *Norhla*'s founder; 4.Interview notes from a semi-structured interview with an informant who is *Norlha*'s sales manager; 5.*Norlha*'s WeChat articles introducing the aesthetics of the Tibetan people and their place of origin; 6.Photos and field notes from store visits to *Reclothing Bank*, and *klee klee*, including the products, in-store exhibitions, recycling boxes, and the exterior environment; 7. Short videos introducing the *naze naze* project, the design of *klee klee*'s Columbia Circle store posted on the brand's WeChat platform; 8. CNN's profile feature article on the founder of *Reclothing Bank*.	Gathering" organised by *klee klee*; 3. A call-for-participant video by an environmental influencer, published on *RISE*'s WeChat platform.	2. Field notes, interview transcripts, and photos from my initial fieldwork and follow-ups with participants from the *Green Initiative*; 3. Photos and field note from store visits to *Déjà Vu*'s second-hand trading shop.
Corpus data	Promotional Corpus, consisting of WeChat articles collected from *klee klee*.	Profile Feature Corpus and Event Communication Corpus, consisting of WeChat articles collected from *klee klee* and *RISE*.	Popular Science Corpus, consisting of WeChat articles collected from *RISE*.

Table 4.4. Overview of datasets selected for each chapter of findings

4.7 Data integration and analytical workflow

This section provides a detailed account of how I operationalised the "ethnography-led, corpus-validated" model in practice, demonstrating the step-by-step process through which raw data from both methodological strands were systematically integrated to produce the findings that will be presented in subsequent chapters. To illustrate this process, I will use an example that will be fully

developed in the findings chapters: the rhetorical strategy of "authorisation". This example traces how initial ethnographic observations about how brands use external certifications to legitimise their sustainability claims evolved through corpus validation into a comprehensive understanding of "authorisation" as a key discursive strategy. It is important to note that while this example previews concepts that will be explored in depth in Chapter 5, the focus here remains on methodological process rather than substantive findings.

4.7.1 Step-by-step analytical process

This study follows an integrated "ethnography-led, corpus-validated" model, which combines two methodological approaches into a purposeful and iterative dialogue. This method is operationalised through a recursive process consisting of four key phases, each with specific goals and procedures that systematically turn raw data into solid findings.

Phase 1: Ethnographic discovery

The process commenced with immersive ethnographic analysis, where I engaged in deep, contextual examination of field data to generate initial insights and identify emergent rhetorical strategies. Following Braun and Clarke's (2012) reflexive thematic analysis, I systematically coded field notes, interview transcripts, and visual materials using ATLAS.ti. This involved:

- Applying semantic coding to capture explicit meanings in participants' accounts
- Developing latent codes to identify underlying assumptions and ideological positions
- Maintaining reflexive memos to document emerging interpretations and analytical decisions

Specifically, my coding process involved a hybrid strategy combining descriptive, analytical, and process coding to systematically organise and interpret the data. A detailed visual record of the inductive coding process, demonstrating the progression from raw data to initial themes across various data types (field notes, photos, videos, and promotional materials), is provided in Appendix 9. Following Saldaña (2021), descriptive coding was used first to assign basic labels that summarised the primary topic of data segments, such as "store layout" or "CSR explanation", providing a foundational inventory of the dataset. For clarity and conciseness in presenting the findings, the data presentation in subsequent chapters focuses on the analytical and process codes,

sidestepping the initial, more granular descriptive codes. Building on this, analytical coding was applied to develop more abstract, theoretical categories that captured the underlying constructs and ideological work in the data, such as "authorisation" or "simplicity as a taste" (Emerson et al., 2011). Finally, process coding (Charmaz, 2014) was utilised to capture action and sequence, employing gerunds like "leveraging the power of knowledge" or "advocating eco-altruism" to trace how discursive strategies unfolded and evolved over time within and across field sites. This multi-layered approach ensured the analysis remained grounded in the empirical data while enabling the development of theoretically informed interpretations.

For example, during my visit to *klee klee*'s Anfu Road store, I observed the careful arrangement of certification labels paired with bilingual educational texts. Additionally, my interview with informant Lin, who discussed the brand's practical reliance on "global certifications", helped me develop the initial descriptive code "pragmatic authorisation through external certification." This initial code was subsequently refined through corpus validation and iterative integration with other data, ultimately evolving into the broader analytical code "authorisation", one of the rhetorical strategies that contribute to the discursive construction of "authenticity". The first phase, however, focused on depth rather than breadth, allowing rich, context-sensitive insights to emerge from lived experiences and material practices observed in the field.

Phase 2: Corpus validation & expansion

The field-derived insights then guided targeted corpus analysis to test their prevalence and uncover precise linguistic patterns across a larger body of text. This phase translated ethnographic codes into specific corpus queries through:

- Systematic keyword analysis comparing the promotional corpus against the zhTenTen17 reference corpus using the Simple Maths measure (Kilgarriff, 2009)
- Collocational analysis with defined parameters (span: L5-R5, MI scoring, minimum frequency thresholds)
- Concordance examination of significant terms to understand contextual usage patterns

In the "authorisation" example, this involved identifying "GOTS" as a statistically significant keyword (keyness score: 1544.1) and analysing its characteristic collocates, including "全

程”(fully), “认证” (certified), and “全球” (global). The corpus moved the analysis from observing single instances of certification discourse in interviews to demonstrating its systematic realisation across the brand’s promotional texts.

Phase 3: Iterative interpretation

The quantitative findings from the corpus were qualitatively interpreted by returning to the ethnographic data, creating a dialogue between linguistic patterns and contextual understanding. This phase involved:

- Constant comparison between corpus-derived patterns and ethnographic records
- Contextualisation of linguistic features within observed social practices and material arrangements
- Refinement of initial codes based on the convergence or divergence of evidence

When corpus analysis revealed the formulaic use of “GOTS 全程认证” (GOTS fully certified), my ethnographic understanding of how the brand educated consumers about certification authority enabled me to interpret this as a strategic simplification rather than mere repetition. Similarly, the strong collocation with “全球” (global) gained significance when viewed through the lens of the brand’s exhibition strategies that emphasised international legitimacy.

Phase 4: Synthesis

In the final phase, both strands of evidence were woven together to build multi-layered arguments about discursive value construction. This involved:

- Integrating linguistic patterns with social practices to explain how rhetorical strategies function
- Engaging theoretical frameworks to develop explanatory insights
- Constructing coherent discourses that account for both systematic patterns and contextual nuances

The finalised codes, which illustrate how discourse is constructed through semiotic choices, were understood as rhetorical strategies that contribute to ideological positioning, emphasising or

downplaying particular meanings (Van Dijk, 1998). With the comprehensive contextual information from ethnography and the quantified textual evidence from the corpus, the aggregated patterns of meaning were interpreted as discourses, not as merely topical themes, but as dynamic processes of social construction instantiated through these strategies. This synthesis thus moved the analysis from identifying what was said and observed to explaining how specific discourses of authenticity, trust, and moderation were dynamically constructed and legitimised within the field.

The analysis of "authorisation" illustrates this synthesis: the ethnographic insight into the brand's two-tiered verification approach (ideal firsthand assessment and practical certification reliance) combined with the patterns identified in certification discourse within the corpus reveals how "authorisation" functions as a rhetorical strategy that turns external validation into symbolic capital within ethical consumption. This recursive process ensured that neither methodological approach operated in isolation. The ethnography ensured that corpus analysis was not just a mechanical counting task by offering the context necessary for meaningful interpretation. Conversely, the corpus analysis prevented ethnographic insights from being merely anecdotal by showing how they systematically appeared across a larger textual dataset.

4.7.2 From ethnographic codes to corpus queries

The translation of ethnographic insights into corpus queries followed a protocol to ensure methodological rigour and replicability. Each ethnographic code underwent a three-step process:

Step 1: Conceptual clarification

I first refined ethnographic codes by examining their contextual meanings across different field sites. For the "authorisation" code, this involved distinguishing between different types of validation: institutional certifications, media recognition, and expert endorsements observed across various stakeholder interactions.

Step 2: Lexical identification

Next, I identified the specific linguistic realisations of these conceptual categories. This involved:

- Compiling comprehensive lists of relevant terms from field notes and documents

- Consulting additional stakeholder publications, such as annual reports and sustainability guides, to ensure the compilation of a comprehensive and contextually relevant lexicon
- Validating term selection through preliminary corpus searches

For "authorisation", this yielded search terms including "GOTS", "BCI", "认证" (certification), "标准" (standard), and "全球" (global), representing the different dimensions of external validation observed ethnographically.

Step 3: Query design

Finally, I designed structured corpus queries with precise parameters:

- Keyword analysis using consistent statistical measures (Simple Maths with constant 100)
- Collocational analysis with fixed span (L5-R5) and frequency thresholds
- Concordance sampling strategies ensuring representative coverage

This approach ensured that corpus investigations remained grounded in the empirical realities of the field while enabling comprehensive linguistic analysis.

4.7.3 Interpreting corpus results through ethnographic insight

The interpretation of corpus findings consistently drew upon ethnographic context to move beyond surface-level linguistic patterns and develop sociologically meaningful explanations. This process involved three key analytical moves:

Contextualisation of frequency patterns

When corpus analysis revealed the high frequency of certain terms, ethnographic understanding provided the necessary context to interpret their significance. For instance, the statistical prominence of "GOTS" (keyness score: 1544.1) gained meaning when viewed alongside ethnographic observations of how certification labels were materially displayed in retail spaces and strategically discussed in stakeholder interviews.

Explaining collocational relationships

Ethnographic insights helped explain why certain words consistently appeared together. The strong collocation between "GOTS" and "全程" (fully) (MI score: 8.0) reflected the brand's emphasis on comprehensive accountability observed during factory visits and supply chain discussions. Similarly, the association with "全球" (global) mirrored the cosmopolitan consumer identity cultivated through the brand's international positioning strategies.

Understanding discursive functions

Most importantly, the ethnographic context enabled me to understand what discursive work these linguistic patterns performed. The formulaic use of certification terminology was not merely descriptive but functioned as what Stein and Ramaseshan (2016) term "touchpoints" in the customer experience, building trust through external validation. This interpretation emerged from observing how sales staff used certification language during customer interactions and how educational materials framed certification authority.

This interpretive process made sure that corpus findings were always understood in their social and practical contexts, avoiding decontextualised linguistic analysis while leveraging the systematic nature of corpus methods.

4.7.4 Concrete example: The workflow for identifying "authorisation"

The analysis of "authorisation" provides a comprehensive illustration of the integrated analytical workflow in practice:

Ethnographic starting point (Phase 1)

The process began with Lin's interview, revealing *klee klee*'s pragmatic approach to verification: while idealising direct oversight, the brand relied on global certifications for practical validation. Meanwhile, store observations revealed how certification labels were materially integrated into product displays and educational materials. These insights generated the core ethnographic understanding of "authorisation" as a strategic delegation of legitimisation.

Corpus translation and validation (Phase 2)

This ethnographic insight guided targeted corpus investigation:

- Keyword analysis confirmed “GOTS” as highly significant, ranking second overall
- Collocational analysis revealed characteristic patterns, including “GOTS 全程认证” and strong associations with authority-establishing terms
- Concordance examination showed both formulaic usage (10 of 14 instances) and explanatory contexts emphasising international recognition

Iterative interpretation (Phase 3)

Returning to ethnographic data, I recognised how these linguistic patterns reflected the brand’s strategic navigation between ideal and practical authorisation. The frequent formulaic use of certification terminology corresponded to contexts where the brand assumed audience familiarity, while explanatory patterns mirrored the educational approach observed in store exhibitions and staff training.

Theoretical synthesis (Phase 4)

The integrated analysis revealed how “authorisation” serves the key discursive function of constructing “authenticity” through a process of institutional validation. This understanding led to a connection with Coupland’s (2003) framework, which suggests that authenticity is not an intrinsic trait but rather a quality that depends on being authorised. According to this view, for a product to be deemed authentic, there must be a consensus within a community that it has been adequately validated by a recognised authority. The strategic use of certifications like GOTS functions precisely as this essential “infrastructure of expert authenticators” (Coupland, 2003, p. 419). “Authrisation” establishes a brand’s sustainable credentials by turning technical standards into a widely accepted warrant of authenticity and forging the necessary consensus among consumers about what constitutes a genuinely sustainable product.

This workflow demonstrates how the “ethnography-led, corpus-validated” model enabled me to develop robust explanations that capture both the systematic linguistic patterns and their contextual meanings, progressing from raw data to theoretically informed findings about the construction of discursive value in sustainable fashion markets. Through this recursive integration, the research maintains both the contextual sensitivity of ethnography and the systematic rigour of corpus linguistics, producing findings that are both empirically grounded and analytically refined.

4.8 Analytical perspective and findings structure

This section outlines the overarching analytical perspective that guided the interpretation of the data and provides a roadmap for the findings presented in the subsequent chapters.

4.8.1 A dualist approach to discourse analysis

It is important to note that this project takes a dualist approach to discourse analysis, acknowledging the significance of and connection between both micro- and macro-level discourses when applying the term. Discourse studies are often divided into micro- and macro-level analyses (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). Macro-level discourses, linked to Foucault (1972), view language as shaped by dominant Discourses—systems of thought that define subject positions through normalisation and self-discipline (Whittle et al., 2014). These capital-D Discourses (Gee, 2014) represent ideologies within social structures (Clegg, 1989; Fairclough, 2013). Discourse is tied to social relations, power dynamics, and identity formation (Fairclough, 2013). Gee (2014) emphasises "recognition" as key, where language and social behaviours help define identity within a group. This is particularly relevant to this project, as neoliberal ideologies and elite Discourses influence the value construction and circulation of cultural products like fashion items branded as "sustainable". In contrast, small-d discourse focuses on micro-level interactions (e.g. Andersen & Johansen, 2021; De Cock et al., 2024; O'Keeffe & Walsh, 2012; Sarangi & Roberts, 1999), analysing specific language instances, such as how things are said and their contextual meaning (Gee, 2014).

While both acknowledge the constraints of power, they differ in emphasis: small-d discourse highlights speakers' performative choices, whereas Capital-D Discourses often view these choices as externally imposed (e.g. Blommaert, 2005; Cameron, 2001; Wodak, 2020). This research does not rigidly separate these two levels but treats them as intrinsically linked. This integrated stance is essential for connecting localised, observed interactions with the broader, dominant discourses that give them meaning, a connection that will be demonstrated analytically in the following findings chapters.

4.8.2 Overview of discourses and structure for the findings chapter

The integrated analysis identified three principal discourses: Authenticity, Trust, and Moderation, which structure the presentation of findings in this thesis. Authenticity pertains to the

discursive construction of a product's genuine nature through its production process and craftsmanship. Trust refers to the building of confidence through stakeholder involvement in communities of like-minded consumers and producers. Moderation conveys a philosophy of self-restraint and simplistic aesthetics in consumption and taste.

For a concise and coherent data presentation, the findings are organised to highlight the discourse most prominent in each sub-corpus. Chapter 5 focuses on the discourse of authenticity, drawing primarily from the Promotional Corpus (brand profiles, product descriptions). Chapter 6 examines the discourse of trust, based mainly on the Profile Feature Corpus and the Event Communication Corpus (activities and partnerships). Chapter 7 explores the discourse of moderation, centred on the Popular Science Corpus (sustainability concepts and awareness). It is important to note that this structure is a presentational strategy; all three discourses permeate the datasets to varying degrees, and the analysis will note their interplay where relevant.

4.9 Ethical considerations and research credibility

This section outlines the ethical protocols employed throughout the research and examines how the mixed-methods design significantly enhances the study's credibility. Given the emphasis on elite commercial organisations and the possibility of sensitive corporate data, it was crucial to uphold strict ethical standards and ensure analytical robustness. The integrated approach tackled procedural ethics and established a self-adjusting framework in which various data types consistently verify and enhance one another.

4.9.1 Ethical practice

The research received full approval from Lancaster University's Research Ethics Committee after submitting a comprehensive application detailing all protocols. The ethical framework was implemented through several key measures:

- Informed consent was obtained through a meticulous multi-stage process. Initial contact was made through organisational websites or social media channels, often leading to the marketing or media communication departments. Before all interviews, I provided bilingual Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms (Appendices 1 and 2) to accommodate participants' language preferences. During meetings, I verbally reinforced

participants' rights, particularly emphasising their freedom to withdraw within two weeks. Signed consent forms were collected before proceeding, with hard copies remaining visible throughout sessions to continuously remind participants of their rights. After the interviews, I kept communication open through email or WeChat for any further questions or clarifications.

- Anonymity and confidentiality were carefully managed through multiple strategies. All participants are referred to by pseudonyms in the research findings. However, complete anonymisation presented practical challenges given the small size of some organisations and the public nature of corporate communications. I addressed these limitations transparently with participants, ensuring only essential information related to the research focus was included in the thesis. All photographs of individuals were rendered unidentifiable, and the images of products and stores were used only with the prior agreement of the company. Furthermore, I recognise that full anonymisation of the organisations was not possible, as they remain easily identifiable through their publicly available data and the textual extracts cited in this thesis. Because these brands are naturally traceable, the use of their names was pre-approved by the respective companies.

- Data security and risk management protocols were strictly maintained. All data were stored on password-protected devices in compliance with university regulations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I implemented additional safety measures, including social distancing and the use of protective equipment, during in-person research activities. The research design minimised potential risks to participants, and no participants withdrew from the study during the two-week withdrawal period.

4.9.2 Ensuring research credibility

The mixed-methods design directly addresses concerns about the reliability and validity of qualitative research (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982) by creating multiple verification pathways. Combining ethnographic and corpus-linguistic approaches provides a strong framework for establishing credibility through verification strategies.

- Methodological triangulation was achieved through the systematic convergence of different data types. The ethnographic component provided deep contextual understanding of social practices and material arrangements: from observing how certification labels were displayed in retail spaces to documenting how sales staff discussed sustainability with customers. Simultaneously, the corpus analysis quantitatively validated these observations across large volumes of textual data, testing whether patterns identified in fieldwork were systematically manifested in corporate communications.

- Thick description and analytical transparency were maintained through detailed documentation of research processes and contextual factors. The ethnographic records provided the necessary framework for meaningfully interpreting corpus-derived linguistic patterns, preventing decontextualised analysis. Furthermore, I engaged in regular peer examination by presenting data and analysis to supervisors, peers, and conference audiences, incorporating their feedback to strengthen interpretive claims. While acknowledging Spiggle's (1994) point that qualitative data can have multiple interpretations, the mixed-methods approach offered a structured way to develop and support specific interpretations through the convergence of evidence.

- Reflexivity and positionality management were central to the research process. Building on Tracy's (2010) idea of sincerity, I stayed conscious of how my dual role as both insider (familiar with sustainable fashion) and outsider (critical researcher) affected how I collected and interpreted data. This reflexive stance helped navigate what Sarangi (2007) identifies as the fundamental paradoxes of ethnographic research. The social constructionist perspective underlying the study acknowledged the subjective nature of social reality while employing methodological integration to build robust and defensible insights.

The credibility of this research thus stems not from claims of objective truth but from the demonstrated ability of the mixed-methods design to produce insights that are simultaneously empirically grounded, contextually sensitive, and systematically validated. The continuous dialogue between ethnographic depth and corpus breadth created a self-adjusting analytical cycle. This process allowed new insights to be examined and refined through different types of evidence,

ultimately producing findings that account for both the nuanced realities of social practices and their consistent expressions in discursive patterns.

4.10 Summary

This chapter outlines an ethnography-led, corpus-validated mixed-methods approach to investigate how value is discursively constructed in Shanghai's high-end sustainable fashion market. The research is situated within a pragmatic paradigm, which justifies the integration of interpretive multi-sited ethnography and the more empirical techniques of Corpus-Assisted Discourse Study (CADS) by focusing on their complementary strengths in solving the research problem.

The methodology is operationalised through a four-phase, iterative process: 1) Ethnographic Discovery involving immersive fieldwork to generate initial, contextual insights and inductive codes; 2) Corpus Validation & Expansion, where field-derived codes are translated into precise corpus queries. A specialised corpus of WeChat articles is analysed to validate the prevalence of these themes and uncover their exact linguistic patterns; 3) Iterative Interpretation, which qualitatively contextualises corpus patterns within ethnographic data. This dialogue explains the *why* behind the linguistic *what*, ensuring patterns are not misinterpreted; and 4) Synthesis, weaving both strands into a cohesive argument, which moves from identified strategies to explain how they construct overarching discourses of Authenticity, Trust, and Moderation.

The chapter details the design and implementation of both methodological approaches, including site selection of six key stakeholders, longitudinal ethnographic data collection (2019-2023), and corpus compilation with analytical techniques such as keyword, collocation, and concordance analysis. It concludes by discussing ethical considerations and illustrating how this integrated design ensures research credibility through methodological triangulation, thick description, and reflexivity. Having laid the methodological groundwork, the following chapters focus on the empirical findings that constitute the core of this thesis.

Chapter 5 The discourse of authenticity: Constructing commodity value in Shanghai's high-end sustainable fashion

Figure 5.1. Crossbody cell phone bag by *naze naze*

The small crossbody cellphone bag in Figure 5.1 was bought during my visit to *klee klee*'s store in Columbia Circle in January 2023. Having never been to that store before, I briefly introduced myself and my research project to the shop assistant. It was about 11 am in the morning. She was busy organising some newly arrived products with another colleague. I said I was interested in sustainable fashion and the way you circulated the information about sustainability in the store. After knowing my intention, she said I could just visit the store myself since she was a bit busy then. I asked whether I could take some photos, and she said no problem. During the whole visit, she just occasionally gave me a friendly smile. Before leaving the store, I chose that small bag and headed to the counter to pay. She jokingly said, "You don't buy it only to avoid embarrassment, do you?" "No! I do like it!" I said, but then I did feel a little awkward. "Our store is great for taking photos, right?" She chatted with me while settling the bill. Then, she helped me register a

membership account, and after I paid, she handed me the product, packed in a small white paper bag with *klee klee*'s signature hand-shaped logo printed on it.

My decision to buy the bag was not solely driven by a love for fashion, hand-crafted goods, or sustainability, nor was it entirely an attempt to compensate the busy shop assistant for any inconvenience. As a researcher, I want to keep this small bag as an example of how a culturally significant commodity can showcase value. While as a consumer, I like the bag's bright and vivid colours of lemon yellow and cream white. Moreover, the design is simple but unique, as one cannot find it in either a fast fashion or designer brand. According to *klee klee*'s description, this bag, a product from the *naze naze* project, was crafted by a female weaver from the Dulong tribe using traditional blanket-weaving techniques. It is now displayed as a commodity in a store located in a gentrified commercial area of Shanghai. *naze naze* is one of the brand's social responsibility projects, aiming to "enhance the value of local women's work through the modern methods of production, management and promotion" (*klee klee*'s brochure). The term "naze naze" comes from "naze naze brao" in the Dulong language, which means "to weave slowly". The Dulong people are an ethnic group with a population of less than 10,000 in Yunnan province, southeast China. *klee klee* jointly launched the project with the Beijing Contemporary Art Foundation (BCAF) and Yunnan Foundation for Youth Entrepreneurship and Employment in 2015. Each year, from December to January, *klee klee* organises a pop-up exhibition for the project in the store, introducing the recent progress and displaying the latest products made by local women.

Figure 5.2. Interior label of the bag

Figure 5.2 shows the inside label of the bag I bought. It reads "独龙族项目，织女：李仙英" (Dulong project, female weaver: Li Xianying). Each product from the *naze naze* project features a label that introduces the producer's name. The label is inconspicuously attached to the product but still easily noticeable to the owner. This practice instantiates what Currid-Halkett (2017, p. 54) describes; she argues that inconspicuous consumption reinforces class boundaries because its meanings are illegible "without tacit information or a significant amount of money". The business equips consumers with the cultural knowledge to recognise this distinction through discursive constructions like the label itself, which provides the "tacit information" needed to decode the product's authenticity and ethical value. While a simple, minimalist product, its cultural significance is sophisticated. Introducing the product's backstory, such as mentioning the project name and the producer, subtly imbues it with "authenticity", a long-debated concept in social sciences (e.g. Trilling, 2009 [1972]; Bruner, 1994). With late capitalism, niche products are increasingly valued for their distinct identities and perceived authenticity (Heller, 2013). The *naze naze* cell phone bag exemplifies how high-end sustainable fashion discursively constructs added value through language and other semiotic resources. I argue that authenticity significantly enhances the value of products branded as "sustainable", "ethical", or "eco-friendly". This argument echoes the scholars both in sociolinguistics and material culture (e.g., Coupland ,2003;

Duchêne & Heller, 2012; Cavanaugh, 2016; Mapes, 2021). In today's neoliberal society, authenticity itself has become a valuable commodity that is both manufactured and performed.

The central aim of this chapter is to shed light on the creation and commodification of authenticity within Shanghai's high-end sustainable fashion sector, which is fundamentally discursive in nature. As Harvey (2012, p. 103) notes, "claims to uniqueness, authenticity, particularity, and speciality…are as much an outcome of discursive constructions and struggles as they are grounded in material fact". The effectiveness of deploying linguistic (e.g. branding language, storytelling, sustainability claims) and non-linguistic resources (e.g. visual aesthetics, packaging, material sourcing) determines the potential of authenticity and value creation. In other words, the extent to which these elements align with consumer expectations and cultural values directly impacts their ability to create symbolic and economic value, reinforcing exclusivity and social distinction within elite consumption practices.

As I outlined previously, in this chapter, I present a discourse analysis based on a data set comprising ethnographic field notes, photos, interview transcripts, promotional materials (both physical and online) and social media content (i.e., WeChat articles). By examining the linguistic and semiotic strategies employed in organisational styling (Wee, 2015) of the businesses under investigation, this chapter aims to unveil the conceptualisation of added value in the commodities, with a particular focus on discourse of authenticity. The analysis that follows is structured around the integrated framework of Coupland (2003) and Mapes (2018, 2021), which guides the examination of authenticity and elitism in organisational styling. After detailing this framework, the chapter presents the dataset, the key findings, and their interpretation.

5.1 Analysing the discourse of authenticity: Analytical approach

The discourse of authenticity in the data revealed a complex interplay between general cultural codes of what is considered "authentic" and the specific strategies used to claim elite status. Therefore, for the purpose of this chapter, an integrated analytical framework was developed from the work of Coupland (2003) and Mapes (2018, 2021). The integration proves highly significant for understanding the rhetorical strategies in the data. This framework enables me to trace how "authenticity" is operationalised as a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), reinforcing social distinction and concealing privilege under the guise of "good taste".

5.1.1 Coupland's qualities of authenticity

According to Coupland (2007), authenticity "could be a powerful concept to utilise" when analysing style. He notes that "Styling, for example, creates social meanings around personal authenticity and inauthenticity, when speakers parody themselves or present themselves as 'not being themselves'" (Coupland, 2007, p. 25). Studies that illustrate the ongoing and open-ended process of constructing "authenticity" showcase how linguistic resources, like opting for one language over another during a specific interaction, serve as a method to achieve authenticity when shaping identities or belonging to a community (Coupland, 2003, p. 417; also see Bucholtz, 2003; Cutler, 2003). Coupland (2003, pp. 418-419) provides a foundational sociolinguistic model for understanding how authenticity is recognised and claimed in contemporary culture. He identifies five key qualities:

1. Ontology (i.e., having an actual existence)
2. Historicity (i.e., longevity, durability and timelessness)
3. Systemic coherence (i.e., originating in some important social or cultural contexts)
4. Consensus (i.e., having a high degree of acceptance within a constituency)
5. Value (i.e., cultural value with prominent symbolic positions).

He argues that the criterion of value is deemed the most critical aspect of authenticity. It persists as the crucial element even when other criteria have weakened. Authentic things, whether objects, experiences, or individuals, often play a prominent role in culture and hold specific symbolic positions. They are seen as both culturally valuable and personally validating for those who recognise their significance. As Cavanaugh and Shankar (2014) argue, the discursive construction of "authenticity" goes beyond merely assigning labels or descriptions as authentic. Instead, it necessitates the precise delineation of authentic attributes, challenging others' definitions in favour of one's own, and engaging in contests over these definitions, all with the intention of generating economic value for specific items. This echoes Appadurai's (1986, p. 45) view that "the only way to preserve the function of these commodities in the prestige economies of the modern West is to complicate the criteria of authenticity." As he explains, the reason is that with the continuous advancement of technology, mass production of items that were previously restricted has become available to more consumers. As a result, consumers nowadays have a closer relationship with the source of these products, and middle-class consumers are now empowered to acquire them legally

and affordably. Hence, Appadurai (1986, p.45) observes that "there is a particular set of issues concerning authenticity and expertise that plagues the modern West, and this set, which revolves around the issues of good taste, expert knowledge, originality and social distinction, is especially visible in the domain of art and art objects."

5.1.2 Mapes's rhetorical strategies of elite authenticity

Not only in the realm of art and artistic artefacts, but also in various other domains, one can discern the intersection of authenticity and issues such as taste and distinction. Adopting Coupland's (2003) approach, Mapes (2018, 2021) examines the class status and privilege in food discourse. She argues that combining the discursive tropes of "elite" and "authenticity" as an overarching discourse creates a paradoxical potential that both produces distinction and asserts unpretentiousness. Moreover, she suggests that the apparent contradiction within elite authenticity enhances its effectiveness in concealing privilege (Mapes, 2021). She identifies five rhetorical strategies specific to producing a distinction in elite food practice (Mapes, 2021, p. 21):

1. Historicity (i.e., "a focus on origin, longevity and continuity, tradition")
2. Simplicity (i.e., "an attitude of 'less is more'; a minimalist aesthetic in design of food, space, and marketing; (performed) effortlessness")
3. Pioneer spirit (i.e., "a celebration of innovation, personal labour, adventurousness"),
4. Lowbrow appreciation (i.e., "a fascination with foods/environments associated with 'the poor': the working class, immigrants, rural areas")
5. Locality/Sustainability (i.e., "consistent references to (responsible) sourcing of ingredients, and/or environments and community practices").

Those strategies are interconnected, and a combination of them constructs the overarching discourse of elite authenticity that (re)produced and (dis)avowed distinction (Mapes, 2018, 2021). Based on her research, the pursuit of authenticity in food discourse is presented as natural, omnivorous, and egalitarian. However, this portrayal in food discourse conceals the production and maintenance of status, cultural capital, and "taste of luxury", as noted by Bourdieu (1984).

5.1.3 An integrated framework for analysing authenticity

By aligning and adapting the analytical frameworks of Coupland (2003) and Mapes (2018, 2021) to the context of Shanghai's sustainable fashion, this analysis identifies a set of interrelated

rhetorical strategies (presented in Table 5.1). This framework is used heuristically to dissect how the brands' organisational styling (Wee, 2015)—through promotional materials, social media content, retail space, and corporate events—works to construct and maintain the associated traits of authenticity.

Rhetorical Strategies	Description
High quality	Highlighting the rarity of the raw materials, the intensive manual labour, or particular crafting involved in the production processes, all manifested in the high-quality/ luxury textual and good performance of products
Uniqueness	An expression of a distinctive taste and personality; differentiating the products from mass-produced, ordinary consumer goods; highlighting the personal and emotional connection between the commodity and its owner
Locality	Referring back to the local, environmental-friendly and responsible sourcing of raw materials; also referring to environments and community practices
Authorisation	Invoking authority- the products require an infrastructure of expert authenticators (such as B-Corp, Better Cotton Initiatives, Global Organic Textile Standard, etc.) to establish and defend the status of eco-friendliness
Historicity	A focus on history, origin, tradition and longevity -the products, the raw materials, the production processes and even the buildings/stores that display those products should be durable and timeless
Naturalness	A celebration of natural materials which have an intrinsic claim to existence- e.g. animal furs or plants, born naturally rather than something artificial/synthetic or plant-based dyeing using natural plants as dyes

Table 5.1. Rhetorical strategies of Authenticity

5.1.4 Authenticity as cultural capital and concealed privilege

As revealed through the application of this framework, the function of this discursive work is the accumulation of what Bourdieu (1986) termed cultural capital. The discursive construction of "authenticity" is not an end in itself; it is a mechanism for creating value and distinction. This chapter demonstrates how "good taste" is presented as a natural attribute rooted in authentic values (e.g. sustainability, craftsmanship, ethical sourcing), rather than as a function of economic power. This process is fundamental to elite class formation, as Bourdieu (1984, p. 66) contends, "the capacity to produce and use symbolic goods, especially those regarded as the attributes of excellence, constitutes one of the key markers of 'class' and also the ideal weapon in strategies of

distinction." Thus, the discourse of authenticity transforms material commodities into symbolic goods, leveraging them in the strategic performance of class identity.

In this way, the discourse of authenticity serves to conceal privilege. The high cost of sustainable fashion is framed not merely as a price tag, but as the justified premium for authentic, ethical, and distinguished consumption. The analysis will show how the rhetorical strategies outlined in the integrated framework help turn material and economic capital into symbolic capital, solidifying the brand's position for itself and the class identity of its consumers within the elite circle of Shanghai.

5.2 Data overview

As explained in Chapter 4, I combine corpus-assisted discourse analysis with multi-sited ethnography in this project. This methodological combination aims to investigate whether and how these two approaches can be used in a complementary way to allow for methodological triangulation and provide a more comprehensive picture of the discourse under analysis. Subject to space limitations, this chapter focuses specifically on the findings related to the discourse of authenticity. Based on previous sociolinguistic literature, authenticity has become a valuable commodity that is both manufactured and performed, obscuring how status and taste are deliberately constructed and disseminated (Mapes, 2021). As seen in *naze naze*'s cell phone bag illustrated at the beginning of this chapter, this discourse is prominent within Shanghai's elite sustainable fashion. Ethnographic and corpus data of this project consistently confirm the recurrent and strategic use of "authenticity".

The data for this chapter comprises a diverse range of sources that capture the organisational styling (Wee, 2015) of three sustainable fashion brands: *klee klee*, *Norlha* and *Reclothing Bank*. As previously mentioned, organisational styling encompasses both internal (e.g. with employees) and external (e.g. with customers and other stakeholders) communication, through which organisations construct their identities (Wee, 2015). Specifically, ethnographic field notes and photographs document store visits to *Yudinist* (*Norlha*'s pop-up store in Shanghai), *Reclothing Bank*, and *klee klee*, detailing product displays, in-store exhibitions, and introductory texts on sustainability initiatives showcased in the store. Semi-structured interviews provide insights from industry insiders, including a *klee klee* marketing professional and *Norlha*'s sales manager, offering perspectives on branding strategies and consumer engagement. Media articles from ELLE

and CNN profile the founders of *Norlha* and *Reclothing Bank*, highlighting brand narratives and public perceptions. Additionally, *Norlha*'s WeChat articles showcase how the brand frames Tibetan aesthetics and heritage, while short videos on WeChat introduce *klee klee*'s *naze naze* project and store design, illustrating how brands integrate sustainability into spatial and visual storytelling. Together, this rich ethnographic data provides a multi-faceted perspective on the discourse of authenticity in the organisational styling of sustainable fashion, synthesising multimodal corporate messaging, publicly oriented media content, and my firsthand stakeholder engagement and retail environment observations.

For the convenience of data presentation from the corpus, this chapter focuses on the Corpus of WeChat Promotional Articles to report the findings regarding "authenticity". After systematically reading and categorising articles based on text types from the WeChat accounts of *klee klee* and *RISE*, articles within the same text type were collected and uploaded to *Sketch Engine* (Kilgarriff et al., 2014), a web-based platform for corpus analysis. Following the preliminary analysis of ethnographic data, I have identified that the discourse of authenticity is primarily associated with product information, including, but not limited to, raw materials, craftsmanship and the production process. The Promotional Corpus is more relevant to the discourse of authenticity than other sub-corpora, including only *klee klee*'s WeChat articles on brand profiles, product descriptions, and sales promotions. While other sub-corpora also contain authenticity-related keywords, they have distinct focuses: the Event Communication Corpus and the Profile Feature Corpus are particularly linked to the discourse of trust, and the Popular Science Corpus relates to the discourse of moderation; therefore, this chapter only presents the findings from the Promotional Corpus. During the data analysis stage, I examined the top 100 keywords in context by reviewing their concordance lines to reveal more detailed linguistic features from the data. In parallel, I continued to conduct ethnography, especially participant observation of online and offline events. In this regard, the interpretation of corpus results was informed by aggregated contextual data collected from the ethnography. To gain a brief understanding of how the brand represents itself on social media, I will start by presenting the findings of a *Word Sketch* of the most frequently occurring keyword in the corpus, "klee klee". *Word Sketch* is a tool on *Sketch Engine* which analyses a word's context to summarise its grammar and collocational behaviour, organised by grammatical relations like object, subject, and modifier.

5.3 Findings

5.3.1 The representation of *klee klee* in the text

"klee klee" ranks first in the keyword list, with its keyness score at 5486.31 (calculated by simple math), significantly higher than other keywords. A further *Word Sketch* analysis of the word shows more details about how it was used in the context. For my analysis, I examine the cases of collocates in which "klee klee" was used as a subject and possessive adjective to explore how the brand represented itself as an actor with actions, intentions, and responsibility similar to individual persons, and how it portrayed its products on WeChat.

In the total of 459 occurrences, "klee klee" is used as a subject in 54 cases. Figure 5.3 is a screenshot obtained from *Sketch Engine*, which shows a random sample list of 20 concordance lines, of which "klee klee" is the subject. When representing their activities, continuous or accomplished actions of *klee klee* are emphasised, which foregrounds their agency and achievement. Most of the right-sided (R1-R5) verb collocates (i.e., 带来-brings, 新增-has increased, 主导-leads, 调整了-revised, 开发-develops, 开发了-developed, 着手还原-started to bring back, 使用-employs) are material process types in terms of transitivity. Material processes can be understood as concrete actions with an outcome or effect (Thompson, 2013). Here, *klee klee*'s active role as a change-maker is foregrounded. For instance, the brand "**leads** the design of the handbag" (Line 7 "手袋由 *klee klee* **主导**设计"), "**started to bring back** the colour of nature" (Line 14 "**着手还原**自然的色彩"), and "**employs** the ozone laundry technique on denim" (Line 19 "**使用**牛仔臭氧水洗工艺"). Besides, some verb collocates are behavioural processes (i.e., 准备了-has prepared, 一直在尝试使-is trying to make, 一直在探索-is exploring, insists on using), and they mainly convey the ongoing efforts of the brand's commitment to sustainability. Notably, "一直" in Lines 15, 16, and 17 (meaning "all the time" literally) is an adverb indicating the progressive aspect in Chinese, showing *klee klee*'s perseverance in pursuing sustainability in raw materials and production processes. For example, *klee klee* "**is exploring** the possibility of environmental protection and sustainable lifestyle all the time" (Line 17 "**一直在探索**环保和可持续生活的可能性"). Apart from the material and behavioural processes, the mental process (i.e., 提倡-advocates, 关注-cares about/supports) also exists in the list. Mental processes can be

perceived as actions occurring within the internal world of the mind (Thompson, 2004). From the sample list, *klee klee* "**advocates** the rational consumption" (Line 2 "**提倡**理性消费") and "**cares about** the sustainable development of ethnic minority and community groups related to the clothing industry" (Line 20 "**关注**社会少数群体和行业相关群体的可持续发展"). In both instances, the emphasis was placed on promoting the brand's concept and engagement within the community rather than solely introducing the product.

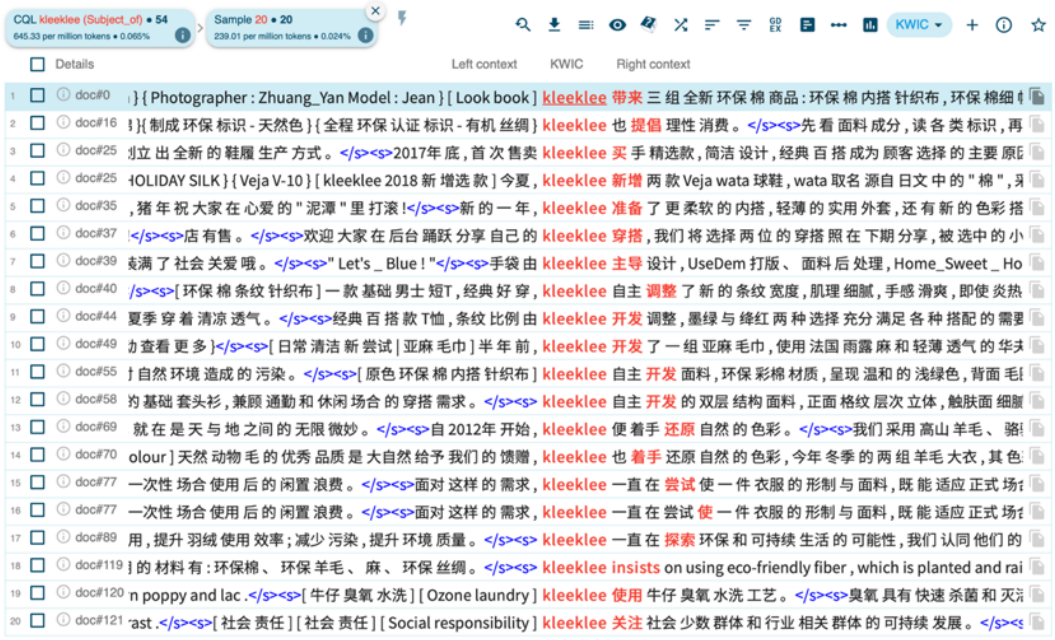

Figure 5.3. Concordance lines for "klee klee" as a subject

The transitivity analysis points to the broader objectives of product promotion on the brand's social media platform, including establishing a positive corporate identity and cultivating customer loyalty. The analysis results appear to support some observations made in earlier literature regarding the genres of annual and corporate social responsibility (CSR) reports published by large companies. For instance, based on Fuoli (2018), companies strategically adjust their linguistic stance to align with the communicative purpose of each report type. He notes that in CSR reports, firms depict themselves as committed and caring through frequent expressions of intention and desire. In contrast, in annual reports, they adopt a rational and detached tone towards the information provided to convey competence and resolve, marked by fewer stance expressions and a distinct use of *intend* (Fuoli, 2018). The representation of *klee klee* in the Promotional Corpus shows the features of both text types. It highlights its active role as a change-maker in sustainable

fashion, positioning the brand as both an innovator and an advocate. The frequent use of material process verbs (e.g., "develops", "leads", "employs") emphasises tangible actions and achievements, reinforcing the brand's agency in driving sustainability initiatives. Behavioural process verbs (e.g., "is exploring", "is trying") further underscore its ongoing commitment to sustainability. Additionally, mental process verbs (e.g., "advocates", "supports") reflect *klee klee*'s engagement with ethical consumption and community development. What differs from previous research in nuance is that, after expressing corporate commitment to ethical values, the text producer also provides knowledge, such as specific principles, for the audience to follow. For example, the remaining text in Line 2 intends to educate the consumer on being rational—"first look at the fabric composition and read the various types of labelling" ("先看面料成分, 读各类标识"). Here, the text producer uses the directives or the imperative mood, establishing a voice of expertise. While the content ostensibly promotes the awareness of rational consumption, *klee klee*'s customers, especially its regular ones, are presumably already well-versed in such principles. By reiterating these values, the brand engages in a process of performative validation. It publicly articulates values the audience already holds, not to instruct, but to recognise and affirm their existing consumer identity. This strategy acknowledges and endorses the "rational" behaviours customers already practice. Consequently, this reinforcement deepens the elite consumer's sense of shared values and allegiance, further solidifying their fandom and strengthening their identification with the *klee klee* brand community.

The second avenue I explored is the list "klee klee" used as a possessive adjective. I assumed that looking into the node word used as a possessive adjective has the potential to reveal qualities the brand attributes to itself and its products. When it was used as a possessive adjective, there was an extra "的" (used as an auxiliary in Chinese and used with an adjective or attributive phrase) followed by "klee klee". It is argued that a subtle sense of pride can be expressed by adding the auxiliary "的". Figure 5.4 displays the concordance lines in which "klee klee" is used as a possessive adjective. Among 13 cases in total, there are various collocates that come after "klee klee" (e.g. 买家秀图片-buyer's show photo, 代表产品线-signature collection, 基础单品-basic item, 有机棉-organic cotton, 百搭好物-versatile item, 家居系列-home section, 衣服-clothes, 店铺-store, 夏季积分活动-summer sales, 朋友-friends). Examining the concordance lines reveals additional details in the brand's portrayal of its products and those who purchased them. For

instance, in Line 1, *klee klee* invites its customers to send their **buyer's show photo** to the WeChat platform and share their own "unique dressing style" ("独有的穿衣风格"). When it comes to the products, its **signature collection** is "stylish while also offering a smooth and skin-friendly feel" (Line 4 "有型同时也可享受亲肤爽滑"), "not only follows three environmental standards but also in a classic and timeless style" (Line 2 "符合我们的三大环保原则, 同时款式经典, 跨越时间"), its **basic item** is "intended to have a high-fashion impact, even with minimal embellishments" (Line 3 "可以穿出时尚的效果, 即使没有太多的装饰"), and *klee klee's* Original Colour Collection and denim products are "**versatile items**" (Line 7 "百搭好物"). In other cases, some hyperbole-like words further add a layer of pride. For example, the products of *klee klee*'s **home section**, "whether it is loungewear or bedding", are all made of "100% eco-friendly materials" (Line 11 "不论是家居服还是床品,全部采用 100%环保"). Here, the property of naturalness is emphasised by the hyperbole-like phrase "100%". Apart from using explicit positive words and expressions, there are also implicit ways of describing its products. An illustration of this is in Line 5. The right context is that " '*klee klee*'s **clothes** must be worn to be truly appreciated' is just telling the truth" ("*klee klee* 的**衣服**一定要穿上身才知道"是句大实话). When introducing its double-knitted fabric made of eco-friendly cotton, the brand quotes comments from others (presumably its customers) and confirms that these words are truthful by admitting that the comment is "just telling the truth" ("大实话"). Who endorsed and left the comment remains unknown, but the branding message is clear: the products are of premium quality and must be experienced in person. One might also argue that the text producer suggests that the true hallmarks of *klee klee*'s high quality are fully appreciated only by those who purchase and wear its products. This message, however, is subtly conveyed and softened by the brand's casual and colloquial tone in social media content. Another case in point is in Line 8, "To tell you in secret, the raccoon velvet is the most frequently-touched fabric at *klee klee*'s **store**" ("悄悄告诉大家, 在 *klee klee* 的**店铺**里, 貉绒是触摸率最高的面料"). The original context does not explain why such a fact should be kept secret, but one possible reason might be to create a sense of intimacy between the brand and its customers—only close friends share secrets. Sharing this "fun fact" about the raw materials used in *klee klee*'s products directly shows the high quality of *klee klee*'s products and their popularity among customers.

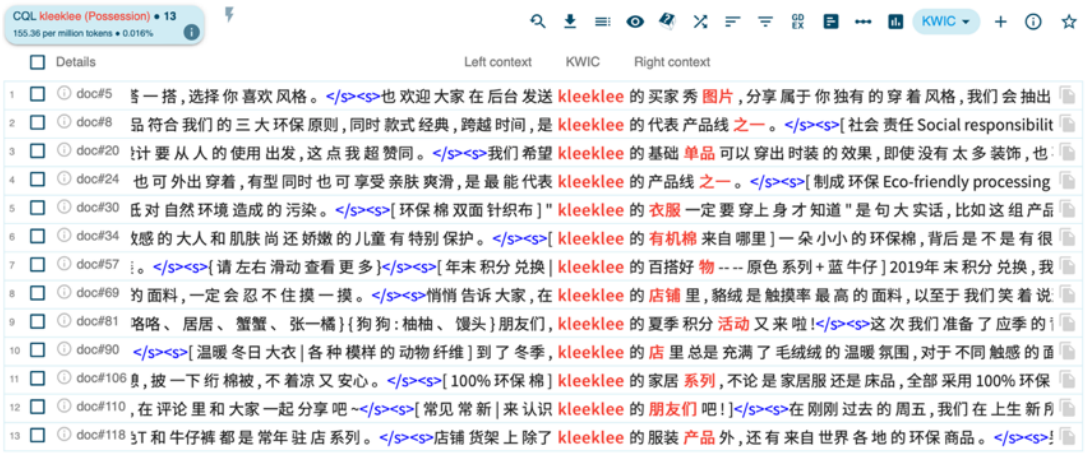

Figure 5.4. Concordance lines for "klee klee" as a possessive adjective

The linguistic patterns observed in *klee klee*'s use of possessive construction "klee klee's+[noun]" exemplify what Cavanaugh (2016) terms economic sociability: during production, circulation, and exchange, interactions that combine social and economic functions to create meaning and value. Through the strategic use of the possessive construction, the brand cultivates a sense of intimacy and pride, framing its products (e.g., "**signature collection**", "**organic cotton**" and "**home section**") and community (e.g., "friends", "buyer's show photo") as extensions of a shared identity. This is not merely descriptive language but a form of value-adding discourse, where stylistic choices (colloquial tone, hyperbole, "secret-sharing") reinforce social bonds while simultaneously elevating the perceived quality and exclusivity of the goods. By attributing qualities like "**100% eco-friendly materials**" and "**timeless style**" to its products, *klee klee* does more than promote its products; it integrates consumers into a community co-constructing value, where economic exchange becomes embedded in social relations. This practice reflects the neoliberal emphasis on curating the self through consumption (Urciuoli, 2008), as the brand's social media articles encourage customers to see their purchases as expressions of distinction and ethical alignment. *klee klee*'s linguistic practices illustrate economic sociability (Cavanaugh, 2016) by incorporating particular selves and social relationships into the economic sphere through interactions, transforming marketing discourse into opportunities for identity shaping and brand loyalty.

The corpus-assisted discourse analysis of the brand identity, as revealed in the *word sketch* analysis of the most frequent keyword "klee klee" in the Promotional Corpus, has uncovered several distinctive focuses of organisational styling within Shanghai's elite sustainable fashion on social media. These focuses provide heuristic textual evidence for identifying the rhetorical

strategies through multi-sited ethnography and further analysis of other keywords from the corpus. Together, those strategies discursively construct the "authenticity" and added value of products marketed as "sustainable" or "eco-friendly". In the following sections, I will present the findings of the analysis based on the six rhetorical strategies, accompanied by illustrative examples drawn from the overall data.

5.3.2 High quality

In the previous section, examples from the corpus data illustrate how *klee klee* promotes the premium quality of its products by encouraging customers to experience them in person (e.g., "*klee klee*'s clothes must be worn to be truly appreciated"). The analysis of the ethnographic data supplements this corpus finding: not only *klee klee*, but also other brands adopt the "feel the quality for yourself" rhetoric when introducing the texture of the fabric. The rhetorical strategy of "high quality" plays a significant role in communicating the brand's positioning to the public, associating sustainable fashion products with social status and good taste.

"High quality" in practice

In several cases from ethnographic data, emphasising the high quality of the products is sometimes more prominent than simply explaining the abstract concept of sustainability. This is because the quality is more straightforward and can be perceived directly by the customer. For example, Extract 5.1 is a vignette recorded during my fieldwork at Yudinist, a tea-based "lifestyle platform" shop hosting *Norlha*'s pop-up.

11 January 2023, *Yudinist* Store

在得知我的来意后，店员非常热心，主动向我介绍关于诺乐展的情况，还推荐我关注一下他们店铺的微信公众号，一般他们都会通过公众号宣传店铺近期的活动。我问店员为什么会和诺乐合作办一个这样的快闪店，店员说他们之间的合作是基于品牌理念的相似性，他们店的主理人和诺乐的创始人朋友，从去年开始每年诺乐都会在他们店里做快闪店的活动，两个品牌的顾客也比较相似——“都是对品质有比较高的追求，这些产品本身的质量非常好，很有质感，如果是懂一点面料的顾客，他们只要摸一下这个产品就能感受到…”

Upon learning my purpose, the shop assistant kindly introduced me to the *Norlha* pop-up shop. He also recommended that I follow their shop's official WeChat account, which would publicise recent activities. I asked the shop assistant why they would cooperate with *Norlha*. He said that their cooperation was based on the similarity of their brand value. The founder of *Norlha* is friends with their manager, and *Norlha* has opened a pop-up shop in their store every year since last year. He mentioned that their clientele was quite similar as well. - "They all require a relatively high level of quality. You know, the quality of these products from *Norlha* is exceptional. If you have some knowledge about fabrics, you could easily tell just by touching the material…."

Extract 5.1. Field note from the store visit, *Yudinist*, 11 January 2023

I decided to check out the *Yudinist*, as I had only visited *Norlha*’s pop-up at *klee klee*’s. I was curious why a shop not related to fashion would host a *Norlha* pop-up. The shop assistant provided an answer that cleared up my confusion. It does not matter what the item is, whether it be a scarf or a teapot; what matters is its high quality and the luxurious lifestyle it represents. First and foremost, the value of the products lies not in some intangible or abstract concepts but in the quality that can be felt and experienced. Nonetheless, the capability of recognising the product’s value has a certain threshold. Only those with some expertise have such capacity, and of course, only those who can afford the product can simultaneously possess the symbolic value. To provide another illustration, during the semi-structured interview on my first visit to *klee klee*’s Anfu Road store, Lin, then a member of the marketing and social media team, described the brand’s target demographic. Extract 5.2 presents a segment of her response.

9 December 2020, *klee klee* Anfu Road Store

Lin(Informant):[…]因为我们其实是做女装出生的，所以在衣服的版型和设计方面其实是有基础在的，一部分就是普通的客人，他觉得这个衣服穿着好看，然后他就会买；另外一个部分是，他可能进来了之后了解到可持续的这种概念，他可能觉得就是很想要了解或体验或支持一下，然后他也会进行购买；那我们大部分的客群就是收入可能是中等、中等以上，然后有一定经济实力，然后比较，就是具有事业性，或者是家境比较优渥的女性，但也只能说目前整个品牌的销售基础还是在大家对于产品的认可上，因为它是可持续而购买的人会比较少，但是会有很多人是因为买了这个衣服觉得它很舒适、很好穿，然后再去了解说这是一个可持续的品牌，然后我觉得它对于我们来说算是一个，就是目前来说感觉是一个标签吧。[…]

Trans: [...] We originally sold women's clothing, which inspired the style and design of our current clothes. Some customers buy our clothes for their style, while others come across our store and learn about sustainability. Perhaps they make purchases to know about our product, experience it, or support us. The majority of our customers are women with an income above average. They have access to economic resources through their careers or family wealth. I would say the current sales of the entire brand are still based on everyone's recognition of our products. Our clothes are primarily purchased for their comfort, a quality that we prioritise, with sustainability being a secondary consideration that customers develop later. At the moment, I think it's more like a label for us. [...]

Extract 5.2. Transcript from the interview with Lin, *klee klee* Anfu Road Store, 9 December 2020

Notably, the extract reveals that the brand prioritises product quality over sustainability in its conceptual framing. Lin believes the value of *klee klee*'s product lies more in its quality than in the "sustainability" label, and the texture of the product is an essential aspect of showcasing its worth. Once again, *klee klee*'s strategy for promoting "authenticity" clearly involves encouraging potential customers to engage in a tactile examination of product quality. The informant denies that sustainability is the primary reason customers buy the products from *klee klee*. Rather, she contends that customers are attracted to the brand primarily because of its style and superior quality. This preference signals the social status of elite consumers who purchase sustainable goods, as their taste for premium quality is underpinned by habitus, an internalised social structure cultivated over many years, that shapes and reflects class distinctions (Bourdieu, 1984).

Further, Lin's delineation of *klee klee*'s target demographic explicitly foregrounds gender and economic status, defining the ideal consumer as a woman with an above-average income, whose financial resources derive from professional success or intergenerational wealth. This gendered consumer profile aligns with broader patterns in sustainable fashion consumption. As Zhang et al. (2023) confirm, female Gen-Z consumers in China demonstrate a significantly higher propensity

to purchase sustainable fashion than their male counterparts—a finding that echoes earlier theories framing women as primary fashion innovators and influential taste-makers within their social circle (Summers, 1970; Bertrandias & Goldsmith, 2006).

While these trends have empirical support, *klee klee*'s promotional discourse sometimes uncritically reinforces the very traditional social roles that underpin this gendered consumption. In some cases, the brand situates women within a stereotypical caregiver paradigm, implicitly linking eco-conscious consumption to maternal duty and familial responsibility rather than autonomous choice or collective environmental ethics. This strategy is exemplified from the corpus data presented in Figure 5.5, an excerpt from the Promotional Corpus containing the search term "妈妈" (mum). The text producer advises, "[Available at *klee klee* Anfu Road store] When holding a baby, their skin may come into direct contact with the clothes of their mum. Additionally, babies may even bite their mum's clothes. Therefore, it is recommended that parents wear natural and eco-friendly clothes while holding their little ones to take care of their health."

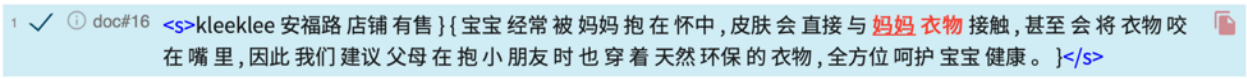

Figure 5.5. "妈妈衣物" (mum's clothes) in the original sentence

In the text, *klee klee* avoids direct gendered address but implicitly reinforces traditional roles by crafting a real-life scenario centred on a female caregiver, exclusively referred to as "mum" (despite using the gender-neutral term "parents" at the end of the text). This narrative conjures a sense of urgency and responsibility by evoking potential hazards to infant health, positioning the purchase of eco-friendly clothing as a maternal duty important for child safety. In doing so, the brand does not merely reflect a social reality but actively instrumentalises normative gender roles, framing sustainability not as a universal imperative but as a maternal obligation. While it might be commercially effective, this appeal ultimately commodifies caregiving and confines sustainable consumption to a traditionally feminine, domestic sphere. Furthermore, it must be clear that this strategy overlooks the significant economic and cultural barriers to sustainable fashion. The recommendation presupposes that consumers possess not only the specialised knowledge to authenticate eco-friendly products but also the financial means to acquire them. Thus, while *klee klee* markets itself on progressive values, its organisational styling perpetuates gender stereotypes and fails to acknowledge the inequality of access to the high-quality products. To promote the high

quality of their products, the elite sustainable fashion brands use gendered language and fear-based persuasion. This discursive practice reveals a fundamental tension within their ethical branding: a reliance on conventional, exclusionary narratives to drive sales, which exemplifies the problematic and contradictory ways in which they construct "authenticity".

Mapping "high quality" in the corpus

Analysis of the Promotional Corpus reveals that some keywords within the Top 100 list are associated with the rhetorical strategy for signalling "high quality". There are two distinct semantic focuses. One is on the tactile and material properties of products, exemplified by terms such as "挺括" (crisp and structured), "亲肤" (skin-friendly), and "沙爽" (breathable sandy). The other is on their practical functionality, illustrated through items like "内搭" (base layers), "套头衫" (pullovers), and "筒裤" (straight cut trousers). The lexical patterning reflects a strategic communication of value through both sensory appeal and wearable utility. To validate the importance of this rhetorical strategy in the brand's social media text, I examined the node words "肌理" (texture) and "针织布" (knitted fabric) in the corpus. Their quantitative data are presented in the table below.

Search Term	Frequency	Relative Frequency (per million tokens)	Keyness score	Collocates	Function
肌理 (texture)	71	848.49	376.77	"麦" (wheat ear pattern), "清晰" (clear), "微皱" (slightly wrinkled), "粗犷" (rough), "斜纹" (twill), "沙爽" (breathably sandy), "松软" (soft), "感" (feel), "提花" (jacquard), "表面" (surface)	Constructing Authenticity
针织布 (knitted fabric)	130	1553.57	1387.95	"针"(gauge), "薄棉"(light cotton), "圈圈"(loop), "双面"(double-sided), "上装" (top), "自主"(self-	Constructing Authenticity

		designed), “不同于”(unlike/different from), “粗细”(coarse and fine), “松软”(soft and fluffy), “条纹”(stripped)

Note: Where the list of collocates is extensive, only the top ten are presented here due to space constraints. Otherwise, the complete list if collocates is retained, though punctuation markers are excluded.

Table 5.2. Quantitative data for “肌理” (texture) and “针织布” (knitted fabric) in the Promotional Corpus

Among the relevant keywords, “肌理” (texture), which ranks 26th in the Top 100 list, anchors *klee klee*’s claims of quality in tangible terms, allowing audiences to intuitively grasp their material value. Its collocates, such as “麦” (wheat-ear pattern), “清晰” (defined), and “微皱” (slightly wrinkled), exemplify how texture is evoked through precise, sensory language rather than abstract assertions, implying superior materials and craftsmanship. Similarly, “针织布” (knitted fabric), ranked third, is contextualised by technical collocates such as “针” (gauge), “圈圈”(loop), and “双面” (double-sided), reinforcing a meticulous description and textural specificity. Through these lexical patterns, *klee klee* merges detailed descriptions of material qualities with evaluative language to cultivate an aesthetic of sophisticated effortlessness. This attention to material-semiotic subtlety shows how descriptive language does not merely represent but actively constructs the value and perception of physical textile, reflecting the concept of language materiality (Shankar & Cavanaugh, 2017), where discourse directly influences the economic and social worth of products.

Discursive patterns in detail

The rhetorical strategy of “high quality” aligns traditional artisanal values with the modern market’s niche demand for social distinction. To illustrate how this strategy is operationalised, the following examples present node words alongside their collocates within original sentence contexts.

Taking the node word “肌理” (texture) and its “collocate “微皱” (slightly wrinkled) (MI score= 8.88) as an illustrative case, all four instances in their original sentences are presented in Figure 5.6. The translation of the first case is, “Please scroll to view more items. [Green Cotton Crosshatch Cloth] Our green light cotton has been taken through a salt-shrinking finish to create a **slightly**

wrinkled effect on the surface, adding an extra touch to the **texture** and fun to the simple style". The second case is translated as "Please scroll to view more items. [White Shirt] The shirt fabric from Japan has a unique paper-like feel, with a **slightly wrinkled texture** that creates a sense of relaxation". The text details the production process or origin of the fabric, followed by a brief description of its texture and a personal assessment. Cases 3 and 4 share a common emphasis. Case 3 is translated as "The fabric has been salt-shrunk to give it a warm, lightweight surface with a **slightly wrinkled texture**", while the translation of Case 4 is "[Eco Cotton Light Cotton Fabric] It is a high-density woven fabric with high yarn density and high cotton quality; the fabric is lightly salted to give it a **slightly wrinkled texture**". As evidenced in Cases 1 and 2, the clothes exhibit "high quality" through a deliberately less formal style, where slight wrinkles are framed as marker of ease, relaxation, and warmth. In reality, however, this aesthetic of effortlessness is strategically constructed, requiring *klee klee* intentional appropriation of traditional craftsmanship and selective use of premium raw materials, as illustrated in Cases 3 and 4. This tension echoes Khan's (2013) argument that the performance of "ease" often conceals privilege and resources, naturalising what is in fact a costly and carefully curated embodiment of distinction. Thus, while *klee klee* emphasises the innate ease of its products, it simultaneously reveals and markets the considerable effort invested in creating such value, perpetuating a cycle where aesthetic effortlessness reinforces social exclusivity.

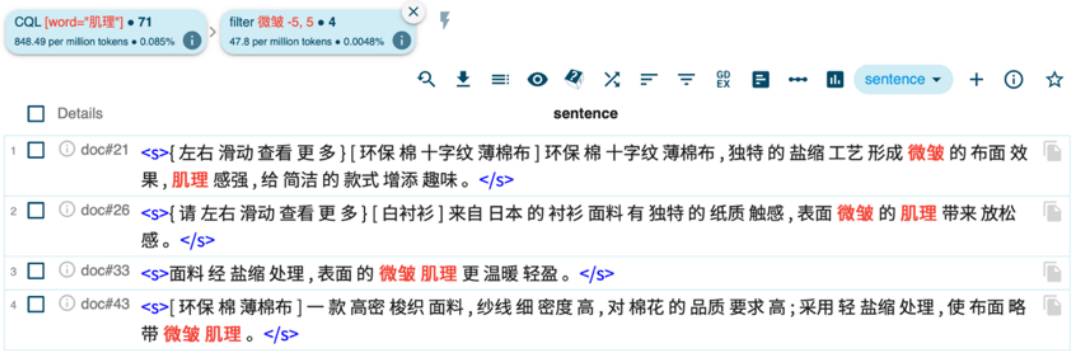

Figure 5.6. "肌理" (texture) with "微皱" (light-wrinkled) as a collocate in the original sentences

Figure 5.7 presents the original sentence of the node word "针织布" (knitted fabric) and its collocate "针" (gauge), which share an MI score of 9.01 and serve to specify particular aspects of the fabric's production process. The first and second sentences are the same (the text in the parentheses is a subheading, so "knitted fabric" occurs twice in this sentence). The sentence is

translated as “Please scroll to view more items. [Green Cotton Double-sided **Knitted Fabric** with Coarse and Fine **Gauge**] The double-sided **knitted fabric** with coarse and fine **gauge** on the surface is thick and warm. The classic cardigan style is suitable for home or going out. There is a pocket inside the left chest for cards and other valuables. The pullover can be worn by itself or as an inner, and the zipper is a plus”. The translation of the third case is, “[Green Cotton Double-**Knitted Fabric** with Fine and Coarse **Gauge**] Green cotton origin: Xinjiang. This double-knitted fabric, with yarn of varying thicknesses, is delicate and soft on the inside and fluffy and three-dimensional on the outside”. The last one is translated as “[For an Autumn That Calls for Hoodies] [Green Cotton Double-**Knitted Fabric** with Fine and Coarse **Gauge**] Green cotton origin: Xinjiang. When the autumn wind blows, put on the hat of the hoodie. When walking outdoors in the autumn, whether with your dog or on the way to the gym, it is helpful to protect yourself from the wind. A hoodie is perhaps the most frequently used clothing item in spring and autumn”.

Figure 5.7. “针织布” (knitted fabric) with “针” (gauge) as a collocate in the original sentences

The three cases above illustrate the patterns through which *klee klee* introduces its products in the promotional text. Key features, such as eco-friendly material sources, textural qualities and artisanal craftsmanship, are often highlighted in subheadings, followed by elaborative descriptions. In several instances, geographical origin (e.g. “产地”) appears as a prominent collocate of “针织布” (knitted fabric), reinforcing traceability and authenticity. Descriptions of tactile experience (e.g. “thick and warm”, “delicate and soft”, and “fluffy and three-dimensional”) further underscore product quality through embodied, sensory language. Beyond material properties, *klee klee* situates its garments within specific lifestyle contexts, suggesting versatility across scenarios such as relaxing at home (in Cases 1 and 2), walking outdoors in autumn, caring for pets, or visiting the

gym (in Case 4). This emphasis on adaptability does not merely demonstrate functional utility; it also reflects a curated projection of refined, multi-faceted living. As Bourdieu (1984, p. 200) observed, middle- and upper-middle-class consumption often blurs boundaries between the internal realms of "at home" and the external sphere "for others", as well as between the daily (quotidian) and special occasions (extra-quotidian). Food and clothing are invested with "categories of form and appearance" for them. This means there is a heightened emphasis on style, presentation, and external perceptions, even in everyday aspects like food and clothing. Food becomes not just about nourishment but also about aesthetic and social signalling. Similarly, clothing transcends mere functionality; it becomes a way to communicate status, taste, and identity. By aligning its products with such values, *klee klee* not only markets functionality but also invites alignment with a class-specific lifestyle, effectively enabling customers to see themselves within the brand's discursive construction of social distinction and environmental consciousness.

5.3.3 Uniqueness

References to distinctive taste and personal style frequently occur across *klee klee*'s promotional texts and organisational styling efforts. For example, a special feature on ELLE[1] profiling *Norlha*'s founder, later shared on the brand's WeChat account, showcased her philosophy of style: "I do not simply opt for well-known brands, but rather find pleasure in creating my unique style. I enjoy incorporating objects, jewellery, and prints from different eras, regardless of their cost or renown. […]." The articulation of curated individuality reflects the founder's perspective on developing one's taste. Also, it resonates discursively with the brand's audience, reinforcing an alignment between personal distinction and the brand's aesthetic values. Such a connection finds further reinforcement in the styling practices observed during ethnographic fieldwork, to which I now turn.

"Uniqueness" in practice

The multi-sited ethnography reveals explicit emphasis on product and brand uniqueness. As *Norlha*'s sales manager explained during a phone interview, the uniqueness of the products arises

[1] ELLE is a globally recognised fashion and lifestyle magazine, initially founded in France in 1945. It covers fashion, beauty, culture, and contemporary issues, catering to an audience interested in style and modern living. With editions published in over 40 countries, ELLE has a significant influence on global fashion discourse, featuring interviews with designers, trend reports, and celebrity features. The magazine blends high fashion with accessible style insights, making it a key platform for shaping and reflecting fashion and cultural trends worldwide (Elle, n.d.).

from the handmade nature of the items and their specific cultural and geographical origins. Since the informant did not want to be recorded, detailed notes were taken during the conversation. Extract 5.3 presents a segment of the notes, which illustrates how the brand articulates its defining characteristics. Specifically, my interview prompt was designed to elicit the informant's perception of brand value—essential features that differentiate *Norlha* from competitors. In response, the informant emphasised that the brand's most distinctive feature lies in its products being "purely hand-made", positioning them in opposition to industrial mass-production.

17 March 2021, Phone interview

Qin (Researcher): 您觉得 Norlha 的价值具体体现在何处?

Trans: What does value mean to you concerning Norlha?

Daoji (Informant):

1. 纯手工

Trans: Purely hand-made

2. 不是一种商业理念，它强调的是一种循环，这个与佛教理念也有关。Norlha 经营得到的利益都会回馈到本地人，改善他们的家庭经济。而且这个项目从开始就打算一直做下去的，不是说创始人赚到钱之后就离开了，他们也一直与牧民们一起生活在这里。

Trans: Norlha is not just a business idea but a concept that emphasises the cycle, which is also related to Buddhist philosophy. The profits generated by Norlha are given back to the local people to improve their family economy. The founders have been living with the herders since the beginning of the project, and their intention was never to make money and then leave but rather to continue the project and support the local community.

3. 产品本身的品质，Norlha 工作坊坐落在牧区，这样一个原始的环境，但定位却是欧洲的高端市场，从商品产地到市场的联系是非常直接的，这是由于它本身的魅力，吸引了市场。Norlha 的产品有着不一样的款式，它在设计上融合了藏族元素，又有国际化的经营管理团队，是原始产品国际化、民族化的结果。

Trans: Norlha workshop is located in a pastoral area, which is a primitive environment. However, Norlha has positioned itself in the high-end market in Europe, thanks to its own charm that attracts the market. The quality of the products is exceptional, as the goods are sourced directly from the origin to the market. Norlha's products have a unique style that blends Tibetan elements with an international management team. This is the original result of the product's internationalisation and ethnicisation.

Extract 5.3. Note from the phone interview with Daoji, 17 March 2021

Moreover, the informant highlighted the social value *Norlha* generates within the local community, a feature that distinctly sets it apart from conventional profit-oriented enterprises. He stressed that *Norlha* is not simply a business project; its value lies in contributing to the local society. By linking the brand's sustainable business model to Buddhist principles of reincarnation, he provided a spiritual justification for its mission, noting that profits are reinvested to enhance living conditions for the Tibetan community. He further emphasised the long-term nature of the project, noting that "the founders have been living with the herders since the beginning of the project" and remain committed to expanding the workshop to ensure ongoing support for the community. Thus, *Norlha*'s uniqueness is discursively constructed through its social value (i.e., visible, local impact) and cultural value (i.e., a business philosophy deeply influenced by the Buddhist worldview).

The final key point the informant mentioned centred on product quality and market positioning, underscoring how *Norlha*'s distinctive "charm" enables it to appeal to high-end European markets despite its origins in a remote and "primitive" (原始) region. In Chinese, the term 原始 carries a range of connotations: it can neutrally signify originality and authenticity (e.g., 原始森林 "primaeval forest"), critically imply underdevelopment or backwardness (e.g., 原始社会, "primitive society" and 原始的生活方式 "primitive way of life), or romanticise natural purity and harmony (e.g. 原始美, "primitive beauty"). In the informant's narrative, all three dimensions converge. *Norlha*'s charm is framed as emerging from the untouched Qinghai-Tibetan plateau, yet refined through "an international management team". This rhetorical move strategically positions the brand between two imagined geographies: one primitive, pure, and culturally authentic, and the other modern, industrial, and commercially sophisticated. By discursively layering these geographic and cultural contrasts, the brand enhances its perceived uniqueness and market value.

The informant's account of uniqueness can be critically analysed through the theoretical frameworks of Orientalism (Said, 2014) and the commodification of ethnicity (Meiu et al., 2020). The references to "living with the herders" and Buddhist-inspired motives romanticise Tibetan culture and simplify complex spiritual principles into marketable attributes. This framing may inadvertently obscure structural economic disparities and overstate the inclusivity of local participation. By positioning cultural authenticity and community reinvestment as forms of ethical capital, *Norlha* justifies its premium market positioning. However laudable its social intentions

are, the rhetorical strategy of "uniqueness" often functions to differentiate the brand within a niche consumer segment rather than to fundamentally challenge neoliberal market logics. The repeated portrayal of Tibet as "primitive" and "untouched" perpetuates Orientalist binaries—contrasting a mystical, timeless East with a rational, modern West—and aligns with what Meiu et al. (2020, pp.1-2) term the "commodification of difference", the process by which ethnic or cultural identity is turned into a marketable commodity within late capitalist economies. Although *Norlha*'s model generates tangible economic benefits for the local community, it also reduces living cultural and spiritual practices to aestheticised brand assets. This echoes Meiu et al. (2020)'s observation that identity itself becomes a *corporatised resource* under neoliberalism, a means of generating profit through the sale of heritage, symbolism, and Otherness. It reinforces asymmetries between the "primitive" producer and the "modern" consumer. The commodification of difference, even when well-intentioned, often perpetuates the very asymmetries it aims to dismantle. This dynamic, as Meiu et al. (2020) argue, is common in neoliberal economies where identity is both a product and a prison.

Mapping "uniqueness" in the corpus

Although the Top 100 keyword list contains no direct semantic references to "uniqueness", a closer analysis of collocates associated with "针织布" (knitted fabric) and "肌理" (texture), two keywords discussed earlier on "high quality", revealed two significant markers of distinctiveness: "不同于" (unlike), which modifies "针织布", and "独特" (unique), which collocates with "肌理". To further investigate the rhetorical strategy of "uniqueness" in the brand's social media discourse, I specifically extracted and examined concordance lines containing the node words "不同于" and "独特" across the corpus. Quantitative data from the corpus are presented in the table below.

Search Term	Frequency	Relative Frequency (per million tokens)	Collocates	Function
不同于 (unlike)	9	107.56	"常规" (conventional), "针织布" (knitted fabric), "牛仔" (denim), "的" (a possessive, attributive, and nominalising particle)	Constructing Authenticity

独特 (unique)	29	346.57	“质感” (textural quality), “肌理”(texture), “还” (still/yet), “面料”(fabric), “使用” (to use/usage), “有”(to have), “棉”(cotton), “一”(a), “的” (a possessive, attributive, and nominalising particle), “是”(to be)	Constructing Authenticity

Note: Where the list of collocates is extensive, only the top ten are presented here due to space constraints. Otherwise, the complete list if collocates is retained, though punctuation markers are excluded.

Table 5.3. Quantitative data for “不同于” (unlike) and “独特” (unique) in the Promotional Corpus

The rhetorical strategy of “uniqueness” differentiates *klee klee*’s products from mass-produced, consumer goods, a strategy quantitatively evidenced by the high MI score of 10.96 between the node word “不同于” (unlike) and its strongest collocate “常规” (ordinary/conventional). Closer examination of concordance lines containing “不同于” reveals a contextual emphasis on the rarity and distinctiveness of the brand’s materials in comparison to ordinary garments or fabrics such as knitted fabric and denim (other two frequent collocates of “不同于”). Similarly, the top two collocates of “独特” (unique) are “质感”(textual quality) and “肌理”(texture), with MI scores of 8.23 and 6.93, respectively. These terms further reinforce the uniqueness by accentuating superior material performance and premium quality, consistently framed through positive evaluative language.

Discursive patterns in detail

The rhetorical strategy of “uniqueness” enables the tastemakers within elite sustainable fashion to deploy symbolic authority over aesthetic valuation, determining which features constitute legitimacy and value. This process frequently involves the cultural appropriation of traditional crafting techniques, particularly those originating from ethnic minority groups, which are strategically used to construct discourse of authenticity and rarity around the products. To examine how this strategy is discursively operationalised, the following analysis draws on corpus data, investigating node words and their collocates within original textual contexts. Moreover, informed by ethnographic insights from earlier interviews with the informant from *Norlha*, a supplementary multimodal discourse analysis of the brand’s social media articles is provided.

Take “常规” (conventional), the top 1 collocate of “不同于” (unlike) as an example. Figure 5.8 is a screenshot displaying the original sentences where the collocates can be found. The translation of Case 1 is, “This season, *klee klee* has taken a new approach to eco-friendly silk fabrics. Together with our fabric supplier, we have developed a new eco-friendly silk double-knitted fabric, which has a low-profile matte finish and good elasticity, **unlike** the bright surface of **conventional** silk”. The translation of Case 2 is, “Please scroll to view more items. [Light Jersey Denim] **Unlike** the texture of **conventional** denim, the thin knitted denim fabric, which was applied with the indigo-dyed technique, is soft against the skin and has good stretch and drape”. Case 3 is translated as “**Unlike** a **conventional** crewneck sweatshirt, the high-neck design offers a more sophisticated sense of proportion and a higher fashion quotient, while also providing relatively good warmth for early spring wear”. The first two cases contrast *klee klee*’s knitted fabric and other common ones by pointing out the uniqueness of the material. Features such as “a low-profile matte finish”, “good elasticity”, and “good stretch and drape” are depicted as unexpected and innovative in the text. Meanwhile, the third case highlights the design of *klee klee*’s sweatshirt, by contrasting its high-neck design with a more regular crewneck one. The product is unique in that it successfully marries high-fashion aesthetics with practical utility.

As Bourdieu (1984, p. 66) contends, the capacity to employ and shape “symbolic goods”, particularly those regarded as emblems of excellence, serves as a key marker of social class. In the fashion industry, text producers strategically link objective material properties such as glossy or matte finishes, stiff or soft textures, and crewneck or high-neck designs to subjective evaluative frameworks, including conventional versus unconventional, high-profile versus low-profile, and refined versus unrefined aesthetics, as well as notions of proportion and style acuity. Through such discursive practices, the text producers actively construct and disseminate culturally contingent ideals of “good taste” to their audiences. In doing so, these promotional communications participate in defining and legitimising new standards of beauty and style within the field—a process that, while seemingly aesthetic, ultimately reinforces social hierarchies.

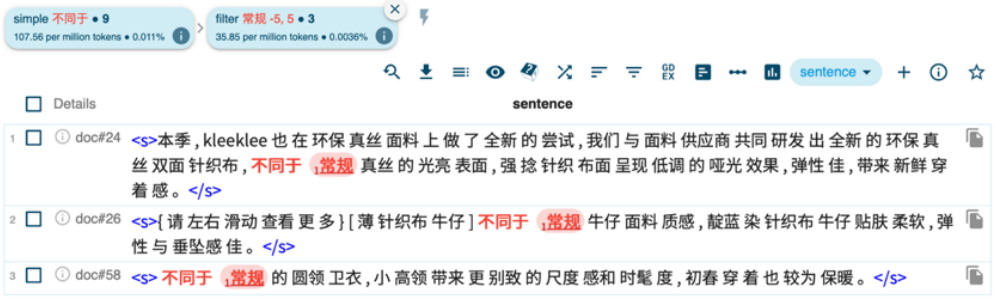

Figure 5.8. “不同于” (unlike) with “常规” (conventional) as a collocate in the original sentences

To provide another case in point, the corpus data reveals that the node word “独特” (unique) occurs strategically and frequently with the collocates “质感” (textual quality) and “肌理” (texture) to construct a material-based discourse of distinction. Figure 5.9 presents the original sentences of these top two collocates. For instance, in Cases 1 and 2, phrases like “质感独特” (unique textural quality) are used to describe J-Mesh fabric (made from local jute and recycled cotton), linking “uniqueness” to sustainability and functionality such as thermoregulation. Similarly, in Case 3, “肌理独特” (unique texture) is applied to traditional Japanese *washi* paper to underscore cultural heritage and performance qualities like durability and waterproofness. As shown in Case 4 describing wool-cotton blends, “独特的质感” (unique textural quality) links “uniqueness” with physical comfort and structural integrity. Through these expression patterns, “uniqueness” becomes tangible and measurable, conceived not as an abstract quality but as an emergent property of material excellence, artisanal craftsmanship, and eco-conscious production. This rhetoric supports a brand narrative that elevates functional and ethical attributes, such as breathability, anti-pilling, and handmade techniques, into markers of exclusivity and cultural authenticity.

Figure 5.9. “独特” (unique) with “质感” (textual quality) and “肌理” (texture) as collocates in the original sentences

However, the strategy of "uniqueness" raises critical questions regarding the commodification of cultural heritage and sustainability, as traditional techniques and ecological values are strategically repackaged as distinctive taste targeting elite consumers. Consider: "Japanese traditional 'washi' paper has a unique texture. It is lightweight, abrasion-resistant and water-resistant, so how can we not develop this precious traditional craft?". Here, the material qualities of the fabric are explicitly highlighted to underscore its uniqueness, while its origin and historical significance further enhance its perceived value. The use of the Japanese term "washi" serves to authenticate and enhance the product's appeal, embedding it within a narrative of craftsmanship and exclusivity. By framing itself as a brand that recognises and actively promotes such traditional techniques, *klee klee* adopts an assertive and prideful tone that is reinforced through rhetorical devices such as rhetorical questions. This approach not only celebrates the integration of heritage crafts into modern production but also establishes the brand as a curator of cultural and aesthetic distinction, aligning with Bourdieu's notion of "symbolic goods" as tools of social differentiation.

For example, a WeChat promotional article titled "*Norlha*'s beauty is unique" ("诺乐的美是独特的美") explicitly attributes the brand's distinctiveness to its handcrafted production process (Extract 5.4). Note the positive evaluation of the products hand-made by craftsmen that deliver "the warmth of their hands and dedicated attention" ("手心的温暖和专一的目光"). The spotlight is moved from the product itself to the human labour behind it. While acknowledging the limited use of traditional looms, the text underscores that the weaving remains reliant on manual skills, ensuring that each product bears the unique imprint of the individual artisan, to the point where it is poetically suggested that variations occur because "each artisan breathes differently". Much like the "100% eco-friendly" claim discussed earlier, the phrase functions as strategic hyperbole, intensifying the perception of exclusivity and irreplicability central to *Norlha*'s brand narrative.

手工捻线，手工编织一直是诺乐工匠引以为傲的出品，因为每一件作品都荷载着她们手心的温度和专一 的目光。哪怕那些非手工捻线的作品，每一件都是如此独一无二。因为它们是在传统的纺织机上由工匠一经一纬 手工编织而成。只要每位工匠的呼吸气息不一样，便没有两件完全相同的诺乐作品。

Hand-twisting and hand-knitting have always been the pride of Norlha artisans, as each piece carries the warmth of their hands and their dedicated attention. Even the pieces that are not hand-twisted are unique. They are unique because the artisans hand-woven them on traditional looms, warp and weft by hand. As long as each artisan breathes differently, no two pieces of Norlha are exactly the same.

Extract 5.4. Texts published on *Norlha*'s WeChat account, 24 December 2021

As evidence in Figure 5.10, a screenshot from *Norlha*'s WeChat article titled "Have you ever seen how beautiful Tibetan stripes are?" ("你见过藏民的条纹有多美吗?"), the brand combines product promotion with an introduction to traditional Tibetan costume. The primary aim is to showcase the uniqueness of *Norlha*'s long striped blazer, emphasising features such as its fabrication from "GOTS certified organic cotton, hand-woven and sewn by *Norlha* artisans" ("以GOTS 验证的有机棉花为素材, 由诺乐工匠手工编织布料及缝制"). The subheading proclaims: "The beauty of the Tibetans is the beauty of nature, and the aesthetics of the Tibetans are marvellous" ("藏民的美是自然的美, 藏民的审美观令人赞叹"). Notably, the text repeatedly references Tibetans and positively evaluates their aesthetics as inherently natural. Below the subheading, two photos show models gazing directly at the viewer. As Machin and Mayr (2012) suggest, such a gaze can acknowledge the viewer's presence and convey intentionality. Here, the models' neutral expressions paradoxically evoke a sense of accessibility to a distant, "primitive" world. Accompanying captions detail the cultural significance of strips in Tibetan dress, explaining their functional and decorative roles within traditional nomadic life. The translation of the caption is: "Stripes are a common feature in Tibetan clothing. In Western Tibet, people use striped fabrics to wrap around their waists, which serves the dual purpose of protecting their waists and backs. The herders who wander around the high plains of Tibet use striped felt to decorate their heavy, woollen Tibetan robes. "

Figure 5.10. Photos published on *Norlha*'s WeChat article, 21 August 2021

Through this curated representation, the local Tibetan community is rendered culturally and geographically distant—deliberately constructed as "the Other" in contrast to the presumed urban, Han Chinese or Western "Self". Again, this strategic essentialisation echoes what Meiu et al. (2020) term the commodification of difference, wherein ethic identity is sanitised, packaged, and marketed as a source of authenticity and exclusivity. *Norlha*'s discourse, while celebrating Tibetan aesthetics, effectively appropriates cultural symbols such as stripes, craftsmanship, and the association with nature to add symbolic value to its products. This process exemplifies how marginalised cultures are homogenised and turned into luxury commodities, reinforcing what Bourdieu would recognise as hierarchies of taste and cultural capital.

However, such branding raises ethical questions regarding agency and power: who benefits from this narrative? While *Norlha* creates economic opportunities for local artisans, it also risks

reducing complex cultural practices to aestheticised selling points. The romanticised portrayal of Tibetans as "close to nature" perpetuates a timeless, exotic image that may ultimately reinforce, rather than subvert, colonial patterns of representation and consumption. Thus, even as the brand invites consumers to appreciate Tibetan culture, it does so within a neoliberal framework that privileges market logic over genuine cultural reciprocity or structural equity.

5.3.4 Locality

Building on the discursive construction of "uniqueness" through material and cultural distinction, another key rhetorical strategy employed by high-end sustainable fashion brands is that of "locality". "Locality" denotes the emphasis on locally sourced, environmentally responsible raw materials and ethically embedded production practices. This approach is often manifested through public commitment to corporate social responsibility (CSR), such as *Norlha*'s stated pledge that "care for our employees and concern for the environmental impact of our production is embedded in every piece of work." Similar to the rhetorical strategy of "uniqueness", which draws value from cultural specificity and aesthetic exclusivity, "locality" establishes brand legitimacy through stories of ecological ethics and community engagement—successfully turning geographic and moral distinctiveness into concrete signs of quality and integrity.

"Locality" in practice

During my store visits to local sustainable brands, I noticed many examples of corporate social responsibility initiatives embedded directly into the store spaces. A clear instance is the clothing donation box stationed outside the *Reclothing Bank*, as shown in Figure 5.11. This is not just a standalone charity drop-off; it is part of a structured partnership with a non-governmental organisation called "同心互惠" (Tongxin Huhui), which translates to "one heart, mutual benefit." The process goes beyond simple donation: clothes are collected and repurposed by women from disadvantaged regions, who receive training to transform the material into new products such as quilts. According to an interview with the brand's founder, Zhang Na, published on *Huanqiu.com*, the broader mission is educational and economic, providing skills and support to female migrant workers, unemployed women, and those in rural communities to help improve their livelihoods ("设计师张娜: '再造衣银行'创始人" [Designer Zhang Na: Founder of the brand *Reclothing Bank*], 2013). In that sense, the brand communicates its CSR mission through discursive media

reports while also demonstrating it through tangible, on-the-ground devices like the donation box, creating a cohesive link between narration and action.

Figure 5.11. Clothing donation box located outside the *Reclothing Bank* store, 12 January 2023

Similarly, *klee klee* uses multiple communication channels to showcase its CSR initiative, the *naze naze* project. As briefly mentioned at the start of this chapter, the project was launched in 2015, and the *naze naze* Textile Workshop was officially founded in 2020. Each year, *klee klee* visits Dulongjiang Township in Yunnan to conduct follow-up interviews with the project's participants, Dulong female weavers, and then presents these findings in an exhibition at its two stores in Shanghai. In 2022, due to COVID travel restrictions, the *klee klee* team was unable to conduct on-site research and moved the follow-up activities online. This unusual situation resulted in a differently designed in-store exhibition. At the beginning of 2023, I resumed offline fieldwork and documented the exhibition's format and content. Using the Anfu Road store as an example, the overall exhibition demonstrated increased interactivity compared to previous versions. As is shown in Figure 5.12, a table placed near the store entrance displayed not only the annually printed *naze naze* project reports and posters but also a metallic tray filled with colourful sticky notes carrying messages from customers to the weavers. The wall behind the table featured bilingual (Chinese and English) introductions to the *naze naze* project. Opposite this wall, a large display

consisted of multiple panels, each printed with portraits and basic information about the weavers (Due to privacy considerations, the photo of this wall is not included here). These panels provided bilingual self-introductions, covering name, personal interests, age, and the number of years each woman had participated in the project.

Figure 5.12. *naze naze* exhibition at *klee klee*'s Anfu Road store, 11 January 2023

From the exhibition design of *klee klee*'s store, the rhetorical strategy of "locality" is discursively constructed to bridge geographical and cultural distances, creating an intimate, tangible connection between the urban consumer in Shanghai and the rural weavers in Yunnan. The exhibition does not merely report on a distant CSR project; it actively constructs a simulated sense of place within the retail environment. By featuring portraits, bilingual self-introductions, and personal details of the Dulong women, the exhibit humanises abstract beneficiaries, presenting them as distinct individuals with names, interests, and years of dedication. Meanwhile, the tray of colourful customer messages for the weavers acts as a direct, material channel for engagement, fostering a participatory community that transcends physical separation. Consequently, even when an in-person visit to Dulongjiang was impossible, the brand effectively curated a localised experience, making the remote workshop feel immediately present and personal within the cosmopolitan context of its Shanghai store.

This sophisticated use of "locality" by *Reclothing Bank* and *klee klee* in their organisational styling exemplifies a broader rhetorical strategy within Shanghai's elite fashion industry. This approach can be conceptualised as a process whereby, as Blum (2017, p. 9) observes, "the indexicality of local exceeds its semantic meaning of location and indexes moral and aesthetic qualities." Within the city's high-end retail spaces, references to remote regions like Dulongjiang or collaborations with non-governmental organisations like Tongxin Huhui were not just presented as geographical facts but as symbols of authenticity, ethical integrity, and sustainability. This rhetorical strategy effectively constructs a social distinction, creating a dichotomy between sensible, moral consumer "insiders" who understand and value this narrative and an irresponsible "rest". Consequently, the rhetorical approach of emphasising "locality" can sometimes transform rural livelihoods and ethical concerns into a refined aesthetic experience, potentially commodifying them. The "local" is becoming a branded attribute that justifies premium pricing and reinforces the moral identity of the cosmopolitan consumer. In the end, while these corporate initiatives may bring economic benefits to communities, their framing within the retail environment reinforces the consumer's elitist status, rendering ethical consumption a form of cultural capital that is accessible and understandable only to elite consumers.

Mapping "locality" in the corpus

Within the top 100 keywords of the Promotional Corpus, only two terms, "安第斯" (The Andes) and "棉农" (cotton farmer), establish a direct semantic link to "locality". However, a more revealing pattern emerges from an analysis of multi-word terms. This examination uncovers several phrases that exhibit stronger associations with the concept, including "环保棉产地" (origin of eco-friendly cotton), "棉产地" (cotton origin), "羊毛产地" (wool origin), "苎麻产地" (ramie origin), "安第斯高山幼羊驼毛" (Andean highland young alpaca wool), and "云南红茶茶叶" (Yunnan black tea leaves). This pattern prompted a focused analysis on the frequently occurring term "产地" (origin). An investigation of its collocates and concordance lines revealed a consistent rhetorical pattern: the term is mainly used to introduce the geographical source of materials. This finding necessitated a closer examination of the original context.

Parallel analysis of the keyword list further indicates that *klee klee*'s promotional strategy extends beyond its own CSR initiatives to strategically frame its business partners (e.g., "Veja",

“诺乐”/*Norlha*, and “TANGENTGC”) as models of social and environmental responsibility. By characterising these collaborators as “friends”, the brand constructs a narrative of profound alignment in values, emphasising a shared commitment to sustainability. To support the role of the “locality” as a rhetorical strategy within the brand’s social media discourse, the following subsection will centre on a detailed analysis of two node words: “产地” (origin) and “Veja”. The analysis will investigate their occurrences in the corpus, supplemented by the context in which they were originally posted on the social media platform. The quantitative data for these two node words are presented in the table below.

Search Term	Frequency	Relative Frequency (per million tokens)	Keyness score	Top 10 Collocates	Function
产地 (origin)	214	2557.42	140.514	“新疆” (Xinjiang), “棉” (Cotton), “中国” (China), “土耳其” (Turkey), “环保” (eco-friendly), “请” (please), “印度” (India), “针织布” (knitted fabric), “左右”(left and right), “羊毛” (wool)	Constructing Authenticity
Veja	41	489.97	489.21	“球鞋” (sneakers), “ASF” (Ateliers Sans Frontières), “工厂” (factory), “法国” (France), “合作” (cooperation), “Veja”, “以” (primarily functions as a preposition meaning “by means of” or “using”, introducing the method, basis, or standard behind an action), “开始” (started), “品牌” (brand), “制作” (made/production)	Constructing Authenticity
Note: Where the list of collocates is extensive, only the top ten are presented here due to space constraints. Otherwise, the complete list if collocates is retained, though punctuation markers are excluded.					

Table 5.4. Quantitative data for “产地” (origin) and “Veja” in the Promotional Corpus

Discursive patterns in detail

The strategic use of the term "产地" (origin) within *klee klee*'s promotional texts functions as a key mechanism for converting geographical provenance into cultural capital, a process illuminated by Bourdieu's theory of distinction. The typical presentation is notably concise—often a simple description such as "The origin of the linen: Belgium. The origin of the ramie: Sichuan, China" presented in Figure 5.13. This information is positioned immediately after the product name to frame "locality" as an intrinsic value. This format is common in original WeChat articles for consumers to be informed about the production locations of the products they purchase. However, as the case in Figure 5.14 indicates, this brevity is strategically adjusted for origins like the Peruvian Andes, where detailed descriptions of high-altitude plateaus and naturally-hued wool authenticate a romanticised "naturalness". The sentence is translated as "if your wardrobe is not quite ready for the new season, explore our autumn collection. [The Original Colour collection made of flat-knitted highland wool] **Origin**: the Andes plateaus of **Peru**, soaring above 3,000 metres. This natural environment bestows the wool with eight inherent hues, eliminating the need for ant dyeing process. The resulting soft colours appear as if they were freshly blended on an artist's palette."

Figure 5.13. Screenshot of a promotional article by *klee klee* on WeChat

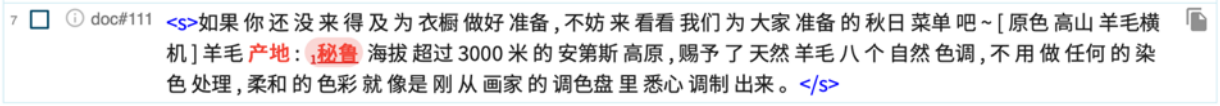

Figure 5.14. “Peru” and “产地” (origin) in the original sentence

Nevertheless, as displayed in Figure 5.13, the information of sourcing origin in the dataset is mostly simplified, only including the country or the province (if sourced domestically) where the raw material is sourced without further elaboration. I argue that a brief mention of the product’s place of origin in the promotional text can help highlight the brand’s commitment to corporate social responsibility, and sometimes, “locality” also signals the use of high-quality raw materials. The brand sources raw materials from various global suppliers to maintain its premium standards. The form and quantity of textual detail assigned to a place index its symbolic worth, which cultivate a consumer habitus adept at decoding simplified origin marker as signals of ethical

sourcing and quality, while interpreting elaborated narratives as warrants for premium value. By reserving rich textual details for traditionally prestigious, "exotic" locales like Peru, while rendering other places in minimalist terms, the brand inadvertently reconstructs a global hierarchy of place that commodifies specific geographies to appeal to the class-based aspirations of its urban consumer base.

To give another example, the salience of "Veja" and its collocates further illustrate the brand's strategy of aligning partners recognised for environmental and social governance. *klee klee* is associated with "Veja" in the context of production introduction, indicating that they carefully select products from other sustainable sources. Importantly, the claims of eco-friendliness are enhanced by quantifiable evidence. For instance, as shown in Figure 5.15. the screenshot displays the original sentences of the collocate "个" (a common quantifier in Chinese), with an MI score of 5.43. Cases 2 and 4 share a similar meaning, which can be translated as "[Sustainability at the production stage] ***Veja*** purchases natural rubber from **sixty** local families and teaches the workers to turn the latex directly into the film using the liquid smoked sheet technology developed by the Chemistry Laboratory of the University of Brasilia". In Case 3, it is claimed that "one pair of ***Veja*** sneakers contains **three** recycled plastic bottles". By disclosing precise figures, such as number of benefiting families and the volume of recycled bottles used to create each product, the brand employs data as a rhetorical tool to construct transparency and material traceability. This use of verifiable statistics serves to authenticate the product's ethical narrative, appealing directly to consumers whose purchasing habits are informed by values of environmental and social responsibility.

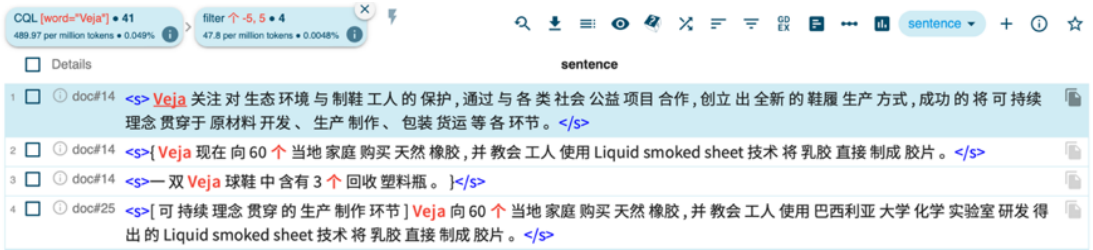

Figure 5.15. "Veja" with "个" (a common quantifier in Chinese) as a collocate in the original sentences

Similarly, analysing the context of the collocate "制作" (produced/production), with an MI score of 6.14, reveals the brand's strategic focus on traceability. As evidenced in Figure 5.16, which shows the phrase collocating with "Veja" in the original sentences, the recurring question

"Who **produced *Veja*** sneakers?" in Cases 1 and 3 frames the narrative. A closer look at its broader context (shown in Figure 5.17) reveals that the original articles introduced how the organisation protects workers' rights and improves their living conditions. Besides, the answer to the question of who made *Veja* sneakers specifies that "Most of the factory employees are of German descent who migrated to Brazil in the 19th century" ("大多数工厂员工为 19 世纪迁徙至巴西的德国后裔"), which adds a layer of historical and ethical value. This strategy mirrors the earlier use of numerical data, intending to authenticate production through genealogical and geographical disclosure. However, the narrative remains superficial; the details about worker ancestry are presented without further contextualisation, and the next immediate sentence moves on to introducing the brand's partner in labour rights protection. The text producer attempts to uncover the story behind the commodity but oversimplifies it, focusing solely on figures and the origin of immigrant workers. While effectively signalling ethical commitment to conscious consumers, this approach simplifies complex social and historical realities into coherent, value-adding qualities, ultimately commodifying heritage as a justification for authenticity.

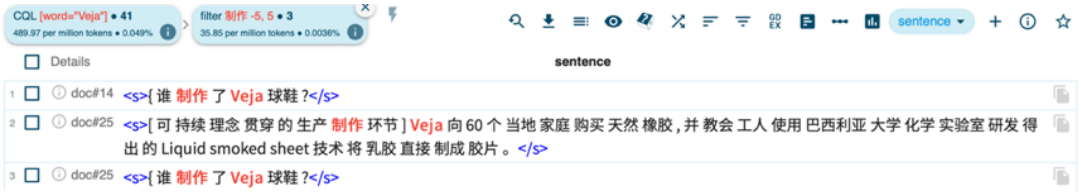

Figure 5.16. "Veja" with "制作" (produced/production) as a collocate in the original sentences

第一位,一直以高标准要求工厂,完善工人的保护制度。</s><s>现在,工厂里人人生活富足,每人都拥有自己的房子,工人们还可以组织集会,为自己争取应得的权利。</s><s>{谁制作了Veja球鞋?</s><s>大多数工厂员工为19世纪迁徙至巴西的德国后裔。}</s><s>Veja的长期合作伙伴还有Ateliers_ Sans_Frontiè res (ASF),这是一个公益组织,主要帮助被社会所排斥、或面临就业困难的人重新

Figure 5.17. "Veja" and "制作" (produced) in context

The strategic simplification of place and labour observed in the corpus is reinforced by by *klee klee*'s multimodal rhetoric, which constructs a romanticised vision of "locality" consistent with what Mapes (2020) identifies in food discourses—an idealised, naturalised view of rural life adds value to the product. This is exemplified in a video introducing the *naze naze* project, entitled "Explore the transformation and innovation of design in the *naze naze* project and hear the interesting stories of the Dulong weavers~" ("探索 *naze naze* 项目中的设计搭配转变和创新,聆

听独龙族织娘们有趣的故事~”). In fact, the promised “interesting stories of the Dulong weavers” are mediated entirely through the brand’s lens, without direct narration from the weavers themselves. The video contains no spoken dialogue—only background music featuring a song performed in the Dulong language. The translated subtitles of the lyrics, presented in both English and Chinese in the video, are as follows in Extract 5.5.

远方的朋友 Friends from afar

欢迎你到这里 It is a joy to welcome you

喝杯甘甜的美酒 Might I propose a toast

唱起欢乐的歌 and sing the joyous chants

Extract 5.5. Translated subtitles of the lyrics in the *naze naze* video

The video offers a series of curated scenes—a senior woman wearing the traditional Dulong facial tattoo and costume, a weaver at a handloom, snow-capped mountains—contrasted with modern elements such as a teenager in a Laker jersey playing basketball (see Figure 5.18). In another scene (see Figure 5.19), two boys stood facing the same direction, and two other adults stood to their left and right. The four seemed to be facing another camera, taking their group photo. The younger boy wore modern clothing, and the rest wore traditional clothing. The older boy looked down at the younger one, and the adult woman on the far left lifted the boy’s head with her hand to indicate that he should look ahead to face the camera. The boy then lifted his chest and stared straight ahead. The individuals in the video seldom make direct eye contact with the camera, thus rarely engaging with the viewer. Following Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, p. 124), these compositions function as an “offer image”, inviting the viewer to observe rather engage, framing Dulong life as an object open for examination and contemplation. This visual rhetoric relies on a logic of distinction: by juxtaposing “authentic” traditional symbols with modern elements, Dulong culture is transformed into a form of capital, appealing to a cosmopolitan habitus, which values ethical consumption that supports local communities.

The video commodifies Dulong life into a non-disruptive, idyllic narrative through visual and textual choices in the video’s editing, subtitles, and selective framing. Outside viewers can see familiar aspects of this remote world from the video, such as subtitled lyrics and a boy playing basketball in a Lakers jersey. In a sense, these elements symbolise the connection between the

Dulong people and the outside world, and importantly, it is *klee klee*'s CSR efforts that make the connection possible. Meanwhile, the video also features elements that are unfamiliar to the viewers, like the background song in the local language, people wearing traditional costumes and tattoos, a manually operated loom, and the natural scenery. Through intentional camera techniques, these elements construct a vision of "the Other", portraying an idealised world that follows traditional norms. Local people are presented as living in harmony with their cultural heritage, surrounded by traditional songs, attire, natural landscapes, and historical artefacts, subtly infused with elements of modern progress. This carefully curated portrayal reinforces a romanticised insider/outsider dynamic, where "locality" is packaged for ethical consumption, indexing authenticity and enhancing the perceived value of the products from the *naze naze* project.

Figure 5.18. Screenshot 1

Figure 5.19. Screenshot 2

Connecting field and text

Together, the ethnographic and corpus data show that the rhetorical strategy of "locality" involves constructing a tangible, ethical origin for products, but this construction is deliberately mediated to enhance brand distinction. Ethnographic evidence reveals how this rhetoric is materialised in retail spaces through *Reclothing Bank*'s donation box and *klee klee*'s *naze naze*

exhibition, which physically bridges the geographical and cultural distance between the cosmopolitan consumer and the rural producer, fostering an intimate, sensorial connection. In contrast, the corpus data shows a more systematic, lexical pattern, where the term "产地" (origin) and claims about partners like "Veja" discursively link ethical consumption to specific geographies and statistics, building a narrative of traceability and transparency. Despite different forms of data, the ethnographic showcasing embodied, spatial experiences and the corpus revealing repetitive, value-laden keywords, both converge to show how "locality" is commodified in organisational styling with sustainable fashion. They collectively reveal a fundamental tension: the strategy employs tangible locations and social realities to establish authenticity, while simultaneously simplifying and romanticising them. This approach transforms complex cultural and labour relations into a refined, aestheticised form of ethical capital, which ultimately perpetuates an imbalanced power dynamic between the elite consumer and the distant, often idealised, source of production.

5.3.5 Authorisation

While the strategies of "uniqueness" and "locality" construct "authenticity" through narratives of cultural distinction and geographical origin, the rhetorical strategy of "authorisation" shifts this legitimising role to external, institutional actors. This strategy operates by justifying a product's sustainability claims through an infrastructure of expert certification, invoking standards and seals from third-party organisations such as B-Corp, the Better Cotton Initiative, or the Global Organic Textile Standard as objective warrants for ethical status. By embedding products within this ratified framework of "eco-friendly" or "conscious" designations, "authorisation" simplifies complex ethical principles into standardised, market-ready labels. This process not only verifies practices but also actively establishes a hierarchy of legitimacy, where the authority to define and authenticate "sustainability" is delegated to these institutions, thereby turning their certification into a form of symbolic capital within the ethical marketplace.

"Authorisation" in practice

During my first store visit interview, Lin revealed a pragmatic, layered rhetorical strategy of "authorisation" adopted by *klee klee*. When asked about the standards for selecting suppliers of organic and sustainable materials, she outlined an approach in which the brand navigates the

practical limits of oversight by using external certifiers to verify its ethical claims. As the interview transcript shown in Extract 5.6 indicates, the informant begins by establishing the ideal form of "authorisation": firsthand, embodied verification through "on-site assessments" and personal visits to factories, which builds credibility through the founder's direct involvement and effort. However, she immediately acknowledges the logistical reality that "not in every case" can this be done. It is at this point of restriction that the strategy smoothly shifts to institutional authorisation. When physical verification is impossible, the brand relies on "global certifications" from specific auditing organisations, accepting that their "constraining standards" provide a sufficient guarantee of quality and ethics. This dual approach creates a comprehensive framework of "authorisation": the brand's authority relies on its own scrutiny when possible, and on certified third parties when not. This allows *klee klee* to maintain a consistent narrative of guaranteed sustainability across its entire supply chain.

9 December 2020, *klee klee* Anfu Road Store

Lin (Informant): [...] 然后像我们的环保棉就是会有全球认证，环保棉的全球认证也是有一个这种，机构，他们专门是在做审核，然后包括有机真丝，也会是在四川，然后我们的供应商，我们也会去考察，因为毕竟环保原料这种东西，就是来源比较多，你可能就是需要通过某些认证，然后某些是你自己去考察，他们有些数据要去做，就是选择。

Trans: [...] For example, our organic cotton comes with global certifications. There are specific organisations responsible for auditing these certifications. The same goes for our organic silk, which is sourced from Sichuan. We also conduct on-site assessments of our suppliers. Given the diverse sources of sustainable materials, it's essential to rely on some certifications while also verifying others through our own due diligence. We base our selections on the data we gather.

Qin (Researcher): 所以你们都会去实地考察吗？

Trans: So do you visit every supplier you work with?

Lin (Informant): 对，然后像，也不是都会啦，像一些比如说我们植物染，这种工厂，我们都会实地去，然后来源，有机真丝这种，我们大部分的工厂，就是可能他能够让你实地认证的我们都会去看一下，包括在我们最开始 klee klee 创始初期，然后去找到一些满意的原材料，然后包括，就是选料的环节我们的主理人其实还挺，投入了很多心力的。然后其它的就是，比如说通过一些认证，他自己就会有一些约束的标准，那么它本身的品质和在道德层面上就会有保证的。

Trans: Right. Well, not in every case. For something like our plant-dyeing factories, you'd go and see them in person. And for sources like organic silk, for most factories—if they allow you to do an on-site verification—we would go and take a look. Also, from the earliest days of *klee klee*, when we were sourcing satisfactory materials, our founder was really quite... invested a lot of personal effort into the selection process. For the rest, if they have certain certifications, that in itself means they are bound by certain standards. So, their quality and ethical standing are thereby guaranteed."

Extract 5.6. Transcript from the interview with Lin, *klee klee* Anfu Road Store, 9 December 2020

During my fieldwork at the *klee klee* store on Anfu Road, the careful curation of "authorisation" became tangible in the minimalist space of the biodynamic farming exhibition (see Figure 20). The raw, textured concrete of the floor and the clean white walls formed a gallery-like backdrop, directing attention to the displays. There, bathed in the store's soft, focused lighting, a simple silk vest displayed as both product and artifact (see Figure 5.21). Its label details a story of origin: organic silk sourced from *Otex*, a partner employing biodynamic agricultural methods. This encyclopedic label, presented bilingually alongside an illustrated cocoon, functioned as what Stein and Ramaseshan (2016) refer to as the customer's first "touchpoint" or interaction with their purchases, materially introducing the global standards that certify its sustainability. The entire

presentation, from the sparse product arrangement to the didactic bilingual texts, framed the space as one of conscious contemplation rather than commerce. In this store space, “authorisation” unfolds not just through text, but through the entire sensory form; the pedagogical materials established clear criteria for judging sustainability, educating the consumer gaze. By embedding this information within the exhibition’s tactile and intentionally minimalist environment, the brand firmly establishes sustainability as a defining, authentic feature of its products, turning them from simple garments into certified items of ethical consumption.

Figure 5.20. Display stand, *klee klee* Anfu Road store, 8 August 2021

Figure 5.21. Product label, *klee klee* Anfu Road store, 8 August 2021

Mapping "authorisation" in the corpus

The results of the corpus analysis reveal that abbreviations of organisations or standards can be found in the keyword list of the Promotional Corpus. These keywords include "GOTS", "Textile", "Standard", "Global", and "BCI", which suggest "authorisation". To illustrate, "GOTS" (Global Organic Textile Standard) ranks second in the Top 100 keywords list, indicating its significance in the corpus. In the original text, such keywords often occur in the description of production processes or raw materials, and the text producer often highlights that every step of production strictly abides by the standard. In some cases, a detailed introduction of the authenticators described as "internationally recognised" is provided to establish the authoritative status of those standards. For example, when analysing the context of "GOTS", its collocates such as "标准" (standard), "符合" (meet/follow), "皆" (all), "纺纱" (yarn), "减少" (reduce), "化学" (chemical), "过程" (processes), "认证" (certified), and "全程" (fully) convey a message that *klee klee*'s products are eco-friendly and guaranteed by standards set up by industrial authorities. Adverbs "皆" (all) and "全程" (fully) intensify the impact of that message. To gain an in-depth understanding of how the external authenticators are represented in the brand's social media text,

I examined the second most frequently used keyword "GOTS" in the corpus. The quantitative data are presented in the table below.

Search Term	Frequency	Relative Frequency (per million tokens)	Keyness score	Collocates	Function
GOTS (Global Organic Textile Standard)	131	1565.52	1544.1	"工作组" (work team), SA (Soil Association), "标准" (standard), Global, Textile, "制定" (to make), Standard, "组成"(to comprise), Organic, "皆" (all), "纺纱" (yarn), "符合" (meet/follow), "全球" (Global), "国际" (International), "标准" (Standard), "纺织品"(Textile), "减少" (reduce), "全程" (fully)	Constructing Authenticity

Note:

1. Where the list of collocates is extensive, only the top ten are presented here due to space constraints. Otherwise, the complete list if collocates is retained, though punctuation markers are excluded.
2. As some collocates correspond to the full lexical terms represented by the GOTS acronym, along with their Chinese equivalents, this table also includes a selection of additional collocates.

Table 5.5. Quantitative data for "GOTS" (Global Organic Textile Standard) in the Promotional Corpus

Discursive patterns in detail

Based on the interview data from my initial visit to the *klee klee* Anfu Road store, the rhetorical strategy of "authorisation" is demonstrated by the use of verifiable third-party certification systems that turn abstract ethical principles into concrete technical standards. As is shown in Extract 5.7, when asked to specify the standards for material selection, the informant, Lin, elaborates that *klee klee* operates on two levels: first, through ethical certification (ensuring animal fibres are obtained humanely), and second, through comprehensive process-based certification, as exemplified by standards like GOTS. By specifying that certification demands a three-year pesticide-free cultivation period and maintaining organic integrity throughout the entire process from harvesting

to dyeing—the essence of "全程" (full process)—Lin creates a narrative of rigorous, system-wide accountability. Similarly, analysis of the corpus reveals that the keyword "GOTS" and its frequent collocate "全程" (fully) within the brand's social media discourse function as a key pattern for "authorisation". This pairing, with an MI score of 8, positions *klee klee* as a transparent mediator of scientifically grounded and ethically audited sustainability.

9 December 2020, *klee klee* Anfu Road Store

Qin (Researcher):所以这样的标准是怎么样的?

Trans: What are those standards specifically?

Lin (Informant): 就是你也可以之后去看一些他们的官网，比如说他们会保证，就是所有我们的动物毛都是不伤害动物本身的情况下获取，或者比如说环保棉他全称认证是保证从棉花的种植的三年内不施加农药、化肥，然后在采摘、制成、后面染色的过程当中都会是有机，不伤害环境和土地的。

Trans: You can also check their official websites for more details. For instance, they guarantee that all our animal fibres are obtained humanely, without harming the animals. As for organic cotton, its full certification, such as the Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS), ensures that no pesticides or chemical fertilisers are used on the cotton fields for at least three years before harvest. Furthermore, the entire subsequent process—from harvesting and manufacturing to dyeing—is required to be organic, causing no harm to the environment or the soil.

Extract 5.7. Transcript from the interview with Lin, *klee klee* Anfu Road Store, 9 December 2020

Of 14 occurrences in the corpus, ten appear in the fixed pattern "GOTS 全程"+"认证", functioning as a label meaning "GOTS fully certified" when describing products from *klee klee* or its friends (business partner), such as *LIBECO* (a Belgium-based linen brand). In these instances, the term is presented without elaboration, suggesting an assumption of audience familiarity with this certification standard. The remaining four occurrences, as illustrated in Figure 5.22, demonstrate slight variations in phrasing and provide contextual explanations about the GOTS standard. For instance, Case 4 in Figure 5.22 is translated as "[**GOTS fully** certificated T-shirt] Our GOTS fully certified T-shirt is made from green cotton that goes through a production chain meeting GOTS standards, from cultivation, spinning, weaving, dyeing, to garment processing." The text producer defines the meaning of "fully-certified" by specifying each process of the entire production chain and stresses that *klee klee* consistently followed GOTS.

Figure 5.22. Four cases of "GOTS" with "全程" (fully) as a collocate in the original sentence

Furthermore, other collocates such as "纺织品" (textile), "全球" (global), "Global", "Textile", "Standard", "有机" (organic), "Organic", "国际" (international), and "SA" (Soil Association), "工作组" (work team) are related to the definition of GOTS and the authorities (such as SA) who work as a team and set up GOTS. The collocate "全球" (global), with an MI score of 8.48, exemplifies this strategy of institutional authorisation. For instance, as shown in Figure 5.23, the accompanying text clarifies, "[**GOTS**: **Global** Organic Textile Standard] GOTS (Global Organic Textile Standard) was launched in 2006 and is an internationally recognised organic textile standard." This type of explanatory statement, which emphasises the standard's historical legitimacy and global recognition, appears regularly in the brand's promotional materials. By incorporating such definitions, *klee klee* strengthens the authentication of its sustainable products, educating consumers and building trust through an external, time-tested authority. Overall, the analysis of the node word "GOTS" and its collocates in original sentences confirms that the brand strategically uses institutional authenticators to establish and validate the credentials of its fashion products. This aligns with Coupland's (2003) framework, which posits that authenticity is not an inherent quality but is granted through "authorisation". For a product to be recognised as authentic, a community consensus must be established, affirming that its status has been legitimately verified by a recognised authority. The strategic deployment of certifications like GOTS functions as this vital "infrastructure of expert authenticators" (Coupland, 2003, p. 419). Therefore, "authorisation" operates by turning technical standards into proof of authenticity, creating the consensus that defines a product as genuinely sustainable.

Figure 5.23. "GOTS" with "全球" (global) as a collocate in the original sentence

Apart from describing the product, the text producers also strategically use "authorisation" in social media articles that promote the brand and introduce its founder. To exemplify, Figure 5.24 is a screenshot of the final section of an article announcing the opening of *Reclothing Bank*'s first offline store in Shanghai. The article indicates that the store is a space that showcases the key brand concepts. The text producer further explains these concepts, and at the end of the article, it highlights the achievements and reputation of *Reclothing Bank, as* well as Zhang Na, the brand's founder and chief designer. The text is translated as "In 2020, as the only brand in Asia to be recognised in CNN[2]'s feature on sustainable fashion, *Reclothing Bank* was named an 'Environmental Pioneer' alongside world-renowned designer brands such as *Stella McCartney* and *Vivienne Westwood*. Zhang Na was hailed by the media as 'the first person in China to work in sustainable fashion'." Here, the "authorisation" is based on media recognition and being mentioned alongside world-renowned designer brands on equal footing. The attention-grabbing phrases like "the only brand in Asia", "pioneer", and "the first person in China" have raised the profile of the brand and its founders in the fashion industry, as well as being innovators in the field of sustainable fashion, both globally and domestically. Additionally, CNN accredits those titles of the brand; hence, obtaining "authorisation" is readily achievable.

[2] CNN (Cable News Network) is a globally recognised news organisation founded in 1980 by Ted Turner in the United States. It was the first 24-hour television news channel and has since become a leading source of international news, politics, business, and culture. With a wide-reaching digital and broadcast presence, CNN delivers real-time reporting and in-depth analysis across multiple platforms. Known for its global coverage and investigative journalism, CNN plays a significant role in shaping public discourse and media narratives worldwide (CNN, n.d.).

2020年，在CNN关于可持续时尚的专题报道中，作为亚洲唯一获选品牌，与Stella McCartney、Vivienne Westwood等全球著名设计师一同被称为"环保先锋"，而品牌的创始人兼设计总监张娜，更被媒体誉为"中国可持续时尚第一人"。

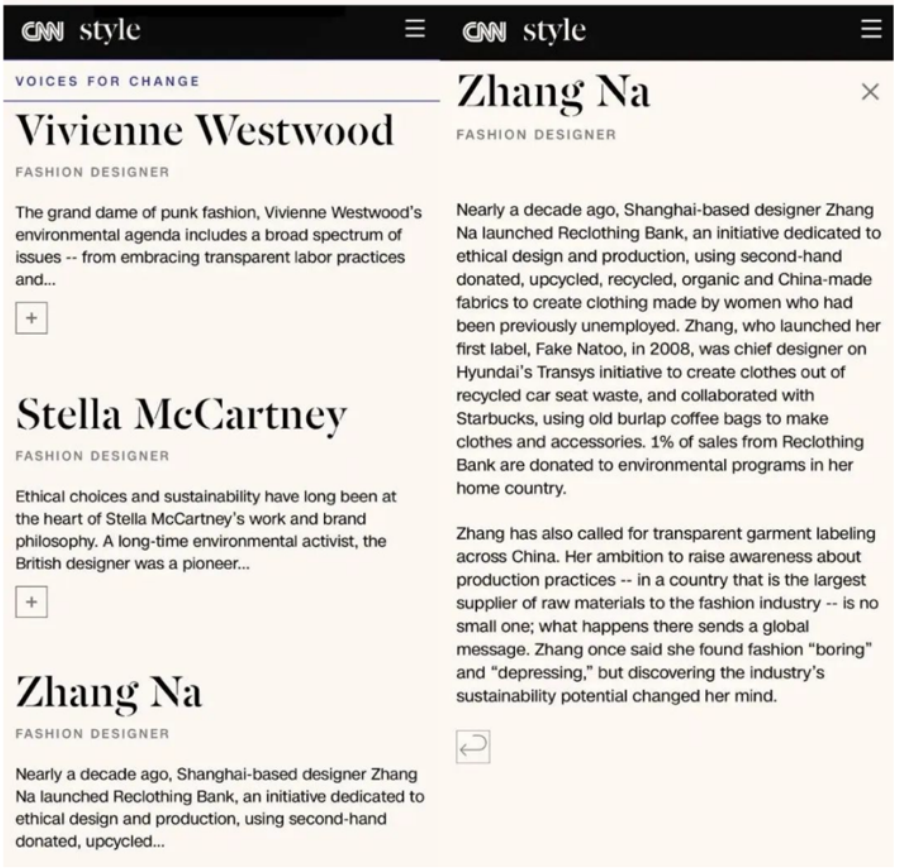

Figure 5.24. Screenshot shared in a WeChat article published by *Reclothing Bank*, 15 December 2022

The strategic use of media authorisation is evident in the paired website screenshots that directly cite an original CNN review featuring both *Reclothing Bank* and its founder, Zhang Na. These visual elements serve to authenticate the honours mentioned in the accompanying text above, with the parallel presentation of three designer's name in identical typography subtly positioning Zhang Na as an equal to internationally recognised figures in sustainable fashion. Notably, the inclusion of the left screenshot appears intentionally redundant. While Zhang Na's profile is fully detailed on the right, the additional visual serves primarily to showcase her placement alongside globally established designers. The text producer uses international media coverage to discursively authenticate the brand's industry standing. Importantly, the presentation assumes considerable cultural literacy from its audience: the screenshots preserve the original English text without

translation or contextual explanation of CNN or the other featured brands. This implicit expectation reveals how the authorising process relies fundamentally on the receiver's ability to decode these prestige markers. Thus, value construction emerges as an interactive relationship between text producer and reviewer, where "authorisation" only succeeds when the audience possesses the necessary cultural capital to validate it.

Connecting field and text

The ethnographic and corpus data together demonstrate that the rhetorical strategy of "authorisation" involves systematically delegating ethical credibility to external certifiers, thereby transforming abstract standards into symbolic capital. Ethnographic evidence reveals the pragmatic, layered nature of this strategy, captured in Lin's interview, where a dual framework of ideal (firsthand verification) and practical (reliance on "global certifications") "authorisation" is articulated and materialised in store exhibitions that frame certifications as intrinsic to product identity. The corpus data complements this by quantifying the rhetoric, showing how high-frequency keywords like "GOTS" and collocational patterns such as "GOTS 全程认证" (GOTS fully certified) discursively reinforce an infrastructure of external validation. While the ethnography highlights the strategic reasoning and spatial enactment of "authorisation", the corpus reveals its repetitive, almost formulaic lexical patterning, both illustrating how "authenticity" is technically constructed and standardised. However, a critical divergence emerges: the ethnography uncovers the brand's conscious negotiation of logistical limits, whereas the corpus presents a seamless, authoritative front, obscuring such compromises. Ultimately, both datasets show that "authorisation" does more than just verify sustainability in organisational styling; it actively creates a hierarchy of legitimacy. This process shifts the power to define ethical value to institutions and, in turn, commodifies authenticity for an audience with the cultural capital to interpret these prestige indicators.

5.3.6 Historicity

The rhetorical strategy of "historicity" constructs "authenticity" through an appeal to temporal depth, tradition, and endurance. This approach imbues products (e.g. "Owning a *Norlha* blanket means owning a beautiful piece of history"—the title of an article on *Norlha*'s WeChat platform), raw materials (e.g. "the fabric of denim is strong, durable, and sustainable, making it suitable for

long-term wear" in *klee klee*'s WeChat article), and production processes (e.g. "The Nuan Collection comprises high-end artisanal workshops from Italy, France, and India, supporting the sustainability of centuries-old family heritage and craftsmanship", as introduced in *Reclothing Bank*'s WeChat article) with value by framing them as vessels of history. Whether through narratives of artisanal lineage, the innate durability of raw materials like denim, or the timeless aesthetic of retail spaces, by emphasising longevity and origin, "historicity" positions commodities not as novel inventions but as enduring legacies, connecting consumption to a romanticised past of craftsmanship and resilience. This strategy turns time itself into a marker of quality and authenticity, creating a narrative of timeless value that resonates with consumers seeking to anchor their identity in objects perceived as both durable and culturally significant.

"Historicity" in practice

On my first visit to *klee klee*'s newly opened store, an overcast sky softened the light over Columbia Circle, where the store in Building 3 stood in quiet contrast to its surroundings (see Figure 5.25). The Soviet-era building style, with its weathered concrete façade and stark geometric lines, stood in contrast to the neighbouring Spanish-style Navy Club and the distant high-rises, creating a palpable sense of layered history. As detailed in Chapter 2, this location has witnessed multiple historical transitions: from its Republican-era origins to the People's Republic of China through industrial transformation, and now as a hub for creative industries under Vanke's redevelopment. This physical context is fundamental to the brand's rhetorical strategy of "historicity", which functions within a broader urban condition where rapid development has often exacerbated social disparities. A notable instance is the unemployment and poverty that followed industrial and technological shifts, exemplified by the surge of laid-off workers in 1990s China (see Cheng & Beresford, 2012; Chen et al., 2013). This legacy complicates contemporary urban regeneration, which, as Zhong (2013) argues, is often property development disguised as cultural initiatives. In this model, culture is instrumentalised as a marketing tool to elevate real estate values, with genuine promotion of arts and culture remaining limited.

Figure 5.25. Building 3, Columbia Circle, 11 January 2023

By situating itself within this architecturally and historically rich environment, *klee klee* draws upon the material durability of the architecture and traditional production methods to strengthen its own discourse of authenticity, yet this process reveals the dual nature of "historicity". While celebrating the endurance of objects and techniques, this framing often reduces human actors to mere carriers of tradition, inadvertently obscuring the social displacements caused by the same urban transformations that made spaces like Columbia Circle available for creative reuse. Ultimately, this strategic "historicity" functions as a mechanism of distinction. The cultivated aesthetic appreciation for "authentic" historical elements, whether in architecture or artisan techniques, requires specific cultural capital to decode and economic capital to acquire. Through this rhetorical framing in organisational styling, *klee klee* and similar brands in the creative economy generate symbolic value that resonates most strongly with elite consumers who possess the resources to participate in this curated historical narrative. This could potentially widen the social divides that sustainable businesses ideally aim to address.

Mapping "historicity" in the corpus

The rhetorical strategy of "historicity" within the Top 100 keywords is mainly articulated through terms denoting traditional craftsmanship and production processes, such as "靛蓝"

(Indigo), Indigo, Juice, 染色 (dyeing), SIWA (a Japanese brand specialising in *washi* paper goods), 染 (to dye) and 植物染 (plant dyeing). A closer analysis of their collocates and concordance lines reveals two distinct focuses. The first emphasises product longevity, framing the items as timeless and durable, thereby aligning with Coupland's (2003) assertion that "historicity" entails withstanding the test of time. The second focus honours the historical origin of techniques, often tracing their history and foregrounding the brand's role in their revival. This is illustrated by the keywords "靛蓝" (indigo) / "Indigo" and their collocates, which collectively construct the value of this dyeing method as being deeply embedded in its historical lineage. The keywords "靛蓝" (indigo) and "Indigo", while linguistically distinct, function as a single semantic unit within the corpus, referring to the same natural dye. Their parallel presence underscores the bilingual nature of *klee klee*'s communication strategy. Analysis of their collocates and concordance lines confirms that both terms are deployed within similar discursive contexts to articulate the brand's commitment to traditional, natural dyeing techniques. Thus, a closer examination of how Indigo Dyeing is depicted in the corpus could uncover how "historicity" is operationalised. Quantitative data from the corpus are presented in the table below.

Search Term	Frequency	Relative Frequency (per million tokens)	Keyness Score	Collocates	Function
"靛蓝" (indigo)	64	764.84	620.94	"应用" (to apply), "染工艺" (dyeing technique) "色调" (shade), "灯芯绒" (corduroy),"此" (this), "染" (to dye) "100%", "于" (in/on/at),"随着" (as/with/along with), "水洗" (washing/laundering)	Constructing Authenticity
Indigo	49	585.58	561.83	Juice, "易于"(easy to), "节能"(energy-saving), "仅"(only), "染料"(dye), "染" (to dye), "单宁"(denim), "纱线"(yarn), "染色"(dyeing), "过程"(process)	Constructing Authenticity

Note: Where the list of collocates is extensive, only the top ten are presented here due to space constraints. Otherwise, the complete list if collocates is retained, though punctuation markers are excluded.

Table 5.6. Quantitative data for “靛蓝” (indigo) and “Indigo” in the Promotional Corpus

Discursive patterns in detail

The contextual analysis of “靛蓝” (indigo) shows that collocates such as “应用” (to apply), “染工艺” (dyeing technique), “色调” (shade), “100%”, “水洗” (washing), “工艺” (technique), “juice”, “采用” (used), “Indigo”, “传统” (traditional), “染色” (dyeing) briefly introduce the technique of Indigo Dyeing. A clear example is the collocation of “靛蓝” (indigo) with “应用” (to apply), which has an MI score of 10.16. In all 14 instances observed, the accompanying text remains identical across 13 different documents, as demonstrated in Figure 5.26. The sentence, translated as “[Indigo Juice] It is an easy-to-wash denim dyeing technique where indigo **is applied** solely **to** the yarn’s outer layer, achieving a 100% **indigo** shade”, serves as a standardised description for *klee klee*’s denim products. This verbatim repetition across contexts highlights a deliberate rhetorical strategy, reinforcing both the technical specificity of the traditional method and the brand’s consistent narrative of craftsmanship in its promotional text.

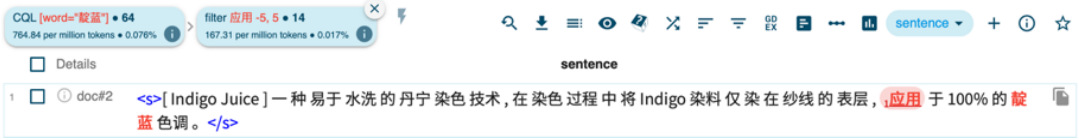

Figure 5.26. “靛蓝” (indigo) with “应用” (to apply) as a collocate in the original sentence

Besides, analysis of the concordance lines of “靛蓝” (indigo) reveals its application extends beyond denim to various other products. As shown in Figure 5.27, when examining its collocate “传统” (traditional), with an MI score of 6.18, the textual analysis provides a detailed elaboration of this technique’s historical processes and artisanal significance. Case 1 is translated as “[Bluegrass] Bluegrass Dyeing is a **traditional** dyeing process with **indigo**. The stems and leaves of the plant are soaked, fermented, and oxidised in a series of intricate steps to create a dye. Depending on the number of times it is dyed, the dye can produce a variety of rich blue colours.” In this case, the elaboration of Bluegrass Dyeing highlights the technical complexity and artisanal ingenuity embedded in this tradition, directly linking process intricacy to the richness of the final blue hues. This historical continuity is further emphasised in Case 2: “Individual shoes are dyed

using the **traditional Indigo** Dyeing method, which has become increasingly glamorous over time with different variations in colour." Here, *klee klee* tracked the historical origin of Indigo Dyeing and brought it back to the present day, accentuating the importance of history and tradition. It frames the technique not as a static but as an accumulating aesthetic value through historical duration.

The remaining cases consistently reinforce this pattern. Case 3 is translated as "The *Katsukawa NIBE* low-top trainer is dyed in the **traditional Indigo** Dyeing process, giving it a bright, blue colour that is all the more special", which attributes the "special" quality of trainers directly to the traditional dyeing process. The translation of Case 4 is, "[Botanical Indigo Dyeing, Blue Print from Erjia Town] [Eco-friendly Processing] Following the principle of eco-friendly processing, *klee klee* menswear uses the **traditional** Chinese botanical **Indigo** Dyeing process for the first time, and selects the print pattern for redesigning, and then develops a simple and relaxed blue print cloth, combined with the style of shirt with a sense of holiday casualness, which is suitable for menswear in the summer." In that sense, the text producer explicitly positions *klee klee*'s adaptation of Chinese botanical Indigo Dyeing as both a revival of heritage and a contemporary redesign. These examples collectively illustrate a recurring discursive pattern where "historicity" both legitimises production techniques by grounding them in history and emphasises the enduring, evolving value of the crafted objects. This creates a narrative that integrates technical tradition into the brand's story of aesthetic and cultural sustainability.

Figure 5.27. "靛蓝" (indigo) with "传统" (traditional) as a collocate in the original sentences

Other collocates such as "灯芯绒" (corduroy), "染" (dyeing), "随着" (as), "棉布" (cotton cloth), "针织布" (knitted fabric), and "植物" (botanical), refer to the product applied with the indigo dyeing technique and its texture. Some cases reveal a sophisticated rhetorical strategy that turns material imperfections into markers of aesthetic distinction. This is particularly evident in three

cases where “随着” (as/with) collocates with “靛蓝” (indigo), with an MI score of 7.94, framing the natural fading of indigo-dyed fabrics not as product deterioration but as an evolving aesthetic journey (see Figure 5.28). The first case is translated as, “As we know, denim and **indigo** dyes will change colour **as** you wear them, so there are many more layers of blue.” Here, the text producer establishes common ground through the phrase “as we know” (“大家知道”), positioning colour evolution as shared knowledge among the text receiver (most of whom are *klee klee*’s regular customers). Case 2 can be translated as “Certain shoe styles employ traditional **Indigo** Dyeing. The colour evolves over time, gaining more personality and charm **with** age”, which explicitly characterises the colour evolution as enhancing “personality and charm”. The third case is, “[Indigo Dyed Cotton] Please scroll to view more items. The texture is created using a double warp, double weft weave, and **Indigo** Dyeing, resulting in a rich colour. That colour will fade slightly **with** washing, giving it an elegant yet rustic look.” Here, *klee klee* reinterprets fading through positive descriptors like “rustic” (古朴) and “elegant” (优雅), attempting to construct an idealised consumer identity that appreciates natural processes and has the cultural capital to decode these nuanced aesthetic values. This rhetorical framing not only justifies the premium positioning of the products but also fosters a sense of shared identity among consumers who can appreciate this distinct interpretation of value and beauty.

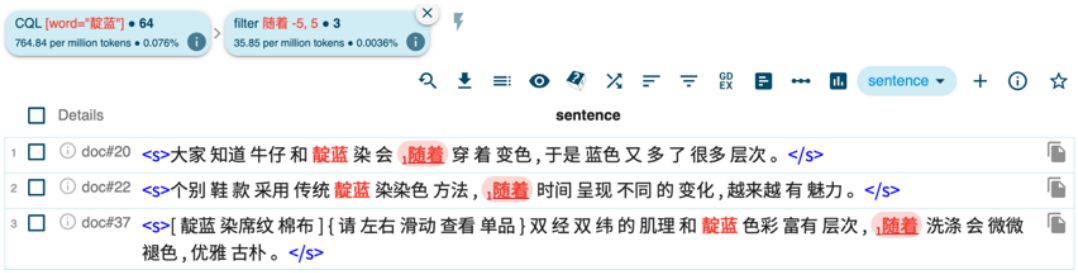

Figure 5.28. “靛蓝” (indigo) with the collocate “随着” (as/with) in the original sentences

klee klee’s rhetorical framing of indigo’s evolving aesthetics can be understood through Kopytoff’s (1986) theory of the cultural biography of things. Kopytoff argues that in complex societies, a “yearning for singularisation” is often achieved by referencing the passage of time, a process that moves an object from a homogenous commodity to a singular, sacred state (1986, p.80). This theoretical model clarifies *klee klee*’s approach: the brand accelerates the process of singularisation by proactively sacralising the future ageing of its products. While most commodities usually lose value over time due to wear, *klee klee* reverses this logic, explicitly

telling consumers that the colour will "gain more personality and charm with age". The fading and evolution of the indigo hue are not seen as damage but as an "elegant yet rustic look", highlighting these signs of use as desirable proof of the object's unique story. Essentially, the brand distinguishes its products from the homogeneous world of commodities by associating them with a narrative of ageing. According to Kopytoff (1986), this could make the product more unexchangeable in consumers' minds and creates a type of value that increases over time instead of decreasing.

Moreover, as shown in the ethnographic data, this discursive construction of "historicity" is materialised in the physical retail space of *klee klee*, and its architectural narratives are further documented in the film about its design philosophy shared on the WeChat platform. The documentary footage, featuring an interview with architects, presents the store design through a curated sense of "historicity". In Extract 5.8, the architects describe their process of reclaiming 1970s industrial features, including the "exterior walls made of washed stone" and "old ceiling lights from Shanghai's factories". This narrative does more than describe sustainable design; it performs a process of singularisation (Kopytoff, 1986), actively pulling these objects from the "homogeneous world of commodities" (in this case, demolition waste) and sacralising them through their recontextualisation within a high-fashion boutique. The architects' focus on expert knowledge, such as the "original proportions" of windows or the quality of "old" fixtures, transforms these elements from obsolescence to a mark of distinction. This practice effectively constructs a cultural biography for the store itself, where the signs of use on the reclaimed materials become proof of an authentic, local history. However, this framing is highly selective; it aestheticises the factory's past while systematically neglecting the social narratives of industrial decline and worker displacement that originally rendered those lights and stones obsolete. Therefore, the store's "historicity" acts as a form of cultural capital, allowing elite consumers to display their appreciation for a refined, sustainable aesthetic that is clearly distinguished from the mainstream pursuit of the new.

00:22-00:35

振宇（案亭事务所）：整个房子可能是 70 年代的时候，一个老的厂房，它有很多比较有味道的一些细节，包括它的水洗石的一些外墙面，包括它的一些门窗原先的一些比例。

Zhenyu (*CASE PAVILION*, architectural firm): The entire house may have been an old factory constructed in the 1970s, boasting numerous distinct details that give it character. This includes features like the exterior walls made of washed stone and the original proportions of the doors and windows.

01:42-02:15

丹捷（案亭事务所）：我们会去收集一些曾经在其他项目用的一些大理石的那些废料，*klee klee* 这个项目的时候，我们又想起了这些石头，虽然我们追求的不是装饰，在被好好处理之后是非常好看，还有一些回收的上海七八十年代老厂房的吸顶灯，它不被流行的原因只是因为它旧了，但是它又那么的好。

Danjie (*CASE PAVILION*, architectural firm): We would collect some waste marble materials used in previous projects. When working on the *klee klee* project, we thought we could reuse these stones. Although our focus is not on decoration, they look beautiful after properly handling them. We also collect old ceiling lights from Shanghai's factories built in the 1970s and 1980s. They are not trendy now simply because they are old, but they are actually of excellent quality.

Extract 5.8. Transcript of the video published on *klee klee*'s WeChat account, 10 May 2023

Connecting field and text

Both ethnographic and corpus data reveal that the rhetorical strategy of "historicity" involves carefully selecting temporal depth, thereby distinguishing products by positioning time as a symbol of authenticity and value. Ethnographic evidence shows how this strategy is realised both spatially and narratively, from *klee klee*'s embedding within the layered history of Columbia Circle to the architects' documentary showcasing the beauty of reclaimed industrial materials. This crafts a nuanced narrative of architectural endurance, honouring the aesthetics of the past while subtly concealing social displacements involved. The corpus data complement this systematically by quantifying the lexical construction of "historicity", with keywords like "靛蓝" (indigo) and its collocates such as "传统" (traditional) and "随着" (as/with) discursively framing craftsmanship as a legacy and product ageing as an accumulation of "charm" and "personality". A comparison of findings from both sources shows that while ethnography illustrates how "historicity" is strategically and materially enacted in specific contexts, the corpus highlights its recurring pattern across promotional texts. Both methods demonstrate that "historicity" functions as a mechanism

of distinction in organisational styling: it educates consumers to reinterpret material imperfection and temporal passage as aesthetic virtues, engaging a decoding process that demands and reinforces cultural capital. In the end, this coordinated rhetoric commodifies time by turning a selective and idealised past into a form of symbolic capital, which justifies higher prices for an elite consumer base.

5.3.7 Naturalness

Unlike the temporal validation of "historicity", the rhetorical strategy of "naturalness" gains its persuasive strength from an appeal to ecological purity and pre-industrial authenticity. This strategy constructs value by promoting raw materials—such as *Norlha*'s "khullu" yak wool or *klee klee*'s "non-transgenic cotton"—that are presented as intrinsic products of nature, ostensibly untouched by synthetic or chemical processes. The rhetoric extends to the production processes involving natural ingredients, such as plant-based dyeing, which is narratively linked to ancient wisdom and botanical ingredients, in contrast to artificial industrial processes. By discursively aligning commodities with an idealised state of organic origin, "naturalness" does not just describe a material condition but actively establishes a moral and aesthetic hierarchy. This strategy effectively converts biological facts into cultural capital, where the "natural" becomes a symbol of purity, health, and ethical integrity, thereby justifying a premium market position for goods that can authentically embody this inherent virtue.

"Naturalness" in practice

During my multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, the rhetorical construction of "naturalness" became particularly evident at the biodynamic exhibition in *klee klee*'s Anfu Road store. The display was structured around bilingual educational panels that framed biodynamic preparations (BD) as the distinctive feature separating this practice from standard organic farming. Amidst this didactic environment, one artefact drew attention with its raw immediacy: a soil-stained cow horn placed directly on the display surface, entirely exposed without any glass covering or enclosure barrier (see Figure 5.29). As adjacent texts explained, this horn served as a vessel for fermenting BD 500, a preparation where cow manure is buried in the soil to stimulate plant growth. Its presentation was intentionally rough, with earth still clinging to its interior as material evidence of its journey from field to exhibition.

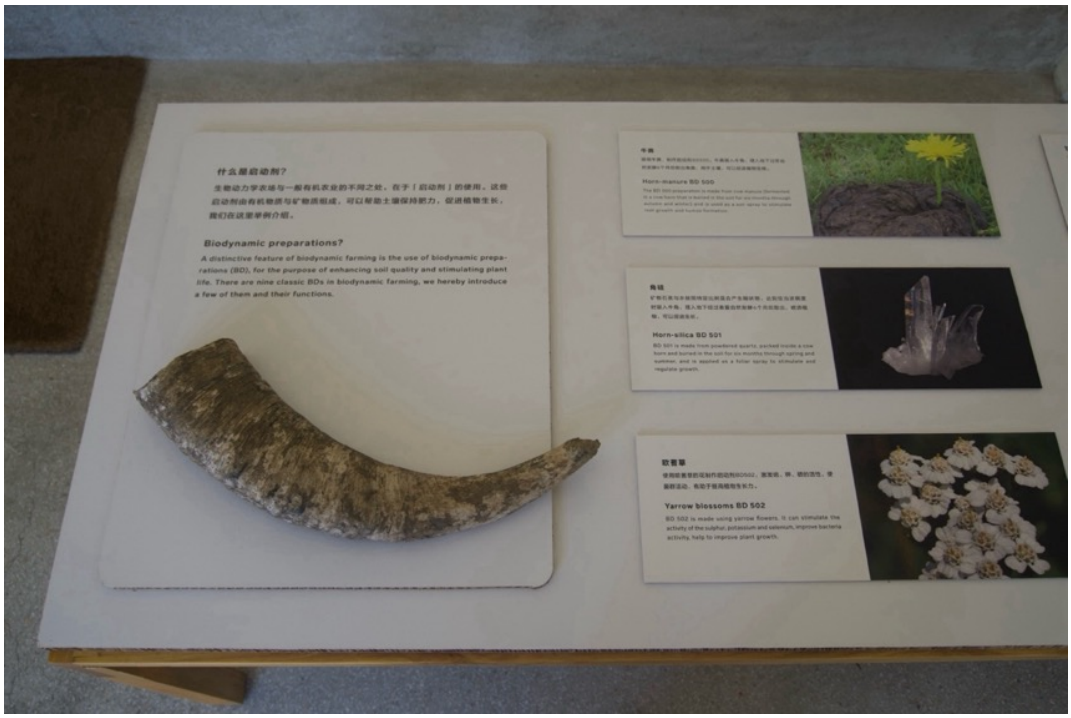

Figure 5.29. Exhibits displayed at the *klee klee* Anfu Road store, 8 August 2021

This rhetoric of unmediated authenticity, however, coexisted with a parallel approach of technical legitimation via bilingual documentation. While the horn grounded the narrative in reality, the English and Chinese panels, featuring specialised terminology about various natural BDs, helped to intellectually contextualise their artefacts for a cosmopolitan audience. This generated a compelling discursive interaction: the horn's immediate sensory impact offered what seemed like irrefutable evidence of "naturalness", while the bilingual texts established an authoritative framework of scientific practice. The cow horn thus functioned as the epistemological anchor in this network of meaning, bridging abstract agricultural concepts with the consumer's craving for tangible proof. The rhetorical strategy of "naturalness" constructs a multifaceted appeal, where authenticity is derived from both the raw materiality of the exhibit and the discursive framing that positions biodynamics as a sophisticated, legitimate alternative to conventional agriculture.

Mapping "naturalness" in the corpus

Analysis of the Promotional Corpus reveals that the rhetorical construction of "naturalness" is systematically articulated through some keywords in the Top 100 list. These include direct references to natural materials, such as "牦牛绒" (yak wool), "羊驼毛" (alpaca wool), and "亚麻"

(linen), which inherently signal an organic sourcing. Particularly significant is the keyword "原色" (Original Colour Collection), which ranks 8th in keyness and functions as a central node in this semantic network. Its collocates consistently reinforce this naturalistic narrative through three distinct categories: material composition ("羊羔" lamb wool, "毛" wool, "驼绒" camel hair, and "羊驼毛" alpaca wool), artisanal processes ("采集" collect, "制成" production), and technical specification ("羊毛横机" flat-knitting machine for wool, "纱横机" flat-knitting machine for yarn). Additional collocates like "服饰" (clothes), "圈圈" (loop), "大衣" (coat), "内搭" (base layer), and "变化" (change) further contextualise these materials within finished products and their texture qualities. Analysis of the concordance of lines of "原色" (Original Colour Collection) reveals that the rhetorical strategy of "naturalness" is not employed in isolation. The same textual data shows co-occurrence with other rhetorical strategies discussed previously, including "high quality", "uniqueness" and "locality". This suggests that "naturalness" functions as a rhetorical thread within a broader discursive framework, reinforcing and being reinforced by the brand's other strategies to construct "authenticity" together. Thus, the analysis of the "原色" (Original Colour Collection) effectively illustrates how the "naturalness" is implemented based on the corpus data. Quantitative data from the corpus are presented in the table below.

Search Term	Frequency	Relative Frequency (per million tokens)	Keyness score	Collocates	Function
"原色" (Original Colour Collection)	106	1266.76	682.7	"羊毛横机" (flat-knitting machine for wool), "服饰" (clothes), "纱横机" (flat-knitting machine for yarn), "采集" (collect), "羊羔" (lamb wool), "系列" (collection), "圈圈" (loop), "毛" wool "大衣" (coat), "原料" (raw material)	Constructing Authenticity
Note: Where the list of collocates is extensive, only the top ten are presented here due to space constraints. Otherwise, the complete list if collocates is retained, though punctuation markers are excluded.					

Table 5.7. Quantitative data for "原色" (the Original Colour Collection) in the Promotional Corpus

Discursive patterns in detail

Discourse analysis of the corpus reveals a rhetorical pattern wherein an excessive emphasis on "naturalness" is strategically positioned in opposition to artificial traits, establishing "naturalness" as the dominant evaluative norm. This prioritisation, as Coupland (2003) suggests, reinforces authenticity by appealing to the ontological legitimacy of natural objects—those deemed to possess an intrinsic claim to existence, in contrast to their artificial counterparts. However, this discursive construction goes beyond material or philosophical assertions; it gains social influence by aligning with the habitus of elite consumer groups. As Elliott (2013) notes, while "green consumption" may appear inconspicuous, it functions as a nuanced expression of taste—one that feels ethically and personally "right". This alignment allows sustainable products to serve as markers of "ethical distinction", a subtle yet powerful form of cultural capital that enables consumers to affirm both their moral integrity and aesthetic judgment. The analysis of data from both sources shows that "naturalness" is not merely a product attribute but a powerful mechanism for social and symbolic distinction in organisational styling. The following analysis will examine how the theoretical framework is operationalised in the promotional texts of sustainable brands, focusing specifically on how they systematically construct a dichotomy between natural and artificial elements and align this contrast with the sensibilities of their elite consumer base through social media content.

Concordance analysis of the keyword "原色" (Original Colour Collection) reveals how *klee klee* constructs "naturalness", positioning it as the definitive standard against which artificial alternatives are measured. Among 106 cases, I have selected the sentences that illustrate how "naturalness" is strategically employed in the text (see Figure 5.30). This strategic emphasis is particularly evident in the brand's conceptualisation of this collection, defined through phrases such as "大自然中原有的颜色" ("the colour in nature" in Case 2) and "来自自然的, 原本的颜色" ("the original colour from nature" in Case 7). In some cases, the collection was also translated as the "Natural Colour" Collection. The brand elaborates that this means "no chemical dyes are used from the collection of raw materials to the production process so that the colour of the fabrics is the original colour of the animal or plant fibres, which are friendly to the environment and animals, and which comply with the environmental standards of the raw materials and the finished product" (Case 1). As is shown in Case 9, this collection is one of *klee klee*'s "大家熟知的" ("well-

known") product lines that represents "在服装行业中可持续设计的更多可能性" ("a possibility of sustainable fashion design in the textile industry") and "*klee klee* 与自然为善的方式与原则" ("*klee klee*'s way and the principle of doing good with nature").

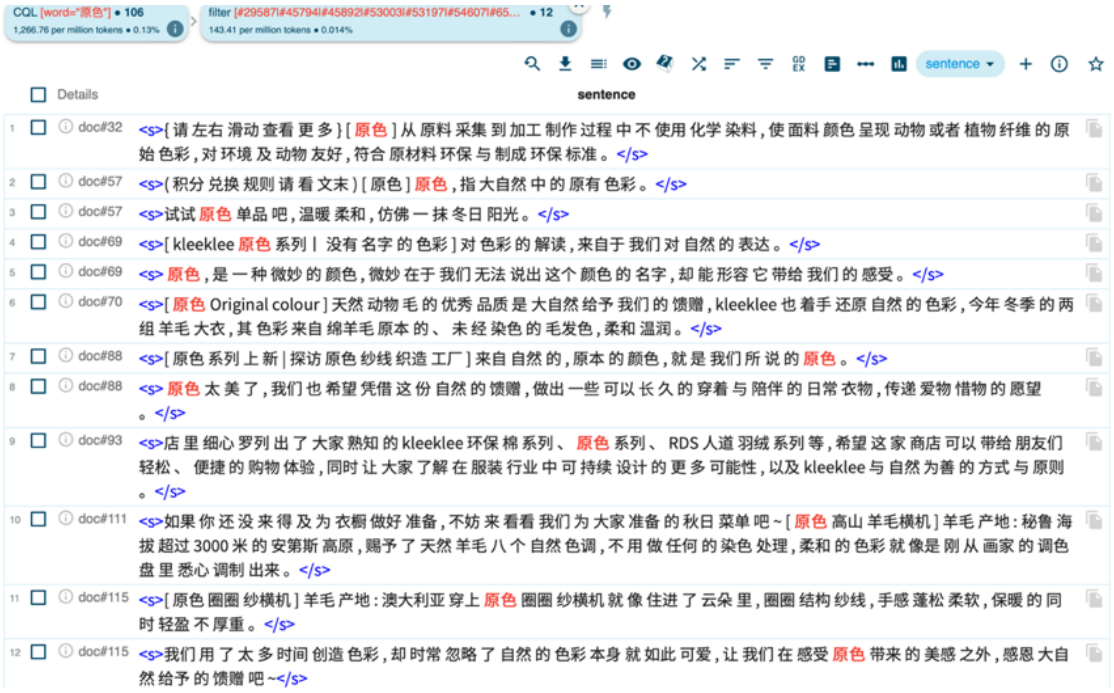

Figure 5.30. "原色" (Original Colour Collection) in the original sentences

To strengthen the brand's association with nature, *klee klee* claims that its interpretation of colour is "来自于我们对自然的表达" ("derived from our expression of nature" in Case 4). The brand admits that it is difficult to name the colour because of its subtlety, but "却能形容它带给我们的感受" ("we can still describe the feeling of it" in Case 5). *klee klee* employs rich sensory metaphors, describing the material as "温暖柔和,仿佛一抹冬日阳光" ("warm and soft, just like the sunshine in winter" in Case 3), and the wearing experience as akin to "住进了云朵里" ("living in the clouds" in Case 11) The physical attributes of products, like warmth, lightness, and softness, are metaphorically associated with natural phenomena such as winter sunshine and clouds, thereby transforming material qualities into symbolic representations of nature itself. By presenting the collection as both a technical achievement in sustainability and an aesthetic homage to nature, *klee klee* uses "naturalness" as a key indicator of its products' authenticity. As Coupland (2003) suggests, natural objects possess an inherent claim to genuine existence; by closely aligning its

products from the Original Colour Collection with this pre-existing natural order, the brand distinguishes them as ontologically secure and authentically superior to artificial counterparts.

The brand's rhetorical construction of "naturalness" is further reinforced in some cases, attributing agency to nature while minimising human intervention. This is exemplified in several key statements: in Case 6, the brand declares that "The superior quality of natural animal hair is a blessing from nature. *klee klee* aims to restore the natural colours of wool. For this winter, two sets of wool coats have been created using the original, undyed colour of sheep's wool. The wool is soft and gentle, providing warmth and comfort." This framing highlights the brand's role as merely revealing pre-existing natural qualities rather than actively creating them. This narrative of nature as the primary actor is most evident in the description of the Andes in Case 10, which "赐予了天然羊毛八个自然色调" ("give natural wool eight different natural shades"). Significantly, the original Chinese sentence employs two adjectives with the same meaning (i.e., "natural"), "天然" and "自然", to modify wool and its shades—a conspicuous instance of overlexicalisation that, following Teo (2000, p. 20), signals a deliberate persuasive effort through redundant emphasis.

The rhetorical strategy of "naturalness" extends beyond simple description to serve as an ethical appeal, encouraging gratitude for the gift of nature. In Case 8, the brand claims that "original colours are so beautiful that we wanted to use this gift of nature to make everyday clothes that can be worn and accompany you for a long time, to convey the desire to love and cherish things." In Case 12, *klee klee* explicitly instructs readers to "让我们在感受大自然带来的美感之外，感恩大自然给予的馈赠吧" ("feel the beauty of the original colours and be thankful for what nature has given us"). Arguably, this discursive framework subtly establishes a contrast between natural and artificial colour, foregrounding the inherent value and emotional resonance of natural hues while implicitly situating synthetic alternatives as comparatively lacking in these qualities.

The rhetorical effect of this "naturalness" emphasis is twofold. First, it effectively erases human labour from the production narrative, presenting the finished garments as direct "gifts" from nature rather than products of human manufacture. Second, it creates what might be termed a "rhetoric of negation", where sustainability is defined primarily by what is absent (chemical dyes) rather than what is present. This strategic emphasis ultimately serves to authenticate the products through what Coupland (2003) identifies as the "ontological security" of natural objects, i.e., their inherent

claim to existence that distinguishes them from artificial imitations. By framing its Original Colour Collection as merely revealing nature's pre-existing palette, *klee klee* constructs a powerful authenticity claim that justifies both the sustainable positioning and premium value of its products.

Apart from the corpus data, which focuses only on *klee klee*'s WeChat articles, the other two brands also employ the rhetorical strategy of "naturalness" in their social media communication. For *Norlha*, "naturalness" encompasses symbolic constructions of geographical origin and artisanal identity. This is exemplified in Extract 5.9, where the brand depicts its origin in Ritoma village as being in harmony with the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau. *Norlha* describes itself as "born in the embrace of heaven and earth", a metaphorical framing that positions the enterprise as nature's direct offspring, nurtured by its environment. The carefully crafted imagery of "mountains, water, sky, white clouds, and the smiling faces of the locals" creates a rhetoric of organic belonging, where the brand's identity becomes inseparable from its natural setting. Here, the brand explicitly links this naturalised identity to consumer acceptance, suggesting such representations make "you", potential customers, "accept the culture of *Norlha* and its products".

> 仁多玛村就是在天地怀抱间孕育了诺乐这样的一个社会企业。当你走进这里，看见这里的山，水，天空，白云，还有当地人的笑脸，你便会满心喜悦的接纳诺乐这样的一 种文化和他们的产品。他们的原材料取自这里，他们的生产者生长在这里，一切都是 那么的真实，自然，没有一丝矫饰，也不需要浮夸。
>
> Ritoma Village is where a social enterprise like Norlha was born in the embrace of heaven and earth. When you walk into the village and look at the mountains, water, sky, white clouds, and the smiling faces of the locals, you will be filled with joy to accept the culture of Norlha and its products. Their raw materials come from this place, their producers are born here, and everything is so real and natural without a trace of pretence or pomposity.

Extract 5.9. Introductory texts about Ritoma Village published on *Norlha*'s WeChat account, 22 March 2014

This strategic construction of "naturalness" culminates in explicit value judgments that reinforce a strict dichotomy between natural and artificial. The description of *Norlha*'s products as "so real and natural without a trace of pretence or pomposity" implicitly devalues alternative production methods as inauthentic. This dichotomous framing relies on a framework of genealogical authenticity—the notion that nature, as the primordial "nurturer", transfers its authentic essence to the brand as its "child". Through this rhetorical construction, the brand not only naturalises its products but also establishes a hierarchy of value where natural origin becomes the ultimate

warrant of authenticity, effectively distinguishing its offerings within the competitive fashion market.

For *Reclothing Bank*, "naturalness" is framed through what I call a "rhetoric of urgency", which is illustrated in Extract 5.10. In a video clip introducing the brand published on WeChat, the founder of *Reclothing Bank* employs a war metaphor, casting the ocean as an environmental battlefield. Extract 5.10 is part of the transcript of the voiceover in the video. The war metaphor creates a sense of urgency in the audience, and by mentioning that the sea covers 70% of the Earth's surface, the importance of winning the battle becomes evident. The speaker expresses her remorse about the impact of ocean pollution on biodiversity resulting from human actions, potentially evoking a sense of moral responsibility among the audience. She then demonstrated her brand's leadership in the sustainable fashion industry by explaining that it solves problems through innovative research and development of new technologies, emphasising "world-leading pace" ("领先世界的速度"). In this context, the brand evokes a sense of moral duty and presents itself as a provider of solutions. This discursive framework effectively channels consumer anxiety into brand loyalty, making sustainable consumption feel both ethically necessary and aesthetically appealing.

> 环境远远不只有我们生活的这些土地，占地球面积 70%的海洋是环保的更大战场。我很惋惜，原来人类带给自然的伤害这么严重，渔网、塑料瓶这些常见的垃圾在海洋内导致了种种生态物种的问题。我们用领先世界的速度，研发出了最新的工艺技术，把这些海洋塑料回收粉碎，变成最基础的再造面料
>
> The environment is not just about the land we live in. The oceans that occupy 70% of the surface of Earth are now more significant battlefields of environmental protection. I feel deeply sorry for the severe damage to nature caused by humans. Common types of trash, such as fishing nets and plastic bottles, have caused many problems for marine life. With a world-leading pace, we have developed the latest process technology to recycle and crush marine plastics and turn them into the most basic recyclable fabric.

Extract 5.10. Narrative of the brand founder from an introductory video published on *Reclothing Bank*'s WeChat account, 10 September 2020

However, this rhetorical strategy reveals an inherent contradiction in the discourse within sustainable fashion. The very technology praised for transforming ocean waste into recyclable fabric ultimately produces synthetic material, which weakens the natural/artificial dichotomy that underpins much sustainable branding. This tension points to what might be termed "selective transparency", where brands emphasise environmental problems and technological solutions while omitting important details about production costs, resource consumption, and net environmental

impact. By avoiding these details, it becomes difficult for viewers to objectively assess whether the solution of the fashion industry is effective in addressing environmental issues. Therefore, the aesthetics of contrasting the natural with the artificial can be questionable. Many sustainable fashion products are marketed as "natural" to emphasise authenticity and quality, while some are made possible by modern technological innovations that transform waste into treasure. Consequently, the natural/artificial binary emerges not as a fixed aesthetic opposition but as a flexible rhetorical tool within marketing strategy. What remains consistent is the oversimplification of complex sustainability challenges, where carefully curated brand narratives often mask the limitations and contradictions of their own practices in organisational styling.

Connecting field and text

The ethnographic and corpus data collectively show that the rhetorical strategy of "naturalness" is realised through a framing of ecological purity, which establishes a moral and aesthetic hierarchy favouring the natural over the artificial. Ethnographic evidence reveals how this strategy is materially and sensorially enacted—from the soil-stained cow horn at *klee klee*'s exhibition, presented as unmediated proof of biodynamic authenticity, to *Norlha*'s narrative of being "born in the embrace of heaven and earth", which naturalises brand identity through geographic and symbolic belonging. The corpus data supplements this by revealing the lexical construction of "naturalness", where keywords like "原色" (Original Colour Collection) and the associated rhetoric discursively reinforce an opposition to artificiality, often through overlexicalisation of the word "natural". A detailed comparison shows that ethnography records the curated, experiential performance of naturalness, highlighting internal contradictions like *Reclothing Bank*'s dependence on synthetic recycling technologies. Meanwhile, the corpus reveals a repetitive, patterned use of promotional language that often omits human labour, portraying products as direct "gifts" of nature. Both methods combine to demonstrate how "naturalness" functions as a flexible tool of distinction in organisational styling: it appeals to the habitus of elite consumers who value ontological authenticity and ethical purity, even as the strategy selectively simplifies complex environmental realities. Therefore, the rhetorical strategy of "naturalness" commodifies ecological virtue, transforming a romanticised vision of nature into cultural capital that justifies premium value while masking the nuanced compromises underlying sustainable production.

5.4 Summary

"[…] demand is a socially regulated and generated impulse, not an artefact of individual whims or needs" (Appadurai, 1986, p.32).

Upon exploring the dataset obtained from Shanghai's high-end sustainable fashion industry, a significant insight emerges: fashion tastes transcend mere trends and profoundly influence the behaviour of contemporary consumers. In this chapter, I have analysed how the fashion industry, a key influencer of taste, generates value both within and beyond the product by embracing the emerging concept of "sustainability". The added value is not only created for elite consumers to continuously solidify their power and privilege through self-styling, but also associated with a socially responsible and authentic way of living. The sustainable fashion under analysis aims to engage a niche audience in adopting this style and being considered elite. Therefore, the way elite consumers are depicted in the discourse not only mirrors social reality but also plays a crucial role in shaping norms and expectations, ultimately reinforcing the pressure to conform. As stressed by Appadurai (1986, citing Baudrillard, 1981, and Bourdieu, 1984), in modern Western society, the entities dominating fashion and defining good taste effectively restrict social mobility, establish social hierarchies, discriminate, and subject consumers to a constantly evolving game whose rules are dictated by those deemed "tastemakers" and their associated experts who occupy the highest positions in society. Upon analysing the value construction strategies employed by high-end sustainable fashion businesses through discourse, it is evident that a comparable trend is emerging in China, albeit predominantly observed in affluent cities such as Shanghai. The luxury brands have created a distinct aesthetic for a niche market by incorporating concepts such as "sustainability", "ethics", and "environmental protection" into their products. The taste preferences signalling class distinction among elite consumers may appear innocuous, but they are subtly embedded within social norms and moral frameworks during their formation and circulation. This requires tastemakers to comprehensively explain and identify attributes that align with established norms and ethical standards. In this sense, authenticity plays a vital role in shaping and spreading taste preferences within high-end sustainable fashion businesses. According to Mapes (2018), authenticity is closely tied to power dynamics because it involves deciding who has the authority to confirm something as authentic (Bruner, 1994, as cited in Mapes, 2018). She argues that authenticity conceals individuals' participation in elite behaviours and affords them elevated status by framing their "good taste" as inclusive and innocuous.

According to Cavanaugh and Shankar (2014), constructing authenticity through discourse involves more than simply affixing labels or descriptions to items as authentic. Instead, the discursive construction of "authenticity" is a strategic practice employed to enhance the perceived value and desirability of specific products or experiences. Supported by evidence from the datasets, this chapter reveals how organisational styling of sustainable brands employs six interconnected rhetorical strategies to construct the discourse of authenticity as a core source of added value. Specifically, the rhetorical strategies are summarised as follows:

High quality: The rhetorical strategy of "high quality" in sustainable fashion branding emphasises high quality, rarity of materials, and craftsmanship, which plays a significant role in communicating brand positioning and associating products with social status. Product quality is often prioritised over sustainability concepts, as customers can directly perceive quality. The study also highlights the gendered representation in promotional communication, targeting female caregivers and using safety concerns to justify the purchase of eco-friendly clothing. Sustainable fashion brands often employ gendered language and scenarios to promote their high-quality products, but this approach fails to address the unequal access to these products.

Uniqueness: The discursive construction of "uniqueness" is found in brand communication to emphasise personal taste and differentiate products from mass-produced goods. The brand's distinctiveness is shaped by the social and cultural values it embodies, with a strategic focus on leveraging geographic context and cultural elements. Notably, sustainable fashion brands frequently adopt aesthetics from ethnic minority groups and portray the local community as "the Other", creating symbolic value and appealing to a high-end market.

Locality: "Locality" emphasises the significance of responsibly sourcing raw materials and promoting corporate social responsibility. The product promotional text showcases various brands' practices that prioritise employee well-being, minimise environmental impact, and support marginalised communities. By disclosing the origin of raw materials, sustainable fashion brands aim to demonstrate their dedication to social responsibility and the utilisation of top-notch materials. The portrayal of "locality" in the product's origin creates an ideal world narrative, appealing particularly to elite consumers.

Authorisation: The rhetorical strategy of "authorisation" refers to using expert authenticators to establish the credibility of eco-friendly products. "Authorisation" is manifested through product

labels and social media articles, strategically using media recognition and associations with renowned brands to authenticate brand reputation. The process of authorising and establishing the value of sustainable fashion products clearly demonstrates an interactive relationship between the text producer and reviewer. This indicates the crucial role of text receivers in decoding and validating the "authorisation".

Historicity: In promoting sustainable fashion brands, "historicity" is embodied in various aspects, including products, raw materials, production processes, and even the design of stores. This strategy aims to emphasise durability, tradition, and timelessness, cultivating refined taste and distinguishing the elite class from ordinary consumers who may struggle to understand the value inherent in those products. I argue that the growing importance of "historicity" as a branding strategy in the creative economy and cultural product promotion raises concerns about the potential neglect of social issues and the widening gap between elite and ordinary consumers.

Naturalness: The rhetorical strategy of "naturalness" centres around using natural materials instead of synthetic ones and implementing production methods incorporating natural ingredients. This strategy aims to convey authenticity, positive qualities, and a connection to nature. Nonetheless, an excessive emphasis on "naturalness" in marketing could create an aesthetic dichotomy between natural and artificial. This reveals inconsistencies within sustainable fashion, as certain sustainable fashion products rely on contemporary technological advancements rather than natural sourcing. The rhetorical strategy of "naturalness" selectively presents information, influencing consumer perceptions and support for brands. However, it can raise doubts about the actual effectiveness of the solutions offered by fashion companies.

In Shanghai's sustainable fashion landscape, the rhetorical strategies outlined above serve not as simple promotional instruments but as sophisticated mechanisms for perpetuating elitist narratives. As Thurlow and Jaworski (2017b) argue, elitism transcends material wealth to be actively performed through consumption patterns that signal social distinction. The brand strategies in organisational styling do more than market products—they empower consumers to embody and perform an elitist identity through curated consumption. Within this framework, "authenticity" becomes a key discursive tool for elite positioning, functioning simultaneously as marketing strategy and cultural capital that enables brands and consumers to mutually constitute privileged identities. The following two chapters will examine how elite consumers engage with

these narratives to validate their social distinction, particularly since comprehending “true” sustainability requires specialised knowledge, ethical consciousness, and cultivated taste. Essentially, this discourse of authenticity and related rhetorical strategies risks obscuring social inequalities, thereby reproducing conventional power structures. The performative nature of elitism, expressed through consumer choices where authenticity operates as a form of added value, reinforces social stratification within contemporary Chinese society.

Chapter 6 From knowledge to trust: Informal learning and the construction of like-minded consumer communities in sustainable fashion branding

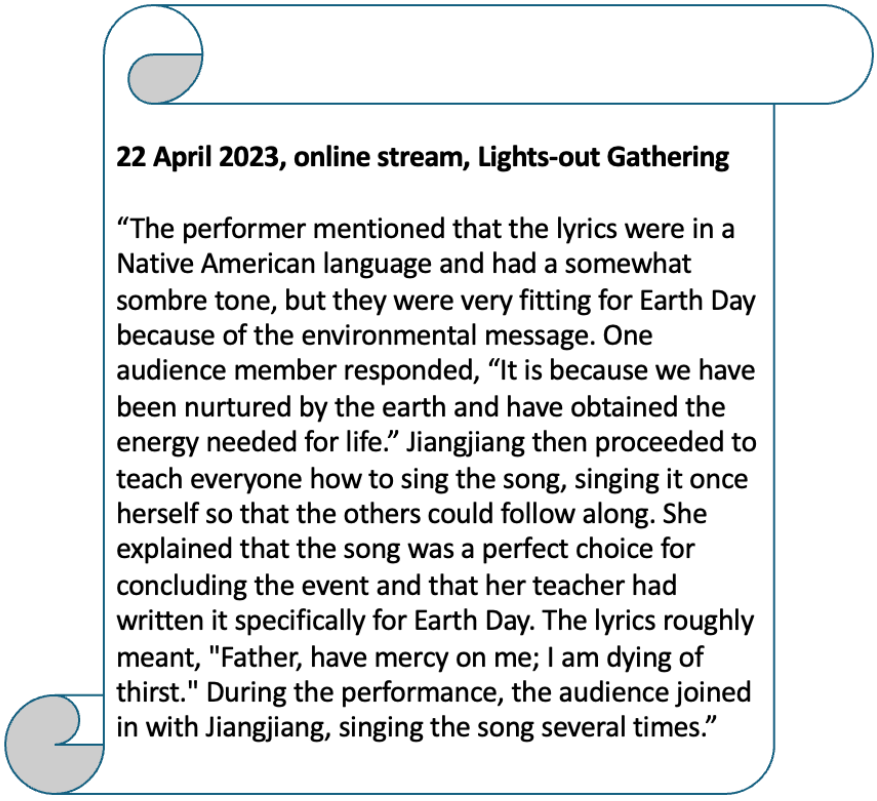

Figure 6.1. Vignette from participant observation, WeChat platform, 22 April 2023

Figure 6.2. Screenshot taken during the online livestream, WeChat platform, 22 April 2023

Figure 6.1 is part of a vignette from the field note recorded during my online participant observation on *klee klee*'s celebration party for Earth Day called "Lights-out Gathering". On the evening of Earth Day, the brand invited its customers and social media followers to this event. It featured a handpan (also called "hang", a musical instrument) artist, with the audience sitting on the floor around her and interacting in between each song (see Figure 6.2). The performer created

a relaxing atmosphere, chatting with the audience about music, nature, and organic food ingredients. Associated with the discussion in the previous chapter, this event is a good example of what Heller (2003) terms the commodification of authenticity. By staging an intimate, acoustic performance centred on themes of nature and sustainability, the brand transforms abstract environmental values into a consumable experience for its customers. The choice of a handpan—an instrument symbolising wellness and a connection to non-mainstream culture—and the discussions of organic ingredients are not merely thematic; they are strategic elements that construct and sell an "authentic" eco-conscious identity. This event reframes the brand's role from a clothing retailer to a curator of a specific, marketable lifestyle. It functions as a form of informal learning (Ala-Mutka et al., 2009; Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Bayne et al., 2009; Kress & Selander, 2012; Stocklmayer et al., 2010), which becomes a powerful tool for organisational styling (Wee, 2015), shaping public perception of the brand.

The event concluded with the performers teaching the audience to sing a song called "Earth Flow". As the vignette was presented, the performer mentioned that the lyrics were in an indigenous language from South America and had a sad tone. Still, they align well with Earth Day due to their environmental message. She then proceeded to teach everyone how to sing the song, explaining that the song was written specifically for Earth Day. The lyrics roughly meant, "Father, have mercy on me; I am dying of thirst". Then, the audience joined the performer, singing the song several times during the performance. The commodification of authenticity is achieved via linguistic heritage, where the indigenous language acts not as a living language but as a borrowed symbol of "authentic" ecological wisdom. The perceived connection to a land and culture considered "closer to nature" enhances value in this branded context, through which *klee klee* forms a relationship with the pre-industrial, idealised environment. This practice is a clear example of language materiality (Shankar & Cavanaugh, 2017). The indigenous language is valued for its physical and sensory properties—its sonic texture, its rhythmic pattern, and the collective physical act of voicing it. The translation of the lyrics ("dying of thirst") provides a thematic anchor, but the primary effect comes from the material realisation of the language itself. The audience does not need fluency; they need only to reproduce the sounds, thereby materially participating in and embodying the brand's curated atmosphere of solemn, global environmental concern. The language becomes a material resource, like the handpan's sound, used to craft a specific, immersive experience.

Without prior knowledge, one might find it unexpected to envision this event being hosted in a clothing store arranged by a fashion brand. Instead, the assumption might be that it would occur in an educational institution organised by non-governmental organisations committed to environmental protection. This is not a simple case of corporate social responsibility; it is a strategic adaptation of corporate identity and role, as analysed by Heller (2003) in the context of the new economy. Businesses are no longer confined to producing goods; they now produce experiences, identities, and lifestyles (Heller, 2003). By integrating educational initiatives and appropriating the symbolic tools such as indigenous culture, *klee klee* shifts its role from merely participating in the market to shaping cultural and ethical values. This approach involves community participation but also heightens tensions that Heller (2003) identifies: it turns symbols of resistance (indigenous pleas for God's mercy) into marketable experiences, blurring the line between genuine community engagement and commercial expansion.

This chapter examines the role of language in Shanghai's post-reform capitalist landscape, highlighting how informal learning acts as a gateway into the neoliberal "knowledge-led" and "discourse-led" economy (Fairclough, 2002, p. 164) and the adoption of semiotic resources. The data concentrates on the high-end sustainable fashion brand *klee klee* and consulting firm *RISE*, both based in Shanghai. They have organised training initiatives, such as lectures, exhibitions, and workshops to promote sustainable consumption and build a like-minded community among their target audience, mainly from the middle- and upper-middle socioeconomic classes. Employing an ethnography-led mixed-methods approach combining multi-sited ethnography and corpus-assisted discourse study (CADS), I have identified the discourse of trust. This discourse emphasises two main points: firstly, a commitment to transparency in interactions with producers, their craftsmanship, and business partners; secondly, the engagement of a consumer community bound by shared values of sustainability. The findings section will elaborate on four specific rhetorical strategies used in this organisational styling: (i) Showcasing traceability and transparency, (ii). Leveraging the power of knowledge, (iii) Advocating eco-altruism, and (iv) Managing a fan base and fostering close customer ties. Ultimately, the added value of sustainable fashion products targeting elite customers is discursively constructed while the brand's positioning is further reinforced within the broader public sphere. This study sheds light on Fairclough (1996, p.71)'s concept of "technologisation of discourse", a process that commodifies knowledge and enables economic manipulation through discourse practices.

6.1 Analysing the discourse of trust: Analytical approach

This chapter examines how *klee klee* and *RISE* employ the discourse of trust to influence consumer awareness and build an elite community. The analysis is guided by three interconnected conceptual frameworks that proved crucial for understanding the data: (i) informal learning as a corporate strategy, (ii) the technologisation of discourse, and (iii) synthetic personalisation. These frameworks serve as lenses to illuminate the specific rhetorical strategies found in the data.

6.1.1 Informal learning as a corporate strategy

The analysis reveals that the corporate-led initiatives of *klee klee* and *RISE* function not merely as marketing, but as structured forms of informal learning. The conventional understanding of learning privileges the formal, institutional setting of the school, where pedagogies are structured and outcomes are systematically evaluated. This model of formal education is widely recognised as a fundamental factor in shaping individuals' development, socioeconomic trajectory, and social status (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Stocklmayer et al., 2010). Importantly, from a sociological perspective, it functions as a primary engine of social reproduction. As Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) observe, formal learning institutions not only impart skills; they systematically inculcate individuals into the dominant norms, values, and cultural codes of the social class system, thereby perpetuating existing hierarchies.

However, an increasingly critical dimension of learning occurs outside these formal structures. This informal learning typically unfolds in unstructured settings, often through digital platforms and everyday practices, without formal evaluation (Enos et al., 2003; Lohman, 2006; Watkins & Marsick, 1992). In the contemporary, rapidly digitised, and globalised world, these informal learning environments are becoming as, if not more, influential than formal ones. Digital media, in particular, serves as a pivotal driver, providing a global platform for acquiring knowledge, accessing information, and sharing ideas, thereby fundamentally reshaping learning practices (Ala-Mutka et al., 2009; Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Bayne et al., 2009; Kress & Selander, 2012). The significance of this shift is exemplified in research by Dong and Blommaert (2016), which examines the formation of a globally-oriented Chinese middle-class identity. Their study demonstrates how cultural codes and tastes are transmitted from global to local contexts precisely through these channels of informal learning. They posit that for upwardly mobile Chinese

consumers, access to informal global learning is as important as formal qualifications in constructing a recognisable and legitimate class identity.

This chapter engages directly with this paradigm, analysing how the informal learning outcomes of middle- and upper-middle-class consumers—fostered by corporate initiatives—serve to indicate and perform their distinctions in taste. However, it makes a crucial departure from the perspective of Dong and Blommaert (2016). While their focus remains on the agency of the *consumer* in acquiring cultural capital, this study shifts the analytical lens to the *producer* of informal education, namely, corporate entities like *klee klee* and *RISE*. Consequently, my research centres not on the consumption of cultural codes, but on their semiotic production. I investigate how these businesses strategically design and deploy informal learning through workshops, social media content, and curated events to educate a target audience, shaping their tastes and aligning them with the brand's sustainability ethos. This strategic use of informal learning is a key mechanism for constructing the discourse of trust.

6.1.2 The technologisation of discourse

To understand the economic logic behind this discursive work, the concept of the technologisation of discourse (Fairclough, 1996) serves as an important explanatory framework in this chapter. According to Fairclough, "[…]Language[…] is becoming more central and more salient in the New Capitalism than in earlier forms of capitalism" (Fairclough, 2002, p. 163). In his words, New Capitalism is "the new form of capitalism emerging from contemporary transformations" (Fairclough, 2002, p. 164). He points out that the importance of language is evident in how New Capitalism is described as "knowledge-" or "information-based" and that the transformations of capitalism are driven by knowledge and discourse (Fairclough, 2002, p. 163). In that sense, various forms of discourse, including economic, organisational, managerial, political, and educational discourses, contribute to knowledge production, circulation, and consumption. In a "knowledge-based" economy, he argues that knowledge and semiosis become commodities, and this is referred to as the "technologisation of discourse" (Fairclough, 1996, p. 71), a process during which semiosis becomes open to processes of economic calculation, manipulation, and design.

This chapter employs this concept to analyse how knowledge about sustainability and ethical production becomes a value-adding commodity for high-end fashion. The findings demonstrate that the brands' efforts are an instantiation of this process: traceability, material knowledge, and

eco-altruism are not just values but rhetorical strategies that add exchange value to products and reinforce brand positioning within Shanghai's creative economy. The technologisation of discourse, therefore, provides the macro-economic rationale for the micro-linguistic strategies uncovered in the data.

6.1.3 Synthetic personalisation and the construction of community

At the micro-discursive level, the analysis is guided by Fairclough's (1989) concept of synthetic personalisation to examine how businesses in Shanghai's sustainable fashion sector simulate interpersonal closeness to foster a commercial community. Fairclough (1989) identified this process as a defining feature of commodified discourse, terming it *synthetic personalisation*. He defines it as the process by which mass media and institutional discourses simulate private, face-to-face conversations, creating the illusory impression that a mass audience is being addressed as a unique individual. As Patrona (2015) summarises, this strategy fosters a sense of synthetic solidarity, overcoming the inherent anonymity of broad audiences by claiming a shared common ground and personal engagement. However, Fairclough (1989) offers a critical perspective, arguing that this manufactured egalitarianism is fundamentally driven by marketisation and consumerism. He questions whether such conversationalised discourse signifies a genuine democratisation of culture or, instead, serves as an ideological tool for powerful elites to engender compliance and mask underlying power asymmetries.

The linguistic mechanisms of synthetic personalisation are well-documented, including the strategic use of personal pronouns (e.g., "we", "you", "our"), interrogatives, imperatives, and features of spoken grammar like exclamations (Patrona, 2015). For instance, Collins's (2019) case study of the Nottingham-based business "Dukki" provides a clear example. By adopting the local dialect and addressing followers as "yer/yo boggers", the brand uses synthetic personalisation to construct an in-group identity tied to a specific locale, reinforcing belonging through shared vernacular. Additionally, Talbot (1995), extending Fairclough's work from a feminist discourse-analytic perspective, introduces the concept of "synthetic sisterhood". She illustrates how women's magazines use imperatives, informal lexicon, exclamation marks, and presuppositions of shared knowledge to simulate a reciprocal, friendly relationship with their teenage readers. This "sisterhood" is a discursive construction that socialises young women into a consumer-based

femininity, integrating them into "synthetic consumer communities" where identity is intrinsically linked to consumption.

Similarly, this study examines how stakeholders in Shanghai's high-end sustainable fashion industry employ synthetic personalisation to build a community aligned with elite values and tastes. Data from social media and multi-sited ethnography reveal a strategic use of intimate address, shared jargon around sustainability, and narratives of collective mission. This creates a paradox: while the products are economically exclusive, the discourse is strategically inclusive and approachable. The analysis will demonstrate that this is not a contradiction but a coherent strategy. The exclusivity of the brand is reflected not only in the pricing of the products but also in the manufactured sense of community intimacy. Access to this "close-knit" circle is reserved for those who can afford both the financial and cultural cost of entry.

This fosters a reciprocal relationship of mutual recognition: the brand recognises the consumer's discerning taste and ethical alignment, and the consumer, in turn, acknowledges the brand as a legitimate tastemaker. The synthetic personalisation employed by the brand does not lessen its elite status but rather reinforces it by validating the consumer's class-based aesthetic sensibilities. The perceived intimacy makes the adoption of the brand's sustainability and eco-conscious values feel like a personal choice rather than a commercial imposition. Ultimately, this chapter elucidates how this underlying logic, whereby discourse masks market relations as personal relationships, is articulated through language, reinforcing social distinction under the guise of community and shared purpose within Shanghai's socio-economic context.

6.2 Data overview

To achieve the research goals of this chapter, I adhere to the overall methodology of the current project and select representative examples from my datasets to present. This chapter has four sets of data components. The first two sets comprise field notes accompanied by photos and social media articles as supplementary materials. The third set is a video clip, and the fourth set comprises two corpora compiled from social media articles. The details are introduced below.

6.2.1 Training workshops: "Gathering like Water" event series

"Gathering like Water" is a series of activities themed on protecting water resources co-organised by *klee klee* and *Qiandao Lake Water Fund*. This event series started from June 24 to September

15, 2022, taking place at *klee klee*'s Columbia Circle store. Due to COVID restrictions in Shanghai, most events were also live-streamed for remote attendance. The event series featured an exhibition showcasing the efforts of the research teams from the *Water Fund* in preserving water resources. It emphasised nature-based conservation solutions proposed by the team and stakeholder engagement models for water conservation, aiming to raise public awareness and encourage their involvement. During the exhibition*, klee klee* also invited members of the *Water Fund*, as well as scholars and practitioners engaged in water conservation, wetland protection, landscape design, and ecological restoration to give four lecture talks, sharing their stories of water conservation. Additionally, to increase audience interaction, they hosted a 2-hour board game event focused on managing a watershed.

6.2.2 Brand activation event: Earth Day celebration

"*klee klee* & Friends' Lights-Out Gathering" is a brand activation event celebrating World Earth Day (a global event promoting environmental awareness and action since 1970) on April 22, 2023. The event took place at *klee klee*'s Columbia Circle store, where the brand invited a hang (a musical instrument) artist, customers, and the owner of an organic farm, who is the brand's business partner, to join together. The brand celebrates the event annually with various activities, including book recommendations and sales, clothing donations, and gift offers with purchases. Also, the event has a one-hour lights-out ceremony each year at *klee klee*'s two physical stores. The brand's 2023 Earth Day celebration was unique because it featured more interactive customer engagement, and the live-streaming mode captured the interactions between customers and the brand.

Anecdotally, I suspect that *klee klee* may have confused Earth Day with Earth Hour because how they celebrate the former is similar to the latter. Earth Hour is an annual event that encourages individuals, communities, and businesses to dedicate one hour to the Earth by switching off non-essential electric lights from 8:30 to 9:30 p.m. on the last Saturday of March. It is essential to note that, despite conveying similar environmental messages, Earth Day and Earth Hour are two distinct events that occur on different dates.

6.2.3 Call for participants video: A self-introduction from an environmental influencer

The video was created to recruit participants for a talk on an eco-friendly lifestyle at an event series called "Fuckup Night" ("搞砸之夜", the English translation is the organisation's own), part

of the Sustainable Life Festival organised by *RISE*. Published on *RISE*'s WeChat account on October 29, 2022, it is a short video featuring a monologue from an environmental influencer, along with clips of her daily life snippets. Regrettably, I was unable to attend the event mentioned in the video due to COVID-19 restrictions and work-related constraints that prevented me from leaving the province where I live. Nevertheless, the video is interesting because, during the 51-second clip, the speaker shared her opinions on environmental protection as a lifestyle and discussed the actions she has been taking in her daily life. Arguably, this reflects how elite consumers perceive their environmental actions. Conversely, it can also be seen as the identity and image that businesses aim to project to their target elite customers in order to appeal to them. This means that businesses are likely crafting their branding, messaging, and practices to resonate with the values and expectations of affluent, environmentally conscious customers.

6.2.4 Businesses' social media texts: The Corpora of WeChat Profile Feature and Event Communication Articles

For the convenience of data presentation, the corpus findings regarding the discourse of trust focus on the Profile Feature Corpus and Event Communication Corpus. These two sub-corpora were compiled from WeChat articles that are suitable for investigating the research objectives outlined in this chapter.

Both *klee klee* and *RISE* employ the social media platform WeChat to disseminate information about various commercial events they have organised. Since the events predominantly focus on eco-themes, those articles cover specialised knowledge and educate participants interested in joining. In addition, the businesses also introduce some individual stakeholders within the sustainable fashion field by publishing some WeChat articles in the format of interview transcripts. Those individuals include fashion designers, brand managers, other business partners, artists, and non-professional models invited to shoot the fashion look. All of them shared their stories concerning sustainable fashion and lifestyle, and the style of the conversations between the interviewee and interviewers was very casual, like chatting between close friends. In addition to these two sub-corpora, others also contain trust-related keywords, but they have distinct focuses; for example, the Promotional Corpus is more relevant to the discourse of authenticity, as discussed in Chapter 5.

For corpus compilation, I built two corpora based on text types rather than businesses. The rationale is that I consider those businesses part of an interconnected community, and this research does not involve comparing nuances among individual businesses. Both *klee klee* and *RISE* have published articles on event communication and profile feature text types. Thus, I have included the documents from both entities together in one corpus, as they are of the same text type. I first browsed the content of each WeChat article and categorised them based on text types. Finally, I uploaded the two types of articles to *Sketch Engine* separately, which resulted in two corpora.

6.3 Findings

6.3.1 Showcasing traceability and transparency

Ensuring traceability and transparency regarding the social and economic impacts of raw material sourcing and production processes is increasingly important, particularly within the fashion industry. This idea relates to corporate social responsibility (CSR), which encompasses "the economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic expectations that society has of organisations at the given point in time" (Carroll, 1979, p. 500). If the organisation aims to fulfil a successful economic and social role within the market, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is regarded as an essential strategy (Arrigo, 2009). The "do well by doing good" notion in CSR has led to criticisms, arguing that it is merely another management fad (Crouch, 2006). For example, Brei and Böhm (2014) demonstrate that the CSR campaign, as a cause-related marketing strategy, enhances the company's long-term profits and shareholder value. Moreover, they contend that it effectively legitimises corporate entities and consumer capitalism as a whole. As a result, the fundamental issues of inequality have not been addressed directly.

In this project, businesses that identify themselves as "sustainable", "ethical", or "eco-friendly" fashion make significant efforts to communicate their corporate social responsibility (CSR) through various means rather than relying solely on traditional methods such as releasing annual CSR reports. Instead, they engage customers in more interactive ways, like organising in-store exhibitions to introduce the raw materials and production processes or making the product label more "educational" by explaining in both English and Chinese where the raw materials are sourced and the global standards by which the product was certified. In Chapter 5, when discussing the rhetorical strategy of "authorisation", I provided more details about those examples to illustrate

how the stakeholders under analysis establish and defend their claims of "sustainability". In this regard, traceability and transparency are closely linked to the discourse of authenticity. This connection arises because demonstrating traceability and transparency requires authoritative validation, such as international certification or standardised explanatory narratives that authenticate the products. Nevertheless, for the value of traceability and transparency to be recognised and embraced by the target audience, it must also be understood from the perspective of "trust".

"Showcasing traceability and transparency" in practice

Extract 6.1. is a vignette recorded during the "Lights-out Gathering", which I also mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Besides the handpan artist Jiangjiang, Xiaoli was another guest invited by *klee klee*. She is based in Yunnan and owns Rainbow Hunter, an organic farm. During the event, her farm provided all refreshments, including cocktails and snacks (Figure 6.3), which were beautifully displayed and adorned with candles. The partnership between *Rainbow Hunter* and *klee klee* has been established since 2020, when *klee klee* featured a profile article about Xiaoli on WeChat, introducing her business philosophy of "reconnecting with nature". The farm's emphasis on a deep human-nature connection is closely related to the concept of terroir, which scholars have extensively examined in the realms of food and language (e.g. Cavanaugh, 2007). "Terroir" serves as a method of ascribing morality, value, and superior taste to food practices (Mapes, 2020). This discourse was actively mobolised by the host from *klee klee*, who emphasised that the ingredients were "transported by air directly from Yunnan", a statement intended to index freshness, authenticity, and a connection with a pristine terroir.

However, the use of air freight, one of the most carbon-intensive logistics methods, creates a contradiction between the brand's stated sustainable habitus and its material practices. Such contradiction could be critically interpreted not as a simple oversight, but as a strategic choice that serves to reinforce exclusivity. Also, this practice can be understood through the concept of "cultural omnivore" (Peterson & Kern, 1996). The modern elite distinguishes itself by consuming not just traditional luxury, but also "authentic" and "local" experiences from distant sources. The ability to consume "Yunnan's terroir" in Shanghai overnight is a powerful display of cultural and economic capital. It suggests that consumers can expect instant delivery from a remote location perceived as pure and authentic, despite the environmental impact. Air freight itself becomes a

marker of status, a material signifier of the consumer's ability to transcend usual logistical and ecological constraints. Thus, rather than a commitment to sustainability, the distinctive taste for "authentically sourced, air-freighted goods" is a mechanism for consolidating class-based distinction, revealing the inherent tensions within the discursive construction of high-end sustainable fashion.

22 April 2023, Online Stream, Lights-out Gathering

此时主持人正好接过话题，介绍活动当日的另一位嘉宾，来自彩虹农场的小丽。主持人介绍说今天现场的鸡尾酒是小丽特地从云南带来的，她在云南生活了 14 年，经营彩虹农场、酿酒，今天的梅子酒里特地加了杜松子——圣诞树的种子，接着主持人暗示小丽和大家介绍一下鸡尾酒的调制过程。

The host transitioned to another guest at the event, Xiaoli from Rainbow Farm. The host introduced today's cocktail, specially brought from Yunnan by Xiaoli from Rainbow Farm. She has lived in Yunnan for 14 years and runs a farm and a brewery. The host added that the plum wine served today had used juniper berries, the seeds of Christmas trees. The host then cued Xiaoli to introduce more details about the cocktail-making process.

小丽开始介绍道这个酒给云南本土的梅酒做了一个升级，本土的梅酒是用本地酒泡制的，而本地酒在蒸馏过程中有杂味，影响了梅子的清香，所以她做了一些改进，用自己种的甘蔗熬红糖，制成本地郎姆酒，然后再加入杜松子，这样就会有金酒的基底，品酒的人"可以喝到森林气息"，还加了农场自种的柠檬和香草，"所以会有种乡土的感觉，是一种有层次的递进，它有前调、中调和尾调。这和手碟的声音有点像，其实自然的东西都是相通的，我们在做每个酒的时候都会去现熬红糖，都是在遵循自然法则。"她说道。

Xiaoli introduced the cocktail, an upgraded version of Yunnan's traditional plum wine. According to her, the original plum wine is made by steeping plums in local liquor, but it often has a sour taste due to impurities in the distillation process, which affects the plum's fragrance. To improve this, she used her homegrown sugarcane to create local rum, adding juniper berries to form a gin base, giving the drink a "forest flavour". She also incorporated lemons and herbs from her farm, adding, "It brings a sense of rural life, with layered flavours—top, middle, and base notes. It's like the sound of a hang drum. Everything in nature is interconnected. When we make each drink, we boil fresh brown sugar, respecting the natural order."

Extract 6.1. Field note from *klee klee*'s Earth Day celebration, WeChat platform, 22 April 2023

Figure 6.3. Refreshments at the event, WeChat platform, 22 April 2023

The rhetorical strategy of "showcasing traceability and transparency" is essential in elucidating the local production process through a narrative approach, As shown in the second paragraph of Extract 6.1, Xiaoli's story about her hand-made plum wine goes beyond simply indicating the local origin of her ingredient; her explanation functions as a sophisticated discursive performance. Similar to Silverstein's (2003) concept of "oinoglossia" or "wine talk", Xiaoli employs a specialised register that not only describe the product but also constructs its value and her own identity as a producer. She began by explaining the production process of the traditional local plum wine, where impurities from distillation result in a sour taste that affects the plum's fragrance. This sets the stage for her improved version, which still uses local ingredients but enhances the recipe by using "homegrown sugarcane to make local rum" and adding juniper berries, lemons, and herbs "grown from her farm". The detailed description of the winemaking process makes the cocktail unique for the participant, as Xiaoli has crafted the wine specifically to reflect the terroir of the region and made it an "upgraded" version. Crucially, Xiaoli's use of metaphorical and aesthetic language—phrases like "forest flavour" ("森林气息") and "a sense of rural life" ("有种乡土的感觉")—parallels what Silverstein identifies as "characterological figurations" (Silverstein, 2003, p. 225). These are anthropomorphising metaphors that attribute human-like qualities, such as personality or a background, to a non-human entity. By consuming the wine and its accompanying

narrative, the participant is invited to not just taste a beverage, but to partake in an essence of "nature" and "rural authenticity".

In the process of value creation, an important moment is when Xiaoli employs a semiotic strategy that Silverstein identifies as indexical iconicity (2003, p. 203). This concept describes a semiotic process where an indexical sign (a sign that points to a context) is perceived as having an iconic or naturally motivated relationship with what it signifies. In other words, the connection is made to feel inherent and diagrammatic, rather than arbitrary or constructed. Xiaoli achieves this by describing the wine's "layered flavours" ("有层次的递进"), which she poetically compares to the sound of the handpan. Here, she creates a diagrammatic relationship between the two sensory experiences; the wine's complexity is presented as iconically mirroring the artistic sophistication of the music. This indexical iconicity naturalises the wine's high value, making it seem like an obvious property of the product itself rather than a subjective marketing claim. Furthermore, at the end of her introduction, she emphasised the labour-intensive process of cocktail production by articulating the need to "boil fresh brown sugar" ("现熬红糖"), framing it as "respecting the natural order" ("尊重自然法则"). Thus, through oinoglossic discourse, Xiaoli performs and commodifies an identity of authentic, nature-connected craftsmanship. In particular, the indexical iconicity between taste and sound is key to this performance, as it transforms a narrative about production into a sensory, "natural" fact about the product's elite status (Silverstein, 2003).

Mapping "showcasing traceability and transparency" in the corpus

As evidenced by Xiaoli's narrative of the cocktail-making process, a key strategy businesses display transparency and traceability is by discursively highlighting the connection between products and nature or local terroir. This strategy is linked to the construction of "authenticity", a discourse detailed in Chapter 5, where stakeholders establish their "sustainability" claims through authoritative validation, sourcing locations, and historical origins. However, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, for the value of traceability and transparency to be recognised and embraced by the target audience, it must be anchored in the perspective of "trust". Therefore, the focus of this chapter shifts from *what* is claimed (as analysed in Chapter 5) to *how* the concepts themselves are discussed to construct this "trust". Ethnographic observation reveals that in direct consumer engagement, the brand avoids abstract definitions of transparency or traceability. Instead, it

employs a storytelling approach, using descriptive and metaphorical language to make these concepts experientially tangible.

To systematically explore how this rhetorical strategy shapes in written texts, this section turns to corpus data. An initial examination of the Top 100 keyword lists in the Profile Feature Corpus and Event Communication Corpus contains no direct semantic references to "traceability" and "transparency". This leads me to analyse specifically the concordance lines and original context of the term "溯源"—the literal translation of "traceability" in Chinese—across two corpora to identify how businesses linguistically construct the concept for their audience. Quantitative data for this search term from the corpus are presented in the table below. As shown in the table, the term "溯源" (traceability) has a low absolute frequency, occurring only 9 times in total across the corpora. However, its distribution is strategically significant. It occurs with a higher relative frequency in the Profile Feature Corpus (64.36 per million tokens) compared to the Event Communications Corpus (19.69 per million tokens). Furthermore, the term is completely absent in the Promotional Corpus.

Search Term	Sub-corpus	Frequency	Relative Frequency (per million tokens)	Function
溯源 (traceability)	Event Communication	4	19.69	Constructing Trust
	Profile Feature	5	64.36	Constructing Trust
Note: The translation of "溯源" varies with context.				

Table 6.1 Quantitative data for "溯源" (traceability) in the Event Communication Corpus and the Profile Feature Corpus

The frequency and distribution of the term "溯源" traceability suggest it functions as a technical or insider term within industry discourse, rather than as a common feature of customer-facing communication. This likely explains its complete absence from the Promotional Corpus. Eight out of nine cases of the term originate from *RISE*, a sustainability consultancy where this terminology is part of their professional language. In contrast, the single instance from the fashion brand *klee*

klee appears not in their own marketing, but within a profile feature interviewing their wool supplier. In a sense, this pattern indicates that while traceability is of significant value within the fashion industry, brands like *klee klee* strategically translate this technical concept into the more narrative, experiential language of "terroir", "craftsmanship", and "story" when addressing consumers. This avoids potentially technical jargon in favour of discursive strategies that build trust through sensory and emotional resonance.

Discursive patterns in detail

In the Event Communication Corpus, traceability is predominantly framed with a techno-managerial discourse. As Figure 6.4 shows, the first two lines have the same content, which is about an event preview published on *RISE*'s WeChat platform. According to its original context (see Extract 6.2), the text highlights the effort of *Allbirds*, a global sustainable fashion brand, to measure its carbon footprint, from material traceability to design and even recycling, mentioning that it was the first fashion brand in the world to label all its products with a carbon footprint. Here, the traceability of raw materials is a component in carbon footprint calculation, a quantifiable and auditable metric. Similarly, in the third line, *RISE* introduces a digital platform and indicates that the platform aims to "leverage the decentralised, traceable, and transparent nature of blockchain to create a recycling experience for brands, designers, and users in a two-way dialogue" ("利用区块链去中心化、溯源及透明化的特性, 为品牌、设计师及使用者们创造一个双向对话的循环使用体验"). Here, the blockchain platform is promoted for its "traceable and transparent nature", presenting it as a neutral, technological fix for sustainability. This framing, which emphasises a "two-way dialogue" ("双向对话"), constructs a model of citizenship where corporations provide data and consumers take responsibility for making "correct" choices. This aligns with Fairclough's (2002) characterisation of New Capitalism, where social and environmental relations are managed through technical and discursive systems.

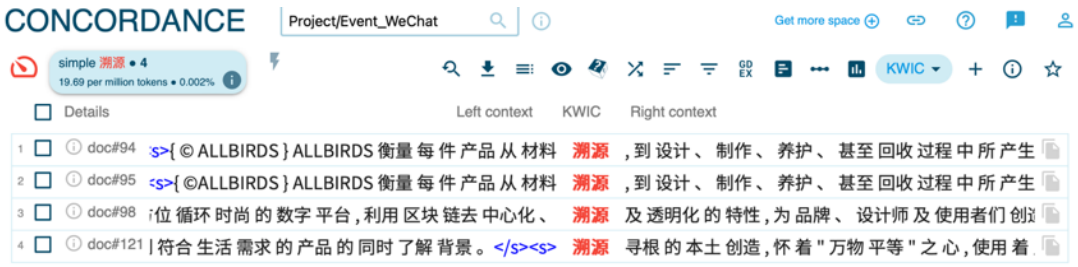

Figure 6.4. Concordance lines for “溯源” (traceability) in the Event Communication Corpus

{ ©ALLBIRDS } ALLBIRDS 衡量 每 件 产品 从 材料 **溯源**, 到 设计 、 制作 、 养护 、 甚至 回收 过程 中 所 产生 的 碳 排放量 , 并 于 2020 年 世界 地球日 前夕 成为 首 个 为 全线 产品 贴上 〞 碳 足迹 〞 标签 的 时尚 品牌 。

{ ©ALLBIRDS } ALLBIRDS measures the carbon emissions generated across its full product life cycle—from material **sourcing** and design to manufacturing, care, and even recycling. Ahead of Earth Day 2020, it became the first fashion brand to attach a "Carbon Footprint" label to its entire product line

Extract 6.2. Original sentence containing “溯源” (traceability/sourcing) in Lines 1 and 2

Moreover, the fourth line (also from *RISE*) ties the notion of equality to traceability, together constructing the defining characteristic of the brand *RISE* introduced in the article. The complete sentence with the translation is presented in Extract 6.3. Here, a significant discursive shift occurs where traceability is reconfigured from a technical process into a narrative of cultural connection. As seen in Extract 6.3, *RISE* redefines “local creation” (“本土创造”) as the selection of materials “closely connected to local culture” (“贴近本土文化”) and the process of “experimenting and exploring possibilities” (“实验探索可能性”) to create products that “return to the essence in both design and form” (“从设计和形式上都回归本质”). It also emphasises the brand’s core value of “equality of all things” (“万物平等”) while imposing high standards on the final product—it must be “minimal, fully utilised, and clean in its purity” (“没有多余、物尽其用、干净纯粹的”). By framing traceability as a commitment to these qualities, the discourse performs a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1984; 1991). It misrecognises the high cost and privilege required for such artisanal practices, instead presenting them as a natural, egalitarian, and altruistic philosophy.

溯源 寻根的本土创造，怀着〞万物平等〞之心，使用着贴近本土文化的材料在实验、探索可能性的同时创造出没有多余、物尽其用、干净纯粹的产品，从设计和形式上都回归本质。

Tracing origins and roots through local creation, with a belief in "equality of all things", they use materials closely connected to local culture, experimenting and exploring possibilities while creating products that are minimal, fully utilised, and clean in their purity, returning to the essence in both design and form.

Extract 6.3. Original sentence containing "溯源" (traceability/tracing origins) in Line 4

As Figure 6.5 displays, traceability in the Profile Feature Corpus is related to story and storytelling (Line 1), local ethnic minority culture (Lines 2 and 5), and raw materials and design (Lines 3 and 4). The interpretation of the term by the text producers reveals similarities between the texts from the two corpora. However, the first line in the Profile Feature can provide further insights. Specifically, the original context of "溯源" (traceability) from *klee klee*'s WeChat article reveals *klee klee*'s explicit discussion of how to communicate traceability. The article features an interview with a sales staff member called Moran, who works for *klee klee*'s wool supplier and has 14 years of working experience in marketing. The interview with Moran (Extract 6.4) functions as a metapragmatic commentary on the brand's own discursive strategies. What she believes about the importance of "story" and "traceability" and how marketing people communicate to the customers is similar to how Xiaoli promoted her brand, as illustrated at the beginning of this section.

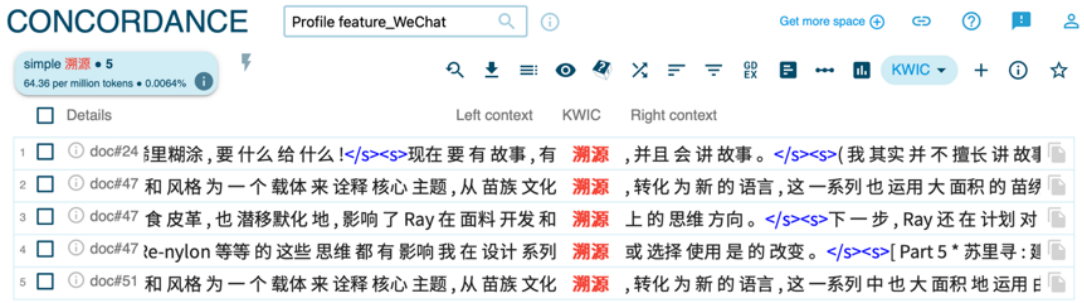

Figure 6.5. Concordance lines for "溯源" (traceability) in the Profile Feature Corpus

As the Extract 6.4 shows, *klee klee* asked Moran about the changes that happened in the sales industry during these decades. Moran's observation underscores the profound influence of the information age on the industry as a whole. This encompasses the emergence of expert consumers

who possess a comprehensive understanding of the products they purchase and heightened expectations for sales personnel to demonstrate specialised expertise in their offerings. Her description reflects the key characteristics of an informational economy, where "sources of productivity and competitiveness for firms, regions, and countries rely more than ever on knowledge, information, and the technologies for processing them, including management technologies and the management of technology" (Castells, 1997, p. 7). In this context, the informational economy operates within the transformations of capitalism driven by knowledge and discourse, as outlined by Fairclough (2002). Moran confirms that the rise of "expert consumers" in the informational economy, makes transparency and traceability a non-negotiable demand and a form of cultural capital that salespeople must possess. The company disseminated this discussion on its social media platform to inform the public of the prevailing shift towards transparency in product marketing. This CSR strategy not only earns recognition from elite consumers who expect the company to disclose its environmental and social practices but also places the onus on ordinary consumers to research, evaluate, and differentiate between products, forcing them to make ethically sound choices. Moran acknowledges her lack of storytelling skills, framing the brand's communication as inherently honest and trustworthy. Including this detail in brackets within the *klee klee* text could indicate that it is secondary but noteworthy. This suggests that "storytelling" (讲故事) in this context does not carry negative connotations (as the phrase might mean "exaggeration" or "deceit" in some Chinese contexts). Instead, it underscores that professionals like Moran uphold honesty and integrity in their marketing approach.

klee klee：你做这份工作已经14年了，你觉得行业前后有什么变化吗？以前做销售和现在有什么不同吗？

***klee klee*:** You've been working in this industry for 14 years. What changes have you noticed over time? How does working in sales now compare to before?

莫然：我觉得行业变化在于，以前我们自己也不知道什么是好的面料，物理指标什么样的效果是合格；而如今一线客户已经成为专家，对于需求点，舒适性，风格，甚至连价格等都完全驾驭，信息时代进步的速度转眼即逝，所以我们需要进步，需要让未来的产品更加的一目了然，更符合当下的需求。 以前我做销售可能有点稀里糊涂，要什么给什么！现在要有故事，有 **溯源** ，并且会讲故事。 （我其实并不擅长讲故事，仍然保留最早的一部分，坦诚、清晰、负责，我是这样理解，但是我会学习）。

Moran: I think the main change in the industry is that in the past, even we didn't know what made a good fabric, or what physical standards meant a product was up to par. Nowadays, frontline customers have become experts—they fully understand their needs in terms of comfort, style, and even price. The pace of progress in the information age is incredibly fast, so we need to keep up and make future products more straightforward and aligned with current demands. In the past, my approach to sales might have been a bit clueless—just giving customers whatever they asked for! Now, there has to be a story, a sense of **traceability**, and the ability to tell that story. (I'm actually not great at storytelling and still stick to the basics—being honest, clear, and responsible. That's how I see it, but I'm learning.)

Extract 6.4. Original context of "溯源" (traceability) in the conversation between *klee klee* and Moran

Connecting field and text

The ethnographic and corpus data collectively illustrate that the rhetorical approach of "showcasing traceability and transparency" is carried out via two discursive frameworks: one performative and narrative, the other technical and systematic, both aimed at building trust among an elite consumer audience. Ethnographic evidence captures the performative dimension, where transparency is rendered experiential through oinoglossic storytelling—as in Xiaoli's detailed narrative of plum wine production, which uses indexical iconicity to naturalise value and obscure the logistical contradictions of air-freighted authenticity (Silverstein, 2003). The corpus data, by contrast, reveals the strategic lexical patterning behind this rhetoric, quantifying how the technical term "溯源" (traceability) is conspicuously absent from direct promotional language, yet appears

in consultancy and profile features where it is framed within a techno-managerial discourse of carbon metrics and blockchain. A comparison reveals their complementary roles: the ethnography illuminates the curated, sensorial *performance* of transparency that builds emotional trust, while the corpus exposes the deliberate *erasure* of its technical mechanics from consumer-facing texts, reflecting a strategic translation of complex data into palatable stories. Ultimately, both methods converge to show that "traceability" is less about factual disclosure and more about a sophisticated legitimation process. This process cultivates a class-specific trust, appealing to "expert consumers" who possess the cultural capital to decode both the romanticised narratives and the underlying technical warrants, thereby reinforcing their distinction within the ethical marketplace.

6.3.2 Leveraging the power of knowledge

"Leveraging the power of knowledge" concerns introducing technical terms and expert knowledge by specialist speakers or text producers in organisational styling. It integrates education or training into the process of reshaping consumption patterns through informal learning environments established by the organisations. Based on the analysis's findings, the strategy is argued to add sophistication to sustainable fashion and promote a sustainable way of life, thereby creating value for the products.

"Leveraging the power of knowledge" in practice

To illustrate, Extract 6.5 is a vignette that I recorded to demonstrate how an expert guest speaker engages with the audience during a training workshop on environmental protection. The talk was the second training workshop of the "Gathering Like Water" event series, dedicated to urban ecological design. The speaker, Dr. Zhu, introduced himself as a researcher affiliated with the Chinese Academy of Science and a co-founder of Hangzhou Qingshang Nature School. The vignette is part of the second section of his talk, which focuses on aquatic insects. Note that he mentioned the original Latin words of the abbreviation ETP (E for Ephemeroptera, P for Plecoptera, and T for Trichoptera) and their corresponding English words.

6 August 2022, Online Stream, 2nd workshop of "Gathering like Water"

Moving on to the second half of his talk, entitled "The Insects Attracted by Water"(my translation, and I believe it is the actual theme of the presentation), Dr Zhu first showed three diagrams of the eco-system of water, illustrating the differences in terms of the varieties and numbers of insects under different water conditions (good, intermediate and bad). He introduced the term "EPT aquatic insects" (E for Ephemeroptera, P for Plecoptera, and T for Trichoptera). Since the concept appeared very technical and unfamiliar to most audiences, Dr Zhu explained the original Latin names and their corresponding English words (mayfly, caddisfly, and stonefly, respectively). When he talked about the Ephemeroptera, he specifically mentioned its association with the word "ephemeral" and added that "this is a GRE (Graduate Record Examination) vocabulary". Also, he showed many pictures of aquatic insects and asked whether the audience could recognise them.

... ...

The interaction between the presenter and the audience was mainly during the presentation, and there was no Q&A session. Dr Zhu initiated some questions based on the content of his talk. When discussing aquatic insects, he asked the audience whether anyone could recognise them through pictures. One mother and daughter appeared to know it quite well (they could even tell the difference between damselfly and dragonfly, whose appearances are very similar). Dr Zhu said they must have had abundant experience observing insects. Overall, the presentation involved plenty of technical knowledge, and the audience showed a great interest in it. However, they didn't interrupt the presenter to ask questions very often - they just listened attentively and responded to the presenter's occasional questions.

Extract 6.5. Field note from *klee klee*'s "Gathering Like Water" event series, WeChat platform, 6 August 2022

Although the topic is ecology, the spontaneous use of technical terms in English and Latin exemplifies what Khan (2013) identifies as the modern elite's "ease", a cultivated capacity to navigate diverse domains of knowledge with comfort and fluency. Dr. Zhu showcased his range of English vocabulary by mentioning the word "ephemeral", which relates to "Ephemeroptera" in Latin and belongs to GRE[1] vocabulary. The speaker referenced this probably due to his previous experience as a visiting scholar in the US, which he introduced at the start of the event. This resonates with Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) argument about formal education in the acquisition

[1] The GRE, or Graduate Record Examinations, is a standardised test that forms part of the admissions process for many graduate schools in the United States, Canada, and a few other countries.

of the essential diacritics associated with social class. Formal learning and educational credentials serve as essential foundations. Through formal schooling, both the speaker and the audience have achieved a reasonable level of English proficiency, and they can also quickly grasp new terminology in ecology. Without these credentials, they would lack access to informal learning environments, not to mention understanding the topics discussed in those environments.

During the event, the sophistication of the audience is demonstrated through their spontaneity in encountering unfamiliar knowledge, including specialised terminologies in a discipline, foreign languages, and even ancient languages like Latin. The fact that the speaker did not explain what the GRE is presupposes the audience's familiarity with it as common knowledge, suggesting that many have taken or will take the exam for graduate study in North America. This aligns with the shift in elite culture that Khan (2013) describes, "from entitlement to privilege", where privilege is demonstrated not by static lineage but by a mobile, individual capacity to master diverse contexts. The audience's display of "omnivorousness" (Peterson & Kern, 1996), comfortably consuming ecology, Latin, and GRE vocabulary, is a key marker of this new elite identity (Mapes, 2021; Khan, 2013). I participated in the event online and was unable to closely observe all participants present in person. However, based on the interaction, it is clear that the audience was engaged. They were sitting and listening to Dr. Zhu's talk attentively, and occasionally, some of them answered the questions posed by Dr. Zhu. As a participant observer, the entire scenario reminded me of an academic lecture in an educational setting rather than a clothing store selling fashion products. It particularly surprised me that a mother and daughter in the audience could distinguish between similar-looking insects (damselfly and dragonfly), and even the speaker himself commented on their rich experiences in observing insects. This observation underscores how the informal learning environments curated by the provide a platform for consumers to inconspicuously perform their cultural capital—their hobbies, knowledge, and refined sensibilities.

This vignette shows how the brand's events function as spaces where elite identity is reaffirmed. The "ease" with which both speaker and audience handle complex knowledge presents cultural fluency as a natural, individual attribute. However, this apparent effortlessness is misleading. The ability to participate in this way is the result of significant privilege, including access to high-quality education and international experiences. Khan (2013) argues that this new elite culture, which appears open and meritocratic, effectively obscures the advantages that make it possible.

By framing this display of knowledge as a casual, shared interest, the event helps to naturalise social inequality. It makes class privilege seem like personal intellectual curiosity, thereby legitimising the status of the participants without overtly stating it. In this way, the pursuit of ecological knowledge doubles as a subtle but effective mechanism of social distinction.

Mapping "leveraging the power of knowledge" in the corpus

The corpus data also show that stakeholders involved in educational initiatives, such as the example above, establish themselves as thought leaders in the fashion industry. By positioning themselves as sources of knowledge, these actors enhance their credibility and associate their brands with innovation and expertise, thereby reinforcing a reputation of trustworthiness. As in the previous section, the focus here is not on the specific content of the knowledge (which will be detailed in Chapter 7), but on how the very discourse of "knowledge" and "education" is mobilised to construct "trust". Ethnographic observation shows that in consumer-facing contexts, this knowledge is not presented as formal instruction, but is framed as a casual, shared interest—a common practice within elite cultural consumption.

To investigate this pattern, I employed the same method as in Section 6.3.1. An initial review of the Top 100 keywords in the Profile Feature Corpus and Event Communication Corpus showed a predominance of proper names (brands, organisations, designers), with no direct semantic references to "knowledge" or "education". However, a concordance analysis of these named entities revealed that discussions about the role of education in promoting sustainable fashion emerged when introducing specific advocates or designers. To explore this more systematically, this section presents findings from an analysis of the search term "教育" (meaning "education" or "to educate", depending on the grammatical context) within the Profile Feature Corpus, examining its surrounding concordance lines and original sentences. The quantitative data for this search term are presented in the table below.

Search Term	Frequency	Relative Frequency (per million tokens)	Function
教育 (education/to educate)	16	205.97	Constructing Trust

Table 6.2 Quantitative data for "教育" (to educate/education) in the Profile Feature Corpus

Discursive patterns in detail

Figure 6.6 presents the concordance lines for "教育" in the Profile Feature Corpus, revealing several key thematic areas in how education is framed within sustainable fashion. The usage of the term shows education as an institutionalised practice, with Lines 1-3 detailing the establishment of *Chaimiduo*[2]'s Nature Education Centre and its integration into an organic food supply system. A second theme presents education as a generational concern, as seen in Line 4's focus on children's education. Furthermore, education is framed as a core business challenge in Line 5-8, which address the difficulties in consumer education and awareness-raising. A broader, systemic view emerges in Lines 9, 10, 11, and 14, which connect sustainability to wider contexts like the environment, general education, and the market. Finally, Lines 12,13, 15 and 16 present education as a matter of individual and industrial development, focusing on how personal education in social responsibility influences both the fashion industry and sustainable development. To elaborate on how individuals in these profiles conceptualise education's role, the following analysis will focus on the original context of the search term "教育" in Lines 9 and 15, presented below in Extracts 6.6 and 6.7, respectively.

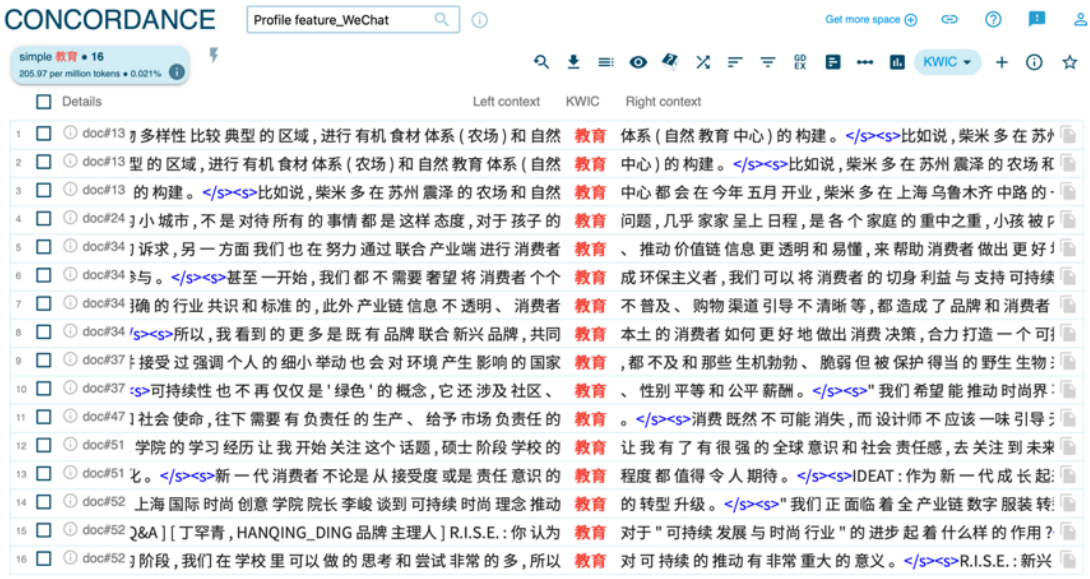

Figure 6.6. Concordance lines for "教育" (education/ to educate) in the Profile Feature Corpus

[2] *Chaimiduo* (柴米多) is a sustainable lifestyle brand originating in Yunnan, build around the "farm-to-table" concept. Its main businesses include the production and sale of organic ingredients, farm-to-table dining, and nature-based education, aiming to promote sustainable food culture and living in urban settings.

Extract 6.6 is retrieved from a *RISE* article from March 2021 featuring Margaret Zhang, Vogue's "youngest ever editor-in-chief", an Australian-Chinese. The article details her educational background, work experience, and views on environmental issues. The excerpt below, quoted from Zhang's blog, underscores her belief in the significance of the in-person experience of nature: she argues that people who grow up inland without direct exposure to oceans or rainforests cannot truly understand ecological protection and sustainable development, their knowledge being "merely confined to false political movements and trendy commercial buzzwords in mum circles". She further contends that even those raised in nature-centric environments with an educational system emphasising individual action cannot achieve the same "soul-stirring" understanding as someone who has experienced scuba diving and witnessed the "lively yet fragile wildlife that is properly protected" firsthand.

她 在 博客 里 写到 ： ″ 没有 亲身 了解 我们 失去 的 是 什么 ， 是 不 可能 理解 我们 对 环境 的 破坏 究竟 有 多 严重 的 。 对于 成长 在 内陆 、 没有 机会 亲眼 见证 真实 且 充满 生命力 的 海洋 、 热带 雨林 、 山脉 的 魔力 的 人们 而言 ， 生态 保护 和 可持续 发展 的 理念 只 是 局限 在 虚假 的 政治 运动 和 宝妈 朋友圈 里 的 商业 流行 词汇 罢了 。 即使 在 自然界 长 大 ， 并 接受 过 强调 个人 的 细小 举动 也 会 对 环境 产生 影响 的 国家 **教育** ， 都 不及 和 那些 生机勃勃 、 脆弱 但 被 保护 得当 的 野生 生物 来 一 次 潜水 更 直击 心灵 。

She wrote in her blog: "Without personally experiencing what we have lost, it is impossible to understand the severity of our environmental destruction. For those growing up in inland areas without the opportunity to witness the real, vibrant magic of the ocean, tropical rainforests, and mountains, the concepts of ecological protection and sustainable development are merely confined to false political movements and trendy commercial buzzwords in mom circles. Even in countries where **education** emphasises that small individual actions can impact the environment, nothing is more soul-stirring than diving with the lively yet fragile wildlife that is properly protected."

Extract 6.6. Original context of "教育" (education) in Line 9

Her message is explicit: genuine ecological understanding requires direct and immersive experiences. While this seems a straightforward advocacy for environmental engagement, her perspective is deeply entrenched in a logic of distinction. Zhang defines authentic understanding through scuba diving, an activity that is geographically, financially, and socially exclusive. This framing aligns with what Khan (2013) identifies as the modern elite's embodiment of "ease", a capacity to navigate and consume a wide range of experiences, from elite careers to adventurous

hobbies, which is presented as a natural attribute rather than a product of privilege. In fact, the financial, physical, and temporal expenditures associated with acquiring diving skills are not readily accessible for the average individual, not to mention the potential adverse effects of human diving activities on the marine ecosystem (see, e.g., Milazzo et al., 2002).

Following Zhang's quotes, the text producer aligns with this view, stating that environmental awareness is reflected in hobbies like skiing, hiking, and diving, as "people only protect what they truly love". Nevertheless, the hobbies mentioned subtly demonstrate class distinctions, which are typically acquired in informal learning environments by individuals. Again, access to these activities is generally a privilege for those with adequate economic resources. This logic seamlessly connects environmental virtue to a specific set of cosmopolitan, resource-intensive leisure practices. This is a clear expression of the "cultural omnivorousness" (Peterson & Kern, 1996) that Khan (2013) describes, where elite status is demonstrated not by exclusive highbrow taste, but by the ability to consume a broad range of high- and low-cultural forms.

The rhetorical strategy of "leveraging the power of knowledge" functions as an ideological operation. By framing environmentalism as a matter of personal, embodied experience through exclusive hobbies, it transforms an ethical stance into a mark of elite identity. The way Zhang effortlessly shifts between high fashion and remote diving spots makes this type of environmentalism seem like a natural result of a curious, well-travelled individual. However, this apparent effortlessness is a social construct. As Khan (2013) argues, this "ease" is a costly privilege, one that is cultivated through access to economic capital and transnational mobility. The underlying logic is therefore problematic and exclusionary. It implicitly suggests that those without the means for such experiences—those who cannot ski, hike remote trails, or scuba dive—are less capable of "truly loving" or understanding nature. This effectively shifts the focus of environmental responsibility away from systemic, collective action and corporate accountability, and onto individual consumption and class-based performance. It establishes a hierarchy of authenticity where the most legitimate environmentalist is the one with the most privilege and visibly demonstrable experiential capital. This process effectively normalises social inequality by framing it as a difference in personal virtue and ecological awareness.

Interestingly, the corpus data also reveals that highlighting informal learning environments does not diminish the importance of formal education. For example, Extract 6.7 indicates how the

stakeholder believes that formal education, as a marker of social class, remains essential for cultivating environmental awareness. The interviewer from *RISE* interviewed a young fashion designer, Hanqing, who attended the sustainable fashion design challenge organised by *RISE*. The extract discusses Hanqing's perspective on the role of education in promoting sustainable fashion development. She highlights that international education exposed her to new perspectives and values, fundamentally altering how she approaches her work and realising the importance of education in cultivating a deeper awareness of sustainability issues. In her comments, she mentions that early in her career, her focus was primarily on the popularity and appeal of her designs, without much attention to sustainability. It was only after pursuing postgraduate studies at the Royal College of Art in the UK that her perspective shifted. She credits the school's emphasis on "global awareness" and "social responsibility" for instilling in her a sense of ethical responsibility and a forward-thinking approach. In other words, what she focuses on in her comments is overseas education, which she believes played a crucial role in expanding her understanding of the broader implications of design and prompting her to reflect on issues she had not previously considered.

R.I.S.E. ：你 认为 **教育** 对于 〞可持续 发展 与 时尚 行业〞的 进步 起 着 什么样 的 作用 ？

R.I.S.E.: What role do you think **education** plays in the advancement of "sustainable development in the fashion industry"?

罕青 ：一开始 做 设计师 的 时候 ，我们 会 更 关注 自己 的 设计 会 不 会 被 别人 喜 。 所以 其实 我 对 可 持续 的 关注 是 从 英国 皇家 艺术 学院 的 影响 开始 ，学校 会 不断 的 向 设计师们 传导 全球 意识 和 社会 责任感 这样 的 议题 ，不断 地 引导 我们 去 思考 关于〞未来〞这个 议题 ，在 这样 的 引导 下 ，有 一些 责任感 和 以前 可能 没 想 过 的 事 真的 就 成为 了 思维 的 习惯 和 无形 的 意识 。 它 会 启发 学生 站 在 未来 设计师 的 角度 进行 思考 ，会 赋予 我们 很多 权利 和 概念 ，让 设计师们 真正 觉得 自己 有 责任 而且 有 能力 做 一些 事情 去 影响 或者 改变 行业 。[…]

Hanqing: When I first became a designer, we focused more on whether others would like our designs. My attention to sustainability began at the Royal College of Art in the UK, where the school constantly instilled global awareness and social responsibility in designers. This guidance made us continually reflect on the topic of the "future." Through this, a sense of responsibility and consideration I hadn't thought of before became ingrained in my mindset. It encourages students to think from the perspective of future designers, empowering us with the belief that we have both the responsibility and the capability to influence or change the industry. [...]

Extract 6.7. Original context of "教育" (education) in Line 15

When discussing the importance of education, she primarily stresses her change in ethical awareness rather than concrete aspects, such as the technical knowledge and skills required to produce sustainable designs. Hanqing's emphasis on abstract concepts is evident in her use of vague terms like "global awareness" and "social responsibility". Her comments reflect the profound impact of discourses related to neoliberal capitalist values on individuals, such as the rhetoric of globalisation and empowerment prevalent in the branding of higher education (see Wodak & Fairclough, 2010, for the European context; and Ng, 2014, for the Singaporean context). This comment, published on *RISE*'s WeChat platform, underscores the role of elite education in shaping values related to sustainability. This aligns with Klein's (2000) observations on modern branding strategies, which increasingly shift away from emphasising tangible aspects and instead focus on constructing conceptual meanings and values. By associating brands with these abstract, value-driven attributes, companies can create a stronger emotional connection with consumers, making their brands more relatable and meaningful (Aaker, 1997; Kapferer, 2008; Koller, 2009).

This case demonstrates how sustainability is discursively constructed as a form of elite cultural capital, acquired through prestigious international education. The emphasis on abstract values rather than technical skills serves an important ideological purpose. It simplifies a complex issue that often needs practical, regulated solutions into a question of personal ethics and awareness—a mindset fostered in exclusive institutional settings. This discourse effectively obscures the material and technical challenges of sustainable production and shifts the burden of responsibility onto the individual's cultivated "awareness". Ultimately, this framing serves to reinforce class boundaries. Access to this form of "enlightened" sustainability is gatekept by the high cost of overseas education, making it a privileged credential. The narrative suggests that true sustainability understanding is not just about what you do, but about *who you are* and *where you were educated*. This legitimises the authority of a transnational elite, perpetuating inequality under the guise of ethical progress.

Connecting field and text

The ethnographic and corpus data together show that the rhetorical strategy of "leveraging the power of knowledge" is carried out through a sophisticated discursive framework that transforms educational capital into a mechanism of social distinction, naturalising elite privilege as ethical awareness. Ethnographic evidence captures the performative dimension of this strategy, where

displays of knowledge—like Dr Zhu's effortless use of Latin terms and ecological concepts during a brand event—function as what Khan (2013) terms a cultivated "ease". This creates an inclusive-seeming space that, at the same time, excludes those lacking specific cultural or educational credentials. The corpus data complements this by quantifying how knowledge is constructed discursively, with the term "教育" (education/to educate) in profile features framing sustainability as a product of elite international education and exclusive experiential learning, as seen in Margaret Zhang's highlighting of scuba diving as crucial to authentic environmentalism. A comparison shows their distinct yet mutually supportive roles: the ethnography highlights the embodied, interactive performance of knowledge in curated informal settings, making cultural fluency seem innate, while the corpus reveals the systematic ideological framing that favours abstract values from prestigious institutions over practical, accessible knowledge. Both methods, however, demonstrate that this rhetorical strategy functions as a powerful tool of legitimation, shifting sustainability from a collective, systemic duty to an individual trait acquired through exclusive formal and informal learning. This creates a hierarchy of authenticity that justifies elite power while hiding the material inequalities that make such knowledge possible.

6.3.3 Advocating eco-altruism

"Advocating eco-altruism" involves emphasising actions taken or commitments made by the speaker or their organisation to protect the environment, support societal well-being, and promote sustainability. It also includes suggestions the speaker offers to the audience on how to achieve sustainability, as well as acknowledging the audience's interest and concerns regarding sustainability and environmental issues. The analysis findings suggest that this rhetorical strategy serves to demonstrate both the organisation's and its elite consumers' responsibility and awareness toward environmental protection and local communities, fostering a sense of self-satisfaction and moral fulfilment.

"Advocating eco-altruism" in practice

Extract 6.8 is part of the subtitles of the call-for-participant video for a talk entitled "How Environmentalism helped me love myself more after letting go of moral pressure", part of the series of talks on the Sustainable Life Festival organised by *RISE*. Published on the official WeChat account of *RISE* on 29 October 2022, the short video features a monologue from an environmental influencer who introduced herself as "a 1998-born environmentalism and vegan culture enthusiast"

(“一个 98 年的环保和素食文化的爱好者”), and it displays three clips of her daily life snippets, whose subheadings and subtitles are shown below. The video features both the speaker’s voice and subtitles, accompanied by upbeat background music.

[给“旧物”找“新家”]

[Finding a ‘New Home’ for ‘Old Things’]

那其实我觉得环保它就是一个非常有个性、非常有品质的生活方式，因为我去购买了很多二手的一些用品，那它除了受环境影响更低之外，它们也是更有个性的，都是独一无二的。

I believe that environmentalism is a highly personalised and quality way of living. I’ve bought a lot of second-hand items, which not only have a lower environmental impact but are also more unique—each one is one of a kind.

[“蚯蚓箱”堆肥]

[Composting with a ‘Worm Box’]

环保其实是一种技能满满的生活方式

Environmentalism is actually a lifestyle full of useful skills.

[“更简单轻松的生活”]

[A ‘Simpler and Easier Life’]

我也希望通过分享这样一个低门槛，然后比较轻松易行的环保生活方式可以鼓励到更多的人加入进来

I hope that by sharing this accessible and relatively easy-to-follow eco-friendly lifestyle, I can encourage more people to join in.

Extract 6.8. Subtitles from the call-for-participant video, WeChat, 29 October 2022

In the first clip, the speaker talks about her experience of buying (vintage) second-hand items as an example of her environmentalist life, which she regards as “a highly personalised and quality way of living” (“一个非常有个性、非常有品质的生活方式”). This framing exemplifies what Currid-Halkett (2017, p. 54) terms as “nonpecuniary inconspicuous consumption”, a practice where status is signalled not through high cost, but through specialised knowledge, aesthetics, and cultural cues that are legible only to a specific in-group. While mentioning the “quality way of living”, the camera gives a close-up shot of her nightstand (Figure 6.7), which has a transparent glass tabletop with wooden or bamboo edges and legs. On the surface, there is a vintage-style lamp, incense sticks, a glass cup, and decorative items like preserved flowers and framed illustrations. Although there are many items, the overall colour scheme is harmonious, reflecting the homeowner’s aesthetic taste. This curated aesthetic is not expensive in a Veblenian sense—that is,

it does not flaunt status through high price and overt luxury, which Veblen (2017 [1899]) identified as "conspicuous consumption" in the 19th-century leisure class—but signals a significant "cost of information" (Currid-Halkett, 2017). This refers to the cultural knowledge and "insider" taste required to source, recognise, and artistically assemble such a tasteful lifestyle, which is a modern form of status signalling (Currid-Halkett, 2017). The camera then shifts to a scene in a second-hand shop, where the speaker shows the camera an old tin box printed with the words "All-Colour Film" and a brand logo called "Shanghai" (Figure 6.8). The tin box is open, and inside are papers resembling receipts, though the contents are unclear in the video. The accompanying subtitle reads, "a lower environmental impact" ("受环境影响更低"). The speaker then faces the camera, mimicking the expression of a woman in an old photograph from a frame she is holding, with the subtitle, "also more unique—each one of a kind" ("也是更有个性的, 都是独一无二的"). The camera then quickly cuts to a delicate antique vase (Figure 6.9). Here, the "value" is not in the price of the vintage tin but in the cultural capital required to appreciate its uniqueness and historical narrative, transforming thrifting from a frugal act into a signifier of sophisticated, individualistic taste. This is the essence of nonpecuniary inconspicuous consumption: the item is affordable, but the ability to choose the *right* affordable item—one that signals uniqueness and cultural awareness—is what conveys elite status.

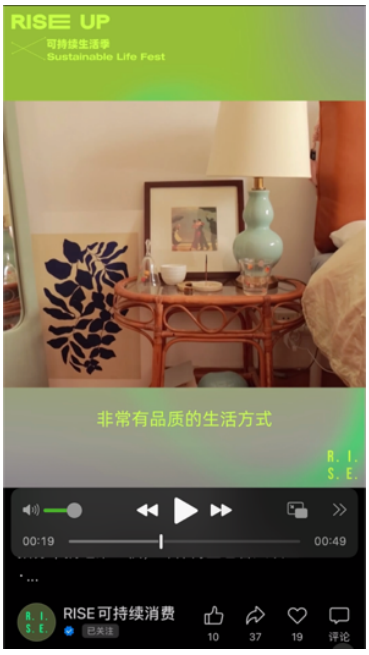

Figure 6.7. Screenshot 1

Figure 6.8. Screenshot 2

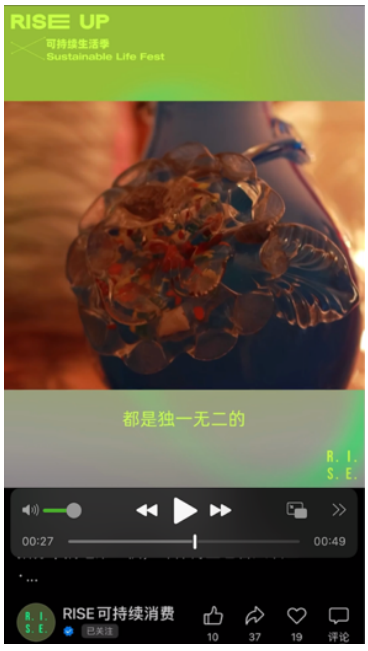

Figure 6.9. Screenshot 3

The second section is about small-scale home gardening, titled “Composting with a Worm Box”. The video captures the speaker wearing gloves, taking a jar of soil from a box filled with dirt and worms, and then planting a tiny seedling in the jar (see Figure 6.10). The accompanying text reads, “Environmentalism is actually a lifestyle full of useful skills” (“环保其实是一种技能满满的生活方式”). This is a direct manifestation of what Currid-Halkett (2017), drawing from Khan (2013), calls a “learned form of capital”. The practice itself is the physical embodiment of cultural capital—knowledge about ecology, composting, and sustainable gardening that is acquired through education and immersion in specific, environmentally conscious circles. This knowledge constitutes a form of nonpecuniary inconspicuous consumption; it is a status symbol that costs little in money but requires significant investment in learning and socialisation to acquire (Currid-Halkett, 2017). This section is relatively short, and then it transitions to the following theme, which is about the speaker’s eco-friendly travel methods, titled “A Simpler and Easier Lifestyle”. The first scene shows the speaker picking up an eco-friendly tote bag, transitioning from an indoor home setting to an outdoor one. The camera focuses on the tote bag in close-up, and once in the outdoor scene, the bag is placed into a bicycle basket (see Figures 6.11, 6.12 and 6.13). At this moment, the subtitle reads, “this accessible” (“这样一个低门槛”). Then, the camera switches to the speaker herself, riding a bicycle on the streets of a residential area in Shanghai, accompanied by the text, “relatively easy-to-follow” (“比较轻松易行的”). The final scene zooms out, alternating between clips of the speaker cycling and running, subtly implying that this is her daily mode of transportation. The text concludes with, “can encourage more people to join in” (“可以鼓励到更多的人加入进来”).

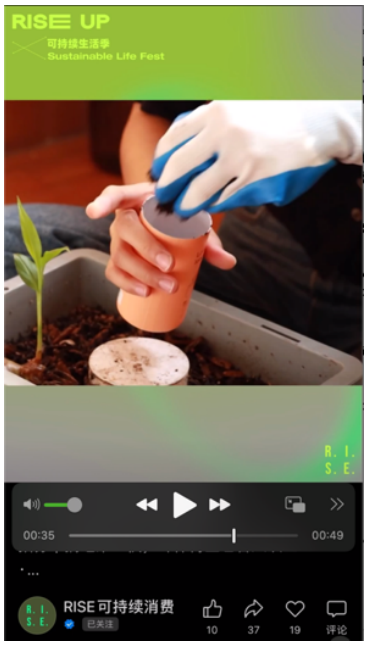

Figure 6.10. Screenshot 4

Figure 6.11. Screenshot 5

Figure 6.12. Screenshot 6

Figure 6.13. Screenshot 7

The entire video can be seen as an example of *RISE* providing informal education to consumers interested in sustainable fashion through social media. The text in the video (both written subtitles and the speaker's voice), combined with the visual content, further emphasises the message of eco-altruism, defining sustainability and environmentalism as a lifestyle. Throughout the narration, the speaker highlights how this lifestyle reflects personal character, hobbies, and aesthetic taste. Rather

than showcasing ordinary, functional second-hand appliances or household items, she presents decorative objects with a sense of nostalgia tied to specific eras, reinforcing symbolic boundaries between those who possess the cultural knowledge to appreciate such aesthetics and those who do not. Additionally, she uses the example of worm composting to demonstrate that this lifestyle requires knowledge and expertise in ecological and environmental sciences, subtly implying that it demands a certain level of education from its practitioners, thereby raising the "cost of information". However, this content takes up only a small portion of the video, which soon shifts to emphasise the simplicity and ease of this lifestyle, illustrated through examples of eco-friendly transportation such as cycling and running. The arrangement of information in the video suggests a deliberate intention—to encourage a broader audience to embrace this lifestyle. A noteworthy detail is that the speaker is dressed in athletic attire, a style not typically associated with commuting for work or school. While cycling and running are indeed environmentally friendly, they are not as universally accessible or "low-barrier" as the speaker implies. Given the high cost of living in central Shanghai, many individuals are compelled to reside in areas that require longer commutes, where adopting so-called sustainable modes of transportation, such as cycling and running, is more characteristic of an elite lifestyle. Based on my observations, most people in Shanghai continue to opt for more affordable public transportation or quicker options such as private cars and electric scooters. Nevertheless, such suggestions are more easily accessible to the intended audience or consumers with the time and financial resources to prioritise self-care and eco-friendliness over practical expenses.

The video presents an ostensibly "everyday" environmentalist lifestyle, but it is, in fact, more aligned with elite living. This lifestyle is often portrayed as environmentally conscious, but it remains largely inaccessible to the average individual. It both promotes a new, youth-led, eco-conscious way of living and subtly reinforces class distinctions. This video serves as a prelude to the speaker's formal presentation, titled "How Environmentalism Helped Me Love Myself More After Letting Go of Moral Pressure" ("放在道德压力后, 环保帮助我更好地爱自己"). Here, the discourse of "self-love" is mentioned, which has become increasingly popular on Chinese social media and is typically associated with the pursuit of a higher-quality life and personal development, influenced by neoliberal ideologies. For instance, Sun (2023) provides an insightful analysis of how China's beauty economy and social media influence intersect with neoliberal ideals and the discourse of self-making. Such discourses are often embedded in consumer choices and lifestyles

that reflect class-based distinctions and preferences. By introducing environmentalism into the narrative of "self-love", the speaker reframes sustainable living as a more niche and exclusive marker of class identity.

Applying Currid-Halkett (2017)'s framework, this video can be seen as a strategic performance of inconspicuous consumption that leverages the rhetorical strategy of "advocating eco-altruism". The influencer's curated lifestyle—her vintage finds, worm composting, and cycling—serves as a display of "cost-of-information" signifiers, showcasing a high level of cultural capital and ethical awareness rather than pure wealth. This aligns with how the aspirational class distinguishes itself through subtle, coded behaviours. The rhetorical strength depends on how this performance is presented. By promoting environmentalism as an accessible and skill-based form of "self-love", the video moralises these class-coded consumption patterns. It persuasively portrays a habitus grounded in privilege—such as the time allocated for composting or the wealth required to live centrally for easy cycling—as a universally accessible and altruistic goal. Therefore, "advocating eco-altruism" serves a dual purpose: it promotes sustainability while also reinforcing and legitimising the social distinctions linked to this particular, knowledge-based lifestyle.

Mapping "advocating eco-altruism" in the corpus

To systematically examine how sustainability and its associated lifestyle are defined in corporate social media, I began with a keyword analysis across two corpora. This process identified one multi-word term that was particularly salient and aligned with the focus suggested by my ethnographic data. The search term is "可持续生活" (sustainable life) from the Event Communication Corpus. This term ranked 13th in the key multi-word list and occurred 50 times, indicating its significance. Given its prominence and thematic relevance, I selected it for an in-depth analysis of its usage and discursive context.

To understand how this term is framed, I first analysed its collocates within the Event Communication Corpus, using the MI statistic and removing punctuation (see Table 6.3). The results reveal several key patterns. The strongest collocate is "Sol Collective" (MI: 11.14), a sustainable trading platform, which immediately frames sustainable living within a context of consumption. This is reinforced by the high MI score for the collocate "商品" (commodity; MI: 9.23), resonating with the finding form the video analysis that sustainability is often promoted to

an elite class through consumption. Furthermore, the collocate "提案" (proposal; MI: 11.07), suggests that this way of living is represented as a novel concept being put forward by the corporate stakeholders. The presence of the second-person pronoun "你" (you; MI: 4.78) indicates a discursive strategy to make sustainable life more relatable and personally address affluent consumers. Guided by this preliminary collocate analysis, I proceeded to a close examination of the concordance lines and their original context. This subsequent step was crucial for moving beyond statistical associations to uncover the dominant discourses constructed around the concept of "sustainable life". The quantitative data for this search term are presented in the table below.

Search Term	Frequency	Relative Frequency (per million tokens)	Keyness score	Collocates	Function
可持续生活 (sustainable life)	50	246.09	242.32	Sol Collective, "提案" (proposal), "批" (a measure word, meaning *a large number of*), "关心" (care about), "商品" (commodity), "给" (to give), "生活" (life), "方式" (style), "提供" (to provide), "平台" (platform)	Constructing Trust
Note: Where the list of collocates is extensive, only the top ten are presented here due to space constraints. Otherwise, the complete list if collocates is retained, though punctuation markers are excluded.					

Table 6.3 Quantitative data for "可持续生活" (sustainable life) in the Event Communication Corpus

Discursive patterns in detail

The carefully crafted branding of the sustainable trading platform, "Sol Collective", is consistently reinforced across *RISE*'s social media communications, as evidenced by corpus data: the collocation of "Sol Collective" with "sustainable lifestyle" occurs five times. While the high Mutual Information (MI) score is likely due to "Sol Collective" being a proper noun, the significance lies in the repetition: the same introductory sentence, which articulates the platform's core belief in eco-altruism, is found across five different articles. Extract 6.9 illustrates the branding of "Sol Collective", where the Latin word "Sol" is deployed not merely as a name but as

a signifier designed to accumulate positive social and ethical value. The text provides evidence for this in its explicit gloss of the term: "The name 'Sol', meaning 'sun' in Latin, reflects the platform's vision: for each item to bring positive energy into daily life, adding warmth and a more meaningful, positive dimension." This process is linked to the commodification of language (Heller, 2003; 2010b), where linguistic features themselves become marketable resources. Here, the Latin etymology and the positive values it indexically entails are commodified to add symbolic and economic value to the platform and the products it sells; the "warmth" of the sun is not just a feeling but a quality that can be acquired through consumption, and speaking the language of "Sol" signals membership in a community of conscious consumers.

[Sol] **Sol Collective** ，一个「**可持续 生活 方式**」平台。将对「环保意识」和「社会责任」富有热情的产品、品牌、设计师、制造商与消费者联结，通过设计理念来交流「地球友好」的态度与价值观。Sol，在拉丁语中意为〞太阳〞，我们希望这里的每一件物品，都能给大家带来正能量，让生活更有温度和积极的意义。

[Sol] **Sol Collective** is a **sustainable lifestyle** platform that connects products, brands, designers, manufacturers, and consumers who share a passion for environmental awareness and social responsibility. It facilitates the exchange of planet-friendly attitudes and values through design philosophy. The name "Sol," meaning "sun" in Latin, reflects the platform's vision: for each item to bring positive energy into daily life, adding warmth and a more meaningful, positive dimension.

Extract 6.9. Original context of "Sol Collective"

Figure 6.14 displays a screenshot of the concordance lines for the collocate "提案" (proposal) that occurs with the search term "可持续生活" (sustainable life). Each case follows the same pattern, titled "给可持续生活的提案" ("The Proposal for Sustainable Life"), and is accompanied by practical tips to the right of the heading. A close reading of those cases shows that consumption is essential to achieving sustainable living. This framing positions sustainable living not as a radical departure from consumerism, but as a curated set of consumer choices, which can be understood through Currid-Halkett's (2017) concept of "cost-of-information inconspicuous consumption". The "proposals" serve as a guide to acquiring the specific cultural capital—the knowledge of *what* and *how* to consume—that signals membership in an environmentally conscious, elite class (or an aspirational class, in Currid-Halkett's term). In Line 4, it is suggested

to “learn to stop yourself in time and practice rational consumption” (“学会及时‘刹手’, 理性消费”). Line 6 is about “starting by changing your consumption habits and paying attention to your consumer behaviour” (“从消费方式开始, 关注自己的消费行为”). Line 12 mentions “actively participate in the sharing economy” (“多多参与共享经济”). In addition to the aforementioned consumption-based principles, other proposals offer more concrete consumer choices that serve as non-pecuniary signifiers. For example, the fifth line suggests opting for fabrics made from 100% natural ingredients, while the seventh advises building a versatile capsule wardrobe. The eighth encourages consumers to “learn about sustainable fabrics and check labels before purchasing” (“认识可持续面料, 购买衣服时看清成分”), and the tenth advocates for choosing solid personal care and cleaning products. Line 11 suggests trying a plant-based diet, while Line 13 promotes using natural light and upgrading to energy-efficient light bulbs. Each of these specific actions is a relatively affordable purchase, but their significance lies in the “cost of information” required to know that these are the correct and socially valorised choices within this specific habitus. By addressing sustainability in clothing, food, and everyday product choices, these guidelines construct a standard model for a sustainable lifestyle, effectively enregistering a set of consumer behaviours as the legitimate performance of eco-consciousness. Furthermore, Lines 15 and 16 broaden the notion of sustainability to encompass career choices and financial investments, proposing that these decisions should also consider sustainability as a critical factor. This expansion marks a move towards a more comprehensive and demanding form of inconspicuous consumption, where one’s entire life trajectory is expected to align with these curated value.

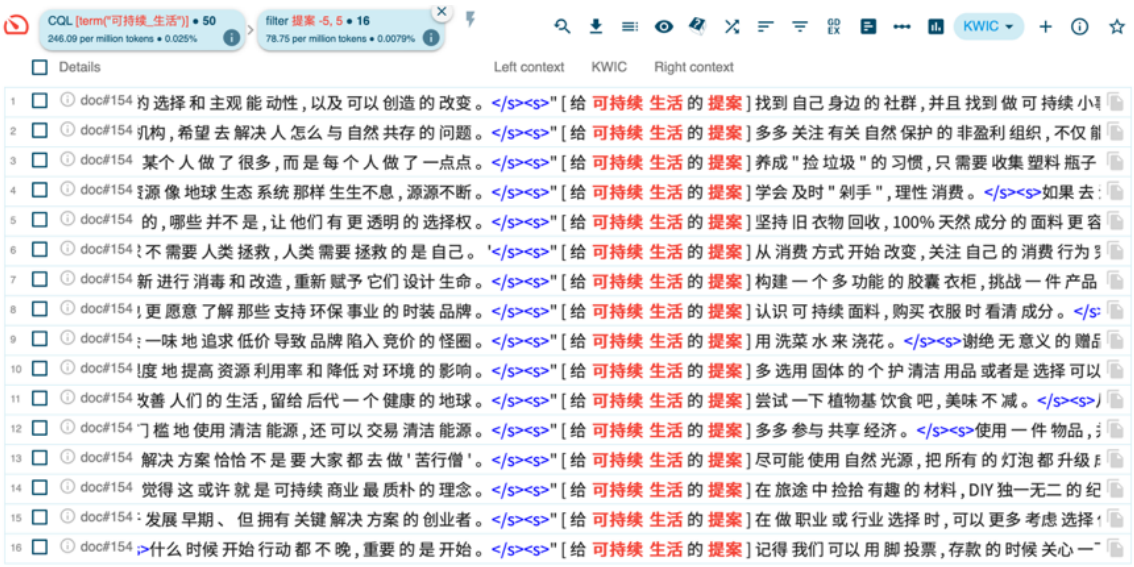

Figure 6.14. Concordance lines for the collocate "提案" (proposal) occurring with "可持续生活" (sustainable life) in the Event Communication Corpus

Figure 6.15 displays three cases of using the second-person pronoun "你" (you), collocating with "可持续生活" (sustainable life). All of them employ the second-person pronoun "you" to establish proximity with the text consumers, directly presenting proposals for sustainable living and inviting them to engage in these practices. This direct mode of address is a key discursive strategy for disseminating the cultural codes of a specific habitus. In the first line, "you" refers specifically to "a practitioner of sustainable living or a professional within the sustainability sector" ("可持续生活的践行者, 是可持续行业的从业者"). In Line 3, it denotes "an organisation, brand, shop owner, community, or social media influencer committed to promoting sustainable lifestyles" ("致力于可持续生活的组织/品牌/店主/社群/社交媒体达人"). "You" in Line 2 refers to a broader public. From the wider context of the text, it is evident that the text producer seeks to invite these groups to participate in discussions (Line 1), encouraging individuals to consciously choose a sustainable lifestyle and to "plan" (规划) for sustainable living (Line 2), and to leverage their influence to collaborate with each other (Line 3). This deliberate use of "you" demonstrates how Currid-Halkett's (2017) "cost-of-information" inconspicuous consumption operates, by dividing the audience into different levels of cultural capital. The use of "you" is not generic; it specifically addresses the reader, implying different degrees of familiarity and accountability. Addressing the "practitioner or professional" (Line 1) and "organisations/influencers" (Line 3) assumes that they are already supporters of this cultural capital, capable of refining and spreading

the lifestyle. In contrast, the address to the broader "you" (Line 2) functions as an invitation to begin acquiring this costly information, framing sustainability as a conscious, individual "plan" that one must learn to enact. The term "plan" (规划) itself is significant, implying that this lifestyle is not an innate practice but a carefully managed project requiring strategic knowledge.

Figure 6.15 Concordance lines for the collocate "你" (you) occurring with the "可持续生活" (sustainable life) in the Event Communication Corpus

The examples where "提案" (proposal) and "你" (you) collocate with "可持续生活" (sustainable life) illustrate a sophisticated strategy of lifestyle branding aimed at constructing an elite, eco-altruistic identity. This narrative calls upon individuals to adopt rational consumption, engage with ecological knowledge, and participate in sustainability discussions, crafting a morally commendable image. However, a deeper analysis reveals that these primarily aspirational guidelines that function as a mechanism of class distinction. Informed by Currid-Halkett's (2017) theory, this promoted lifestyle is predicated on a significant "cost-of-information" that is not equally available to all. The knowledge required to navigate "sustainable fabrics" or make "sustainable financial investments", presupposes a level of education, cultural exposure, and leisure time characteristic of the elite class. Consequently, what is framed as a universal "proposal" actually commodifies environmental ethics into a set of consumerist practices that serve to signal elite cultural capital, creating a subtle barrier to entry.

This dynamic is further refined by the strategic personalisation of the discourse. The use of the second-person pronoun "你" (you) and the provision of specific, practical recommendations make the lifestyle appear achievable and soften the moral burden. This rhetorical strategy broadens the appeal but obscures the underlying economics. The pursuit of this lifestyle necessitates considerable investments of time, financial resources, and knowledge, rendering accurate adherence less a matter of intention and more a function of one's socioeconomic position. In that sense, the fundamental objective of campaigns such as "The Proposal for Sustainable Life" is not merely to promote environmentalism but to enhance the self-perception of a target audience by providing a curated identity for consumption. The discourse successfully frames sustainability as

a positive, personal project while systematically downplaying its challenges. In doing so, it effectively entrenches class boundaries by transforming ethical practices into a stratified economy of cultural knowledge and inconspicuous consumption. The "eco-altruistic" image, therefore, becomes a new marker of social distinction, reinforcing the very inequalities it claims to transcend.

Connecting field and text

The ethnographic case and corpus data together demonstrate that the rhetorical strategy of "advocating eco-altruism" is implemented through a carefully curated performance of sustainable living that simultaneously promotes ethical consciousness and reinforces class distinction. The ethnographic data, specifically the influencer's video, captures the performative dimension of this strategy, where sustainable practices such as vintage consumption, home composting, and cycling are framed not merely as environmental acts but as markers of a sophisticated, "high-quality" lifestyle rooted in cultural capital rather than monetary cost. This aligns precisely with what Currid-Halkett (2017) identifies as "cost-of-information inconspicuous consumption", where value is derived from specialised knowledge and aesthetic discernment. In contrast, the corpus data systematically substantiates this rhetoric through lexical and discursive patterning, such as the repeated collocation of "可持续生活" (sustainable life) with terms like "提案" (proposal) and "商品" (commodity), which frame sustainability as a curated set of consumer choices accessible primarily to those possessing the requisite cultural and economic resources. A comparison shows that ethnography highlights how eco-altruism is experienced personally and seems achievable, whereas the corpus reveals its formal institutionalisation as a standardised, guideline-based lifestyle model. Both datasets, however, reveal how this strategy acts as a mechanism for moral and social distinction: it transforms environmental responsibility into a class-specific habitus, where the "cost of information" subtly but firmly delineates boundaries between the elite who can effortlessly adopt this lifestyle and those excluded by its implicit cultural and economic demands. Therefore, "advocating eco-altruism" not only promotes sustainability; it legitimises and obscures the privilege behind its adoption, thereby reinforcing social hierarchies under the pretence of ethical universalism.

6.3.4 Managing a fan base and fostering close customer ties

"Managing a fan base and fostering close customer ties" is a rhetorical strategy that emphasises shared values and common ground among businesses, partners, and customers in the sustainable fashion industry. The analysis reveals that businesses employ this strategy to enhance their brand's image and acknowledge their customers' loyalty. Additionally, by engaging with other stakeholders and customers in a personal manner, sustainable fashion businesses foster social intimacy and solidarity within the broader community.

"Managing a fan base and fostering close customer ties" in practice

Extract 6.10 is from another field note I took during the *klee klee* Earth Day lights-out event. This part occurred at the beginning of the event, right after the performer finished the second piece and began chatting with the audience. The atmosphere was relaxed, and the audience showed great interest in the instrument the performer was playing (see Figure 6.16). The performer, Jiangjiang, asked the audience to guess when the instrument was created. This led to a discussion, as recorded in my notes, regarding the meaning of the brand logo and name. During the audience Q&A, after Jiangjiang finished her first two songs, a question was asked about how long she had been learning to play the handpan. In her response, Jiangjiang first described the technique of playing the handpan as "relaxing" ("很放松"). She noted that the technique of playing the handpan involves the principle that "the harder you try, the less sound it produces" ("越用力越不出声"). Then she connected this principle to the brand philosophy that *klee klee* has consistently marketed, which emphasises the concept of "take-it-slow" ("慢慢来"). This moment is a clear example of corporate-led informal learning, where the brand uses a cultural experience to subtly inculcate its core value. The philosophical link between the instrument's technique and the brand's ethos is not a neutral observation but a carefully designed lesson, transforming an abstract brand slogan into a tangible, experiential truth for the audience. Notably, this was the second time Jiangjiang mentioned *klee klee*'s core values while chatting with the audience about the instrument and her own experiences. To avoid appearing to be deliberately engaging in overt brand marketing, she laughed after saying, "Take it slow". The audience responded with knowing laughter, and one participant humorously commented that Jiangjiang was "perfectly on the theme" ("非常扣题"). This remark carries multiple layers of meaning within the context. At face value, it refers to how Jiangjiang adeptly connected her discussion about learning to play the handpan with *klee klee*'s brand philosophy, aligning with the expected tactics of commercial marketing discourse. However,

on a deeper level, the notion of "perfectly on theme" also suggests that *klee klee*'s brand ethos is inherently aligned with the broader Earth Day theme of sustainability—critiquing other business approaches that prioritise speed over quality and neglect the environmental impact of development.

22 April 2023, Online Stream, Lights-out Gathering

第二首曲子结束后，乐手自我介绍，接着向观众介绍演奏的乐器手碟——hang 或者 handpan，并请他们猜测乐器诞生的时间。

After the second piece of music ended, the musician introduced herself and then introduced the instrument she played, called "hang" or handpan. She then asked the audience to guess when the instrument was created.

观众们积极猜测时间，其中有些观众听说过这个乐器，还有人猜得比较准——2000 年左右，Jiangjiang 介绍说"今天给大家介绍这个乐器在这里也很合适，因为它叫'hang'，我其实很好奇为什么 *klee klee* 的标志是手。"观众中有人抢答，"虽然我不清楚这个手势（的意思），我知道 *klee klee* 是藏语的'慢慢来'。"然后有 *klee klee* 的员工解释这个手势是手语里"慢"的意思。

The audience enthusiastically speculated about the time period of the instrument, with some having heard of it before, and a few guessing accurately—around the year 2000. Jiangjiang then said, "It's also fitting to introduce this instrument today because it's called 'hang'. I'm actually curious why *klee klee*'s logo is a hand." Someone in the audience responded, "Though I'm not sure what the hand gesture means, I know that *klee klee* is Tibetan for 'take it slow'. " A *klee klee* employee then explained that the gesture meant "slow" in sign language.

接着观众向乐手提问，Jiangjiang 一一回答，其中一位观众问她学了多久，乐手分享了她关于打手碟的感受——很放松，演奏这个乐器的技巧就是要放松，"越用力越不出声，就像 *klee klee* 一样，要慢慢来。"因为又一次提到了品牌，为了不产生刻意的感觉，Jiangjiang 说完笑了起来，观众们也再一次大笑，还有人开玩笑说非常"扣题"。

The audience then began asking the musician questions, and Jiangjiang answered them one by one. One audience member asked how long she had been playing, to which the musician shared her feelings about playing the handpan—it's very relaxing, and the key to playing it is to relax: "The harder you try, the less sound it makes. It's just like *klee klee*; you have to take it slow." Since she mentioned the brand again, to avoid coming across as too deliberate, Jiangjiang laughed after speaking, and the audience laughed once more. Someone even joked that it was "perfectly on theme".

Extract 6.10. Field note from *klee klee*'s Earth Day celebration, WeChat platform, 22 April 2023

This discussion, prompted by the event's guest performer, exemplifies how a commercial brand creates an informal educational setting that engages its collaborators and consumers in the discursive construction of its brand identity. The "take-it-slow" philosophy of *klee klee*, which is initially vague and open to interpretation, is contextualised through concrete, lived examples in this conversation. Originally presented as a rejection of the fashion industry's focus on rapid change in favour of a more time-intensive pursuit of quality, this principle is expanded by

participants to apply to a broader array of life scenarios, thus transforming it into a universal life philosophy. This discursive expansion promotes a deeper alignment with the brand's values among event participants, encompassing both offline and online attendees, while simultaneously enhancing the brand's image as one that is committed to ethical and sustainable practices. Moreover, the rhetorical strategy of "managing a fan base and fostering close customer ties" deliberately cultivates a casual, approachable atmosphere that promotes solidarity among consumers, thereby avoiding overt displays of commercial intent. When Jiangjiang mentioned the brand philosophy a second time, both she and the audience laughed, a response open to various interpretations. However, it likely served to lighten the event's tone, downplaying its strategic aims so that participants would not perceive the environmental theme as overly serious or view *klee klee* as merely leveraging the event to enhance its brand image.

Figure. 6.16. Handpan or "Hang" and some auxiliary instruments, WeChat platform, 22 April 2023

While this event successfully fosters a sense of community and shared values, the entire interaction is a masterful exercise in hegemonic branding, where the commercial imperative is naturalised through cultural discourse. The "knowing laughter" shared by Jiangjiang and the audience is particularly significant; it signals collective recognition of the branding strategy, yet this very recognition dissolves resistance. By acknowledging the commercial subtext through humour, the event neutralises potential cynicism, making participants complicit in the very process

they perceive as transparent. This demonstrates how informal learning, in this corporate context, functions not to empower critical thought but to foster consent and alignment with a pre-determined brand ideology. The "take-it-slow" philosophy, while appealing, is ultimately a commodified discourse that distinguishes *klee klee*'s consumers as part of an enlightened in-group who can afford to reject "fast" culture. Therefore, the event's success in building a discourse of trust and community also strengthens the social distinctions embedded in the consumption of elite sustainable fashion, presenting a class-based lifestyle as a universal ethical aspiration.

Mapping "managing a fan base and fostering close customer ties" in the corpus

Beyond consumer awareness activities that integrate online and offline efforts, the brand's social media text producer also discursively crafts a relaxed, conversational writing style to attract more consumers and foster community solidarity among them. To comprehend the discursive construction of like-mindedness, the concept of "synthetic personalisation" (Fairclough, 1989) provides a framework for examining the linguistic features businesses employ to appeal to individual consumers and prospective clients. In this sense, language plays a crucial role in personalising both the text producer and the text consumer in a fabricated manner, enabling businesses to simulate a concrete connection with individual members of the public.

To illustrate how synthetic personalisation is achieved from the social media discourse, this section presents an analysis of the concordance lines for the search term "朋友们" (friends) within the Event Communication Corpus. The emphasis on this term emerged during preliminary analysis of keyword lists and concordance lines across two corpora, which indicated that numerous brands, companies, and individual, particularly in *klee klee*'s social media content, are often addressed intimately as "friends". Although the term does not appear on the keyword list itself, its significant presence in the Event Communication Corpus, with 61 occurrences and a high relative frequency of 300.23 per million words, worth closer examination. To identify the meaningful lexical relationships, I first investigated the collocates of the term. Table 6.4 presents the collocates of the search term "friends" in the Event Communication Corpus using the MI statistic. Proper nouns and punctuation have been remained, as they function as significant linguistic features that contribute to the construction of synthetic personalisation. Following the collocational analysis, a close examination of concordance lines and their original contexts was conducted. This step was essential to move beyond statistical patterns and uncover how the brands represent various

stakeholders within an elite sustainable fashion community. The quantitative findings related to this search term are summarised in the table below.

Search Term	Frequency	Relative Frequency (per million tokens)	Collocates	Function
朋友们 (friends)	61	300.23	“不定期” (on an irregular basis), “聚会” (gathering), “花园” (garden), “国” (countries), “游牧” (nomadic), “～”, *klee klee*, “商店” (store), “欢迎” (welcome), “各” (each),	Constructing Trust
Note: Where the list of collocates is extensive, only the top ten are presented here due to space constraints. Otherwise, the complete list if collocates is retained, though punctuation markers are excluded.				

Table 6.4 Quantitative data for “朋友们” (friends) in the Event Communication Corpus

Discursive patterns in detail

Table 6.4 illustrates that the collocates of “朋友们” (friends) exhibit characteristics of synthetic personalisation, a process where institutions simulate a private, conversational tone to address a mass audience (Fairclough, 1989). Semantically, collocates like “聚会” (gathering), “花园” (garden), “欢迎” (welcome), “商店” (store), “请” (invite), “分享” (share), and “来” (come) construct a context of inclusive social events, framing commercial promotions as friendly invitations. The use of first-person plural pronouns further enhances this manufactured intimacy, creating a “we-ness” that blurs the line between the corporate brand and the individual consumers. Notably, the strategic use of informal punctuation—exclamation marks and tildes (~)—is a key linguistic technology for this personalisation. As Figure 6.17 shows, Line 1 (“This exhibition is centred around this achievement. You’re welcome to come and take a look, friends!”) uses an exclamation mark to project warmth and enthusiasm, mimicking the tone of a face-to-face conversation. Simultaneously, the verbal reduplication in “看看” (to take a look) leverages its pragmatic implication of “tentativeness” (Xie, 2020) to soften the directive, mitigating any sense of a corporate command and making the invitation feel more like a suggestion from a friend. This combination is a deliberate synthetic strategy to downplay the promotional core of the message. Other phrases like “欢迎大家来玩!” (“You’re all welcome to come and have fun! ”) in Line 2,

“周五好呀！” (“Happy Friday!”) in Line 3, and “欢迎分享给你的朋友哦！” (“Feel free to share with your friends!”) in Line 4 further personalise the relationship, showcasing an intimate business-customer dynamic that effectively masks the underlying market transaction.

Figure 6.17. Concordance lines for the collocate “!” occurring with “朋友们” (friends) in the Event Communication Corpus

Similarly, incorporating tildes (~) enhances the brand’s approachability by subtly shifting the register away from formal business discourse. Drawing on Xu and Xia’s (2023) study on innovative uses of tildes in Chinese WeChat messages points out that tildes are primarily used in online messages to perform speech acts such as expressives and directives, while also conveying sound extension and enhancing message vibrancy (i.e., to enhance or lessen the illocutionary forces of speech acts). Furthermore, the pragmatically driven use of tildes is influenced by their semiotic features and users’ politeness motivations to maintain rapport in communication (Xu & Xia, 2023). For example, in Figure 6.18, the heading “Let’s take some photos, friends~” (Lines 1 and 2) employs both verbal reduplication (拍拍照, meaning “to take some photos”) and the tilde to soften the directive. This phrase, used as a heading, refers to an activity initiated by *klee klee* during the pandemic. The following text of the two examples first introduces the brand’s initiative, inviting “friends” from across the country working from home to take and share photos capturing the moment of their local life. Then, it showcases the photos collected from *klee klee*’s business partners, former employees, customers, etc., who respond to the brand’s initiative. This transforms a brand-initiated marketing campaign into a casual, collaborative activity, reducing the perceived pressure on participants and fostering synthetic solidarity.

Figure 6.18. Concordance lines for the collocate “~” occurring with “朋友们” (friends) in the Event Communication Corpus

By contrast, the third line, “Always looking forward to meeting up with friends~” (“总期待着能和朋友们相聚~”), demonstrates how the same punctuation can be used to intensify an emotional expression. Here, the brand is anthropomorphised, and the tilde, coupled with the adverb “always” (总), conveys a lingering, heartfelt anticipation for reunion. A closer contextual analysis (Extract 6.11) reveals that this “reunion” is an invitation for loyal customers to return to the physical store in September 2022, following the conclusion of the nearly six-month lockdown in Shanghai. *klee klee* aims for its loyal customers to resume in-person shopping, encouraging them to “come and meet” (“来见面吧”), as this, in the brand’s perspective, represents the genuine act of living (“去生活吧”, go live your life or embrace life). Although the primary intent is promotional—inviting customers to visit physical stores and introducing new autumn/winter products—it manifests synthetic personalisation through the strategic use of punctuation, word choices, and imperative sentences to evoke emotional engagement from the text reader. These linguistic strategies soften the overt marketing tone while intensifying an emotional resonance with the audience. This example illustrates how the rhetorical strategy of “managing a fan base and fostering close customer ties” is achieved in social media content, thereby stimulating a sense of shared experience and community between the brand and its customers.

[…] [2023 春夏 新品 发布会 | 来 见面 吧 , 去 生活 吧] 过去 的 大半 年 中 , 总 期待 着 能 和 **朋友们** 相聚 ~ 舒朗 的 秋日 终于 来临 , 2022 年 9 月 16 日 , 我们 邀请 朋友们 在 上生 新 所 *klee klee* & friends 店铺 外 的 广场 上 聚会 , 并 见证 2023 年 春夏 新品 的 发布 。 我们 希望 在 不同 都市 生活 场景 里 , *klee klee* 都 能 给 大家 提供 更 多 的 选择 。 当然 在 工作 中 , 我们 也 希望 大家 能 感受 到 松弛 与 舒适 。 所以 本季 轻 正式 类 的 产品 有 一定 的 增加 , 比如 衬衫 、 半 裙 、 马夹 , 以 继续 强调 休闲 与 正式 的 混搭 与 叠 穿 , 更 好 地 展现 不同 造型 场景 间 的 切换 。[…]

[2023 Spring/Summer New Product Launch | Come and Meet, Go Live] Over the past half year, we've always been looking forward to meeting up with **friends** ~ The crisp autumn days have finally arrived. On September 16, 2022, we invited friends to gather at the plaza outside the *klee klee* & friends store at Columbia Circle to witness the release of the 2023 Spring/Summer new products. We hope that *klee klee* can provide more options for everyone in different urban living settings. Of course, we also hope everyone feels relaxed and comfortable at work. Therefore, this season, there is an increase in light formalwear items, such as shirts, skirts, and vests, continuing to emphasise the mix and match of casual and formal styles, allowing for smoother transitions between different style settings

Extract 6.11. Original context of "朋友们" (friends) in Line 3

While these linguistic strategies effectively foster an approachable and emotionally resonant brand image, a critical examination reveals their role in masking underlying power dynamics and eliciting agreement and alignment. The consistent portrayal of customers as "friends" and the framing of commercial promotions as social "gatherings" point to a commercialisation of social ties. The use of synthetic personalisation represents a strategic framing that maintains the commercial nature of the relationship while presenting it in terms of friendship and shared values. The purported "friendship" is inherently conditional and asymmetrical: the brand dictates the form and purpose of engagement, while the consumer is positioned primarily as a participant and purchaser. Strategies such as mitigated directives make the adoption of the brand's values, such as community and sustainability, appear to be voluntary personal choices. This, in turn, strengthens brand loyalty and legitimises its premium market position. Thus, rather than diminishing the brand's elite or commercial character, such intimate discourse reinforces it. It affirms the consumer's identity as a member of a selective in-group, all while subtly concealing the strategic, profit-oriented motives behind a performed display of mutual closeness and shared values.

Connecting field and text

The ethnographic and corpus data together demonstrate that the rhetorical strategy of "managing a fan base and fostering close customer ties" is implemented through a deliberate synthesis of experiential engagement and systematic linguistic personalisation, which works to reframe commercial relationships as genuine social bonds. The ethnographic data reveal the strategic enactment of this rhetoric in practice, exemplified by *klee klee*'s Earth Day event, where the performer's discursive linkage between handpan technique and brand philosophy ("take-it-slow") transformed corporate values into shared, experiential wisdom, fostering communal solidarity through knowing laughter and participatory learning. Complementarily, the corpus data quantifies this strategy through lexical patterning, where the high-frequency term "朋友们" (friends) and its collocates—"gathering," "welcome," and informal punctuation like tildes—discursively construct a fabricated intimacy, exemplifying what Fairclough (1989) terms "synthetic personalisation". A comparison reveals that the ethnography captures the curated, embodied performance of community in physical spaces, making hegemonic branding feel unforced, while the corpus exposes the repetitive, formulaic linguistic strategies that simulate friendship systematically across digital communication. Together, both datasets converge to show how this strategy operates as a mechanism of elite distinction: it cultivates a loyal in-group through shared values and emotional resonance, while simultaneously obscuring underlying commercial imperatives and reinforcing class boundaries by framing participation in this exclusive "community" as a marker of cultural and ethical superiority.

6.4 Summary

This chapter examines how informal learning is instrumented in organisational styling (Wee, 2015) within the knowledge-based economy of post-reform Shanghai. Sustainable fashion businesses targeting the high-end market facilitate informal learning through awareness-raising events and social media articles disseminating event information and related expert knowledge. By integrating ethnographic and corpus linguistics methodologies, an analysis of both sides of the data elucidates the objectives of informal learning, which collectively emphasise mutual reliability, shared moral values, appreciation of knowledge, and the advancement of solidarity—all framed within the discourse of trust. Four rhetorical strategies utilised in organisational styling have been identified: (i) Showcasing traceability and transparency, (ii) Leveraging the power of knowledge,

(iii) Advocating eco-altruism, and (iv) Managing a fan base and fostering close customer ties. Specifically, the rhetorical strategies are summarised as follows:

Showcasing traceability and transparency: The analysis reveals that traceability and transparency have become increasingly significant within the fashion industry under investigation, as they are in relation to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). As the findings reveal, the emphasis on showcasing traceability and transparency echoes the perspective proposed by Crouch (2006), who holds that CSR discourses and projects are mainly driven by long-term interests in terms of trust and value or taste preferences in the market, requiring an organisational capacity to intervene against short-term market advantage and interests. In this study, businesses positioning themselves as "sustainable" or "eco-friendly" are adopting more interactive, narrative-driven methods of communicating CSR, moving beyond traditional formats such as annual reports. The ethnographic and corpus data reveal that this rhetorical strategy operates through two distinct yet complementary discursive frameworks: a performative-narrative approach and a technical-systematic approach, both designed to build trust among elite consumers. These strategies include product labelling with detailed sourcing information and in-store exhibitions that highlight production processes, as illustrated in Chapter 5. The ethnographic observations presented in this chapter demonstrate how brands employ performative storytelling, using detailed narratives of production processes to create experiential transparency that naturalises value through indexical iconicity (Silverstein, 2003). The cases discussed exemplify how brands integrate local producers and employ storytelling to underscore the relationship between products and their origins, ultimately fostering consumer trust, authenticity, and ethical engagement. Simultaneously, corpus analysis reveals a strategic lexical patterning where technical terminology of traceability appears primarily in consultancy contexts, framed within techno-managerial discourses of carbon metrics and blockchain, while being conspicuously absent from direct consumer-facing promotions. The themes of traceability and transparency highlighted in organisational styling resonate with the assertions of Rosenau and Czempiel (1992), who consider CSR a vital component of a larger historical shift from government to governance. During this transition, corporations, alongside other private social entities, including non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community groups, assume a political role that was traditionally fulfilled by state actors (Scherer et al., 2012). Utilising the rhetorical strategy of "showcasing traceability and transparency" implies that, within the informational economy, businesses under investigation value the importance of CSR by

engaging customers through interactive forms of communication. The underlying purpose of being transparent about their operations is to serve as a marketing strategy, enhance social distinction for both the product and the buyer, and justify the price tag. This process specifically cultivates trust among "expert consumers" who possess sufficient cultural capital to decode both the romanticised production narratives and the underlying technical justifications, thereby strengthening their distinction within the ethical marketplace. Disseminating information about their CSR initiatives through external communications, such as social media articles, appeals to elite consumers who expect transparency regarding ethical and environmental practices by corporations, while also placing responsibility on the broader public to make ethical purchasing decisions.

Leveraging the power of knowledge: Strategically instrumentalising knowledge in marketing sustainable fashion brands, "leveraging the power of knowledge" weaves technical expertise and education into brand communications and reshapes consumer behaviour in informal learning settings like workshops and lectures. The ethnographic and corpus data together reveal that this rhetorical strategy operates through a sophisticated discursive framework that transforms education into a mechanism of social distinction. By introducing complex ecological concepts in the training workshops, as illustrated in the "Gathering like Water" event series, brands add sophistication and value to their products while positioning themselves as thought leaders in sustainability in the informal learning settings they facilitate. Ethnographic evidence captures the performative dimension of this strategy, where displays of specialised knowledge function as what Khan (2013) terms a cultivated "ease", creating seemingly inclusive spaces that nevertheless exclude those lacking specific cultural or educational credentials. Through "leveraging the power of knowledge", businesses increase their attractiveness and align with the ethical values of affluent consumers, thus reinforcing their legitimacy in the market. The corpus data complements this by showing how knowledge and education is constructed discursively, with educational terminology framing sustainability as a product of elite international education and exclusive experiential learning. This is illustrated primarily by the viewpoint of Margaret Zhang, the former editor-in-chief of Vogue China, who argues that direct, privileged experiences—such as scuba diving—are crucial for developing genuine environmental awareness. This viewpoint highlights the class-based nature of environmental consciousness and how sustainable brands align their products with the cultural capital of elite consumers. Zhang's perspective, which underscores the significance of exclusive access to nature as a determinant of environmental understanding, further reinforces the

socio-economic barriers that are inherently present within contemporary discourses on sustainability. Both methods demonstrate that this rhetorical strategy functions as a powerful tool of legitimation, shifting sustainability from a collective, systemic duty to an individual trait acquired through exclusive learning. Meanwhile, despite an emphasis on informal education, formal education remains a critical factor in shaping sustainable values, as illustrated by the other example of a designer who attributes her ethical shift towards sustainability to her overseas education experience. Such discourse exemplifies the influence of neoliberal values, such as empowerment and self-improvement, while simultaneously minimising the significance of governmental intervention in addressing social inequalities and environmental challenges.

Advocating eco-altruism: Through the rhetorical strategy of "advocating eco-altruism", individuals and organisations emphasise their environmental commitments. The ethnographic case and corpus data together demonstrate that this strategy is implemented through a carefully curated performance of sustainable living that simultaneously promotes ethical consciousness and reinforces class distinction. By offering practical sustainability guidance, sustainable businesses appeal particularly to elite consumers by fostering a sense of moral responsibility and self-fulfilment. The analysis of one of the corporate social media videos promoting sustainable practices, such as second-hand shopping and eco-friendly transportation, reveals how sustainability is framed as a personalised, aesthetically driven, and skill-based lifestyle. The ethnographic data captures this performative dimension, framing these practices not merely as environmental acts but as markers of a sophisticated, "high-quality" lifestyle rooted in cultural capital, aligning with what Currid-Halkett (2017) identifies as "cost-of-information inconspicuous consumption". However, this portrayal reinforces class distinctions, rendering sustainable living more accessible to affluent individuals. The analysis also unveils that corporate social media articles further connect sustainability with consumerism, where adopting eco-friendly habits requires financial resources and knowledge, limiting accessibility for average consumers. The corpus data systematically illustrates this by revealing lexical patterns, such as the collocation of "可持续生活" (sustainable life) with terms like "提案" (proposal) and "商品" (commodity), framing sustainability as a set of curated consumer choices. The text producer of corporate social media frames sustainable living as an inherently moral choice, highlighting a normative view of "proper" modern behaviour. Platforms like WeChat, though seemingly open, maintain hierarchical structures that subtly promote dominant ideologies. As Marwick (2013) argues, social media not

only reflect but actively shape standards for modern identity, functioning as tools of governance by aligning users with prevailing social norms and values. Consequently, conveyed via social media, informal education in various formats can function as an instrument for those in power to promote specific perspectives of identity, subtly regulating users toward socially desirable behaviours. Nevertheless, these discourses are not explicitly elitist, especially when conveyed in a personable and approachable style. The use of the second-person pronoun "you" personalises the discourse, encouraging elite consumers to embrace sustainability without imposing significant moral pressure. In this framing, sustainable living is portrayed as a morally admirable and personally gratifying objective. Both datasets reveal how this strategy acts as a mechanism for moral and social distinction, transforming environmental responsibility into a class-specific habitus where the "cost of information" delineates social boundaries. However, it is important to note that it perpetuates class-based distinctions in environmental engagement, which are primarily accessible to individuals of greater wealth. Therefore, "advocating eco-altruism" not only promotes sustainability but also legitimises and obscures the privilege behind its adoption, reinforcing social hierarchies under the guise of universal ethical ideals.

Managing a fan base and fostering close customer ties: The rhetorical strategy of "managing a fan base and fostering close customer ties" in the sustainable fashion industry focuses on shared values and like-mindedness among businesses, customers, and partners. The ethnographic and corpus data together demonstrate that this strategy is implemented through a deliberate synthesis of experiential engagement and systematic linguistic personalisation, which works to reframe commercial relationships as genuine social bonds. This approach enhances brand appeal and acknowledges customer loyalty by fostering a sense of social intimacy and solidarity. Events like *klee klee*'s Earth Day lights-out gathering illustrate how conversations during the event connects brand philosophy with lived experiences, with ethnographic data revealing how such events strategically manage customer relationship, transforming corporate values into shared, experiential wisdom and fostering solidarity through informal learning. This subtle engagement softens overt marketing when promoting brand values. On social media, brands adopt "synthetic personalisation" (Fairclough, 1989) to create a conversational tone, simulating closeness with customers. Utilising expressions such as "朋友们" (friends) and other informal linguistic choices surrounding the term, along with specific punctuations, tends to lessen the promotional nature of messages, rendering them more relatable. These linguistic strategies enhance brand loyalty by fostering a sense of

community, where marketing is seamlessly integrated with personal interaction. Together, both datasets converge to show how this strategy operates as a mechanism of elite distinction: it cultivates a loyal in-group through shared values and emotional resonance, while simultaneously obscuring underlying commercial imperatives. This rhetorical strategy strengthens consumer ties while reinforcing the brand's ethical and sustainable identity, ultimately reinforcing class boundaries by framing participation in this exclusive "community" as a marker of cultural and ethical superiority.

In a sense, elite consumers of sustainable fashion in Shanghai are typically characterised by a high level of education and financial stability, with their social and spatial mobility predominantly dependent on formal educational qualifications. As Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argue, these credentials serve as "hard" indicators of social class. Nevertheless, Bourdieu (1984) also notes that social class distinctions extend into a range of "soft" indicators, where individuals use these subtle markers to delineate and reinforce class boundaries through acts of "distinction", thus contributing to the collective construction of social class. Informal learning environments enable elite consumers to acquire and display these "soft" indicators and class-specific practices. High-end sustainable fashion brands utilise both online and offline channels to create informal learning spaces, thereby building brand identity and cultivating a loyal consumer base. This dynamic illustrates Fairclough's (1996) concept of the "technologisation of discourse", situated within the framework of knowledge-based or information-driven New Capitalism. It is characterised by growing reliance on emerging communication technologies, the rising significance of branding in determining the economic success of products, companies, nations, and individuals (Fairclough, 2002, citing Klein, 2000), as well as the increasing dominance of media representations and imagery (Fairclough, 2002).

Chapter 7 The discourse of moderation: Constructing elite environmentalism through the moral aesthetics of less

Figure 7.1. *klee klee*'s "rewilded garden", Columbia Circle, 11 January 2023

Figure 7.2. Example of a typical garden design, Columbia Circle, 11 January 2023

Displayed in Figure 7.1 is a photo of the garden landscape design outside *klee klee*'s store at Columbia Circle. The landscape presents a distinct appearance compared to the upscale commercial districts that people could envision in post-reform urban areas in China. One could observe the aesthetic contrasts between the two by comparing this photo with Figure 7.2, featuring the garden-adorned *Tsutaya Books* directly across from *klee klee*'s. The garden outside the *klee klee* store lacks the polished, organised atmosphere usually found in classic commercial landscapes. Instead, plants are arranged in grey and white triangular pots on the ground, creating diverse geometric patterns by combining the triangular shapes. The plants vary in species and are left to grow freely without being trimmed into specific shapes, creating a seemingly random, untamed effect reminiscent of natural wild landscapes. The overall design exhibits a minimalist style, characterised by simple colours and recurring geometric patterns throughout the garden. Apart from the wild plants, there is little decoration in terms of lines or extra colours. The benches, which appear to be made from natural wood, also embody this simple, restrained approach.

This visually striking yet unconventional garden is central to *klee klee*'s "Rewilding the City" initiative, through which the brand articulates its commitment to introducing elements of natural wildness into the urban environment. To elaborate on this concepts, the organisation hosted a lecture, inviting customers to participate both online or in person. Notably, when discussing the garden's plant selection, a guest expert in urban biodiversity restoration emphasised prioritising ecological recovery over human aesthetics. This statement is particularly significant given that the garden itself embodies *klee klee*'s distinct aesthetic taste—representing their curated version of 'natural' beauty—which stands in deliberate contrast to the conventional landscape designs familiar to the general public. Thus, the landscape design adjacent to the store exemplifies the social distinction that the business has strategically constructed as part of its value-creation strategy. The "aesthetic shock" of this rewilded space within a bustling business district enhances the commercial value of both the brand and its products. This approach aligns perfectly with the expectations of their targeted customer, who are willing to pay a premium for products that reflect their distinctive taste—a taste rooted in privilege and socioeconomic advantages. In this case, the "rewilded garden" serves as a powerful branding mechanism that merges immaterial environmental narratives with material landscape design to create added value, appealing specifically to consumers who value sustainability, exclusivity, and premium quality, and who

possess both the cultural capital to appreciate this curated "wildness" and the financial means to acquire it.

This chapter examines how stakeholders in Shanghai's high-end sustainable fashion industry construct and communicate their aesthetic tastes and consumer philosophies through discourse. Through the organisational styling (Wee, 2015) of brands like *klee klee*, consultancies like *RISE* and *Green Initiative*, and second-hand trading platforms like *Déjà Vu*, concepts of consumer minimalism and green consumption are discursively promoted to establish social distinction for their elite customers. I argue that this distinction is achieved through a discourse of moderation, which employs not only linguistic resources but also semiotic elements, such as the "rewilded garden" landscape at a *klee klee* store (Figures 7.1 and 7.2). The data collected for analysis in this chapter include interview transcripts with the project manager from *Green Initiative*, field notes taken during participant observation at awareness-raising events and store visits, as well as social media articles introducing concepts related to sustainability in fashion. The discourse of moderation was identified. Moderation is, in the sense of moderateness, a self-restraint attitude or practice when it comes to consumption. The discourse advocates for rejecting conventional consumption patterns established by capitalist mass production, and for creating a framework wherein consumer needs are continually created and expanded to sustain economic growth (Comor, 2008). Characterised by a rhetoric of self-restraint and simplistic aesthetics, this discourse is operationalised through three key rhetorical strategies: (i) Simplicity as a taste, (ii) Eco-consumption as a virtue, and (iii) Ecology as a commodity.

Nevertheless, the analysis also uncovered a deeper, critical tension: these seemingly virtuous practices may perpetuate a cycle of privilege. To fully interpret this finding, the analytical framework for this chapter was expanded to include the concept of environmental gentrification (Checker, 2011, 2018, 2020). This concept provides an insightful lens for understanding how the branding strategies of high-end sustainable fashion—much like urban green developments—can redefine spaces and habits in ways that subtly exclude lower-income groups, thereby exacerbating social inequality. Ultimately, this chapter demonstrates how the rhetorical strategies of elite sustainable fashion embed a minimalist aesthetic and a sense of moral responsibility into a class-based identity, turning consumption into a symbol of social distinction that mirrors the exclusionary patterns of environmental gentrification.

7.1 Analysing the discourse of moderation: Analytical approach

The concepts of minimalism, consumer minimalism, and environmental gentrification emerged as essential interpretive lenses during the data analysis. Although the overall theoretical framework of this thesis was outlined earlier, these particular constructs were essential for understanding the detailed discursive construction of elite identity and its social and economic impacts in Shanghai's sustainable fashion context. This section outlines their theoretical lineages and critical debates to clarify how they are operationalised in this chapter as analytical tools.

7.1.1 Minimalism as cultural capital

The discourse of moderation is deeply related to the aesthetic philosophy of minimalism. To understand its function as a marker of distinction, it is necessary to trace its origins and the debates surrounding the concept.

Minimalism, as an artistic movement, emerged in the late 1950s and 1960s as a radical departure from the expressive abstraction that preceded it (Meyer, 2004). Pioneers such as Donald Judd, Agnes Martin, and Frank Stella often rejected the idea of art as a medium for personal expression, instead embracing art as an objective experience free of narrative or metaphor (Meyer, 2004). This movement is characterised by clean lines, geometric shapes, and a preference for monochromatic or limited colour palettes, challenging the elaborate and expressive nature of prior artistic styles (Colpitt, 2014). The movement has influenced various fields beyond visual arts, impacting architecture, design, music and even literature by promoting simplicity, clarity, and intentionality (Meyer, 2004).

This very principle of reduction ignited an enduring critical debate, central to which is the question of emotional depth. Critics like Varnedoe (1990) argued that minimalism's extreme austerity resulted in a sterile, impersonal and ultimately alienating aesthetic. By systematically removing colour, narrative, and figurative elements, he contended that minimalist works could feel cold and distant, creating a barrier to empathetic viewer engagement. This perspective views the sparse visual field as an emptiness, a failure to communicate on a human level. In direct opposition, supporters such as Chave (2008) have mounted a defence, asserting that it is precisely this reduction that creates a fertile, reflective space for the viewer. She argues that by refusing to dictate meaning, minimalist art invites a deeper, more personal and contemplative engagement. The

viewer is not a passive recipient but an active participant who completes the work through their perception and bodily experience of it, potentially evoking a profound and unique emotional response. This tension between coldness and contemplation is more than just an academic note; it directly influences how minimalist aesthetics in branding are perceived by consumers—as either authentically profound or cynically austere.

This debate over emotional resonance is intricately linked to a second critique concerning accessibility and elitism, especially in its applications within architecture and design. The critic Foster (1996) articulated this view, noting that seemingly simple, uncluttered spaces of minimalist design are often a façade for extreme complexity and expense. The "perfect" concrete wall, the vast, empty space—these are achieved with expensive materials and meticulous, cost-prohibitive construction. Foster thus argues that minimalist spaces, far from being universally accessible, typically serve an elite demographic that possesses both the financial means to create them and the lifestyle that can accommodate their high-maintenance demands. The luxury of a clutter-free environment, he points out, is often a privilege reserved for those who can afford ample space and domestic support, making the minimalist lifestyle an impractical ideal for those from other socioeconomic backgrounds.

Even as some argue that the digital age has democratised art—Xiong (2024), for instance, explores how Post-Conceptual artists, like Sol LeWitt, find new audiences online—its manifestation as a consumer aesthetic remains largely exclusive. The minimalist lifestyle, as promoted by high-end brands, predominantly appeals to individuals with the resources, leisure, and cultural background necessary to appreciate its austere aesthetics and maintain its demanding spaces. The abstraction and lack of ornamental guidance in minimalist design can seem culturally alienating to those without the specific cultural knowledge to decode its simplicity. This very sense of detachment, both emotional and practical, is what makes minimalist aesthetics an effective tool for social distinction. The ability to engage with and derive meaning from this sparse visual language functions as a form of cultural capital, a resource that signals refinement and exclusivity. Consequently, despite its rhetoric of universality and simplicity, minimalism in practice tends to symbolise elitism, an aesthetic taste accessible only to those who can fully appreciate, afford, and maintain it.

7.1.2 Consumer minimalism: The virtue of restraint

Consumer minimalism translates artistic minimalism into daily practice, advocating reduced consumption and thoughtful selection of possessions. This transition from art movement to consumer philosophy is crucial for analysing the discourse of moderation in the data.

The intellectual foundations of consumer minimalism were laid in the 1970s and 1980s, most prominently within the "voluntary simplicity" movement. Elgin and Mitchell's work, *Voluntary Simplicity* (1977), described a lifestyle choice aimed at reducing material consumption to improve quality of life and minimise environmental impact. They framed it as a conscious rejection of the fast pace and materialistic focus of modern consumer society, laying the groundwork for what is now a field of study around minimalist living (Elgin & Mitchel, 1977). Recent scholarship reveals consumer minimalism as a complex phenomenon influencing environmental awareness, psychological well-being, and consumption behaviour. For example, Oliveira de Mendonça et al. (2021) identify a transitional journey from material dissatisfaction to lifestyle integration, driven by both personal well-being and ethical concerns. Similarly, Tosun and Sezgin (2021) point out that voluntary simplicity is often viewed as a moral commitment that transcends mere aesthetics and becomes part of a broader sustainable consumption movement. Proponents like Palafox (2020) view minimalism as an environmental solution, citing its tangible ecological advantages through reduced waste and lower carbon footprints. By limiting possessions, it is argued that individuals can cultivate a deeper connection to nature and directly challenge the culture of overconsumption. In this view, minimalism is elevated from a personal choice to a potential catalyst for a broader movement toward environmental justice and sustainability (Palafox, 2020).

However, significant critiques problematise these optimistic views. Scholars question the political efficacy of minimalism, arguing that an emphasis on individual responsibility diverts attention from necessary systemic reforms and corporate accountability (Vanderheiden, 2010; Obradovich & Guenther, 2016). Building on this, Jensen (2019) offers a sharper critique, suggesting that corporations often strategically promote the rhetoric of personal responsibility to deflect blame from industrial polluters. In this light, corporate minimalism can be seen as a form of "greenwashing" that perpetuates the very system it claims to challenge.

Furthermore, and central to the argument of this chapter, minimalism functions as a form of identity and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Despite its presentation as a rejection of

consumerism, the minimalist lifestyle is often a curated, aestheticised form of consumption that is predominantly accessible to the educated middle and upper-middle classes. The practice involves selecting fewer but higher-quality, often more expensive, items—a "quality over quantity" approach that requires significant financial security and the cultural knowledge to discern what constitutes "good" design (Wilson & Bellezza, 2022). This creates a subtle but powerful form of "distinction", where minimalist consumption becomes a marker of cultural sophistication and refined taste (Wilson & Bellezza, 2022). Therefore, consumer minimalism, while promoting values of equality and sustainability, can paradoxically strengthen the very social hierarchies it claims to dismantle, and potentially limit its broader environmental impact by emphasising individual change rather than collective action.

7.1.3 Environmental gentrification: A critical lens for spatial and social exclusion in consumption

Environmental gentrification provides the crucial framework for understanding the social implications of sustainable fashion, explaining how sustainability initiatives can reinforce spatial and social inequality.

Environmental gentrification refers to the process in which environmental improvements in urban areas, such as the creation of parks, and cleanup of polluted sites, or the introduction of green infrastructure, lead to increased property values and living costs. This, in turn, often results in the direct or indirect displacement of lower-income residents (Checker, 2018). Checker's (2020) work critically examines how the "greening" of cities, while producing undeniable ecological benefits, is frequently co-opted by market forces that prioritise aesthetics and profitability over equity. She argues that this creates a profound contradiction: ecological advantages can unintentionally exacerbate social inequalities, a phenomenon repeatedly observed in cities undergoing urban renewal initiatives (Checker, 2020).

For instance, research by Gould and Lewis (2016) in cities like Atlanta and Chicago demonstrates that while green infrastructure improves local environmental conditions, it also drives real estate development and speculation, potentially pricing out existing low-income communities. Similarly, Maantay and Maroko's (2018) study of brownfields redevelopment in New York reveals a recurring pattern: the transformation of industrial land into green spaces, while remediating contamination, triggers gentrification by making the area attractive for upscale

housing, ultimately displacing the very communities that endured the prior environmental burdens (Maantay & Maroko, 2018). This process highlights the acute challenge of balancing environmental justice, which seeks to prioritise marginalised groups, with the exclusionary outcomes of environmental gentrification.

This chapter adapts and applies this urban sociological concept to the realm of high-end consumption. The initiatives analysed, such as *klee klee*'s "Rewilding the City" project, can be interpreted as micro-scale manifestations of this same dynamic. The brand's carefully curated storefront garden and its associated discourse are not merely landscaping; they are a spatial and semiotic strategy that parallels urban green development. They create an exclusive, eco-conscious environment that signals a particular, sophisticated lifestyle. In the same way that a new park can raise the status of a neighbourhood and attract affluent newcomers, the "green" branding of these fashion labels raises the cultural and economic capital required to participate in their consumer community.

This connects directly to the critiques of green consumption. While green consumption emphasises purchasing decisions that minimise environmental impact (Connolly & Prothero, 2008), scholars like Scales (2014) critically note that it often does little to challenge the fundamental structures of capitalism driving overconsumption. Research into consumer behaviour shows that while attitudes and product attributes like eco-labelling are motivators (Zhang & Dong, 2020; Testa et al., 2021), green products are often sold at a premium (Akenji, 2014), making them cost-prohibitive for many. This creates a parallel exclusivity: just as environmental gentrification makes green spaces inaccessible to the original community, the discourse and practice of green consumption in high-end fashion make a "green" identity inaccessible to those without the requisite economic capital.

Thus, the intersection of these three concepts reveals a robust analytical framework to understand the discourse of moderation. The aesthetics of minimalism provide the visual and philosophical language of distinction. Consumer minimalism provides the moral and lifestyle narrative that frames this distinction as a virtuous, ethical choice. Finally, environmental gentrification provides the critical lens to understand the social costs and exclusionary logic of this process, revealing how the organisational styling of sustainability, much like urban greening, can

become a tool for reinforcing class boundaries and exacerbating social inequality, creating a cycle of privilege that marginalises those without the means to participate.

7.2 Data overview

To meet the research goals of this chapter, I follow the project's overall methodology and choose representative examples from my datasets for elaboration. This chapter has three sets of data components. The initial collection comprises my field notes from online participant observation, conversations with informants via WeChat, and other textual materials gathered from the organisation's websites and WeChat official account. The second set features interview transcripts, field notes, and photos taken from offline field trips. The third set includes a corpus compiled from social media articles on *RISE*'s official account. Further details are provided below.

7.2.1 Experiential brand campaign: "Rewilding the City" initiative

klee klee, in collaboration with Guo Taoran, founder of *Forest City Studio*, Guo Yifeng, landscape designer, and Vans Zhang, founder of *TRASHAUS*, launched the project "Rewilding the City" ("在城市中心建一座乡野花园") in late 2021. According to the introductory article (published on 22 November 2022) shared on the brand's WeChat platform, the project aims "to bring these native plants back to the city centre, so they can be closer to our nature-loving friends" ("希望将这些乡土植物带回城市中心, 希望它们与喜欢自然的朋友们可以距离更近一些"). This project created an indoor and outdoor garden landscape design featuring native plants for the *klee klee* store at Columbia Circle. These landscapes are strategically positioned around the building's exterior, near the Ground-floor lift entrance, within the store (located on the first floor), and on the store's balcony, which overlooks Columbia Circle's central plaza and is visible from the outside. On 28 November, 2022, the brand held a formal promotional event at the store to present the project to its customers and the wider public. Three key participants were invited to the event and to engage in a structured discussion with the audience, tracing the project's progression from inception to completion. Key topics included the "rural aesthetic" ("乡野审美") guiding the design, the ecological significance of the project, and its relationship to sustainable economic practices. The event was also live-streamed on *klee klee*'s short video live-streaming account on WeChat. Due to the pandemic lockdowns, I was unable to attend the event in person; instead, I joined via live stream. On 11 January 2023, after lockdown restrictions lifted, I visited the store to

photograph and document the project's landscape design. I subsequently contacted the store staff via WeChat, requesting them to forward my questions about the project to the relevant person in charge. A few weeks later, I received responses to my inquiries. Also, *klee klee* has conducted two additional live broadcasts (in March and April 2023), where store staff guided brand followers through the store's plants via mobile video. The store has also created a dedicated account on Xiaohongshu (Rednote), a popular lifestyle-sharing platform in China, to document the growth of the plants in the store.

7.2.2 Initial fieldwork for *Green Initiative* and follow-ups

My fieldwork commenced with an interview with the project manager of *Green Initiative* (GI), an organisation that identifies itself on its webpage as a sustainability consultancy. GI has launched the *RE: FORM* project, which brings together local fashion brands, educational institutions, charitable organisations, and community service companies in Shanghai. This initiative aims to promote sustainable consumption and enhance public awareness regarding recycling used clothing. The project manager of *RE: FORM* consented to participate in my research and accepted my invitation for an interview. On 31 August 2019, I visited GI's office in Shanghai, where I conducted a semi-structured interview with the informant. The 40-minute interview focused on gathering insights regarding the project's background, goals, key stakeholders, and operational processes involved in clothing recycling. I also asked the informant for his opinions on the development of sustainable fashion in China, especially in wealthier cities like Shanghai, and the consumer's role in this process. The informant subsequently invited me to attend a lecture organised by GI focused on promoting sustainable consumption, strategically held during the Double Eleven shopping festival celebrated annually on China's major e-commerce platforms *Taobao* and *Tmall* since 2009. Additionally, GI disseminates articles on sustainable living and minimalist consumption on WeChat. These textual materials were analysed as supplementary data in this chapter to understand how the text producer of the organisation discursively constructs and disseminates its consumption philosophy concerning sustainability.

7.2.3 Store visit to *Déjà Vu*'s second-hand trading store

On 8 August 2022, I visited the *klee klee*'s store on Anfu Road to visit an exhibition on the biodynamic farm held at the store (for a detailed discussion of this exhibition, see Chapter 5). During this visit, I passed by the adjacent *Déjà Vu*'s store and decided to visit. The full name of

the store is *Déjà Vu Circular Store.* Established in December 2020, this is the brand's first integrated store, offering both second-hand books and clothing in a space featuring minimalist interior design. Slogans about fashion and environmental sustainability adorn the walls of the second-floor apparel section. I recorded the store environment with photographs and field notes to provide more visual data for this research.

7.2.4 Business's social media texts: The Corpus of WeChat Popular Science Articles

Given that this chapter focuses on the discourse of moderation, a discourse analysis utilising corpus approaches was conducted on social media articles pertaining to aesthetic taste and consumer philosophy. *RISE*, the consulting firm, regularly publishes WeChat articles on sustainability topics in the fashion industry, introducing concepts such as "slow fashion", "vegan fashion", and "fair trade". Notably, the organisation produces a series of WeChat articles that fall under the tag "R.I.S.E. PEDIA" and describe it as an "encyclopaedia of sustainable fashion". The organisation asserts that it has introduced the column to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of sustainable fashion and encourage individuals to incorporate sustainable practices into their daily routines. The introductory statement of this column claims that *RISE* aims to facilitate discussions surrounding concepts, materials, consumption, and industry perspectives within the fashion sector, targeting its clientele and the wider public.

I adopted the same methods for corpus compilation as I did in Chapter 5 and 6. First, I browsed the content of each WeChat article and categorised them based on text types. While choosing popular science articles, I occasionally noticed a combination of text types. For instance, some pieces discussing upcoming events also incorporate content that introduces sustainability concepts. As a result, these articles often adopt a hybrid genre, blending corporate, academic, and journalistic elements. This is what Bhatia (2005, pp. 218-219) describes as 'genre colonies'; these are clusters of genres that evolve together, influenced by social and institutional practices, resulting in "hybrid genres" with mixed features from different genre traditions. The genre hybridisation observed in the data aligns with Fairclough's (1993) critique of promotional discourse infiltrating institutional settings, where strategic effects override meaning, reshaping authority and institutional identity. However, in this case, the dynamic is reversed: corporations strategically adopt institutional

authority to legitimise their discursive construction of value, positioning themselves as knowledge producers rather than mere market actors.

The popular science text type encompasses complex concepts and specialised terminology, often featuring multi-word expressions. Thus, the keywords for analysis in this chapter emphasise multi-word terms (MWTs) rather than single words. MWTs are extracted from the corpus, concentrating on terms that consist of two or more words and are commonly employed in contexts involving more technical language and expert knowledge related to the fashion industry. In this chapter, after compiling the Popular Science Corpus, MWTs were automatically extracted using the "keywords and term extraction" functionality on *Sketch Engine*, compared with the reference corpus, zhTenTen17 simplified Chinese.

7.3 Findings

7.3.1 Simplicity as a taste

"Simplicity as a taste" relates to a "less is more" attitude, highlighting minimalist aesthetics. The businesses under analysis are the taste producers, who employ this strategy as a guiding principle in the design of products, marketing approaches, and retail environments. Meanwhile, for their customers, the rhetorical strategy of "simplicity as a taste" is linked to a lifestyle that promotes reduced consumption and discerning selection of possessions, which is associated with the principles of consumer minimalism (see Elgin & Michelle, 1977, and other studies referenced in Section 7.1.2). This strategy embodies an elite discourse that critiques the material excesses and desires generated by consumerism while simultaneously expressing admiration for high-quality living. Rather than advocating for a complete cessation of consumption, it encourages reducing purchase frequency, concentrating instead on acquiring products that are crafted to be high-quality, timeless, and durable. This approach cultivates a consumer aesthetic and philosophy distinct from mainstream, mass-market perspectives, constructing a form of cultural capital for elite consumers engaged in sustainable fashion practices. The garden landscape design illustrated at the beginning of this chapter is a typical example of the organisation constructing simplicity as a taste. The "rewilded garden" is a visual contrast to the gardens typically found in the same commercial area, attracting the passersby's attention. In doing so, this strategy delineates a social distinction,

distinguishing the elite consumers from the general populace limited to purchasing mass-produced goods, thereby serving as a marker of social status.

"Simplicity as a taste" in practice

Social distinction is constructed discursively in various contexts in organisational styling through the "simplicity as a taste" strategy. In a WeChat article from *Green Initiative* (GI), the text producer presented the content as an interview conversation, educating the reader on how to select clothes with the principle of "less is more". The article is entitled "Feel Like You Never Have Anything to Wear? Fashion Experts Share Tips for Choosing the Perfect Wardrobe" ("衣柜里总少件衣服?时尚达人教你选衣之道"). The interviewee in the conversation is a fashion enthusiast and the founder of a fashion brand. Extract 7.1 shows that when the interviewer inquiries about the reasons for her "less is more" philosophy, she begins by pointing out the negative consequences of the fashion industry, specifically citing the water usage required to produce a standard T-shirt (bold in original). Note the contrast foregrounded in the text by pointing out that the amount of water equals an "adult's drinking water for three years" and the assumption that "inexpensive, fast fashion clothes are worn no more than three times on average" ("廉价快时尚衣服, 穿着的次数大约不超过三次"). In this way, the interviewee or the text producer critiques the mass-produced (fast) fashion industry with a nearly exaggerated statement, claiming that "most people" wear fast fashion items "no more than three times". In turn, this phrasing implies that consumption guided by minimalist principles is morally superior. Then, she redefines personal purchasing behaviour from merely reflecting individual style to an opportunity to contribute positively to the environment, thereby enhancing the significance of her minimalist consumption choices.

From a critical perspective, this organisational styling of "simplicity as a taste" does not merely promote reduced consumption; it actively constructs a new hierarchy of taste where minimalist practice signifies moral and aesthetic superiority. The critique of fast fashion in Extract 7.1, while highlighting valid environmental concerns, functions to establish a moral dichotomy. By juxtaposing the "wasteful" fast-fashion consumer with the "virtuous" minimalist, the discourse frames ethical consumption as an exclusive privilege. This aligns with the critique of consumer minimalism, which argues that such a narrative diverts attention from systemic corporate accountability (Jensen, 2019) and transforms ethical responsibility into a personalised lifestyle

choice accessible mainly to those with economic means. The "morally superior" phrasing, therefore, is not just an observation but a key mechanism in distinguishing a superior consumer identity.

> ［…］后来我又了解到，时尚行业是全球第二大污染的行业。 **生产一件普通的白色棉T恤，要消耗 2700 升水，相当于一个成人三年的饮用水**。对于我们大多数人来说， 购买的廉价快时尚衣服，穿着的次数大约不超过 3 次。这让我开始意识到，**我们每个人的购物行为，不仅是在为自己的衣着品味投票，也是改变地球环境的机会**。从此，我的服装消费更理智了，我也总结了很多经验，可以跟大家分享。
>
> [...] I later learned that the fashion industry is the second-largest polluting industry in the world. **Producing a single plain white cotton T-shirt requires 2,700 liters of water, equivalent to an adult's drinking water for three years.** For most of us, inexpensive fast fashion clothes are worn no more than three times on average. **This made me realize that every purchasing decision we make is not only a vote for our own style but also an opportunity to impact the planet's environment.** Since then, I have become more thoughtful about my clothing consumption, and I have gathered a lot of insights that I can share with others.

Extract 7.1. Texts published on GI's WeChat account, 9 December 2018

To give another example, Extract 7.2 presents the interviewee's specific recommendations for adopting a "less is more" philosophy (bold in original). In this context, the interviewee conceptualises clothing as a "tool for communication, silently expressing to the world: who I am" ("一个沟通工具。它在无声地向外界表达:我是谁。"). She asserts that attire functions as "part of your silent business card" ("无声名片的一部分") in professional settings, requiring choices that are both appropriate for the occasion and reflective of personal character. From this standpoint, she provides three ostensibly straightforward recommendations. However, in practice, these guidelines presuppose that consumers possess a degree of aesthetic discernment and specialised knowledge of clothing—such as an understanding of colour coordination and tailoring techniques—as well as sufficient financial resources and prior experience with various brands to accurately "select a few go-to brands within your budget" ("在预算内, 选好经常光顾的品牌"). The interviewee further elaborates on her personal insights, emphasising that "fabric quality and tailoring always take priority" ("面料和剪裁永远是第一位的"). She connects the "less is more" aesthetic and consumer philosophy with the "high quality" concept, attributing value to this

approach that reflects the wearer's identity and social status. The concluding statement further underscores the role of "practical minimalism" ("快速实用主义") in bridging clothing choice with identity expression. In particular, the interviewee notes that "modern women occupy multiple roles" ("现代女性都是一人多角色"), a perspective likely to resonate with female readers, especially those from middle- to upper-middle-class backgrounds. In contemporary society, these women navigate diverse social roles and settings, ranging from family and professional life to personal interests, which require clothing that not only expresses their identity and individuality but also conforms to the external expectations of each context. Within this framework, the interviewee stresses the importance of versatile garments that can be styled in different ways ("一衣多穿", "one piece, multiple outfits"), as each item must fulfil diverse requirements and reflect the wearer's multifaceted identity while maintaining high standards of fabric and tailoring. Thus, the act of "not buying" or "buying less" is framed as a more powerful indicator of social status than frequent purchasing, reflecting the economic and cultural capital of the consumer.

The suggestions in Extract 7.2, although portrayed as universal, rely on having substantial cultural and economic capital, directly reflecting Bourdieu's (1984) theory of distinction. The need for "aesthetic discernment", "specialised knowledge of clothing", and the financial ability to prioritise "fabric quality and tailoring" are markers of cultural capital. This knowledge is not innate; it must be acquired through exposure and education, making it a powerful class barrier. The idea of the "silent business card" is especially illuminating: it indicates that clothing is not just about semiotic display but about mastering a more subtle, restrained code—one that, as Foster (1996) noted regarding minimalist design, looks simple yet is expensive and complex to decode. The framing of "not buying" as a higher-status activity than "buying" is the ultimate expression of this dynamic. It exemplifies consumer minimalism (Wilson & Bellezza, 2022), where restraint acts as a deliberate, visible marker of cultural refinement and financial stability. The ability to navigate multiple social roles with a limited selection of high-value garments ("一衣多穿") does not challenge consumerism but elevates it to a more exclusive and refined level. Consequently, this discourse of moderation, while promoting inclusivity and sustainability, effectively performs a practice of elitism (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2009), constructing an elite identity characterised by its ability to transform economic capital into the cultural capital of minimalist, "virtuous" consumption.

很多女生有一柜子衣服，还是觉得没有衣服穿。大部分原因在于不了解自己，盲目跟风购买。

衣服，在我看来，是一个沟通的工具。它在无声地向外界表达:我是谁。尤其在职场，衣物是你无声名片的一部分。首先，衣服要适应场合，可以用来突出"你"本人，衣服喧宾夺主是大忌。

要找到自己的风格，这三件事很重要:

1)知道你适合什么颜色，

2)知道你的身型适合什么类型的裁剪，

3)在预算内，选好经常光顾的品牌，这样能节省挑选时间。

对我个人来说，尤其职场的衣服，面料和裁剪永远是第一位的。

我个人的衣橱理念，更偏向快速实用主义。毕竟现代女性，都是一人多角色。一件衣服，能做不同搭配，是很重要的，就是我一直强调的**"一衣多穿"**。

Many women have a closet full of clothes yet still feel like they have nothing to wear. This is often due to a lack of self-awareness and blindly following trends.

To me, clothing is a tool for communication, silently expressing to the world: *who I am*. Especially in the workplace, clothing is part of your silent business card. First, clothes should suit the occasion and highlight *you*—the wearer; letting clothes overshadow you is a significant misstep.

To find your own style, three things are essential:

1. Knowing which colours suit you,

2. Knowing which cuts are best for your body type,

3. Selecting a few go-to brands within your budget to save time when shopping.

For me personally, especially with workwear, fabric quality and tailoring always take priority.

My personal wardrobe philosophy leans toward practical minimalism. After all, modern women play many roles, and it's important for a single piece of clothing to work in various combinations—what I always emphasize as **"one piece, multiple outfits."**

Extract 7.2. Texts published on GI's WeChat account, 9 December 2018

The WeChat article is not GI's only channel to advocate minimalist aesthetics and consumer philosophy. The *RE: FORM* project represents the organisation's primary initiative, collaborating with various partners to collect discarded clothing for recycling and repurposing. Previously referred to as the *Fibre* project, the initiative has undergone a renaming. Extract 7.3 is drawn from the interview transcript I conducted during my first visit to the GI office in 2009. The project manager, Ash, clarified that this change represents the organisation's strategic shift in focus towards enhancing awareness about conscious consumption. The reason for the renaming is to underscore that the project aims to transform the public's perception of clothing and fashion.

Notably, the informant suggested that the goal of GI is to encourage consumers, particularly those equipped with greater economic and cultural resources, to reconsider the prevailing fashion industry and the implications of their consumption behaviours. This implies criticism of the current fashion industry, particularly fast fashion, which heavily relies on mass production and over-consumption. This is why GI refuses to simply gather discarded clothing, much of which likely originates from mass production, allowing consumers to keep buying and perpetuating the "vicious cycle". Instead, the informant pointed out that the intention of GI is more profound, as it seeks to transform consumption patterns, thus facilitating the adoption of a minimalist and environmentally conscious lifestyle that it advocates.

Qin (Researcher): Why do you call the project "RE: FORM"? How do you come up with that name?

Ash (Informant): This one is an interesting question. If you go back to the history of the project...we first launched dated 4 years back...the project is called *Fibre* because the main goal of the project was shredding old textile to back into fibre. But after some time, we realised that there's so much waste out there...and if we just offer people an option to dispose of their old clothes which were worn-out, it's not solving anything. It's like...ok...I am giving you an access card to dispose of your old clothes and go on buying new clothes...so we are only helping the problem of textile waste by giving people an easy solution to dispose of their clothes and giving them an excuse that 'Oh I donated my clothes, now I can go and shop more'. So that's why we adjusted the project to be called 'RE: FORM', which is more like reforming the way we think about clothes...the way we think about fashion and yeah, I missed one more stakeholder...swap events...people who organise swap parties, so clothes swap events. So, trying to get people to understand the problem behind fashion, behind the overconsumption of textiles, reduce the number of clothes they use, and dispose of them in a responsible manner. And just rethink fashion in the way reform your view of fast fashion. So that's how we came to the name 'RE: FORM'. So, it's not just a recycling project. It's an educational and awareness project which offers people a chance to dispose of their old clothes.

Extract 7.3. Interview with Ash at GI's office, 31 August 2019

Towards the end of the interview, I asked the informant to evaluate the current media coverage of sustainable fashion in China (as shown in Extract 7.4). He further expressed his critique of mass production and overconsumption under the capitalist framework in his response. Notably, at the

start of his answer, he criticised some media outlets for promoting “sustainable fashion” without truly understanding the concept, focusing instead on the label of “sustainability” itself. The informant cited examples of environmentally friendly product lines introduced by some profit-driven fashion brands reliant on mass production. He noted that while these solutions to environmental issues from the fashion industry are innovative, they remain in the early stages; products from those lines account for only a tiny portion of total sales. In this context, the informant evaluated this phenomenon as a form of greenwashing by fashion brands. Here, I should clarify that initially, I introduced the topic of greenwashing before the interview; after presenting my research topic, the informant asked why I was interested in sustainable fashion. I explained that the rise of sustainable fashion in recent years has sparked significant debates, with both supportive and critical perspectives—some of the criticism pointing to greenwashing in the eco-friendly lines of fast fashion brands. I shared that my aim was to understand the development of sustainable fashion in China. My reply stemmed from my research motivations, not from a desire to conform to the informant’s perspectives. In retrospect, the informant’s perspective aligns with a critical viewpoint on mass-produced sustainable product lines, despite some of them also offering eco-friendly options in their product lines. It is evident that the concept of sustainable fashion, as a label, is defined and interpreted differently by businesses targeting various consumer groups. The informant critiques the excessive production and consumption models promoted by traditional apparel manufacturing and the rapidly growing fast fashion industry in recent years. What he advocates is a more niche, “less is more” consumer philosophy emphasising high quality and timelessness, which caters specifically to an elite consumer demographic that has more socioeconomic resources for conscious consumption.

Qin (Researcher): What do you think of the current media coverage of sustainable fashion and related issues in China? Do you think it is adequate enough?

Ash (Informant): So again, the whole concept of sustainable fashion is buying a garment which has a green label with a leaf on it, which says sustainably sourced or sustainably manufactured...not really they understand the meaning of this tag or if this T-shirt, this garment worths a regular garment, how much more sustainable is this one. Nobody really knows... they just blindly think, oh, this has the tag that says it's certified by somebody as sustainable, so I think I should buy this. So, right now, a lot of media are focusing on these tags. These collections, like you yourself have said, H&M launching their conscious fashion collection, or Adidas launching their Parley line of shoes...again, these are brilliant ideas. They are very innovative in using old fishing nets or using discarded plastics to make new products. They are definitely solving the problem of plastic waste and producing new products. But, still, these ideas are still in a very early stage. These companies... If you look at the sales of their conscious fashion collection or those especially sustainably produced or made from recycled materials, they make up a very small percentage of their overall sales. And it does come with a process of greenwashing; you are very right in that sense. But this is how the textile and fashion industry has been working for the last, I would say, 200 years or so, and they have been manufacturing and producing in a certain trend. In the last 20 or 30 years, this graph has gone up with consumption levels increasing a lot, so the sudden spike in production and consumption is what has led this whole fashion industry to become a really polluting one.

Extract 7.4. Interview with Ash at GI's office, 31 August 2019

While GI's critique of fast fashion and greenwashing is valid, a critical examination through the lens of consumer minimalism reveals that its own advocacy is not a neutral alternative but a form of strategic organisational styling (Wee, 2015) that cultivates an exclusive, elite sustainability. The organisation's specific focus on consumers who are equipped with greater economic and cultural resources clearly acknowledges that the "less is more" philosophy it advocates acts as a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). This strategy effectively creates a hierarchy of ethical consumption, where the ability to adopt a minimalist, conscious lifestyle becomes a new marker of distinction, separating a morally and aesthetically enlightened elite from the mass-market consumer. The critique of greenwashing thus rightly challenges corporate co-optation but simultaneously frames GI's own vision as the more authentic—and therefore more exclusive—

alternative. GI's discourse, through its organisational styling, curates a specific taste for sustainability rooted in privilege. It promotes consumer minimalism focused on individual, mindful consumption, as critics like Jensen (2019) argue, rather than challenging capitalism's growth. This risks reinforcing social hierarchies, making sustainable fashion a privileged identity instead of a universal practice.

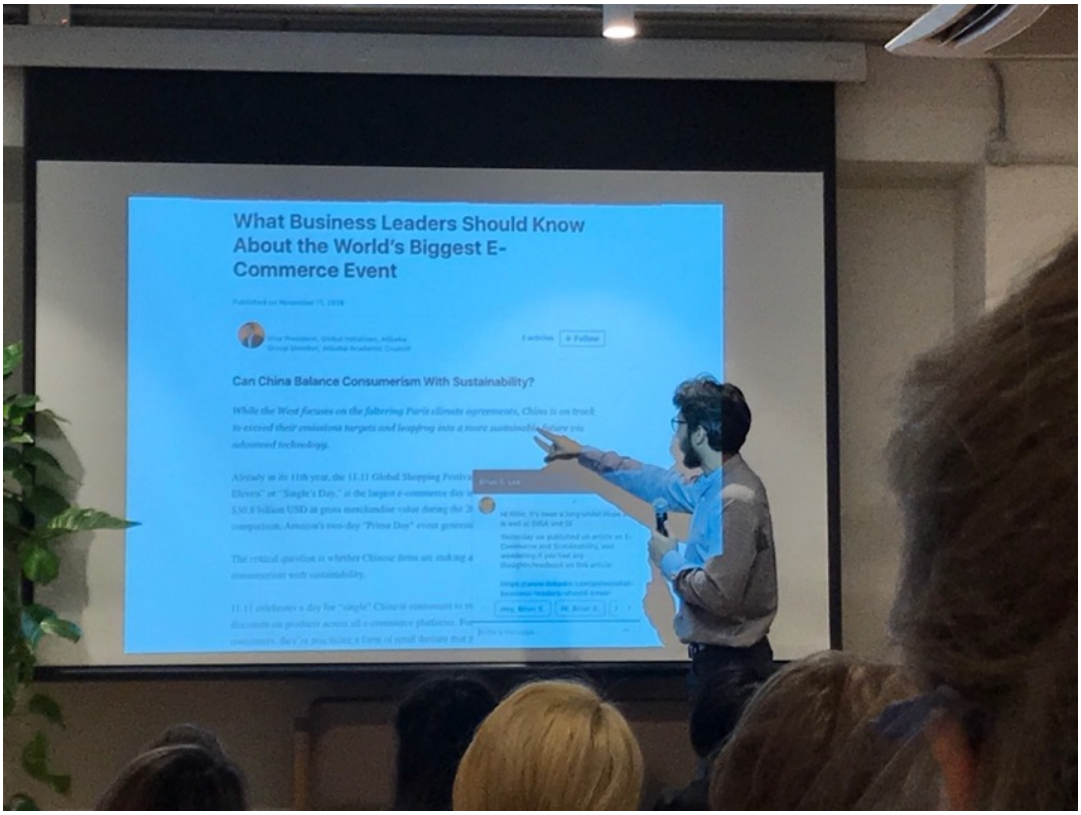

Figure 7.3. Forum on sustainable consumption, GI's office, 13 November 2019

Figure 7.3 features a photo I took at an awareness-raising event held by GI two months following my first interview. The forum, entitled "Sustainable consumption & retail: Fad or reality", began with an opening speech delivered by the founder of GI, who introduced the topic by relating it to the recent online shopping festival (as shown in Figure 7.3). Three speakers presented in sequence: a management consultant specialising in business strategy and marketing, a co-founder of a fashion brand focused on retail production in China, and a director at the Luxury & Innovation Institute with expertise in consulting for the creative, luxury, and fashion industries. After the speeches, they sat in front of the audience to discuss the question posed by the host: "What does sustainability mean to them?" Regarding the audience composition, approximately two-thirds of the attendees

are expatriates, so the event was conducted in English. The remaining Chinese participants at the event were predominantly young and middle-aged individuals who could engage in discussions in English. This indirectly reflects their relatively high level of education, as English is considered a foreign or additional language in China. Although most Chinese people begin learning English at the age of nine, schools often neglect the development of listening and speaking skills (Renandya & Hu, 2018; Wei, 2023). Participation in this event implicitly necessitated a certain level of English proficiency, specifically in the domains of listening and speaking, to effectively engage in discussions conducted entirely in English on specialised topics such as sustainable fashion and critiques of consumerism. Consequently, attendance at such an event serves as an indicator of cultural capital among elite consumers.

The forum, while aiming to promote sustainable consumption, effectively functions as a curated social space that reproduces exclusivity. Choosing English as the language of instruction serves as a significant linguistic gatekeeper, embodying what Shankar and Cavanaugh (2017) describe as the materiality of language. Here, English proficiency is more than just a symbolic skill; it is a practical requirement for participation, which excludes most of the local Chinese population and helps form a closed, transnational elite community. Furthermore, the composition of the speaker panel—featuring a management consultant, a brand founder, and a luxury industry director—is a clear act of organisational styling (Wee, 2015) that frames sustainability through a predominantly corporate and commercial lens. This event's expertise focuses mainly on business strategy and market innovation, rather than on other crucial perspectives such as grassroots environmental activism or supply chain labour justice. This selective framing legitimises a specific, market-compatible version of sustainability. It performs a discourse of elitism (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2009) by associating ethical practice with business savvy and luxury branding, thus reinforcing the idea that solutions to the climate crisis depend on expert-led, corporate-friendly consumption rather than on collective, systemic change or community-driven action. The event thus becomes a platform for curating and validating a specific class taste for sustainability, consolidating cultural capital among a select group rather than democratising the discourse.

Mapping "simplicity as a taste" in the corpus

An initial analysis of the Top 100 keywords from the Popular Science Corpus, including single words and multi-word terms, point toward a recurring discursive strategy: the construction of an

aesthetic contrast between “slow fashion” and “fast fashion” in *RISE*’s social media articles. To examine this strategy, I investigate the contextual data related to these two opposing concepts in the corpus.

The quantitative data reveals a significant discursive emphasis. The multi-word term “慢时尚” (slow fashion) occurs 18 times, with a high keyness score of 201.74, ranking 22nd on the keyword list. In contrast, “快时尚” (fast fashion) appears 16 times in the corpus, akin to slow fashion; however, its keyness score is markedly lower at 145.5. This discrepancy is due to much lower than its counterpart. The discrepancy is due to their respective frequencies in the large-scale reference corpus (zhTenTen17, simplified Chinese), where “fast fashion” is a common term with 4,009 instances, whereas “slow fashion” is far less frequent, appearing only 113 times. This indicates that while “fast fashion” is a widely recognised concept in broader Chinese public discourse, “slow fashion” remains a more niche and marked term, whose prominence in *RISE* Popular Science Corpus is therefore highly significant.This quantitative foundation justified a more detailed qualitative investigation. Since they are multi-word term, a direct analysis of the concordance lines and their original broader context was conducted. This examination confirmed that the lexical contrast aligns with a clear value judgment, creating a noticeable representation of positive “slow fashion” in opposition to negative “fast fashion”. The quantitative data for this search term are presented in the table below.

Search Term	Frequency	Relative Frequency (per million tokens)	Keyness Score	Function
慢时尚 (slow fashion)	18	207.17	201.74	Constructing Moderation
快时尚 (fast fashion)	16	184.15	145.5	Constructing Moderation

Table 7.1 Quantitative data for “快时尚” (fast fashion) and “慢时尚” (slow fashion) in the Popular Science Corpus

Discursive patterns in detail

In the text (see Figure 7.4), slow fashion is defined as a new perspective and approach to fashion that embodies “ecology”, “ethics” and “green” (“生态”, “伦理”, “绿色” in Line 3), being positioned as a “revolutionary” (“革命性的” in Line 3) process in the contemporary world. The

text producer from *RISE* associates various positive qualities with the term, such as “durability”, “non-conformity”, “environmental friendliness”, “quality”, “functionality”, and “safety” (“耐久性”, “不随波逐流”, “环保性” in Line 5), while depicting it as a “rejection of unconscious consumerist impulses” (“反对无意识的消费主义冲动” in Line 6). The text also claims many designers and brands have “awakened” (“觉醒” in Line 12) to advocate for slow fashion. For consumers, embracing slow fashion signifies “rejecting the blind consumption driven by vanity and desire” (“摒弃被虚荣和欲望所裹挟的盲目消费冲动” in Line 16).

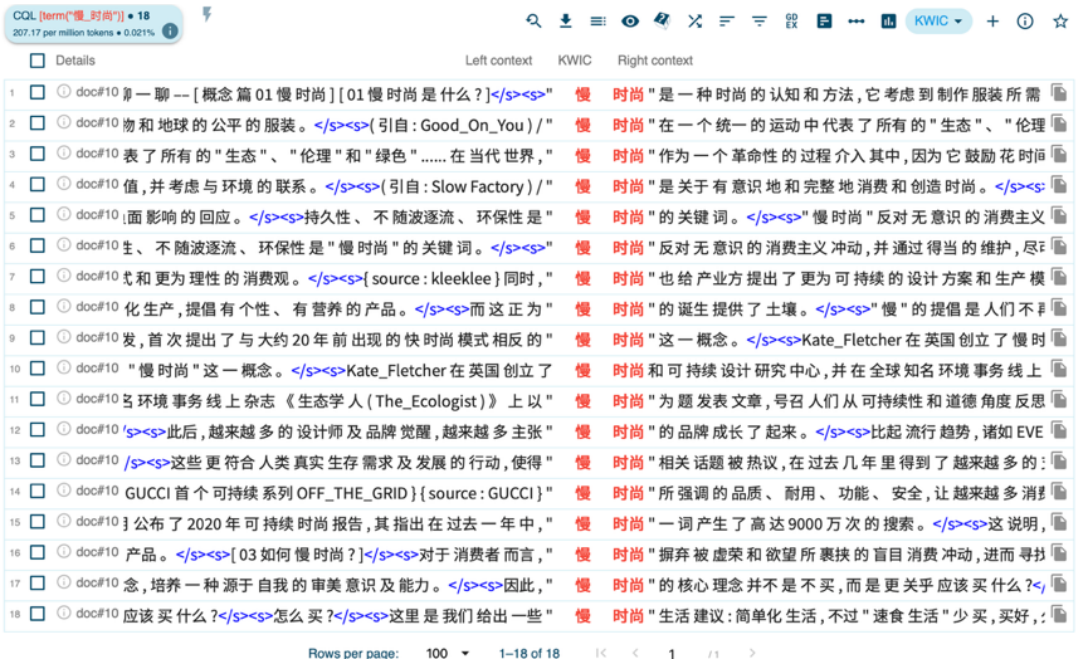

Figure 7.4. Concordance lines for the multi-word term “慢时尚” (slow fashion) in the Popular Science Corpus

This construction of a moral and cognitive binary is a powerful discursive strategy. By framing slow fashion as a conscious “awakening” and fast fashion as an “unconscious impulse”, the text creates a hierarchy of consumer subjectivity that implicitly divides them into the enlightened and the unenlightened. Fast fashion (see Figure 7.5), on the contrary, is defined as the opposite of slow fashion, representing an outdated business model characterised by a “take-make-dispose” cycle (“获取–制造–弃置” in Line 8). It embodies “mass production” (“大规模生产” in Line 2), “a relentless pursuit of low costs” (“拼命压低成本” in Line 1), and “leveraging the advantages in cost and speed” (“凭借成本和速度的优势” in Line 5). Its defining traits include being “cheap”, “low quality”, and “disregardful of social and environmental impacts” (“廉价”, “低质量”, “不顾

社会和环境影响” in Lines 7 and 8). The text highlights that this model has profound negative effects on human health, the natural environment, and the working conditions of the garment industry labourers. Besides, the text producer asserts that the fast fashion industry has driven up market demand for garments containing plastic components, contributing to environmental pollution during production. These products are noted for their short lifespan and “often being discarded within a year” (“在短短一年内就被淘汰了” in Line 15). Promoting sustainability, the text producer urges consumers to “select sustainable brands and avoid fast fashion” (“购买可持续品牌, 拒绝快时尚” in Line 11), referencing a second-hand fashion platform policy that bans the resale of fast fashion items.

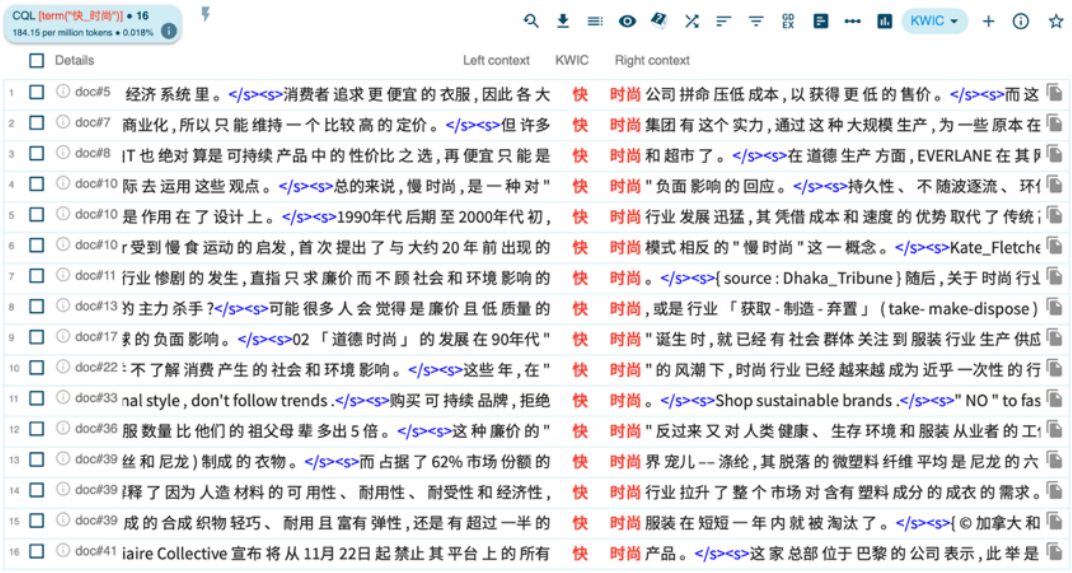

Figure 7.5. Concordance lines for the multi-word term “快时尚” (fast fashion) in the Popular Science Corpus

However, this virtuous call to action rests on an unstated economic privilege. The attributes of “quality”, “durability”, and “functionality” are semantically linked to ethical choice, yet they are materially linked to higher cost. This discourse effectively obscures the fact that the prescribed “rejection” of fast fashion is only a viable option for those with the financial capacity to choose more expensive alternatives. Consequently, the text’s moral framework, while critiquing irresponsible consumption, inadvertently reinforces a different form of exclusion. It promotes a vision of sustainability that is accessible only to an economic elite, transforming ethical consumption from a universal principle into a privileged identity marker and legitimising a higher price point as a sign of virtue rather than mere cost.

Extract 7.5 exemplifies how *RISE* frames "slow fashion" as a lifestyle and a marker of consumer aesthetic taste. When introducing potential consumers to ways of practising "slow fashion", the text producer emphasises that consumption driven by "vanity and desire" ("虚荣和欲望") constitutes a form of blind impulse and should be rejected. Instead, the text advocates for a clothing philosophy centred on "durability" ("耐久性") and "personal style" ("个人风格"), fostering an aesthetic awareness and capability rooted in the self ("培养一种源于自我的审美和能力"). This narrative amplifies the importance of individual consciousness, linking its expression to consumer behaviour with the claim that "slow fashion is not about abstaining from purchasing but about carefully considering what to buy and how to buy" ("慢时尚的核心理念并不是不买, 而是更关乎应该买什么, 怎么买"). The text then provides practical suggestions on slow fashion from consumption behaviour and lifestyle perspectives, advocating for a simplified life over a fast-paced one. However, this "simplicity" is inherently refined, exemplified by purchasing high-quality, timeless, and durable products. These lifestyle suggestions implicitly convey a minimalist aesthetic sensibility and consumer philosophy, emphasising individual consciousness—"not blindly following trends or idolising well-known brands" ("不盲目跟随潮流和推崇大品牌"). However, what is glossed over in the text is the prerequisite for practising these suggestions: possessing relatively high levels of cultural and economic capital. In essence, the text producer neglects to acknowledge the above-average costs associated with "slow fashion", which may limit its accessibility to individuals with constrained socioeconomic resources. Additionally, the text fails to account for the level of education and knowledge required for individuals to make informed, conscious consumer choices that consider environmental and societal well-being. It differentiates between slow and fast fashion by highlighting the aesthetic choices and consumption values associated with each concept. The unequal distribution of economic and cultural resources, which influences consumer choices, is often obscured.

［03 如何 慢 时尚？］ 对于 消费者 而言，**“慢 时尚”** 摒弃 被 虚荣 和 欲望 所 裹挟 的 盲目 消费 冲动，进而 寻找 一 种 持久性 更 强 、 更 具 个 人 风格 的 穿衣 理念，培养 一 种 源于 自我 的 审美 意识 及 能力。因此，**“慢 时尚”** 的 核心 理念 并不 是 不 买，而 是 更 关乎 应该 买 什么？ 怎么 买？ 这里 是 我 们 给出 一些 **“慢 时尚”** 生活 建议：简单化 生活，不过 “速食 生活”少 买，买好，久 用 买 前，想 清楚 自己 是否 真的 需要 不 盲目 跟随 潮流 和 推崇 大 品牌，选择 适合 自己 的 才 是 最 好 的 选择 更 经典 易于 搭配 和 质量 好 、 经久 耐用 的 产品 购买 闲置 二手 类 衣服 多 使用 搭配 以前 的 衣服 选择 交换 / 再 造 / DIY 方式 优化 衣柜 里 的 衣服 日常 悉心 维护 每 一 件 物品 。让 它 陪 你 更 久 尽可能 修补 破 久 的 衣物 不 随便 丢弃 每 一 件 衣物。

[How to Embrace “Slow Fashion”?] For consumers, **“slow fashion”** involves rejecting the blind consumption driven by vanity and desire, instead seeking a more durable and personalised approach to clothing that fosters self-developed aesthetic awareness and the ability to create a unique style. At its core, **“slow fashion”** is not about abstaining from purchasing but about carefully considering what to buy and how to buy. Here are some life tips for “slow fashion": It emphasises simplifying life and avoiding the “fast-paced” lifestyle, buying less but investing in quality pieces that last longer. Before purchasing, consumers are encouraged to reflect on whether they genuinely need the item, to avoid blindly following trends or idolising well-known brands, and to choose items that suit them best. Slow fashion promotes selecting classic, versatile, and durable products, buying second-hand clothing, and maximising the use of existing wardrobe pieces. Consumers are also encouraged to explore swapping, upcycling, or DIY methods to refresh their wardrobes, maintain and care for their clothing properly to prolong their lifespan, and repair rather than discard damaged items whenever possible. This approach not only minimises waste but also allows clothing to accompany the wearer for a longer time, embodying a sustainable and thoughtful lifestyle.

Extract 7.5. Original context of the multi-word term “慢时尚” (slow fashion)

Essentially, taste is a crucial means by which the text producer conceals the advantages of acquiring such taste. According to Bourdieu (1984, p. 466), taste is “a practical mastery of distributions which make it possible to sense or intuit what is likely (or unlikely) to befall—and therefore to befit—an individual occupying a given position in social space”. At its core, taste reflects the unconscious alignment with one’s social position. This theoretical framework reveals how with economic constraints easing, luxury preferences become more refined, extending even to everyday items. Bourdieu highlights that upper classes demonstrate a “pure” aesthetic in ordinary choices—such as cooking, clothing, or decoration—viewing their preferences as markers

of distinction and moral superiority rooted in their access to cultural and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 40).

In the WeChat article (as shown in Extract 7.5), consumers who opt for fast fashion and a "fast-paced lifestyle" ("速食生活") are portrayed as lacking individuality in their aesthetic preferences, unthinkingly conforming, irrational, and impulsive. These individuals are seen as driven by "vanity and desire" ("虚荣和欲望"), which they seek to satisfy through the consumption of fast fashion products. Conversely, consumers who choose slow fashion and minimalist lifestyles are portrayed as having individuality, a strong sense of personal consciousness, rationality, and self-restraint. This discursive construction creates a moral hierarchy of consumers. Nevertheless, their individuality in the text is represented exclusively through purchasing behaviours—acquiring slow fashion products denotes a high quality of living and becomes a marker of social status.

Here, the portrayal of simplicity as a taste holds particular significance—it is an aesthetic taste that creates value for businesses and consumers who align with slow fashion. However, this narrative conceals the truth by framing what is essentially a privilege of capital—the economic capital to purchase "high-quality" items and the cultural capital to decode minimalist aesthetics—as merely a matter of superior moral and aesthetic character. The text thus legitimises social stratification by presenting the consumption patterns of an elite as the result of individual virtue and refined taste, effectively obscuring the unequal distribution of the resources that make such choices possible. The discourse does not challenge consumerism but redirects it into a channel that requires greater capital to navigate.

Connecting field and text

The ethnographic and corpus data together demonstrate that the rhetorical strategy of "simplicity as a taste" is implemented through a consistent discursive framing that equates aesthetic minimalism with moral and cognitive superiority, thereby legitimising elite consumption patterns as virtuous choices. The ethnographic data reveals the strategic, lived enactment of this rhetoric—from GI's forums, where English-language proficiency and corporate expertise gatekeep participation, to interview narratives that contrast "enlightened" minimalist consumption with "blind" fast-fashion impulse. This performative dimension is further reinforced by the corpus data, which quantifies a marked lexical opposition between "慢时尚" (slow fashion)—associated with

“awakening”, “durability”, and “ethics”—and “快时尚” (fast fashion)—linked to “disposal” and “vanity”. The comparison highlights their complementary functions: ethnography documents the curated, experiential expression of minimalist identity in exclusive environments, whereas the corpus reveals the recurring pattern of a moral binary across promotional texts. Both datasets reveal how “simplicity” functions as a powerful means of distinction: it transforms economic capital into cultural capital by depicting the ability to purchase high-quality, durable items and interpret minimalist aesthetics not as a privilege, but as a sign of personal refinement and ethical integrity. Consequently, this strategy conceals the material barriers to “conscious consumption” and reinforces social hierarchies, presenting a class-based lifestyle as a universally accessible moral ideal while systematically excluding those without the necessary resources.

7.3.2 Eco-consumption as a virtue

“Eco-consumption as a virtue” is a rhetorical strategy framing environmentally conscious purchasing behaviour as morally superior. This strategy links consumption choices to ethical responsibility, creating an aspirational narrative that encourages consumers to view their buying decisions as extensions of their personal values and social identity. By doing so, brands position themselves as facilitators of virtuous living and changing consumption patterns, appealing to consumers who seek to align their lifestyle with sustainability and social good. I argue that the purpose of this approach is not only to drive sales but also to cultivate brand loyalty by aligning products with consumers’ values and fostering a sense of moral satisfaction through consumption. A straightforward method to invoke consumers’ moral responsibility is by sharing statistics about the negative impact of the conventional mass-produced textile industry.

“Eco-consumption as a virtue” in practice

An analysis of *Déjà Vu*’ s interior, informed by Ledin and Machin’s (2019) critique, reveals that the store is not merely a container for discourse but is itself a “semiotic material shaped as a whole” (Ledin & Machin, 2019, p. 503). This concept of a “material whole” refers to a communicative artifact that is encountered and experienced as a complete, coherent entity, where its overall design and configuration are fundamental to its meaning, rather than just the sum of its individual parts like texts or images. In this case, the store’s overall design, characterised by minimalist aesthetics, creates a specific “contextual configuration”. The large windows and bright fluorescent lights, reminiscent of old Shanghai factories from the 1980s and 1990s, create a spacious and well-lit

shopping environment. Although there is a large quantity of second-hand clothing, all items are neatly arranged on racks based on colour schemes. This outer form codes the bonds of communication, establishing an environment that signifies transparency, order, and industrial efficiency, thereby distancing itself from the clutter and chaos often associated with traditional thrift stores.

The bilingual wall texts and symbols can be understood through the lens of "canons of use" (Ledin & Machin, 2019, p. 501). This term describes the established, historically evolved traditions and conventions for using semiotic resources in specific social practices. As the Figures 7.6 and 7.7 show, the statistics and their meaning are highlighted visually, featuring a large, bold black font that stands out, while the accompanying text is notably smaller in size. Figure 7.6 illustrates the environmental pollution caused by the fashion industry, identified as the second-largest global polluter. With examples of jeans and cotton T-shirts, the text outlines the significant water pollution and CO2 emissions generated during production. The use of symbols further simplifies and clarifies the textual information. Pollution is symbolised by a skull, while the impact of producing a pair of jeans is depicted with an image of pants accompanied by an equal sign. The resulting pollution is shown as a water droplet marked with black stains. Likewise, the carbon emissions associated with T-shirt production are expressed through similar symbolic representations. Additionally, an image of the Earth is displayed, with a T-shirt icon superimposed to further emphasise the connection between the fashion industry and the environment. Regarding Figure 7.7, it is remarkable to see a contrast between two starkly different statistics in the fashion industry in China: the used clothing recycling rate (1%) compared to the discard rate (99%). The detailed textual explanation describes the severe pollution caused by discarded clothing, affecting both the atmosphere and the soil. It also encourages consumers to engage in clothing recycling, framing it as an action that helps protect air, water, and soil. The graphics include two arrows forming a circle to symbolise recycling, with a clothed cat at its centre—a signature symbol of the *Déjà Vu* brand. The cat features prominently throughout the store as a recurring design element, representing the brand. *Déjà Vu* does not invent new semiotic resources; it draws from established canons. The use of stark environmental statistics and warning symbols is a canon from environmental activism and critical journalism. The minimalist aesthetic and the strategic placement of text are canons of corporate branding and museum display. By fusing these canons, *Déjà Vu* legitimises its narrative,

creating a space where the consumer is interpellated as both an activist and a discerning boutique shopper.

Figure 7.6. Inside *Déjà Vu*'s store 1, 8 August 2021

Figure 7.7. Inside *Déjà Vu*'s store 2, 8 August 2021

The analysis of the store space shows that *Déjà Vu* employs text and other symbolic resources to give the act of purchasing second-hand goods moral significance. This analysis also highlights the "affordances" of the spatial medium. Affordances are the possibilities for action and meaning-making that are inherent to a specific material or technology (Ledin & Machin, 2019). A store affords bodily movement and immersion in a way a webpage or advertisement does not. The text on the walls draws the attention of in-store consumers to the concepts of sustainable fashion and the circular economy. It encourages them to view their sustainable choices, such as buying second-hand, as a social distinction. The brand's implicit critique of the traditional fashion industry can also be understood as a subtle endorsement of its own values. While ostensibly presenting facts and data does not make a straightforward condemnation of the traditional fashion industry, the implicit critique is intentionally amplified through visual techniques—such as larger font sizes and bold lettering—to capture customers' attention. The large, bold statistics on the wall exploit the affordance of scale to overwhelm and persuade, while the recurring branded cat symbol leverages the affordance of repetition within a physical space to build brand recognition and loyalty.

This strategic presentation allows the audience to intuitively grasp the industry's shortcomings in its mass production and consumption model, highlighting the benefits of a circular economy through statistical contrasts. Framing eco-consumption as a virtue cultivates moral satisfaction in customers' purchasing decisions and reinforces their alignment with the brand's consistently promoted values. Additionally, the textual and symbolic information on the two walls serves as a method of constructing the brand image. This also explains why the recycling symbol in Figure 7.7 features a clothed cat representing the brand at its centre, suggesting to consumers *Déjà Vu*'s pivotal role by placing itself in a "central position" literally in the development of the circular economy. The design choice to place the brand logo at the centre of the recycling symbol is a clear act of "organisational styling" (Wee, 2015), where the corporation curates a specific taste and moral stance by leveraging the spatial affordances of the wall.

However, this mode of presenting information is often selective, streamlining the narrative to facilitate consumer engagement—primarily through the act of purchasing second-hand items and identifying with associated lifestyles and consumption practices. Businesses often highlight the "green" features of their products or business models. Still, they tend to downplay the limitations of using "green" labels in achieving sustainability and addressing broader systemic issues related to environmental protection. The text producer creates value by opting into a circular economy,

leveraging guilt, pride (arguably), and a sense of contribution to a larger cause, making consumers feel responsible for participating in eco-conscious practices. By focusing on individual guilt and responsibility through a carefully designed "material whole" that draws on familiar "canons of use", the store's design effectively commodifies the critique of fast fashion, transforming a systemic issue into a depoliticised, market-based lifestyle choice that ultimately reinforces the very consumerist structures it claims to challenge. Thus, the enactment of eco-conscious practices in daily life becomes a marker of social and cultural capital. Consumers are encouraged to perceive their sustainable choices as indicators of refined aesthetic taste, sophistication, or forward-thinking. This, in turn, enhances the value of products marketed as "sustainable", "ethical", "eco-conscious" or using similar terms.

Mapping "eco-consumption as a virtue" in the corpus

An initial analysis of the Top 100 keywords from the Popular Science Corpus, including single words and multi-word terms, terms such as "道德时尚" (Ethical Fashion), "道德焦虑" (moral anxiety), "良心消费" (Ethical Consumption), "公平贸易" (fair trade), "情感反馈" (emotional feedback) are related to the rhetorical strategy of "eco-consumption as a virtue". The text producer introduces and defines these terms, framing sustainable consumption in the fashion industry as a moral obligation that enables consumers to fulfil their ethical responsibilities and feel positively about themselves. Keyness scores of these terms suggest the importance of representing consumption patterns for sustainability in organisational styling on social media, with "道德时尚" (Ethical Fashion) at a keyness score of 292.41, "道德焦虑" (moral anxiety) at 233.61, "良心消费" (Ethical Consumption) at 214.09, "公平贸易" (fair trade) at 214.09 and "情感反馈" (emotional feedback) at 179.95.

To examine this rhetorical strategy, I investigated the contextual data related to these concepts in the corpus. In this section, the findings of "道德时尚" (ethical fashion) and "道德焦虑" (moral anxiety) are presented to illustrate. The multi-word term "道德时尚" (ethical fashion) occurs 26 times, ranking 10th on the keyword list, and "道德焦虑" (moral anxiety) appears 21 times in the corpus, ranking 16th. This quantitative foundation justified a more detailed qualitative investigation. Since they are multi-word term, a direct analysis of the concordance lines and their

original broader context was conducted. The quantitative data for this search term are presented in the table below.

Search Term	Frequency	Relative Frequency (per million tokens)	Keyness Score	Function
“道德时尚” (ethical fashion)	26	299.25	292.41	Constructing Moderation
“道德焦虑” (moral anxiety)	21	241.7	233.61	Constructing Moderation

Table 7.2 Quantitative data for “道德时尚” (ethical fashion) and “道德焦虑” (moral anxiety) in the Popular Science Corpus

Discursive patterns in detail

The concordance lines of the term “道德时尚” (ethical fashion) indicate its focus on precise definitions, positive social impact, and the encouragement of consumer participation. Figure 7.8 presents examples of concordance lines concerning the definitions of ethical fashion. All cases appear within a single document that introduces the concept and is categorised under the tag “R.I.S.E. PEDIA”. Based on the corpus data, ethical fashion “aims to reduce the negative impacts on humans, animals and the planet” (Line 6, “旨在减少时尚行业对个人, 动物和地球的负面影响”) in the entire process of “design, production, and distribution” (Line 8, “设计、生产和分销”). The text producer particularly distinguishes this concept from sustainable fashion. The former places more emphasis on the social impact of the fashion industry, aiming to “benefit the workers in the production and supply chain” (Line 9, “使生产供应链上的劳动者受益”) regarding their “salary, working conditions, and physical and mental health and safety” (Line 11, “劳工薪资待遇、工作环境、身心健康安全”).

Figure 7.8. Concordance lines for the multi-word term "道德时尚" (ethical fashion) in the Popular Science Corpus

To guide consumers toward supporting ethical fashion, the text producer constructed a detailed persuasive argument, as shown in Extract 7.6. According to the original text, consumers should be equipped with the knowledge to identify and choose ethically produced products when purchasing fashion items. This can be conveniently realised by using the sustainable fashion consumer decision-making guide platform, *RERISE*, launched by the organisation. Notably, the specific suggestion is not directly introduced at the beginning; instead, the text producer first establishes a relatable scenario for readers, prompting them to connect it to their own circumstances. This is followed by invoking the readers' sense of moral responsibility, encouraging them to empathise and advocate for the rights of labourers at the "very upstream of the supply chain" ("供应链最上游") in the fashion industry. The text producer strategically portrays the text receiver, ordinary consumers, as the opponents of the toxic 996[1] work schedule and compares their working

[1] The term 996 refers to a work schedule where employees work from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week. It has become emblematic of the demanding and excessive work culture in China's tech industry, where companies expect employees

conditions with those of workers in the fashion industry, who must endure even more extreme overwork, known as 007[2]. This comparison is designed to evoke readers' moral responsibility and even a sense of guilt. The underlying logic suggests that individuals experiencing the "996" work schedule typically belong to the middle- or upper-middle classes, who are more likely to be aware of injustices and possess the social, economic, and cultural capital necessary to defend their rights. In contrast, those subjected to the "007" work schedule are part of society's disadvantaged groups and are more in need of support from "996" audiences. The text implies that those who enjoy greater social resources should bear greater moral responsibilities, appearing to align with liberal ideology.

消费者 如何 支持 「 **道德 时尚** 」？ 作为 普通 消费者，当 我们 在 为 自己 的 工作 环境 抗争，拒绝 〞 996 〞 的 不适当 工时，不妨 也 思考 一下 在 供应链 最 上游 〞 007 〞 的 劳动者 。 在 购买 时尚 产品 时，甄别 并 选择 符合 〞 **道德 时尚** 〞 的 产品，或许 是 我们 能够 给予 遥远 的 劳动者 和 沉默 的 动物 最 大 的 尊重 。 在 中国 市场 中，无论是 〞 **道德 时尚** 〞 还是 〞 可持续 时尚 〞 均 尚 未 形成 明确 的 行业 共识 和 标准，此外 时尚 产业链 信息 透明度 不足 、 消费者 教育 不 普及 、 购物 渠道 引导 不 清晰 等 问题，阻碍 了 消费者 对于 可 持续 时尚 产品 的 购买 。为此，我们 发起 了 可持续 时尚 的 消费 决策 引导 平台 RERISE，通过 建立 可 持续 时尚 产品 评价 体系 、 检索 可 持续 时尚 产品 信息 等 功能 和 方式，帮助 中国 消费者 提高 可 持续 时尚 消费 决策 的 效率 和 准确性，引导 消费者 意识 到 自身 的 消费 决策 对于 商业 未来 发展 、 环境 和 社会 影响 的 重要 意义 。[…]

How Can Consumers Support **[Ethical Fashion]**? As ordinary consumers advocating for fair work environments and rejecting the unreasonable "996" work culture, it's worth reflecting on the "007" workers at the very upstream of the supply chain. When purchasing fashion products, identifying and choosing those aligned with "**ethical fashion**" might be the tremendous respect we can offer to distant workers and voiceless animals. In the Chinese market, neither "**ethical fashion**" nor "sustainable fashion" has yet established clear industry consensus or standards. Moreover, issues like insufficient transparency in the fashion supply chain, lack of consumer education, and unclear guidance in shopping channels hinder consumers from purchasing sustainable fashion products. To address these challenges, we have launched *RERISE*, a platform to guide sustainable fashion consumer decisions. By creating a sustainable fashion product evaluation system and offering tools to search for sustainable product information, *RERISE* seeks to help Chinese consumers make efficient and accurate purchasing decisions. Furthermore, it aims to raise awareness about the critical impact of consumer choices on the future of business, the environment, and society. [...]

Extract 7.6. Original context of the multi-word term "道德时尚" (ethical fashion)

to work long hours to meet intense deadlines and competition. The term gained widespread attention after being openly endorsed by influential tech leaders, sparking debates about work-life balance, workers' rights, and burnout.

[2] The term 007 refers to a work schedule of midnight to midnight, seven days a week. It represents an even more extreme version of overwork, often used satirically or critically to highlight exploitative working conditions, particularly for labourers at the bottom of supply chains or in industries with little labour protection. This term is frequently associated with factory workers, delivery drivers, and other vulnerable groups who may not have the protections or bargaining power to resist such schedules.

However, the specific suggestions that follow are deeply consumerist in nature. Meeting these moral obligations is presented not as a heavy burden or a significant sacrifice for the elite but as simple as changing their consumption patterns. Suppose challenges arise during this process, such as distinguishing between the concepts of "ethical fashion" and "sustainable fashion", businesses like *RISE* are positioned to assist and guide consumers in making the "right" choices. In other words, the text indicates that consumers can fulfil their moral responsibilities merely by adjusting their consumption habits, a process facilitated by the support of organisations like *RISE*. Moreover, the consumption choices of elite classes are portrayed as highly meaningful in the text, capable of influencing the future of business, the environment, and society ("[…]意识到自身的消费决策对于商业未来发展、环境和社会影响的重要意义"). Businesses promoting sustainable or ethical fashion elevate product value by positioning their elite consumers as ethically responsible individuals occupying a moral high ground. Through the "eco-consumption as a virtue" strategy, they frame purchasing choices as carrying ethical responsibility and significant societal and environmental impact. Simultaneously, the strategy also enhances the image of the company or brand itself, portraying it as a facilitator that helps consumers fulfil their moral obligations.

Essentially, the text performs an ideological trick: it initially recognises a significant social inequality (the 007 versus 996 dynamic) to elicit a genuine ethical response. However, it then redirects that moral impulse back into the very market-based logic that often creates such inequalities. The proposed solution, conscious consumption, is primarily an individual-based and depoliticised approach to the systemic issue of labour exploitation. By framing ethical responsibility as a matter of consumer choice, the conversation shifts collective political accountability into a private market decision. This process of "ethical individualisation" relieves both corporations and the state of the need for structural reform, instead placing the onus for change entirely on the individual shopper. The brand, in positioning itself as the essential guide and facilitator, thus commodifies the social conscience it helped to awaken, transforming a critique of capitalist exploitation into a new, morally-laden market niche.

Another case in point is "道德焦虑" (moral anxiety). According to the concordance lines (see Figure 7.9), the surrounding text of the term suggests that "a growing number of consumers are increasingly experiencing moral anxiety regarding their consumption actions" ("越来越多的消费者在进行消费时会产生"道德焦虑" in Line 2, and similar phrases recurring in Lines 1, 4, 5, 7, 8,

11,12, 16, 18 and 20), particularly “worrying about the effects of these behaviours on the environment and society” (“惧怕自己的行为会对环境和社会产生负面影响” in Line 2). Most cases relate to *RISE*’s analysis reports on Chinese sustainable fashion consumers, where the text producer introduces the key findings from the report in WeChat articles. When mentioning the term “moral anxiety”, it is emphasised that “the more awareness of sustainable fashion consumers have, the more likely they are to become morally anxious, leading to their transformation towards conscious consumption” (“可持续时尚认知度越高的消费者, 其道德焦虑感越高, 进而产生了一种新型的消费倾向——良心消费” in Line 3, and similar phrases recurring in most lines, except for Lines 15, 18, 19 and 21). Notably, the text producer does not overtly amplify moral anxiety but rather presents it as a motivating force encouraging consumers to adopt more ethical consumption habits. This motivation stems from awareness of sustainable fashion, with moral anxiety emerging primarily among consumers who possess a higher degree of such awareness. In this framing, moral anxiety functions less as a concept to be explored and more as a symbolic marker—used to differentiate elite consumers and signal social distinction through their purchasing behaviour.

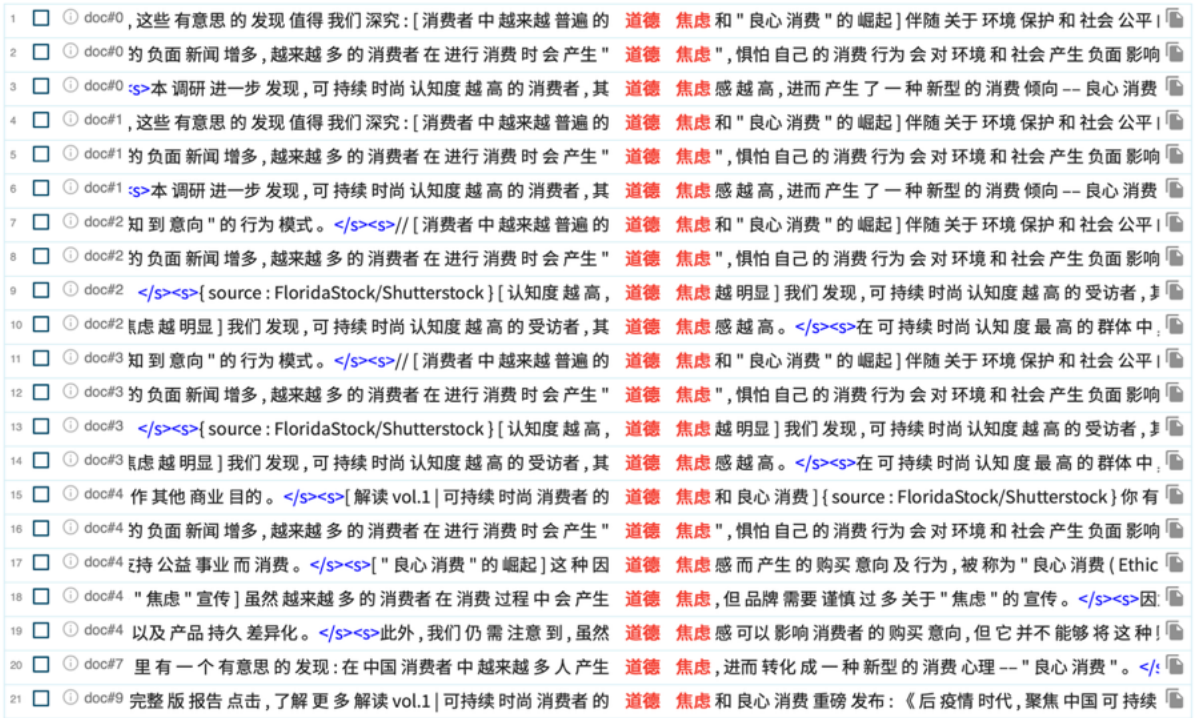

Figure 7.9. Concordance lines for the multi-word term “道德焦虑” (moral anxiety) in the Popular Science Corpus

In some instances, the text producer of *RISE* even advocates against overemphasising anxiety. For example, in Extract 7.7, *RISE* advises fashion brands to be cautious with excessive "anxiety" messaging based on the assumption that purchasing behaviour should be linked to seeking satisfaction and joy. Note that the discussion of moral anxiety surrounding consumption here still reflects a consumerist value—"purchasing behaviour is more often associated with seeking satisfaction and joy" ("购买行为更多的是期盼着带来满足感和愉悦感"). This suggests that while the text producer introduces concepts like ethical fashion and conscious consumption, these notions serve more as means than ends. The primary function of those concepts is to ascribe moral and symbolic significance to expensive, sustainable fashion items rather than accurately delineating the specific accountability associated with societal overconsumption. The underlying goal remains to promote consumption, albeit of higher-priced products that align more closely with the aesthetic sensibilities, cultural capital, and progressive values of middle- and upper-middle-class consumers. Thus, the moral responsibility articulated in the text is framed as moderate rather than radical. Emphasising morality may create pressure, and pressure tends to cause anxiety. As a result, businesses must carefully and strategically manage consumers' anxiety levels in organisational styling. A moderate level of anxiety can motivate elite consumers to shift toward "conscious consumption", but excessive anxiety risks backfiring, potentially suppressing consumption altogether. For this reason, the text producer advocates against overemphasising moral anxiety, presenting conscious consumption as a "free choice" ("自由选择"). The elite class is portrayed as having the autonomy to decide whether to assume moral responsibility in their purchasing decisions without being coerced into doing so. However, this notion of free will is, in practice, persistently shaped by consumerist ideology, with discourse serving as a key mechanism in its maintenance and reinforcement.

″良心消费″正在成为越来越普遍且具有影响力的消费行为，但品牌需谨慎进行过多″焦虑″宣传 虽然越来越多的消费者在消费过程中会产生 **道德 焦虑**，但品牌需要谨慎过多关于″焦虑″的宣传。 因为购买行为更多的是期盼着带来满足感和愉悦感，因此消费者倾向于远离负面消息，他们不希望购买产品来增加焦虑。 正如学者 Deirdre Shaw 所说，″良心消费″是消费者的自由选择，而非强制性选择，消费者有权决定是否将社会责任考虑到其消费决策中。

"Conscious consumption" is becoming an increasingly common and influential behaviour, but brands should exercise caution with excessive "anxiety" messaging. While more consumers experience **moral anxiety** during the consumption process, brands need to be careful not to overemphasise anxiety in their campaigns. This is because purchasing behaviour is more often associated with seeking satisfaction and joy, and consumers tend to avoid negative messages—they do not want their purchases to add to their anxiety. As scholar Deirdre Shaw puts it, "conscious consumption" is a free choice for consumers, not an obligation. Consumers have the right to decide whether to factor social responsibility into their purchasing decisions.

Extract 7.7. Original context of the multi-word term "道德焦虑" (moral anxiety)

This careful calibration of "moral anxiety" reveals that its main role is not truly engaging with ethical dilemmas, but rather serving as a managed resource within the framework of consumer capitalism. By linking specific consumption patterns (whether eco-, conscious, sustainable, or other forms) to moral values, the text producer aims to leverage the emotions triggered by moral considerations—such as anxiety, guilt, pride, and satisfaction—to drive the consumption of those particular products that aim for moral good. Importantly, these emotions are deliberately manipulated to remain within a range that supports the ultimate goal: encouraging consumption without deterring it. The discourse reinterprets a potentially disruptive social emotion as a productive, market-oriented psychological motivator. By linking anxiety directly to "conscious consumption", the text producer transforms it from a critique of the system into a driver for a niche market within that system. The recommendation to avoid "excessive anxiety" is not primarily about protecting consumers' well-being. Instead, it acts as a strategy of risk-management designed to prevent ethical issues from escalating to a level that could threaten the core idea of consumption itself.

For elite consumers, this rhetorical strategy of "eco-consumption as a virtue" appears to offer an alternative to traditional consumption—a choice that signifies class distinction and progressive values. Yet, this framing also serves as a subtle form of coercion. As a result, the "free choice"

offered to elite consumers is highly limited. It is the freedom to choose between different commodities, not the freedom to question the culture of commodification itself. Once elite consumers accept and internalise the moral and ethical frameworks promoted by businesses, they become susceptible to ongoing manipulation through discourse. The discourse of moral anxiety, therefore, operates as a sophisticated regulatory mechanism. It creates just enough psychological discomfort to encourage a shift in purchasing habits towards more profitable "sustainable" goods, while at the same time ensuring this discomfort does not develop into a political consciousness that might challenge broader capitalism. This shows that moral narratives can be crafted for egalitarian elite consumers to further entrench them in consumption behaviours that support corporate goals, potentially disguised as ethical responsibility. This process effectively privatises and individualises a systemic crisis, turning the consumer's psyche into the main focus for handling the contradictions of ethical capitalism, instead of tackling those contradictions through collective political efforts.

Connecting field and text

Therefore, both the ethnographic case of *Déjà Vu* and the corpus data from Popular Science illustrate the concrete presence and use of the rhetorical strategy of "eco-consumption as a virtue." Together, they reveal a shared logic for framing sustainable purchasing as a moral duty. The ethnographic analysis highlights the strategy's material enactment: *Déjà Vu*'s store, as a coherent "material whole", employs spatial design and symbolic elements to create an immersive environment where consumption is seen as a virtuous act. Conversely, the corpus data exposes its discursive mechanism: through terms like "ethical fashion" and the careful management of "moral anxiety", the discourse individualises responsibility and steers ethical impulses towards market-driven solutions. Comparing these shows a difference in their mechanism: the ethnographic data presents a spatially immersive persuasion, using the physical affordances of the store to shape bodily experience and perception, while the corpus data demonstrates a more explicitly lexical persuasion, directly defining ideas and adjusting emotional triggers through text. Despite their different mediums—one sensory and spatial, the other conceptual and linguistic—both lead to the same depoliticising effect. They collectively illustrate how "eco-consumption as a virtue" functions as a cultural instrument, commodifying critique and turning systemic problems into a reaffirmation of consumerist identity.

7.3.3 Ecology as a commodity

The rhetorical strategy of "ecology as a commodity" emphasises viewing the ecosystem as a product that can be measured in terms of both gain and cost. The businesses under investigation often lead discussions on environmental protection through various events and on their social media platforms, sharing insights on how ecosystems function and how they can be preserved. The data suggest that promoting eco-products and business-led eco-initiatives can help mitigate the damage caused to the ecosystem. It is contended that the objective of this strategy is to link the discourse surrounding the ecosystem and its preservation with value creation for sustainable fashion products, as well as the businesses promoting themselves in connection with sustainability.

"Ecology as a commodity" in practice

At the start of this chapter, I introduced the "rewilded garden"—*klee klee*'s exterior landscape design—as an example of how the business strategically incorporates ecological knowledge and its environmental initiative to create a striking visual contrast, or "aesthetic shock", within a bustling commercial district. Apart from adopting a minimalist landscape design to highlight a unique taste, this approach exemplifies how the strategy of "ecology as a commodity" enhances the commercial value of the business and its products. This process can be critically understood as a form of environmental gentrification at a micro-scale (Checker, 2018). Just as urban greening can raise the status and cost of a neighbourhood, *klee klee*'s curated natural aesthetics elevate the cultural and economic "cost of entry" for its brand community. Besides visual messaging, businesses also construct value discursively through branding events and social media articles. They further rationalise their exploitation of the ecosystem, appropriating the environment as a key element in value creation through discourse. This strategy is, in essence, aligned with customer expectations associated with the brand and justifies the premium pricing of products aimed at an elite clientele.

To illustrate, Extract 7.8 and 7.9 are field notes taken from my online participation in *klee klee*'s promotional event, introducing its "Rewilding the City" initiative to customers. Both extracts record the remarks from two guest speakers, who are the key stakeholders engaged in the project. They highlight the distinctions between *klee klee*'s "rewilded garden" and other urban botanical gardens or parks concerning their overall landscapes (mentioned by Yifeng in Extract 7.8) and the

role of businesses in restoring urban biodiversity (mentioned by Mr. Guo in Extract 7.9), linking the rewilding to the gentrification process of the store space.

Specifically, in Extract 7.8, Yifeng, a landscape designer collaborating with *klee klee*, contrasts the design of the "rewilded garden" with the neatly planned parks in urban settings, highlighting the natural qualities of the former. According to her, plant distribution lacks defined boundaries in the "rewilded garden", distinguishing it from bounded, manicured, and artificial landscapes. She invited the audience on-site to closely observe and identify the plants in the garden after the event, hinting at the presence of many gardening enthusiasts among the attendees. Yifeng also mentioned that the garden includes a dedicated composting area, reflecting the principles of "sustainability" and "circularity" embedded in its design. Additionally, she emphasised that in selecting plants for the garden, apart from fostering biodiversity, it was essential to consider the actual circumstances, i.e., characteristics of urban rooftop balconies. The selection process focused on finding plants that are adaptable to the environment. From a professional perspective, Yifeng explained to the audience the unique natural attributes of the "rewilded garden". Through her explanation of the design philosophy, the "rewilded garden" is imbued with a more distinctive ecological significance. She mentioned that the process of "rewilding" involves "developing and experimenting with different plant species", contingent upon investing time, expertise, technology, and other resources.

28 November 2022, Online Stream, Promotional event on "Rewilding the City" project

怡妦表示，总体来看，做个项目的感受很开心，是一种学习，学习到这种布置方式与传统的景观布置不一样。整个项目强调大家的共同参与，每个小伙伴都是项目的一部分。因为项目是在上生新所这样一个能见度高的商业景观，这个乡野花园对于很多人来说都是审美上的冲击，这个项目是值得挑战的，会让大家看到不一样的景观。接着，她对比展示了一般的景观设计案例和 *klee klee* 上生新所"乡野花园"比较狂野的景观，表示它们的视觉观感相差很多，所以这个项目需要调和——"人可以用，人可以接受、动植物也可以接受"，需要寻找一种平衡，大家都能去接受。

Yifeng remarked that the arrangement of plants did not resemble the neatly organised layout of a park; there were no defined boundaries, as the vegetation was distributed according to its natural community patterns. "In nature, you rarely see perfectly arranged spaces," she explained. "The plants here are quite interesting; people can take a closer look and identify them..." She then pointed out that further inside was the composting area, where fallen leaves were used as fertiliser. The plants in the garden are selected for their resilience to sunlight, and some species have already been replaced to better adapt to this environment. The goal, beyond fostering biodiversity, is to identify plants that can thrive in the urban ecological conditions of the area. She noted that since many rooftops in Shanghai are similarly exposed to intense sunlight, growing plants in such spaces could greatly benefit the environment. However, it requires developing and experimenting with different plant species. ... She remarked that because the project is at Columbia Circle, a highly visible commercial area, this rewilded garden is an aesthetic shock for many people. She said, "The project is challenging, allowing the public to see a different landscape." Then, she showed some cases of typical commercial landscape design and contrasted them with the landscape of *klee klee*'s garden at Columbia Circle. She noted that the visual perception offered by the project differed significantly from the usual ones. Thus, in designing the garden, they hoped the public would adjust their views. The rewilded garden is one that "people can use and accept, and so can the animals and plants," she remarked. "We need to find a balance in our design that everyone can embrace."

Extract 7.8. Field note from Yifeng's Talk, WeChat platform, 28 November 2022

This discourse, while emphasising ecological benefits, strategically reframes the "rewilded garden" as a sophisticated aesthetic and ecological upgrade to the commercial space. This parallels the logic of urban environmental gentrification, where the "greening" of an area is used to signal a superior, more refined lifestyle, thereby attracting a wealthier demographic (Gould & Lewis, 2016). Thus, the reasoning behind *klee klee*'s corporate effort, supposedly aimed at revitalising urban biodiversity, remains questionable. As Yifeng pointed out, the "rewilded garden" presents an "aesthetic shock" ("审美上的冲击") to those unaccustomed to it, challenging their tolerance of aesthetic taste. In this sense, the "aesthetic shock" functions as a mechanism of distinction, much like the displacement caused by urban gentrification; it creates a social and aesthetic barrier

that separates a discerning, elite in-group from a general public unable to decode or appreciate its "wild" logic.

Similarly, according to Extract 7.9, Mr. Guo, an expert in ecological restoration, remarked that urban gardens and parks have a counterintuitive low biodiversity coefficient. Here, he introduced the concept of the biodiversity coefficient and emphasised that it is calculated based on the "richness and evenness of species distributions" ("自然情况下、基于合理的群落结构"). Here, it is implied that the gardens and parks commonly seen in the cities lack such richness and evenness and, thus, cannot function well in restoring biodiversity. Furthermore, he specified the concept of biodiversity by mentioning three levels of the concept (i.e., diversity in terms of species, genetic and ecosystem), adding more sophistication to the rewilding project by introducing specialised knowledge on ecology. This deployment of specialised ecological knowledge functions as a form of cultural capital, creating a hierarchy of environmental understanding that distinguishes the brand's enlightened elite consumers from the general public. After guiding the audience to recognise that the "rewilded garden" at *klee klee* sharply contrasts with its urban counterparts, with the latter having low biodiversity coefficients, Mr. Guo elaborated on the importance of preserving ecosystem diversity. At this point, he introduced an important concept—"the service value of the ecosystem" ("生态系统的服务价值"), which provides a more authoritative and academic endorsement for the rhetorical strategy of "eco-system as a commodity". The service-ecosystem framework views value as co-created through interactions among service actors, where it emerges from collaborative exchanges rather than being solely generated by individual firms (Vargo et al., 2017). Within the framework, value is viewed as dynamic and context-dependent, involving multiple stakeholders, including customers, firms, and other entities in the broader ecosystem (Vargo et al., 2017). Thus, it is argued that this theory serves as a foundation for promoting sustainable fashion products and other goods labelled as "eco-friendly" or similar. It emphasises that ecosystems deliver services, and everyone benefiting from these services is responsible for participating in value co-creation. Marketing literature supports this perspective. For instance, Frow et al. (2014) argue that adopting a service ecosystem perspective is crucial for marketing strategies, as it underscores the need for firms to engage with all ecosystem actors and acknowledges the key role of customers in co-creating value by influencing the value derived from services.

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郭老师表示一直有一种误区，认为城市里的植物园或者公园的生物多样性系数高，但其实这个系数是衡量自然情况下、基于合理的群落结构来得出的。生物多样性有三个不同的层面，包括物种的多样性、物种遗传的多样性、生态系统的多样性。生态系统的服务功能包括提供氧气、降噪、抗洪、抗台风等作用，如果没有这些功能就意味着人类需要花很多成本去做比如河道清理、堤坝修建、灾民安置，生态系统帮助我们平衡了这个成本，这被称为生态系统的服务价值。根据统计，生态系统每年提供给我们的价值远高于全球的经济生产总值。生态系统的服务功能依赖于结构的健康、完整，那么生态系统的多样性就是前提。虽然城市里有很多园林树种，但它们的结构非常的单一，对城市面对的气候挑战没有很大帮助，通过对生态多样性的恢复，可以更好地持续在未来几十年、几百年保障城市的生态安全。

Mr. Guo said that there has always been a misconception that the biodiversity coefficient of botanical gardens or parks in cities is high. However, this coefficient is calculated based on the richness and evenness of species distributions, serving as an indicator of ecosystem health. He further explained that biodiversity has three different levels: species diversity, genetic diversity, and ecosystem diversity. The service value of the ecosystem includes providing oxygen, reducing noise, and combating floods and typhoons, among others. Without these functions, humans would have to spend significant amounts of money on tasks such as river cleaning, dam construction, and the resettlement of victims from natural disasters. The ecosystem helps us offset these costs, which is referred to as the service value of the ecosystem. According to statistics, the annual service value provided by the ecosystem far exceeds the global GDP. However, this service value depends on the health and integrity of the ecosystem, with biodiversity being a fundamental requirement. Although there are many garden trees in the city, the ecosystem in those areas is quite simple, which hampers the city's ability to confront climate challenges. The restoration of biodiversity will better ensure the ecological security of our city in the coming decades.

Extract 7.9. Field note from Mr. Guo's Talk, WeChat platform, 28 November 2022

In the event, Mr. Guo listed some of the functions ecosystems serve for human activities, then highlighted the substantial economic value of these "service functions" ("服务功能"), pointing out that their annual value exceeds the global GDP. The logic behind this statement is that the ecological environment can be harnessed as a tool to meet specific human needs while offsetting the associated economic costs. The economic value of the ecological environment is further emphasised, with its benefits compared to global GDP, claiming that it surpasses the latter. After laying the groundwork for this important logic, Mr. Guo asserted that the health of the ecological environment determines the value of the services it can provide, highlighting biodiversity as a key component of ecological health. From a critical perspective, this framing represents a profound

neoliberal appropriation of nature, wherein ecological health is made contingent upon its quantifiable "service value". This logic directly facilitates a process of environmental gentrification in the consumer sphere. By attributing a significant economic value to ecosystem services—claiming they "exceed the global GDP"—the discourse justifies establishing exclusive, high-value "green" enclaves.

Mr. Guo then criticised the current urban landscape designs for relying on overly homogenous plant species. This critique of public urban greenery, followed by the promotion of *klee klee*'s private, "superior" alternative, mirrors the dynamics of urban environmental gentrification, where existing green spaces are framed as inadequate to legitimise new, exclusionary developments. By employing words that trigger war-related metaphors such as "confront" (面对), "challenge" (挑战), "ensure" (保障) and "security" (安全), he constructed the concept of "ecological security", framing conventional urban parks and gardens as vulnerabilities in the fight against ecological threats. He concluded that only through the restoration of biodiversity can the "ecological security" of the city be assured. This framing of ecological issues as a matter of security is a powerful rhetorical move. It transforms biodiversity from a shared public good into a private safeguard and an exclusive concern for those who can afford it. The brand positions its rewilded garden not just as an aesthetic choice, but as an important defensive measure in an ongoing ecological crisis, thereby morally justifying its exclusive, premium nature. This process deepens the symbolic and social exclusion inherent in this form of consumer-level environmental gentrification, creating a hierarchy where true "safety" and "responsibility" become privileges of wealth.

Both Yifeng and Mr. Guo highlighted the distinctions between *klee klee*'s "rewilded garden" and conventional urban landscapes, each drawing on their own professional expertise to frame the comparison. Yifeng emphasised the garden's use of native plants and its sustainability design, providing the audience with a deeper understanding of the principles behind rewilding. Mr. Guo, examining the topic from a broader perspective, underscored the economic value of ecosystem services and framed the species uniformity in urban landscapes as a potential "threat", thereby positioning "rewilding" as a necessary solution. Through this expert-led discourse, the stakeholders reframe "ecological preservation" and "natural attributes" as tools for enhancing the brand's commercial value. The term "rewilding" itself functions as a marketing label that justifies premium pricing, assisting consumers in recognising the symbolic value linked to the concept.

However, this creates a profound contradiction central to environmental gentrification: the ecological value of "rewilding" is co-opted to add cultural and economic value to the brand, thereby reinforcing social exclusion. The initiative, while ostensibly for public ecological benefit, effectively "greens" the brand's image for a privileged few, raising its symbolic capital and justifying its premium positioning in a cycle that mirrors the exclusionary outcomes of urban green development.

Since the online participant did not have an opportunity to ask questions during the live streaming, I sent my follow-up questions to the WeChat account of *klee klee* Columbia Circle store. The backend staff forwarded my questions to the relevant personnel in charge of the "Rewilding the City" initiative, and I received a response a few days later. Extract 7.10 is one of the questions I raised. I was particularly interested in the concept of "rural aesthetics" that Yifeng introduced and wanted to know how the brand itself views this aesthetic. I specifically mentioned the keywords "scarcity" and "aesthetic shock" in my question, as these terms were explicitly or implicitly mentioned by Yifeng (see the last few sentences in Extract 7.8).

问题 1： 直播中郭怡妦博士提到了"乡野审美"，这样的 "乡野审美" 在能见度如此高的商业区出现，是否会因为它的稀缺性和带来的冲击感赋予 *klee klee* 上生新所店铺一种价值？

Question 1: During the talk, Dr Yifeng Guo mentioned "rural aesthetics" many times. I am wondering whether the scarcity and aesthetic shock of "rural aesthetics" in a busy commercial area help to create value for *klee klee*'s store and the brand.

回答： 其实最初也只是因为店铺中有小花园以及露台这两个场景，因地制宜，也为了更加契合 *klee klee* 可持续的理念，相较于引进外来的精致景观植物，我们联系了城市荒野，希望种植乡野植物。因为这些不起眼的野花野草，对生态多样性是更有益处的，在养护上也不必太费精神，不需要过多的浇水或施肥。

Answer: Actually, at first, it was only because the shop had a small garden and terrace, so we adapted to the local conditions. In order to better align with *klee klee*'s sustainable concept, rather than introducing delicate non-local landscape plants, we contacted the Forest City Studio and hoped to plant wild plants. These unobtrusive wildflowers and grasses are more beneficial to ecological diversity, and they do not require too much maintenance, such as excessive watering or fertilisation.

Extract 7.10. Follow-up conversation with *klee klee* staff via WeChat messages, 27 February 2023

The reply from *klee klee* did not directly reference the two keywords but instead explained the project's original intent as being "adapted to the local conditions" ("因地制宜"). In other words,

this emphasised that they simply made use of two vacant spaces in the store rather than intentionally launching this project to achieve a particular purpose. This claim of spontaneous, non-commercial intent exemplifies a typical organisational styling (Wee, 2015), where a corporation cultivates an authentic, uncalculated image to make its curated taste appear more natural and less like a deliberate marketing strategy. However, the answer from the brand did note that the project aligns with the brand's sustainable philosophy, making the garden an outward expression of the brand's values. It also mentioned a comparison of aesthetic preferences, contrasting "delicate non-native landscape plants" ("外来的精致景观植物") with "unobtrusive wild flowers and grasses" ("不起眼的野花野草"), and emphasised that *klee klee* chose the latter because they are "more beneficial to ecological diversity" ("对生态环境是更有益处的") and easier to maintain. This explanation not only provides practical reasons for selecting native plants but also links this choice to the brand's core values, highlighting its commitment to the ecological environment. It distinguishes the brand's aesthetic approach from the more conventional designs found in other stores.

When I raised the core question about the value or significance of the "Rewilding the City" initiative for *klee klee*, as is shown in Extract 7.11, the brand's response first pointed out that the plant landscapes in the store are not just for decoration or beautification. They hope that the "rewilded garden" can "better integrate with the surrounding environment and people" ("可以和周围的环境、人，更好的融合") and "grow together" ("大家一起成长"). This response highlights the importance of coexistence and harmony between humans and their environment, aligning with the brand's long-established image of being approachable and in tune with both people and nature. The second sentence of the response introduces a deeper meaning, elevating the significance of the "rewilding" project to another level. It presents the project as providing "friends" ("朋友们") in the city with an opportunity to connect with nature and form a bond with it. Here, nature, or more specifically, the ecological environment, is symbolised by the native plants in the "rewilded garden". This framing is an example of organisational styling that gentrifies the concept of public ecological access. The brand stylises itself as a benevolent provider of a scarce urban resource—authentic nature—thereby justifying its premium status. This creates a micro-level form of environmental gentrification; just as urban greening can make a neighbourhood exclusive, the brand's curated "wild" aesthetic and the cultural capital required to

appreciate it raise the social and economic barriers to participating in this form of "sustainable" community. Within the discourse, this symbolic representation of nature implies a subtle commodification. Its value, while not directly monetary, lies in the symbolic and cultural capital the brand cultivates around itself and its products, reinforcing a cycle of privilege where access to a "green" identity is mediated by consumer choice and brand affiliation.

问题 3： 这个项目对 *klee klee* 来说有什么样的意义或者价值？

Question 3: What is the significance or value of this project for *klee klee*?

回答： 我们希望这个「花园」不仅仅是一处好看的景观，而是可以和周围的环境、人，更好的融合，大家一同成长。同时，我们也希望朋友们在城市里就可以更好的接近自然，虽然店里的小花园空间不大，但从身边的一草一木开始和自然做朋友，好像也是不错的:）

Answer: We hope this "garden" is not just a beautiful landscape but can better integrate with the surrounding environment and people and grow together. At the same time, we hope that friends can better connect with nature in the city. Although the small garden space in the store is not large, it is still a good idea to start making friends with nature from the nearby plants and trees :)

Extract 7.11. Follow-up conversation with *klee klee* staff via WeChat messages, 27 February 2023

Mapping "ecology as a commodity" in the corpus

An initial analysis of the Top 100 keywords from the Popular Science Corpus, including single words and multi-word terms, multi-word terms such as "动物福利" (animal welfare), "纯素时尚" (vegan fashion), "动物源材料" (animal-derived materials), "生物多样性" (biodiversity), "气候变化" (climate change) etc., are related to the rhetorical strategy of "ecology as a commodity". The text producer constructs the natural environment and its protection as valuable assets that can be marketed to consumers. Keyness scores for these terms indicate the salience of environmental considerations in the ongoing development of the fashion industry, with "动物福利" (animal welfare) at a keyness score of 419.34, "纯素时尚" (vegan fashion) at 248.02, "动物源材料" (animal-derived materials) at 158.20, "生物多样性" (biodiversity) at 123.13, "气候变化" (climate change) at 117.41.

To analyse this rhetorical strategy, a close examination of the contextual data associated with these concepts was conducted within the corpus. This section uses the case of "纯素时尚" (vegan fashion) to illustrate the findings. The multi-word term "纯素时尚" (vegan fashion) appears 22

times, ranking 13th on the keyword list. Notably, the term's absence from the reference corpus (zhTenTen17, simplified Chinese) indicates its emerging and highly niche status. This prominence within the specialised corpus justified a subsequent qualitative investigation. Given that it is a multi-word term, a direct analysis of the concordance lines and their original broader context was carried out. The quantitative data for this search term are presented in the table below.

Search Term	Frequency	Relative Frequency (per million tokens)	Keyness Score	Function
"纯素时尚" (vegan fashion)	22	247.02	248.02	Constructing Moderation

Table 7.3 Quantitative data for "纯素时尚" (vegan fashion) in the Popular Science Corpus

Discursive patterns in detail

According to the concordance lines shown in Figure 7.10, the discourse constructs "纯素时尚" (vegan fashion) through a strategic narrative that moves from conceptual grounding to a call for ethical consumption. The narrative is initiated by repeatedly posing and answering the foundational question, "What is 'vegan fashion'?" ("「纯素时尚」是什么?", Lines 1-5), which firmly defines the concept as products made "without using or harming animals" ("在不使用及不伤害动物的情况下") (Lines 4-5). This precise definition serves to establish a clear ethical boundary. The discourse then builds moral urgency by reframing the industry's environmental impact (Line 9) and positioning vegan fashion as the essential corrective. This sense of imperative is ultimately channeled into practical, consumer-oriented guidance, offering tools like a "Consumer Action Guide" ("消费者行动指南") (Line 12) while simultaneously issuing cautions against "fake eco-friendliness" ("假环保") (Line 16). This coherent discursive progression, which leverages definitions from Lines 4-5, crisis framing from Line 9, and consumer guidance from Lines 12-22, effectively transforms an ethical principle into a structured, market-ready lifestyle identity.

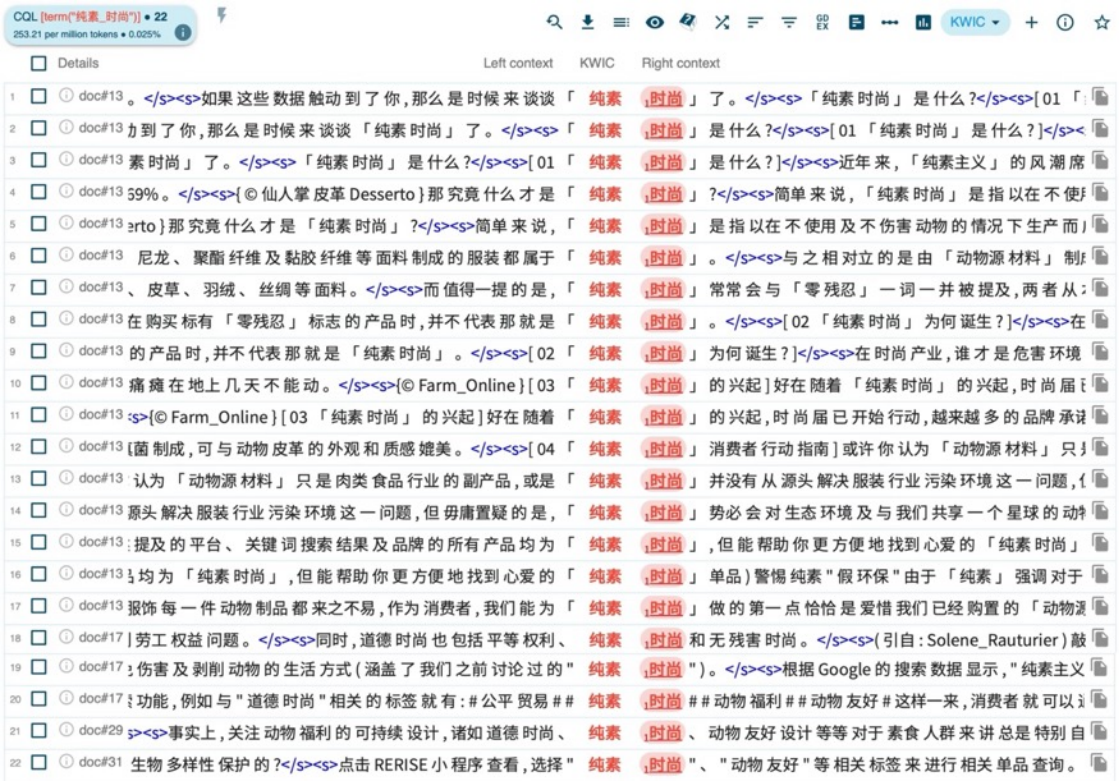

Figure 7.10. Concordance lines for the multi-word term "纯素时尚" (vegan fashion) in the Popular Science Corpus

RISE published one WeChat article (Document 13 as shown in Figure 7.10) under the tag "R.I.S.E. PEDIA" dedicated to introducing the concept of vegan fashion. Extract 7.12 presents the definition of the term provided in that article. This definition is structured to build a comprehensive and ethically rigorous standard. It begins with a simple, accessible explanation, framing vegan fashion as products made "without using or harming animals" ("在不使用及不伤害动物的情况下"). This is then strategically elaborated with greater specificity, explicitly excluding not only obvious animal materials but also "any animal by-products" ("任何动物副产品"), such as glues, dyes, and chemicals derived from animals. This layered definition establishes a clear moral boundary, distinguishing "vegan fashion" as a purer, more ethically consistent category within sustainable fashion. The ultimate goal of "vegan fashion" is articulated as a profound moral imperative: "to end the harm caused to animals by the fashion industry" ("以终结动物因服装行业而受害"). This framing elevates vegan fashion beyond mere a lifestyle consideration, turning it into a morally significant consumer identity and adding symbolic value to products that meet this strict definition.

那 究竟 什么 才 是 「 **纯素 时尚** 」 ？ 简单 来 说 ， 「 **纯素 时尚** 」 是 指 以在 不 使用 及 不 伤害 动物 的 情况 下 生产 而 成 的 衣服 、 鞋子 、 包袋 及 配饰 等 服饰 产品 。 更 确 切 地 说 ， 这些 时尚 产品 不 含有 任何 动物 材料 ， 且 在 整个 生产 的 过程 中 均 未 采用 任何 动物 副产品 （ 包括 从 动物 身上 提取 的 胶水 、 染料 和 化学 物质 等 ） ， 以 终结 动 物 因 服装 行业 而 受害 。

So, what exactly is **"vegan fashion"**? Simply put, **"vegan fashion"** refers to clothing, shoes, bags, and accessories that are produced without using or harming animals. More specifically, these fashion products contain no animal materials and do not involve any animal by-products (including glue, dyes, and chemicals derived from animals) throughout the entire production process, aiming to end the harm caused to animals by the fashion industry.

Extract 7.12. Original context of the multi-word term "纯素时尚" (vegan fashion)

Specifically, Extract 7.13 illustrates how the text discusses the reasons for the emergence of vegan fashion. The text commences by posing a rhetorical question, inviting readers to contemplate which entities within the fashion industry cause the most significant harm to the environment. The text producer utilises the word "culprits" ("杀手") to draw a comparison between environmental damage and criminal acts, thereby stimulating public awareness and reinforcing a sense of moral obligation regarding the matter. Then, an answer is provided, claiming that it is a common view that "cheap and low-quality" ("廉价且低质量") fast fashion or the traditional linear production model in the fashion industry is the main reason for the deterioration of the environment. However, the conclusion reached by the text producer is not the above; instead, it is the incorporation of animal-derived materials in the production process. The text further claims that most consumers remain unaware of this harm due to the "lack of transparency in the supply chain" ("产业链的低透明度"). Then, *RISE* outlines various environmental issues associated with animal-derived materials that many consumers remain unaware of, such as deforestation, loss of arable land, water waste and pollution, and the decline of biodiversity. The severity of those environmental issues is highlighted by the use of statistics. For instance, the text notably points out that the water needed to produce one kilogram of cowhide is equivalent to the amount of water a person would drink over 30 years. This comparison is straightforward, linking personal life with the environment, making it easy for consumers to recognise the harm caused by animal-derived materials. The text producer aims to enhance consumer awareness of sustainability and animal rights, leveraging the rising interest in these issues and presenting them as essential to sustainable fashion. The ecosystem—through its association with veganism, sustainability, and ethical practices—integrates into a broader consumer narrative that sustainable fashion stakeholders

utilise to differentiate themselves from traditional fashion companies, which were critiqued earlier in the text. In this sense, vegan fashion transforms ecological consciousness into a marketable commodity, aligning with the rhetoric of "ecosystem as a commodity", where the ecosystem is commodified not as a direct product but as a branding tool that enhances the perceived value of the business.

[02 「 **纯素 时尚** 」 为何 诞生 ？] 在 时尚 产业 ， 谁 才 是 危害 环境 的 主力 杀手 ？ 可 能 很多 人 会 觉得 是 廉价 且 低 质量 的 快 时尚 ， 或是 行业 「 获取 - 制造 - 弃置 」 （ take- make-dispose ） 的 线性 生产 模式 。然而 ， 新 的 研究 表明 ， 「 动物源 材料 」 制 成 的 纺织品 事实上 是 对 环境 造成 了 最 大 危害 ， 却 常常 由于 产业链 的 低 透明度 而 被 消费者 所 忽视 。… 在 原材料 的 获取 上 ， 商业 农场 需要 大量 的 水 与 土地 资源 来 繁殖 及 饲养 动物 。 以 最为 常 见 的 牛皮 材质 举例 ， 每 一 公斤 的 牛皮 ， 在 原材料 上 就 需要 17,093 升水 ， 这 是 足以 供 一 个 人 饮用 30 年 的 量 ！ 绝大多数 的 「 动物源 材料 」 在 其 纺织品 加工 的 过程 会 使用 大量 的 有毒 化学 物质 ， 以 保证 织物 的 耐久 度 、 染色性 、 柔软度 、 光泽感 以及 抗皱 防污 能力 。 例如 ， 为了 使 羊毛 及 羽绒 等 动物 纤维 易于 染色 ， 在 其 水洗 过程 中 大量 的 有毒 化学 物质 被 使用 。 从 放牧 动物 到 种植 用于 饲养 动物 的 作物 ， 畜牧业 占据 了 全球 80% 的 农业 用地 ， 同时 也 是 森林 砍伐 的 重要 因素 之一 。 在 过去 的 50 年 间 ， 全球 有 17% 的 森林 被 砍伐 ， 用作 养牛 场 的 建设 与 开发 。 这 极大 程度 上 影响 和 减少 了 生物 多样性 ， 导致 世界 各 地 动物 栖息地 和 物种 的 丧失 。

[02 Why Did "Vegan Fashion" Emerge?]

In the fashion industry, who are the main culprits harming the environment? Many might think it is cheap, low-quality fast fashion or the industry's "take-make-dispose" linear production model. However, new research indicates that textiles made from "animal-derived materials" are, in fact, the biggest environmental offenders, often overlooked by consumers due to the lack of transparency in the supply chain. ... In terms of raw material sourcing, commercial farms require large amounts of water and land resources to breed and raise animals. For example, with cowhide, each kilogram of leather requires 17,093 litres of water, enough to supply one person with drinking water for 30 years! The majority of "animal-derived materials" involve the use of harmful chemicals in their textile processing to ensure durability, dyeability, softness, gloss, and resistance to wrinkles and stains. For instance, to make wool and down fibres easier to dye, toxic chemicals are extensively used during their washing process. From grazing animals to growing crops for their feed, livestock farming occupies 80% of global agricultural land and is a major factor in deforestation. Over the past 50 years, 17% of the world's forests have been cleared for cattle ranching. This has significantly impacted and reduced biodiversity, leading to the loss of animal habitats and species worldwide.

Extract 7.13. Original context regarding the emergence of "纯素时尚" (vegan fashion)

Moreover, the value of vegan fashion increases when it is portrayed as an emerging trend. As shown in Extract 7.14, the concept of vegan fashion has gained popularity in the fashion industry. The text producer first notes that major fashion events, such as the London, Amsterdam,

Melbourne, and Helsinki Fashion Weeks, have begun implementing "fur-free" policies, reflecting the growing recognition of this emerging concept. Notably, *RISE* also indicates the traditional fur customs of the Helsinki region. While no further comments on that practice are provided in the text, this mention underscores that anti-fur and vegan fashion represent innovation, a break from tradition, and progressiveness. The emphasis on innovation in vegan fashion is further elaborated as the text introduces how plant-based materials, such as cacti, pineapple, banana leaves, and wine pomace, are utilised in fashion. Once considered waste or by-products, these materials are now redefined as valuable raw materials for fashion products. In other words, the fashion industry commodifies elements of the ecosystem (e.g., plant fibres and agricultural waste) by transforming them into high-end, sustainable products, adding environmental value as part of their market appeal. In the text, innovative materials like cactus leather and wine-pomace-based vegan leather are introduced not only for their functional qualities but also as symbols of a sustainable, eco-conscious lifestyle, where the environmental benefits (e.g., recycling food waste and promoting circular economy) are integrated into the product's value. Also, by emphasising the use of innovative, sustainable, plant-based materials, the fashion industry commodifies environmental protection efforts. The brands mentioned in the text, such as *Veja* and *H&M*, capitalise on the growing demand for eco-friendly products, positioning the health of the ecosystem as a selling point that increases the value of their offerings. By highlighting the environmental credentials of their materials, these brands turn ecological considerations into marketable assets. This approach responds to market demand for "greener" options and further monetises environmental concerns, enabling brands to command premium prices from their elite consumer base.

[03 「 **纯素 时尚** 」 的 兴起] 好在 随着 「 **纯素 时尚** 」 的 兴起 ， 时 尚 届 已 开始 行 动 ， 越来越 多 的 品牌 承诺 以 承担 更 多 环境 及 社会 责任 的 形式 试图 改善 现状 。 在 「 反 皮草 运动 」 的 影响 下 ， 伦敦 、 阿姆斯特丹 和 墨尔本 等 地 的 时装周 已经 实现 了 零 皮草 ， 而 赫尔辛基 时装周 则 更 进 一 步 ， 实现 了 无 皮草 和 无 皮革 的 承诺 。 值得 一 提 的 是 ， 赫尔辛基 所在 地区 已经 有 数千 年 的 皮草 风俗 ， 这 也 是 当地 服装 文化 中 最为 重要 的 基础 部分 之一 。…开始 「 吃素 」 了 的 时尚 届 将 仙人掌 、 菠萝 、 香 蕉叶 、 蘑菇 、 树叶 、 苹果 等 植物 基 原材料 制成 了 面料 ， 更为 环保 的 生产 过程 大大 地 提升 了 其 可持续性 。 比如 不 需要 水 就 能 生长 的 仙人掌 ， 其 叶子 可 被 用来 制作 纯素 皮革 ， 植物 的 其余 部分 完好无损 ， 整个 过程 对 环境 的 负面 影响 很 小 。 环保 生 产 此 类 面料 的 还 能 一定 程度 上 再次 利用 食品 行业 的 废弃 材料 ， 促进 循环 经济。例 如 法国 球鞋 品牌 VEJA 推出 了 由 玉米 工业 废料 制成 的 、 可 生物 降解 的 「 纯素 」 小 白 鞋 Urca ； H&M 在 其 Conscious Collection 中 使用 以 意大利 葡萄 酒渣 制成 的 纯素 皮革 Vegea ， 一 种 用 废弃 葡萄皮 及茎 制成 的 创新 「 纯素 」 皮革。

[03 The Rise of "Vegan Fashion"]

Fortunately, with the rise of "**vegan fashion**", the fashion industry has started to take action. More and more brands are committing to taking on greater environmental and social responsibility in an effort to improve the current situation. Under the influence of the "anti-fur movement," fashion weeks in cities like London, Amsterdam, and Melbourne have already achieved fur-free status, and Helsinki Fashion Week has gone a step further by making a commitment to being both fur-free and leather-free. It is noteworthy that the region of Helsinki has had a long history of fur culture, which has been one of the most important aspects of the local fashion heritage. The fashion industry, now "going vegan", has begun to use plant-based materials such as cactus, pineapple, banana leaves, mushrooms, tree leaves, and apples to create fabrics. The more environmentally friendly production processes significantly enhance their sustainability. For instance, the cactus, which requires no water to grow, has its leaves used to make vegan leather, while the rest of the plant remains intact. The entire process has minimal negative environmental impact. The eco-friendly production of such materials also allows for the reuse of waste materials from the food industry, promoting a circular economy. For example, the French sneaker brand VEJA launched "vegan" sneakers "Urca", made from industrial corn waste, which are biodegradable; H&M uses Vegea, a vegan leather made from Italian wine pomace, a type of innovative vegan leather created from discarded grape skins and stems, in its Conscious Collection.

Extract 7.14.Original context regarding the development of "纯素时尚" (vegan fashion)

While the text presents vegan fashion as a progressive ethical alternative, a critical perspective uncovers its role as a form of "green distinction". The discourse meticulously constructs a new moral hierarchy within consumption. By first dismissing the "common view" that fast fashion is the primary culprit and instead pinpointing animal-derived materials as the true "culprit", the text does not challenge consumerism but redirects it. It replaces one set of commodities with another, more exclusive set, framed as ethically pure. This strategic shift effectively obscures the fact that

overproduction and consumption, the core drivers of environmental degradation, remain largely unchallenged. Furthermore, the celebration of innovative plant-based materials, while highlighting tangible ecological benefits, exemplifies the commodification of circular economy logic. The transformation of agricultural waste into luxury goods is a powerful narrative, but it remains firmly embedded in a growth-oriented capitalist framework. The "environmental value" added is, in practice, a form of symbolic capital that increases exchange value for elite consumers. This process represents a sophisticated form of organisational styling, where brands like *H&M* can assimilate a radical critique of the industry—the move away from animal exploitation and linear waste—and repackage it as a new, premium product line. Thus, the discourse of vegan fashion, for all its ethical merits, mainly serves to consolidate a market for sustainable luxury, allowing consumer capitalism to absorb and profit from ethical concerns without requiring a fundamental systemic change.

Connecting field and text

Therefore, the ethnographic case of *klee klee* and the corpus data on vegan fashion collectively illustrate the operationalisation of the "ecology as a commodity" strategy, revealing a consistent process of turning ecological principles into economic and cultural worth. The ethnographic data illuminates the spatial and experiential enactment of this strategy: *klee klee*'s "rewilded garden" and the accompanying expert discourse, which frames ecosystem health through the neoliberal logic of "service value", create a micro-scale site of environmental gentrification. This spatial strategy uses ecological authenticity and an "aesthetic shock" to elevate the brand's status and justify its premium positioning. Similarly, the corpus data reveals the discursive and lexical mechanisms of commodification: the meticulous definition of "vegan fashion", the strategic framing of animal-derived materials as the primary "culprit", and the celebration of innovative plant-based materials all contribute to shaping a new, exclusive market niche. The comparison reveals a key difference in their strategies of persuasion: the ethnographic case operates through an immersive, material-aesthetic experience naturalises the brand's claim to ecological expertise, while the corpus data employs a more direct, instructional discourse that explicitly defines ethical boundaries and guides consumer choice. Despite the difference in medium, both datasets lead to the same conclusion: the appropriation of ecological critique. They portray systemic environmental issues as challenges that can be addressed through selective consumption,

redirecting ethical concerns into a market-driven approach that reinforces social distinctions and ultimately supports, rather than challenges, the consumerist system.

7.4 Summary

In this chapter, I examine how stakeholders in Shanghai's high-end sustainable fashion industry construct and circulate aesthetic taste and consumer philosophy through the discourse of moderation. Focusing on the fashion brand *klee klee*, consulting firms *RISE* and *Green Initiative*, and the second-hand platform *Déjà Vu*, it shows how these organisations promote consumer minimalism and green consumption to create social distinction for elite customers. Through discursive construction that combines linguistic and semiotic resources, businesses attract eco-conscious consumers by emphasising exclusivity, quality, and sustainability in their brand campaigns. This might lead to environmental gentrification, as eco-friendly initiatives increase the appeal of retail spaces and elevate the value of the products offered in stores. Employing a mixed-methods approach that combines multi-sited ethnography with corpus-assisted discourse study, I identify three prominent rhetorical strategies in the discourse of moderation: (i) Simplicity as a taste, (ii) Eco-consumption as a virtue, and (iii) Ecology as a commodity. These strategies add value to products and services by turning their consumption into a marker of social identity for the targeted elite customers. Ultimately, a minimalist aesthetic is constructed that reflects the class tastes of elite consumers. In developing and promoting this aesthetic, text producers associate it with the prevailing environmentalist narrative and ethical responsibility, establishing this connection as a fundamental aspect of the brand's values and business philosophy.

Simplicity as a taste: This rhetorical strategy promotes a minimalist approach to consumption, emphasising quality over quantity. Businesses that adopt this philosophy position themselves as taste producers, encouraging consumers to embrace a lifestyle centred on reduced consumption and the careful selection of high-quality, durable products. This approach strategically frames minimalism not just as an aesthetic but as a signifier of intellectual and ethical refinement, thereby legitimising elite consumption patterns as virtuous choices. "Simplicity as a taste" critiques overconsumption and material excess, advocating for a refined, ethical lifestyle that aligns with sustainable fashion. The ethnographic investigation demonstrates how this rhetorical strategy is conveyed in organisational styling within strategic marketing, product design, and retail environments. It captures the performative enactment of this identity, where exclusive forums and

participant narratives contrast "conscious" choice with the "irresponsibility" of mainstream consumption. In this sense, this strategy is framed as a marker of cultural capital that distinguishes the targeted elite consumers from those engaged in mass-market consumption. Consumers who embrace minimalist principles and prioritise timeless, eco-friendly products are depicted as sophisticated and environmentally conscious. According to the findings of corpus-assisted analysis, a contrast is established between "slow fashion", which is linked to sustainability and ethics, and "fast fashion", which is criticised for its mass production, low quality, and environmental damage. This is quantified in the corpus by a clear moral binary, where "慢时尚" (slow fashion) is lexically linked to "awakening" and "durability", while "快时尚" (fast fashion) is associated with "disposal" and "vanity". Through interviews and marketing materials from organisations such as *Green Initiative* and *RISE*, the analysis highlights how minimalist fashion choices are discursively constructed as rational, self-restrained, and socially distinctive. Together, the datasets show a division of labour: ethnography reveals the curated experience of simplicity in exclusive settings, while the corpus reveals the systematic discursive patterns that uphold it. Consequently, this strategy operates as a powerful mechanism of social distinction, converting privilege into perceived virtue and obscuring the material barriers to participation, thus reinforcing social hierarchies under the guise of a universal ethical ideal.

Eco-consumption as a virtue: This strategy positions environmentally conscious purchasing as a morally superior act, linking consumer choices to ethical responsibility. This approach encourages consumers to see their buying decisions as reflections of their values and social identity, with brands acting as facilitators of virtuous consumption. By aligning products with consumers' ethical beliefs, businesses foster brand loyalty while promoting sustainable alternatives. Multi-sited ethnography reveals how *Déjà Vu* utilises statistics and symbolic visuals to critique the environmental harm of fast fashion and advocate for second-hand clothing, presenting itself as a key stakeholder in the circular economy. The ethnographic analysis highlights the material enactment of the strategy, showing how the store functions as a coherent "material whole" that immerses customers in an environment where consumption feels virtuous. The store's layout and messaging suggest that purchasing second-hand items offers moral and social benefits, making it a distinctive choice for consumers. This strategy also resonates with consumers' sense of moral satisfaction, rendering sustainable choices as contributions to a noble cause. By contrasting the negative impacts of mass production with the benefits of eco-friendly practices, the brand positions

its offerings as not just sustainable but also socially and morally responsible. Meanwhile, corpus findings indicate that the use of terms like "ethical fashion", "moral anxiety", and "ethical consumption" helps drive the message, motivating consumers to shift toward more conscious purchasing habits. This reveals the discursive mechanism of this strategy, which individualises responsibility and guides ethical impulses toward market-based solutions. However, brands remain mindful not to induce too much guilt or anxiety, which could discourage purchases. Instead, the strategy aims to maintain a sense of autonomy for consumers while encouraging consumption that aligns with progressive values, reinforcing social distinction and cultural capital among wealthier, eco-conscious consumers. While the ethnography relies on a spatially immersive persuasion and the corpus data on a more direct, lexical one, both ultimately achieve the same depoliticising effect: commodifying critique into a reaffirmation of consumer identity.

Ecology as a commodity: This rhetorical strategy treats the ecosystem as a product that can be quantified in terms of both value and cost. Businesses in the sustainable fashion sector adopt this approach by promoting eco-friendly products and environmental initiatives, linking ecological preservation to the creation of commercial value. Through offline and online branding, these companies connect ecological preservation with value creation, targeting elite customers who share their commitment to sustainability. A comparison shows the ethnographic case operates through an immersive, material-aesthetic experience, while the corpus uses a direct, instructional discourse. Despite this difference, both appropriate ecological critique, portraying systemic issues as solvable through selective consumption and redirecting ethical concerns into a market logic that reinforces the consumerist system. From multi-sited ethnography, the rhetorical strategy is illustrated by *klee klee*'s use of a "rewilded garden" to contrast with conventional urban landscapes, positioning the garden as a distinctive feature that adds commercial value while appealing to eco-conscious consumers. The ethnographic data shows this creates a micro-scale site of environmental gentrification, using ecological authenticity and an "aesthetic shock" to elevate the brand's status. Experts were invited to explain how the garden contributes to urban biodiversity and addresses ecological challenges. They present the health of ecosystems as integral to economic value, often framing it through a neoliberal logic of "service value", arguing that biodiversity improves urban spaces. This strategy links environmental conservation to business success, utilising the ecosystem as a means to justify premium pricing for sustainable products. From the corpus-assisted discourse analysis, the strategy extends to concepts such as vegan fashion, where plant-based materials are

marketed as sustainable alternatives to animal-derived textiles. Once considered waste, these materials are now redefined as valuable resources, turning the ecosystem into a marketable asset. Businesses capitalise on the demand for eco-conscious fashion by adopting sustainable materials, thereby enhancing their appeal and justifying higher prices. In doing so, they commodify environmental protection, catering to elite consumers' preference for sustainable goods.

Chapter 8 Conclusion: Localising global elitism within Shanghai's sustainable fashion industry

In the final chapter of *Elite Authenticity: Remaking Distinction in Food Discourse*, Mapes (2021) examines the widespread elite authenticity and globalised consumerism by presenting multimodal examples of food discourse from around the world. Integrating Blommaert's (2018) discussion on "communities of knowledge", she argues that enduring social inequality, coupled with the simultaneous denial or acceptance of eliteness by "ordinary" consumers, is a common feature of the so-called 'light' and 'thick' communities in which many individuals exist, engage, and socialise. Blommaert (2018) notes that "thick" groups, characterised by strong ties and regular interactions (such as the church or state), can be central to some sociolinguistic studies, but he suggests the need for a greater focus on what he refers to as "light" communities. Referencing Goffman (1971), Blommaert describes light communities as sharing "brief moments of tight but temporary and ephemeral groupness" and should be studied "as a way to arrive at insights into fundamental social procedures such as socialisation and identity development" (Blommaert, 2018, pp. 65-66). In that sense, Mapes (2021) suggests that light communities are ubiquitous, comprising individuals who may never physically interact or experience a sense of 'groupness', yet they may share a worldview, general demographics, and/or a particular type of consumer behaviour. These groups are interconnected both translocally and transnationally—that is, across different local settings and national borders—through shared practices and values, often facilitated by digital networks. Focusing on elite authenticity in food discourse, she argues that its dissemination across diverse global contexts is shaped considerably by the mediated, digital, and online components of contemporary Western society (Mapes, 2021).

Although my project analyses elite discourse from a different perspective, the findings from my investigation also suggest alignment with Mapes's insights. In the current study, customers and businesses that collaboratively create the concept and value of sustainable fashion through offline commercial events and online social media interactions also seem to form a light community. Consider *Norlha* from this project as an example. Founded on the Tibetan Plateau, it has successfully integrated into the global luxury market, supplying raw materials to European high-end brands while establishing a stable domestic customer base in wealthier regions like Shanghai through strategic partnerships with local sustainable brands. Its expansion highlights the influence

of global trade, technological advancements, and the rise of social media in shaping contemporary luxury and sustainability-driven consumer markets. More importantly, it illustrates how these forces contribute to the establishment of a light community bound by shared values. In this community, individuals express their identities through the social distinctions signalled by their fashion choices. As Mapes (2021) points out, members of a light community are regularly schooled in consumerist practices by actively engaging with their communities that encourage and expect such behaviours. Moreover, in their analysis of "permeable geographies", Thurlow and Jaworski (2017b, p. 536) emphasise that globalisation allows the diffusion of elite status through ordinary interactions with diverse people, places, and objects. As individuals navigate global spaces, the rhetoric of privilege seamlessly integrates into daily exchanges, reflecting how transnational networks subtly maintain and reinforce social hierarchies.

Having said that, this project aims not to definitively clarify the socioeconomic effects of globalisation on social class and cultural dynamics. Instead, I attempt to illustrate how elite consumer behaviours, values, and aesthetics—often originating from Western global markets—are adapted, reshaped, and integrated into Shanghai's unique socio-economic and cultural landscape. In this context, the localisation of global elitism underscores how global elite consumption patterns—especially those linked to sustainability, exclusivity, and authenticity—are reinterpreted to align with local class dynamics, economic structures, and cultural narratives. In what follows, I offer a detailed project summary, concentrating on the main findings from the previous three findings chapters. It underscores the interplay between global influences and the localised dimensions of the discourses derived from my data.

8.1 Summary of interpretation

This project investigated the discursive value creation of high-end sustainable fashion in Shanghai, where the global trend of sustainable fashion—emphasising ethical consumption, environmental awareness, and minimalist aesthetics—is being localised with a focus on class distinction and cultural capital within the city's post-reform landscape. Throughout the project, I have argued that in Shanghai's fashion industry, the concepts such as environmental activism and ethical labour are woven into a broader discourse of elite self-styling and social positioning. Consumers engage with sustainable fashion not just as an environmental choice but as a marker of status, taste, and cultural refinement.

The thesis built on a range of sociological and linguistic theories, particularly drawing on Bourdieu's (1984) sociological framework to argue that aesthetic judgment is deeply influenced by socioeconomic background, with taste functioning as a marker of social distinction. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* highlights how ingrained dispositions, shaped by upbringing and education, inform individual preferences, including those related to sustainable consumption. Within this context, I explored how green consumption serves as a status symbol (Elliott, 2013), aligning with the notion of the cultural omnivore (Peterson & Kern, 1996), wherein elite consumers adopt diverse tastes that blur traditional class boundaries. Also, I examined the interaction between language, materiality, and social hierarchies, drawing on Williams (1977) and Bourdieu (1977b) to argue that language both reflects and reinforces class distinctions. Shankar and Cavanaugh's (2012) theory of language materiality provides insight into how linguistic practices shape economic and social realities, particularly in the context of global and technological shifts, such as the rise of social media marketing, the digital circulation of sustainability discourses, and the global spread of elite consumption. Additionally, the works of Miller (1998, 2005) and Barthes (1990 [1967]) inform the discussion of fashion as both a material object and a system of signs. Barthes' semiological analysis highlights fashion's role as a discursive force, where the language surrounding clothing enhances its symbolic value and consumer appeal. This perspective underscores how fashion employs language to construct meaning, shape identity, and reinforce cultural norms within capitalist systems. The central argument of this thesis is that the value of high-end sustainable fashion is rooted in distinction, leveraging an image of sustainable, ethical, and authentic production while distancing itself from industrialised, exploitative, and delocalised manufacturing. Throughout the project, I have observed that in contemporary China, the intersection of language and consumption is central to class identity, especially among the urban elite, where fashion branding employs linguistic strategies to enhance product desirability and reinforce exclusivity.

Chapter 2 situated sustainable fashion consumption within Shanghai's post-socialist/neoliberal-oriented framework, examining how urban restructuring and economic reforms have shaped consumer behaviour. Following the Reform and Opening-Up, Shanghai has emerged as a key site for neoliberal-oriented policy experimentation, including local entrepreneurship (Wang, 2011), public sector privatisation (Buck, 2007), housing commodification (Pow, 2009), and property-driven development programmes (Wu, 1999). These transformations have been instrumental in

promoting the city's image as a desirable place to live, work, and invest, further reinforcing market-driven economic expansion. In this context, urban spaces serve a dual function, facilitating economic growth and shaping consumption patterns for the affluent. Keil (2002) describes urban neoliberalism as an extensive re-regulation process that reshapes everyday urban life, resulting in changes to urban identities, social conflicts, and class ideologies. Consequently, Shanghai's urban landscape has experienced significant neoliberal transformations, affecting both its physical environment and the lived experiences of its residents. Within this evolving urban framework, China's official discourse promotes the idea of a "harmonious middle class", where consumption and lifestyle serve as key identity markers (Goodman, 2014). This reflects broader economic shifts towards consumption-led growth, particularly in Shanghai, where the transition from a production-based economy to a consumption-driven one is evident (Cartier, 2013). Drawing on Thompson (1978) and Bourdieu (1984), this project viewed class as dynamic rather than fixed, shaped by cultural practices and consumption habits. The sustainable fashion sector in Shanghai serves as a compelling case study to explore these dynamics, illustrating how consumption and cultural capital reinforce elite status. This reflects the global shift from Fordism to post-Fordism, where economic growth prioritises creativity and knowledge over industrial production (Leslie and Rantisi, 2012). China's embrace of the creative economy aligns with this trend, emphasising symbolic production and cultural industries as drivers of urban renewal (Potts, 2010; Hartley & Montgomery, 2009; Keane, 2007). The concept of a creative city highlights the significance of cultural diversity and urban branding for economic competitiveness (Zhong, 2013). Shanghai has embraced this approach in its urban regeneration by emphasising the creative economy, particularly in fashion and design (He, 2019; Gu, 2020). The city has seen significant growth in high-end, eco-conscious fashion, driven by a rising awareness of environmental issues (Zhang & Lang, 2018). Nonetheless, this project showed that promoting sustainability in fashion goes beyond environmental issues; it is an aesthetic choice linked to ideology and social influences. This tendency reinforces taste hierarchies, with sustainability seen more as a symbol of distinction than as a practice accessible to all.

The findings reported in Chapter 5, 6 and 7 illustrated how the added value of sustainable fashion products is constructed discursively through distinction, encompassing three major discourses: Authenticity, Trust, and Moderation. In short, "authenticity" pertains to the depiction of the production process or the crafting of the product; "trust" alludes to the stakeholder's

engagement within communities of like-minded consumers and producers; and "moderation" signifies self-restraint and a preference for simplistic aesthetics in consumption and consumer taste. For each discourse, various rhetorical strategies were identified, manifesting in complex and interconnected ways, as shown by the ethnographic and corpus data. In the findings chapters, I elucidated how these rhetorical strategies facilitate the creation of discursive value and the localisation of global elitism within Shanghai's sustainable fashion industry. The discourse analysis of the data uncovered the complex ways global sustainability trends are adapted, reinterpreted, and integrated into local class structures in Shanghai. Sustainable fashion becomes a tool for elite distinction, cultural capital, and status performance.

In Chapter 5, I started by elaborating on each of the six rhetorical strategies in turn, showcasing the various discursive tactics used in promotional materials, including semiotic choices, presupposition, and overlexicalisation. The materials comprise online articles, photographs, videos published on stakeholders' WeChat accounts and official websites, as well as other corporate communications such as semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and textual information printed on products or displayed in stores, all of which I recorded during my ethnography. As authenticity has become a commodity in late capitalism (Heller, 2013), it is also localised within the sustainable fashion discourse in Shanghai. Authenticity in this context is not merely about eco-conscious materials or ethical production; it is strategically employed as a branding tool to associate sustainable fashion with exclusivity and elite identity. Sustainable fashion brands in Shanghai utilise concepts such as heritage craftsmanship, local sourcing, and "slow fashion" to enhance their authenticity. However, this authenticity is curated for a wealthy consumer base that perceives sustainability more as a refined lifestyle choice than an environmental initiative. This aligns with Appadurai's (1986) view that demand can be socially regulated. In Shanghai, sustainable fashion brands construct demand by associating their products with both global sustainability ideals and local cultural narratives of sophisticated modernity and taste. The ability to engage with "authentic" sustainable consumption thus becomes another way for elites to distinguish themselves. Below are the core ideas of the six rhetorical strategies identified within the discourse of authenticity in sustainable fashion branding.

- **High quality:** Emphasising craftsmanship and rarity. This strategy signals exclusivity, with quality prioritised over sustainability. Also, gendered marketing targets female caregivers, reinforcing accessibility inequalities.

- **Uniqueness:** Differentiating products through personal taste and cultural value. This strategy often incorporates ethnic aesthetics to create exclusivity and attract high-end consumers.
- **Locality:** Enhancing authenticity through ethical sourcing and corporate social responsibility. This strategy uses raw material origins to shape an idealised discourse of sustainability.
- **Authorisation:** Establishing credibility through expert endorsements, media recognition, and prestigious brand associations, this strategy focuses on consumer validation.
- **Historicity:** Highlighting tradition and timelessness. This strategy distinguishes elite consumers while risking the neglect of social issues and the perpetuation of class divisions.
- **Naturalness:** Conveying authenticity through natural materials and production methods. This strategy selectively represents sustainability by obscuring dependence on technology occasionally, establishing a conceptual distinction between natural and synthetic products.

In Chapter 6, I examined the training initiatives organised by stakeholders—such as lectures, exhibitions, and workshops—that promote sustainable consumption and cultivate a like-minded community among the elite target audience. With a multi-sited ethnography and corpus-assisted discourse study of stakeholders' social media articles concerning event communication, a key theme is the discourse of trust in this context. Giddens, in *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990), contends that in modern societies, *trust* is increasingly situated in abstract systems and expert knowledge rather than in personal relationships. As traditional sources of trust diminish, individuals rely more on institutions, brands, and expert narratives to navigate complex global markets. This dynamic is evident in the realm of sustainable fashion branding, where trust is built through corporate social responsibility (CSR) as well as endorsements from influencers and experts. High-end sustainable fashion brands in Shanghai utilise transparency rhetoric and knowledge-based branding to position themselves as ethical and credible, catering to elite consumers who seek moral validation in their purchasing decisions. Informal learning (Ala-Mutka et al., 2009; Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Bayne et al., 2009) plays a crucial role here, serving as both a tool for corporate branding and a gateway into the global neoliberal "knowledge-led" and "discourse-led" economy (Fairclough, 2002, p. 164). Using synthetic personalisation (Fairclough, 1989), brands create intimate consumer communities, blending marketing with personal engagement. However, this trust is selective and exclusive. The data analysis demonstrated that

environmental awareness is frequently framed as a privileged experience, predominantly accessible to individuals with the resources and education necessary to engage. Giddens (1990, p. 92) further emphasises the role of trust in maintaining ontological security—a stable sense of self-identity grounded in the perceived continuity and reliability of one's social and material environment—as individuals seek stability in an uncertain world. By embedding sustainability within high-status consumerism, brands offer elite consumers a sense of ethical reassurance, simultaneously reinforcing class-based distinctions. The key ideas regarding the four rhetorical strategies identified within the discourse of trust are outlined below.

- **Showcasing traceability and transparency**: Fostering consumer trust and positioning brands as ethically responsible. This strategy appeals to elite consumers who value transparency, positioning it as a marketing tool that justifies premium prices and aligns with CSR practices while emphasising the role of corporations in governance alongside the nation.
- **Leveraging the power of knowledge:** Integrating complex ecological concepts into the brand communications and using educational events to add value and sophistication to the products. This strategy caters to elite consumers by aligning with their ethical values and reinforcing the brand's legitimacy, while subtly emphasising socio-economic divisions through exclusive access to environmental experiences.
- **Advocating eco-altruism:** Promoting sustainability as a personalised, skill-driven lifestyle that appeals to affluent consumers and connecting eco-friendly behaviours with moral responsibility. This strategy presents sustainable living as a personal and aesthetic choice, reinforcing class distinctions and limiting accessibility for less affluent consumers. It also fosters moral engagement in sustainability without imposing direct pressure, thereby rendering such engagement appear effortless.
- **Managing a fan base and fostering close customer ties**: Cultivating loyalty and enhancing brand appeal through informal communication and emphasising shared values. This strategy involves organising events and adopting a conversational tone in social media and other corporate communications. Brands foster a sense of community, softening blatant marketing while strengthening consumer relationships by merging personal interaction with ethical branding, reinforcing their sustainable identity.

Chapter 7 further investigated the discourse of moderation, concentrating on ethnographic and corpus linguistic data regarding aesthetic taste and consumer philosophy within Shanghai's high-end sustainable fashion industry. This discourse reflects the localisation of global elitism, where sustainability, minimalism, and ethical consumption are reinterpreted as markers of elite status. Moderation connects closely with Weber's (2005) notion of "worldly asceticism", portraying self-restraint in material consumption as a moral and social virtue. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber describes "worldly asceticism" as a disciplined form of consumption in which individuals renounce immediate gratification, avoid material excess, and reinvest their wealth in ways that demonstrate moral and rational self-control (2005). He asserts that "wealth is thus bad ethically only in so far as it is a temptation to idleness and sinful enjoyment of life" (Weber, 2005, p. 108). In Shanghai's sustainable fashion industry, businesses portray their consumers as responsible, enlightened individuals who make ethical purchasing decisions, in contrast to fast fashion consumers, who are depicted as wasteful and impulsive. By promoting concepts such as consumer minimalism (Elgin & Mitchell, 1977; Pangarkar et al., 2021; Rich et al., 2020) and green consumption (Connolly & Prothero, 2008; Carrier, 2010; Fridell, 2007) in stakeholder's corporate communications, elite consumers are encouraged to reject excessive materialism in favour of a minimalist, high-quality wardrobe that conveys moral superiority and sophisticated taste. This reflects Weber's argument that self-discipline in economics legitimises social hierarchy (2005). He posits that the disciplined, methodical lifestyle promoted by Protestant ethics encouraged individuals to engage in systematic work and rational economic activities, facilitating wealth accumulation. Over time, these religiously motivated behaviours transformed into secular practices, where pursuing wealth became justified as an end in itself, independent of its original religious context (Weber, 2005). This shift illustrates how religious asceticism enabled a secular ethos that legitimises wealth. Likewise, businesses in Shanghai's sustainable fashion industry turn ethical self-discipline and rational consumption into a privilege for the affluent, where only the elite can afford to consume less yet better, thereby reinforcing their cultural and economic dominance. Rather than advocating for accessible environmental practices, the discourse of moderation in this context serves more as a privileged aesthetic and ethical ideal through three rhetorical strategies, the key points of which are summarised as follows:

- **Simplicity as a taste**: Promoting minimalism and emphasising quality over quantity. This strategy critiques overconsumption and positions consumers prioritising durable, eco-

friendly products as sophisticated and ethically conscious. Marketers target the elite, presenting minimalist choices as symbols of cultural capital and social distinction.

- **Eco-Consumption as a virtue**: Framing environmentally conscious purchasing as a moral obligation, thus encouraging consumers to align their buying choices with ethical values. By using statistics and visuals, brands highlight the harm of fast fashion while promoting eco-consumption as both ethical and socially rewarding. Through strategic language, companies encourage sustainability without inducing excessive guilt, reinforcing eco-conscious consumers' cultural capital.
- **Ecology as a commodity**: Treating ecological preservation as a marketable asset and linking sustainable practices to commercial value. Brands promote environmentally friendly products and initiatives to attract affluent consumers, justifying the higher prices with ecological worth. Ecological preservation, therefore, has become a profitable commodity, capitalising on the demand for sustainable goods.

Overall, the findings across the three chapters illustrated how Shanghai's high-end sustainable fashion industry strategically employs corporate communications to highlight product authenticity, fostering trust and exclusivity with elite consumers. Moreover, by presenting moderation as a form of aesthetic taste linked to social class, these businesses foster ideological and value-driven connections within corporate-consumer relationships. In this process, organisational styling (Wee, 2015) plays a crucial role as businesses define their brand positioning by enhancing symbolic capital and cultivating what Wee (2015) refers to as an "organisational culture". Similar to Bourdieu's (1984) concept of habitus, organisational culture is shaped and reinforced through repetitive actions and discourses that construct brand identity, promote specific values and norms, and establish differentiation in competitive markets (Wee, 2015). Beyond responding to existing consumer demand, the organisational styling actively shapes new market expectations, reinforcing social class distinction through purchasing behaviours and fashion choices. As social hierarchies transform, brands create new forms of distinction, using discourse to legitimise emerging social divisions. Language and symbols serve as powerful instruments in this process, allowing businesses to create a consumer culture that is both aspirational—framing sustainability as the ideal goal—and exclusive—establishing social distinction as its ultimate realisation. This aligns with my previous discussions on how high-end sustainable fashion in Shanghai emerges within the broader global landscape of late capitalism, where economy is increasingly knowledge-based

and discourse-driven (Fairclough, 2002). As part of the cultural and creative sector, the fashion industry has become a key driver of economic growth, where new product concepts, aesthetic preferences, and consumer ideologies must be constructed and disseminated through discourse to establish distinct market positions and reinforce privilege.

8.2 Localising global elitism

"The advent of modernity increasingly tears space away from place by fostering relations between "absent" others, locationally distant from any given situation of face-to-face interaction. In conditions of modernity, place becomes increasingly phantasmagoric: that is to say, locales are thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them" (Giddens, 1990, p. 18).

Giddens' concept of phantasmagoric place—where local spaces are shaped by distant economic and cultural forces—provides a critical lens for understanding Shanghai's sustainable fashion industry. His argument that modernity disrupts the traditional linkage between space and place through disembedding mechanisms and time-space distanciation (Giddens, 1990, p. 18) helps explain how Shanghai's sustainability movement in local fashion industry is deeply enmeshed in global flows of capital, ideology, and aesthetics. The city's economic reforms and deepening globalisation have reshaped its business landscape and social demographics, leading to the rise of an elite consumer class that actively engages with sustainability as a fashionable, status-enhancing practice. The development of Shanghai's sustainable fashion industry is not merely a local phenomenon but is shaped by global sustainability discourses largely originating from Western markets. Due to its deepening marketisation and robust economic power, Shanghai has become a key site for localising sustainability discourses in China. The city is a hub where global ideas are adapted to the emerging elite consumption patterns. However, these discourses, driven by the elite, do not necessarily reflect the broader socioeconomic realities of China. While many among the urban middle- and upper-middle classes appear to embrace sustainable fashion as part of a global aesthetic and ethical lifestyle, other social groups—including workers in mass production, rural communities, and lower-income urban populations—often remain relatively excluded from these practices, both economically and ideologically (for a critique of how dominant sustainable fashion discourse perpetuates systemic injustices by moralising and regulating the consumption habits of the poor, see Von Busch, 2022; for a nuanced analysis of how social class identity shapes green consumption, see Yan et al., 2021). Thus, sustainable fashion in Shanghai mirrors global elitism

and deepens internal inequalities within China, as ethical consumption becomes a privilege for those in cosmopolitan spaces, reinforcing class divisions.

As highlighted throughout this thesis, inequality is not only material but also discursively constructed through ideologies and cultural practices embedded in class performance. Following Thurlow and Jaworski's (2012) argument that social research should focus on both the recipients and the beneficiaries of inequality, this analysis scrutinises the discourse producers of elitism—those who create and reinforce class hierarchies—rather than solely focusing on the victims of inequality (p. 490). Thurlow and Jaworski (2017c) further argue that elitism is not simply about material wealth but is actively performed through social choices and symbolic distinctions. The data analysis shows that the rhetorical strategies used in Shanghai's sustainable fashion industry do more than simply promote products; they enable consumers to embrace an elitist narrative, reinforcing their social status through purchasing behaviours and lifestyle performances. Through the discourses of authenticity, trust, and moderation, both brands and individuals claim elite status by positioning sustainability as an exclusive lifestyle choice. These discourses obscure social inequality, echoing Zukin and Maguire (2004), who underscore that green consumption can transform environmentalism into a marketing strategy, where sustainability is utilised to promote products rather than fostering systemic change, ultimately framing social justice as a matter of consumer choice instead of addressing more profound structural inequalities. The performance of elitism through consumption choices plays a fundamental role in maintaining social distinction, as sustainable fashion is framed not as a universal responsibility but rather as a refined, high-status identity marker.

In exemplifying the rhetorical strategy of leveraging the power of knowledge in Chapter 6, I quoted a statement from Margaret Zhang, Vogue China's youngest-ever editor-in-chief, from a WeChat article published by *RISE* in March 2021. The analysis indicates that environmental awareness is framed as a privileged experience, primarily accessible to those possessing the financial and educational resources necessary to participate in sustainability discourses. Here, I reiterate this case because Zhang's emphasis on exclusive access to nature—such as scuba diving—as a way of developing "authentic" environmental consciousness illustrates how sustainability discourses align with elite cultural practices. According to the article, Zhang describes the general public's understanding of sustainability as limited to "false political activities" and "commercial buzzwords in mom circles". Although this may appear to critique the

politicisation and commercialisation of environmental protection, I argue that her underlying logic reproduces the very rhetorical strategy she seeks to criticise. Zhang claims that authentic environmental consciousness comes from first-hand experiences of nature and excludes those who lack the socioeconomic resources to engage in elite leisure activities like scuba diving. The activities she mentioned represent a performance of the privileged class, as the financial, physical, and temporal costs associated with acquiring diving skills and accessing marine environments make this practice unattainable for most people. Furthermore, her beliefs may overlook the environmental consequences of human recreational activities such as scuba diving, boating, and snorkelling (see Milazzo et al., 2002), which contradict the very principles of ecological preservation that she champions. Zhang's reflections on environmental protection following her diving holiday evoke a tone reminiscent of the infamous phrase, "Let them eat cake", highlighting a disconnect between privileged experience and broader structural concerns. While she advocates for education as a solution to environmental issues, she simultaneously dismisses formal education systems, arguing that classroom-based environmental education is insufficient. What she fails to recognise is that access to such education is, in itself, a privilege. In reality, not all schools in developing countries are equipped to provide education in environmental consciousness. Even when such programmes exist, economic barriers that limit direct access to nature often persist (see Ham & Sewing, 1988; Onyeaka & Akinsemolu, 2025; Sithole et al., 2024; Uddin, 2024). Zhang's stance reflects an elitist perspective that equates sustainability with high-status experiential knowledge—regardless of original intent—while overlooking the structural inequalities that hinder broader public participation in sustainability initiatives.

Margaret 休假期间最爱的就是徒步、潜水等户外活动，以此亲近自然和动物。

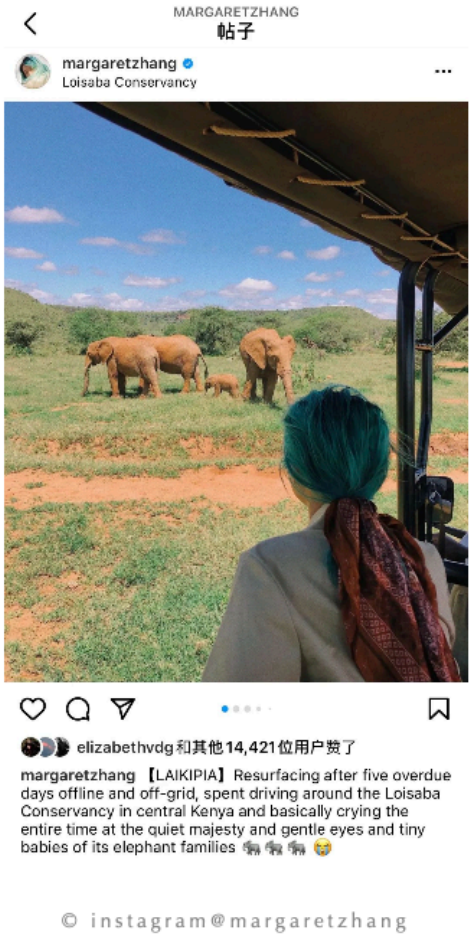

Figure 8.1. Screenshot of an Instagram post by Zhang, as featured in a *RISE* WeChat article

To provide another example (see Figure 8.1) in the same article, just above Zhang's criticism of current environmental protection, the text producer lists her hobbies—outdoor activities such as hiking and scuba diving—and includes a screenshot of Zhang's Instagram post, showcasing her love for nature and wildlife. This visual element serves a dual function: it verifies her claims of participating in 'authentic' nature experiences while also reinforcing the classed nature of these activities as markers of social distinction. By displaying this curated image, the text implicitly signals that genuine environmental engagement requires direct, first-hand immersion in elite outdoor hobbies, taking place in a natural reserve in central Kenya. Again, access to those activities is a privilege reserved for individuals with financial resources and cultural capital. The underlying

assumption is that those who do not partake in high-status hobbies cannot truly appreciate nature, possess environmental awareness, or engage in authentic ecological protection. This logic is deeply problematic, as it reduces sustainability to a performance of class identity rather than a structural issue requiring systemic change. Such visual signalling of class identity through consumption habits and lifestyle is increasingly prevalent on Chinese social media platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu (Rednote) (e.g. Peng, 2019; Skulsuthavong & Wang, 2025). Social media facilitates the mundane, transnational circulation of elitist sustainability discourses, reinforcing collective schooling into desiring and performing elite status. As these discourses proliferate, particularly within "light" consumer communities in today's digitalised world, they influence aspirational consumption behaviours and reinforce social inequality.

8.3 Practical implications: After critique, so what?

At this point, it is necessary to contemplate a question that has long occupied my thoughts: after five years of data collection and analysis, research into relevant literature, and nearly two years of writing, what new insights is my research contributing? And, perhaps more importantly, what might it offer beyond academia? These questions are crucial, and neither can be answered easily or quickly. However, before attempting to respond, I would like first to clarify the nature of my research, which will, I hope, help me set the stage for answering those important questions.

First and foremost, while applied linguistics often seeks to address practical, real-world challenges, this research does not aim to offer prescriptive solutions or interventions (e.g. improving communication strategies or enhancing inclusivity in public messaging to make sustainable fashion more accessible or environmentally effective). Nor is this an exclusively theoretical study focused on developing, analysing, or expanding existing theories and concepts related to sustainable fashion. When discussing my research with others, some have suggested that, upon graduation, I might consider applying for a marketing or branding consultant position at a fashion company in Shanghai. On those occasions, I usually respond with an awkward smile or, more humorously, thank them for the suggestion as an excellent way to convert research findings into material wealth. Once, I was asked whether I had conducted a survey exploring the relationship between consumer behaviour in sustainable fashion and social class or whether I had tested the correlation between the elite class and green consumption. Again, I had to smile and explain that while these suggestions might lead to interesting findings, they are not my research

questions to address. Importantly, my research does not align with positivism. Positivist studies are based on the belief that reality is objective and can be systematically understood through empirical observation and scientific methods. They aim to explain social phenomena using quantitative techniques, while emphasising neutrality, predictability, and generalisability (Bryman, 2012).

While grounded in empirical data—including ethnographic fieldwork and corpus-assisted discourse study—this work adopts a critical perspective to examine the meaning of social class in 21st-century China. It focuses on elite consumption as a performance of social distinction in the sustainable fashion sector, situated within the broader socioeconomic context of a post-socialist society influenced by late capitalism. By "critical perspective", I mean that this research is inspired by Critical Theory, which argues that social reality is shaped by power, ideology, and historical context (e.g., Horkheimer, 2002 [1937]; Foucault, 2007; Fairclough, 2013). Rather than merely describing social phenomena, critical research seeks to challenge and transform social structures, particularly those related to inequality, oppression, and power relations (Bryman, 2012).

Despite such a lofty (and also ambitious) research goal, the most challenging question I have been asked at academic conferences is, "what practical impact does your research have?" When I was asked this question for the first time, I did my utmost to remain composed, smiling (as usual) and acknowledging it as a good question. However, in that moment, the smile was more of a tactical gesture, because my mind had not yet come up with a clear answer. Indeed, it is a fair question: After critique, so what? This is something I have thought about deeply throughout my research journey, and now, at this point in the thesis, I am finally prepared to offer a brief reflection.

Regarding the question of whether sociologists can make society better, Giddens once asserted:

"Hence the thesis that more knowledge about social life (even if that knowledge is as well buttressed empirically as it could possibly be) equals greater control over our fate is false. It is (arguably) true about the physical world, but not about the universe of social events" (Giddens, 1990, p. 43).

In other words, unlike the physical sciences, knowledge about society does not simply accumulate to produce greater predictability or control. This is because the social world is reflexive—meaning that as soon as knowledge is produced, it is absorbed, interpreted, and acted upon by individuals, institutions, and power structures, altering the very conditions being studied. Reflexivity is a term that Giddens discusses in several of his works (e.g. 1990, 1991). It refers to

the extent to which individuals are perceived to shape their societal position in relation to the influence of external factors. It also involves the concept of an informed or reformed reaction to both internal and external assessments of social practices.

Giddens outlines a hypothetical scenario, noting that "Expanding our understanding of the social world might produce a progressively more illuminating grasp of human institutions and, hence, increasing 'technological' control over them, if it were the case either that social life were entirely separate from human knowledge about it or that knowledge could be filtered continuously into the reasons for social action, producing step-by-step increases in the 'rationality' of behaviour in relation to specific needs" (1990, pp. 43-44). Here, he critiques the Enlightenment ideal that suggests societies can become progressively more rational and efficient through the systematic application of knowledge (Giddens, 1990). Instead, Giddens argues that while some aspects of society do function in this way, this vision falls short as a totalising model. He identifies four structural constraints that prevent knowledge from fully rationalising modern social life: differential power, the role of values, unintended consequences, and the reflexivity of modernity itself (Giddens, 1990). I argue that these limitations further inform my research findings, highlighting the reflexive nature of the discourses of authenticity, trust, and moderation. These discourses construct sustainable fashion as both a site of reflexivity and a mechanism of self-discipline. Regardless of how businesses define sustainable fashion as rational, beneficial to human development, and environmentally responsible, this project reveals that its emergence and evolution remain constrained by inherent structural and ideological limitations.

Giddens (1990) first highlights power inequalities as a fundamental barrier to the rational application of knowledge. He argues that while knowledge is generated within society, it is not equally accessible to all groups. Those in positions of power can selectively appropriate and control knowledge, using it to serve their own interests rather than the collective good. This echoes Adkins's (2002) discussion on the relationship between reflexivity and inequality, contending that "reflexivity is a resource, allowing mobility and thus 'privileged positions' in late modernity" (p. 130). As demonstrated in this thesis, these power asymmetries are particularly evident in the sustainable fashion industry, where expert knowledge about environmental impact is mediated through corporate interests. Although sustainability is portrayed as rational, ethical, and environmentally responsible, guided by self-reflection, it is often strategically co-opted to reinforce elite consumerism rather than promote systemic change. For instance, brands employ

discourses of authenticity and trust to justify premium pricing of their products, positioning sustainable fashion as an aspirational lifestyle and cultivating a community that appeals to like-minded consumers. This results in a paradox: while sustainability is advocated as a collective ethical responsibility, its practical realisation remains an exclusive privilege.

Relatedly, the second limitation concerns the fluid relationship between knowledge and value systems (Giddens, 1990). Giddens (1990) contend that if knowledge could be applied to a universally rational foundation of values, then social progress would be more straightforward. However, no such transcendental value system exists. Instead, knowledge interacts with shifting cultural perspectives and ideological frameworks, making it difficult to achieve purely rational social change. In the context of this study, sustainability is not merely a rational response to environmental concerns; rather, it is intertwined with elitist consumption discourses in late capitalism. For instance, the consumption practices in sustainability are tied to a minimalist aesthetic and moral values that align with an elite identity formation. The discourse of moderation portrays sustainable fashion as a symbol of sophistication, positioning it as a cultural marker of distinction rather than an accessible environmental practice. This illustrates Giddens' argument that knowledge alone does not lead to social progress because it is always embedded within broader ideological frameworks.

Giddens' third limitation concerns the unpredictability of social life (Giddens, 1990). He asserts that even if knowledge about society continuously improved, it would never be possible to account for all variables. This is because social actions produce unintended consequences, which in turn shape future developments. A relevant example in this project is digital activism related to climate issues. While its original aim may genuinely be to raise awareness, it can also result in performative eco-consciousness, such as virtue signalling on social media, rather than leading to tangible behavioural change. Elliott's (2013) study on status and green consumption helps explain this phenomenon by showing that the meaning and impact of environmentally conscious behaviour are not fixed but rather context-dependent. She argues that green consumption does not have a universal status value; instead, its significance varies by time and place. In some contexts, buying eco-friendly products may signal genuine environmental commitment, while in others, it may serve primarily as a status marker without leading to deeper engagement with sustainability. These examples illustrate Giddens' argument that, even with increasing knowledge, societies cannot be fully controlled or rationalised because human action remains inherently unpredictable.

The fourth, and arguably most important, limitation that Giddens (1990) identifies is the reflexivity of modernity itself. Unlike the natural sciences, where knowledge can be applied to external, more stable realities, social knowledge is inherently part of the system it describes. This means that when new knowledge is introduced into society, it does not remain static or neutral. Rather, it interacts with existing social structures, practices, and institutions, altering the very conditions being studied. As a result, modernity is characterised by continuous cycles of adaptation and transformation, where knowledge does not simply accumulate and lead to greater control, but rather disrupts and reshapes social structures, often in unpredictable ways.

Reflexivity profoundly influences this project by addressing the broader question of the empirical implications of my thesis. If critiques—like those presented in this thesis—become more widely recognised, illuminating the economic inequalities embedded in sustainability discourses, brands and institutions may strategically adjust their approaches to maintain the exclusivity and cultural dominance. This means that instead of addressing structural inequalities, they may rebrand sustainability in ways that appear more inclusive while still maintaining elite barriers (e.g., offering "accessible" sustainable lines while keeping core collections luxury-focused). Also, they may shift their messaging to co-opt critiques, positioning themselves as progressive and socially aware, without implementing substantial systemic changes. For instance, if brands respond to critiques of elitism in sustainable fashion by incorporating social justice narratives into their marketing, they may still fail to address the core economic and ideological barriers that exclude working-class consumers from sustainable choices. Instead, they might focus on aestheticising ethical consumption, framing it as a matter of personal virtue and self-expression rather than systemic reform. This is already visible in how minimalist aesthetics and "slow fashion" are framed as ethical choices, yet remain financially and culturally inaccessible to many consumers. Moreover, new forms of status-based consumption may be developed, where other concepts could be added as another layer of cultural capital, reinforcing distinction through knowledge and values rather than just price alone.

This process reflects Giddens' (1990) argument that new knowledge generates new contradictions, power struggles, and unintended consequences, often making social structures more complex and unstable rather than more predictable and controlled. Therefore, this limitation regarding reflexivity highlights a fundamental challenge in critiquing elite sustainability discourses: while it is necessary to emphasise inequality and exclusivity, this does not inherently

result in greater inclusivity. Instead, it may initiate new cycles of commodification, whereby businesses assimilate criticism and transform it into novel forms of distinction and market advantage.

Extract 8.1 is a typical example of self-reflection within the industry. The excerpt is an introductory text of a WeChat article published by *RISE* on November 1, 2020. The article was republished under a column called *Good Question*, which belongs to the *Bottledream Good Lab*, a WeChat channel. This column invites industry experts to discuss social and environmental issues, compiling these conversations for publication on social media. The discussion in this article featured *RISE*'s founder Du Yijia as a participant. From the introduction, it is evident that part of the article's focus is on the relationship between sustainable fashion and social class. In the text, *RISE*'s founder employs specialised knowledge to explain why sustainable fashion products are priced higher. She refers to economic principles such as "production costs determine pricing" ("生产成本决定价格"), the labour costs required to achieve "social equity" ("社会公平性"), and the technological innovation costs needed to "reduce resource consumption, environmental degradation, and ecological pollution throughout the value chain and product lifecycle" ("减少价值链过程和产品生命周期内的资源消耗、环境退化和生态污染"). Additionally, she mentions the "carbon footprints" ("碳足迹"), "certifications and audits by third-party authorities" ("第三方权威机构认证和审计") to explain the cost, concluding that "the price, whether high or low, depends on what it is compared to" ("价格高低取决于比较的对象"). Although her response rationally addresses concerns regarding high pricing, it avoids discussing whether sustainable fashion constitutes a form of class privilege.

时尚“绿”了。

在刚结束的上海时装周，几乎成了一个“可持续时尚”的秀场，都在讲回收材料、新技术和实验室，连时装周的红毯“绿”了。

这光景似乎都让人忘了，就在几年前，“快时尚”曾以平民化的价格，快速复制高级时装的风格红翻了整个地球。

只是，随着大规模生产背后“血汗工厂”“环境污染”的问题浮现在大众视野，他们也背负起道德和环境上苛责。

所以，可持续时尚就是时尚产业出路吗？

可持续时尚产品这么贵，是不是一种中产特权？

想成为一个负责任的消费者，我们应该怎么买衣服呢？

Fashion has “Gone Green”

At the recently concluded Shanghai Fashion Week, sustainability dominated the stage—recycled materials, new technologies, and laboratory innovations were at the centre of discussions, and even the red carpet had turned “green”.

This spectacle almost makes one forget that just a few years ago, fast fashion, with its affordable pricing and rapid replication of high-end styles, had taken over the global market.

However, as public awareness grew around the sweatshops and environmental pollution behind mass production, fast fashion brands became subject to moral and environmental scrutiny.

So, is sustainable fashion the future of the industry?

Are sustainable fashion products, with their high price tags, a privilege of the middle class?

If we want to be responsible consumers, how should we shop for clothing?

Extract 8.1. A critical reflection on sustainable fashion, republished via *RISE*’s WeChat account

In contrast, another expert directly addresses criticism regarding the exclusivity of sustainable fashion, arguing that “Sustainability, or rather the circular economy, should not be a privilege reserved for a small group of environmentally conscious individuals who exert considerable effort to participate. I believe sustainability should be an economic activity that all consumers can conveniently and easily engage in” (“可持续或者说循环经济，不应该是少数的特别在意环保的人们大费周章才能参与的特权活动。我认为可持续是应该所有消费者都可以方便地、轻松参与的经济活动”). While the expert’s comments appear to advocate for inclusivity by suggesting that sustainability should be accessible to all, the advice offered in the later text still reflects the cultural practices and consumption logic of the privileged class. Then, she states, “Is it necessary to buy sustainable products? I think it depends on an individual’s awareness and enthusiasm for environmental protection. Some consumers truly appreciate a brand’s sustainability philosophy as well as its products. For example, I personally choose to buy *Stella McCartney* or

upcycled cashmere products whenever I have comparable options" ("至于是不是一定要买可持续产品？我觉得需要个人对于环保的认知和热情。有些消费者就是特别欣赏品牌的可持续理念，也欣赏这个品牌的产品，比如我，我会在有同等选择的情况下优先购买 *Stella McCartney*，还有一些升级再造的羊绒产品"). Notably, suggestions such as choosing sustainable brands like *Stella McCartney* or buying upcycled cashmere products assume a certain level of economic capital, aesthetic literacy, and access to niche markets—resources that are unevenly distributed in China's stratified urban society. In this context, "privilege" refers to class-based advantages—namely economic, cultural, and social capital—that enable individuals, particularly those in the professional or middle- and upper-middle classes in cities like Shanghai, to make "green" choices that are perceived as ethical or tasteful. Although she claims that sustainability should not be a privilege reserved for a select few, her suggestions ultimately reinforce that very privilege rather than challenge the elitist structure of sustainable consumption.

In this regard, reflexivity is inherent to the discourses produced and disseminated in the sustainable fashion industry. As Adkins (2002, p. 130) points out, reflexivity is "not necessarily transformative or detraditionalising" but instead often serves to reinforce the status quo. That said, while this perspective may appear pessimistic, it is crucial to acknowledge that the empirical implications of this project might not fundamentally alter the existing reality; instead, it could trigger new cycles of commodification. As brands absorb new discourse, they repurpose it as yet another form of market distinction, maintaining status hierarchies rather than dismantling them.

Nevertheless, my initial motivation for this research is optimistic—my goal is to unveil the hidden social inequalities embedded within discourse. Employing Bourdieu's (1984) theoretical framework enhances the understanding of how status emerges, not only in overt and intentional ways but also in subtle and unconscious forms. In relation to sustainability in fashion, I align with Elliott (2013) in cautioning against the notion of a fixed "green consumer identity", as this suggests a stable, coherent category of individuals who consistently engage in green consumption for a singular purpose. Instead, she proposes that green consumption should be understood as a fluid and evolving phenomenon, influenced by shifting cultural, economic, and ideological contexts rather than a rigid identity (Elliott, 2013). As established in this project, the relationship between social status and sustainable fashion extends beyond deliberate signalling. While sustainability can serve as a marker of distinction, individuals do not always explicitly display their status when

consuming sustainable fashion products. Rather, they partake in practices that may be shaped by habit/lifestyle, aesthetics, ethical beliefs, or cultural conditioning, yet still reinforce social hierarchies by privileging those with the economic and cultural capital to participate. Understanding this dynamic requires looking beyond overt displays of distinction to examine how status, sustainability, and consumer behaviour intersect within broader social and economic structures.

While subtle and nuanced, I argue that the discursive production and maintenance of privilege are pervasive. These phenomena can be observed across various sectors; alongside the fashion industry, examples of elitist discourse are also present in food, tourism, education, housing, and beyond. According to Thurlow and Jaworski (2017c, p.186), elite markers are not exclusively associated with the demographic elite, but rather "trickle down" into more extensive semiotic landscapes. In this context, the concept of eliteness transcends mere political, social, or economic categorisation; it also represents a discursive and rhetorical construct that perpetuates cycles of privilege by influencing broader cultural participation. This study explores the "casually observable" social distinctions among elites and the upwardly mobile in Chinese megacities (Li, 2021), focusing on the cultural capital they perform and display through discourse. Moreover, I argue that the materiality of language, as theorised by Shankar and Cavanaugh (2017), is important for understanding how cultural capital operates within elite discourse. Through this lens, I examine the ideological foundations of value creation, the linguistic and visual representation of elite mythologies, and the increasingly complex ways these discourses are reproduced in a digitalised and globalised world. Although reflexivity may perpetuate inequality, I believe researchers in the social sciences must continue to expose and analyse the social injustice embedded within discourses critically. Like other systemic issues, sustainability requires ongoing critical engagement, as its definition, control, and adaptation are contested and subject to elite influence and commodification. Recognising and confronting these power dynamics is crucial in the pursuit of meaningful and systemic change.

With all this in mind, my contribution lies in critically analysing how elite discourses of sustainability in fashion reinforce, rather than challenge, social inequalities. Drawing Giddens' (1990) notion of reflexivity, I examine how concepts such as sustainability, authenticity, and ethical consumption are selectively appropriated to perpetuate privilege rather than to advance genuine systemic change. Through a detailed investigation of Shanghai's sustainable fashion

industry, I illustrate how seemingly inclusive discourses around sustainability subtly reproduce an exclusivity tied to economic and cultural capital. Instead of providing prescriptive solutions, my research reveals the implicit mechanisms through which sustainability discourse operates as a site of elite class performance. It highlights the need for continued critical reflection on the intersections of consumption, discourse, and social hierarchy in contemporary China.

8.4 Reflections on methods: Contributions, challenges and limitations

This thesis adopts an innovative, ethnography-led mixed-methods approach to analyse the discursive construction of value in Shanghai's high-end sustainable fashion industry. Situated within a pragmatic paradigm, that prioritises the research problem over epistemological purity, the research strategically integrates multi-sited ethnography with a Corpus-Assisted Discourse Study (CADS). This is not merely a parallel application of two methods, but a deeply integrated, recursive four-phase iterative exchange guided by an "ethnography-led, corpus-validated" model. This framework ensures the research is driven by contextual discovery from the field and systematically validated by empirical linguistic evidence, offering a more comprehensive analysis than either method could achieve alone.

8.4.1 Contributions

A significant advantage of this methodology is its methodological triangulation, which directly addresses the complexity of analysing discursive value construction. The process commenced with Ethnographic Discovery, where immersive, longitudinal fieldwork across physical and digital sites identified emergent themes, social practices, and rhetorical strategies directly from the field. This initial inductive phase was crucial for accessing tacit knowledge and the socio-material contexts in which value is embedded, ensuring that the research priorities were shaped by the field itself rather than predefined categories. These field-derived insights then directly guided the phase of Corpus Validation & Expansion. Here, by using keyword, collocation, and concordance analysis, the concepts identified through ethnography were translated into specific linguistic queries to be investigated within a specialised corpus of WeChat articles containing 451,420 tokens, made up of four sub-corpora. This phase had two main purposes: to evaluate how well the ethnographic themes generalised and followed patterns across a broader dataset, and to enhance linguistic precision by identifying specific collocations, lexical patterns, and the frequencies of these discursive strategies.

This prevented deep, contextual insights from being merely compelling anecdotes by showing how they are systematically implemented in corporate communication.

The defining strength of the model is the phase of Iterative Interpretation. The quantitative and linguistic patterns revealed by the corpus were not taken as self-explanatory but were brought back to the rich, contextual depth of the ethnographic data. This qualitative interpretation answered the "why" behind the "what", grounding corpus findings in the lived experiences, material arrangements, and unspoken norms observed in the field. For instance, the corpus-identified formulaic use of certification labels like "GOTS 全程认证" (GOTS fully certified) was further understood through ethnographic observations of how these labels were materially displayed and strategically explained to consumers. This back-and-forth movement ensured the analysis remained contextually grounded and that linguistic evidence was not misinterpreted in a social vacuum. The final Synthesis wove the strands of evidence from both methods into a cohesive, multi-layered argument about the discursive construction of value, culminating in the identification of three principal discourses: Authenticity, Trust, and Moderation.

The originality and strength of this approach lie in its capacity to bridge the apparent epistemological tension between interpretive ethnography and empirical corpus linguistics into a strategic analytical strength. By adopting a pragmatic stance, the research utilises the complementary strengths of each method: ethnography provides the "inside-out" perspective of lived reality and social practice, while corpus analysis offers the "outside-in" perspective of systematic, recurring linguistic patterns. In other words, ethnographic inquiry adds contextual depth, revealing how discourses are interpreted, contested, and embodied in consumer behaviour. Meanwhile, corpus analysis provides large-scale, systematic insights into discursive trends, ensuring empirical robustness and generalisability. Furthermore, the multi-sited ethnographic design, encompassing both physical retail spaces and digital platforms like WeChat, was uniquely suited to capturing the distributed nature of contemporary fashion discourse. Ultimately, this methodology provides a novel framework for critical discourse studies, demonstrating how language, ideology, and market practices intersect to shape elite sustainability discourses in a globalised context.

8.4.2 Challenges

Although this approach offers significant analytical advantages, it also presents several methodological challenges. One key challenge lies in integrating large-scale corpus analysis with ethnographic insights. These two data streams required different analytical lenses, yet needed to speak to each other to form a coherent argument. To address this, I had to carefully align corpus findings with ethnographic observations, ensuring that quantitative trends were not analysed in isolation but were instead situated within broader cultural, economic, and social frameworks. This required an iterative research process, where emerging patterns from the corpus informed further ethnographic inquiry, and vice versa. Nevertheless, there were moments of unpredictability in the discourse—instances where brands' public messaging shifted in response to external events (e.g., COVID and local restriction policies), consumer backlash (e.g., criticisms towards greenwashing), or newly trending values (e.g., the popularity of "slow living" and cultural heritage in recent years). These shifts, often occurring in real-time and across different media platforms, complicated the coding process and required the analytical framework to remain open and adaptive. In some cases, brands may revise their rhetoric over time, reflecting a strategic responsiveness to the evolving socio-political and cultural environment. Thus, embracing unpredictability as informative rather than disruptive becomes part of the methodological process. In practice, this meant continuously revisiting initial assumptions and being open to modifying interview questions or coding categories as new patterns emerged in the data. Such reflexivity was essential in managing the complexity of multi-sited data and ensured that the analysis remained grounded and attuned to context.

Another difficulty stems from data accessibility and the model's significant practical constraints. The intensive resource demands of the model present a significant practical constraint. The need for long-term, multi-sited ethnographic work, along with the demanding tasks of compiling a corpus and sophisticated quantitative and qualitative analysis, makes this approach particularly time-consuming and logistically complicated. This model is inherently vulnerable to challenges of access; the foundational ethnographic phase relied on the cooperation of a small number of elite organisations. Securing stakeholder consent for extensive participation is challenging—many of them refused to engage further in the research. Therefore, while corpus analysis allowed me to systematically analyse publicly available corporate communications, specific internal decision-making processes within sustainable fashion brands remained inaccessible. It is acknowledged that

gaining entry to more sensitive internal corporate communications was often beyond the scope of an independent academic project. Therefore, corporate strategy meetings, internal communications, or unpublished data about how decisions were made were not included in the analysis. Thus, the study cannot fully account for the behind-the-scenes motivations or power dynamics that shape the entire picture of organisational styling. In other words, the findings illuminate how high-end sustainable fashion is portrayed and constructed in public discourse, but not necessarily how those discourses are negotiated or contested internally. This combination of methods, while offering complementary insights, involved a conscious trade-off between breadth and depth, potentially sacrificing the profound depth attainable through a singular methodological focus. I remained critically aware of this gap, noting wherever possible when interpretations were based on outward communications that may themselves be strategic or idealised representations.

8.4.3 Limitations

While the integrated "ethnography-led, corpus-validated" model employed in this study offers a robust framework for analysing discursive value construction, it is important to acknowledge its inherent limitations. These constraints, which arise from the methodological choices, the nature of the integration, and the researcher's positionality, help to define the boundaries of the research and suggest avenues for future scholarly inquiry.

First, the model's sequential design introduces a dependency on the initial ethnographic phase. As the corpus analysis is specifically guided by insights derived from fieldwork, the scope of the entire investigation is necessarily shaped by the boundaries of that fieldwork. Any emergent discursive practices or stakeholder perspectives that fell outside the purview of the selected field sites or the researcher's ethnographic attention during the discovery phase would not have been translated into corpus queries and thus remained systematically uninvestigated in the textual data. A significant manifestation of this limitation concerns the scope of the ethnography itself. My fieldwork mainly concentrated on brand representatives and corporate events, providing an important insight into how sustainability discourses are performed by those who produce and market the products. However, it did not fully capture the perspectives of all stakeholders; for example, the voices of the producers (e.g., the former nomadic herders employed by *Norlha* to weave yak wool) were only indirectly accessed. My ethnography did not involve extended interviews or life histories that would allow these workers to articulate their experiences in their

own terms. As a result, the research speaks *about* these artisans more than it lets them speak for themselves, leaving their personal narratives and reflections on transitioning into a luxury supply chain as a critical gap and a potential counterpoint to the brand-led discourse.

Second, the principle of "corpus-validation" must be understood within the strategic parameters of the corpus itself. The corpus was compiled not for statistical representativeness of the entire market, but for its strategic relevance to the ethnographically-defined network. Consequently, while the corpus can confirm the prevalence and linguistic features of a discourse within the curated communications of key stakeholders like *klee klee* and *RISE*, its findings cannot be statistically generalised to the broader sustainable fashion landscape in Shanghai. The validation the corpus provides confirms how discourse is systematically constructed in a specific setting, but it cannot speak to how common those discursive constructions are elsewhere.

A third theoretical limitation lies in the interpretive challenge of reconciling divergent findings. The model envisions a recursive dialogue where corpus findings qualitatively inform ethnographic interpretation and vice versa. However, the process for resolving a fundamental contradiction between datasets, such as when a theme is prominent in the corpus but was rarely observed or regarded as insignificant in the field, relies heavily on the researcher's reflexive judgment rather than a predetermined protocol. This "black box" of iteration, while a source of analytical depth, introduces an element of subjectivity that is difficult to fully standardise or replicate.

Overall, my positionality as a researcher and the practical constraints of access fundamentally shaped what data could be collected. Rather than glossing over these issues, I reflect on how they have influenced the knowledge produced. The methodological design, centred on how sustainability and authenticity were constructed by businesses, inevitably means that some viewpoints remain outside the frame. By recognising these limitations from the selectivity of the ethnography to the strategic boundaries of the corpus, I do not undermine the value of the findings but instead advocate for further research to continue critically exploring a deeper, multi-vocal understanding of discourses in constructing social distinction within sustainable fashion.

8.5 Prospects for further research

Despite the limitations discussed in the previous section, this study provides a foundation for future interdisciplinary research on sustainability discourse, providing insights that could be further expanded upon in several areas of direction:

8.5.1 Longitudinal studies on sustainability discourse

Considering the reflexivity of elite sustainability discourses, future research should examine how sustainability evolves over time, particularly in response to policy changes, consumer activism, and shifting economic conditions. A longitudinal perspective—tracking these changes over extended periods—could be beneficial in understanding emerging patterns and trends. One critical area of investigation is how brands adapt their messaging when confronted with accusations of greenwashing or exclusivity. As scrutiny of sustainability claims increases, brands adjust their messaging to maintain credibility. Some enhance transparency through reports and certifications, whilst others reframe narratives to deflect criticism regarding exclusivity or to emphasise incremental progress. Researching these adaptations over time can reveal whether companies commit to sustainable practices or simply engage in more sophisticated forms of greenwashing. Another key question involves the social inclusivity of elite sustainability discourse. Sustainability efforts often favour wealthier demographics, reinforcing the perception that eco-friendly choices, such as organic food, electric vehicles, and ethical fashion, are privileges rather than societal norms. Das and Albinsson (2023) further illustrate that mainstream sustainability discourse is typically shaped by Western, elite-driven perspectives, which frequently marginalise traditional, indigenous sustainable practices prevalent in the Global South. Instead, they highlight subversive consumption practices—such as traditional farming by the Bonda women in Odisha and the socially engaged art of the Patachitrakars in West Bengal—as forms of resistance. These practices exemplify politicised identity performances rooted in local knowledge systems, which counter neoliberal and neocolonial ideologies. Through these cases, the article demonstrates how sustainability, for marginalised communities, is not just about environmental concern but also about seizing agency, preserving identity, and asserting resistance within a globalised, capitalist framework. Data from my project suggests that localised traditional sustainable practices are indeed incorporated into corporate sustainability discourses. For example, *Norlha*'s branding strategically highlights its engagement with Tibetan nomadic culture, presenting its workshop as

integrating traditional craftsmanship into its sustainability discourse. However, this representation primarily serves corporate interests, and future research could build on this by conducting in-depth ethnographic fieldwork focusing on the lived experiences and perspectives of the craftsmen, many of whom are former nomads. Investigating how they understand and articulate their roles in relation to sustainability may offer critical insights into whether, and how sustainability discourses in China can move beyond elite-driven narratives to include diverse cultural and socio-economic voices.

8.5.2 Gender and racial dimensions of sustainability discourse

Future research could also explore how gender and race influence sustainability discourses in fashion (in Chapter 5, I have touched on these topics, but not in depth). First, sustainability marketing often targets women, particularly mothers, as moral consumers responsible for ethical purchasing (MacGregor, 2005). Elliott (2013) suggests that having children under 18 increases green consumption, reflecting how sustainability is framed as an extension of maternal duty. Future studies could explore how gender norms influence eco-conscious consumption, whether men engage differently with sustainability, and how these discourses reinforce traditional domestic roles. Second, sustainability discourse is racialised, as luxury fashion brands frequently appropriate ethnic aesthetics, portraying marginalised communities as the "Other" to create symbolic value and market exclusivity. Research should critically examine how sustainability discourses commodify ethnic cultures, romanticise traditional craftsmanship, and reinforce elitist consumption patterns. Future research could integrate gender and racial perspectives to provide a more intersectional critique (Cho et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1991) of sustainability discourses. This perspective would illustrate how elitist and exclusionary dynamics extend beyond class to encompass gendered and racialised forms of inequality. It can further deepen understanding of how sustainability is marketed, consumed, and experienced across different social groups.

8.5.3 Integrating influencer and consumer perspectives in different digital spaces

Given the increasing significance of social media in shaping sustainability discourses, future research could benefit from a deeper exploration of various digital spaces. Platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu (Rednote) are essential arenas for discussing sustainability in China, where both brands and consumers actively negotiate the meaning of being "sustainable".

Such an examination could explore how sustainability messaging circulates through digital networks; the role of influencers and key opinion leaders (KOLs) in shaping sustainable fashion discourses; and how consumers engage with corporate sustainability claims—whether through endorsement, skepticism, or resistance. Social media provides a participatory space where discourse is more interactive and contested, making it crucial to understanding both top-down brand narratives and bottom-up consumer responses. This approach would offer a more dynamic and comprehensive perspective, revealing not only how sustainability is marketed but also how it is challenged, reinterpreted, and co-opted in digital spaces.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Participant information sheet

Lancaster University

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Management School Research Ethics Committee (FASS-LUMS REC)

ETHICS APPLICATION FORM FOR STAFF and PhD STUDENTS

Participant Information Sheet

参与者信息表

Discursive Value Creation and Circulation of Sustainable Fashion in China

中国可持续时尚产业中话语的价值创造与传播

Researcher: Qin Fan, Lancaster University

研究者：范沁，兰卡斯特大学

Purpose of research: This research investigates how the concept of sustainable fashion is constructed and circulated through language within the textile industry in China. It will highlight your role as one of the practitioners of the industry who has created added value discursively. My aim is to examine what value you attach to sustainable fashion and products and how you attach that value through language within your profession.

研究目的：本研究旨在调查中国的纺织行业如何通过语言，构建和传播可持续时尚的理念，突出显示您作为该行业的从业者之一、通过话语创造附加价值的角色，试图了解您对可持续时尚及相关产品赋予了怎样的价值，以及您是如何通过语言赋予这种价值的。

What am I asked to do/how will I participate in the study: You will be part of an ethnographic study that aims to investigate discourses on the sustainable fashion through observations of your team meetings and discussions. Besides, I will conduct short ethnographic interviews with you and other stakeholders, which will not exceed 15 minutes each. I will take notes about my observations and record the interviews which will be my data.

如何参与研究：您将参与民俗志研究（ethnographic study），该研究的主要目的是通过观察您的团队会议和讨论研究有关可持续时尚的语篇。 此外，我也会对您和其他相关人员进行简短的访谈，每次访谈不超过 15 分钟。 我在观察中会做笔记，访谈会被录音，笔记和录音将会成为我的研究数据。

What will happen to the data after the fieldwork/my participation: Once I have finished this observation and any conversation with you, I will scan all the fieldnotes and transfer them into a word file. Also, I will transcribe the audio recordings after the interview. It is hope that this data will used to develop academic papers/journal articles and presented at the conferences. All data will be anonymized; this applies to your name, all persons you engage with as well as the company or organisation you work in. Any identifiable information will be kept separately and securely.

研究数据如何处理：完成实地观察和访谈后，我将扫描所有笔记并将它们转换为 word 文档。 另外，访谈结束后我将把录音内容转换成文字。 希望这些数据将用于之后的撰写学术论文/期刊论文并能在会议上发表。 所有数据将被匿名化， 包括您的姓名、与您相关的所有人员以及您工作的公司或单位。任何可被识别的个人信息都将被单独、安全地保存。

Data protection and storage: The word document containing scanned fieldnotes will be stored in encrypted files on a password-protected laptop. The original written fieldnotes will be kept in a locked drawer at my home. Besides, the transcribed audio recordings will be stored on an encrypted and password-protected laptop. After my work has been examined and/or published, they will be erased.

数据保护和存储：包含扫描笔记在内的 Word 文档将存储在受密码保护的笔记本电脑中的加密文件夹中。 原始笔记将保存在研究者家中的上锁抽屉里。 此外，转录的音频记录将存储在经过加密和密码保护的笔记本电脑中。 在我的研究被审查和/或发布后，它们将被删除。

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Lancaster University

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Management School Research Ethics Committee (FASS-LUMS REC)

ETHICS APPLICATION FORM FOR STAFF and PhD STUDENTS

Confidentiality: Any information you provide will be anonymised during analysis and in future publications. Any identifiable data will be removed. Anonymized fieldnotes will be kept separately from any identifiable information so the two cannot be linked. However, if it is felt something you talk about might be damaging to you or others, it may be necessary for me to tell somebody who can help prevent this.
机密性：您提供的任何信息都将在研究分析和将来的出版物中被匿名化。任何可被识别身份的数据都将被删除。匿名化的笔记将与任何可被识别的信息分开保存，因此二者将无法被联系在一起。但是，如果您感到自己所谈论的内容可能对自身或他人造成损害，那么我将有必要告知可以帮助您预防此事发生的人。

Anonymity: All data and any subsequent conference presentations and journal articles will be anonymised and fictitious names (pseudonyms) will be given to all participants.
匿名：所有数据以及随后的任何会议演讲和期刊文章都将被匿名化，所有参与者都将被提供虚拟名称（化名）。

Voluntary participation: Your participation is voluntary and if you do agree initially to take part you can end your involvement at any time prior to or during the interview. If you decide to withdraw from the interview at any point all relevant data will be immediately destroyed. In addition, if within 2 weeks of your involvement you withdraw from participation in the study all relevant data will be destroyed, but after that point it will not be possible to withdraw the data.
自愿参与：您的参与是自愿的，即使如果您最初同意参加，也可以在访谈之前或之中的任何时候结束您的参与。如果您决定在任何时候退出访谈，所有相关数据将立即被销毁。此外，如果您在参与研究后的两周内决定退出研究，则所有相关数据都将被销毁，但在您参与完研究两周之后将无法撤消数据。

University Research Ethics Committee: This research and any ethical implications of this research has been considered by University Research Ethics Committee and approval to continue with this has been granted. For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit our webpage: www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection
大学研究伦理委员会：大学研究伦理委员会已经考虑了本研究和该研究的任何伦理意义，并已批准继续进行。有关兰卡斯特大学出于研究目的如何处理个人数据以及您数据权利的更多信息，请访问我们的网页：www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection

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Email: [redacted]

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Appendix 2: Consent form

Lancaster University

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Management School Research Ethics Committee (FASS-LUMS REC)

ETHICS APPLICATION FORM FOR STAFF and PhD STUDENTS

CONSENT FORM
同意书

Informed consent form – please complete if you are happy to take part in this research

知情同意书–如果您愿意参加本研究，请填写

Project Title: Discursive Value Creation and Circulation of Sustainable Fashion in China
课题名称： 中国可持续时尚产业的话语价值创造与传播
Name of Researchers: Qin Fan
研究者姓名： 范沁
Email: q.fan1@lancaster.ac.uk
电子邮箱： q.fan1@lancaster.ac.uk

Please tick each box
请在每个方框中打勾

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily. 我确认已阅读并理解以上研究信息表。 我有机会考虑信息内容、提问并得到满意的答复。	☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during my participation in this study and within two weeks after I took part in the study, without giving any reason. If I withdraw within two weeks of taking part in the study my data will be removed. 我理解我的参与是自愿的，并且我可以无需给出任何理由，在参与本研究的任何时候以及参加本研究后的两周内随时退出。 如果我在参加研究的两周内退出，我提供的数据将被删除。	☐
3. I have spoken to the researcher and understand that my participation will involve being interviewed and observed. 我已经与研究者进行了交谈，并且理解我的参与将涉及被访谈和观察。	☐
4. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications or presentations by the researcher/s, but my personal information will not be included and all reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project. 我理解研究者可能在未来的学术报告、论文、出版物或演讲中使用我提供的任何信息，但是我的个人信息将不包括在内，并且研究者将采取所有合理的措施保护课题参与者的匿名性。	☐
5. I understand that my name/my organisation's name will not appear in any reports, articles or presentation without my consent. 我理解未经我同意，我的名字/我单位的名称将不会出现在任何报告、文章或演示文稿中。	☐
6. I understand that any interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed. 我理解任何采访都会被录音再转换成书面录音稿。	☐
7. I understand all transcribed audio data and fieldnotes will be stored in encrypted files on a password-protected laptop. The original audio recordings and written fieldnotes will be kept securely in a	☐

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locked drawer at researcher's home. After my work has been examined and/or published, all data will be erased. 我理解所有转录的音频数据和研究笔记将存储在受密码保护的笔记本电脑里的加密文件夹中。原始录音和笔记将安全地保存在研究者家中带锁的抽屉里。在研究被审查和/或发布后，所有数据将被销毁。	
8. I agree to take part in the above study. 我同意参与以上研究。	☐

_____ _____ _____

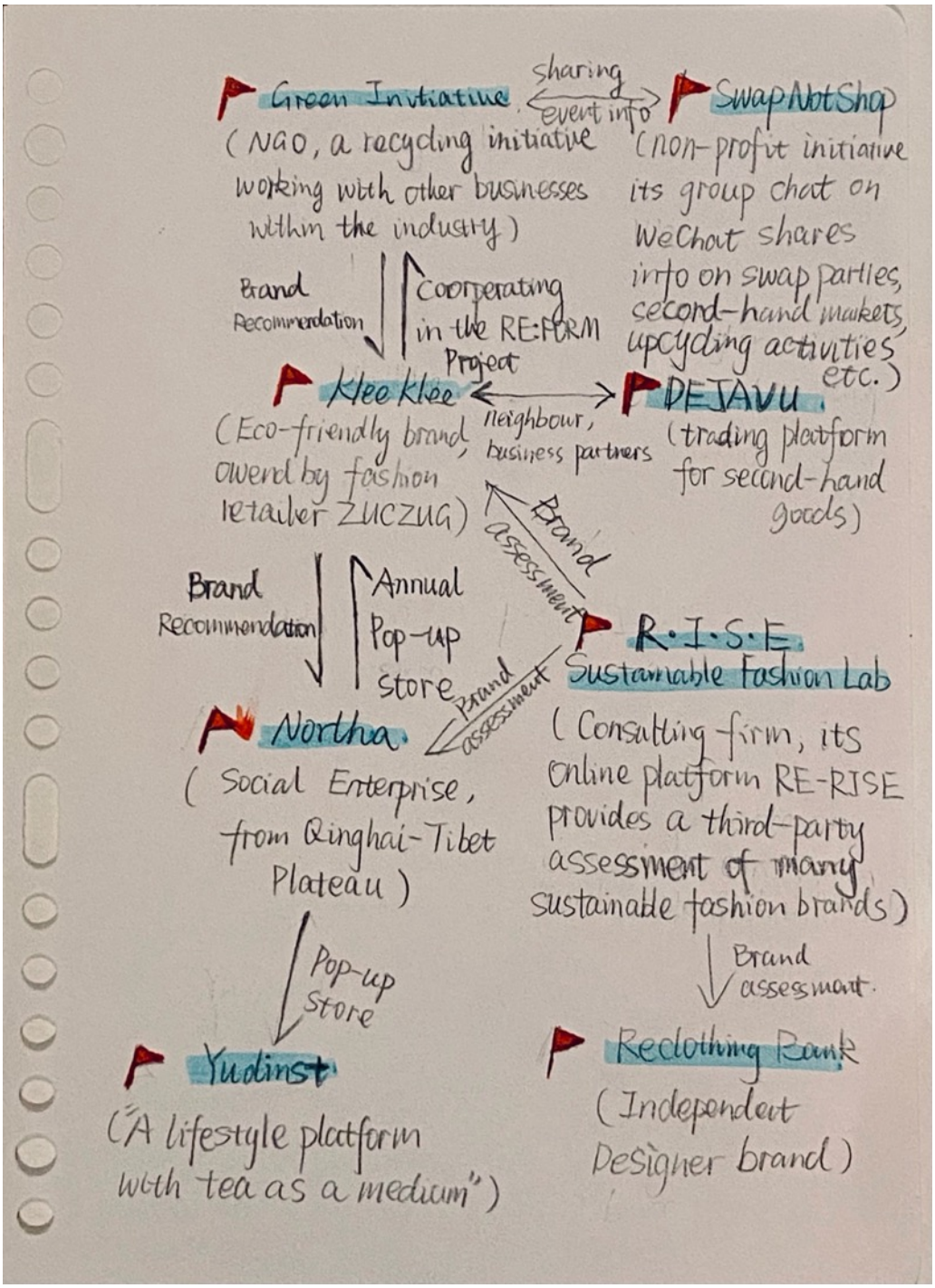
Name of Participant 参与者姓名 Date 日期 Signature 签名

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.
我确认参与者有机会提出有关该研究的任何问题，并且我已尽所能正确回答参与者所提出的所有问题。 我确认没有强迫他人同意参与本研究，并且参与者是自由自愿给予同意的。

Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent 研究者签名_____ **Date 日期** _____ Day/month/year

One copy of this form will be given to the participant and the original kept in the files of the researcher at Lancaster University
该表格的一份副本将提供给参与者，原件将保存在兰卡斯特大学研究人员的档案中

Appendix 3: Map of stakeholder relationships



Appendix 4: Sample guiding questions for interviews

Sample 1: Debut semi-structured interview with the project manager of the *Green Initiative*, 31 August 2019 (conducted in English)

Interview prompts:

1. Could you describe the history and the purpose of "RE:FROM"?
2. Who are the shareholders of your project? In whose interest do you operate?
3. Why do you call the project "RE: FORM"? How do you come up with that name?
4. Who is the target audience of your project? How do you make the recycling system available to them?
5. What is the purpose of the workshops, such as "REFORM Textile Waste, RETHINK Fashion Consumption", that you have organised? How did you operate them? What about their outcomes? By the way, are you going to organise one in the near future?
6. As one of the promoters of sustainable fashion in China, what do you think of the development of sustainable fashion in the market of Shanghai or other large coastal cities in China? Do you think it is popular among consumers there? Is it well-supported by government policy? Does the local community welcome it?
7. What do you think of the current media coverage of sustainable fashion and related issues in China? Do you think it is adequate enough? If not, why is the case? What are the most efficient channels/ways to promote the idea and products of sustainable fashion?
8. What do you think of Chinese consumers' (especially those from large coastal cities) involvement in promoting sustainability in the fashion industry? What kind of role do they play?

Sample 2: Semi-structured interview with an employee from *klee klee* who worked in marketing and social media communication, 9 December 2020 (conducted in Chinese)

Interview prompts:

1. Although I have learnt the background of your brand based on the introductory web pages on WeChat, could you please tell me about your brand in a few words? (How do you define your brand? What's the history of the brand? How did you decide on the brand name? How do you position yourself on the market? Where do you advertise?)
   虽然通过微信公众号已对 *klee klee* 有了初步了解，您是否能再简单介绍一下 *klee klee* 这个品牌？（您是如何定义它的？*klee klee* 的品牌历史？名称由来？市场定位是什么？主要通过哪些渠道进行品牌宣传？）
2. Your business practices are mainly focused on organic materials, sustainable production as well as social responsibility. How did you come up with this business model (strategy)? (What are the criteria you have for deciding which supplier (of raw materials) and producers you take?)

klee klee 致力于有机原材料、可持续生产以及社会责任三方面的发展，请问这样的商业模式（策略）是如何产生、形成的？ 你们在选择产品原材料供应商和生产者时秉承什么样的标准或原则？

3. What does 'value' mean to you in relation to *klee klee*?
   关于 *klee klee*（品牌理念、产品、运营模式 etc.），您觉得它的价值是什么？

Follow-up questions:

4. What is your understanding of "sustainability" within the fashion industry?
   请问您对时尚行业的"可持续"是如何理解的？
5. Why do you think "slowing down/klee klee" is the core value of your brand?
   为何"慢慢来"成为了 *klee klee* 的品牌核心价值观？
6. Who might be the targeted audience/customer of your brand? What influence do you believe you have made on their consumption habit and lifestyle? In what way?
   请问 *klee klee* 主要针对哪一类客户群体？您觉得品牌对这类客户的消费和生活习惯造成了什么影响？ 以一种什么方式？
7. What do you think of the current situation of high-end sustainable fashion in the market of coastal eastern cities, such as Shanghai, in China?
   请问您对当前中国东南沿海地区（如上海）的中高端可持续时尚的发展现况有何看法？
8. If you could point me some other similar enterprises or get me in touch with someone in your supply chain?
   为了更多地了解可持续时尚行业，请问您是否了解其它与 *klee klee* 类似的品牌并能介绍我认识吗？或者是你们的合作伙伴？

Sample 3: Semi-structured interview with the sales manager from *Norlha*, 17 May 2021 (conducted in Chinese)

Interview prompts:

1. How did *Norlha* come up with its current business model in the first place?
   Norlha 目前的商业模式在项目发展初期是如何形成的？(怎么萌生了这个想法？)
2. As far as you are concerned, what do you think of the relationship among environment, community, and business?
   从您的角度看，环境、社群、和商业这三者有着怎样的联系？
3. What does value mean to you in relation with *Norlha*?
   您觉得 *Norlha* 的价值具体体现在何处？

4. Who might be the targeted audience/customer of your brand? Whether there is any relationship between the brand and customers' choices and lifestyles and if so, what is this relationship like?
   Norlha 的目标客群是哪一类人？ 品牌与客户群体的消费选择和生活方式是否有联系？如有，是怎么样的联系？
5. What do you think of the situation of high-end sustainable fashion industry in the domestic market? Is there any difference between home and abroad and if so, in what ways they are different ?
   您觉得高端的可持续时尚产业在国内市场的发展状况如何？和国外市场相比是否有不同，如有，体现在哪些方面？
6. What's the distinctive value of *Norlha*, compared with other brands?
   Norlha 这个品牌或是它的产品和其他品牌相比，有何特殊品质？
7. In what ways do *Norlha* promote its products and communicate its core values to the public? I've read about those articles you shared on WeChat and Weibo. Besides, there is also the pop-up store, like the one I saw in *klee klee*.
   Norlha 是怎么推广自己的产品和并将自己的核心价值传递给大众？我在你们微信公众号和微博上看到许多推广品牌和产品的文章。还有就是上次在 *klee klee* 看到了你们的快闪店。

Sample 4: Semi-structured interview with a shop assistant from *klee klee*'s Anfu road store, 8 August 2021 (conducted in Chinese)

Interview prompts:

1. What's your partnership like with *Otex*? Are they one of your suppliers?
   奥特斯与 *klee klee* 的合作是怎么样的？是原材料供应商吗？
2. Why do you organise this exhibition?
   办展的目的/初衷是什么？
3. How do you introduce the exhibition to your customers?
   你们会怎么向顾客介绍这个展？
4. Generally speaking, do customers at the store pay special attention to this exhibition?
   店里的顾客对这个展览的关注度如何？有没有顾客专程到店来了解这个展览？
5. Are organic silk products popular among your customers at present?
   顾客喜欢你们的环保丝绸产品吗？
6. Follow-up: Whether this popularity is associated with the introduction and promotion of them to the public?
   它的受欢迎程度是否与你们对这种材料的科普宣传有关联？

Appendix 5: Sample interview transcript

The following is the full original transcript in Chinese from an interview with a *klee klee* employee responsible for marketing and social media communication. "R" denotes the researcher, and "P" refers to the participant. The one-hour interview took place on 9 December 2020, during my first visit to *klee klee*'s Anfu Road store. The conversation began with casual self-introductions, transitioned into a more focused semi-structured interview, and concluded with the participant providing a guided tour of the store and an introduction to the brand. The transcript presented here is from the semi-structured interview segment, which was audio-recorded with the participant's consent and lasted 19 minutes and 6 seconds. The English version is my own translation based on my interpretation of the participant's original responses.

Interview transcript, 9 December 2020

R: 我通过微信公众号了解到你的品牌，是否可以请您简单介绍一下品牌的历史或者说您是如何定义它的?

P: 那我现在讲的都是从我个人和我的职业角度来讲，*klee klee* 是一个做可持续环保的品牌，其实本来是属于服装领域的环节，最开始这样去做主要是因为大家在这个行业内也会看到很多服装的污染，然后就造成资源浪费的情况，所以最开始它是素然的一个系列，是手语系列，然后本身就是比较注重在舒适度、日常性、然后面料这样的，就是重视在这些方面，然后后面就是在，具体的时间我也忘了…16 年还是 15 年，公众号上面有，独立出来做了 *klee klee* 这个独立品牌，*klee klee* 它是藏语"慢慢来"的意思，然后我们的手是手语"慢慢来"的意思，所以核心就是希望大家能够在"快时尚"的环境下能够放慢脚步，找到自己真正喜欢的衣服，然后尽量地去减少购买的频率、日常衣物的使用频率。其实可持续的话现在主要就是两块，一个是材料的研究和循环，另外一个方面，我们是希望，嗯我们不会去做材料的一些回收，这方面的东西，然后我们是希望能够在原材料方面就是去找到一些更环保、更可持续的东西，然后减少这种浪费的环境债。

R: 你刚才提到可持续的原材料作为你们的一种（商业）模式之一，我看到公众号上提到了三块，原材料、可持续生产和社会责任，你们在选择产品原材料供应商和生产者时会秉承怎么样的标准或者原则?

P: 因为现在其实慢慢做可持续环保的也比较多一些，因为我不是在做设计师这一块，但是我了解到的资料是，比如说我们的羽绒，是和人道羽绒 RDS 合作的，它所有的羽绒，他们是会有自己的品牌认证和一些信息的公示的，比如说它不会去把鹅杀掉，他们官网会有一些信息。

R: 他们是一个怎么样的组织？是供应商吗?

P: 他们应该是一个类似于协会，他们有自己的，我查一下（手机上搜寻 RDS 网站），就是会有一个认证在，通过这个认证，应该他会有一些，然后他会有一个羽绒的标准，然后他应该是会去约束他的供应商，会有怎么样的要求在，然后像我们的环保棉就是会有全球认证，环保棉的全球认证也是有一个这种，机构，他们专门是在做审核，然后包括有机真丝，也会是在四川，然后我们的供应商，我们也会去考察，因为毕竟环保原料这种东西，就是来源比较多，你可能就是需要通过某些认证，然后某些是你自己去考察，（…）他们有些数据要去做，就是选择。

R: 所以你们都会去实地考察吗？

P: 对，然后像，也不是都会啦，像一些比如说我们植物染，这种工厂，我们都会实地去，然后来源，有机真丝这种，我们大部分的工厂，就是可能他能够让你实地认证的我们都会去看一下，包括在我们最开始 *klee klee* 创始初期，然后去找到一些满意的原材料，然后包括，就是选料的环节我们的主理人其实还挺，投入了很多心力的。然后其它的就是，比如说通过一些认证，他自己就会有一些约束的标准，那么它本身的品质和在道德层面上就会有保证的。

R: 所以这样的标准有怎么样的？

P: 就是你也可以之后去看一些他们的官网，比如说他们会保证，就是所有我们的动物毛都是不伤害动物本身的情况下获取，或者比如说环保棉他全称认证是保证从棉花的种植的三年内不施加农药、化肥，然后在采摘、制成、后面染色的过程当中都会是有机，不伤害环境和土地的。

R: 然后我还感兴趣的是，关于 *klee klee* 这个品牌，您觉得它的价值体现在何处？

P: 价值吗？

R: 嗯，比较大的一个问题。

P: 我自己是觉得它的品牌价值可能就是，就创造一种大家可以对"可持续"进行讨论的语境吧，因为现在其实就我自己看到的话，有很多可持续、包括环保方面，还是一些，就是时尚行业内或是一些大品牌，比如说类似于耐克，比如说今年我们要做一个环保材料，或者说对塑料什么进行回收，但是他其实，我自己认为啊，他只是在他整个大的营销环境当中做的其中的一个 campaign，然后他有一定的道德责任在，但是我们是从根本上希望从可持续出发，然后希望大家，就是包括我们的客人，当然你肯定还是会继续有消费行为，但是你要怎么为你自己的消费负责。就是我们会尽量地跟客人介绍说我们有什么样的理念，然后我们客人，就是有些也会问啊，那你们羊毛是从哪里来的怎么的，就是去增进大家在这个环境当中的一些了解和讨论吧。

R: 你刚才提到讨论，你们是通过哪些渠道进行品牌和产品的宣传的？

P: 其实我们在宣传方面没有很特别地说要去，比如说联系媒体呀，或怎么样，我们都不会主动地去进行媒体的报道，我们一方面主要是，嗯，我们自己的这个店，就是在街边，然后现在人流会比较大，有兴趣的客人，或者像今天这种不是很忙的情况下我们都会尽量地去和客人聊天啊，去介绍，店铺内的沟通会是这样。然后另外一方面是我们所有的衣服上都会有一个水洗标，然后上面我们都会写上，你等会儿可以看一下，比如说是环保棉，然后下面就会用两三句话大致介绍一下环保棉是什么，然后我们产品也会有，比如说原色，每个产品都会有一个类似于环保理念的东西，然后放在上面，可能大家就会好奇一下，那这个是什么东西，然后每个月我们也会有一个，几乎每个月吧，我们会有一个 pop-up，这个 pop-up 都是和我们有相同理念的品牌来做，然后你现在看到的是诺乐，其实他们也是从原材料到制成环保到社会责任都会涉及，他们是一个 B Corp，他们主要是在甘南那边致力于营造当地的藏族社区，他们以前都是游牧民族的，现在有一个比较稳定的社区，他们所有的原材料都是牦牛，身上梳下来或者是掉落的牦牛绒，都是自然脱落的，然后所有的，你看视频，他的制成过程都是由当地人进行手工制作的。所以我们都会跟这样的品牌合作，上一个合作是跟碧山供销社，因为他们和 *D & Department* 合作，我们三方一起做的，从前年，去年开始吧，有一个一起做的关于 *D & Department* 长效设计的这样一个理念的器物展，每年都会做，基本上每个月都会有这样的展览。像这种展览有时候会有媒体主动地去发布，然后我们自己的平台就是公众号、然后是素然的公众号，然后就是会希望有，嗯因为其实本身对这种理念感兴趣的人也是少部分，但是你可能在店铺会有些客人进来，他也会更多地了解到不同的做可持续的这种品牌。然后我们一般布展的时候都会有一个交流会，就是请到一些人到店里面来做一些展示，然后分享这样。

R: 就是在这个店铺里吗？

P: 对，这个小小的店铺（笑）。

R: 很有意思，那你觉得 *klee klee* 的市场定位或者说它的客户群体，是针对哪一类人群？

P: 我们现在接触到的客户群体可能就是属于，一部分是，因为现在的年轻人其实对可持续大家都比较有一些环保意识，应该算有三部分，我先说一下我们目前有的客户群，因为我们其实是做女装出生的，所以在衣服的版型和设计方面其实是有基础在的，一部分就是普通的客人，他觉得这个衣服穿着好看，然后他就会买；另外一个部分是，他可能进来了之后了解到可持续的这种概念，他可能觉得就是很想要了解或体验或支持一下，然后他也会进行购买；那我们大部分的客群就是收入可能是中等、中等以上，然后有一定经济实力，然后比较，就是具有事业性，或者是家境比较优渥的女性，但也只能说目

前整个品牌的销售基础还是在大家对于产品的认可上，因为它是可持续而购买的人会比较少，但是会有很多人是因为买了这个衣服觉得它很舒适、很好穿，然后再去了解说这是一个可持续的品牌，然后我觉得它对于我们来说算是一个，就是目前来说感觉是一个标签吧，会有一些客人进到店里说“哦，这就是那个做环保的牌子”，这种感觉，然后我们是在定价方面可能是在中等偏上一点点，我们是不太希望说，当然一直会面临到很多人说那你们做可持续是不是因为这个理念才把价格提这么高，但其实是因为，一部分是因为本身原料的标准和获取的这种途径就是会比一般的寻找原料会麻烦一些，然后中间会有一些隐形成本；然后另外一个方面是我们希望在，就是不希望它因为可持续而成为某一种特例，就它仍是一个服装，只是说希望大家从中能有这样一个理念，所以定价还是按照产品本身的定价在做，但是也不希望大家是因为便宜或是怎么样才选择去购买这个产品。就是希望大家，其实我觉得诺乐他们有一个理念也是挺好的，因为他们的东西在普通人看来也很贵，他们一条围巾也要好几千块，但是他们就觉得是你在你自己的定价范围内，就合理的定价范围内把价格定到比较高的位置其实是有利于你整个产品，你的理念和你的品牌的良性生存，因为你整个团队、然后你所支撑的理念其实是都，要继续发展是需要资源去支撑的。包括我们像做，之前那个，我们有一个这个（指海报），我们的社会…就是公益，社会责任方面，就是这个 *naze naze*， 它是我们和北京当代艺术基金会合作的一个独龙族妇女的织毯项目，这一个项目我们的收益都是完全透明的，这个收益都是全部给到独龙族妇女和当地社区的发展，所以你在做社会责任这方面其实你也是需要人力去投入的，那这个成本也是需要你团队自己去 cover 掉的。

R: 我还有最后几个问题，你对当前东南沿海或者就说上海这一块的可持续时尚这一行业的看法是怎么样的？从刚才你的回答当中可以看出很多顾客先是认识这个牌子的衣服，然后再慢慢了解你们的理念这些，那你对这个市场的整体发展是如何看待的？你觉得它的发展怎么样？

P: 就是现在我们了解到的做…就我自己了解到的做服装的可持续品牌，就纯粹从源头开始做可持续的，其实了解的不是很多，因为除了一些比如说大的品牌，在做他们绿色或环保的项目以外，就是独立的品牌其实不是太多，就从原材料就开始完全环保的，然后像那种 free tech 这种就不算。但是其实我觉得，怎么讲呢，现在对于各个，包括看到的那种微信上面的推广，也不是推广，就是媒体的关注也会更多，由媒体传播出来的，我觉得大家对于这个议题的关注也会更多，那么以前大家的观念就会说我只是买一个衣服， 我觉得这些它怎么样都无所谓，然后但是现在大家会，觉得可持续它会是一个附加价值，甚至以后它可能会成为一个人做选择的主导价值，就是你可能，年轻一代的人，因为现在自然环境也在恶化，就是我身边会有很多人，包括有很多年轻的顾客他们都会把这个产品是否道德、是否可持续作为他们很重要的一个选择标准，虽然现在整个市场上的…怎么讲，这个范围还不够大，但我

觉得应该是大家以后发展的一个趋势吧，因为有很多品牌也在出自己的，包括一些快时尚的品牌都会出自己的环保线，所以我觉得应该还…情况以后还挺乐观的。

R: 然后最后一个问题，你刚才提到快时尚的环保线，就从你个人或者整个品牌的角度来看，你们和快时尚环保线的区别是怎么样的？

P: 其实…我就讲我个人的观点，因为我觉得像那种快时尚的品牌，因为我自己是不买那种衣服的，我是觉得它本身是从一个，就是极速盈利的角度下，然后面临到这种市场环境的改变，然后它觉得在一个，可能是迫于营销压力，或者是它整个的财务方面的情况，它需要继续去拓展它的市场而，觉得要追随这种社会的变化而做的一个改变，但它其实核心跟它以前最开始做快时尚品牌的经营核心是一样的，那就是我要怎么去找到市场的那个，就是点，然后我要去做这个事情，但是我觉得像做，一开始就决定要做可持续的品牌，那它就根本的理念是不一样的，就是我们是要做可持续这个事情，但是我们要做这个事情的基础上怎么生存下去。

The English translation version

R: I knew your brand through your introductory web pages on WeChat. Could you please tell me about your history? And how do you define your brand?

P: What I'm talking about now is from my personal and professional point of view. *klee klee* is a sustainable and environmentally friendly brand. In fact, it belongs to the clothing industry. At first, it was established because there is a lot of pollution in this industry, resulting in a waste of resources. So at the beginning, it was one series of *ZUCZUG*, which was called Shouyu (meaning sign language) series. It paid more attention to comfort, dailiness, and fabrics. They paid attention to these aspects, and then later, I have forgotten the specific year...maybe 2016 or 2015? You can double-check this on our official account on WeChat…*klee klee* was founded as an independent brand. *klee klee* means "take it slow" in Tibetan language, and our hand (in the logo) means "take your time" in sign language. So the key message here is to hope that everyone can slow down in a social environment under the influence of fast fashion, find clothes that one really likes, and try to reduce purchases and the frequency of daily use of clothes. In fact, there are two main areas in our (efforts of) sustainability. One is researching on and recycling of the materials. On the other hand, we hope, um, we won't do some recycling (of clothes). In this regard, we hope to be able to find the raw materials which are more environmentally friendly and sustainable at the very beginning, and then reduce this wasteful environmental debt.

R: You have mentioned using sustainable raw materials is one of your business strategies. According to your official account, you mainly focus on organic materials, sustainable production as well as social responsibility. What standards or criteria do you follow when selecting the suppliers or manufacturers?

P: Nowadays there is actually an increasing number of corporations who gradually turn focus onto the sustainability and environmental protection. Although I don't work as a designer, the information I have got is, for example, our down is in cooperation with RDS (Responsible Down Standard), and they certify and provide some information of the down, for example, it promises not to kill the goose. Their official website has more information about this.

R: What kind of organization are they? Are they supplier?

P: They should be a kind of association. They have their own…Let me check…they made some standards for selecting the down and issue the certificate (to their suppliers). So they will restrict their suppliers by some kinds of requirements. Also, our organic cotton has a similar global certificate. There is one global association which certifies the organic cotton. In addition, for example, our organic silk originates in Sichuan province. We have visited our suppliers in person, because after all, there are various sources of environmentally friendly raw material. You may need certain certification, and you need to visit some of them yourself. There are some decisions to make.

R: So do you visit every supplier you work with?

P: Yes, and like, well, not every, of course. Like the plants of our vegetable dyes, this kind of factory, we will visit them in person, or some suppliers of raw material, like organic silk, so we will visit most of our factories which they may be able to let us go there and inspect. At the very beginning of *klee klee*'s establishment, our manager and the team put a lot of efforts into finding the satisfactory raw materials. On the other hand, for example, through certain certification, some standards have already been there, so its own quality and ethics can be guaranteed.

R: What are those standards specifically?

P: You can also check them on their official website later. For example, they guarantee that all the animal fur we used was obtained without harming the animals themselves, or for example, the certificate of organic cotton guarantees no pesticides or chemical fertilizers will be applied to the cotton within the first three years since it was grown. And the process of picking, producing and dyeing will all be organic, and will not harm the environment and the land.

R: What does 'value' mean to you in relation to *klee klee*?

P: Value? (Pause)

R: Yeah, well, a very broad question.

P: I personally believe our brand value is perhaps about creating a context in which everyone can discuss "sustainability", because now, as far as I know, although there are many topics related to sustainability, including environmental protection… it is still within the fashion industry or by some big brands, such as *Nike*, say, they decide to do research on an environmentally friendly material, or to recycle plastic. But they actually…I think, it is only one of their campaigns under the current marketing situation. And they have certain responsibility to do so. However, what we hope is to start from the concept of sustainability fundamentally, and we hope that everyone, including our customers, to be responsible for their own purchase, though you will definitely continue to buy. We try our best to introduce our ideas to the customers and they will also ask us questions like "where does your wool come from?" so as to raise everyone's awareness (of sustainability) and invite more discussions on it in this context.

R: So through what channels do you introduce your brand and products to the public?

P: In fact, we don't put many efforts into the publicity, such as contacting the media, or whatever-we would not take the initiative to ask for more media coverage. On the one hand, we mainly, um, our own store is on a busy street, which attracts many customers to come in. If they are interested or if we are not very busy, like today, we will chat with them to introduce (our brand/product). So the conversation in the store will be like this. On the other hand, there is a washing label on all our clothes, which writes…you can take a look later, for example, if it is made of organic cotton, there will be a general introduction to it in two or three sentences. Each product features one concept related to environmental protection, like our series of *Yuan Se* (meaning original colour), and then everyone may be curious and wonder what this is. Also, every month we have a…almost every month…there is a pop-up store held in our store. This event is held by a brand with the same philosophy as ours. What you can see now is *Norlha*, whose business also involves organic materials, sustainable production, and social responsibility. They are B Corp (Benefit-Corporation), mainly committed themselves to building a local Tibetan community in Southern Gansu province. They (referring to the local people) used to be nomads, but now they live in a relatively stable community. All of their products are made of yak wool, which is combed or dropped from the yak naturally. And all the products, as you can see from the video, are handmade by local people. So we cooperate with brands like them. The business partner we worked with of our last event was *Bishan Supply and Marketing Co*., and they cooperate with *D&Department*, so our three parties worked together. From the year before…actually last year, we have held an exhibition on long-term design each year. So basically we hold such exhibition every month. Sometimes the media will report this. Well, we mainly publicize those events on our own platforms-the official account of *klee klee* and *ZUCZUG*. We hope to, um, well you know, because in fact, people who are interested in this concept only takes up a small proportion, but there might be some customers who come across our store on the street, and they can also learn more about different brands

dedicated to sustainability. When we launch an exhibition, we usually will have a small forum to invite some people to introduce the exhibits and share their ideas.

R: In this store?

P: Yes, in this small store (laughter).

R: Sounds interesting. Who might be your targeted customer?

P: At present, our customer group is, well, partly, because young people today actually pay more attention to sustainability. There should be three parts. Let me first talk about our current customer group. We were once a brand selling women's clothing, which laid the foundation for the style and design of our clothes. So some of them are just ordinary consumers who buy our clothes simply because they think they look good; for the other part, some may just come across our store and learn the idea of sustainability. They make purchases maybe because they want to learn more about our product, experience it or support us. The majority of our customers are women who has an income above the average. They possess the economic capital with their own career, or coming from a wealthy family. I would say the current sales of the entire brand is still based on everyone's recognition of our products. Only few people buy our product for sustainability, but many buy it because they think our clothes are comfortable to wear, and then they learn that we are a sustainable brand. At the moment, I think for us, it's more like a label. Some customers will come to our store and say something like "Oh, this is the brand dedicated to environmental protection". And our price may be a little bit above the average, we don't expect to… of course, some people may doubt by saying "Is it because you align yourself with the idea of sustainability, you raise your price so high?" ,but in fact, it is partly because the standard of raw materials is higher than the ordinary clothes and it takes more efforts to obtain them, so there are some hidden costs in the whole process; and another reason is that we hope… well, we don't want our product to become an exception because of sustainability. It is still a piece of clothing and we hope everyone will raise their awareness (of sustainability). So the pricing is still based on the product itself. We don't want to see people buy our product just because it is cheap or other reasons. I just hope that everyone, actually, I think Norlha has a very good point. Their products are also very expensive in the eyes of ordinary people-their scarf costs a few thousands of yuan. They think it is actually beneficial to set the price to the highest position within a reasonable pricing range, which forms a virtuous circle for your product, your value, and your brand, because your entire team and the value you support actually need resources to develop. Including what we currently engage in…we have this (referring to the posters), our social responsibility project-*naze naze*, it is a project cooperated with Beijing Contemporary Art Foundation, which helps female Dulong weavers. Our income from this project is completely transparent. All profits will go to improve the livelihood of Dulong women and support their local community. So actually you need resources to invest in the area of social responsibility, whose cost also needs to be covered by your team.

R: What do you think of the current situation of high-end sustainable fashion in the market of coastal eastern cities in China, for example, Shanghai? From your answer, I can see a lot of your customers knew your products before they learn more about your ideas. What do you think of the development of this market?

P: What we know about the brands dedicated to sustainable fashion is... well, as far as I know, there are only few brands that work on applying the sustainable raw materials and producing processes. In fact, I haven't heard many except for some big brands, which have projects on environmental protection. There are actually not too many independent brands which commits themselves to sustainability by using the raw materials from the very beginning. But actually, I think, how to say it, nowadays, you can see different kinds of promotion on WeChat, not promotion, I mean media coverage on this issue increases. Thanks to the media, people started to be more concerned with this topic. In the past, people believed they just bought a piece of clothing and they didn't care about how it had been produced. However, now everyone believes sustainability is an added value, and in the future it may even become the determining factor of one's consumption choice, especially for the younger generation, since our natural environment is deteriorating. Many people, including our young customers will consider whether this product is ethical and sustainable as a very important criterion for them when making consumption choice. Although the entire market...how to say, is not big enough, I think it will be a trend in the future, because many brands also have their own…including some fast fashion brands…they have their own production line dedicated to environmental protection, so I think it can be quite promising in the future.

R: Ok, I have one more question. You have mentioned fast fashion and their production line dedicated to environmental protection. From your own or your brand's perspective, what differences are there between the fast fashion brand and yours?

P: Actually... I'll just talk about my personal point of view, because I think, like those fast fashion brands, because I don't buy that kind of clothes myself, I think profitability is still the motivation of the fast fashion. The market environment changes, and they need to continue expanding their market and follow the trend accordingly when they are under the pressure of change or they have to meet some financial challenges. They do change, but their core actually has no difference from the one they had as a fast fashion brand at the beginning- to find the market preference and then quickly respond it. However, brands which decided to be sustainable at first are fundamentally different, that is, we want to be sustainable, whereas we also need to consider how we can survive in the market with sustainability in mind.

Appendix 6: Sample interview notes

When an informant was unwilling to be recorded, I took notes during the interview to capture the key points and later used a voice recorder on my phone to record additional details while they were still fresh in my memory. On one occasion, during a phone interview with *Norlha*'s sales manager, a technical issue occurred with the recording device, which I only discovered after the interview had ended. Fortunately, I had maintained the habit of taking notes throughout the interview. Upon realising that the audio file could not be played, I immediately attempted to recall additional details and compiled a more comprehensive interview memo. I then followed up with the informant to verify and confirm the information, ensuring that the notes accurately reflected the informant's intended meaning as much as possible. The phone interview lasted approximately 15 minutes and was conducted in Chinese. Notes were taken in Chinese during the conversation, and the English translation was added afterwards during the note compilation process. In the interview notes below, "R" denotes the researcher, and "P" refers to the participant.

Interview notes, 17 May 2021

R: 目前的商业模式在项目发展初期是如何形成的？(怎么萌生了这个想法？)

P:

- 我们的创始人德清当时收到母亲的委托，2004 年来到仁多玛村试点，收集牦牛绒，牦牛绒在当地是非常珍贵的材料。德清的母亲是法国人，所以她知道这边的情况，她的父亲是藏族人，她在美国长大，但又回到自己的故乡，她也是藏族人，开始做 *Norlha* 的项目。
- *Norlha* 主要是起源于德清母亲 Kim 的理念，它不是一个纯商业的项目，而是一个社会型企业，这样的理念能帮助本地人就业、可持续发展，它也符合佛教的一些观点，Kim 是佛教徒，佛教也是藏族的传统宗教，所以它既结合了宗教和传统，又融合了现代的可持续发展理念。

R: 从您的角度看，环境、社群、和商业这三者有着怎样的联系？

P:

- 一是对当地人，*Norlha* 不改变当地人原本的生活环境，他们也不用外出打工，可以在现代化的经营管理模式下，在本地工作。
- 二是从环境角度上看，*Norlha* 无论是从生产过程还是原材料的采集都是环保、可持续的。

R: 您觉得 *Norlha* 的价值具体体现在何处？

P:

- 纯手工
- 不是一种商业理念，它强调的是一种循环，这个与佛教理念也有关。*Norlha* 经营得到的利益都会回馈到本地人，改善他们的家庭经济。而且这个项目从开始就打算一直做下去的，不是说创始人赚到钱之后就离开了，他们也一直与牧民们一起生活在这里。
- 产品本身的品质，*Norlha* 工作坊坐落在牧区，这样一个原始的环境，但定位却是欧洲的高端市场，从商品产地到市场的联系是非常直接的，这是由于它本身的魅力，吸引了市场。*Norlha* 的产品有着不一样的款式，它在设计上融合了藏族元素，又有国际化的经营管理团队，是原始产品国际化、民族化的结果。

R: *Norlha* 的目标客群是哪一类人？ 品牌与客户群体的消费选择和生活方式是否有联系？如有，是怎么样的联系？

P:

- 主要是中高端市场，*Norlha* 的定价相对较高的。
- 这些客户更关注产品背后的故事，他们一般经济条件较好，有较高的教育背景，也乐于接受环保可持续的理念。
- 品牌与客群的消费选择和生活方式确实是有联系的。

R: 您觉得高端的可持续时尚产业在国内市场的发展状况如何？和国外市场相比是否有不同，如有，体现在哪些方面？

P: 目前的确是有越来越多的可持续时尚品牌在国内市场上发展起来，越来越多的人关注到这个问题，一些品牌的宣传也越来越多，但他们的真实性是有疑问的。

R: *Norlha* 这个品牌或是它的产品和其他品牌相比，有何特殊品质？

- 原始的材料，过程是可溯源的
- 国际化的运营模式
- 藏族文化元素

R: *Norlha* 是怎么推广自己的产品和并将自己的核心价值传递给大众？我在你们微信公众号和微博上看到许多推广品牌和产品的文章。还有就是上次在 *klee klee* 看到了你们的快闪店。

P: 除了你说的社交媒体、pop-up store 之外，我们的品牌宣传主要还是在仁多玛，我们的工作坊，还有就是在夏丹的 *Norden* 酒店，它们是 *Norlha* 的姐妹品牌，一家高端型酒店，主要推崇的是环保可持

续的理念，酒店里使用的所有产品都是环保的。顾客来到这边亲自体验这些环保的产品，也会对我们的产品做进一步的了解。这部分顾客会成为 *Norlha* 比较稳固的客群。

The English translation version

R: How did *Norlha* come up with its current business model in the first place?

P:

- With her mother's mission, our founder Dechen came to Ritoma Village in 2004 to collect yak wool. Yak wool is a very precious material in the local area. Dechen's mother is French and she married a Tibetan, so she knew the situation here. Dechen grew up in the US, but she is also a Tibetan in a sense. So she returned back to her hometown and started to work on the *Norlha* project.
- *Norlha* is originated from the idea of Dechen's mother, Kim. It is not a purely commercial project, but a social enterprise. This idea can help local people find jobs and promote a kind of sustainable development, which is in line with some Buddhist viewpoints. Kim is a Buddhist. Buddhism is also the traditional religion of Tibetans, so it combines the religion and tradition with the modern concept of sustainable development.

R: As far as you are concerned, what do you think of the relationship among environment, community, and business?

P:

- First, as far as the locals are concerned, *Norlha* does not change the original living environment of them, and they do not need to leave their own environment to make a living. They can work locally under the modern business management.
- Second, from an environmental point of view, *Norlha* is environmentally friendly and sustainable in both the production process and the collection of raw materials.

R: What does value mean to you in relation with *Norlha*?

P:

- Purely hand-made
- *Norlha* is not about a business idea, because it emphasizes a kind of circularity, which is also related to the Buddhist viewpoints. The profits will return to the local people and improve the financial condition of their families. In addition, *Norlha* is a long-running project. It is not like, for example, the founders came here to do the business and then they left after making money. Dechen and her family have been living here with the herdsmen since its very beginning.
- The quality of the product itself speaks. *Norlha* workshop is located in a pastoral area, although in such a primitive environment, it positions itself in a high-end market in Europe. From the origin of the product to the end market, the connection is very direct. This is due to its own charm, which attracts the market a lot. *Norlha*'s products have its unique style. It incorporates Tibetan elements into its design and has

an international management team. It is the result of globalization and localization of the original product.

R: Who might be the targeted audience/customer of your brand? Whether there is any relationship between the brand and customers' choices and lifestyles and if so, what is this relationship like?

P:

- Our position is mainly in the high- and middle-end market. *Norlha*'s pricing is relatively high.
- Our customers pay more attention to the stories behind the products. They generally have better economic conditions, have a higher education background, and are willing to accept the concepts of environmental protection and sustainability.
- There is indeed an connection between the brand and the consumer choice and their lifestyle.

R: What do you think of the situation of high-end sustainable fashion industry in the domestic market?

P: At present, there are indeed more and more sustainable fashion brands developing in the domestic market. People nowadays concern about this problem, and some brands are putting much efforts on promoting the image of helping the environmental protection, but I think the authenticity of some is questionable.

R: What's the distinctive value of *Norlha*, compared with other brands?

P:

- Original materials and traceable production process
- International business model of operating and management
- Tibetan cultural element

R: In what ways do *Norlha* promote its products and communicate its core values to the public? I've read about those articles you shared on WeChat and Weibo. Besides, there is also the pop-up store, like the one I saw at *klee klee*'s store.

P: In addition to the social media and the pop-up store you mentioned, our brand promotion is mainly at our workshop in Ritoma and also at Norden hotel in Xiadan, which is the sister brand of *Norlha*. It is a high-end hotel, mainly advocating the concepts of environmental protection and sustainability. All products used in the hotel are environmentally friendly. Customers who come here to personally experience these environmentally friendly products will also have a better understanding of our products. Those customers will become one of the stable parts of *Norlha*'s customer base.

Appendix 7: Sample field notes

Sample 1 Participatory approach: In-person

Date: 8 August 2021

Place: *klee klee* & friends, Anfu Road store

Event: Exhibition, called “Life at a Biodynamic Silk Farm”

Physical space	店门口的橱窗上贴有展览的海报，进门左边的墙面上是介绍有机真丝的文字，墙面前方的桌子上摆放着三叠宣传册（一本介绍 *klee klee* 品牌历史，两本海报大小的画册，介绍 let’s blue 和 nazi nazi 项目）；右边的墙面是关于生物动力学农场循环系统的示意图，前方桌面上展示了生物动力学的启动剂（有两件为实物，其中牛角内有牛粪-启动剂之一），桌子边上有一台电脑，播放着介绍生物动力学农场的视频。除了进门处左右两边，店铺的中间区域也有专门的展台，展台上摆放着环保真丝产品，还有一些洗护方法的介绍，边上陈列着洗护产品（来自合作品牌），展台下方展示了一些设计类的书籍，展台上方还悬挂着展板，印有关于农场的介绍性文字。 There is an exhibition poster on the window at the entrance of the store. On the wall to the left of the entrance, there is the printed text introducing the organic silk. On the table in front of the wall, there are three stacks of brochures (one introducing *klee klee*; the other two poster-size booklets introducing the brand’s *let’s blue* and *nazi nazi* project). The wall to the right is a printed diagram of the biodynamic farm circulation system, and the photos of many biodynamic preparations (BD) are displayed on the front desk (besides, there are two real objects, one of which is some manure stored in a horn). There is a computer near the table, playing a video about the biodynamic farm in Sichuan province. In addition to the left and right sides of the entrance, there is a special exhibition stand in the middle of the store. The organic silk products are displayed on the stand. There some text introducing how to wash and care the silk products alongside with some

	laundry care products from their business partner displayed. Some books about design can be found under the stand. Two display boards are hung above the stand with some text about the biodynamic farm.
People	两位销售，一位店长，另有两位其他工作人员。 在我参与活动期间（1 点 50 到 2 点 30，大约 40 分钟），进店的顾客数量大概不到 20 人，大部分顾客只是进店逛了一圈，有些关注到了店内的展览和真丝产品。顾客中 30 岁左右的年轻人居多，还有一些游客（进门询问附近 *Brandy Melville* 的店铺位置）。 Two salespeople, one store manager, and two other staff members During my visit (from 1:50 pm to 2:30 pm, about 40 minutes), the number of customers was probably less than 20 people. Most of them just strolled around the store and some indeed noticed the exhibition and the silk products. They are mostly women around 30. Besides, some tourists entered the store just for asking the location of *Brandy Melville* (an American brand which is very popular among young girls currently).

Activities of people	**The interaction among people**
1. 我进店后向店员说明来意，店员同意我对店铺进行拍照，但需要先整理一下展台上的商品。 After I entered the store, I explained my intention to the staff. They allowed me to take photos of the store, but they said they needed to tidy up the exhibition stand first. 2. 店内的客流量不算很大，我在店内期间没能观察到店员主动与顾客交流产品或者展览，基本上顾客都以自行光顾为主，有些顾客只是进门了解一下就离开了，没有遇到顾客试衣的情况。 The customer flow was not very large during my stay. I did not observe the case where the salesperson actively communicated with customers about	店内的一位销售成为了我的被访者，我向她询问了本期展览的一些情况。 一开始她建议我周一直接与晋琳谈会更好，因为我之前直接与晋琳对接，她会更熟悉我的情况，但我表示问题比较简短，只是做一个大致的了解。随后，被访者与店长（坐在门后的桌子那边）沟通之后表示愿意与我聊一下。 我先向她简单介绍了我的研究课题，她坐在我对面的位置，一边听我讲一边翻阅着手里的宣传册。她表示不愿意录音，访谈结束后解释原因一是因为店内环境音比较嘈杂，二是担心自己讲太快、讲不好，表示晋琳肯定讲得更好。

products or the exhibition. Instead, customers looked at the products and the exhibition themselves quietly. Most customers just walked around without staying for too long. I did not observe any one who tried on the clothes either. 3. 店员表示周日有整理清算的工作，能接受我采访的时间比较有限，店长坐在电脑前处理工作，其他人在看店。最后与我沟通的被访者是店内的销售，她简单解答了我的一些问题。 The salespeople said that they are usually very busy on Sundays, so the time available for my interview could not be very long . The manager sited in front of the computer, handling her work, while others were watching the store. Finally, one of the salespeople agreed to talk with me briefly.	谈话正式开始后，被访者在慢慢表现出对参与此研究的热情，在介绍、回答问题的过程中明显放下戒备（露出笑容，谈话结束时主动询问我的基本情况、是如何了解他们品牌的），最后还将手里的宣传册送给我，说可能会对我的研究有帮助。 I got a chance to interview with one salesperson about some issues of the exhibition. At the beginning, she suggested that it would be better for me to talk with Jinlin (my previous informant) directly on Monday, because I had directly contacted with Jinlin before, and she would be more familiar with my project, but I said that it doesn't matter and the questions are simple, just help me to have a general understanding, etc. . Then, she went to the store manager (sitting at the table near the entrance), maybe for getting the permission from her. A few seconds later, she came to me and expressed her willingness to talk with me. I briefly introduced my research topic to her again. She sat opposite me and read the brochure while listening my self-introduction. When I asked if I could record the interview, she rejected it. When the interview finished, she explained that the ambient sound at the store was relatively noisy, besides, she worried that she would speak too fast or not very well when being recorded, believing that Jin Lin can talk better than her. After we talked for a while, the interviewee gradually showed her enthusiasm for

		participating in this research, and she obviously let go of her guards (e.g. showing a smile, and asking me about my project and where I know about their brand.). At the end of our talk, she gave me the brochure that she was reading, saying that it might be helpful.
Impressions and thoughts	整个展览主要以文字、视频、图像和实物（牛角、堆肥、有机真丝产品）的形式呈现，向顾客展示了有机真丝的来源和其背后的生物动力学原理，是对品牌宣扬的“可持续环保”理念的一种直观的溯源和展现。我在店内观察期间看到一些顾客关注到了展区中的产品和文字介绍，但没有见到他们与店员的直接互动交流。顾客以年轻女性居多，相比周日周边热闹的店铺（顾客需要排队入场），*klee klee* 的顾客不算很多。有些顾客在看到我对布展拍照后也会驻足观看，还有几个游客进店询问 BM 的店铺位置，这与上次晋琳和我介绍的情况一样，周边商圈的影响增加了店铺的人气，让 *klee klee* 品牌既处于一种热闹、流行、话题度高的商业氛围，又保持着自身安静、小众、独特的品牌属性。 The entire exhibition is mainly presented in the form of text, video, image and real object (a horn, some biodynamic compost and organic silk products) to show customers the original production process of organic silk and the biodynamic principle behind it. So the brand’s advocated values of sustainability and environmental protection can be traced back and introduced to the public. During my participant observation at the store, I saw some customers dose notice the exhibits and the text, but I did not witness any direct interaction between customers and the staff. Some customers stopped to look closely at exhibition board perhaps when seeing me taking photos. Compared with the busy shops nearby (the customers had to queue to enter the store), *klee klee* was relatively quiet on Sunday. A few tourists came to the store to ask about the location of BM’s store, which is the same as what had been mentioned by Jinlin last time. The influence of the surrounding businesses has increased the store’s popularity, putting it into a lively and topical business atmosphere, while still allowing *klee klee* to maintain its own low-key and distinctive brand attributes.	

Sample 2 Participatory approach: Online

Date: 22 April 2023

Place: *klee klee* & friends, Columbia Circle store

Event: Brand activation activity, called “Lights-out Gathering”

<table>
<tr><td>Physical space</td><td colspan="2">*klee klee*’s Columbia Circle store
a table of food and cocktail, some mats on the floor
only one light turned on
several candles lit for the Earth Day event</td></tr>
<tr><td>People</td><td colspan="2">Jiangjiang, the hang player and yoga teacher
Xiaoli, the manager of the brand *Rainbow Hunter*
Team members of *klee klee*
Offline participants
Online viewers (554 viewd)</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Activities of people</td><td>The interaction among people</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">1. 晚上 8 点，活动正式开始，一位手碟乐手坐在地垫上开始表演，来参加活动的人逐渐围在她身边席地而坐，欣赏音乐。乐手请现场的一些观众一起手摇一种乐器，增加音乐的层次感。
At 8 pm, the event officially started, with a “hang” artist sitting on a mat and starting to perform. People who came to the event gradually gathered around her and sat on the ground, enjoying the music. The artist invited some of the audience members to shake a musical instrument together to add more layers to the music.</td><td></td></tr>
</table>

2. 第一首曲子结束后，乐手向观众介绍刚才演奏的曲名——细泉和意义。 After the first song ended, the artist introduced the name of the piece she just played to the audience, which was called Xiquan (Delicate Spring) and its meaning.	Jiangjiang 解释第一首曲子与水元素相关，作为地球日的活动开场曲非常合适，因为“由水诞生了很多美好的东西，比如酒”（她目光朝向现场桌面上的鸡尾酒看了一样），边上观众大笑。 Jiangjiang explained that the first song is related to the water element, which is very suitable as the opening song for Earth Day event, because “many beautiful things were born from water, such as wine” (she looked at the cocktail on the table and the audience laughed).
3. 第二首曲子结束后，乐手自我介绍，接着向观众介绍演奏的乐器——hang, 并请他们猜测乐器诞生的时间。 After the second piece of music ended, the musician introduced herself and then introduced the instrument she played, which was a hang. She then asked the audience to guess when the instrument was created.	观众们积极猜测时间，其中有些观众听说过这个乐器，还有人猜得比较准——2000 年左右，Jiangjiang 介绍说“今天给大家介绍这个乐器在这里也很合适，因为它叫‘hang’，我其实很好奇为什么 *klee klee* 的标志是手。”观众中有人抢答，“虽然我不清楚这个手势（的意思），我知道 *klee klee* 是藏语的‘慢慢来’。”然后有 *klee klee* 的人解释这个手势是手语里“慢”的意思。 After the audience made guesses about the time when the instrument was created, some of them having heard of it before and a few even correctly guessing it was around the year 2000, Jiangjiang introduced the instrument called “hang”. She explained that it was very appropriate to showcase it in the event, as it was named “hang”, which means hand. She said she was curious why the logo of *klee klee* had a hand gesture. A member of the audience answered that although she didn’t know the meaning of the hand gesture, she knew that *klee klee* meant “slow down” in Tibetan. Then, a *klee klee* employee explained that the hand gesture meant “slow” in sign language.
4. 在演奏第三首曲子前，乐手接着介绍 hang, 她说这个乐器也适合一些节日场景，“它也可以演奏出吃年夜饭的感觉”，Jiangjiang 打了一首很有春节氛围的音乐，喜庆又传统，观众们大笑。第三首曲子是一首“很帅的，偏日本调的”曲子，曲名叫《奈良的夜》，在之后与观众的交流中 Jiangjiang 说这是她老师编写的曲子。第三首曲子结束后，乐手继续与观众交流，观众提出了很多问题。	

5. Before playing the third piece, the musician continued to introduce the hang, saying that this instrument is also suitable for some festive occasions, “it can also play the feeling of eating the Chinese New Year’s Eve dinner.” Jiangjiang played a piece of music with a festive and traditional atmosphere, which made the audience laugh. The third piece is “very cool, with a Japanese tune” called “Night in Nara.” During the subsequent exchange with the audience, Jiangjiang mentioned that this was a piece written by her teacher. After the third piece, the artist continued to interact with the audience, and they raised many questions.	观众的问题和乐手回答的概括: 1. 乐手演奏时手会累吗? （乐手：不会） 2. 乐器是怎么诞生的? （乐手：主要三种乐器影响，其中包括缸鼓，也受 70 年代一些欧洲的钢铁乐队影响。） 3. Hang 是来源于哪个语言? （乐手：应该是瑞士那边。） 4. 鼓上为什么会有一些坑坑洼洼? （乐手：因为这个乐器是手工制作的，所有会有这种粗糙的感觉，但也带来了与手工制作者的联结，很有自然的感觉。） 5. 这是节拍器吗? 6. 学了多久? [此时直播镜头给到鸡尾酒一个特写] 乐手分享了她关于打手碟的感受——很放松，演奏这个乐器的技巧就是要放松，“越用力越不出声，就像 *klee klee* 一样，要慢慢来。”因为又一次提到了品牌，为了不产生刻意的感觉，Jiangjiang 说完笑了起来，观众们也再一次大笑，还有人开玩笑说非常“扣题”。 **Summary of the audience’s questions and the musician’s answers:** 1.Will your hands get tired when playing? (Jiangjiang: No, they won’t.) 2.How was the instrument created? (Jiangjiang: It was mainly influenced by three types of instruments, including the drum, and also by some European steel bands [or Steel Pan Ensemble] in the 1970s.)

6. 第四首曲子叫 Urban，乐手说“我们都是生活在都市的人，但我很喜欢 *klee klee* 这个品牌 … 因为它会让我变简单，把心里的这种简单和大家连接，知道这么多人也是和我一样的，不会觉得那么孤单。”第四首曲子结束后，乐手和观众的交流继续展开。 The fourth piece is called “Urban”, and the artist said, “We all live in cities, but I	3.What language does the word “hang” come from? (Jiangjiang: It should be from Switzerland.) 4.Why are there bumps and holes on the drum? (Jiangjiang: Because this instrument is handmade, there will be this kind of rough feeling, but it also brings a connection with the handmade producer, which is very natural feeling.) 5. Is this a metronome? 6. How long has the musician been learning to play? [At this point, the live broadcast camera gave a close-up of a cocktail] The artist shared her feelings about playing the hang- it is very relaxing, and the technique for playing this instrument is to relax. “The more force you use, the less sound comes out, just like *klee klee*. You have to take it slowly.” Because the brand was mentioned again, to avoid any deliberate feelings, Jiangjiang laughed after speaking, and the audience laughed again, with someone joking that it was very “on-topic”. 观众的问题: 1. 是否都是原创的? 2. 是否有记谱的方法? Jiangjiang 解释手碟的发声原理、打击手法、如何打出不同的音以及一些基本结拍。彩虹农场的小丽邀请 Jiangjiang 去云南演奏，她说这个和云南那边的环境太适合了。Jiangjiang 接着向观众解释手碟，她说手碟和古代中国的编钟和印尼的甘美来 Gamelan 比较像，都属于旋律打击乐，既有节奏又有旋律。

really like *klee klee* ... because it makes me simpler, and it connects my simplicity with everyone else. I know there are many people like me, so I don't feel so lonely." After the fourth piece, Jiangjiang continued to interact with the audience. 7. 观众们的好奇心和热情很强，乐手在观众好几轮的问题过后，建议大家休息一下、喝一会儿酒再继续。此时主持人正好结果话题，介绍活动当日的另一位嘉宾，来自彩虹农场的小丽。主持人介绍今天现场的鸡尾酒是云南彩虹农场的小丽特地从那边带来的，她在云南生活了14年，经营彩虹农场、酿酒，今天的梅子酒里特地加了加了圣诞树的种子——杜松子，接着主持人问小丽要不要和大家介绍一下鸡尾酒的调制过程。 The audience's curiosity and enthusiasm were strong, and after several rounds of questions, Jiangjiang suggested that everyone take a break, have a drink, and then continue. At this point, the host transitioned to another guest at the event, Xiaoli from Rainbow Farm. The host introduced today's cocktail, specially brought from Yunnan by Xiaoli from Rainbow Farm. She has lived in Yunan for 14 years and runs the farm and a brewery. The plum wine served today has added juniper berries, the seeds of Christmas trees. The host then asked Xiaoli if she	3. 乐手的职业？ Jiangjiang 的主要职业是瑜伽老师，手碟也被融入到她的瑜伽课上，作为一种疗愈方式，"是一种让意识安放下来的媒介"。 4. 用来摇节奏的是什么乐器？ ——一种果实。 观众开始猜测具体是什么果实。 5. 手碟的发声原理是什么？ Jiangjiang 回答手碟上大一点的凹陷区域可以打出低音，小一点则是高音。发声原理是亥姆霍兹共振原理 Helmholtz resonance，然后她简单解释了一下在日常生活中体现这一原理的实际例子。 **The audience's questions:** 1.Are they all original compositions? 2. Is there a method for notation? (Jiangjiang explained mechanism of the sound production, percussion techniques, how to play different notes, and basic rhythm. Xiaoli from Rainbow Farm invited Jiangjiang to play in Yunnan, and she said it was perfect for the environment there. Jiangjiang continued to explain the hang to the audience, saying that the instrument is similar to ancient Chinese bianzhong and Indonesian gamelan, belonging to melodic percussion music with both rhythm and melody.) 3.What is the Jiangjiang's profession? (Jiangjiang's main profession is a yoga teacher, and the hang is also integrated into her yoga classes as a healing method, "a medium for placing consciousness".)

would like to introduce the process of making the cocktail to everyone.	4.What kind of fruit is used to produce the other instrument for shaking the rhythm? (The audience began to guess what specific fruit it was.) 5. What is the sound production principle of the hang? (Jiangjiang answered that the larger concave area on the hang can produce low-pitched sounds, while the smaller one produces high-pitched sounds. The mechanism of sound production is related to the Helmholtz resonance principle, and she briefly explained some practical examples of this principle in daily life.
8. 小丽开始介绍：这个酒给云南本土的梅酒做了一个升级，本土的梅酒是用本地酒泡制的，而本地酒在蒸馏过程中有杂味，影响了梅子的清香，所以她做了一些改进，用自己种的甘蔗熬红糖，制成本地郎姆酒，然后再加入杜松子，这样就会有金酒的基底，品酒的人“可以喝到森林气息”，还加了农场自种的柠檬和香草，“所以会有种乡土的感觉，是一种有层次的递进，它有前调、中调和尾调。这和手碟的声音有点像，其实自然的东西都是相通的，我们在做每个酒的时候都会去现熬红糖，都是在遵循自然法则。”接着小丽简单介绍了彩虹农场，农场不专门做餐饮，“只是一个空	观众提问：“你们叫城市猎人，是有去真的打猎吗？” 小丽解释城市猎人是一个“发现者、探索者，她/他在猎取东西时时遵循自然法则的，真正的猎人是懂规矩、有法则的，我取这个名字是取了这个精神，”然后彩虹是因为“农场周围有很多的彩虹，一天可以看到三个”。观众们羡慕地惊呼，“我原来在城市的时候没法看到这些，在大理就很容易，有种回到童年的感觉。” **The audience’s question:** You call yourselves city hunters, do you actually go hunting? (Xiaoli explains that City Hunter is a “discoverer, explorer who follows the laws of nature when hunting for things. A true hunter understands the rules and has principles. I took this name to

间，适合大家喝茶、冥想、瑜伽、喝酒，也提供一点点吃的。”主持人插话，“今天酒里的香草都是小丽从她的农场摘好带过来的——” “富有森林气息”小丽补充。接着主持人还提到桌上很大桑叶，它是小丽拿给大家当碟子装食物用的，小丽建议现场观众闻一闻叶子，观众感慨说很香，“地球日嘛，就应该闻一下地球的味道。”小丽说。观众感叹这个叶子很大，相比之下上海的桑叶都很小。接着聊天的对话逐渐分成好几个。主要是两位嘉宾和不同的观众聊天，直播画面主要记录了来自乐手 Jiangjiang 这边的对话。 Xiaoli began to introduce: this cocktail is an upgrade to Yunnan’s local plum wine. Local plum wine is made by steeping plums in local liquor, which has a bad taste due to impurities during distillation, affecting the fragrance of the plums. So she made some improvements, using sugarcane grown by herself to make local rum, and then added juniper berries. This will create a gin base, and the drinkers “can taste the forest flavour”. She also added lemons and herbs grown on the farm, “so there is a sense of rural feeling, it is a layered progression, it has top, middle, and base notes. It’s a bit like the sound of a hang. In fact, natural things are all interconnected. When we make each drink, we will boil fresh brown sugar, following the laws of nature.” Then Xiaoli	embody this spirit.” Rainbow was chosen to name the farm because “there are many rainbows around the farm, and you can see up to three in one day.” The audience admiringly exclaims, “I couldn’t see these things when I was in the city, but it’s easy to see them in Dali. It feels like going back to childhood.”)

briefly introduced the Rainbow Farm. The farm does not specialize in catering, “it’s just a space suitable for drinking tea, meditation, yoga, drinking, and a little bit of food.” The host interrupted, “The herbs in the drink today are all picked by Xiaoli from her farm—“Full of forest flavour”, Xiaoli added. Then the host mentioned the large mulberry leaves on the table, which Xiaoli brought as plates for food. Xiaoli suggested that the audience smell the leaves, and they exclaimed that it smelled great. On Earth Day, you should “smell the scent of the earth”, Xiaoli said. The audience marvelled at the large size of the leaves, which were much larger than the mulberry leaves in Shanghai. Then the conversation gradually divided into several parts. The main dialogue was between the two guests and different audiences, and the live broadcast mainly recorded the conversation from the artist Jiangjiang’s side.	乐手和观众交流手碟的乐器材质、学习过程，有些观众好奇需要什么天赋/资质可以学这个乐器,； 另一面一些观众在讨论如何用彩虹农场的香草盐烹饪，烧烤时添加什么样的草本植物可以提香等等。 The artist and the audience were discussing the instrument used for hang, as well as the learning process. Some of the audience were curious about the talent or aptitude needed to learn this instrument. On the other side, some of the audience were discussing how to use the herb salt from Rainbow Farm in cooking, and which types of herbs can be added to the barbecue to enhance the flavour.
9. 最后，主持人请观众回到地垫上，乐手要表演最后一首曲子，曲名叫 Earth Flow。 Jiangjiang 请现场观众一起参与，正式表演时，观众们一起加入乐手，唱了很多遍。 Finally, the host asked the audience to return to their mats, and the musician prepared to perform the last song called “Earth Flow”. Jiangjiang invited the	她说歌词是印第安语，歌词的意思可能有些悲伤，但在地球日表演非常合适，“因为环保！”，现场观众抢答，“因为我们一直被地球滋养，获取生命所需的能量！” Jiangjiang 接着说道。她教大家如何演唱，她先唱了一遍，其他人大概知道如何唱就可以，她说这首歌作为 ending 非常有意思，曲子是她的老师专门为地球日写的，大意是“父亲，请怜悯我，我快要渴死了。”

audience to participate, During the performance, the audience joined in with Jiangjiang, singing the song many times. 虽然在最后一首曲子结束时活动已经完全超过了原本计划的一小时，但现场还是有许多观众继续留下来和乐手交流，学习这个新的乐器，还有一些观众继续品尝剩余的鸡尾酒和小吃。 Although the event exceeded its originally planned one-hour duration by the time the final song ended, many audience members remained to continue chatting with the artist, learning about the instrument, and some continued to taste the remaining cocktails and snacks.	Jiangjiang said that the lyrics were in an indigenous Indian language and might be somewhat sad, but it was perfect for Earth Day. “Because of the environmental message!” the audience responded. “It is because we has been nurtured by the earth and has obtained the energy needed for life.” Jiangjiang then taught everyone how to sing the song, singing it once herself so that the others could follow along. She said that the song was very interesting as an ending, and that her teacher had written it specifically for Earth Day. The lyrics roughly meant “Father, have mercy on me, I am dying of thirst.”

Impressions and thoughts	**Here are some of my original comments written in the margins of the electronic version of the field note.** Fan, Qin (Postgraduate Researcher) Commented Cultivating a fan base Fan, Qin (Postgraduate Researcher) Commented Appreciating the power of knowledge Fan, Qin (Postgraduate Researcher) Commented Moderation. Simpler in what ways? I guess mainly it is about chaning buying habits- "less is more" mentality. Fan, Qin (Postgraduate Researcher) Commented Xiaoli's Rainbow Farm is a long-term business partner of kleeklee. One can buy farm produce made in Yunan province at kleeklee's store in Shanghai. Fan, Qin (Postgraduate Researcher) Commented Sustainability. This introduction is really interesting. She elaborated on every detail of wine-making and all the local-grown ingredients she added to the wine to make the cocktail. The authenticity of the production processes is emphasised here. Fan, Qin (Postgraduate Researcher) Commented Nature/eco-system as a commodity, adding value to products Fan, Qin (Postgraduate Researcher) Commented Eco-altruism. Here, Xiaoli encouraged the audience to get close to nature by smelling nature- a unique way to raise people's awareness of environmental protection. Fan, Qin (Postgraduate Researcher) Commented It is related to the omnivorousness again. The Indigenous Indian language is definitely not familiar and widely known to Chinses people. Also, I think this behaviour is symbolic in nature- an ancient and exotic language can be associated with naturalness, remoteness, and maybe the magic power of mother earth···I don't know, but there must be some points to sing the song in the indigenous language. Fan, Qin (Postgraduate Researcher) Commented The event was planned to take just one hour, but the audience was so enthusiastic that it lasted over an hour and a half.

Fan, Qin (Postgraduate Researcher) Commented
The musician cued the brand and its values several times during the event. Each time she mentioned the brand, there was laughter and jokes from the musician and the audience to soften the promotional purposes -so still, it was just a party among friends instead of a promotional event.

Fan, Qin (Postgraduate Researcher) Commented
They really got very curious audience!

Fan, Qin (Postgraduate Researcher) Commented
In a way, the natural environment adds value to the business Xiaoli operates in Yunan province.

Fan, Qin (Postgraduate Researcher) Commented
I would say Yoga is also a kind of middle class lifestyle in China, especially for those who can afford to take yoga classes in big cities like Shanghai.

Fan, Qin (Postgraduate Researcher) Commented
Really hard-core!

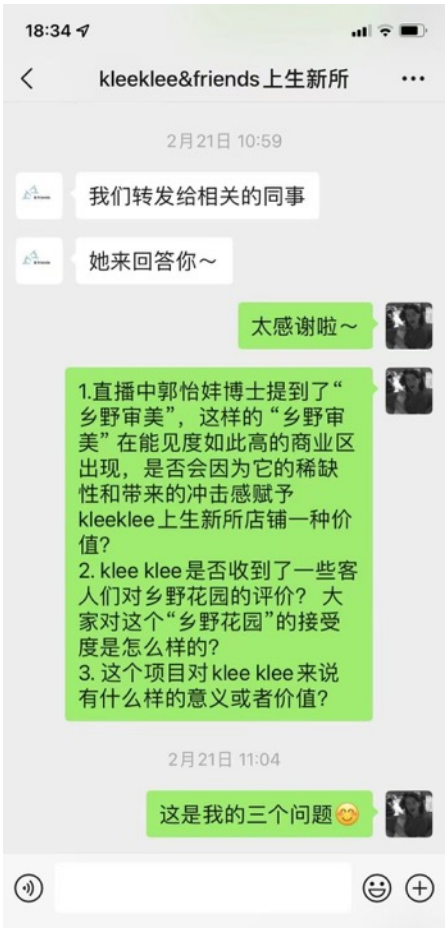
Fan, Qin (Postgraduate Researcher) Commented
Eco-altruism

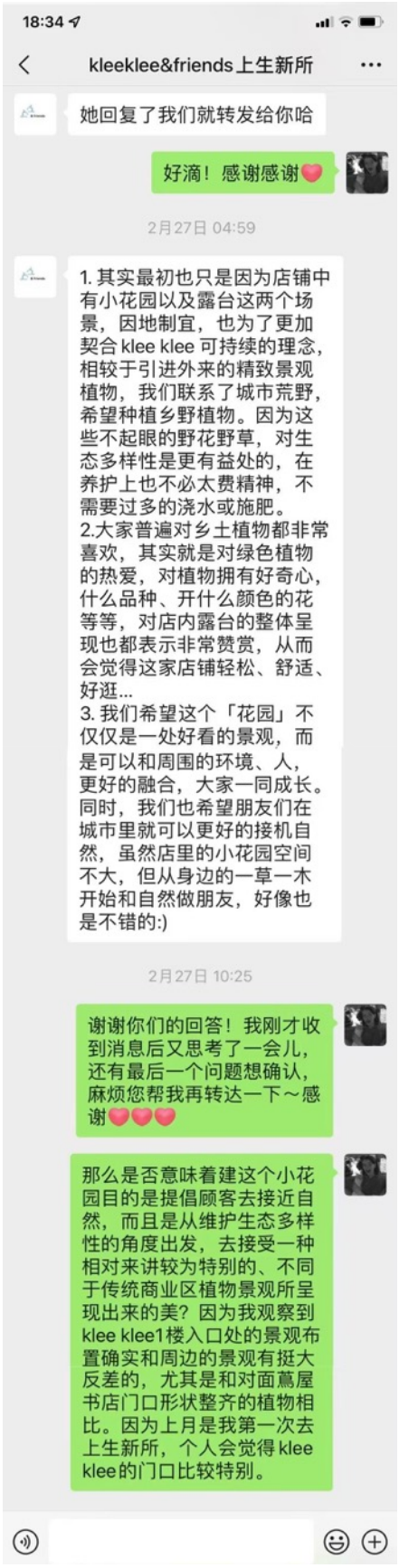
Fan, Qin (Postgraduate Researcher) Commented
The comparison between urban and rural areas (or metropolitan and distant because Dali is also a city.) occurs very often in the events kleeklee held.

Fan, Qin (Postgraduate Researcher) Commented
The audience in this event seems interested in and capable of discussing any topic-music, instruments, cooking and herbs. I think it could be related to “the cultural omnivore” mentioned by Mapes (2021) in her book. She wrote, “In contemporary society, elites are more easily identified by cultural confidence and the ease with which they move between various cultural forms.[…] Omnivorousness is a resource for maintaining an elite identity that is simultaneously not elitist, and not snobbish”(p.13)

Appendix 8: Sample follow-up messages to the brand on social media

Some online events did not provide opportunities for real-time engagement with organisers. To address this limitation, after completing online participant observation, I contacted the brand via WeChat to ask follow-up questions. These questions were relayed by a staff member managing the brand's account to the relevant team member responsible for the event, who then provided responses that were passed back to me through the same intermediary. Below is a screenshot of a WeChat conversation that took place after I participated remotely—by viewing the livestream—in *klee klee*'s experiential brand campaign, which was held both in person and online to introduce the "Rewilding the City" Project. As with previous examples, once I received the reply, I transcribed the conversation into a Word document and translated the original Chinese content into English.




18:34
kleeklee&friends上生新所
她回复了我们就转发给你哈
好滴！感谢感谢❤️
2月27日 04:59
1. 其实最初也只是因为店铺中有小花园以及露台这两个场景，因地制宜，也为了更加契合 klee klee 可持续的理念，相较于引进外来的精致景观植物，我们联系了城市荒野，希望种植乡野植物。因为这些不起眼的野花野草，对生态多样性是更有益处的，在养护上也不必太费精神，不需要过多的浇水或施肥。
2.大家普遍对乡土植物都非常喜欢，其实就是对绿色植物的热爱，对植物拥有好奇心，什么品种、开什么颜色的花等等，对店内露台的整体呈现也都表示非常赞赏，从而会觉得这家店铺轻松、舒适、好逛...
3. 我们希望这个「花园」不仅仅是一处好看的景观，而是可以和周围的环境、人，更好的融合，大家一同成长。同时，我们也希望朋友们在城市里就可以更好的接机自然，虽然店里的小花园空间不大，但从身边的一草一木开始和自然做朋友，好像也是不错的:)
2月27日 10:25
谢谢你们的回答！我刚才收到消息后又思考了一会儿，还有最后一个问题想确认，麻烦您帮我再转达一下～感谢❤️❤️❤️
那么是否意味着建这个小花园目的是提倡顾客去接近自然，而且是从维护生态多样性的角度出发，去接受一种相对来讲较为特别的、不同于传统商业区植物景观所呈现出来的美？因为我观察到klee klee1楼入口处的景观布置确实和周边的景观有挺大反差的，尤其是和对面蔦屋书店门口形状整齐的植物相比。因为上月是我第一次去上生新所，个人会觉得klee klee的门口比较特别。

问题 1: 直播中郭怡妊博士提到了“乡野审美”，这样的 “乡野审美” 在能见度如此高的商业区出现，是否会因为它的稀缺性和带来的冲击感赋予 *klee klee* 上生新所店铺一种价值？

回答：其实最初也只是因为店铺中有小花园以及露台这两个场景，因地制宜，也为了更加契合 *klee klee* 可持续的理念，相较于引进外来的精致景观植物，我们联系了城市荒野，希望种植乡野植物。因为这些不起眼的野花野草，对生态多样性是更有益处的，在养护上也不必太费精神，不需要过多的浇水或施肥。

Question1: During the talk, Dr Yifeng Guo mentioned “rural aesthetics” many times. I am wondering whether the scarcity of “rural aesthetics” in a busy commercial area helps to create value for *klee klee*’s store and the brand.

Answer: Actually, at first, it was only because the shop had a small garden and terrace, so we adapted to the local conditions. In order to better align with *klee klee*’s sustainable concept, rather than introducing delicate non-local landscape plants, we contacted the Forest City Studio and hoped to plant wild plants. These inconspicuous wildflowers and grasses are more beneficial to ecological diversity, and they do not require too much maintenance, such as excessive watering or fertilization.

问题 2: *klee klee* 是否收到了一些客人们对乡野花园的评价？ 大家对这个“乡野花园”的接受度是怎么样的？

回答：大家普遍对乡土植物都非常喜欢，其实就是对绿色植物的热爱，对植物拥有好奇心，什么品种、开什么颜色的花等等，对店内露台的整体呈现也都表示非常赞赏，从而会觉得这家店铺轻松、舒适、好逛...

Question 2: Have *klee klee* received some comments on this project from their customers? How does the customer view the “rural aesthetics”?

Answer: Everyone generally likes native plants, which is actually a love for green plants and a curiosity about them. They want to know the variety of plants and what colour they blossom, etc. People also appreciate the overall presentation of the shop’s terrace, which makes them feel that the store is relaxed, comfortable, and enjoyable to visit.

问题 3: 这个项目对 *klee klee* 来说有什么样的意义或者价值？

回答：我们希望这个「花园」不仅仅是一处好看的景观，而是可以和周围的环境、人，更好的融合，大家一同成长。同时，我们也希望朋友们在城市里就可以更好的接机自然，虽然店里的小花园空间不大，但从身边的一草一木开始和自然做朋友，好像也是不错的:)

Question 3: What is the significance/value of this project for *klee klee*?

Answer: We hope that this "garden" is not just a beautiful landscape, but can also better integrate with the surrounding environment and people, and grow together. At the same time, we also hope that friends can better connect with nature in the city. Although the small garden space in the store is not large, it is still a good idea to start making friends with nature from the nearby plants and trees :)

我的回复：那么是否意味着建这个小花园目的是提倡顾客去接近自然，而且是从维护生态多样性的角度出发，去接受一种相对来讲较为特别的、不同于传统商业区植物景观所呈现出来的美？因为我观察到 *klee klee* 一楼入口处的景观布置确实和周边的景观有挺大反差的，尤其是和对面蔦屋书店门口形状整齐的植物相比。因为上月是我第一次去上生新所，个人会觉得 *klee klee* 的门口比较特别。

My responses: Does this mean that the purpose of building this small garden is to encourage customers to get closer to nature and to accept a relatively special and different kind of beauty from the perspective of maintaining ecological diversity, which is different from the plant landscapes typically found in commercial areas? Because I observed that the landscape design at the entrance of *klee klee* 1F does have a big contrast with the surrounding landscapes, especially compared to the neatly shaped plants at the entrance of Tsutaya Bookstore across the street. Since last month was my first time visiting Columbia Circle, I personally think that the entrance of *klee klee* is quite special.

Appendix 9: Documentation of the thematic analysis and coding process

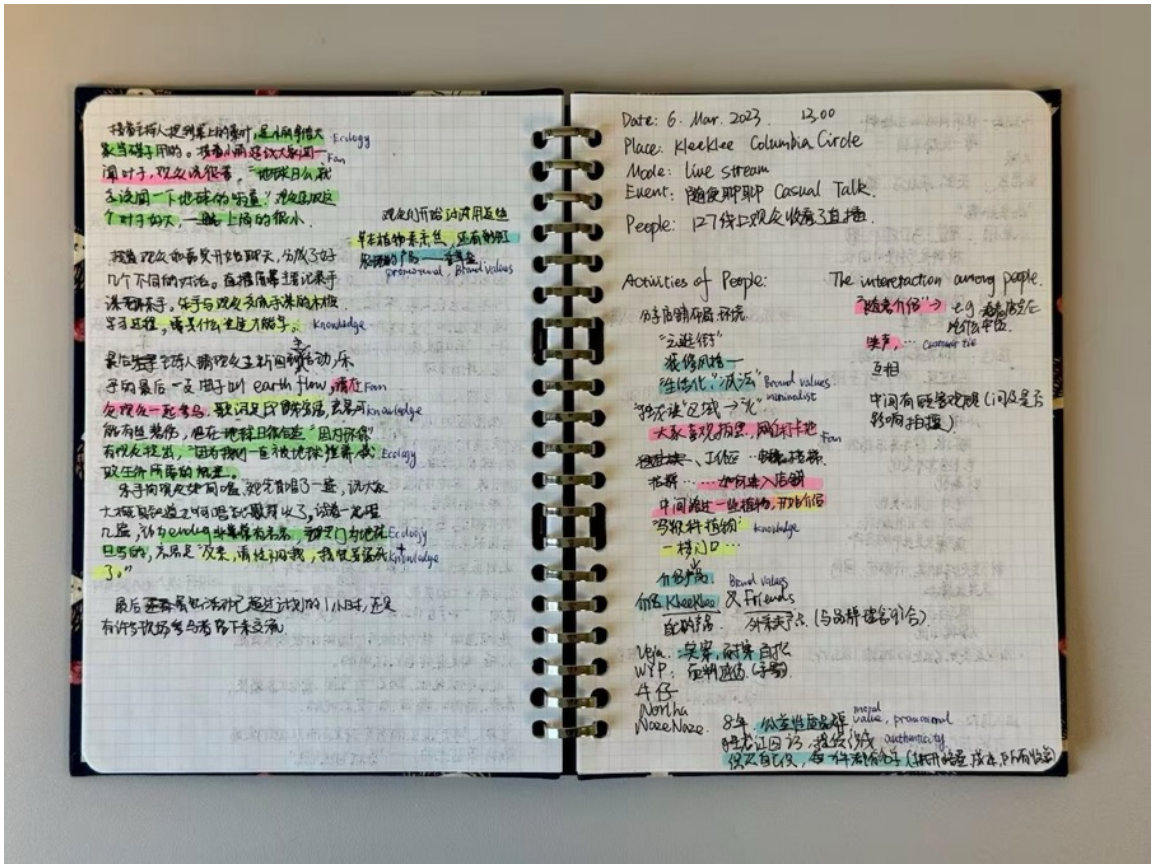


Figure 1. Preliminary review and initial coding of general themes in raw field notes

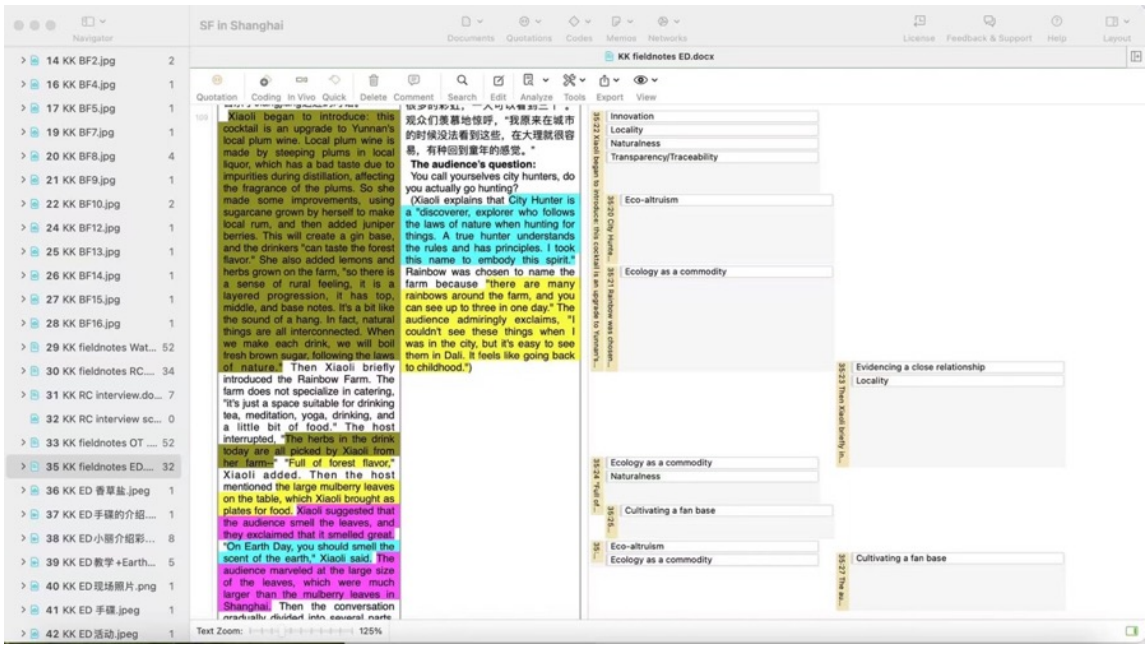


Figure 2. Thematic analysis of digitised data (field notes), conducted in ATLAS.ti.

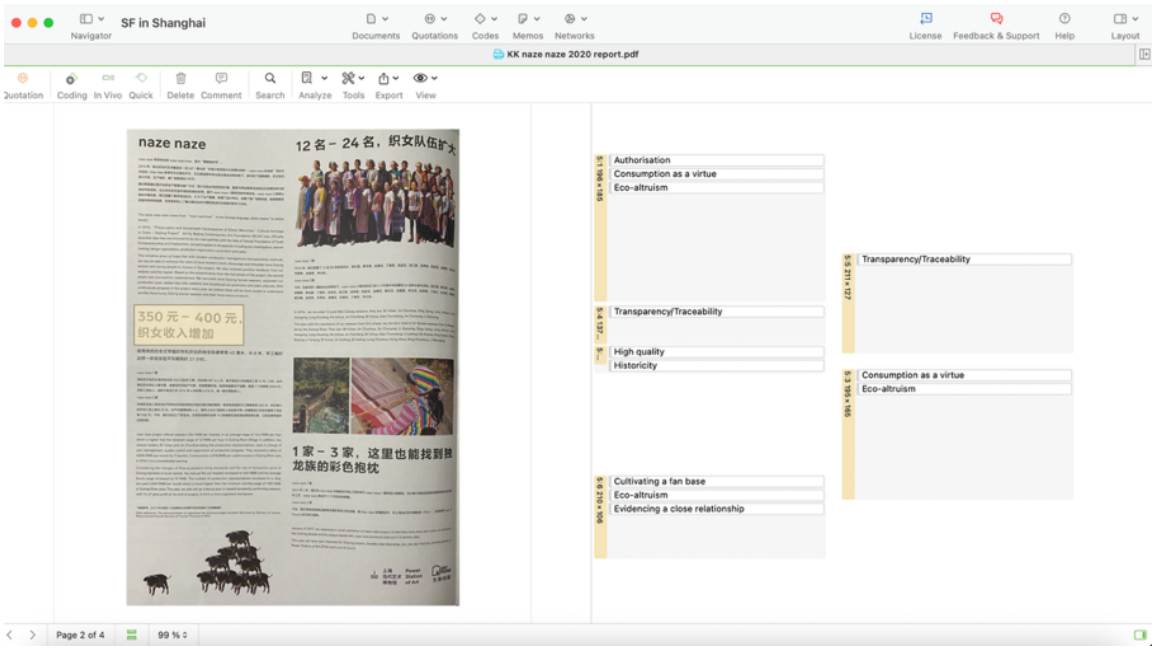


Figure 3. Thematic analysis of digitised data (physical promotional material), conducted in ATLAS.ti.

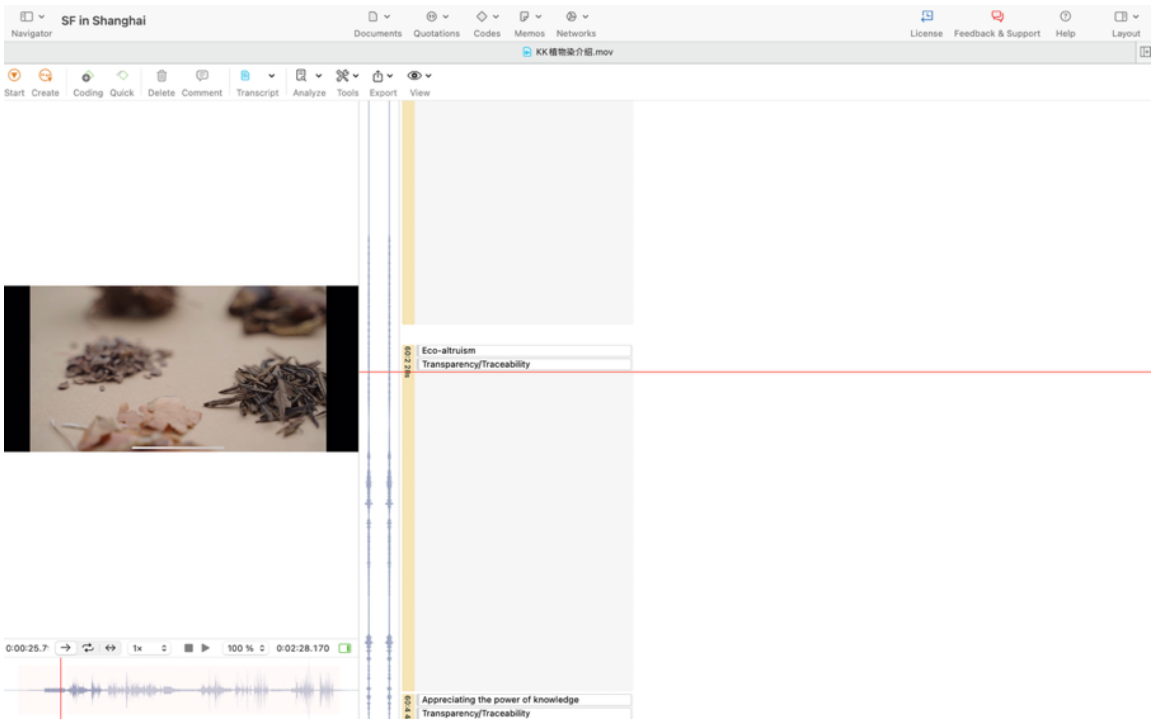


Figure 4. Thematic analysis of digitised data (video posted on WeChat), conducted in ATLAS.ti.

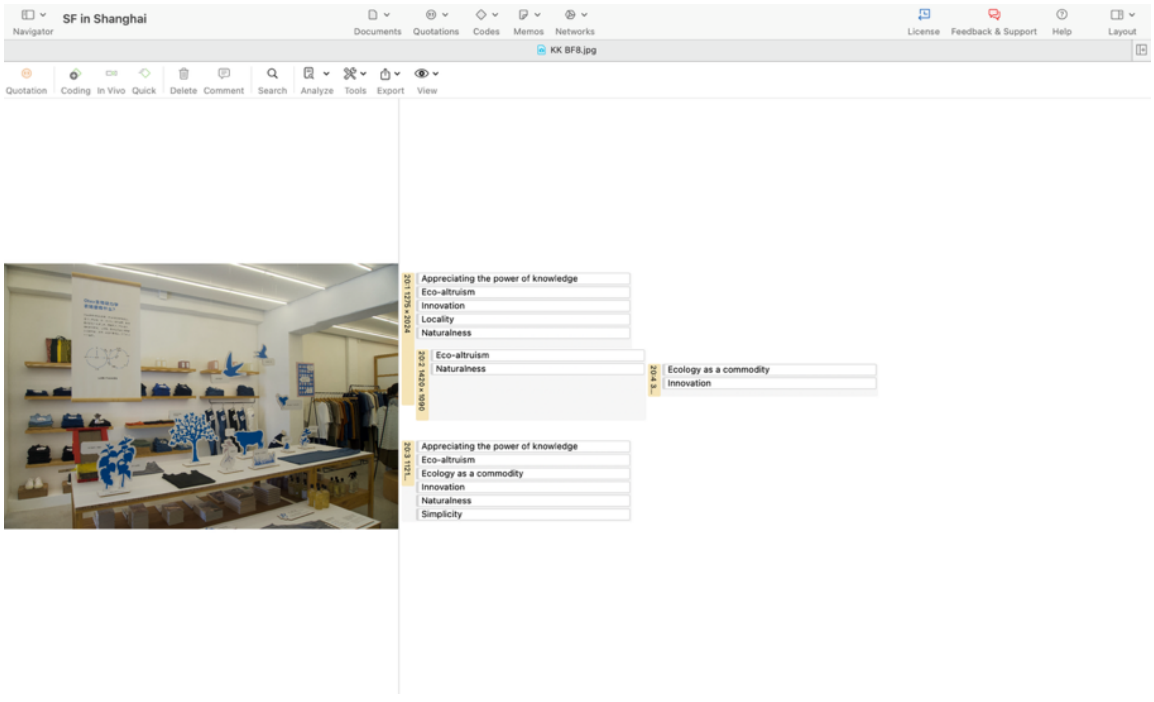


Figure 5. Thematic analysis of digitised data (on-site photo), conducted in ATLAS.ti.

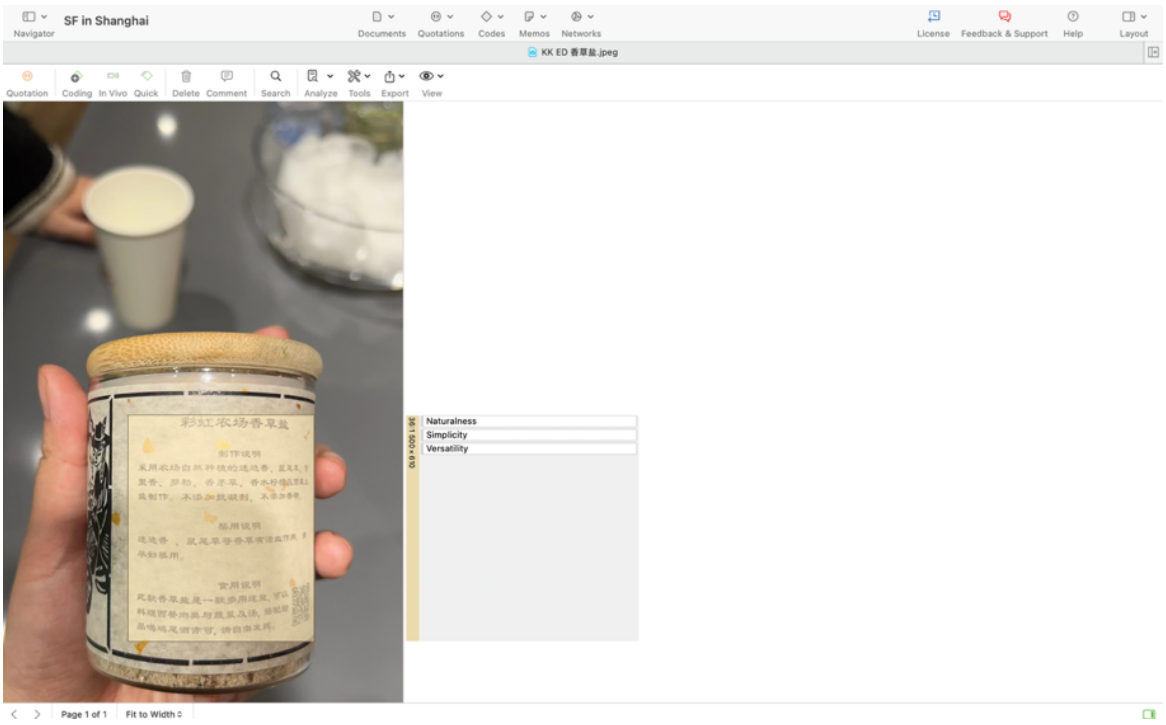


Figure 6. Thematic analysis of digitised data (product photo), conducted in ATLAS.ti.

Appendix 10: Tables of Top 100 keywords and multi-word terms

Table 1. Top 100 Keywords in the Promotional Corpus Compared with Chinese Web 2017 (zhTenTen17) Simplified

abbr. =abbreviation; bn.=brand name

Rank	Item	Translation and annotation	Frequency (focus)	Frequency (reference)	Relative frequency (focus)	Relative frequency (reference)	Score
1	kleeklee	bn.	459	0	5485.31	0.00	5486.31
2	GOTS	abbr. Global Organic Textile Standard	131	241	1565.53	0.01	1544.10
3	针织布	Knitted fabric	130	1992	1553.57	0.12	1387.95
4	the		116	2299	1386.27	0.14	1218.45
5	环保棉	Green cotton	75	11	896.29	0.00	896.70
6	and		106	7954	1266.76	0.48	856.97
7	of		70	2338	836.54	0.14	734.10
8	原色	Original Colour (collection)	106	14220	1266.76	0.86	682.70
9	安福路	Anfu Road	56	384	669.23	0.02	655.07
10	牦牛绒	Yak fur	56	396	669.23	0.02	654.61
11	靛蓝	Indigo Juice Dye	64	3872	764.84	0.23	620.94
12	Cotton		49	152	585.58	0.01	581.25
13	Indigo		49	731	585.58	0.04	561.83
14	棉种	cotton seed	49	1246	585.58	0.08	545.61

15	牛仔	denim	328	104458	3919.79	6.30	537.44
16	苎麻	ramie	60	6335	717.03	0.38	519.64
17	to		61	6820	728.98	0.41	517.35
18	Veja	bn.	41	60	489.97	0.00	489.21
19	诺乐	bn. Norlha	41	81	489.97	0.00	488.59
20	羊驼毛	alpaca wool	40	447	478.02	0.03	466.46
21	棉	cotton	489	192960	5843.83	11.63	462.81
22	挺括	crisp and structured	50	5517	597.53	0.33	449.18
23	Green		41	1628	489.97	0.10	447.11
24	亚麻	linen	109	37449	1302.61	2.26	400.26
25	Juice		32	290	382.42	0.02	376.83
26	肌理	texture	71	20819	848.49	1.25	376.77
27	染色	dye	197	87702	2354.26	5.29	374.72
28	纺纱	spinning	61	17680	728.98	1.07	353.42
29	纱线	yarn	76	29266	908.24	1.76	328.99
30	is		33	3493	394.37	0.21	326.61
31	安第斯	the Andes	38	6634	454.12	0.40	325.13
32	亲肤	skin-friendly	44	11404	525.83	0.69	312.24

33	羊毛	wool	137	74090	1637.23	4.47	299.76
34	TANGENTGC	bn.	25	2	298.76	0.00	299.73
35	Eco-friendly		25	11	298.76	0.00	299.57
36	Organic		25	190	298.76	0.01	296.37
37	滑动	scroll	177	102956	2115.25	6.20	293.73
38	驼绒	camel wool	27	1704	322.67	0.10	293.52
39	内搭	base layer	35	7177	418.27	0.43	292.68
40	SIWA	bn.	24	5	286.81	0.00	287.73
41	面料	fabric	408	268938	4875.83	16.21	283.41
42	天然色	natural colour	24	291	286.81	0.02	282.85
43	水洗	washing	91	52658	1087.50	3.17	260.81
44	套头衫	pullover	25	2838	298.76	0.17	255.98
45	The_	bn. The Chimney Garden	21	0	250.96	0.00	251.96
46	布面	cloth	33	9664	394.37	0.58	249.85
47	in		40	15350	478.02	0.93	248.83
48	Textile		20	29	239.01	0.00	239.59
49	Standard		21	1030	250.96	0.06	237.24
50	Blue	Let’s Blue (collection)	22	2505	262.91	0.15	229.30
51	Global		20	777	239.01	0.05	229.28
52	YAKMA	bn.	19	0	227.06	0.00	228.06

53	安福	Anfu	28	8150	334.62	0.49	225.07
54	friends	kleeklee & friends	19	346	227.06	0.02	223.40
55	筒裤	straight cut trousers	21	2447	250.96	0.15	219.58
56	梭织布	woven fabric	18	418	215.11	0.03	210.80
57	for		24	6128	286.81	0.37	210.19
58	羽绒	down	59	39639	705.08	2.39	208.35
59	The		19	1658	227.06	0.10	207.34
60	Chimney_Garden	bn. The Chimney Garden	17	0	203.16	0.00	204.16
61	石榴皮	pomegranate peel	19	1973	227.06	0.12	203.83
62	organic		17	138	203.16	0.01	202.48
63	use		17	308	203.16	0.02	200.44
64	下装	lower garment	24	7530	286.81	0.45	197.97
65	棉农	cotton farmer	23	6674	274.86	0.40	196.73
66	can		18	1765	215.11	0.11	195.33
67	三里屯	Sanlitun	33	17516	394.37	1.06	192.34
68	竹节	slub yarn/slub fabric	26	10645	310.71	0.64	189.89
69	羊驼	alpaca	25	10025	298.76	0.60	186.87
70	罗纹	ribbing	19	3892	227.06	0.23	184.73
71	棉麻	cotton and linen	30	15827	358.52	0.95	184.01

72	cotton		15	128	179.26	0.01	178.88
73	低消耗	low energy consumption	17	2362	203.16	0.14	178.72
74	丹宁	denim	20	5817	239.01	0.35	177.71
75	茜草	rubia cordifolia	17	2664	203.16	0.16	175.92
76	牛仔布	denim cloth	20	6338	239.01	0.38	173.67
77	混纺	blended fabric	26	13266	310.71	0.80	173.22
78	斜纹	twill cloth	23	9869	274.86	0.59	172.98
79	染	dye	85	81952	1015.80	4.94	171.21
80	will		15	933	179.26	0.06	170.66
81	natural		14	168	167.31	0.01	166.62
82	our		14	179	167.31	0.01	166.51
83	BCI	abbr. Better Cotton Initiative	15	1595	179.26	0.10	164.45
84	织造	weave	32	22145	382.42	1.33	164.23
85	we		15	1833	179.26	0.11	162.33
86	干爽	dry and clean	31	22013	370.47	1.33	159.66
87	吸湿	hygroscopic	26	15874	310.71	0.96	159.31
88	贴肤	close-fitting	14	947	167.31	0.06	159.22
89	from		17	4759	203.16	0.29	158.66
90	The_Laundress	bn.	13	0	155.36	0.00	156.36

91	洗衣精	laundry detergent	13	0	155.36	0.00	156.36
92	植物染	plant dye	13	14	155.36	0.00	156.23
93	养蜂法	beekeeping method	13	26	155.36	0.00	156.11
94	牦牛	yak	34	26852	406.32	1.62	155.57
95	沙爽	breathably sandy	13	133	155.36	0.01	155.11
96	羊羔	cashmere	25	15716	298.76	0.95	153.95
97	process		13	431	155.36	0.03	152.40
98	洗护	toiletry	21	11055	250.96	0.67	151.22
99	裤装	trousers	19	9034	227.06	0.54	147.67
100	洗衣液	liquid detergent	18	8010	215.11	0.48	145.75

Table 2. Top 100 Keywords in the Event Communication Corpus Compared with Chinese Web 2017 (zhTenTen17) Simplified

bn.=brand name; pn.=project name; on.=organisation name

Rank	Item	Translation and annotation	Frequency (focus)	Frequency (reference)	Relative frequency (focus)	Relative frequency (reference)	Score
1	kleeklee	bn.	301	0	1481.48	0.00	1482.48
2	naze_naze	pn.	258	0	1269.84	0.00	1270.84
3	RISE_UP	pn.	222	0	1092.65	0.00	1093.65

4	the		194	2299	954.84	0.14	839.53
5	ImpactHub	on.	151	9	743.20	0.00	743.80
6	Shanghai		147	1578	723.51	0.10	661.60
7	RERISE	pn.	109	0	536.48	0.00	537.48
8	of		118	2338	580.78	0.14	509.93
9	and		137	7954	674.30	0.48	456.48
10	杜怡佳	name, project director of RISE	78	2	383.91	0.00	384.86
11	伊士曼	on. Eastman	78	1551	383.91	0.09	352.00
12	Fashion		75	1467	369.14	0.09	340.07
13	主理人	project director/manager	74	1299	364.22	0.08	338.70
14	MTG	bn. Mind the Gap	71	578	349.45	0.03	338.66
15	搞砸	pn. Fuckup nights	98	7348	482.34	0.44	335.00
16	诺乐	bn. Norlha	68	81	334.69	0.00	334.06
17	to		92	6820	452.81	0.41	321.62
18	独龙族	Dulong ethnic group	70	3084	344.53	0.19	291.38
19	in		108	15350	531.56	0.93	276.64
20	source		57	838	280.55	0.05	268.01
21	安福路	Anfu road	54	384	265.78	0.02	260.75
22	织毯	blanket	54	412	265.78	0.02	260.32
23	for		71	6128	349.45	0.37	255.93

24	挑战赛	challenge/competition	243	61518	1196.01	3.71	254.28
25	B-	B-Corp (Benefit Corporation)	52	249	255.94	0.02	253.14
26	NaiaTM	material name, an innovative textile material	50	0	246.09	0.00	247.09
27	The		54	1658	265.78	0.10	242.55
28	friends	kleeklee & friends	49	346	241.17	0.02	237.23
29	行动者	activist	65	6243	319.92	0.38	233.19
30	推动者	advocator	49	1040	241.17	0.06	227.89
31	is		55	3493	270.70	0.21	224.45
32	旧衣	old clothes	57	4483	280.55	0.27	221.66
33	秀梅	name, Dulong weaver	42	579	206.72	0.03	200.72
34	corp	B-Corp (Benefit Corporation)	40	24	196.87	0.00	197.59
35	织女	female weaver	97	24454	477.42	1.47	193.40
36	C_Team	on.	39	0	191.95	0.00	192.95
37	LABELHOOD	on.	39	116	191.95	0.01	191.61
38	BFC	on. The Bund Finance Centre	42	1439	206.72	0.09	191.14
39	碧山工销社	on. Bishan Crafts Cooperatives	37	0	182.11	0.00	183.11
40	共益	benefit	36	32	177.19	0.00	177.84
41	可持续	sustainable	1024	455169	5039.99	27.43	177.31
42	维码	QS code	37	1853	182.11	0.11	164.72

43	ALLBIRDS	bn.	33	0	162.42	0.00	163.42
44	产业方	industrial sector	31	17	152.58	0.00	153.42
45	独龙	Dulong	42	6367	206.72	0.38	150.12
46	Bridge	on.	31	1202	152.58	0.07	143.20
47	纱线	yarn	78	29266	383.91	1.76	139.27
48	BLUFF	bn.	28	8	137.81	0.00	138.75
49	设计师们	designers	39	6841	191.95	0.41	136.63
50	are		28	557	137.81	0.03	134.30
51	MORE_studio	on.	27	0	132.89	0.00	133.89
52	奕桥	on. Bridge	27	1	132.89	0.00	133.88
53	工作坊	workshop	60	20160	295.31	1.21	133.78
54	织布	weaving/weave/cloth weaving	60	20430	295.31	1.23	132.80
55	主理	manage	36	5882	177.19	0.35	131.55
56	HANQING_DING	bn.	26	0	127.97	0.00	128.97
57	Good	pn. Fashion for Good	28	1294	137.81	0.08	128.77
58	Vegatex	name of an innovative textile material	25	0	123.05	0.00	124.05
59	CLO	on.	26	767	127.97	0.05	123.27
60	姐姐们	sisters	40	10236	196.87	0.62	122.38
61	will		26	933	127.97	0.06	122.10

62	Project		30	3675	147.66	0.22	121.70
63	时装周	fashion week	122	66484	600.47	4.01	120.13
64	YOUTOPIA	pn.	24	1	118.12	0.00	119.12
65	卢珊	name, an illustrator	24	166	118.12	0.01	117.95
66	TENSION_ARCHIVE	bn.	23	0	113.20	0.00	114.20
67	be		27	2907	132.89	0.18	113.93
68	COP	abbr. =conference of the parties	28	3635	137.81	0.22	113.87
69	可持续性	sustainability	65	30620	319.92	1.85	112.79
70	fashion		26	2709	127.97	0.16	110.87
71	with		24	1441	118.12	0.09	109.61
72	苏里寻	name, a fashion designer	22	0	108.28	0.00	109.28
73	Renew		22	83	108.28	0.01	108.74
74	that		25	2540	123.05	0.15	107.58
75	DONSEE	bn.	21	0	103.36	0.00	104.36
76	金春花	name, a female weaver	21	26	103.36	0.00	104.20
77	凯德	on.	36	11791	177.19	0.71	104.17
78	TIMBERLAND	bn.	21	61	103.36	0.00	103.98
79	独龙毯	Dulong blanket	21	68	103.36	0.00	103.93
80	BEYOND	on. Beyond EXPO	23	1963	113.20	0.12	102.12
81	共创	jointly create	56	28488	275.62	1.72	101.82
82	design		21	647	103.36	0.04	100.44

83	China		32	9619	157.50	0.58	100.34
84	PERMISSION_TO_BE_HUMAN	bn.	20	0	98.44	0.00	99.44
85	於野	bn.	20	23	98.44	0.00	99.30
86	by		42	18514	206.72	1.12	98.18
87	花姐	Sister Hua, a female weaver	22	2332	108.28	0.14	95.82
88	as		22	2525	108.28	0.15	94.85
89	ECOBUYER	bn.	19	0	93.52	0.00	94.52
90	雍福会	YongFoo Elite	19	73	93.52	0.00	94.10
91	织女们	female weavers	19	97	93.52	0.01	93.97
92	时尚	fashion	1979	1752682	9740.37	105.63	91.36
93	福士	Raffles City	24	5273	118.12	0.32	90.40
94	can		20	1765	98.44	0.11	89.88
95	皮草	fur	62	40201	305.16	2.42	89.45
96	杜怡	name, project director of RISE	18	75	88.59	0.00	89.19
97	国潮	China chic	18	115	88.59	0.01	88.98
98	唯链	on.	18	235	88.59	0.01	88.34
99	蓼蓝	polygonum tinctorium	18	330	88.59	0.02	87.85
100	抖音	on. TikTok	20	2432	98.44	0.15	86.73

Table 3. Top 100 Keywords in the Profile Feature Corpus Compared with Chinese Web 2017 (zhTenTen17) Simplified

bn.=brand name; pn.=project name; on.=organisation name

Rank	Item	Translation and annotation	Frequency (focus)	Frequency (reference)	Relative frequency (focus)	Relative frequency (reference)	Score
1	kleeklee	bn.	316	0	4067.81	0.00	4068.81
2	RISE_UP	pn.	48	0	617.90	0.00	618.90
3	苗绣	Miao embroidery	52	2601	669.39	0.16	579.54
4	Karen	name, project director of RISE	43	2129	553.53	0.13	491.47
5	罕青	name, fashion designer	31	1	399.06	0.00	400.03
6	IDEAT	on.	26	63	334.69	0.00	334.42
7	Aqua	name, fashion designer	27	818	347.57	0.05	332.19
8	naze_naze	bn.	24	0	308.95	0.00	309.95
9	MTG	bn.	24	578	308.95	0.03	299.52
10	林锦璟	name, fashion designer	23	0	296.08	0.00	297.08
11	苏里寻	name, fashion designer	21	0	270.33	0.00	271.33
12	独龙族	Dulong	24	3084	308.95	0.19	261.37
13	Casc8	bn.	20	0	257.46	0.00	258.46
14	source		21	838	270.33	0.05	258.29
15	纱线	yarn	53	29266	682.26	1.76	247.22

16	HANQING_DING	bn.	18	0	231.71	0.00	232.71
17	BLUFF	bn.	18	8	231.71	0.00	232.60
18	Shanghai		19	1578	244.58	0.10	224.26
19	嘉明	name, owner of Chi Mi Do, restaurant and organic farm	18	982	231.71	0.06	219.71
20	松饼	name, writer	20	4267	257.46	0.26	205.59
21	AESTHETIC_PILL	bn.	15	0	193.09	0.00	194.09
22	徐上茜	name, fashion designer	15	0	193.09	0.00	194.09
23	DONSEE	bn.	15	0	193.09	0.00	194.09
24	ImpactHub	on.	15	9	193.09	0.00	193.99
25	Mong	name, movie director	15	25	193.09	0.00	193.80
26	大陶	name, media practitioner	15	65	193.09	0.00	193.34
27	诺乐	bn. Norlha	15	81	193.09	0.00	193.15
28	星霖	name, graphic designer	15	95	193.09	0.01	192.99
29	杜润锬	name, fashion designer	14	0	180.22	0.00	181.22
30	WYP	bn.	14	15	180.22	0.00	181.06
31	Catherine	name, architect	14	810	180.22	0.05	172.79
32	Mike	name, kleeklee’s regular customer, from Cameroon	18	6231	231.71	0.38	169.18
33	Pascale	name, kleeklee’s menswear designer	13	25	167.35	0.00	168.09
34	刘理	name, project manager of Otex	13	138	167.35	0.01	166.96

35	存处	store	13	909	167.35	0.05	159.60
36	设计师们	designers	17	6841	218.84	0.41	155.66
37	AQUA_LIXUN_SU	bn.	12	0	154.47	0.00	155.47
38	郭鑫慧	name, kleeklee’s photographer	12	0	154.47	0.00	155.47
39	珠织	bead-weaving	12	3	154.47	0.00	155.45
40	Lita	name, coffee shop owner	12	13	154.47	0.00	155.35
41	Ines	name, kindergarten teacher	12	70	154.47	0.00	154.82
42	friends	kleeklee & friends	12	346	154.47	0.02	152.30
43	独龙	Dulong	16	6367	205.97	0.38	149.57
44	Jenny	name, architect	13	2215	167.35	0.13	148.52
45	ECO	on.	15	5283	193.09	0.32	147.22
46	织女	female weaver	28	24454	360.44	1.47	146.11
47	主理人	project director/manager	12	1299	154.47	0.08	144.19
48	洪烨欣	name, fashion designer	11	0	141.60	0.00	142.60
49	Gaki	name, former staff of kleeklee	11	0	141.60	0.00	142.60
50	Home_Sweet	bn. Home Sweet Home	11	0	141.60	0.00	142.60
51	Sara	name, founder of Casc8	12	1763	154.47	0.11	140.54
52	莫然	name, fabric sales manager	11	555	141.60	0.03	137.99
53	挑战赛	challenge/competition	49	61518	630.77	3.71	134.21

54	针织	knitted garment	66	89123	849.61	5.37	133.51
55	Khamir	on. NGO	10	0	128.73	0.00	129.73
56	片丨	fashion shoot	10	45	128.73	0.00	129.38
57	织女们	female weavers	10	97	128.73	0.01	128.97
58	张乐华	name, artist	10	109	128.73	0.01	128.88
59	LABELHOOD	on.	10	116	128.73	0.01	128.83
60	华燕	name, owner of a stuffed bun store	10	887	128.73	0.05	123.15
61	PERMISSION_TO_BE_HUMAN	bn.	9	0	115.86	0.00	116.86
62	黄博群	name, fashion designer	9	0	115.86	0.00	116.86
63	Relief	on.	9	41	115.86	0.00	116.57
64	产业端	industrial end	9	88	115.86	0.01	116.24
65	Shan	name, fashion designer	9	175	115.86	0.01	115.64
66	Susan	name, Susan Rockefeller, wife of David Rockefeller, heir to the Rockefeller family	10	2067	128.73	0.12	115.36
67	Question		9	520	115.86	0.03	113.31
68	THE		9	1388	115.86	0.08	107.84
69	Ahti	name, architect	8	0	102.98	0.00	103.98
70	Siri_Johansen	name, owner of WYP	8	0	102.98	0.00	103.98
71	KAFFTEC	bn.	8	0	102.98	0.00	103.98
72	NaiaTM	material name, an innovative textile material	8	0	102.98	0.00	103.98

73	吴颖华	name, fashion designer	8	3	102.98	0.00	103.96
74	of		9	2338	115.86	0.14	102.42
75	小丽	name, owner of Rainbow Hunter, an organic farm	17	20603	218.84	1.24	98.07
76	Margaret	name, Chief editor of Vogue China	8	1266	102.98	0.08	96.61
77	绣娘	embroiderer	9	4208	115.86	0.25	93.22
78	VOGUE		9	4295	115.86	0.26	92.83
79	时装	fashion	81	170241	1042.70	10.26	92.69
80	独龙江乡	Dulong Jiang Village	7	0	90.11	0.00	91.11
81	PBTH	bn.	7	2	90.11	0.00	91.10
82	陈丹琪	name, fashion designer	7	7	90.11	0.00	91.07
83	FREITAG	bn.	7	53	90.11	0.00	90.82
84	Renew		7	83	90.11	0.01	90.66
85	COLLECTION		7	113	90.11	0.01	90.49
86	布片	patch of cloth	8	2583	102.98	0.16	89.98
87	成衣	ready-made clothes	18	26632	231.71	1.61	89.33
88	可持续	sustainable	187	455169	2407.22	27.43	84.70
89	Hi		10	8900	128.73	0.54	84.44
90	芃芃	name, kleeklee’s child model	7	1334	90.11	0.08	84.33
91	Fashion		7	1467	90.11	0.09	83.71

92	时装周	fashion week	32	66484	411.93	4.01	82.48
93	Home	bn. Home Sweet Home	11	12201	141.60	0.74	82.18
94	可持续性	sustainability	18	30620	231.71	1.85	81.79
95	花姐	Sister Hua, a Dulong female weaver	7	2332	90.11	0.14	79.88
96	Design		7	2337	90.11	0.14	79.86
97	DANQI	bn.	6	0	77.24	0.00	78.24
98	TENSION_ARCHIVE	bn.	6	0	77.24	0.00	78.24
99	柴米	on. Chi Mi Do	8	5496	102.98	0.33	78.11
100	WALL	Bluff's The Wall Collection	6	75	77.24	0.00	77.89

Table 4. Top 100 Keywords in the Popular Science Corpus Compared with Chinese Web 2017 (zhTenTen17) Simplified

bn.=brand name; pn.=project name; on.=organisation name

Rank	Item	Translation and annotation	Frequency (focus)	Frequency (reference)	Relative frequency (focus)	Relative frequency (reference)	Score
1	Fashion		69	1467	774.76	0.09	712.75
2	纯素	pure vegan	58	378	651.25	0.02	637.72
3	source		45	838	505.28	0.05	481.94
4	RERISE	pn.	33	0	370.54	0.00	371.54
5	Sustainable		27	54	303.17	0.00	303.18
6	微纤维	micro fiber	27	898	303.17	0.05	288.55

7	行动者	activist	35	6243	392.99	0.38	286.28
8	The		25	1658	280.71	0.10	256.12
9	Organic		22	190	247.02	0.01	245.22
10	STELLA_MCCARTNEY	bn.	20	0	224.57	0.00	225.57
11	the		20	2299	224.57	0.14	198.12
12	NaiaTM	material name, an innovative textile material	17	0	190.88	0.00	191.88
13	COP	abbr. =conference of the parties	20	3635	224.57	0.22	185.03
14	认知度	awareness	16	152	179.65	0.01	179.01
15	伊士曼	on. Eastman	17	1551	190.88	0.09	175.48
16	Climate		15	84	168.43	0.01	168.57
17	领跑者	leader	45	33625	505.28	2.03	167.29
18	Inspiration		15	249	168.43	0.02	166.92
19	再生棉	recycled cotton	15	273	168.43	0.02	166.68
20	fashion		17	2709	190.88	0.16	164.95
21	可持续性	sustainability	41	30620	460.36	1.85	162.15
22	动物源	animal source	14	8	157.20	0.00	158.12
23	Linen		14	40	157.20	0.00	157.82
24	Renew		14	83	157.20	0.01	157.41
25	可持续	sustainable	381	455169	4278.01	27.43	150.50
26	of		15	2338	168.43	0.14	148.50

27	PEDIA	name of the column, R.I.S.E pedia	13	0	145.97	0.00	146.97
28	RISE_UP	pn.	13	0	145.97	0.00	146.97
29	蓝染	Indigo dye	14	1582	157.20	0.10	144.43
30	Material		13	520	145.97	0.03	142.50
31	脱碳	decarbonisation	15	3290	168.43	0.20	141.39
32	皮草	fur	43	40201	482.82	2.42	141.35
33	设计师们	designers	17	6841	190.88	0.41	135.87
34	消费主义	consumerism	12	128	134.74	0.01	134.70
35	Cotton		12	152	134.74	0.01	134.51
36	大海雀	great auk	12	206	134.74	0.01	134.08
37	Bamboo		12	412	134.74	0.02	132.45
38	Foundation		12	707	134.74	0.04	130.19
39	GLOSSIER	bn.	11	0	123.51	0.00	124.51
40	GETTY_IMAGES		11	0	123.51	0.00	124.51
41	EVERLANE	bn.	11	6	123.51	0.00	124.47
42	for		15	6128	168.43	0.37	123.73
43	时尚界	fashion industry	14	5447	157.20	0.33	119.10
44	宪章	charter	22	18855	247.02	1.14	116.10
45	时尚	fashion	1101	1752682	12362.45	105.63	115.95
46	Fair_Anita	bn.	10	0	112.28	0.00	113.28

47	a-		10	10	112.28	0.00	113.22
48	Hemp		10	13	112.28	0.00	113.20
49	PATAGONIA	bn.	10	49	112.28	0.00	112.95
50	in		19	15350	213.34	0.93	111.34
51	降解	degradable	57	79818	640.02	4.81	110.32
52	VOGUE	name of the magazine	12	4295	134.74	0.26	107.83
53	GUCCI	bn.	14	7787	157.20	0.47	107.67
54	主理人	project director/manager	10	1299	112.28	0.08	105.06
55	to		13	6820	145.97	0.41	104.16
56	PRADA	bn.	11	3502	123.51	0.21	102.81
57	SAINT_LAURENT	bn.	9	0	101.06	0.00	102.06
58	Rens	on.	9	0	101.06	0.00	102.06
59	kleeklee	bn.	9	0	101.06	0.00	102.06
60	杜怡佳	name, project director of RISE	9	2	101.06	0.00	102.04
61	REFORMATION	bn.	9	3	101.06	0.00	102.04
62	Upcycling		9	5	101.06	0.00	102.03
63	ImpactHub	on.	9	9	101.06	0.00	102.00
64	植物染	plant dye	9	14	101.06	0.00	101.97
65	Recycled		9	80	101.06	0.00	101.57
66	BALENCIAGA	bn.	9	182	101.06	0.01	100.95
67	Industry		9	216	101.06	0.01	100.74
68	McKinsey	on.	9	418	101.06	0.03	99.55

69	Selfridges	on.	9	529	101.06	0.03	98.90
70	MTG	bn.	9	578	101.06	0.03	98.62
71	Company	on. McKinsey & Company	9	727	101.06	0.04	97.77
72	开云	on. Kering	9	1063	101.06	0.06	95.91
73	转售	reselling	16	14769	179.65	0.89	95.58
74	Shanghai		9	1578	101.06	0.10	93.19
75	RAY_CHU	bn.	8	0	89.83	0.00	90.83
76	The_	on. The RealReal	8	0	89.83	0.00	90.83
77	C_Team	on.	8	0	89.83	0.00	90.83
78	纺织品	textiles	54	94671	606.33	5.71	90.57
79	Recycling		8	56	89.83	0.00	90.52
80	企业馆	Enterprise Pavilion	8	132	89.83	0.01	90.11
81	Charter		8	207	89.83	0.01	89.71
82	机棉	organic cotton	8	241	89.83	0.01	89.53
83	软核	soft core	8	255	89.83	0.02	89.45
84	Blank	on.	8	441	89.83	0.03	88.48
85	Standard		8	1030	89.83	0.06	85.52
86	面料	fabric	128	268938	1437.23	16.21	83.58
87	时装周	fashion week	37	66484	415.45	4.01	83.18
88	BURBERRY	bn.	8	1607	89.83	0.10	82.81

89	至关重要	extremely important	8	1725	89.83	0.10	82.27
90	废料	waste	27	44968	303.17	2.71	81.99
91	维码	QR code	8	1853	89.83	0.11	81.70
92	NIKE	bn.	10	6909	112.28	0.42	79.98
93	ALLBIRDS	bn.	7	0	78.60	0.00	79.60
94	clothing-		7	0	78.60	0.00	79.60
95	to-		7	0	78.60	0.00	79.60
96	KERING	on.	7	6	78.60	0.00	79.57
97	So-	on. So-Le Studio	7	7	78.60	0.00	79.57
98	RealReal	on.	7	7	78.60	0.00	79.57
99	Nobis	bn.	7	8	78.60	0.00	79.56
100	机竹	organic bamboo	7	11	78.60	0.00	79.55

Table 5. Top 100 Multi-word Terms in the Promotional Corpus Compared with Chinese Web 2017 (zhTenTen17) Simplified

abbr.=abbreviation; bn.=brand name; on.=organisation name

Rank	Item	Translation and annotation	Frequency (focus)	Frequency (reference)	Relative frequency (focus)	Relative frequency (reference)	Score
1	环保 棉	eco-friendly cotton	420	69	5019.24	0.00	4999.45
2	环保 棉 产地	origin of eco-friendly cotton	138	0	1649.18	0.00	1650.18

3	棉 产地	cotton origin	138	64	1649.18	0.00	1643.84
4	转基因 棉种	genetically modified cotton	47	16	561.68	0.00	562.14
5	原材料 环保	environmentally friendly raw materials	47	82	561.68	0.00	559.91
6	纺纱 过程	spinning process	47	276	561.68	0.02	553.47
7	GOTS 标准	GOTS standard (abbr. Global Organic Textile Standard)	45	32	537.78	0.00	537.74
8	有机 纺织品	organic textiles	44	184	525.83	0.01	521.05
9	植物 染色	plant dyeing	44	291	525.83	0.02	517.75
10	生产 纺纱	production spinning	43	0	513.87	0.00	514.88
11	生产 纺纱 过程	production and spinning process	43	0	513.87	0.00	514.88
12	化学 制品	chemical products	50	5952	597.53	0.36	440.52
13	农药 化肥	pesticides and fertilizers	45	4413	537.78	0.27	425.59
14	积分 兑换	points redemption	46	5823	549.73	0.35	407.67
15	纺织品 标准	textile standards	32	447	382.42	0.03	373.36
16	牛仔 面料	denim fabric	30	2008	358.52	0.12	320.71
17	经典 牛仔	classic denim	26	173	310.71	0.01	308.50
18	染色 工艺	dyeing technique	26	1296	310.71	0.08	289.13

19	安福 路 店	Anfu Road store	22	0	262.91	0.00	263.91
20	染色 技术	dyeing technology	23	1254	274.86	0.08	256.48
21	环保 标准	environmental standards	42	16772	501.92	1.01	250.11
22	Organic Textile Standard		20	0	239.01	0.00	240.01
23	Textile Standard		20	0	239.01	0.00	240.01
24	原色 系列	Original Color Collection	20	23	239.01	0.00	239.68
25	有机 棉	organic cotton	20	1218	239.01	0.07	223.60
26	植物 种类	plant species	25	6450	298.76	0.39	215.86
27	系列 服饰	collection garments	19	1091	227.06	0.07	213.99
28	水洗 工艺	washing technique	18	279	215.11	0.02	212.54
29	环保 原则	environmental principles	18	375	215.11	0.02	211.33
30	兑换 商品	redeemable goods	18	670	215.11	0.04	207.72
31	染色 过程	dyeing process	17	593	203.16	0.04	197.12
32	幼 羊驼毛	young alpaca wool	16	0	191.21	0.00	192.21
33	化学 染料	chemical dyes	16	433	191.21	0.03	187.32
34	The		15	0	179.26	0.00	180.26
35	夏季 面料	summer fabrics	15	27	179.26	0.00	179.97
36	良好 棉花	on. Better Cotton (Initiative)	15	49	179.26	0.00	179.73

37	路 店	street store	22	8777	262.91	0.53	172.61
38	色彩 对比	color contrast	17	3497	203.16	0.21	168.62
39	kleeklee 环保	kleeklee eco-friendly	14	0	167.31	0.00	168.31
40	丹宁 染色	denim dyeing	14	0	167.31	0.00	168.31
41	靛蓝 色调	indigo tone	14	16	167.31	0.00	168.15
42	羊毛 产地	wool origin	14	28	167.31	0.00	168.02
43	植物 靛蓝	plant-based indigo	13	0	155.36	0.00	156.36
44	环保 牛仔	eco-friendly denim	13	0	155.36	0.00	156.36
45	丹宁 染色 技术	denim dyeing technology	13	0	155.36	0.00	156.36
46	全程 认证	full-process certification	13	23	155.36	0.00	156.14
47	大 环保	macro environmentalism	14	2664	167.31	0.16	145.03
48	兑换 活动	redemption campaign	13	1316	155.36	0.08	144.87
49	积分 活动	points program	13	1352	155.36	0.08	144.58
50	如遇 商品	if applicable products	12	17	143.41	0.00	144.26
51	色彩 效果	color effect	14	2847	167.31	0.17	143.66
52	植物 纤维	plant fiber	17	7257	203.16	0.44	142.04
53	面料 颜色	fabric color	12	350	143.41	0.02	141.42

54	款 商品	selected items	12	1293	143.41	0.08	133.97
55	商品 质量 问题	product quality issues	12	1467	143.41	0.09	132.68
56	The Laundress	bn.	11	0	131.46	0.00	132.46
57	苎麻 产地	ramie origin	11	0	131.46	0.00	132.46
58	圈圈 针织布	loop knit fabric	11	0	131.46	0.00	132.46
59	GOTS 国际 工作组	on. GOTS International Working Group	11	0	131.46	0.00	132.46
60	棉 协会	on. Cotton Association	11	28	131.46	0.00	132.23
61	天然 纺织品	natural textiles	11	30	131.46	0.00	132.22
62	有机 贸易	organic trade	11	35	131.46	0.00	132.18
63	英国 土壤 协会	on. UK Soil Association	11	39	131.46	0.00	132.15
64	土壤 协会	on. Soil Association	11	68	131.46	0.00	131.92
65	国际 工作组	International Working Group	11	129	131.46	0.01	131.43
66	生物 动力学	biodynamics	11	226	131.46	0.01	130.68
67	山 羊毛	mountain wool	11	243	131.46	0.01	130.55
68	纺织品 协会	on. Textile Association	11	245	131.46	0.01	130.53
69	积分 兑换 活动	points redemption event	11	378	131.46	0.02	129.51
70	小 程序	mini app	46	54402	549.73	3.28	128.72

71	天然 纤维	natural fibers	14	5560	167.31	0.34	126.07
72	自然 色彩	natural colors	11	1287	131.46	0.08	122.92
73	程序 积分	program points	10	0	119.51	0.00	120.51
74	环保 棉 羊毛	eco-friendly cotton wool	10	0	119.51	0.00	120.51
75	kleeklee 植物	kleeklee plant	10	0	119.51	0.00	120.51
76	彩虹 猎人	bn. Rainbow Hunter	10	0	119.51	0.00	120.51
77	双面 针织布	double-sided knit fabric	10	38	119.51	0.00	120.23
78	棉 羊毛	cotton wool	10	47	119.51	0.00	120.17
79	年终 积分	year-end points	10	81	119.51	0.00	119.92
80	原始 色彩	original color	10	231	119.51	0.01	118.85
81	特别 款	special edition	10	994	119.51	0.06	113.70
82	羊羔 绒	lamb fleece	10	1520	119.51	0.09	110.39
83	安第斯 高山 幼	Andean highland young	9	0	107.56	0.00	108.56
84	安第斯 高山 幼 羊驼毛	Andean highland young alpaca wool	9	0	107.56	0.00	108.56
85	高山 幼 羊驼毛	highland young alpaca wool	9	0	107.56	0.00	108.56
86	kleeklee 环保 原则	kleeklee environmental principles	9	0	107.56	0.00	108.56
87	kleeklee 官方	kleeklee official	9	0	107.56	0.00	108.56

88	云南 红茶 茶叶	Yunnan black tea leaves	9	0	107.56	0.00	108.56
89	高山 幼	highland young	9	0	107.56	0.00	108.56
90	加工 制作	processing and production	15	11015	179.26	0.66	108.34
91	天然 色	natural color	9	50	107.56	0.00	108.23
92	积分 兑换 比例	points redemption ratio	9	53	107.56	0.00	108.21
93	店铺 积分	store points	9	129	107.56	0.01	107.72
94	红茶 茶叶	black tea leaves	9	249	107.56	0.02	106.95
95	贸易 协会	trade association	11	4094	131.46	0.25	106.24
96	加工 制作 过程	processing procedure	9	545	107.56	0.03	105.10
97	蓝 印花布	blue printed fabric	10	2850	119.51	0.17	102.84
98	自然 环境	natural environment	56	91636	669.23	5.52	102.76
99	化学 助剂	chemical additives	9	997	107.56	0.06	102.40
100	兑换 比例	redemption ratio	9	1694	107.56	0.10	98.50

Table 6. Top 100 Multi-word Terms in the Event Communication Corpus Compared with Chinese Web 2017 (zhTenTen17) Simplified

abbr. =abbreviation; bn.=brand name; pn.=project name; on.=organisation name

Rank	Item	Tranlation and annotation	Frequency (focus)	Frequency (reference)	Relative frequency (focus)	Relative frequency (reference)	Score
1	naze naze	pn.	210	0	1033.59	0.00	1034.59
2	可持续 时尚	sustainable fashion	203	83	999.14	0.01	995.16
3	时尚 实验室	fashion lab	194	0	954.84	0.00	955.84
4	时尚 行业	fashion industry	207	4215	1018.83	0.25	813.25
5	设计 挑战赛	design challenge	165	182	812.11	0.01	804.29
6	时尚 设计	fashion design	192	8752	945.00	0.53	619.33
7	RISE UP	pn.	119	0	585.70	0.00	586.70
8	时尚 产品	fashion products	136	3975	669.37	0.24	540.82
9	时尚 创新 平台	fashion innovation platform	87	0	428.20	0.00	429.20
10	时尚 创新	fashion innovation	89	692	438.05	0.04	421.47
11	创新 行动者	innovative actor	52	0	255.94	0.00	256.94
12	时尚 消费	fashion consumption	66	5129	324.84	0.31	248.91
13	可持续 生活	sustainable living	50	327	246.09	0.02	242.32

14	时尚 产业	fashion sector	72	8730	354.37	0.53	232.86
15	消费 决策	consumer decision-making	50	2239	246.09	0.13	217.72
16	可持续 变革	sustainable transformation	42	0	206.72	0.00	207.72
17	品牌 方	brand side	50	3692	246.09	0.22	202.12
18	推动者 合作	collaboration with changemakers	39	0	191.95	0.00	192.95
19	生态 友好	eco-friendly	40	466	196.87	0.03	192.47
20	时尚 业务	fashion business	37	128	182.11	0.01	181.71
21	社会 创新	social innovation	53	7718	260.86	0.47	178.73
22	B- corp	abbr. Benefit Corporation	36	0	177.19	0.00	178.19
23	创新 平台	innovation platform	98	29917	482.34	1.80	172.44
24	外滩 金融 中心	Bund Financial Center	33	219	162.42	0.01	161.29
25	实验室 主理人	lab curator	32	0	157.50	0.00	158.50
26	零售 生态	retail ecosystem	32	507	157.50	0.03	153.80
27	织毯 大赛	tapestry competition	31	0	152.58	0.00	153.58
28	时装 设计师	fashion designer	39	7046	191.95	0.42	135.44
29	纤维素 纤维	cellulose fiber	31	2246	152.58	0.14	135.27
30	设计师 品牌	designer brand	45	10850	221.48	0.65	134.52

31	植物 肖像	plant portrait	27	0	132.89	0.00	133.89
32	疫情 时代	pandemic era	25	0	123.05	0.00	124.05
33	循环 设计	circular design	25	287	123.05	0.02	121.94
34	公益 基金会	public welfare foundation	47	15198	231.33	0.92	121.26
35	时尚 创新 平台 创始人	founder of the fashion innovation platform	23	0	113.20	0.00	114.20
36	naze naze 项目	naze naze project	23	0	113.20	0.00	114.20
37	创新 平台 创始人	innovation platform founder	23	0	113.20	0.00	114.20
38	环境 价值	environmental value	24	1159	118.12	0.07	111.35
39	可持续 面料	sustainable fabrics	22	0	108.28	0.00	109.28
40	万科 公益 基金会	on. Vanke Public Welfare Foundation	22	115	108.28	0.01	108.53
41	平台 创始人	platform founder	23	1066	113.20	0.06	107.31
42	艺术 基金会	art foundation	26	4248	127.97	0.26	102.68
43	水 基金	on. Water Foundation	21	569	103.36	0.03	100.90
44	安福 路 店	Anfu Road store	20	0	98.44	0.00	99.44
45	优胜 设计师	winning designer	20	0	98.44	0.00	99.44
46	千岛湖 水 基金	on. Qiandao Lake Water Foundation	20	0	98.44	0.00	99.44
47	NaiaTM Renew	NaiaTM Renew	20	0	98.44	0.00	99.44

48	明珠 美术馆	Pearl Art Museum	20	0	98.44	0.00	99.44
49	设计 互联	Design Society	20	104	98.44	0.01	98.82
50	影响力 投资	impact investing	20	718	98.44	0.04	95.31
51	naze naze 独龙族	naze naze Dulong ethnic group	19	0	93.52	0.00	94.52
52	循环 时尚	circular fashion	19	0	93.52	0.00	94.52
53	彩虹 猎人	bn. Rainbow Hunter	19	0	93.52	0.00	94.52
54	时尚 品牌	fashion brand	50	28421	246.09	1.71	91.08
55	优秀 设计师	outstanding designer	23	4662	113.20	0.28	89.15
56	绿色 倡议	on. Green Initiative	18	92	88.59	0.01	89.10
57	NaiaTM Renew 纤维素	NaiaTM Renew cellulose	17	0	83.67	0.00	84.67
58	Renew 纤维素	Renew cellulose	17	0	83.67	0.00	84.67
59	Renew 纤维素 纤维	Renew cellulose fiber	17	0	83.67	0.00	84.67
60	PERMISSION TO BE HUMAN	bn.	17	0	83.67	0.00	84.67
61	NaiaTM Renew 纤维素 纤维	NaiaTM Renew cellulose fiber	17	0	83.67	0.00	84.67
62	好 瓶	bn. Good Bottle	17	36	83.67	0.00	84.49
63	下方 二维码	QR code below	25	8848	123.05	0.53	80.91
64	生活 方式 品牌	lifestyle brand	17	936	83.67	0.06	80.15

65	共益 企业	benefit corporation	16	0	78.75	0.00	79.75
66	世界 投票	global vote	16	17	78.75	0.00	79.67
67	可持续 发展	sustainable development	147	137026	723.51	8.26	78.26
68	业务 合伙人	business partner	16	367	78.75	0.02	78.02
69	早期 投资	early-stage investment	18	2842	88.59	0.17	76.49
70	游牧 商店	nomadic shop	15	0	73.83	0.00	74.83
71	长效 设计	durable design	15	16	73.83	0.00	74.76
72	纺织 事业部	textile division	15	39	73.83	0.00	74.65
73	可持续 产品	sustainable products	15	150	73.83	0.01	74.16
74	生物 动力学	biodynamics	15	226	73.83	0.01	73.82
75	时尚 平台	fashion platform	15	475	73.83	0.03	72.75
76	方式 品牌	approach brand	17	2979	83.67	0.18	71.78
77	顶尖 设计	top-tier design	16	2064	78.75	0.12	70.93
78	特种 材料	specialty materials	16	2256	78.75	0.14	70.21
79	MORE studio	on.	14	0	68.91	0.00	69.91
80	Fashion Project	Fashion Project	14	0	68.91	0.00	69.91
81	Future Fashion	Future Fashion	14	0	68.91	0.00	69.91
82	商业 价值	business value	54	46758	265.78	2.82	69.88

83	P8 星球	bn. Planet P8	14	22	68.91	0.00	69.81
84	品牌 主理人	brand director	14	221	68.91	0.01	68.99
85	时尚 产业链	fashion supply chain	14	229	68.91	0.01	68.95
86	行动 指南	action guide	22	9777	108.28	0.59	68.76
87	联合国 气候 变化 大会	UN Climate Change Conference	15	1542	73.83	0.09	68.47
88	时尚 领域	fashion field	16	2762	78.75	0.17	68.37
89	全球 时尚	global fashion	16	2861	78.75	0.17	68.02
90	消费 生态	consumer ecosystem	14	609	68.91	0.04	67.43
91	设计 方式	design approach	19	6902	93.52	0.42	66.75
92	联合国 气候 变化	UN Climate Change	18	5947	88.59	0.36	65.96
93	时装 学院	fashion institute	14	1171	68.91	0.07	65.30
94	气候 变化 大会	climate change conference	16	3688	78.75	0.22	65.25
95	变化 大会	change conference	16	3718	78.75	0.22	65.15
96	路 店	street store	20	8777	98.44	0.53	65.04
97	可持续 表现	sustainable performance	13	0	63.98	0.00	64.98
98	HANQING DING	bn./name of a fashion designer	13	0	63.98	0.00	64.98
99	月经 裤	period underwear	13	0	63.98	0.00	64.98

100	诺乐 游牧 商店	Nolo nomadic shop	13	0	63.98	0.00	64.98

Table 7. Top 100 Multi-word Terms in the Profile Feature Corpus Compared with Chinese Web 2017 (zhTenTen17) Simplified

bn.=brand name; pn.=project name

Rank	Item	Translation and annotation	Frequency (focus)	Frequency (reference)	Relative frequency (focus)	Relative frequency (reference)	Score
1	设计 挑战赛	design challenge	40	182	514.91	0.01	510.32
2	时尚 实验室	fashion lab	32	0	411.93	0.00	412.93
3	RISE UP	pn.	32	0	411.93	0.00	412.93
4	时尚 设计	fashion design	43	8752	553.53	0.53	363.05
5	可持续 时尚	sustainable fashion	28	83	360.44	0.01	359.64
6	naze naze	pn.	20	0	257.46	0.00	258.46
7	时尚 行业	fashion industry	21	4215	270.33	0.25	216.37
8	时尚 产品	fashion products	19	3975	244.58	0.24	198.12
9	优秀 设计师	outstanding designer	16	4662	205.97	0.28	161.57
10	大 片 丨	fashion campaign	10	0	128.73	0.00	129.73
11	时尚 创新 平台	fashion innovation platform	10	0	128.73	0.00	129.73

12	生产 代表	production representative	10	48	128.73	0.00	129.35
13	时尚 创新	fashion innovation	10	692	128.73	0.04	124.54
14	苗族 文化	Miao culture	11	2848	141.60	0.17	121.71
15	时装 产品	fashion products	9	186	115.86	0.01	115.56
16	时装 行业	fashion industry	9	784	115.86	0.05	111.58
17	大 片	fashion campaign	15	12763	193.09	0.77	109.71
18	PERMISSION TO BE HUMAN	bn.	8	0	102.98	0.00	103.98
19	救助 中心	rescue center	9	3435	115.86	0.21	96.81
20	时尚 产业	fashion sector	11	8730	141.60	0.53	93.44
21	服装 设计师	fashion designer	14	15853	180.22	0.96	92.68
22	虚拟 时装	virtual fashion	7	0	90.11	0.00	91.11
23	创新 行动者	innovative actor	7	0	90.11	0.00	91.11
24	新兴 品牌	emerging brand	8	2716	102.98	0.16	89.36
25	设计师 品牌	designer brand	10	10850	128.73	0.65	78.44
26	naze naze 项目	pn.	6	0	77.24	0.00	78.24
27	传播 伙伴	communication partner	6	0	77.24	0.00	78.24
28	TENSION ARCHIVE	bn.	6	0	77.24	0.00	78.24

29	动力学 农场	dynamics farm	6	0	77.24	0.00	78.24
30	AESTHETIC PILL	bn.	6	0	77.24	0.00	78.24
31	生物 动力学 农场	biodynamic farm	6	0	77.24	0.00	78.24
32	参赛 系列	competition collection	6	0	77.24	0.00	78.24
33	苗绣 元素	Miao embroidery elements	6	0	77.24	0.00	78.24
34	可持续 循环	sustainable cycle	6	116	77.24	0.01	77.69
35	生物 动力学	biodynamics	6	226	77.24	0.01	77.19
36	新 朋友	new friend	13	20148	167.35	1.21	76.03
37	废弃 材料	discarded materials	6	639	77.24	0.04	75.34
38	传统 手工艺	traditional handicrafts	8	6615	102.98	0.40	74.35
39	AQUA LIXUN SU	bn./name of a fashion designer	5	0	64.36	0.00	65.36
40	限量 专辑	limited edition collection	5	0	64.36	0.00	65.36
41	WALL COLLECTION	name of a collection	5	0	64.36	0.00	65.36
42	素食 皮革	vegetarian leather	5	0	64.36	0.00	65.36
43	挖掘 作品 背后	exploring the story behind the work	5	0	64.36	0.00	65.36
44	P8 星球	bn. Planet P8	5	22	64.36	0.00	65.28
45	女装 大片	womenswear campaign	5	26	64.36	0.00	65.26
46	虚拟 技术	virtual technology	6	3334	77.24	0.20	65.15

47	挖掘 作品	explore the work	5	84	64.36	0.01	65.04
48	服装 设计	clothing design	15	33201	193.09	2.00	64.68
49	秋冬 大片	autumn-winter campaign	5	212	64.36	0.01	64.54
50	品牌 主理人	brand director	5	221	64.36	0.01	64.51
51	时装 设计师	fashion designer	7	7046	90.11	0.42	63.95
52	内衣 设计师	lingerie designer	5	512	64.36	0.03	63.41
53	时装 产业	fashion sector	5	592	64.36	0.04	63.11
54	个人 故事	personal story	5	652	64.36	0.04	62.89
55	平面 设计师	graphic designer	7	7607	90.11	0.46	62.47
56	向左 滑动	swipe left	5	854	64.36	0.05	62.17
57	青年 论坛	youth forum	6	4427	77.24	0.27	61.76
58	环境 价值	environmental value	5	1159	64.36	0.07	61.10
59	时装周 期间	during fashion week	5	1658	64.36	0.10	59.43
60	作品 背后	behind the work	5	1668	64.36	0.10	59.39
61	雨 晴	Yu Qing, name of a fashion designer	5	1730	64.36	0.10	59.19
62	天然 纤维	natural fibers	6	5560	77.24	0.34	58.60
63	灵感 来源	source of inspiration	6	6537	77.24	0.39	56.13

64	独立 设计师	independent designer	5	3150	64.36	0.19	54.94
65	设计 品牌	design brand	5	3383	64.36	0.20	54.30
66	品牌 方	brand side	5	3692	64.36	0.22	53.47
67	循环 模式	circular model	5	3712	64.36	0.22	53.42
68	时装 受众群	fashion audience group	4	0	51.49	0.00	52.49
69	可持续 变革	sustainable transformation	4	0	51.49	0.00	52.49
70	野生 酵	wild fermentation	4	0	51.49	0.00	52.49
71	珠织 工艺	bead weaving craft	4	0	51.49	0.00	52.49
72	疫情 时代	pandemic era	4	0	51.49	0.00	52.49
73	粘胶 尼龙	viscose nylon	4	0	51.49	0.00	52.49
74	RISE UP 挑战赛	RISE UP challenge	4	0	51.49	0.00	52.49
75	可持续 面料	sustainable fabric	4	0	51.49	0.00	52.49
76	NaiaTM Renew	NaiaTM Renew	4	0	51.49	0.00	52.49
77	推动者 合作	collaboration with changemakers	4	0	51.49	0.00	52.49
78	Aesthetic Pill	bn.	4	0	51.49	0.00	52.49
79	优胜 设计师	winning designer	4	0	51.49	0.00	52.49
80	大利 项目	pn, Dali project	4	0	51.49	0.00	52.49

81	雨 晴和	Yu Qing and, name of a fashion designer	4	33	51.49	0.00	52.39
82	上海 时装周 秀场	Shanghai Fashion Week runway	4	34	51.49	0.00	52.38
83	全新 对话	new dialogue	4	35	51.49	0.00	52.38
84	童装 大片	children’s wear campaign	4	35	51.49	0.00	52.38
85	老 绣片	old embroidery piece	4	41	51.49	0.00	52.36
86	实验室 官方	official lab	4	47	51.49	0.00	52.34
87	环保 棉	eco-friendly cotton	4	69	51.49	0.00	52.27
88	海报 二维码	poster QR code	4	108	51.49	0.01	52.15
89	回收 再造	recycled regeneration	4	108	51.49	0.01	52.15
90	针织 品牌	knitwear brand	4	132	51.49	0.01	52.08
91	可持续 理念	sustainable concept	4	134	51.49	0.01	52.07
92	针织 设计	knitwear design	4	209	51.49	0.01	51.84
93	主要 元素	key elements	5	4362	64.36	0.26	51.76
94	环保 原材料	eco-friendly raw materials	4	298	51.49	0.02	51.57
95	当代 语境	contemporary context	4	442	51.49	0.03	51.13
96	生态 友好	eco-friendly	4	466	51.49	0.03	51.06
97	英国 皇家 艺术 学院	Royal College of Art	4	488	51.49	0.03	50.99

98	英国 皇家 艺术	Royal Art of the UK	4	657	51.49	0.04	50.49
99	时装周 秀场	fashion week runway	4	657	51.49	0.04	50.49
100	面料 开发	fabric development	4	760	51.49	0.05	50.19

Table 8. Top 100 Multi-word Terms in the Popular Science Corpus Compared with Chinese Web 2017 (zhTenTen17) Simplified

bn.=brand name

Rank	Item	Translation and annotation	Frequency (focus)	Frequency (reference)	Relative frequency (focus)	Relative frequency (reference)	Score
1	时尚 产品	fashion products	161	3975	1807.77	0.24	1459.21
2	时尚 行业	fashion industry	160	4215	1796.54	0.25	1433.42
3	可持续 时尚	sustainable fashion	122	83	1369.86	0.01	1364.04
4	时尚 实验室	fashion lab	68	0	763.53	0.00	764.53
5	气候 行动	climate action	44	1182	494.05	0.07	462.13
6	时尚 消费	fashion consumption	51	5129	572.65	0.31	438.20
7	动物 福利	animal welfare	51	6106	572.65	0.37	419.34
8	时尚 产业	fashion sector	54	8730	606.33	0.53	397.96
9	潜在 行动者	potential actor	32	0	359.31	0.00	360.31

10	道德 时尚	ethical fashion	26	30	291.94	0.00	292.41
11	疫情 时代	pandemic era	24	0	269.48	0.00	270.48
12	循环 时尚	circular fashion	23	0	258.25	0.00	259.25
13	纯素 时尚	vegan fashion	22	0	247.02	0.00	248.02
14	时尚 品牌	fashion brand	59	28421	662.47	1.71	244.57
15	时尚 认知	fashion awareness	21	41	235.80	0.00	236.21
16	道德 焦虑	ethical anxiety	21	226	235.80	0.01	233.61
17	气候 行动 宪章	climate action charter	20	0	224.57	0.00	225.57
18	可持续 面料	sustainable fabrics	20	0	224.57	0.00	225.57
19	行动 宪章	action charter	20	0	224.57	0.00	225.57
20	STELLA MCCARTNEY	bn. STELLA MCCARTNEY	19	0	213.34	0.00	214.34
21	良心 消费	conscious consumption	19	19	213.34	0.00	214.09
22	慢 时尚	slow fashion	18	113	202.11	0.01	201.74
23	公平 贸易	fair trade	21	3864	235.80	0.23	192.07
24	消费 行为	consumer behavior	42	26277	471.59	1.58	182.92
25	情感 反馈	emotional feedback	16	65	179.65	0.00	179.95
26	品牌 方	brand side	19	3692	213.34	0.22	175.33

27	温室 气体	greenhouse gases	51	39373	572.65	2.37	170.08
28	时尚 行业 气候	fashion industry climate	15	0	168.43	0.00	169.43
29	行业 气候 行动 宪章	industry climate action charter	15	0	168.43	0.00	169.43
30	行业 气候 行动	industry climate action	15	0	168.43	0.00	169.43
31	时尚 行业 气候 行动	fashion industry climate action	15	0	168.43	0.00	169.43
32	消费 决策	consumer decision-making	17	2239	190.88	0.13	169.07
33	行为 图谱	behavior map	15	37	168.43	0.00	169.05
34	行业 气候	industry climate	15	60	168.43	0.00	168.82
35	微 塑料	microplastics	15	439	168.43	0.03	165.06
36	纤维素 纤维	cellulose fiber	16	2246	179.65	0.14	159.12
37	动物源 材料	animal-derived materials	14	0	157.20	0.00	158.20
38	负面 环境	negative environment	13	152	145.97	0.01	145.64
39	概念 篇	concept section	13	155	145.97	0.01	145.61
40	快 时尚	fast fashion	16	4009	179.65	0.24	145.50
41	Z 世代	Generation Z	13	393	145.97	0.02	143.57
42	消费 主力	main consumer group	15	3388	168.43	0.20	140.70
43	碳 足迹	carbon footprint	15	4036	168.43	0.24	136.28

44	消费 人群	consumer group	32	30910	359.31	1.86	125.86
45	宇宙 时装周	Metaverse Fashion Week	11	0	123.51	0.00	124.51
46	GETTY IMAGES	GETTY IMAGES	11	0	123.51	0.00	124.51
47	生物 多样性	biodiversity	39	42557	437.91	2.56	123.13
48	气候 变化	climate change	92	129545	1033.01	7.81	117.41
49	消费 人群 行为 图谱	consumer behavior map	10	0	112.28	0.00	113.28
50	时尚 认知度	fashion awareness level	10	0	112.28	0.00	113.28
51	人群 行为 图谱	group behavior map	10	0	112.28	0.00	113.28
52	消费 人群 行为	consumer group behavior	10	0	112.28	0.00	113.28
53	Sustainable Fashion	Sustainable Fashion	10	0	112.28	0.00	113.28
54	正面 情感	positive emotions	10	141	112.28	0.01	112.33
55	百科 栏目	encyclopedia section	10	169	112.28	0.01	112.14
56	人群 行为	group behavior	10	365	112.28	0.02	110.85
57	消费 过程	consumption process	13	5620	145.97	0.34	109.79
58	胶囊 系列	capsule collection	10	537	112.28	0.03	109.73
59	天然 材料	natural materials	12	4314	134.74	0.26	107.73
60	有机 棉	organic cotton	10	1218	112.28	0.07	105.54

61	参考 资料	references	27	31503	303.17	1.90	104.94
62	NaiaTM Renew	NaiaTM Renew	9	0	101.06	0.00	102.06
63	设计 挑战赛	design challenge	9	182	101.06	0.01	100.95
64	联合国 气候 变化	UN climate change	12	5947	134.74	0.36	99.93
65	植物 染料	plant-based dyes	9	570	101.06	0.03	98.67
66	时尚 消费者	fashion consumers	9	610	101.06	0.04	98.44
67	温室 气体 排放量	greenhouse gas emissions	10	3240	112.28	0.20	94.78
68	购买 行为	purchase behavior	14	11460	157.20	0.69	93.57
69	联合国 气候 变化 大会	UN Climate Change Conference	9	1542	101.06	0.09	93.38
70	气体 排放量	gas emissions	10	3545	112.28	0.21	93.34
71	时尚 百科	fashion encyclopedia	8	0	89.83	0.00	90.83
72	NaiaTM Renew 纤维素	NaiaTM Renew cellulose	8	0	89.83	0.00	90.83
73	实验室 主理人	lab curator	8	0	89.83	0.00	90.83
74	纯素 皮革	vegan leather	8	0	89.83	0.00	90.83
75	Renew 纤维素 纤维	Renew cellulose fiber	8	0	89.83	0.00	90.83
76	Renew 纤维素	Renew cellulose	8	0	89.83	0.00	90.83
77	NaiaTM Renew 纤维素 纤维	NaiaTM Renew cellulose fiber	8	0	89.83	0.00	90.83

78	消费 篇	consumption section	8	65	89.83	0.00	90.47
79	动物 皮草	animal fur	8	96	89.83	0.01	90.31
80	纺织 废料	textile waste	8	117	89.83	0.01	90.19
81	材料 篇	materials section	8	250	89.83	0.02	89.48
82	植物 染色	plant dyeing	8	291	89.83	0.02	89.26
83	时尚 设计	fashion design	12	8752	134.74	0.53	88.87
84	产业 篇	industry section	8	388	89.83	0.02	88.75
85	版 报告	edition report	8	467	89.83	0.03	88.34
86	时尚 领域	fashion field	9	2762	101.06	0.17	87.49
87	气候 变化 大会	climate change conference	9	3688	101.06	0.22	83.50
88	变化 大会	change conference	9	3718	101.06	0.22	83.37
89	纤维 面料	fiber fabrics	8	2144	89.83	0.13	80.43
90	Fashion Industry	Fashion Industry	7	0	78.60	0.00	79.60
91	塑料 微纤维	plastic microfibers	7	0	78.60	0.00	79.60
92	机竹 纤维	mechanically processed bamboo fiber	7	0	78.60	0.00	79.60
93	好 商店	Good Shop	7	33	78.60	0.00	79.44
94	可持续 产品	sustainable products	7	150	78.60	0.01	78.89

95	认知 度	awareness level	20	30919	224.57	1.86	78.78
96	塑料 纤维	plastic fibers	7	299	78.60	0.02	78.19
97	塑料 污染	plastic pollution	7	531	78.60	0.03	77.13
98	学生 群体	student group	12	13012	134.74	0.78	76.08
99	制造 过程	manufacturing process	14	18281	157.20	1.10	75.27
100	合成 纤维	synthetic fiber	10	9062	112.28	0.55	73.27

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