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Sustainability-Driven Business Models

Ecopreneuring in the ethical fashion movement: Conceptual and empirical challenges.

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Abstract
This paper challenges the current discourse on social and ecopreneurship and existing typologies. Through examining 39 ecopreneurs within the ethical fashion movement, the paper aims to contribute to a process-based view of ecopreneurship. The method used explores possibilities to study the organization of the movement which the paper poses as a 'rhizomatic network'.
Acknowledgements & a favour

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1 Introduction

Environmental and social issues have put heavy stress on the fashion industry worldwide. Consumer pressure pushes companies to prohibit child labour in their production chains and pay workers a fair price. These developments account for new opportunities to create sustainable and transparent production chains. Fashion that has been produced in an ethical, economically viable way, according to strong environmental and social values, becomes the new standard.

Ethical fashion is a booming industry with growth figures in sales of organic cotton of 80% per year (Ferrigno 2008). Within this industry, we find around 500 ethical fashion entrepreneurs spread around the globe of which the majority has started not more than four years ago. A large part of them are small groups consisting of the founder and several people working with him or her (ethical fashion entrepreneurs are very often female). In most cases, the founder/entrepreneur directly works with people in developing countries to source and produce the fashion items. Together they somehow form a rhizomatic network (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) of entrepreneurs, often helping each other and at the same time becoming increasingly more competitive.
In line with the eco aspect of entrepreneurship in the ethical fashion industry, I chose to use the word rhizome to describe the global ethical fashion movement. Rhizome is a word derived from nature pointing to the interconnectedness of relations. It stresses the movement as a network of people that try to make money with creating fashion thereby taking the environment, social values and transparency into account. This network is not an organization with fixed boundaries but still, these actors organize themselves around the topic of ethical fashion. The aspect of environment in the fashion industry refers to organic crop growth, using non-toxic dyes and developing new, sustainable fabrics for example out of recycled materials. Social values refer to fair trade which means paying all actors in the supply chain a fair price for their work. It also points to preserving traditional handicraft techniques that have been used to create fashion for many centuries.

Aside from people and planet, profit is the third aspect of ethical fashion which refers to a transparent way of doing business. Transparency can be defined in four key terms, which are certification (labelling f.e. fair-trade or organic practices), communication (between actors within a supply chain but also between different ecopreneurs), connecting (making the story behind a product more visible to the end consumer) and commitment (to buy organic cotton of farmers thus giving them security f.e.).

This rhizomatic network consists of designers, stylists, entrepreneurs, activists, models, journalists, managers and everyone else who contributes to moving eco fashion in the world. They interact at events such as Ethical Fashion Show Paris and online on www.ecofashionworld.com and other websites. Together they constantly learn while sharing and negotiating the concept and practice of eco fashion (Berger and Luckmann 1967). Through practicing this social activity, they habitualize it, give meaning to it and embed this knowledge in the institutionalized fabric of society. In this article, I focus on one group within the ethical fashion rhizome: the entrepreneurs that run their own ethical fashion brand.
2 Ecopreneurship: A process-based view?

One of the biggest challenges of entrepreneurs nowadays is the double-bind between growth of an industry and preservation of our natural environment. This challenge implies an increasing need for environmental responsibility in entrepreneurship (Khare 2003). Ecopreneurship is often defined as ‘entrepreneurship through an environmental lens’ (Schaltegger 2002). Isaak (1998) adds the social aspect to greening businesses by suggesting that ecopreneurs pursue social and ecological goals by means of profit orientated businesses. I stick to Isaak’s definition by perceiving the ecological as well as the social aspect of ecopreneurship (Isaak 1998). To me this concept better describes the entrepreneurial activity in the ethical fashion movement than the concept of social entrepreneurship (Mair, Robinson et al. 2006) that excludes the environmental aspect. In doing so, I challenge the current terminology to describe these new entrepreneurial approaches. There is obviously space for redefinition and the invention of more appropriate words for this upcoming field of green matters.

Over the last ten years, the ecopreneurship discourse has developed and been criticized by various scholars (Schaper 2002; Schick, Marxen et al. 2002; Krishna 2007). “One major critique of the ecopreneurial research literature is that it’s heavy on speculation and extremely light on empirical evidence” (Gibbs 2007). Schaltegger (2002) uses seven case studies and Walley and Taylor (2002) provide four cases for each of their typologies which are based on anecdotal evidence (Taylor and Walley 2002). Linnanen’s concept seems most advanced in this respect since he has spent more than ten years creating and managing environmentally oriented business ventures in Finland (Linnanen 2002). This is the reason I aim to build on Linnanen’s (2002) ecopreneurship typologies that he constructs using internal and external drivers. External drivers in his view are the geographical influence, the reason for market emergence and the degree of enforcement of environmental
standards. Internal drivers are deduced from the entrepreneurial motivation structure: ecopreneurs either follow their predominant desire to change the world or to make money, or a combination of both (Schlange 2006: 3). Based on these definitions, Linnanen distinguishes four types of ecopreneurs:

1. Non-profit business: high desire to change the world, low financial drive
2. Self-employer: low desire to change the world, low financial drive
3. Opportunist: low desire to change the world, high financial drive
4. Successful idealist: high desire to change the world, high financial drive

As Gibbs (2007) points out: there are strong overlaps in all these typologies. Walley & Taylor’s ethical maverick resembles Linnanen’s self-employer, their ad-hoc enviropreneur is similar to the opportunist as is the visionary champion to the successful idealist. Schlange (2006) has put the three typologies within the ecopreneurship debate in a table which gives an overview of their use of internal and external drivers:

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<td>External</td>
<td>Market choice</td>
<td>Structural influences</td>
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<td>Internal</td>
<td>Priority of environmental business goals</td>
<td>Orientation of entrepreneurial mindset</td>
<td>Entrepreneurs’ desires</td>
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*Table 1: Overview of ecopreneurship typologies*
One critique of the ecopreneurship typologies is that they are rather static and fail to account for changes over time as businesses and individuals develop (de Bruin & Lewis 2005 in Gibbs). Could ecopreneurs move between different typologies and which drivers mainly guide their behaviour? Isaak (1998) argues that ideal types will not be found in their pure forms, but serve as a reference point for broader shifts within the business paradigm. Process theory of entrepreneurship confirms this viewpoint as it stresses the fact that you can't pin people down to one type, ‘entrepreneuring’ should rather be used as a verb, stressing the process of ‘becoming’ (Steyaert 2007). Verduijn (2007) compares entrepreneurship research that focuses on the individual entrepreneur with this process-based view. According to her, the individual or static approach provides a ‘static’ analysis in the sense that it delivers an indication of cognitive aspects of an individual at a given moment in time. On the other hand, the process-based view of entrepreneuring is about everydayness: the everyday unfolding of entrepreneurship (Verduijn 2007). This means that entrepreneurship is conceptualized through daily activity and interaction (Steyaert 2004).

If we apply this process-based perspective from the entrepreneurship literature to the ecopreneurial discourse, we need to sincerely look upon the current conceptualization and typologies in use. The little empirical evidence on which the ecopreneurship typologies have been based question how relevant and useful they are. Should we learn from the entrepreneurship discourse and start speaking about ‘ecopreneuring'? The fact that I, as most researchers in this field, have adopted a phenomenological approach already implies that since it is inherently processual, focusing on ‘lived’ and ‘living’ experience. Thus, this contribution seeks to answer my research question: Can ecopreneurship be conceptualized as a process of becoming like has been done with entrepreneurship?
3 Research method: A narrative approach

This paper aims to find confirmation in a process-based view of ecopreneurship and thus criticizes the existing typologies within the ecopreneurship discourse. I do so by collecting stories of 39 ecopreneurs within the ethical fashion movement through which I would like to contribute to redefinition of the concept of ecopreneurship. Ethical fashion entrepreneurs form a small niche market and they are spread around the globe. The biggest event that brings together a substantial amount of these labels is Ethical Fashion Show (EFS) in Paris. This annual event is always held in October and is the occasion where over one hundred ethical fashion brands from all over the world showcase their products.

Being the fifth edition, EFS 2008 took place in a special location, namely the Carrousel du Louvre where big names such as Chanel and Gaultier normally organize their catwalk shows. During four days, the researcher and her assistant observed the different spaces that were part of the event such as the entrance hall with press area and exhibitions, the market place and the fashion shows. Aside from the observations, the researchers interviewed 39 brands for approximately half an hour per brand. The selection was made on the basis of accessibility during the event and the visual merchandising displays of the brands. Besides that, the researchers tried to cover a wide range of different products, from accessories to lingerie to baby clothing and from haute couture to shoes, to casual and sportswear. The main question in the interviews was: 'What's the story of your brand? The interviews were videotaped and these videos allowed the researchers to capture the 'imagerial world' of ethical fashion. As Gobo (2008) stresses: audio-visual tools are becoming highly popular in commercial ethnography and in creative industries such as the fashion industry (Gobo 2008). Images, artefacts and of course clothes make the fashion industry an
enormous visual field that is worthwhile being captured on tape. Besides that, this method might offer insights in how audio-visual tools can be used to study rhizomatic networks.

The video interviews helped the researchers to analyze this exciting rhizomatic network and the different stories of ecopreneurs. We transcribed the interviews and coded them according to topics that sprung up from the text. We double-checked our categorization through comparing the transcriptions with what we saw in the videos and the notes of our observations during the event. If necessary we had a look at the websites of the different brands to check our findings and find additional info. This triangulation of methods allowed us to filter the narratives of the 39 brands and to develop a new categorization that moves beyond current ecopreneurship typologies.

The scarcity of ecopreneurship research available has made me to use an exploratory approach and a phenomenological research paradigm. Most authors researching strategy in sustainable organizations use this inductive approach which facilitates sense-making and derives understanding (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe et al. 2002). I adopt a discursive approach to organizational practice in terms of narratives that construct ‘plurivocal’ meaning and interpretations which lead to infinite meaning making (Boje 1995). Plurivocal meaning making stands for a surplus of possibilities of narratives in its language, its figures of speech and its many voices (Bakhtin 1981). Meaning is produced in the ‘life world’ of the organization through textual arrangements and editing processes (Gabriel 2000; Fairclough 2005). The interaction of individuals with societies’ rules, institutions, values and language is assumed to influence the way in which they see the world. Development of patterns of meaning, manifested through narratives, takes place through a constant process of sense-making, by which organizational actors attempt to create microstability in their interpretive frames and thereby their frames of action (Weick 1995; Berendse 2006). In this approach, the static definition of organization as a stable system with fixed boundaries is
replaced by an approach that acknowledges modern organizations in terms of open-ended meaning networks with fluid structures and permeable boundaries. This perspective helps me in studying the collection of ethical fashion entrepreneurs as a rhizomatic network.

Furthermore, the narrative lens of this study supported my focus on collecting stories and adopting a narrative analysis of those stories (Verduijn 2007). A narrative approach provides the researcher with an understanding of entrepreneurship from the earlier mentioned process-based standpoint (Steyaert 1997). This implies that entrepreneurs can't be viewed as static entities who are often portrayed as for example hero-entrepreneur (Smith 2002). Instead, entrepreneurs are constantly in change, moving from one stage in their personal and professional maturing process to the next. As stories exist of sequences of events, narratives relate of processes. Besides that, a narrative approach also means understanding narratives as life itself (Verduijn 2007). To me narratives have always been a tool to simplify life because they are a plotted story that can somehow bring more coherence to 'messy' reality. In contrast, Steyaert (2007) stresses that narrative methods exist to 'recomplexify' those stories and he suggests to play with them. In this contribution I have used the narrative lens in the process of data collection and in the analysis of the data to which I now turn.

4 Entrepreneurs in the ethical fashion industry

The data reveal interesting information about ecopreneurs in the ethical fashion industry. Looking at the internal and external drivers on which Linnanen (2002) has based his typologies, I will catwalk the reader through the stories. External drivers are the geographical influence, the reason for market emergence and the degree of enforcement of environmental standards. The founders of ethical fashion brands often point to a social problem
they are concerned about as the reason for starting their endeavour. This social problem can either exist in their own community, in the case of for example the Australian brand EcoLogika which started off to help aborigine women, or in another country (f.e. Balianse works with ‘untouchables’ in India). Many entrepreneurs refer to their travels to developing countries which has opened their eyes to poverty and social inequality. For some of these people, the establishment of a fashion brand is a tool to create employment and provide groups of people with a sustainable income. These entrepreneurs often use the term ‘project’ for their company and in many cases they call it a social project and not an environmental project. It seems thus that the social aspect of ecopreneurship within the ethical fashion movement is more important than the ecological aspect.

This finding points to a lack in the conceptualization of ecopreneurship. The external drivers as defined by Schlange (2006) only mention environmental enforcement and no social motivators. In this study, not one ecopreneur has talked about environmental enforcements as such. For them, environmental regulations are not a reason to start their brand. They only enter at a later stage of the entrepreneurial process as challenges the entrepreneurs encounter when they find out that using certified organic fabrics can provide them with more sales. In some cases they help their partners in obtaining certification (f.e. Veja), in others they are simply sourcing from certified suppliers (f.e. Ethos). Although it might not be an intrinsic motivator, people do talk about the ecological aspect of their brand. It’s often related to the production process of integrating ecological materials such as organically grown cotton, chemical-free dyeing and printing up to using recycled packaging for the transport and selling of their garments.

Other entrepreneurs we have interviewed don’t stress their social or ecological orientations but are more fashion oriented and have different motivations for starting a brand. They either can’t find what they’re looking for in the ethical fashion market and
thus want to fill this niche (f.e. Como No). They are not specifically into fashion or social and eco issues, but view serious opportunities to make money with ethical fashion (f.e. NU Jeans). Or they mainly explore it as a hobby (f.e. L' Atelier des Dames) which allows them to travel regularly, create a beautiful product and do something that makes them feel good and helps other people. Expressions that often popped up in the interviews were, irrespective of orientation, the motivator to show that 'you can be chic and fair at the same time' and to 'combine fashion with ethics'.

Internal drivers are deduced from the entrepreneurial motivation structure: eco-preneurs either follow their predominant desire to change the world or to make money, or a combination of both. The backgrounds of the various ethical fashion entrepreneurs differ considerably. In total, we have interviewed eight men and 31 women, most of them aged between 20-50 years old. Some have worked in the fashion industry for years and could no longer bare the injustices they had to deal with (f.e. Sobosibio). They make the shift to start their own brand inspired by their convictions that things can be done differently. Other individuals don't have the design nor the fashion background, but have worked for non-profit organizations. Through their work in environmental or social campaigning they have become aware of the opportunities of creating business to promote development (f.e. Pampa & Pop).

A third category of people comes from a totally different sector than either fashion or social/environmental activities. They often have their own private reasons for starting the brand, being it the challenge of creating attractive design out of innovative fiber (f.e. G=9.8) or the warm heart for the women in developing countries (f.e. Ponchissimo and Royah). A large part of the female entrepreneurs mention that the birth of their first child has made them aware of the state of the planet. This has made them turn to living a more green lifestyle and setting up their own eco fashion brand. Whatever background they
have, none of the entrepreneurs can build on a history that combines all the different aspects of entrepreneurship. This might be the reason they often operate in pairs: they either find a partner with complementary skills (f.e. Van Markoviec) or hire people that add the needed value like artists (EJF).

While the social aspect is often the main driver behind an ethical fashion start-up, it's also often the most challenging aspect. The entrepreneurs often talked about the problems they encountered in dealing with their partners in developing countries. The distance and their partners' lack of access to internet and telephone, often makes the communication difficult. Some people mentioned it would be good if they could travel more often to solve this problem. Knowing that this would improve the social aspect of their company, they also realize it's not as good for the environment. Ethical fashion entrepreneurs often find dilemma's like this on their path which they refer to as both tiring as well as inspiring.

5 Analysis

5.1 Criticizing current typologies

While trying to 'tag' ethical fashion entrepreneurs with Linnanen's ecopreneurship typologies, we encountered four problems. The first is that these typologies are not sufficient to describe the entrepreneurs active in the fashion industry. In our sample of 39 companies, we found two fashion brands that have been started by non-profit organizations. These organizations have social (Art.23) or environmental (EJF) campaigning as their core activities. For them, the label is a way to create revenue which can feed their campaigns. They see ethical fashion as a business and campaigning tool and they are successful in executing it that way. I tended to categorize both of them as successful idealists although this typology doesn't cover what they are. The question is more complicated because while they
definitely exhibit ecopreneurial behavior, one could ask if these organizations are ecopreneurs in the first place.

This notion can further be explained by the fact that it is very difficult to categorize the entrepreneurs in the ethical fashion rhizome as opportunists because to start an eco fashion label is already quite idealistic. Any start-up fashion label needs at least five years to become profitable and for ethical fashion labels this may take even longer. People therefore might start as opportunists, but they need a long breathe to stay only that. My perception is rather that ecopreneurs in ethical fashion always have some ideals otherwise they would not be in the business in the first place. In that respect, studying the ethical fashion network, doesn’t allow space for opportunists at all.

Aside from the finding that the current ecopreneurship typologies are not sufficient to describe the entrepreneurs in the ethical fashion industry, we came across a second problem. Even though some of the typologies still seemed useful (such as self-employer and successful idealist), the stories we collected revealed that entrepreneurs moved from one typology to the other over time. A good example is the case of Pachacuti. The company started off as a social project (non-profit business), growing into a business (self-employer) which sustained the owner and her husband. Now, after fifteen years in business, an impressive sales record and being granted several awards as well as being laureated by the Queen of England, Pachacuti can be called a successful idealist. In order to further illustrate what I mean with the process-based view point I will summarize some of the other stories.

Judith Condor-Vidal: An activist turning to fashion
Peru is where my roots lie, I was born and raised there. For years I worked with rural, cooperatives and fair trade and women’s groups in South America. When I moved to the UK, I became an associate member of IFAT (The International Fair Trade Association) and set up the non-profit organization Fashion for Development. After all those years of social work, I wanted to become more business oriented and create market access for fair trade fashion products in the UK and Europe. Working with a variety of fair trade organizations from around the world, I try to link producer co-operatives with designers, schools of design, and retailers, to create sustainable market access for producers. The ultimate goal of Fashion for Development is to improve the quality of life and opportunities of the individuals behind the products. Our scarves, hats and gloves are knitted by 390 women in Peru and Ecuador who can preserve their traditional skills this way. One reason behind our success is that we collaborate with big companies such as Top Shop. We created several accessories with this British retail giant which sold out in no time. For our efforts we took home the Ethical Fashion Show Award in 2006 which allowed us to enter the French market through mail-order store LaRedoute.

Note: While coming from a non-profit background which was the motivator to go into fashion, Judith Condor-Vidal moves beyond the typical non-profit business as proposed by Linnanen. Her strength lies in her networking skills that allow her to develop public-private partnerships and give her visibility. Through bringing her ideals to the high street stores, she should rather be seen as a successful idealist.

Ada Zanditon: A rising star in the fashion firmament

I was still a student at the London School of Fashion when I attended an event hosted by eco fashion pioneer Katharine Hamnett. I got inspired and started researching eco fabrics
which I integrated in my designs. At that time, the London School of Fashion was already quite aware of sustainability issues and they invited a West-African organic cotton farmer to come and speak at an event they organized. His story made a big impression on me. He showed us pictures of his children wearing neat school uniforms and told us this was only possible because he had reverted to organic cotton production. Before that, he said, he had to spend all his money on expensive pesticides and on medical costs because his family was ill all the time due to these toxics. The farmer’s story made me even more convinced to become an eco designer and I launched my first collection in organic cotton and linen blends. Since then, I am continuously trying to develop my designs as well as my use of eco fabrics. My latest design is a simple dress with sculptural pockets and a back zipper. Based on the idea of creating as less trash as possible, the dress can go to the compost after its lifecycle and the zipper can go in the iron recycling bin. This is an example of translating my philosophy into small inventions that give character to my designs.

(Read the comprehensive interview with Ada Zanditon on


Note: Ada is a clear example of an independent fashion designer for whom design comes first. The idea of contributing to a healthier planet through using eco fabrics is an added value for the young designer. While Ada would fit the category of self-employer at this stage, I envision she could be a successful idealist boosting the image of ethical fashion in the future.

Adamah Stein: Making clothes to survive
Around 1989, I fell in love with a Senegalese man. I moved to Senegal and had a son with him, but after a while we each went our own way. By that time I loved St. Louis in the north of Senegal and the people there who had become my friends. Inspired by their Muslim culture, I started creating clothing out of scrap fabrics and bidding mats. People there are poor, they hardly have jobs and earn very little money. When I went back home to the UK to visit family, people were enthusiastic about my clothes and I sold some of them. This gave me the idea to work with my friends in Senegal to create fashion for the UK market. Since then, I travel up and down between St. Louis and Great Britain. In Senegal, I develop the designs with neighbours and friends who can earn some money and I sell the clothing back home in local shops. It gives me a good feeling to be able to do something for the people there who have given me so much over the years. And this project is a great way to finance my travels between Africa and Europe!

Note: Stein’s story is characterizing for the ethical fashion movement with women connecting two communities: one in the country they fell in love with/in and the other back home. Linnanen would probably tag Stein as a self-employer with a small chance of becoming a successful idealist. Only through extensive networking, these ‘shecopreneurs’ can become visible and in the end maybe even successful in the industry (Behrendt 2009).

Veja: fashion as a tool for ‘business as unusual’

After our studies at a business school in Paris, we made a journey around the world together. Everywhere we noticed that unethical business practices create a lot of misery, both for people, planet and profit. Back in Paris we started Veja with the goal to change the face of business. We wanted to create a fun product, something that was close to who we are and came up with sneakers. In Brazil we had met people who grow organic cotton
and tap natural rubber from trees in the Amazon. These became the two main ingredients for our sneaker collections. We’re not designers but co-create our sneaker models with shoe designers. We’re not marketeers but have many ideas to bring our sneakers to the right target group. The joy of running our own company is to be able to influence every aspect of the business. We can help our suppliers to get organic and fair trade certification because it’s part of our USP (unique selling proposition). We can organize a party with graffiti artists in São Paulo, because we have connections and want to sell to young trend-setters. Because our business model is of secondary importance: people buy Veja because of the great design and fit. Our sneakers are now selling in the best stores in France, Spain, the UK and many other countries. We just opened a second office in London and are talking to distributors in the US. And we feel this is only the beginning.

Note: Of the 100 brands at Ethical Fashion Show, Veja is probably one of the few that actually makes a profit. There are rumours that Puma is orienting on buying Veja like just has happened with U2 Bono’s label Edun, bought by the Louis Vuitton Group (http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124225474914417055.html?mod=googlenews_wsj). In this sense, Veja is a great example of how an ethical fashion entrepreneur can change the face of a whole industry.

These stories confirm that the current ecopreneurship typologies should be reconsidered. They show that very few ecopreneurs stick to doing the same thing in the same format for a long period of time. Most of them move from one product to developing a range of products in order to attend to new consumers and markets. The process-based view allows us to look upon ecopreneurs as they are ‘at this very moment’. To categorize them doesn’t do right to their evolution as a brand. In other words: it’s the status quo and doesn’t give in-
sight in where they have come from and where they are heading to. A narrative perspective helps to reveal this insight and leave the static approach of using typologies.

5.2 Beyond the Triple Bottom Line

The data we collected didn’t only support our process-based view of ecopreneurship, it also gave us insight into what other factors need to be taken into account when studying entrepreneurs in the ethical fashion industry. Through the grounded theory process, we revealed four major themes around which ethical fashion entrepreneurs build their business.

In chapter 1 I already mentioned the triple P of people, planet and profit which aren’t enough when talking about ethical fashion entrepreneurs. A fourth P we need to add is the D of Design, which is an aspect not to be forgotten in ethical fashion. Even if a denim company practices an excellent triple P business model, if your behind doesn’t look good in their jeans, they won’t make it. In table 3 (see appendix), we have included an overview of the 39 labels and the ratio in which they mentioned these themes: on a scale from 1-4, 1 is the most important theme and 4 the least important. The outcome of this table is table 2 which shows the overview how people, planet, profit and design have overall been rated.

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5.3 Redefinition of internal and external drivers

This brings me to a third criticism of the current ecopreneurship discourse which is the suggestion that the definitions of the internal and external drivers, should be questioned. The pool of ethical fashion entrepreneurs showed a wide variety of opinions on what people perceive as a financial drive or a drive to change the world. A financial drive ranges from being able to sustain yourself and your own family to creating employment for other people, to making real big money. A drive to change the world can fluctuate between solving small problems in the local community to preserving a large area of organic farmland, making thousands of people aware of the benefits of ethical fashion up to making a whole country known for being a pioneer in ethical fashion.

5.4 Rhizomatic networking: the road to change?

So far our findings show that the current typologies are not sufficient and should be seen as status quo ‘tags’ instead of characterizations of ecopreneurs over time. When we try to move beyond the ecopreneurship discourse, a fourth critic comes into sight. The shaky definitions of internal and external drivers don’t leave any space for interpretation of interaction between ecopreneurs. This brings us back to my initial conceptualization of the ethical fashion movement as a rhizomatic network. Aside from the Triple P+D formula to ethical fashion entrepreneurship, a fifth essential aspect of this movement, is its reliance on networking. The interviews revealed that brands feel part of a bigger movement in which they see themselves as actors. The focus is not on themselves as individual entrepreneurs, but on the relationships they build between each other and between other actors in the field. Networking is essential to be able to grow as a brand, thereby balancing
6 Reflection

Being an entrepreneur working in the field of ethical fashion, I often found myself in a double bind between `objectively studying the case as a researcher` and `being an active and subjective participant`. This refers to Schutz’s first and second order (1964) and made me aware of that my existing knowledge of the industry would provide me with a biased view of the event. The Hawthorne effect describes how researchers influence the behaviour of the subjects they study and this makes me extra aware of the hats that I am wearing (Gobo 2008). I am not a stranger in the field so it’s difficult to be non-reactive and look with estrangement or as a ‘disinterested observer’ (Schutz 1964). Discussion with my assistant and co-researcher has hopefully helped to overcome some of this bias.
Reflecting upon my research method, I need to admit that doing 39 interviews in four days have produced slightly superficial data. In several cases, people didn’t have time to go into the details of their story. While analyzing the data I realized that I could have asked more questions and allow people more time to tell their often rich stories. Perhaps I was carried away by my own enthusiasm of talking to as many entrepreneurs as possible or by the method we were using. It was the first time for me to do an interview while being filmed and this made me possibly less focused on the entrepreneur. Instead, working with a camera man and paying attention to the visual artefacts as part of the story and not just the words of the entrepreneur, might have distracted me from obtaining real in-depth data. At the same moment, it has possibly confused my interviewees and made them more nervous than necessary which might have changed their stories. In a few cases it would have been impossible to gather real in-depth data since we were dealing with sales people and not with the actual entrepreneurs.

This points to a third reflection since our categorization of ecopreneurs probably depends on the people we interviewed. It is very well possible that in the case we talked to a sales person, the tag of ‘opportunist’ easy came to mind. In most cases we talked to the founder/entrepreneur of the label and then the tags ‘self-employer’ and ‘non-profit’ business were more likely to pop up. In the case of duo’s (two founders/entrepreneurs) or even groups of people running a brand, the initial judgement might have been different depending on the person we interviewed. We have tried to make up for this subjectivity through triangulation: checking websites. The problem is again my embeddedness within the ethical fashion movement and the preconceptions I have. Someone who is able to hire a salesperson in this field, has money to do so and is therefore likely to be an opportunist or a successful idealist in my opinion.
While one could argue that my own background has possibly biased and negatively influenced the study, I would like to stress the positive consequences. I have listened to stories of ethical fashion entrepreneurs for the past five years and I am not that easily impressed anymore when entrepreneurs tell me they want to help ‘the poor people in India’ to make a living. Instead I can distinguish between brands that have an authentic story and brands that simply copy what is already out there. A good example is Tudo Bom who sees its brand as a business approach to social activism. They build supply chains from scratch and empower their seamstresses through making them partly owner of the company. In their effort to create a greater feeling of connection between the different stakeholders, they even flew their seamstresses to Paris to directly meet consumers in department store LaRedoute. A label that tells me they source from Oro Branco in Peru (one of the first organic cotton providers in the world, initiated by Dutch NGO Solidaridad) is less of an innovator and more of a follower in the market. I can imagine that newcomers to this industry with less knowledge won’t be able to see these differences. Watching the videos was an excellent way to check the ‘authenticity’ of the entrepreneurs’ narrations. In some cases, real emotions were visible when the founder of the brand talked about her social project (Ponchissimo). This is something one can’t capture like this neither through quantitative methods nor through any other qualitative method. I see the limitations of me ‘translating’ the images to written words on paper and losing a lot of wealth along the way.

Although I realize this research is very experimental in many aspects, I do believe that I have discovered some value in how I have conducted it. To study a visual industry like fashion, video is an excellent way to go beyond words and unravel sense-making not just from a discursive approach but also from an imagerial approach. Besides that, the exercise to approach this rhizomatic network at a global event, has allowed me to meet a lot of entrepreneurs at the same time. I envision that my next exercise will focus on in-depth case studies of a handful of ecopreneurs to deepen the understanding this study has of...
fered me. Besides that I have found that my background in fashion design and organization & management studies has made me focus on certain aspects of the stories I heart. I have probably overlooked technical details such as the production of fibers, manufacturing of the clothes and certification processes. It would help to bring together an interdisciplinary research team to further study the ethical fashion rhizome which I am so passionate about. Perhaps they can help to answer the question whom I am actually supporting while doing this PHD research. Is it fashion, academics, managerial practice or entrepreneurship studies?

7 Conclusion: challenges and contributions

This paper has examined the stories of 39 ecopreneurs to be able to challenge the current ecopreneurship discourse and introduce the process-based view. First of all I need to acknowledge that it is really time to move beyond current concepts of social entrepreneurship and ecopreneurship. As posed in chapter 2, there is not only space for redefinition, it is necessary to view entrepreneurs in a more holistic way. I have argued that ethical fashion entrepreneurs can better be positioned as ecopreneurs than as social entrepreneurs. The data reveal that most entrepreneurs in this industry stress the social over the environmental aspect which questions the current discourse of environmental and eco entrepreneurship. It also forces me to review my starting point and I suggest to start using the concept of sustainable entrepreneurship which Schaltegger and Starik propose as a synthesis of both social and eco entrepreneurship (Schaltegger 2008). I agree with their argument that although the historic trajectories for both eco and social entrepreneurship differ, the underlying motivations for both activities are very similar. They envision that the future
will see 'a convergence of these currently more independent movements' (Schaltegger 2008) which offers opportunities for further research.

Another question that is being raised through this research is the question what 'success' implies when we consider ecopreneurs. Linnanen’s typology of the succesful idealist doesn’t give an answer to that and it would be worthwhile to explore this question. Is success measured by the positive social and environmental impact they create? Is it measured by how viable the company is in a financial way? This is something the field itself struggles with as well because it seems that ethical fashion entrepreneurs should become a lot more professional if they really want to make an impact. Of the 100 labels present at Ethical Fashion Show Paris, only a handful can be considered a real business, the rest is merely a social project. As mentioned before, ethical fashion entrepreneurs are often women that are being supported by their husband or by investors or non-profit funding. The fact that some labels won’t make it to next year’s event, shows that these 'business models' are not very viable. The ones that are successful have found a niche and operate like a normal brand on the consumer and distribution side. 'Success' should also be seen in the context of ethical fashion entrepreneurs as a rhizomatic network. Success is untangible, with one brand being successful in its venturing until the next company starts doing the same thing but better.

The last blind spot I have found through this study is the question in what way 'ecopreneuring' really differs from 'entrepreneuring'. Taking transparency and the social and environmental aspect into account, is seen as at the core of the ecopreneurial activity. It would be interesting to explore in what way the impact of an ethical fashion label differs from a non-ethical fashion label. Do they really have a smaller footprint while flying around the world to source their organic fabrics and manufacture their collections? Maybe not when compared to a conventional label that produces in its own community but uses
conventional cotton. Some of these questions are being attended to in the field through the implementation of track & trace systems through which consumers can trace the origin of their newly bought garment. Other technical developments on their way will make it possible to calculate the CO2 value of a piece of clothing. I think it’s a matter of calculations which will become more important in the future.

For now, I would like to conclude with the suggestion that studying rhizomatic networks like the ethical fashion movement is essential for our understanding of the times we live in. Ecopreneurship has been described as a catalyst for economic and social change with respect to the vision of a sustainable human society (Schlange 2006). Ecopreneurs can be seen as drivers to a new world and as Berger and Luckman (1967) said: through practicing the social activity of ‘ecopreneuring’, they habitualize it, give meaning to it and embed this knowledge in the institutionalized fabric of society. It’s of great importance to study these kind of redefinitions of business in order to be able to transmit this knowledge to new generations.

8 How to continue?

The feedback I have received on this paper over the last few months, has given me new ideas for the direction of my PhD Research. It will be great if you can look beyond the scope of this paper and provide me with input on the following suggestions:

Theoretical

1. Go on with the process-based view of social and eco entrepreneurship (backed by the following sentence: Rindova, Barry and Ketchen (2009=) framed their call for ARM STF papers in terms of ‘entrepreneuring’ following Weick’s idea that verbs draw attention to action and processes geared toward change creation) and try to develop new definitions based on this viewpoint.

2. Focus with these definitions on the concept of ‘entrepreneurship as social change’ following Calás et.al (2009) who ‘engage in a critical theoretical exercise to extend
the boundaries of entrepreneurship theory and research by reframing 'entrepreneurship as positive economic activity' to 'entrepreneurship as social change'.

3. Deepen the concept of the entrepreneur as 'embedded agent' being part of a rhizomatic network, instead of focusing on the 'hero-entrepreneur'.

4. Move from entrepreneurship to intrapreneurship, hereby researching people within organizations that make a difference. The goal would be to include the stories of these change agents into my PhD research in order to analyze the interaction between the entrepreneurs and intrapreneurs. This suggestion came up through exchange with Kai Hockerts and Rolf Wüstenhagen who have written 'Greening Goliaths versus Emerging Davids: Theorizing about the role of incumbents and new entrants in sustainable entrepreneurship' (under review at JBV at the moment). I consider this a very important angle for my research since it's in my opinion both groups of actors who transform the textile industry.

Methodological

The main advice after my AOM presentation was to extend the use of video which allows me to not just look at text (from interviews). I have two opportunities to do video research within the next two months, both are international conferences where ethical fashion stakeholders gather. Collaboration with a professional video team will allow me to produce much better quality research work. My main question now is: how to develop this methodology and which audience to choose from? Either deepen my knowledge on entrepreneurs or include intrapreneurs in my work? Thank you very much for your feedback in advance!

References


Appendix: Table 3 An overview of Triple P + D amongst 39 ecopreneurs

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