

Article

# Conceptualizing Social and Environmental Responsibility and Its Challenges in Small and Micro Fashion and Apparel Enterprises

Anne Léger <sup>1,\*</sup>, Jocelyn Bellemare <sup>2</sup>  and James Lapalme <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Systems Engineering Department, École de Technologie Supérieure (ÉTS), 1100 R. Notre Dame O, Montréal, QC H3C 1K3, Canada; james.lapalme@etsmtl.ca

<sup>2</sup> Department of Analytics, Operations and Information Technology (AOTI), École des Sciences de la Gestion, Université du Québec à Montréal, 315 Rue Sainte-Catherine E, Montréal, QC H2X 3X2, Canada

\* Correspondence: leger.anne@uqam.ca

## Abstract

This study explores how small and micro fashion and apparel enterprises (SMFAEs) conceptualize and structure social and environmental responsibility within an industry characterized by fragmented supply chains and limited institutional guidance. A qualitative, exploratory case study design examined four Québec-based enterprises through semi-structured interviews; these were analyzed using a hybrid thematic approach interpreted through stakeholder and legitimacy theories. The findings reveal three interdependent dimensions of responsible entrepreneurship: foundational commitments rooted in personal values; organizing mechanisms combining formal tools and informal learning to support continuous improvement; and contextual constraints related to sourcing and systemic opacity. The study advances understanding of early-stage responsabilization as a dynamic alignment between conviction, method, and feasibility. It contributes an integrative model that reframes sustainability from a compliance-oriented goal to an adaptive practice grounded in dialogue and learning. This perspective shows that meaningful sustainability emerges not from universal standards alone but from strengthening everyday human-scale processes of collaboration and adaptation.

**Keywords:** social responsibility; environmental responsibility; responsible entrepreneurship; transparency and traceability; responsible business models; sustainable transition in fashion; fashion and apparel industry



Academic Editor: Ting Chi

Received: 8 December 2025

Revised: 5 January 2026

Accepted: 12 January 2026

Published: 20 January 2026

**Copyright:** © 2026 by the authors.

Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland.

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and

conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution \(CC BY\) license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

## 1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the acceleration of global trade and the decentralization of production chains have transformed the fashion industry. Fast fashion has emerged as a dominant model built on rapid product renewal, low prices, and high volumes. This system has intensified competition across global production networks, exposing the limits of biological and human systems to sustain this pace [1]. The ethical and environmental costs of fast fashion are now widely criticized. Behind the idea of “democratizing fashion,” the model has generated massive waste, poor labor conditions, and opaque supply chains. These outcomes have prompted consumers, institutions, and businesses to call for coordinated action [2]. Yet, the industry remains divided between two opposing logics. On one side, sustainability calls for longevity and sufficiency. On the other, fashion’s consumption-driven economy continues to depend on novelty, speed, and scale [3–6].

Within this tension, a growing number of small and micro enterprises are rethinking what it means to operate responsibly, seeking to align creativity and commerce with social and environmental values. However, they must do so within fragmented and linear supply chains still shaped by a “take–make–waste” logic [7], making the alignment of responsible intentions and operational realities particularly challenging.

Much of the existing research on social and environmental responsibility in the fashion and apparel industry has focused on large firms, which typically benefit from greater financial resources, formalized governance structures and institutional pressures to adopt standardized sustainability frameworks. In contrast, small and micro fashion enterprises operate under markedly different conditions, characterized by limited resources, informal decision-making processes and fragmented supply chains [4,5,8]. While responsible discourses are increasingly present among small fashion entrepreneurs, how social and environmental responsibility takes shape at the micro enterprise level, particularly under real operational constraints, remains insufficiently understood [9]. Addressing this gap, this study examines how small and micro fashion and apparel enterprises (SMFAEs) in Québec conceptualize and structure their social and environmental responsibility. Drawing on stakeholder theory [10] and legitimacy theory [11], the analysis approaches responsibility as a dynamic and contextual process shaped through entrepreneurial commitments, organizing mechanisms and contextual constraints, rather than as the implementation of predefined sustainability standards. By shifting the focus away from standardized frameworks toward the early-stage processes through which responsibility takes form, this study complements practice-oriented approaches by offering a nuanced understanding of responsibility as a situated and negotiated construct. The article is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the main contributions on responsible entrepreneurship in fashion and apparel. Section 3 describes the qualitative methodology. Section 4 presents the results. Sections 5 and 6 discuss the theoretical and practical implications and conclude the study.

## 2. Literature Review

Social and environmental responsibility has become a central concern in the fashion and apparel industry; a sector frequently criticized for its environmental footprint and controversial labor practices. As expectations evolve toward more ethical and sustainable standards, companies seek to reconcile their economic models with these imperatives [12–14]. In this study, we are interested in how social and environmental responsibility integrates into fashion entrepreneurship. Existing research offers diverse entry points into sustainability transitions, drawing on both academic studies and reports produced by industry organizations and institutional actors. Collectively, this body of work underscores the multidimensional nature of sustainability and the complex challenges involved in operationalizing it in fashion and apparel. To navigate this diversity, we organized the literature into three main analytical axes. The first explores motivations and organizational predispositions that drive the adoption of responsible practices. The second examines accountability mechanisms, such as reference frameworks, monitoring tools and certifications that guide responsible models. The third addresses barriers to implementation that constrain these efforts. In order to bring these aspects together and connect them to the lived experiences of entrepreneurs, we also draw on two complementary theoretical perspectives: stakeholder theory [10] and legitimacy theory [11]. These theories help us interpret how entrepreneurs position, justify, and sustain their responsible initiatives within complex and often opaque supply-chain environments. Together, these foundations structure the following literature review which examines how responsibility in fashion and apparel has evolved from a peripheral concern to a central element of entrepreneurial identity and organizational practice.

### *2.1. Motivations and Organizational Predispositions for Socio-Environmental Responsibility*

The literature suggests that responsible practices in SMFAEs emerge from a combination of internal convictions and external pressures. Common drivers include competitive differentiation, growing environmental awareness, stakeholder expectations, and long-term value creation [15]. Increasingly, value creation models move away from purely price-based competition toward mission-driven engagement, emphasizing transparency, ethical sourcing, and environmental mitigation [6,16]. Such strategies enhance brand image while contributing to financial stability and resilience [17,18]. Peer influence and reputational risk of inaction on pressing environmental and social issues also play a significant role helping align organizations with stakeholder values and reinforcing legitimacy in the eyes of consumers [15].

For SMFAEs, responsibility often stems from the founder's personal values and a desire to differentiate through authenticity and purpose rather than compliance only [19]. These entrepreneurs may operate outside traditional market incentives, yet they mobilize strong convictions to guide their sustainability strategies. Organizational culture and leadership are also critical. Visionary leadership, shared values and dynamic capabilities foster sustainable innovation [20,21]. Adopting circular thinking and system-wide stakeholder collaboration strengthens transparency, adaptability and long-term integration to responsibility within complex environments [6,21,22]. These predispositions create favorable conditions for embedding responsibility into operations and securing legitimacy in opaque supply chains [11].

### *2.2. Accountability Mechanisms*

Despite significant efforts to standardize responsible practices, gaps remain between stated commitments and actual implementation. Tools such as the Higg Index and the Fashion Transparency Index offer performance indicators [13,23], yet their effectiveness depends heavily on the reliability of disclosed data [13,17]. Codes of conduct and certifications can foster accountability for environmental impacts, labor rights, and working conditions [2]. However, adoption and enforcement vary widely between firms. While some codes focus primarily on managing reputational risk, others are embedded in core company values. A further challenge lies in the auditing process: many audits are conducted internally rather than by neutral third parties, raising concerns about impartiality and transparency. Moreover, certifications often fail to cover the entire production process, limiting their scope and effectiveness [2]. Nevertheless, these mechanisms remain important. Certifications can act as valuable reference points for consumers and facilitate responsible sourcing for buyers [24,25]. However, without stronger standardization and external oversight, their credibility remains inconsistent. Scholars therefore advocate for more adaptable monitoring systems that account for the diversity of organizational contexts and value chain configurations [3,18,26].

### *2.3. Barriers to Implementation*

These inconsistencies could be explained by a variation of institutional and systemic barriers that persist, hindering the widespread adoption of responsible practices. Studies reports that the current linear model (based on extraction, production, consumption, and disposal) limits the resources available to effectively promote and raise awareness of sustainable development [27,28]. Furthermore, educational and regulatory systems exhibit gaps that restrict the financial accessibility of sustainable products [4,5,29]. The Sustainability Gap study [13] highlights significant discrepancies in the implementation of eco-responsible practices among major fashion brands, often exacerbated by a lack of transparency and the absence of common standards [8,12,13]. Practices such as green-washing worsen the gap between proclaimed sustainability efforts and the actual impact

of the practices, further confusing consumers and fostering skepticism toward so-called “sustainable” initiatives [14,30]. This situation creates contradictions between the actual and perceived value of socio-environmental commitments, underscoring the importance of transparent and educational communication strategies [31].

Moreover, this ambiguity extends to designers themselves. While some perceive their role as an opportunity for positive change, others view the systemic limitations of the industry as insurmountable [9]. This perception can lead to disillusionment that stifles innovation and forces organizations to address immediate challenges rather than anticipate their impact within a broader systemic vision [3,16]. Finally, the ecological transition of businesses remains hampered by a lack of coordinated infrastructure and government support to harmonize responsible practices across value chains [8,15,18].

#### 2.4. Reframed Literature Review of Responsible Fashion Entrepreneurship

In the previous sub-sections, we explored the research landscape through three key axes: motivations and organizational predispositions, accountability mechanisms, and barriers to implementation. Table 1 synthesizes this literature by summarizing each contribution’s context, methodology, key subjects, and theoretical anchors. It also highlights the main limitations identified across studies to help locate blind spots and illustrates how these works connect to our three analytical axes. These axes will later serve to frame the research design presented in Section 3.

**Table 1.** Literature review synthesis.

Authors	Context/Methodology	Key Subjects	Theoretical Anchoring	Limitations	Key Axes
Dal Mas et al. (2022) [16]	Retail brands; Qualitative case study	Ethical sourcing, mission-driven identity, stakeholder alignment	CSR integration, stakeholder theory	Excludes early-stage entrepreneurs and micro-fashion firms	Motivation and predispositions
Chen et al. (2020) [20]	Manufacturing firms; Survey-based (quantitative)	Leadership commitment, innovation, organizational culture for green product development	Green dynamic capabilities theory	Broad industry scope; not fashion-specific	Motivation and predispositions
Payne (2021) [6]	Fashion; Conceptual and empirical reflection	Transparency, circular design, complexity navigation	Circular economy, complexity theory	Theoretical-heavy	Motivation and predispositions, Barriers
Ozdamar Ertekin & Atik (2015/2020) [4,5]	Emerging fashion cultures; ethnographic study	Designer-led activism, tension between ethics and market logic	Institutional voids, social practice theory	Limited in operational scalability or replicability	Motivation, Barriers
Rienda et al. (2023) [15]	Fashion SMEs; Comparative case studies	Stakeholder responsiveness, legitimacy management, performance management, adaptive strategies	CSR integration, Stakeholder and legitimacy theory	Exploratory; needs further validation across contexts	Motivation and predispositions, Barriers
Dickson (2009) [2]	CSR Fashion: Conceptual and empirical reflection and Case study	Social and environmental responsibility strategies of companies, Code of conduct and monitoring	CSR integration, Stakeholder theory	Broad in scope, theoretically grounded, yet contextually constrained.	Accountability mechanisms
Burman (2015) [17]	Textile and Apparel Industries: Literature review, Comparative analysis of two frameworks (GRI G4 and the Higg index)	Sustainability Reference Framework for Textile and Apparel Industries (SRF-T/A) for social, environmental and economic performance	Sustainability Triple Bottom Line Theory	Empirical base limited, literature-centered.	Accountability mechanisms
De Lazzari (2018) [19]	British sustainability-inspired business startups in clothing and gift, interviews and case study	Explore roles of startups vs. traditional firms in managing sustainable business models. Focus on motivations, business models, and longevity factors.	Typology of social entrepreneurship, Business Model Innovation for Sustainability	Focused on UK creative industries (clothing + gifts); sectoral mix may dilute fashion-specific insights. Implementation processes not explored.	Motivation

Table 1. Cont.

Authors	Context/Methodology	Key Subjects	Theoretical Anchoring	Limitations	Key Axes
Segal (2019) [9]	Sustainable design; Designer interviews	Innovation under constraint, system inertia	Practice-based design theory	Focus on perceptions and narratives; limited organizational depth	Barriers
Kumar et al. (2021) [26]	Fashion SMEs and large companies, Survey-based (quantitative)	SMEs vs. large companies' management, Explicit approach vs. implicit approach on financial and social performance	CSR integration, Stakeholder engagement approach (SEA)	Limitations related to survey-based data interpretation	Accountability mechanisms

Source: Authors' own work.

The existing literature offers a fragmented view of responsibility in the fashion and apparel sector. Most studies address specific dimensions in isolation, such as motivations [6,16,18,19], organizational predispositions [20–22], accountability mechanisms [2,13,17,26], or barriers [4,6,9,15]. Few studies examine how these elements coexist and interact within the lived experience of entrepreneurs, especially in small and micro enterprises that are still shaping their approach to responsibility. The absence of unified frameworks and institutional guidance reinforces this fragmentation. Entrepreneurs are left to define and structure their own understanding of responsibility within uncertain and ambiguous contexts [4,5,8,9]. This dispersion reflects a broader challenge in collectively defining what responsible business conduct means in practice. It also limits our ability to understand how responsibility emerges as a coherent process rather than a set of isolated practices.

These observations reveal a critical gap. Existing research rarely explains how entrepreneurs translate intentions into concrete action, navigate constraints and give meaning to responsibility in their daily decisions. This gap points to the need for an analytical perspective capable of capturing responsibility as an evolving and contextually situated process of sense-making, particularly in small and micro enterprises navigating uncertainty and fragmented institutional environments.

### 2.5. Integration of Stakeholder and Legitimacy Theories

Addressing this need for conceptual integration, we draw on two complementary perspectives: stakeholder theory [10] and legitimacy theory [11], to provide conceptual grounding for interpreting how SMFAEs define, structure, and justify their socio-environmental commitments within complex and uncertain contexts.

Stakeholder theory [10] emphasizes that organizations must manage relationships with all actors affected by their activities, not only shareholders, but also employees, suppliers, customers, and communities. In responsible fashion entrepreneurship, this perspective positions sustainability as a relational process, shaped by ongoing dialogue and co-creation of value. It helps explain how entrepreneurs' internal motivations and external collaborations reinforce one another, thereby linking to the first two axes of the literature review (motivations and accountability mechanisms).

Legitimacy theory [11] suggests that organizations seek to align their actions with the norms, values, and expectations of their social environment. According to Suchman, in emerging or loosely regulated sectors such as sustainable fashion, legitimacy is not automatically granted and must be actively constructed and defended. Symbolic actions, such as certifications or sustainability labels, signal alignment with social expectations, while substantive actions, such as transparency and ethical sourcing, translate values into concrete practice. Entrepreneurs engage in both symbolic and substantive actions to communicate their commitment, build trust, and distinguish authentic engagement

from greenwashing. Legitimacy thus emerges as a continuous process of justification and adaptation rather than a static state.

Together, these theories capture the interplay between internal conviction and external accountability, providing the conceptual link between the descriptive insights of the literature review and the empirical approach that follows. They support our transition from what has been observed in existing studies to how these dynamics are experienced and structured by entrepreneurs in practice. In this way, they ground the interview framework and guide our analysis of how responsibility is conceptualized, enacted, and sustained within real entrepreneurial contexts.

### 3. Methodology

The literature review highlights that existing studies often approach responsibility in the fashion and apparel industry as a set of principles rather than as a lived and evolving process. Moreover, little is known about how small and micro enterprises conceptualize and organize responsibility under real operational conditions, particularly at early stages of responsabilization. To address this gap, this study adopts an exploratory qualitative multiple-case study design centered on entrepreneurs' perspectives and experiences. The central research question guiding the study is: How do small and micro fashion and apparel enterprises (SMFAEs) conceptualize and structure their engagement with social and environmental responsibility in the absence of a universally applicable framework or sufficiently adapted institutional support? This approach is well suited to examining complex, context-dependent phenomena and documenting emerging responsibility processes across comparable cases. It thereby enables an in-depth understanding of meanings, motivations, and organizing logics within uncertain and fragmented environments [32].

#### 3.1. Selection of Participating Companies

This study employs a purposive sampling strategy to identify information-rich cases by selecting participants with relevant expertise and experiential knowledge [33,34]. The analysis focuses on four Québec-based small and micro fashion and apparel enterprises employing fewer than ten people, a category representing 66.2% of the provincial sector [35]. These companies were selected for their explicit socio-environmental commitments, evidenced by their recognition within key non-governmental and industry networks and their active participation in sectoral initiatives promoting responsible fashion in Québec. Founders were selected as interview participants as they occupy the primary strategic and operational decision-making roles within these enterprises, providing direct insight into how responsibility commitments are conceptualized and structured within their organization [19]. The relevance of the selected cases was further assessed through a review of public communications, drawing on indicators aligned with established frameworks such as Burman's Sustainability Reference Framework [17] and the Fashion Revolution Transparency Index [36]. Evidence such as transparency, traceability, ethical sourcing, and community engagement served as inclusion criteria. While the sample size is small, the recurrence of themes across the four relatively homogeneous cases generated meaningful empirical insights, suggesting a sufficient level of thematic saturation for the exploratory purpose of this study [33]. The profiles of the selected companies are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Profile of Participating Companies.

Company	Production Model	Observed Socio-Environmental Value Indicators
Company A (Interviewee #1)	Outsourced production outside the country (certified partnership)	Certifications: USDA Organic, European Union Organic Certification, GOTS Certified Collaborations and partnerships with suppliers Keywords: “organic,” “ethical,” “sustainable,” “fair”
Company B (Interviewee #2)	Outsourced production abroad (certified partnership)	Local design Collaborations and partnerships with suppliers Certification: OneCert®/GOTS Water-based screen printing Plastisol screen printing Responsible labeling and education Traceability (serial number) Keywords: “organic,” “ethical,” “responsible,” “environmentally friendly”
Company C (Interviewee #3)	Local production through subcontracting (partnership)	Produced within a 300 km radius Recycled fibers Women-led business Ethical production conditions Collaborations and consultation Studio and community Keywords: “Made in Québec,” “ethical,” “biodegradable,” “sustainability”
Company D (Interviewee #4)	In-house local production	Zero-waste production Local manufacturing Natural fibers Second-hand and collection Training, repair, and education Inclusivity Collaborations and consultation Keywords: “zero waste,” “local manufacturing,” “sustainable,” “circular economy”

Source: Authors' own work.

### 3.2. Semi-Structured Interviews and Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting between 60 and 90 min, conducted via videoconference with the founders of each case enterprise. This method was chosen for its flexibility and its ability to explore lived experiences in depth while maintaining a consistent structure across participants [37,38]. The interview guide (Appendix A) was structured around the three main axes identified in the literature review: motivations and predispositions, accountability mechanisms, and barriers to implementation. The open-ended format encouraged participants to share concrete experiences and examples, while allowing the interviewer to probe and clarify emerging insights during the discussion [38]. The following questions were designed to explore these dimensions from the perspective of entrepreneurs' lived experiences:

- Q1: How do you define your company's responsibility engagements? This question builds on studies addressing motivations and organizational predispositions and aims to uncover the foundational responsibility commitments that entrepreneurs associate with their approach, before these take an operational form.
- Q2: What references and methods are mobilized to structure and monitor these responsible engagements? This question draws from literature on accountability mechanisms and focuses on the reference frameworks, tools, and evaluation methods entrepreneurs rely on to formalize and assess their commitments.
- Q3: What challenges or limitations does your company face in implementing these methods or responsible engagements? This question relates to barriers identified in the literature and seeks to highlight the challenges and constraints entrepreneurs encounter in applying their responsible approach.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed in simplified verbatim format for analysis. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, assured of anonymity, and provided

consent before the interview began. This process ensured transparency and comfort when discussing business practices that might involve sensitive or proprietary information.

### 3.3. Thematic Analysis and Data Processing

The analysis adopted a constructivist perspective, which assumes that knowledge is co-constructed through interpretation rather than treated as a fixed and objective reality. In this view, meaning emerges from participants' individual understandings of their experiences and from the researcher's interpretive engagement with those accounts [39]. This interpretive stance is particularly suited to exploratory qualitative research as it allows the researcher to examine how participants make sense of their experiences and the meanings they attach to them. Accordingly, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify and organize recurrent ideas, categories, and relationships within the interview data [40].

Verbatims were analyzed through an iterative process combining deductive and inductive coding. The initial deductive phase involved classifying excerpts according to the four main themes derived from the interview guide questions:

- M.T.1: Responsibility commitments
- M.T.2: Reference frameworks and tools.
- M.T.3: Performance evaluation and continuous improvement.
- M.T.4: Challenges and constraints.

The second question was separated into two main themes (M.T.2 and M.T.3) to allow for a more detailed distinction between reference frameworks and evaluation mechanisms. This structure ensured coherence between the theoretical foundations, the data collection instrument, and the initial deductive phase of thematic analysis, while remaining open to new insights emerging from participants' narratives.

Figure 1 provides a visual overview of the methodological structuring that guided the study. It illustrates how the research question, literature-informed analytical axes and interview sub-questions informed the deductively derived main themes structuring the initial phase of the thematic analysis.

In a second inductive phase, repeated readings of the transcripts were conducted to refine and enrich this initial framework, allowing meanings to emerge inductively from participants' narratives [41]. New categories were created when participants introduced ideas that nuanced or extended the predefined themes. These emergent codes were then grouped into sub-themes capturing variations in meaning across cases while remaining faithful to each participant's perspective. After several iterations, the thematic structure was reviewed amongst co-authors and adjusted to reflect relationships and recurring patterns observed across the interviews. This refined thematic structure, summarized in Table 3, provided a coherent analytical basis for the subsequent cross-case analysis and for the integrative interpretation developed in the discussion section, where relationships between themes are examined and synthesized.

**Table 3.** Framework of Encoded Themes and Sub-themes.

No.	Main Themes	No.	Sub-Themes
1	Responsibility commitments	1.1	Education and awareness
		1.2	Transparency
		1.3	Traceability
		1.4	Environmental impact
		1.5	Human relations
		1.6	Offering an alternative

Table 3. Cont.

No.	Main Themes	No.	Sub-Themes
2	Reference frameworks and tools	2.1	Certification
		2.2	Expertise and mentorship
		2.3	Continuous monitoring
3	Performance evaluation and continuous improvement	3.1	Feedback and personal judgment
		3.2	Use of assessment tools and certifications
4	Challenges and constraints	4.1	Sourcing and supply chain constraints
		4.2	Technical constraints
		4.3	Lack of data and regulatory framework
		4.4	Costs and competitive pressure

Source: Authors' own work.

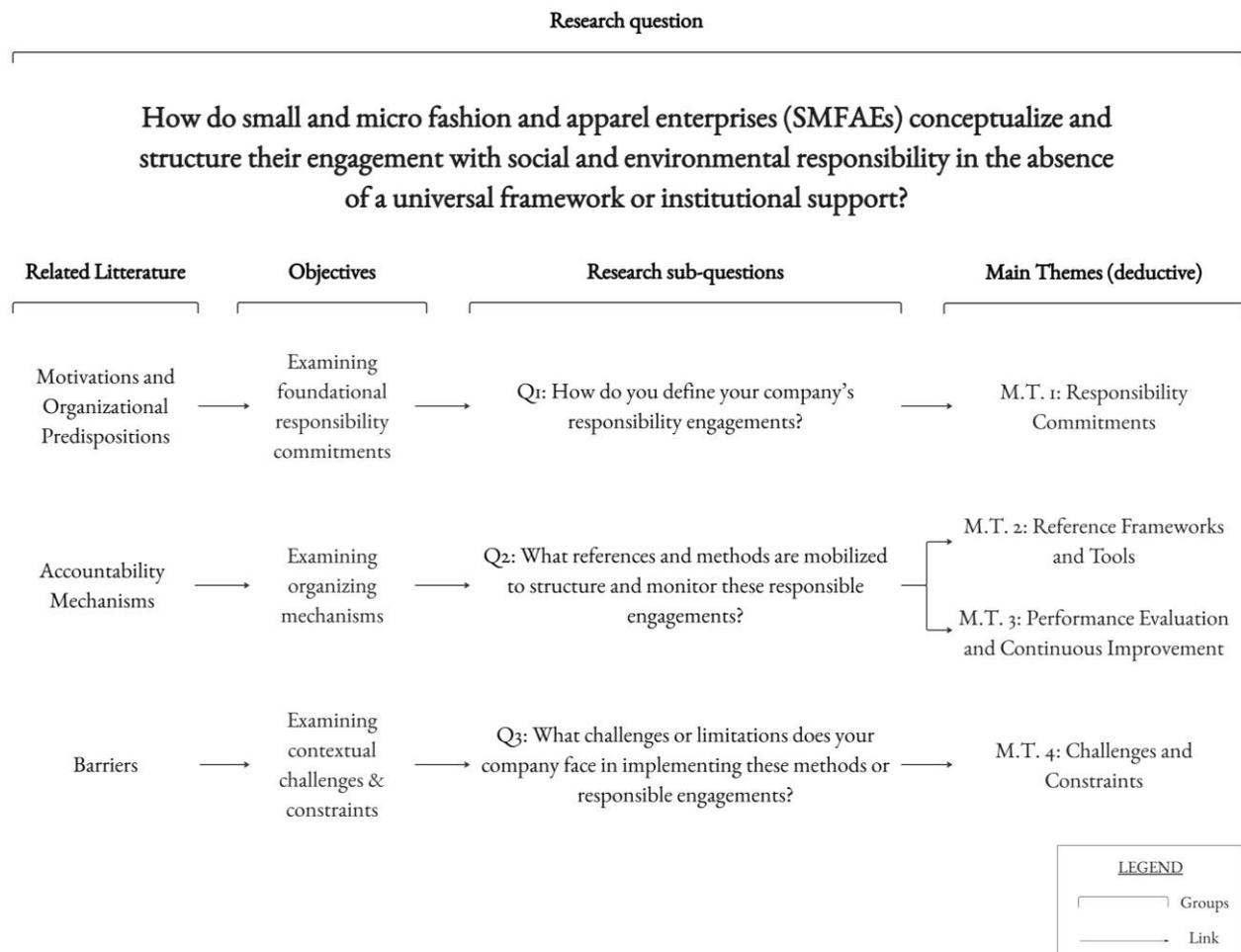


Figure 1. Overview of the methodological structuring process. Source: Authors' own work.

### 3.3.1. Cross-Case Analysis

Following thematic coding, a cross-case analysis was conducted to strengthen the coherence and robustness of the findings. This comparative stage aimed to identify recurring patterns, contrasts, and contextual variations across the four cases, drawing on triangulated materials when relevant. The analysis proceeded through successive pairwise comparisons to assess the consistency of sub-themes across organizational contexts and to refine category boundaries. These comparisons highlighted similarities and contrasts in how entrepreneurs approached responsibility, mobilized organizing mechanisms, and navigated constraints, while also revealing contextual influences related to company size,

product type, and supply-chain configuration. Patterns observed across cases were then synthesized to develop a coherent interpretation of how responsibility takes shape within the sample. Table 4 summarizes this comparative process, which supports the validity of the thematic structure and ensures that interpretations remain grounded in the empirical material presented in Section 4.

**Table 4.** Cross-Analysis Iterations.

Synthesis No.	Paired Companies
Synthesis from Cross-Analysis #1	Companies A + B
Synthesis from Cross-Analysis #2	Companies A + C
Synthesis from Cross-Analysis #3	Companies A + D
Synthesis from Cross-Analysis #4	Companies B + D
Synthesis from Cross-Analysis #5	Companies C + D
Synthesis from Cross-Analysis #6	Companies B + C

Source: Authors' own work.

### 3.3.2. Validation and Reliability

Credibility and reliability were strengthened through data and analyst triangulation. Interview data were combined with complementary sources (company websites, sustainability reports, social media content, and public communications), as well as observational insights derived from the researchers' sustained engagement with sectoral actors (e.g., conferences, roundtables, and communities of practice). This contextual familiarity facilitated access to participants and enriched case interpretation and cross-case comparison. Potential bias associated with this proximity was mitigated through systematic coding procedures and collective analytical deliberation. Coding and interpretation were reviewed iteratively through collaborative discussions among the co-authors. Divergent interpretations were discussed until consensus was reached, constituting a form of analyst triangulation recognized for enhancing credibility and minimizing bias [38].

For transparency, Table 5 (presented at the end of Section 4) provides illustrative examples of coded excerpts, showing how empirical material was categorized and interpreted. The resulting analytical framework comprises four main themes and fifteen sub-themes which structure the presentation of findings in Section 4 (Results and Analysis).

## 4. Results and Analysis

This section synthesizes the findings from the data analysis, structured around four main themes: responsibility commitments (M.T.1), reference frameworks and tools (M.T.2), performance evaluation and continuous improvement (M.T.3), and challenges and constraints (M.T.4). Rather than focusing on specific sustainability practices, the analysis examines the upstream elements that shape how responsibility is conceptualized and structured within SMFAEs, thereby influencing how practices are ultimately selected and enacted. Together, these themes capture entrepreneurs' lived experiences, personal values, and the organizing mechanisms through which commitments are articulated and operationalized within a complex industrial system [19,39,41]. The analysis also highlights systemic, technical, and contextual barriers, alongside opportunities for innovation and collaboration, offering a structured overview of key levers for action and potential pathways to address existing challenges. Across the cases, participants expressed strong responsibility aspirations and long-term commitments, while emphasizing the complexity of translating these intentions into action within fragmented and resource-constrained contexts.

#### 4.1. Main Theme 1: Responsibility Commitments

Considering that motivations for responsible entrepreneurship primarily stem from the founder's personal values and drive [9,19], this theme explores the foundations of responsibility from the entrepreneur's perspective. Six underlying sub-themes emerge, illustrating the core principles the entrepreneurs perceive as essential to uphold and convey within their organizations.

##### 4.1.1. Education and Awareness

Entrepreneurs recognize the complexity of responsible choices, which are often hindered by "gray areas" that make sustainable fashion less accessible to the general public. Three out of four participants stated their commitment to informing and educating their clientele about the social and environmental issues linked to clothing overconsumption. They adopt and embody the roles of educators and communicators, sharing their knowledge through various communication channels (e.g., publications and workshops) to guide consumers toward more informed and responsible choices. Beyond their clientele, they also aspire to positively influence actors within the industry ecosystem, expanding the impact of their initiatives.

##### 4.1.2. Transparency

All interviewees are committed to transparency in their communications, not only by disclosing their good practices, but also by acknowledging their own limitations. One participant demonstrates this commitment by stating, "We don't make promises. We underpromise and overdeliver" (Interviewee 3). This transparency aims to reconnect consumers with the realities of fashion and apparel production, openly showcasing the efforts made and the challenges encountered, based on available information.

##### 4.1.3. Traceability

Traceability complements the commitment to transparency by aiming to substantiate practices with verifiable information, such as tracing the origin of materials. Three entrepreneurs demonstrate their willingness to reduce the "blind spots" in the supply chain through different approaches: some prefer to be present in the field to personally vouch for the accountability of responsible practices, while others rely on third parties' standardized measures, such as certified serial numbers. This observation highlights a divergence and a lack of consensus on what should be considered traceable and what constitutes sufficient proof to validate a commitment.

##### 4.1.4. Environmental Impact

All participants consider environmental impact from a holistic perspective, acknowledging the interconnectedness between ecosystems and global health, and the effect of human activities on them. This awareness influences decision making at every stage of the design process, from conception until end of life, demonstrating a commitment to reducing negative externalities.

##### 4.1.5. Human Relations

All entrepreneurs demonstrate a strong commitment to fostering sustainable human relationships. The intention is to create a positive impact on their community through valuing strong connections with all stakeholders, from producers to final consumers. By cultivating a positive relational climate and fostering mutually beneficial relationships centered on shared values, these companies act as "binding agents" between actors, strengthening relationships within the supply chains.

#### 4.1.6. Offering an Alternative

The businesses we studied strive to offer an alternative model to conventional practices. Three of them highlight the challenges they face in accessing sustainable materials, which motivated them to create and develop their own alternatives to fill a gap in the market. This includes adopting a more environmentally and ethically conscious decision-making approach in every process, such as material selection and production processes, while also supporting communities of makers.

#### 4.2. Main Theme 2: Reference Frameworks and Tools

This theme explores the references and tools entrepreneurs use to translate their commitments into concrete actions. Three dominant sub-themes emerged from the analysis.

##### 4.2.1. Certifications

Certifications are widely used to align practices with social and environmental norms and standards. Entrepreneurs specifically cite the Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS), Fairtrade, Ecocert, and B Corp as key guidelines for validating suppliers' compliance and guiding decision making. These certifications ensure coherence between commitments and practices, strengthening consumer and partner trust in socio-environmental claims.

##### 4.2.2. Expertise and Mentorship

All participants rely on both external and internal expertise to improve their practices. Collaboration between diverse competencies, whether from within the industry or other sectors, provides new perspectives that enrich a responsible approach and better equip the organization to address challenges specific to its context.

##### 4.2.3. Continuous Monitoring

Continuous monitoring is essential for anticipating changes in the business environment and keeping up with the evolution of socio-environmental standards. Two approaches coexist: the first is structured monitoring that follows a research-based or academic methodology, such as adhering to existing guidelines or certifications, and the second is a more informal monitoring approach guided by intuition and relationships. The latter is strongly influenced by the entrepreneurs' personal values, highlighting the impact of their convictions in their practices.

#### 4.3. Main Theme 3: Performance Evaluation and Continuous Improvement

Performance evaluation mechanisms and continuous improvement play a crucial role in the socio-environmentally responsible management of the companies. Two sub-themes represent distinct approaches prioritized by participants: feedback and personal judgment, and assessment tools and certifications.

##### 4.3.1. Feedback and Personal Judgment

Entrepreneurs rely on stakeholder feedback to adjust their practices. The quality of their relationships with their suppliers and clientele influences their ability to evaluate and improve their processes. This collaboration fosters constructive feedback and reflects a climate of trust. This relational dynamic enables proactive risk management and strengthens the commitment to consumers [16,18,42].

##### 4.3.2. Assessment Tools and Certifications

Some companies adopt more formal criteria to explicitly evaluate their social and environmental performance. Codes of conduct or certifications, such as GOTS, serve as references to ensure compliance with company practices and their supply chain. Certifica-

tion and third-party audits provide a rigorous framework for companies to monitor and evaluate their commitment while identifying opportunities for improvement. These tools promote transparency and support continuous improvement efforts [13,23].

#### 4.4. Main Theme 4: Challenges and Constraints

The companies we studied face various challenges. Four sub-themes illustrate the systemic, technical, and contextual constraints that hinder the implementation of a responsible approach as conceptualized.

##### 4.4.1. Sourcing and Supply Chain Constraints

Participants highlight the difficulty of finding reliable suppliers that offer materials meeting high environmental and ethical standards while guaranteeing the desired level of quality. They also report challenges related to high minimum order requirements, which are often inaccessible to small companies that are committed to low-volume production. This context limits their ability to reconcile quality, quantity, cost, and responsible standards, thereby complicating the balance between economic, environmental, and ethical objectives.

##### 4.4.2. Technical Constraints

Entrepreneurs must often balance the technical performance of their products to meet their specific functions (such as athletic, fashion, or workwear) and the environmental performance of the product. Reconciling these requirements remains a challenge for designers, who frequently have to compromise between designing for low environmental impact (e.g., using organic-source or biodegradable materials) and maintaining the technical criteria essential for durable, long-life clothing (such as elasticity, resilience, breathability, or the desired aesthetic). This compromise highlights the difficulty of reaching a unanimous definition of what constitutes a sustainable or responsible garment [1,6].

##### 4.4.3. Lack of Data and Regulatory Framework

Limited access to reliable information about suppliers and materials complicates responsible initiatives, sometimes forcing companies to rely on unverified sources. The absence of strong marketing regulation, particularly with regard to greenwashing, and the lack of institutional support in promoting responsible initiatives hinder companies in standing out in the market. Additionally, the lack of transparency in supply chains and the absence of clear and comprehensible regulations regarding sustainability claims make it difficult to differentiate between genuinely responsible practices and greenwashed offerings [13,23].

##### 4.4.4. Costs and Competitive Pressure

Responsible practices incur higher costs, making it difficult to compete with conventional models. Indeed, local production, small-batch manufacturing, high quality standards, certifications, and the use of sustainable materials lead to additional expense that impact profit margins and retail prices. Remaining accessible while justifying the value of a responsible approach (and its pricing) to consumers is a significant challenge for these businesses, especially when faced with lower-priced, seemingly similar alternatives on the market. This reality highlights the need to raise consumer awareness and education about the added value of responsible practices while promoting responsible communication [13,23].

**Table 5.** Encoded Themes and Sub-themes: Examples of Analyzed Text Fragments.

No.	Main Themes	No.	Sub-Themes	Description	Representative Interview Quote	Participants (Out of 4)	Supporting Literature
1	Responsibility commitments	1.1	Education and awareness	Educate consumers on the socio-environmental issues of fashion and guide them toward responsible choices while positively influencing the industry ecosystem.	“We felt like we were constantly educating and training our customers. Today, our customers come to us because of our values, they challenge us and push us to go even further [. . .]. We help them repair, become more self-sufficient, and understand quality [. . .].”—Participant 3	3	Dickenbrok and Martinez (2018); Fletcher (2014); Ozdamar Ertekin and Atik (2020); White et al. (2017) [1,5,14,42]
		1.2	Transparency	Reconnect manufacturers and consumers by openly sharing efforts, limitations, and the realities of the design and production processes.	“I’ll be transparent. I’ll say: here’s where we are now, and here’s what we want to do to improve. That’s it [. . .]. I only say what I can prove. I’ve researched, I’ve looked into it, and I’m not saying this is THE [solution], but I believe it is A solution.”—Participant 4	4	Dickenbrok and Martinez (2018); Garcia-Torres et al. (2022); Jahnich et al. (2022) [8,31,42]
		1.3	Traceability	Ensure responsible authenticity by tracing the origin of materials and practices throughout the value chain while minimizing blind spots as much as possible.	“Truly weaving the link between the supplier and the customers. In the end, I’m the matchmaker [. . .]. My supplier was already there before, this cotton existed before I came along. I just built a structure around it and presented it to as many people as possible. That’s my job, [. . .] making sure clients know who makes their clothes.”—Participant 1	3	Garcia-Torres et al. (2022) [8]
		1.4	Environmental impact	Take a holistic approach to understanding the interconnectedness of ecosystems and human impacts while reducing negative externalities at every stage of the product lifecycle.	“These micro-particles are so fine that they aren’t filtered out by water purification plants [. . .]. This affects biodiversity, the microorganisms in the ocean that we don’t see [. . .]. And we’re starting to talk about it: we are eating microplastics when we eat fish.”—Participant 4	4	Payne (2021); Sumter et al. (2021); White et al. (2017) [6,14,22]
		1.5	Human relations	Build lasting relationships with all stakeholders by fostering shared values, strengthening both the community and the value chain.	“Yes, our mantra at the workshop is about fostering lasting relationships, whether with clothing, stakeholders, clients, collaborators, or team members. The friendship between [my partner] and me, that’s where it all begins.”—Participant 3	4	Chen et al. (2020); Rienda et al. (2023) [15,20]
		1.6	Offering an alternative	Offering a responsible product that stands out through sustainable materials, ethical practices, and community support, addressing gaps in the industry.	“Our driving goal [. . .] is truly to create something that fosters social and environmental responsibility. It’s about changing what was being done and offering people an alternative while also being educational, because we wanted to show them that there were things that could be done.”—Participant 2	4	Dal Mas et al. (2022), Fletcher (2014), Payne (2021) [1,6,16]

Table 5. Cont.

No.	Main Themes	No.	Sub-Themes	Description	Representative Interview Quote	Participants (Out of 4)	Supporting Literature
2	Reference frameworks and tools	2.1	Certification	Use certifications to validate both supplier and company practices, standardize internal processes, and build trust with stakeholders.	<p>“Basically, in our case, since we’re aiming for this traceability and we’ve chosen to work with GOTS, our information pillars are the GOTS documents.”—Participant 2</p> <p>“We’re also in the process of obtaining B Corp certification. That too has forced us to measure a lot of things we’d never measured before.”—Participant 3</p>	4	Costachescu (2008); Ditty et al. (2021); Sharek and Dickson (2018) [13,24,43]
		2.2	Expertise and mentorship	Leverage external expertise and mentorship to enhance knowledge, bring new perspectives, and address challenges specific to responsible practices.	<p>“When we have a project, we talk to different people about it, and they often help us find the key partners to implement it [. . .]. Maybe it’s just another way of working, because of our academic background [. . .]. So we try to apply the same methodology [research process] to the company, and there are many more resources here than in other countries.”—Participant 3</p>	4	M.-C. Cervellon and Wernerfelt (2012); Sang et Han (2023); Sumter et al. (2021); Qiu et al. (2020) [18,21,22,44]
		2.3	Continuous monitoring	Continuously monitor socio-environmental developments to anticipate impacts, identify opportunities for adjustment, and integrate structured or intuitive approaches aligned with entrepreneurial values.	<p>“I also like it when we draw inspiration from practices in other fields. For example, our circular economy project wasn’t inspired by the textile industry, but by the paper industry. We often look at the winners of circular economy competitions [. . .]. We try to draw inspiration from things other than the fashion industry, which is often the last to take the plunge.”—Participant 3</p>	4	Garcia-Torres et al. (2022); Sumter et al. (2021); Qiu et al. (2020) [8,21,22]
3	Performance evaluation and continuous improvement	3.1	Feedback and personal judgment	Leverage stakeholder feedback and personal judgment to improve practices, fostering trust and collaboration while strengthening commitments to consumers.	<p>“A customer once said to me how animals were treated in Japan. And in my mind, I thought, it’s such a clean country. So I went to find out and animals are treated super badly in Japan. So I stopped using wool from Japan.”—Participant 3</p>	2	Chen et al. (2020); Dickenbrok and Martinez (2018); Garcia-Torres et al. (2022); M. Cervellon and Wernerfelt (2012); Sang et Han (2023); Sumter et al. (2021) [8,18,20,22,42,44]
		3.2	Use of assessment tools and certifications	Adopt a structured evaluation of performance based on predetermined criteria, supported by certifications and third-party audits, to enhance transparency and traceability in product transformation processes.	<p>“The important thing is to follow all the stages, so that means the field, the production, the people who are present. With GOTS, there’s also a socially responsible aspect, from weaving, assembly, pre-washing, right through to the end. Every stage is checked. We fill out the paperwork and GOTS gives us authorization to put their logo on our labels, along with the serial number.”—Participant 2</p>	3	Burman (2015); Costachescu (2008); Daignault-Leclerc (2019); Dickson et al. (2009); Ditty et al. (2021); Garcia-Torres et al. (2022); Sharek and Dickson (2018) [2,8,13,17,24,25,43]

Table 5. Cont.

No.	Main Themes	No.	Sub-Themes	Description	Representative Interview Quote	Participants (Out of 4)	Supporting Literature
4	Challenges and constraints	4.1	Sourcing and supply chain constraints	Constraints in sourcing responsible raw materials, including high minimum order quantities and challenges in balancing quality, costs, volume, and ethical and environmental standards.	"At the beginning, we put a lot of effort into responsible sourcing, and it's something that's quite complicated because we're a drop in the bucket of textile buyers. So we don't have much impact on the practices of our textile suppliers. To survive, we've had to make a lot of compromises."—Participant 3	4	Fletcher (2014); Henninger et al. (2016); Payne (2021) [1,3,6]
		4.2	Technical constraints	Challenges in reconciling the desired ecological and ethical features with the technical requirements of the product (elasticity, breathability, aesthetics), aligned with its intended functionality.	"We agree that I can't use a natural fiber to make leggings, it doesn't perform well enough, it doesn't breathe, etc. In short, we need a synthetic fiber. So we ask ourselves, what's best for the environment while using something that's as close to nature as possible, but still synthetic in a sense, to perform well."—Participant 4	4	Fletcher (2014); Payne (2021) [1,6]
		4.3	Lack of data and regulatory framework	Lack of clear regulations to ensure access to reliable information and regulate "green marketing" practices, as well as resources to support responsible initiatives, hindering the ability to differentiate authentic practices from greenwashing.	"Consumer protection [Office] won't ask me to change my practices, that's up to the competition bureau. It's a lot of e-mail exchanges, and they tell me, 'Yes, you're absolutely right, but it's up to you to ask everyone.'"—Participant 2	4	Dal Mas et al. (2022); Ditty et al. (2021); Garcia-Torres et al. (2022); Ozdamar Ertekin and Atik (2015); Sang et Han (2023); Segal (2019); Simpliciano et al. (2023); White et al. (2017) [4,8,9,13,14,16,18,23]
		4.4	Costs and competitive pressure	Difficulty competing on price due to the additional costs of responsible practices, such as local production, certifications, and high-quality materials, requiring justification of the added value of responsible practices compared to conventional offerings.	"The environmental side costs more. The product, the fabrics, the development, that also reduces our margin. We're now saying that [we're] looking at environmental costs rather than the margin or profit I can make [...]. You have to make a profit to survive, but even so, the margin is much lower than that of our international competitors." —Participant 4	3	Dal Mas et al. (2022); Henninger et al. (2016); Rienda et al. (2023); Sang et Han (2023) [3,15,16,18]

Source: Authors' own work

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Overview and Theoretical Positioning

This section interprets how Québec-based SMFAEs understand and organize their engagement with social and environmental responsibility. It connects the four main themes identified in the analysis to show how responsibility emerges through foundations, methods, and contextual boundaries. Together, these themes form an integrated system that links entrepreneurial values, operational tools, and feasibility conditions. At the foundation lies M.T.1: Responsibility Commitments, which captures the core values and convictions guiding entrepreneurs' decisions. These commitments provide the moral and relational base from which all responsible actions derive. They are then translated into practice through two methodological dimensions: M.T.2: Reference Frameworks and Tools and M.T.3: Performance Evaluation and Continuous Improvement. These two themes represent the mechanisms that structure and monitor responsible action, transforming individual convictions into organized and verifiable practices. Finally, M.T.4: Challenges and Constraints define the contextual limits that determine how far these engagements can be sustained in real operating conditions.

This organization corresponds to the integrative model presented in Appendix B, where foundations, methods, and feasibility interact within a continuous learning loop. The figure illustrates how entrepreneurs navigate between ideals and implementation, continually adjusting their approach as they confront sourcing, technical, and systemic constraints. Responsibility thus takes shape as an iterative movement rather than a linear process, where meaning and legitimacy are built through adaptation. The discussion now moves from describing these practices to interpreting what they reveal about responsibility as an evolving entrepreneurial process. It follows the three guiding research questions: (1) How do entrepreneurs define their company's responsibility engagements? (2) How do they structure and monitor these engagements in practice? (3) How do they cope with contextual constraints or limitations? Viewed through the combined lens of stakeholder theory [10] and legitimacy theory [11], this system highlights responsibility as a dynamic and negotiated process. Entrepreneurs sustain credibility not through compliance alone, but through dialogue, transparency, and the ongoing alignment of conviction with context. In this perspective, responsibility is not a fixed achievement but an adaptive system that links values, methods, and feasibility.

The following sections examine this system in greater depth. Section 5.2 focuses on the ideal configuration where commitments and methods interact. Section 5.3 explores the feasibility of these configurations within real constraints. Section 5.4 concludes by synthesizing these dimensions into broader theoretical and practical implications.

### 5.2. Interpreting the Ideal Responsible Approach

The interpretation of the ideal responsible approach corresponds to the upper section of Appendix B, where Responsibility Commitments (M.T.1) are articulated through Reference Frameworks and Tools (M.T.2) and Performance Evaluation and Continuous Improvement mechanisms (M.T.3) that structure and monitor responsible engagement. Together, these three themes illustrate how entrepreneurs build meaning and coherence around their socio-environmental commitments before facing the contextual constraints discussed in the next section.

### 5.2.1. Main Theme 1: Responsibility Commitments

In response to Q1 (How do you define your company's responsibility engagements?) our findings confirm that the conceptualization of a responsibility-driven model is deeply rooted in entrepreneurs' personal values, lived experiences, and their understanding of sustainability issues in the fashion and apparel sector [19]. These individualized commitments translate into practices that aim to offer ethical and ecological alternatives to mainstream models, while also fostering respectful and meaningful human connections [9,15,16]. This vision reflects a systemic way of thinking that recognizes the interdependence between human and natural ecosystems, a recurring thread across the participants' narratives [45,46]. In line with stakeholder theory [10], such a vision highlights a proactive and relational stance in which sustainability is framed not only as a set of internal practices but as a collective commitment involving consumers, suppliers, and peers.

Another key feature that emerges from the participants' narratives is an educational orientation through which entrepreneurs seek to raise awareness and encourage critical reflection across the value chain [1,3,5,6,16]. Our analysis shows that this role is often enacted through transparent communication, traceability, and dialogue, aiming to reconnect consumers with production realities and foster more informed choices [14,31,47]. Rather than relying solely on formalized standards, these entrepreneurs construct situated definitions of responsibility, shaped by their own motivations and by the relational context in which they operate. This highlights a broader dynamic of collective sense-making and mutual learning among actors, where education, awareness, and collaboration drive systemic change. These principles are aligned with stakeholder theory [10] and with the vision of systemic transition promoted in recent literature [3,6]. These interpretations suggest a shift from compliance-based understandings of responsibility toward more participatory and value-driven forms of engagement. These foundational commitments provide the moral and relational anchor for the practical tools and frameworks through which responsibility is structured and monitored.

### 5.2.2. Main Theme 2: Reference Frameworks and Tools

In response to Q2 (What reference frameworks and methods are mobilized to structure and monitor responsible engagements?), our analysis identifies two interrelated yet distinct dimensions. While M.T.2 emphasizes structured tools that help legitimize and formalize commitments, M.T.3 examines how they are mobilized to evaluate progress, adjust actions, and sustain continuous improvement. As illustrated in the central section of Appendix B, together these themes reflect complementary dimensions of methods for responsibility: one that structures and legitimizes responsible action, and another that enables its evaluation and refinement.

This theme explores how entrepreneurs structure their responsibility-driven model by drawing on existing tools and frameworks not as rigid templates but as flexible references that align their practices with their socio-environmental commitments and realities. A key feature of their approach is the continuous monitoring of their methods to ensure coherence between intentions and actions. Two complementary postures emerge from the data: one methodical and structured, the other intuitive and relational. The first reflects a deliberate effort from the entrepreneur to anchor responsible action in recognized frameworks, often drawing on scientific knowledge and institutional resources such as academic institutions, research centers, government programs, or industry networks to build credibility and guide decisions [21].

In this logic, certifications and codes of conduct such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or certifications like GOTS, Fairtrade, and B Corp are mobilized not as ends in themselves but as structuring tools and legitimizing mechanisms that align practice with values, particularly in outsourced contexts [2,13,25]. Interestingly, our findings show that rather than adhering rigidly to these standards, some entrepreneurs interpret and adapt them to fit their context, constraints, and stakeholder dynamics. Building and adapting from existing frameworks enables them to balance credibility with pragmatism, using these tools not only to guide actions but also as communication levers to engage internal and external teams and reinforce stakeholder trust [10,13,24]. In doing so, entrepreneurs also pursue legitimacy, using recognizable standards and shared vocabularies to signal responsible intent to external audiences [11].

In contrast, a more intuitive and relational posture draws on tacit knowledge, lived experience, and peer-to-peer exchanges. Rather than relying solely on formal mechanisms, entrepreneurs engage with informal networks, cross-disciplinary knowledge, and mentoring relationships, tapping into collective wisdom to adapt to evolving circumstances [20–22]. This approach suggests that responsible entrepreneurship is not merely a matter of compliance but one of continuous reflection and adaptation. Many participants bring prior knowledge of sustainability or production management, pointing to the emergence of hybrid expertise that blends formal and experiential dimensions [22]. Their proactive search for both internal and external guidance reflects an openness to interdisciplinary learning, which fosters agility, contextual relevance, and pragmatic innovation in navigating complex challenges [21,29,44,48].

These findings underscore the necessity of anchoring responsible practices in both internal convictions and externally recognized frameworks. The diversity of methods observed reflects not only the heterogeneity of entrepreneurial profiles and the absence of unified standards but also a fragmented institutional landscape in which entrepreneurs must continuously reconcile flexibility with legitimacy [11]. We interpret this hybrid use of methods as a strategic response to uncertainty and resource constraints (see M.T.4), creating space for creative adaptation while also exposing a need for shared, scalable, and context-sensitive frameworks. In this sense, responsibility is not simply applied but constantly co-constructed, translated, and refined in context. These structuring efforts lay the groundwork for the next theme, which explores how responsibility is evaluated and refined through continuous improvement.

### 5.2.3. Main Theme 3: Performance Evaluation and Continuous Improvement

Although existing frameworks, tools, and expertise provide initial guidelines for monitoring, entrepreneurs must ensure that their initiatives remain aligned with their socio-environmental commitments over time. The need for continuous monitoring naturally leads to evaluating the relevance and effectiveness of the methods employed. This theme mirrors the hybrid logic observed in M.T.2, where entrepreneurs combine structured and methodological tools such as predefined indicators and third-party audits with relational and tacit mechanisms such as stakeholder feedback to assess progress and drive improvement. The evaluation strategies remain diverse, reinforcing the need for context-sensitive approaches that reflect the dynamic and iterative nature of transitioning toward responsibility rather than relying on rigid or universal standards [6,17].

Many entrepreneurs mobilize formal evaluation tools such as performance indicators, life-cycle assessments, or third-party certifications (e.g., GOTS and B Corp) to initiate and monitor responsible practices [2,13,17,48]. These frameworks offer structuring benefits such as comparability, transparency, and external legitimacy [13,24,25], but often require adaptation to operational realities. As in M.T.2, some entrepreneurs choose to selectively

implement components of these standards or develop internal benchmarks inspired by them, seeking balance between alignment and autonomy, particularly in contexts where full certification is unattainable or undesirable.

Alongside these structured tools, entrepreneurs leverage feedback from stakeholders including consumers, suppliers, and collaborators to surface blind spots and identify areas for improvement. This more tacit and informal posture fosters mutual trust and supports iterative, adaptive change, which is particularly valuable for smaller businesses operating with limited resources [1,3,18,21,43]. In the face of limited traceability or data gaps, entrepreneurs may rely on partial indicators such as the perceived reputation of sourcing countries while using open dialogue with stakeholders as a pragmatic lever to act where influence is possible [44]. These strategies not only allow for localized improvements but also contribute to reinforcing reputation, resilience, and risk mitigation capacity [15–18].

Yet the absence of universal standards and the variability of practices across businesses highlight tensions between comparability and contextual relevance [13,16,17]. They nonetheless create space for reflexive and situated evaluation in which responsibility is defined less by compliance with static standards than by the company's ability to learn, adapt, and justify its decisions [18,26]. In this sense, performance evaluation becomes a legitimacy-seeking organizational practice that contributes to the emergence of adaptive models capable of remaining agile in the face of uncertainty. Such legitimacy-building through transparent monitoring reinforces stakeholder confidence and sustains long-term credibility [10,11].

Together, M.T.1 to M.T.3 compose the ideal approach, represented in the upper half of Appendix B, where responsibility unfolds through iterative learning that links conviction, structuring, and evaluation before encountering the feasibility limits addressed in Section 5.3.

### *5.3. Navigating Feasibility and Contextual Constraints*

This section examines how the feasibility of responsible approaches is shaped by contextual constraints faced by small and micro fashion enterprises. While the ideal approach provides a coherent framework for responsible entrepreneurship, its realization depends on conditions that extend beyond individual commitment. Entrepreneurs must translate their values and methods into practice within fragmented supply chains, limited access to sustainable resources, and ambiguous regulatory environments [1,4,5,8,13,27]. These factors define the feasibility of responsible action and reveal the contextual limits that shape how responsibility can be implemented.

The lower tier of Appendix B illustrates these contextual constraints, which directly affect the scalability and consolidation of responsible practices. In response to Q3 (What challenges or limitations does your company face in implementing these methods or responsible engagements?), three main categories of constraints were identified: sourcing and supply-chain, technical, and systemic. Together, they outline the boundaries within which small and micro fashion enterprises operate and expose the structural factors that influence the balance between conviction and execution.

#### **Main Theme 4: Challenges and Constraints**

Sourcing and supply-chain barriers represent one of the most pressing obstacles. Entrepreneurs often face difficulty accessing sustainable materials in quantities compatible with their scale because of supplier-imposed minimum order quantities (MOQs). These requirements reflect global economies of scale that conflict with the small-batch, conscious production models favored by responsible entrepreneurs [1,3,6,23]. Even when willing to pay premium prices for low-impact or bio-based materials, entrepreneurs struggle to justify higher retail prices to consumers. This persistent disconnect between responsible

production logics, market expectations, and value-chain economics forces trade-offs between accessibility, profitability, and integrity [3,6]. Such trade-offs illustrate how global supply-chain structures constrain the boundaries of responsible intent.

Technical constraints arise when balancing socio-environmental goals with product performance. Entrepreneurs must continually prioritize among competing criteria, for example weighing synthetic durability against microplastic concerns or comparing the ecological impacts of different natural fiber agricultural practices [1,3]. These choices underscore the difficulty of achieving a universally sustainable garment. The need to compromise between technical feasibility and environmental performance exemplifies the iterative negotiation that characterizes responsible design practice.

Systemic constraints encompass both informational and institutional barriers. The lack of reliable data and regulatory clarity limits entrepreneurs' ability to ensure traceability and transparency. They operate in opaque supply chains with little access to verifiable information, restricting accurate impact assessment and differentiation in a market saturated with greenwashing and lacking standardized infrastructure [4,13]. Resource shortages further intensify these issues. Limited financial and institutional support slows the development and maintenance of responsible practices [15,18,29]. Inconsistent regulations and the absence of shared sustainability standards add ambiguity, placing the burden of proof on individual firms and undermining legitimacy efforts [12,14,17,18]. This diffuse responsibility amplifies uncertainty and discourages risk-taking even among the most committed actors.

This highlights the structural limits of small-scale agency within a globalized and resource-intensive industry. Entrepreneurs remain motivated by strong ethical values yet must continually navigate tensions between conviction and feasibility. Sourcing barriers restrict access to responsible inputs, technical trade-offs complicate design decisions, and systemic opacity weakens traceability and institutional alignment. Together, these constraints define the parameters within which responsible entrepreneurship can be sustained.

Although these limitations restrict scale and pace, they also emphasize the persistence and pragmatism required to maintain credible commitments under uncertainty. As shown in the lower tier of Appendix B, these contextual constraints delineate the boundaries of feasibility and provide the foundation for the broader synthesis that follows.

#### *5.4. Synthesis and Implications*

The implications of this study relate to how social and environmental responsibility can be understood and supported during the early stages of responsibility formation in small and micro enterprises. The findings suggest that responsibility depends as much on learning capacity and reflexivity as on access to technical tools or resources. Entrepreneurs progress by acting where influence is possible, maintaining transparency, and adapting to constraints through cooperation within their immediate ecosystem.

For researchers, this underscores that responsibility unfolds through iterative processes of learning and alignment rather than as a checklist of predefined practices. Methodologically, this study demonstrates the relevance of interpretive qualitative analysis for examining responsibility in contexts where commitments and organizing logics are still emerging and not yet stabilized into formalized practices or evaluation frameworks. In contrast to sustainability and corporate responsibility frameworks that emphasize standardized implementation and performance indicators, the integrative model illustrated in Appendix B reframes responsibility as an ongoing process of alignment between entrepreneurial intent and contextual feasibility.

For practitioners and support organizations, these insights highlight the importance of mentorship, peer learning, and shared infrastructures that strengthen the relational dimension of responsibility. Policymakers may also draw on these findings to foster more coherent and accessible conditions for responsible action, for instance through simplified certification pathways, transparent traceability systems, and guidance that recognizes gradual improvement. Appendix C provides a thematic synthesis and practical insights, identifying key leverage points through which support mechanisms can enhance both credibility and feasibility in small-enterprise contexts.

The main contribution of this study lies in the integrative model it proposes. Anchored in stakeholder and legitimacy theories, the model in Appendix B makes explicit the tension and continuous alignment required between ideal responsibility aspirations and feasibility conditions. In doing so, it bridges micro-level entrepreneurial experience with broader sustainability transitions and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how small enterprises participate in systemic change.

## 6. Conclusions

This study explored the ways in which small and micro fashion and apparel enterprises (SMFAEs) conceptualize and structure their engagement with social and environmental responsibility in the absence of a universally applicable framework or sufficiently adapted institutional support. It identified the principles guiding responsible practices and the challenges shaping their implementation, contributing to both theoretical reflection and practical advancement toward more sustainable models. This study advances current understanding of social and environmental responsibility in small and micro fashion and apparel enterprises by conceptualizing responsibility as a situated and evolving process rather than a fixed set of practices or standardized benchmarks. The findings show how responsibility takes shape through the interplay of foundational commitments, organizing mechanisms, and contextual constraints, highlighting the ways entrepreneurs navigate tensions between aspiration and feasibility. By articulating this process through an integrative model, the study offers a micro-level perspective that complements existing research largely focused on larger firms and formalized sustainability frameworks.

The findings further indicate that there is no single model for responsible practice. Information opacity, fragmented supply chains, and rigid industrial structures continue to hinder progress and make universal standards unrealistic [1,4,6]. Socio-environmental strategies must therefore adapt to each company's context [15,18] while maintaining transparent communication and credible claims [31,47]. Entrepreneurs operate within constraints that require adaptability, strong organizational predispositions, and the ability to mobilize limited resources [16,19,48], relying on continuous monitoring and stakeholder feedback to refine practices and sustain legitimacy over time [20,21].

From a theoretical perspective, this research mobilizes stakeholder and legitimacy theories to explain how intuitive judgment and formal tools work together to sustain credibility in contexts where conventional metrics are absent. Responsibility emerges as a dynamic process of learning, negotiation, and adaptation [10,11], reflecting an ongoing alignment between conviction, method, and feasibility within uncertain and resource-constrained environments.

This study focuses on the conceptualizing social and environmental responsibility, capturing the early phases through which responsible engagements take shape under contextual constraints. While the exploratory scope and limited sample size constrain generalization, the findings nonetheless open several avenues for future research. As the study centers on entrepreneurs already engaged in responsible practices, the findings reflect the perspectives of a purposively sensitized sample and are not intended to represent the

full spectrum of the industry. Participant narratives may also include aspirational elements. Future research could therefore examine the alignment between stated commitments and enacted practices using complementary methodological approaches. Such investigations would deepen understanding of how early-stage conceptualization translates into operational responsibility across diverse organizational contexts. Comparative studies across regions or sectors, as well as longitudinal approaches, could further trace how early commitments evolve through implementation. Additional work on traceability and certification systems may also clarify their role in shaping credibility and consumer trust.

At the practical level, the results highlight the need for supportive infrastructures that make responsible action more attainable, such as shared traceability tools, accessible certification pathways, and collaborative networks that align conviction with feasibility. Supporting these human-scale initiatives through shared infrastructures, adaptive policy, and sustained academic engagement offers a promising path to bridge individual commitment with broader systemic transformation.

Ultimately, the lessons drawn from these micro enterprises extend beyond the fashion sector. Credible sustainability does not arise from perfect compliance or isolated innovation, but from the collective capacity to learn, adapt, and cooperate within real operational conditions. By reframing responsibility as a process of alignment rather than a static performance metric, this study positions sustainability as a living and evolving practice of sense-making.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, A.L. and J.B.; methodology, A.L. and J.L.; validation, A.L., J.L. and J.B.; formal analysis, A.L., J.B. and J.L.; investigation, A.L. and J.B.; resources, J.L.; data curation, A.L. and J.B.; writing—original draft preparation, A.L.; writing—review and editing, A.L., J.L. and J.B.; visualization, A.L.; supervision, J.L. and J.B.; project administration, J.L.; funding acquisition, J.L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research was supported by funding from the ETS Impulsion Program, École de Technologie Supérieure (ÉTS).

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Ethical review and approval were waived for this study in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement 2 (TCPS2), as confirmed by the institutional ethics committee. The activity was deemed not to meet the definition of research requiring formal ethics approval. Nevertheless, the study was conducted in accordance with recognized ethical standards, including respect for participant autonomy, confidentiality, and informed consent.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed and voluntary consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study. Participants received both verbal and written information regarding the objectives of the study, the use of the data, and measures taken to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to ethical and confidentiality restrictions. The interview data contain sensitive information and were collected under conditions guaranteeing participant anonymity. As such, access to the raw data is restricted in accordance with the informed consent provided by participants.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Appendix A. Interview Guide

Title: Conceptualizing Social and Environmental Responsibility and Its Challenges in Small and Micro Fashion and Apparel Enterprises

Introduction: Review/Reminder of the Consent Document (approx. 10 min)

- Brief introduction and recap of the study and its objectives.
- Reminder of the nature of the contribution.
- Data usage: as outlined in the presentation and consent document.
- Overview of the interview process, guided by three main questions, with potential clarification questions. Please answer to the best of your understanding, in your own words, and based on your experience.

To begin, I would like to take a moment for you to introduce [Company Name] by providing a general overview.

Q1: How do you define your company's responsibility engagements?

Objective: To define the company's fundamental commitments to responsibility.

Examples of potential responses: Responsible sourcing, waste reduction and valorization, transparency, customer education, responsible communication, local production, diversity and inclusion, eco-design, emissions reduction, offering/promoting ethically manufactured products, manufacturing locally, etc.

\*Examples provided above are not to be suggested during the interview but serve as reference points for the interviewer.

(Recap the mentioned elements and introduce the next phase.)

To transition into the second phase of the interview, we will now focus on understanding the methods that allow you to align with your commitments. . .

Q2: What references and methods are mobilized to structure and monitor these responsible engagements?

Objective: Exploring reference models, tools, as well as evaluation and continuous improvement methods employed by entrepreneurs to conceptualize and structure their responsible approach.

Examples of potential responses/reference list of topics that may be explored:

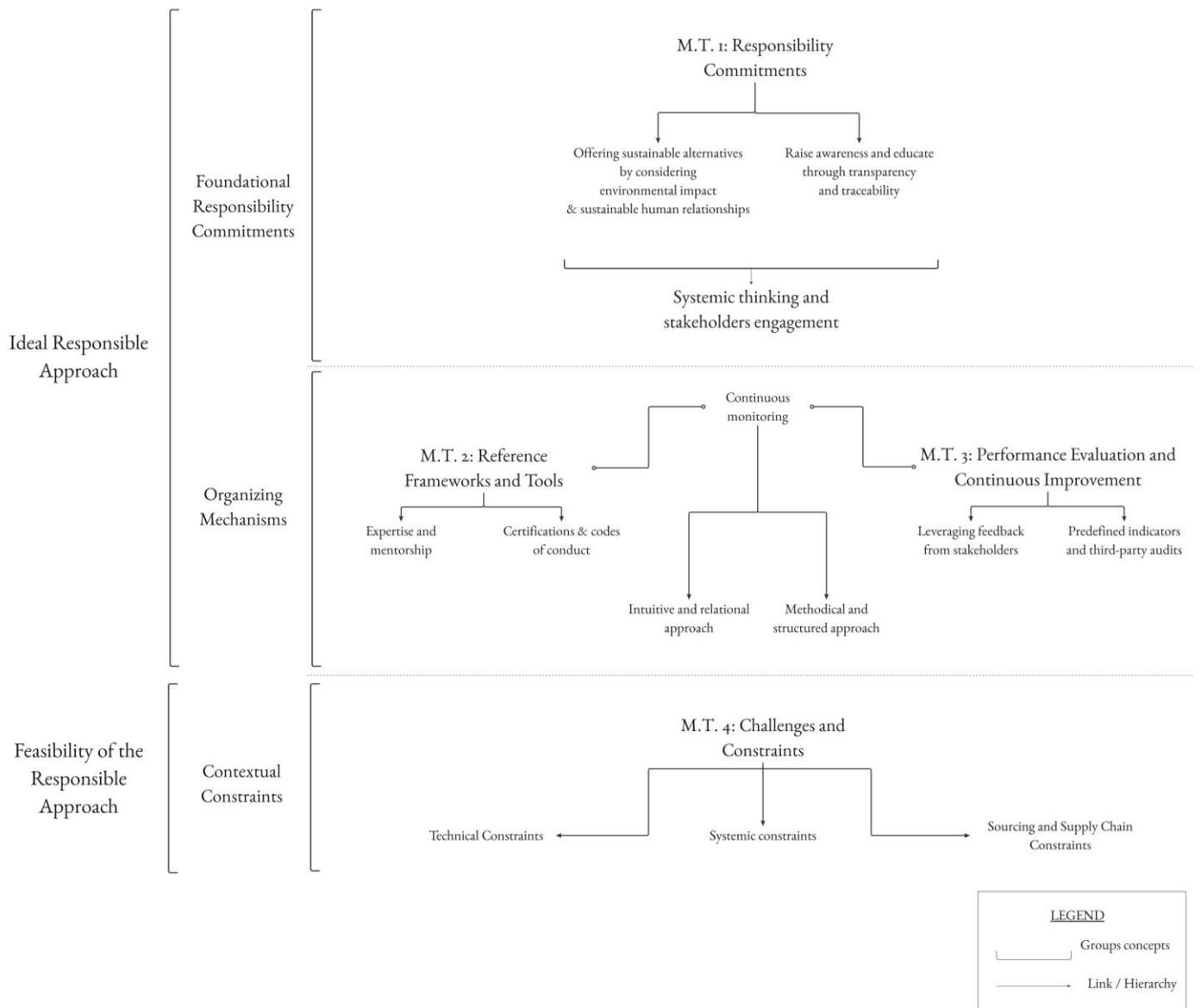
- |   |  |
|---|--|
| ✓ Certification and standards                               | ✓ Partner companies                    |
| ✓ Experts and organizations providing support and awareness | ✓ Government programs                  |
| ✓ Best practice documents and reports                       | ✓ Universities and research centers    |
| ✓ Others: Mentorship and experts                            | ✓ Other Internal or "in-house" methods |

Q3: What challenges or limitations does your company face in implementing these methods or responsible engagements?

Objective: Highlight the challenges and constraints that entrepreneurs encounter in applying their engagements.

Estimated time: 45 to 60 min

## Appendix B. Integrative Model of the Conceptualization of Social and Environmental Responsibility and Its Challenges in Small and Micro Fashion and Apparel Enterprises



**Figure A1.** The model illustrates how responsibility emerges through the interaction of (1) foundational responsibility commitments, (2) organizing mechanisms (including reference frameworks, tools, and performance evaluation) and (3) contextual constraints shaping feasibility. It highlights the dynamic tension between an ideal responsible approach and its feasibility conditions, conceptualizing responsibility as a continuous process of alignment rather than a linear or practice-driven pathway. Source: Authors' own work.

## Appendix C. Thematic Overview and Practical Insights

Main Theme	Core Focus	Findings (Quebec SMFAEs)	Interpretation and Distinctive Elements	Theoretical Lens	Evidence from Data	Comparison with Literature	Practical Implications
M.T.1: Responsibility Commitments	How entrepreneurs construct responsibility commitments through systemic thinking and stakeholder engagement.	Responsibility is rooted in collective meaning-making and long-term stakeholder dialogue, rather than fragmented or symbolic actions.	Commitment as a relational and collective, value-driven process embedded in the entrepreneur's systemic vision.	Stakeholder theory	Example: One designer emphasized 'educating customers on the garment's full journey' to create an emotional and ethical bond.	Aligns with Fletcher (2014) [1] and Dal Mas et al. (2022) [16], but more emphasis on micro enterprises' personal value systems than found in European studies.	Practical: Promote participatory learning and storytelling practices to foster value-driven engagement beyond compliance. Theoretical: Extend Stakeholder Theory to highlight the role of personal ethics in early-stage enterprises.
M.T.2: Reference Frameworks and Tools	How entrepreneurs draw from existing frameworks, certifications, and relational tools to structure responsible practices without necessary formal certification.	Responsible practices are structured through hybrid strategies combining formal and informal tools shaped by mutual understanding.	Responsibility as an evolving construct shaped by stakeholder input and interpreted frameworks rather than simply on compliance.	Stakeholder + legitimacy theory	Example: Some brands rely on informal supplier vetting while selectively adopting GOTS or Fairtrade elements.	Consistent with Ditty et al. (2021) [13] on certifications' signaling role, but here, reliance on informal tools is more pronounced than in large firms.	Practical: Encourage shared learning platforms to co-develop adaptable toolkits combining formal and relational mechanisms. Theoretical: Refine Legitimacy Theory to integrate hybrid accountability approaches.
M.T.3: Performance Evaluation and Continuous Improvement	How entrepreneurs assess and improve their practices using both formal indicators and trust-based benchmarks.	Legitimacy and improvement emerge from adaptive evaluation methods combining internal conviction and external signals.	Performance as a dynamic, negotiated process grounded in stakeholder trust and iterative learning.	Stakeholder + legitimacy theory	Example: Entrepreneurs use consumer feedback on durability and reparability to guide product adjustments.	Echoes Sang and Han (2023) [18] but reveals heavier reliance on relational trust in contexts lacking institutional monitoring.	Practical: Foster mentorship and peer feedback systems to support iterative learning and credible improvement. Theoretical: Position trust-based feedback as an equivalent to formal auditing in legitimacy building.
M.T.4: Challenges and Constraints	How entrepreneurs mobilize stakeholders to navigate and legitimize their approaches in the face of systemic and institutional constraints.	Systemic transformation requires collective support to overcome ambiguity and foster accessible, legitimate pathways to responsibility.	Constraints as triggers for stakeholder mobilization and a call for institutional collaboration to support legitimacy.	Stakeholder + legitimacy theory	Example: Difficulty sourcing small quantities of sustainable materials without high MOQ.	Confirms Henninger et al. (2016) [3] but adds that Québec-specific lack of local certified suppliers deepens the constraint.	Practical: Strengthen ecosystem support through simplified certification pathways and shared traceability systems that enable collective progress toward responsibility. Theoretical: Highlight institutional voids as catalysts for collective stakeholder action.

Source: Authors' own work.

## References

1. Fletcher, K. *Sustainable Fashion and Textiles: Design Journeys*, 2nd ed.; Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group: London, UK, 2014.
2. Dickson, M.A.; Eckman, M.J.; Loker, S. *Social Responsibility in the Global Apparel Industry*; Fairchild Books: New York, NY, USA, 2009.
3. Henninger, C.E.; Alevizou, P.J.; Oates, C.J. What Is Sustainable Fashion? *J. Fash. Mark. Manag. Int. J.* **2016**, *20*, 400–416. [CrossRef]
4. Ozdamar Ertekin, Z.; Atik, D. Sustainable Markets: Motivating Factors, Barriers, and Remedies for Mobilization of Slow Fashion. *J. Macromark.* **2015**, *35*, 53–69. [CrossRef]
5. Ozdamar Ertekin, Z.; Atik, D. Institutional Constituents of Change for a Sustainable Fashion System. *J. Macromark.* **2020**, *40*, 362–379. [CrossRef]
6. Payne, A. *Designing Fashion's Future: Present Practice and Tactics for Sustainable Change*; Bloomsbury Visual Arts: London, UK; New York, NY, USA, 2021.
7. Genois-Lefrançois, P.; Lardja, L.; Lefèvre, T.; Magalas, T. *Livre Blanc de l'Innovation Durable*; CIRODD: Montréal, QC, Canada, 2021. Available online: <https://cirodd.org/0xpy9dRy/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Livre-blanc-de-linnovation-durable-version-finale-19-fevrier-1.pdf> (accessed on 3 August 2022).
8. Garcia-Torres, S.; Rey-Garcia, M.; Sáenz, J.; Seuring, S. Traceability and Transparency for Sustainable Fashion-Apparel Supply Chains. *J. Fash. Mark. Manag. Int. J.* **2022**, *26*, 344–364. [CrossRef]
9. Segal, E. *Designing Sustainable Designers*. Master's Thesis, Royal Roads University, Victoria, BC, Canada, 2019. Available online: <https://search.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/designing-sustainable-designers/docview/2198755307/se-2?accountid=27231> (accessed on 16 March 2022).
10. Freeman, R.E.; Harrison, J.S.; De Colle, S.; Parmar, B.; Wicks, A.C. *Stakeholder Theory: The State of the Art*; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 2010.
11. Suchman, M.C. Managing Legitimacy: Strategic and Institutional Approaches. *Acad. Manag. Rev.* **1995**, *20*, 571–610. [CrossRef]
12. Berg, A.; Hedrich, S.; Ibanez, P.; Kappelmark, S.; Magnus, K.-H.; Seeger, M. *Fashion's New Must-Have: Sustainable Sourcing at Scale*; McKinsey and Company: New York, NY, USA, 2019.
13. Ditty, S.; Amed, I.; Young, R.; Crump, H. *The Sustainability Gap: How Fashion Measures Up*; Business of Fashion: London, UK, 2021.
14. White, C.L.; Nielsen, A.E.; Valentini, C. CSR Research in the Apparel Industry: A Quantitative and Qualitative Review of Existing Literature. *Corp. Soc. Responsib. Environ. Manag.* **2017**, *24*, 382–394. [CrossRef]
15. Rienda, L.; Ruiz-Fernández, L.; Poveda-Pareja, E.; Andreu-Guerrero, R. CSR Drivers of Fashion SMEs and Performance: The Role of Internationalization. *J. Fash. Mark. Manag. Int. J.* **2023**, *27*, 561–576. [CrossRef]
16. Dal Mas, F.; Tucker, W.; Massaro, M.; Bagnoli, C. Corporate Social Responsibility in the Retail Business: A Case Study. *Corp. Soc. Responsib. Environ. Manag.* **2022**, *29*, 223–232. [CrossRef]
17. Burman, R. *Sustainability in Textile and Apparel Industry: Framework Development and Industry Analysis*. Ph.D. Thesis, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, CA, USA, 2015. Available online: <http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/resolver/1840.16/10700> (accessed on 12 September 2022).
18. Sang, Y.; Han, E. A Win-Win Way for Corporate and Stakeholders to Achieve Sustainable Development: Corporate Social Responsibility Value Co-Creation Scale Development and Validation. *Corp. Soc. Responsib. Environ. Manag.* **2023**, *30*, 1177–1190. [CrossRef]
19. De Lazzari, M.A. *Sustainability-Inspired Business Startups (SiBS): An Exploratory Study of Early-Stage UK Companies from the Creative Industry*. Ph.D. Thesis, University of Surrey, Guildford, UK, 2018. Available online: <https://search.proquest.com/pqdtglobal/docview/2050060012/abstract/9EE9B81AB2404161PQ/3> (accessed on 11 May 2019).
20. Chen, Y.; Lin, S.; Lin, C.; Hung, S.; Chang, C.; Huang, C. Improving Green Product Development Performance from Green Vision and Organizational Culture Perspectives. *Corp. Soc. Responsib. Environ. Manag.* **2020**, *27*, 222–231. [CrossRef]
21. Qiu, L.; Jie, X.; Wang, Y.; Zhao, M. Green Product Innovation, Green Dynamic Capability, and Competitive Advantage: Evidence from Chinese Manufacturing Enterprises. *Corp. Soc. Responsib. Environ. Manag.* **2020**, *27*, 146–165. [CrossRef]
22. Sumter, D.; de Koning, J.; Bakker, C.; Balkenende, R. Key Competencies for Design in a Circular Economy: Exploring Gaps in Design Knowledge and Skills for a Circular Economy. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 776. [CrossRef]
23. Simpliciano, L.; Barry, C.; Williot, D.; Dobles, Y.M.; Luglio, I. *Fashion Transparency Index 2023*; Fashion Revolution: London, UK, 2023; p. 152. Available online: <https://www.fashionrevolution.org/fashion-transparency-index-2023/> (accessed on 5 November 2023).
24. Costachescu, O. *Les Entrepreneurs Sociaux: La Gestion des Entreprises Dans le Secteur de la Mode Éthique*. Ph.D. Thesis, HEC Montréal, Montréal, QC, Canada, 2008.
25. Daignault-Leclerc, L. *Pour Une Garde-Robe Responsable*; Les Éditions La Presse: Montréal, QC, Canada, 2019.
26. Kumar, K.; Batra, R.; Boesso, G. Difference in Stakeholder Engagement Approach of Small & Medium Enterprises and Large Companies and Its Performance Implications. *Corp. Soc. Responsib. Environ. Manag.* **2021**, *28*, 992–1001. [CrossRef]

27. Ellen MacArthur Foundation. *A New Textiles Economy: Redesigning Fashion's Future*; Ellen MacArthur Foundation: Isle of Wight, UK, 2017; p. 150. Available online: [https://emf.thirdlight.com/file/24/IwnEDbfl5JTFoAIw\\_2QI2Yg-6y/A-New-Textiles-Economy\\_Summary-of-Findings\\_Updated\\_1-12-17.pdf](https://emf.thirdlight.com/file/24/IwnEDbfl5JTFoAIw_2QI2Yg-6y/A-New-Textiles-Economy_Summary-of-Findings_Updated_1-12-17.pdf) (accessed on 21 October 2022).
28. Ellen MacArthur Foundation. *Circular Business Models: Redefining Growth for a Thriving Fashion Industry*; Ellen MacArthur Foundation: Isle of Wight, UK, 2021; p. 78. Available online: <https://content.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/m/60926fc64dbab81d/original/Circular-business-models.pdf> (accessed on 28 October 2022).
29. Vestechpro. *Étude Sur l'Investissement et L'adoption de Pratiques Innovantes et Durables Pour la Relance de L'industrie de la Mode et de l'Habillement au Québec*; Vestechpro: Montréal, QC, Canada, 2021; p. 32. Available online: [https://vestechpro.com/assets/vestechpro/documents/publications/tude-sur-l-investissement-et-l-adoption-de-pratiques-innovanes-et-durables-2021-vestechpro\\_1.pdf](https://vestechpro.com/assets/vestechpro/documents/publications/tude-sur-l-investissement-et-l-adoption-de-pratiques-innovanes-et-durables-2021-vestechpro_1.pdf) (accessed on 23 October 2022).
30. Carey, L.; Cervellon, M.-C.; Hjerth, H.; Ricard, S. An Exploratory Study of National Differences in Consumers Concern for Eco-Fashion. In *Proceedings of the 9th International Marketing Trends Conference, Venice, Italy, 20–23 January 2010*; Glasgow Caledonian University: Glasgow, UK, 2010; p. 18.
31. Jahnich, M.; Martin, V.; Libaert, T. *Le Guide de la Communication Responsable*; ADEME: Montrouge, France, 2022.
32. Baxter, P.; Jack, S. Qualitative Case Study Methodology: Study Design and Implementation for Novice Researchers. *Qual. Rep.* **2008**, *13*, 544–559. [[CrossRef](#)]
33. Guest, G.; Bunce, A.; Johnson, L. How Many Interviews Are Enough?: An Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability. *Field Methods* **2006**, *18*, 59–82. [[CrossRef](#)]
34. Savoie-Zajc, L. Comment Peut-on Construire Un Échantillonnage Scientifiquement Valide? *Rech. Qual.* **2007**, *5*, 99–111.
35. Tétreault, M. *Diagnostic des Besoins en Main-D'œuvre et Adéquation Formation-Compétences-Emploi—Secteur de la Mode*; Conseil emploi métropole & Mmode: Montréal, QC, Canada, 2017; p. 122. Available online: [https://www.emploi-metropole.org/fileadmin/fichiers\\_emploiMetropole/Publications/CEM-diagnostic-MO-mode.pdf](https://www.emploi-metropole.org/fileadmin/fichiers_emploiMetropole/Publications/CEM-diagnostic-MO-mode.pdf) (accessed on 15 September 2022).
36. Ditty, S. *Fashion Transparency Index 2020*; Fashion Revolution CIC: Leek, UK, 2020; p. 68. Available online: [https://issuu.com/fashionrevolution/docs/fr\\_fashiontransparencyindex2020/1](https://issuu.com/fashionrevolution/docs/fr_fashiontransparencyindex2020/1) (accessed on 16 March 2022).
37. Hervé, F. *L'enquête: Entretien et Questionnaire*, 3rd ed.; Les topos, Economie, Gestion; Dunod: Paris, France, 2015.
38. Patton, M.Q. *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods by Michael Quinn Patton*, 3rd ed.; Sage Publications Limited: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2002.
39. Savin-Baden, M.; Major, C.H. *Qualitative Research: The Essential Guide to Theory and Practice*; Routledge: Abingdon, UK; New York, NY, USA, 2012.
40. Boyatzis, R.E. *Transforming Qualitative Information: Thematic Analysis and Code Development, Nachdr*; Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 1998.
41. Blais, M.; Martineau, S. L'analyse inductive générale: Description d'une démarche visant à donner un sens à des données brutes. *Rech. Qual.* **2006**, *26*, 1–18. [[CrossRef](#)]
42. Dickenbrok, C.; Martinez, L.F. Communicating Green Fashion across Different Cultures and Geographical Regions. *Int. Rev. Public Nonprofit Mark.* **2018**, *15*, 127–141. [[CrossRef](#)]
43. Sharek, A.S.; Dickson, M.A. Apparel and Textile Suppliers' Perspectives on the Impact of Buyers' Purchasing Practices on Environmentally Friendly Operations. Master's Thesis, University of Delaware, Newark, NJ, USA, 2018. Available online: <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2086019692?accountid=10457> (accessed on 8 September 2022).
44. Cervellon, M.; Wernerfelt, A. Knowledge Sharing among Green Fashion Communities Online. *J. Fash. Mark. Manag. Int. J.* **2012**, *16*, 176–192. [[CrossRef](#)]
45. Hutchins, G.; Storm, L. *Regenerative Leadership: The DNA of Life-Affirming 21st Century Organizations*; Wordzworth: Royal Tunbridge Wells, UK, 2019.
46. McDonough, W.; Braungart, M. *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*; Vintage Books: London, UK, 2009.
47. Graveline, A.; Collectif Communication Citoyenne (C3). Comment communiquer ses pratiques responsables? In *Proceedings of the Table de Concertation de la Communauté de Pratique Textile et Habillement: En mode circularité-Modèles d'Affaires*, Montréal, QC, Canada, 26 April 2023.
48. Allen, K. Measuring Sustainable Business Model Innovation in the Fashion Industry. Master's Thesis, University of Delaware, Newark, NJ, USA, 2019. Available online: <https://search.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/measuring-sustainable-business-model-innovation/docview/2287049664/se-2?accountid=27231> (accessed on 16 March 2022).

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.