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A discussion of brand image, fashion communication and social identity

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IU Discussion Papers, Reihe: Business & Management, Vol. 7, No. 12 (JUL 2026)

ISSN: 2750-0683
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56250/4138>
Webseite: <https://repository.iu.org>

THE PATAGONIA VEST AS A SYMBOL OF STATUS AND GROUP AFFILIATION
A DISCUSSION OF BRAND IMAGE, FASHION COMMUNICATION, AND SOCIAL IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT:

The Patagonia vest has increasingly moved beyond its original function as outdoor apparel and has become a visible symbol in business contexts, particularly in finance, consulting, and technology-related environments. This discussion paper examines whether the symbolic meaning of the Patagonia vest still aligns with Patagonia's sustainability-oriented brand image or whether it is increasingly shaped by external social and professional influences.

Drawing on concepts of fashion communication, social identity, brand image, and brand authenticity, the paper combines theoretical perspectives with findings from a quantitative online survey. The results indicate that the vest is perceived less as an expression of environmental consciousness and more as a marker of status, professional belonging, self-confidence, and success orientation.

While Patagonia's brand identity is strongly rooted in environmental responsibility, outdoor authenticity, and sustainable consumption, the vest's meaning in business contexts appears to be shaped primarily by group affiliation and status symbolism.

The findings suggest that symbolic meanings of branded garments can shift when products are adopted by specific professional groups and become embedded in social codes that differ from the original brand identity.

KEYWORDS:

Patagonia vest; brand image; fashion communication; social identity; group affiliation; status symbolism; brand authenticity; business casual; sustainable branding; symbolic consumption

JEL classification: M31, M91, Z13, M14

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Introduction

The Patagonia vest has developed into a symbolically charged garment whose meaning extends far beyond its original function as outdoor apparel. While it was once primarily associated with outdoor activities, it is now increasingly worn in business environments such as the office buildings of New York, Frankfurt, or San Francisco (Hotter, 2024). This shift raises the question of how a garment designed for outdoor use became a recognizable symbol in professional contexts. Clothing is not merely functional or decorative; it also serves as a tool for self-presentation, a symbol of group affiliation, and an expression of power and status (Horn & Gurel, 1981, p. 2). Especially in professional environments, clothing operates as a code that communicates identity and position within social hierarchies (Argyle & Petersen, 2013, p. 294). The Patagonia vest can therefore be understood as part of a broader tradition of symbolically charged clothing. What makes this case particularly relevant is the contradiction between the vest's current associations and Patagonia's brand identity. Patagonia is strongly connected to sustainability and social responsibility (Lehman, 2022; Patagonia, n.d.-b; Patagonia, n.d.-d; Patagonia, n.d.-e). However, the vest is increasingly associated with terms such as "Power Vest" or "Finance-Bro Vest," which are more closely linked to business elites than to environmental activism (Lehman, 2022). Nicknames such as "Fratagonia" or "Patagucci" further illustrate this contradictory perception (Tomkinson, 2015).

This paper therefore examines whether the symbolism of the Patagonia vest still aligns with Patagonia's brand image or whether it is overshadowed by external influences, particularly from business contexts. In addition, it explores the extent to which the vest functions as a symbol of social identity and group affiliation. The guiding research question is:

To what extent does the symbolism of the Patagonia vest align with Patagonia's brand image, or is it overshadowed by external influences, and what role does it play as a symbol of group affiliation?

Initial Situation and Research Subject

MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF THE PATAGONIA VEST

Before turning to the theoretical framework, it is necessary to outline how the Patagonia vest phenomenon is represented in media and social contexts. The vest has received considerable attention in social media posts, magazines, newspapers, and online publications, yet its symbolic meaning in professional settings remains largely underexplored from an academic perspective (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2019).

Media reports suggest that the Patagonia vest has become detached from its original function as outdoor apparel and has acquired a new symbolic role in business contexts. According to the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, the trend emerged on Wall Street after the global financial crisis as part of an industry-wide image shift. Instead of traditional suits, investment bankers in Manhattan, London, and San Francisco increasingly adopted fleece or down vests in order to appear more approachable and down-to-earth (Hotter, 2024). At the same time, the Süddeutsche Zeitung describes the wearers of these garments as predominantly male, white, and highly privileged (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2019).

The vest has consequently become associated with so-called “Tech Bros,” “Finance Bros,” and “Sales Bros” and is often referred to as the “Power Vest” or “Finance-Bro Vest” (Bramley, 2024; Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2019). Although it is commonly labelled the “Patagonia Vest,” similar garments from brands such as Columbia or The North Face are also used to communicate the same business-casual aesthetic (Bramley, 2024). Patagonia’s Corporate Sales Program further contributed to this development by embroidering vests with company logos for banks, tech start-ups, and investment firms, which then distributed them to employees (Bosse, 2024). In 2019, however, Patagonia restricted this program and began supporting only companies that donate at least one percent of their profits to environmental organizations (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2019).

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE “MIDTOWN UNIFORM”

The phenomenon is also highly visible on social media. The Instagram account “midtownUniform” presents images of men wearing the so-called “Midtown Uniform.” This informal uniform typically consists of a shirt, a vest, and chinos (MidtownUniform, 2024). The posts reinforce the idea that the vest is part of a recognizable group aesthetic in urban business settings. According to the New York Post, the account’s owner stated that wearers are motivated by status and by the desire to belong to a specific group, comparing this dynamic to a fraternity (Steussy, 2018).

The symbolic meaning of the vest is also reproduced through memes and short-form content. On the Instagram page “hedgefonds.henning,” for example, the Patagonia vest is staged in relation to the financial world (Schwab, 2024). One post contrasts the expected image of investment advisors in formal suits with their supposed actual appearance in casual vests, thereby highlighting the shift from traditional business elegance to an informal finance-related aesthetic (Schwab, 2024). Similar representations can be found on TikTok, where creators such as “fentifriedchicken” stage the vest in finance-related contexts under captions such as “Work in Finance” (Fenti, 2025).

Conceptual Foundations: Fashion, Clothing, and Social Identity

FASHION AND CLOTHING AS SYMBOLIC SYSTEMS

To understand the symbolic meaning of the Patagonia vest, it is necessary to consider the broader functions of clothing and fashion in society. Although the terms clothing and fashion are often used interchangeably, they do not refer to the same concept. Clothing can be understood as the material product, whereas fashion refers to a broader symbolic system that includes lifestyles, behaviours, consumption practices, and design approaches (Bendel, 2023; Kawamura, 2004, pp. 1–2). In this sense, fashion is not merely material, but gives meaning to garments beyond their practical use (Kawamura, 2004, p. 2).

Dunlap's theories describe several basic functions of clothing, including modesty, attraction, adornment, and protection (Dunlap, 1928, p. 64; Niosi & Chung, 2023, p. 50). While clothing may therefore protect the body or decorate outward appearance, contemporary research increasingly emphasizes its connection to identity and aesthetic expression. Clothing is thus not only practical, but also a medium through which individuals communicate the self (Niosi & Chung, 2023, p. 50).

FASHION AS COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL DIFFERENTIATION

This communicative function is central to the role of fashion in society. Clothing can be understood as a form of non-verbal language that expresses social status, profession, role, self-confidence, conformity, individuality, and other characteristics (Horn & Gurel, 1981, p. 2). Fashion therefore contributes to social differentiation and allows individuals to position themselves in relation to others.

Simmel's theory explains fashion through the interaction of imitation and differentiation: one group imitates the style of another in order to approximate status, while the other seeks distinction through stylistic change (Kim et al., 2021, p. 16). McCracken later described this dynamic as "Chase & Flight," emphasizing how fashion can be used both to imitate and to separate from others (Kim et al., 2021, p. 16). However, fashion change can no longer be understood solely as a top-down process. King's trickle-across theory argues that styles also circulate within social groups, shaped by shared lifestyles, early adopters, opinion leaders, and media influences (Kim et al., 2021, p. 16). Field's trickle-up theory further shows that fashion may move from subcultures or street fashion into mainstream and elite contexts (Kim et al., 2021, p. 17). These perspectives are relevant for the Patagonia vest because its meaning is shaped not only by Patagonia's brand communication, but also by its adoption within specific professional groups.

FASHION, IDENTITY, AND GROUP AFFILIATION

Fashion is closely connected to individual and social identity. The way individuals dress forms part of their identity and communicates aspects of their personality to others (Argyle & Petersen, 2013, p. 258). Since identity is constantly evolving, it cannot be separated from the changing nature of fashion (Davis, 1994, p. 17; Horn & Gurel, 1981, p. 44). At the same time, personal clothing styles are shaped by social and cultural environments and therefore reflect both individual and social identity (Cannon, 1998, p. 35; Sommer, 2005, p. 4).

Simmel's theory is especially useful for understanding fashion as an expression of group affiliation, as it describes fashion as emerging from the tension between connection and differentiation (Simmel, 1911, p. 185). Individuals use clothing either to align themselves with certain groups or to distance themselves from others. This links directly to social identity theory, according to which individuals derive part of their self-concept from membership in social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Since people strive for a positive social identity, they tend to evaluate their own ingroup more positively than relevant outgroups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). A group-specific garment can therefore become a visible expression of shared values, norms, and beliefs while strengthening the wearer's sense of belonging (Sommer, 2005, pp. 3–5; Loschek, 1991, p. 97).

CLOTHING CODES AND THE PATAGONIA VEST

Clothing can also be understood as a system of symbols and codes. Its meaning emerges through clothing codes that are used and interpreted by both wearers and observers in processes of encoding and decoding (Enninger, 1983, pp. 23–48). These codes are shaped by elements such as material, cut, and colour, whose combinations convey specific meanings within a given society (Clarke, 1981). However, such codes are culturally dependent and change over time as social developments and subcultural influences reshape dress codes (Sommer, 2005, p. 2). In complex societies, there is therefore no single unified dress code, but rather a plurality of explicit and implicit codes, some of which are only understood within specific subgroups (Sommer, 2005, p. 4).

Applied to the Patagonia vest, these theoretical perspectives suggest that the garment should not be interpreted only as a functional item of outdoor clothing. Rather, it operates as a fashion object that communicates identity, status, and group affiliation. Its meaning is produced through social interpretation and may therefore shift depending on the context in which it is worn.

Conceptual Foundations: Brand Identity, Brand Image, and Patagonia

IDENTITY-BASED BRAND MANAGEMENT

To analyse the tension between Patagonia's brand identity and the external symbolism of the Patagonia vest, it is necessary to clarify the concepts of brand, identity, brand image, and brand authenticity. According to the German Trademark Act, a brand can be understood as a sign or arrangement of signs and colours that distinguishes the goods and services of one company from those of another (§ 3 Abs. 1 MarkenG). Identity, however, includes both an internal and an external perspective: the internal perspective refers to the self-image, while the external perspective refers to the image formed by outsiders and their role expectations (Burmans et al., 2018, p. 22). Since brand identity emerges from the people behind the brand, especially employees and executives, it can be understood as the identity of a group rather than of an isolated object (Burmans et al., 2018, p. 22).

Brand identity is therefore formed through the collective self-understanding of the individuals behind the brand and through their interaction with external groups (Burmans et al., 2018, p. 26). It refers to the consistent characteristics that, from the perspective of internal target groups, sustainably shape the character of a brand over time (Burmans et al., 2018, p. 26). These characteristics include the brand's origin, competencies, services, values, personality, and vision, which together shape how the brand understands itself and how it seeks to be perceived (Burmans et al., 2018, p. 34).

BRAND IMAGE AND BRAND AUTHENTICITY

In contrast to brand identity, brand image is generated externally. It emerges through a subjective process in which individuals perceive and decode the signals sent out by a brand and evaluate whether the brand can satisfy their needs (Burmans et al., 2018, p. 26). Brand awareness is a prerequisite for brand image, as consumers must first be able to recognize or recall a brand and connect it with a product category (Aaker, 1991, p. 61). Brand image is shaped by perceived brand attributes as well as by the functional and non-functional benefits consumers associate with the brand (Vershofen & Proesler, 1940; Keller, 1993, p. 17).

Functional benefits relate to practical usability, while non-functional benefits include values, vision, and personality (Burmans et al., 2018, p. 48). Especially in saturated markets, such non-functional benefits become central for building a strong brand image. They can be divided into social benefits, such as external appreciation, group membership, and self-presentation, and personal benefits, such as self-actualization or emotional appeal (Burmans et al., 2018, p. 50; Stolle, 2013, p. 262). This distinction is particularly relevant for the Patagonia vest, as its symbolic value appears to be strongly connected to social recognition and group affiliation rather than only to functional use.

Brand authenticity is closely connected to this relationship between identity and image. A brand is perceived as authentic when its behaviour is self-determined and grounded in identity traits such as values, vision, and personality rather than primarily shaped by market trends or external expectations (Burmans et al., 2018, p. 57; Schallehn, 2012, p. 38). Consumers assess authenticity through externally visible factors such as consistency, continuity, individuality, and responsibility (Burmans et al., 2018, p.

59). Responsibility is especially relevant, as it refers to a brand's willingness to act responsibly in society, even if this means forgoing short-term economic gains (Schallehn, 2012, p. 83; Burmann & Adomeit, 2018; Dietert, 2018).

PATAGONIA'S BRAND IDENTITY

Patagonia's brand identity is strongly rooted in the climbing and outdoor community. Founded by Yvon Chouinard, a climber and environmentalist, the company initially produced climbing gear before developing into a sustainable outdoor clothing brand in 1972 (Patagonia, n.d.-a). Its origins in outdoor sports and environmentalism continue to shape its core values, while the company's mission to "save our home planet" expresses its commitment to sustainable consumption and environmental responsibility (Patagonia, n.d.-b).

This identity is also reflected in Patagonia's communication. The "Don't Buy This Jacket" campaign, published in The New York Times, encouraged consumers not to buy the advertised jacket in order to draw attention to the resource waste caused by excessive consumption (Patagonia, 2011). This direct and activist form of communication reinforces Patagonia's image as authentic, rebellious, and responsible (Patagonia, 2011; Burmann et al., 2018, p. 59). Through initiatives such as "Worn Wear," the brand promotes product repair instead of replacement and encourages responsible consumption (Patagonia, n.d.-c). Patagonia also advocates fair working conditions, supports environmental organizations, and focuses on sustainable materials, ecological production processes, and circular economy practices (Patagonia, n.d.-d; Patagonia, n.d.-e).

In summary, Patagonia defines itself through quality, integrity, environmental consciousness, and social responsibility (Patagonia, n.d.-b; Patagonia, n.d.-d; Patagonia, n.d.-e). Its brand strength can be interpreted as resulting from the congruence between communicated values and actual corporate actions, which is central to perceived brand authenticity (Burmann et al., 2018, p. 59; Schallehn, 2012, p. 83). Against this background, the use of the Patagonia vest as a symbol in finance and business contexts becomes especially relevant, as it raises the question of whether the garment's current symbolic meaning still reflects Patagonia's authentic brand identity or whether it has been reshaped by external social and professional associations.

Empirical Research

RESEARCH DESIGN AND SAMPLE

To investigate the symbolic meaning of the Patagonia vest empirically, the study follows a quantitative research design. Since the phenomenon has received considerable media attention but has not yet been comprehensively examined in academic research, a standardized online survey was chosen. This approach makes it possible to identify patterns in perception, compare them with media representations, and test assumptions regarding status, group affiliation, and the symbolic function of the vest (Bortz & Döring, 2006, pp. 8, 24). While qualitative methods could provide deeper individual insights, the quantitative approach is more suitable for identifying broader tendencies within the sample (Berger-Grabner, 2022, p. 127).

The questionnaire was structured into three sections: demographic information, the self-perception of vest wearers, and the external perception of vest wearers. A filter question distinguished between participants who owned a Patagonia vest or a similar vest and those who did not. The broader wording “Patagonia vest or a vest in a similar style” was used to include garments that communicate a similar symbolic meaning beyond the specific Patagonia brand.

After a pretest with five participants, the survey was distributed through Instagram, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn. Since vest wearers were a relevant but harder-to-reach subgroup, a snowball sampling method was used, which is suitable for accessing specific or difficult-to-reach participant groups (Berger-Grabner, 2022, p. 308). In total, 138 datasets were collected. After data cleaning, 113 valid cases remained, including 36 vest owners.

The sample consisted of 52.6% female and 47.4% male participants. The age distribution was uneven, with 56.14% of respondents aged 21–25 and 28.07% aged 26–34. Most participants were based in Germany, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Regarding employment status, 50% were employees, 39.47% students, 7.02% self-employed, and 3.51% pupils or apprentices. Overall, the sample provides useful insights into the phenomenon but must be understood as non-representative due to its selective distribution and demographic concentration.

CHARACTERISTICS AND USAGE OF VEST WEARERS

The descriptive analysis first examined the characteristics and usage patterns of vest wearers. Among the 36 vest owners, men were clearly overrepresented at 66.7%, compared to 33.3% women. Regarding professional affiliation, the category “Other” was mentioned most often, followed by finance with 9 mentions and consulting with 8 mentions.

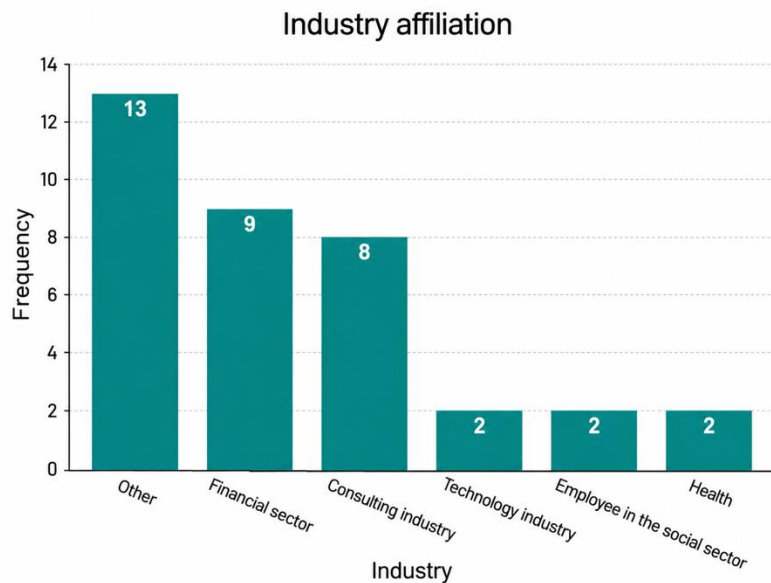


Figure 1. Actual industry affiliation of Patagonia vest wearers.

This indicates that finance and consulting are relevant fields among vest wearers in the sample, although the high number of “Other” responses suggests that future research should differentiate industries more precisely.

The data further suggest that the vest’s primary symbolic relevance lies in the professional environment. Although the vest is also worn privately, respondents reported wearing it regularly or at least occasionally at work. Outfit combinations further support the association with a business-casual style: long-sleeved shirts were mentioned by 91.43% of vest wearers, followed by chinos at 80%, sneakers at 62.86%, sweaters at 60%, and dress or leather shoes at 57.14%. By contrast, T-shirts, sweatpants, short-sleeved shirts, and shorts were mentioned only rarely. The vest therefore appears to be integrated mainly into a semi-formal business-casual aesthetic rather than a purely sporty or outdoor-oriented look.

The most common reasons for purchasing the vest were fashion appeal at 28.72% and functionality at 26.6%, followed by quality and durability at 15.96%. Symbolic reasons were present but less dominant: 11.7% referred to the vest as a symbol within the industry, and 8.51% described it as a status symbol. Sustainability was mentioned by only 5.32%, suggesting that Patagonia’s ecological brand value plays a comparatively minor role in the purchase decision. This pattern is also reflected in the feelings associated with wearing the vest: respondents most often connected it with practical and functional thinking (17.05%), style (14.77%), industry belonging (12.5%), professionalism (11.36%), self-confidence (10.23%), and community orientation (10.23%). Environmental consciousness and value orientation accounted for only 7.95%. Overall, the vest appears to be worn primarily for practical, aesthetic, and social reasons, while sustainability remains secondary.

EXTERNAL PERCEPTION

The general perception of vest wearers was analysed across the full sample of 113 participants. Respondents most frequently associated vest wearers with the finance sector, which was mentioned in

54.87% of cases, followed by consulting at 52.21%, start-ups at 41.59%, technology at 32.74%, and marketing at 30.09%. Other sectors, such as social work, law, and healthcare, played only a minor role. This confirms the strong association between the vest and business-related professional fields.

The personality traits attributed to vest wearers further reflect this image. Respondents most frequently described them as status-conscious (17.76%), self-confident (17.13%), success-oriented (16.82%), and convinced of themselves (15.89%).

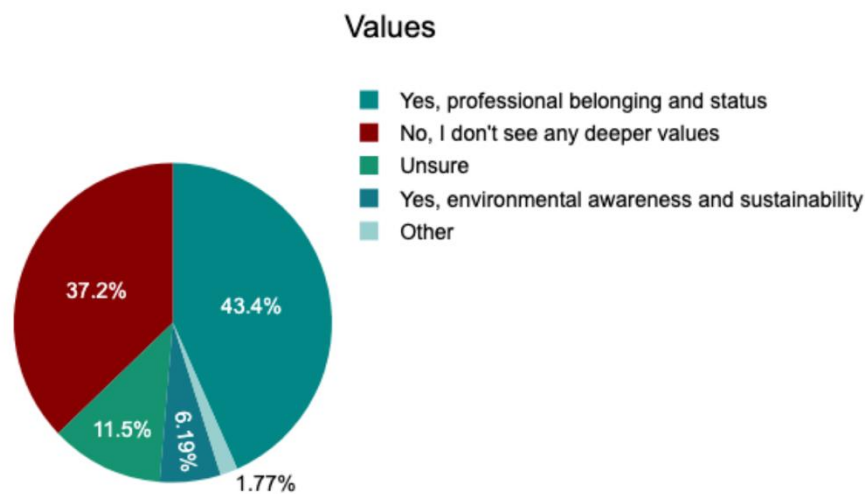


Figure 2. External perception of values associated with vest wearers.

Traits closer to Patagonia's original brand identity, such as being close to nature or committed to sustainability, were mentioned less often, with 8.41% referring to closeness to nature and 4.05% to sustainability commitment. Similarly, most respondents perceived vest wearers as primarily focused on personal interests rather than social engagement. A majority also associated the vest with professional affiliation and status, while only a small minority linked it to environmental consciousness and sustainability.

The comparison between self-perception and external perception reveals additional differences. Vest wearers rated themselves as more fashion-conscious than they were perceived by non-wearers. On average, vest wearers reported a fashion-consciousness score of 3.86, while non-wearers rated vest wearers at 3.17. A similar pattern appears in relation to social status: vest wearers rated their own social status at 3.49 on average, whereas non-wearers rated the social status of vest wearers at 3.23. These differences suggest that vest wearers tend to assess themselves more positively than they are assessed externally.

Overall, the descriptive findings indicate that the vest's symbolic meaning is shaped less by Patagonia's ecological brand identity and more by its social use in professional environments. This interpretation largely corresponds with media representations of the vest as part of the so-called "Midtown Uniform," often associated with finance, consulting, technology, and a male-dominated professional elite. The sample reflects this image, although less extremely than some media portrayals suggest. The strong association with finance and consulting, the dominance of business-casual outfit combinations, and

the attribution of status-consciousness and success orientation support the public image of the Patagonia vest as a marker of professional belonging and symbolic status.

DEVELOPMENT OF HYPOTHESES

Based on the theoretical framework presented above and the descriptive patterns identified in the survey data, three hypotheses were formulated to examine the symbolic meaning of the Patagonia vest more systematically. The first hypothesis focuses on the relationship between status symbolism and environmental consciousness. Since the previous sections indicate that the vest is frequently connected to business-related contexts and professional status, while sustainability appears to play a less prominent role in its perception, the following hypothesis was derived:

H1: The Patagonia vest is more strongly associated with status than with environmental consciousness.

The second and third hypotheses focus on differences between vest wearers and non-wearers. Since the Patagonia vest appears to function as a visible marker of professional style and group affiliation, it can be assumed that vest wearers evaluate other vest wearers more positively than non-wearers do. This was examined with regard to likeability and style consciousness:

H2: Vest wearers perceive other vest wearers as more likeable than non-wearers do.

H3: Vest wearers perceive other vest wearers as more style-conscious than non-wearers do.

Together, these hypotheses allow for a more systematic examination of whether the Patagonia vest is primarily associated with status and whether it functions as a marker of ingroup affiliation among wearers.

HYPOTHESIS TESTING

The statistical analysis further supports the descriptive findings. The first hypothesis examined whether the Patagonia vest is more strongly associated with status than with environmental consciousness. A Wilcoxon signed-rank test showed a significant difference, $W = 1702.5$, $z = 3.46$, $p < .001$, $r = .33$, indicating a medium effect. Thus, the vest was significantly more strongly associated with status than with environmental consciousness.

The second set of hypotheses examined whether vest wearers perceive other vest wearers more positively than non-wearers do. Mann-Whitney U tests showed significant differences for both likeability, $U = 855.5$, $z = -3.54$, $p = .002$, $r = .33$, and style consciousness, $U = 789$, $z = -3.99$, $p < .001$, $r = .38$. These results indicate that vest wearers perceived other vest wearers as significantly more likeable and more style-conscious than non-wearers did. This supports the interpretation of the vest as both a status symbol and a marker of ingroup affiliation.

Discussion

The findings show that the symbolism of the Patagonia vest only partially aligns with Patagonia's brand image. Patagonia's identity is rooted in the outdoor community and in its core promise, "We're in business to save our home planet" (Patagonia, n.d.-a; Patagonia, n.d.-b). The brand positions itself through environmental protection, social responsibility, product quality, and sustainable consumption, which is reflected in campaigns such as "Don't Buy This Jacket" and initiatives such as "Worn Wear" (Patagonia, 2011; Patagonia, n.d.-c). However, the empirical findings indicate that the Patagonia vest has undergone a significant symbolic shift in business contexts. While Patagonia's brand identity is centred on environmental consciousness and responsibility, the vest is externally perceived primarily through associations such as "status-conscious" (17.76%), "self-confident" (17.13%), and "success-oriented" (16.82%). The strong association with the finance and consulting sectors, mentioned in 54.87% and 52.21% of cases, further illustrates how far the symbolic meaning of the vest has moved away from its original outdoor and sustainability-oriented context. This interpretation is supported by the statistical analysis, which showed that the vest was significantly more strongly associated with status than with environmental consciousness.

This discrepancy is particularly relevant in the context of brand authenticity, as authenticity depends on the consistency between a brand's identity, values, and externally perceived behaviour (Burmann et al., 2018, p. 59; Schallehn, 2012, p. 83). Patagonia builds authenticity through intrinsically motivated actions, such as environmental activism, sustainable production, and responsible consumption. In external perception, however, the vest is increasingly linked to extrinsic factors such as professional success, social status, and business affiliation. The Patagonia vest therefore suggests that a single product can become partly detached from its brand identity and develop an independent symbolic meaning through the social contexts in which it is used.

The findings also show that the vest functions as a symbolic feature of social identity. Wearers are not only perceived as individuals wearing a particular garment, but also as members of a recognizable professional and social group. This becomes visible in the strong associations with finance, consulting, and the start-up scene, with the latter being mentioned in 41.59% of cases. The relevance of group affiliation is further supported by the fact that 43.3% of respondents identified professional affiliation and status as central values connected to vest wearers.

In relation to social identity theory, the results suggest an ingroup effect. According to social identity theory, individuals derive part of their self-concept from membership in social groups and tend to evaluate their own ingroup more positively than relevant outgroups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This pattern is reflected in the empirical findings, as vest wearers perceived other vest wearers as significantly more stylish and likeable than non-wearers did. The vest therefore operates as a visual marker of belonging and reflects shared values such as success orientation, status consciousness, self-confidence, and style consciousness.

Overall, the Patagonia vest can be understood as a communication tool within professional contexts. It communicates not only fashion taste or functional preferences, but also social belonging, professional identity, and symbolic status. While Patagonia originally stands for sustainability and outdoor authenticity, the business context has transformed the vest into a symbol of professional affiliation and social distinction.

Recommendations for Action

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be derived. For individuals working in environments where the vest is widely worn, consciously wearing such a garment may strengthen perceived social affiliation and contribute to a positive perception within the professional network. This is especially relevant in industries where informal dress codes send implicit signals of belonging. At the same time, wearers should be aware that the vest is also associated with status consciousness, ambition, and privilege, which may be perceived positively or critically depending on the context.

For Patagonia as a brand, the phenomenon has important implications. The company has already responded to the use of the vest as a corporate status symbol by restricting its Corporate Sales Program to companies that align more closely with its sustainability values (Bosse, 2024; Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2019). This decision reflects a commitment to the brand's core identity and represents a clear stance against prestige-driven consumption.

In addition, Patagonia could further counterbalance the status-driven reinterpretation of the vest through targeted communication. Campaigns emphasizing sustainability, environmental consciousness, repair culture, and outdoor adventure could potentially help reconnect the product more strongly with Patagonia's core values. Rather than rejecting the popularity of the vest entirely, Patagonia could use its visibility to redirect attention toward responsible consumption and environmental activism.

Conclusion

This study examined the phenomenon of the Patagonia vest and the values it represents for both wearers and external observers. The starting point was the contradiction between the vest's original function as outdoor apparel, Patagonia's brand values of sustainability and social responsibility, and its current popularity in business contexts.

The findings show that the symbolism of the vest is strongly shaped by the social context of the business sector. Both wearers and outsiders associate it primarily with status, self-confidence, success orientation, and professional belonging, while Patagonia's original core values play only a secondary role. In this regard, the empirical findings largely correspond with the media representation of the phenomenon.

The study further revealed that the vest does not merely reflect functional preferences or individual style. Rather, it functions as a means of expressing social identity and group affiliation. Vest wearers attributed more positive characteristics to other vest wearers than outsiders did, suggesting an ingroup effect and stronger identification within the group of wearers.

These findings contribute to research on fashion symbolism, brand perception, and group membership. They underline that clothing is not only a material or functional object, but also a medium of non-verbal communication that conveys identity, status, and social affiliation. At the same time, the study shows that the meaning of a garment is not determined solely by the values of the brand behind it. Instead, symbolic meanings can shift when products are adopted by specific social groups or professional subcultures.

In conclusion, the Patagonia vest in business environments represents much more than a practical piece of clothing. It has become a symbol of group membership, professional identity, and social status, while the original values of sustainability and environmental responsibility are partly overshadowed by external influences. Since the study does not claim representativeness, future research should examine the phenomenon using a larger and more diverse sample and investigate more closely how the vest became established as a professional status symbol.

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