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Branding for the Better:

Sustainable branding as driver of more sustainable fashion consumption

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Abstract: This article focuses on how sustainable branding within the fashion industry can drive more sustainable fashion consumption. Present Western fashion industry is characterized by unsustainable consumption, where consumers' urge to keep up with fast-changing trends using cultural and symbolic meanings prevents more sustainable fashion consumption development. We study how sustainable fashion branding is used in consumers' ongoing identity creation processes and how such branding can set coordinates for consumer action that guide towards more sustainable fashion consumption. The findings and analysis are based on a qualitative method where phenomenological interviews seek to capture consumers' first-hand experiences of consuming a sustainable fashion brand. The study shows the importance of considering how consumers' varying perspectives of a sustainable fashion brand leads them to view, use and consume the brand in different ways. The study also shows that it is possible to drive more sustainable fashion consumption by providing consumers with a brand-controlled set of coordinates that generates and facilitates more sustainable consumption.

Keywords: sustainable fashion, sustainable branding, consumer culture theory, performative branding

Introduction

This article focuses on sustainable branding of fashion companies and how such branding is used in consumers' identity creation processes as well as how such branding can drive more sustainable consumption. From a sustainable consumption perspective, it is important to always strive for greater understanding of consumption society in general and, more specifically, how it is possible to leverage on such understanding about consumption culture and inherent elements such as branding and identity creation.

From an environmental perspective, the behaviour of mankind has disastrous effects on earth and its capacity to sustain and feed all its various life forms (Dermody, Hanmer-Lloyd, Koenig-Lewis & Zhao, 2015) and evidence indicate that the depletion of earth's natural resources can be fully derived to human actions and behaviour (Krausmann, Gingrich, Eisenmenger, Erb, Haberl & Fischer-Kowalski, 2009; Vlek & Steg, 2007). Especially when looking at the fashion industry, where we continuously are building our personal narratives through the things we purchase, it is evident how Western consumption culture is characterised by unsustainable consumption

patterns (Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang & Chan, 2012). Fashion is a fast-changing industry where the styles of today are outdated by tomorrow (Joy et al., 2012), forcing consumers to continuously define and redefine their personal identities by constantly consuming new apparel (Niinimäki, 2010; Thompson & Haytko, 1997).

Research shows that consumers are increasingly aware of how their individual ways of acting and consuming relate to more distant events and risks, for example how their everyday excessive consumption patterns are interlinked with global environmental problems (Beck, 2000; Giddens, 1991; Niinimäki, 2010). Beck (2000) means that this has led to a 'politicization' and 'moralization' of consumption and that consumers in identity- and market-driven societies are forced to create their personal narratives using an array of confusing choices and competing responsibilities. Consumers have therefore been given an important role and responsibility in the pursuit of more sustainable development (Autio, Heiskanen & Heinonen, 2009; Markkula & Moisaner, 2012) and they are therefore faced with the displeasing task of finding biographical

solutions to systemic problems that are beyond their direct power to resolve (Beck, 1992). This leaves consumers with a confusing logic and paradoxical reality, where they, on the one hand, must keep up with changing styles in an unsustainable consumer culture but, on the other hand, care for issues of sustainability and are expected to act in more sustainable ways. Following this, consumers are argued to rarely connect their consumption practices to either their knowledge of, or commitment to, issues of sustainability (Niinimäki, 2010; Markkula & Moisander, 2012).

In order to further address these confusing and paradoxical consumer logics, this article builds on Consumer Culture Theory (hereinafter: CCT): a field of research that particularly captures the power of the marketplace and how consumer behaviour is formed. Scholars in this field of research emphasize that consumption culture and the marketplace affects all kinds of consumption and that consumers constantly are constructing and reconstructing their identities through consumption (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Gabriel and Lang, 2006; Niinimäki, 2010). Gabriel and Lang (2006) explain how brands and their symbolic power serve a central role in consumption and even argue that it is brands, rather than goods, that are consumed. More specifically, consumers are constantly trying reach their ideal identities, and consumption therefore functions as a way to overbridge the dissonance they feel between their actual self and their ideal self (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; McCracken, 1986). Hence, consumers are imagining that the next item they purchase will provide them with their desired identity, however, as soon as they possess this desired artefact the desire instead transfers to another object (Niinimäki, 2010; Gabriel & Lang, 2006). Hence, fashion appears to be an especially appropriate industry for studying how sustainable branding affects consumers' purchasing behaviour, not only because it is characterized by an unsustainable consumption nature (Joy et al., 2012), but also because fashion has been described to express inner individual personalities using external symbols, brands and status items (Niinimäki, 2010; Kaiser, 1997; Yan, Hyllegard & Blaesi, 2012). This study focuses on jeans in particular since it is a part of the fashion industry that have been argued to carry much symbolic and cultural meanings all across the world (Miller & Woodward, 2011).

Similar to the symbolic brand consumption, where consumers use brands in their identity creation (e.g. Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Gabriel & Lang, 2006; Niinimäki, 2010), Arvidsson (2005) explains that consumers, through their way of using a particular brand, serve an important role in co-producing the value of a brand. The shared ways in which a brand is understood, interpreted and used by consumers as a cultural resource, constitutes the basis for this brand value (Holt, 2002). As argued by Arvidsson (2005), brands themselves establish an interpretative frame, a 'mediatic space', for their consumers, meaning that the brand sets a framework where they anticipate the behaviour of their consumers by providing the "context of consumption" (p. 244). Through their way of enabling and providing consumers with a common and shared sense around these cultural resources, brands become a platform for consumer action, dictating how to act when using the brand and how to relate to these activities (Arvidsson, 2005). A sustainable brand, i.e. a brand which holds issues of sustainability as its core promise and that has a sustainable and holistic approach towards economical, social and environmental issues (Stuart, 2011), would therefore promote a platform which consumers can use to act more sustainably. However, in the fashion industry, previous research show that sustainability-related branding efforts tend to be drowned by the industry's overall emphasis on consuming more and more (Solér, Baeza & Svärd, 2015).

When studying consumers' adoption of more sustainable consumption patterns, previous research examine how consumer-beliefs influence the potential for behaving ethically, suggesting that concerns for the environment translates into intentionally behaving better (Carrigan, Szmigin & Wright, 2004). Much previous research focus attention to the gap between consumer intentions, attitudes, knowledge and actual consumer behaviour (Heiskanen 2005; Pape, Rau, Fahy & Davies, 2011; Valor 2008; Niinimäki, 2010; Markkula & Moisander, 2012). Markkula and Moisander (2012) use a discursive, practise-based perspective to show that a part of the explanation to the knowledge-behaviour gap in a fashion context is found in the conflicting dilemma between sustainable consumption and the aesthetic norms in the world of fast fashion. This conflicting logic of the fashion market has, however, not received much research attention, nor has previous research managed to capture how the sustainable fashion market and consumption

of sustainable clothing can be driven by brands. Through a case study on a sustainable fashion brand, Egels-Zandén and Hansson (2015) find evidence that the communication of sustainability efforts does affect consumers. More specifically, it is found that consumers who are exposed to increased brand communication of sustainability efforts are twice as willing to purchase the brand in question. This clearly suggests that a sustainable brand do affect consumers, however, given their quantitative approach to this issue, where the causality between purchase behaviour and sustainability interest is problematic and questionable (Egels-Zandén & Hansson, 2015), there is a need for greater understanding about how consumers use a sustainable brand in their fashion consumption.

From all this, we see that the literature on sustainable fashion consumption in general, and the literature on the conflicting logics and dilemmas of the fashion marketplace in particular, lack an understanding of how a sustainable fashion brand can fit into the nexus between unsustainable consumption behaviour and sustainable fashion and bridge the dissonance between these contradicting logics. The research field also lacks a deeper, consumer-focused, understanding of how sustainable branding efforts (Egels-Zandén & Hansson, 2015) relates to more sustainable consumption behaviour. In this article, we therefore ask how sustainable branding within the fashion industry can drive more sustainable fashion consumption.

In order to answer this question, we aim to:

1. describe consumers' experiences of sustainable branded fashion as part of their consumer identity creation
2. discuss implications of sustainable branding as a driver of sustainable fashion consumption

More specifically, we draw on the case of Swedish fashion company Nudie Jeans Co (hereinafter: Nudie) and their efforts to brand themselves as a sustainable fashion company. With a focus on consumers' conceptions about Nudie as a sustainable brand, we contribute to the literature on, and understanding of, sustainable fashion consumption (Markkula & Moisander, 2012; Niinimäki, 2010; Solér et al., 2015) by adopting a branding-perspective to analyse the link between sustainable-branded fashion and consumers' ongoing identity-creation projects. We also extend this literature by investigating

how brands, by offering a platform and framework for consumer action (Arvidsson, 2005; Marshall, 2002), generates more sustainable fashion consumption. Our work further extends previous research in the area of how brand communication about sustainability efforts affects consumers' consumption behaviour (Egels-Zandén & Hansson, 2015) mainly by adopting an approach where phenomenological interviewing allows us to capture consumers' first-hand experiences of sustainable fashion and thereby to gain deeper understanding of this element of the sustainable fashion discourse.

In order to fulfil the aims of this study, we begin this article by constructing a theoretical framework around already existing theories on the concepts of identity creation, fashion consumption, branding, and sustainable consumption. Thereafter, the qualitative method and the phenomenological interviewing used in the study is presented. We then present and discuss consumers' experiences with, and thoughts about, Nudie and their general jeans consumption. Thereafter, we discuss the empirical material in relation to the theoretical framework. Finally, we answer our research aims and discuss our contribution to the research field, what is needed from future research, and end with some more practical managerial implications.

Theoretical Framework

Identity and Fashion Consumption

Consumer Culture Theory (hereinafter: CCT) is an interdisciplinary research tradition concerned with consumers' on-going identity projects and the ways that these projects are influenced by the marketplace and cultural meanings (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Gabriel and Lang (2006) argue that identities are sought through consumption and that it is such a central part of present consumer culture that "identity is Rome to which all discussions of modern Western consumption lead" (p. 79). It is commonly argued that we are what we possess (Belk, 1988; Kornberger, 2010; Sartre, 1943; Tuan, 1980) and Gabriel and Lang (2006) mean that the objects we consume can be regarded as live information systems that convey and contest cultural and symbolic meanings, which in turn are affected by advertising that aims to create stories and narratives around products and brands. Moreover, consumption of these

symbolic and cultural resources is further driven by a desire to enlarge oneself and by a desire to distinguish oneself from others, rather than only trying to fit in (Baudrillard, [1970] 1998; Rutherford, 1990; Sartre, 1943). In a fashion context, shopping for clothing can be described as a practice that helps people show who they are, and who they are in relation to others through the way one dresses (Clarke & Miller, 2002; McRobbie, 2008; Woodward, 2006). Thompson (1995) explains the self as a symbolic project that is actively constructed by consumers through various symbolic materials of the market that together weaves into a coherent narrative of self-identity, i.e. who he or she is. Following all this, symbolic consumption can also serve as a way of actively categorising oneself in society (Banister & Hogg, 2004; Belk, 1988).

Brands and Fashion as Drivers of Identity Creation

Building on this logic of symbolic consumerism (e.g. Kaiser 1997; Niinimäki, 2010) Gabriel and Lang (2006) take a more brand-centric view on consumption as they explain that we consume brands rather than things. Brands serve as symbols and work to engage us with the world by defining who we are in relation to others (Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Gabriel & Lang, 2006). Brands are therefore to be seen as tools for identity-creation (Gabriel & Lang, 2006) and as resources for the symbolic creation of the self (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). As brands are symbolically consumed they can help to form and communicate some basic cultural aspects such as social status, age, gender as well as fundamental cultural values (McCracken, 1993). Also, symbolic consumption helps consumers to categorize themselves in society (Belk, 1988) and brands that promote themselves as sustainable could therefore be consumed as part of building an identity that reflects a sustainable lifestyle. Branding thus structure our behaviour as consumers but also how we as citizens interact with society (Kornberger, 2010). Given the symbolic and hedonic character of the fashion industry and the non-complex, yet often high-involving products (Kapferer & Laurent, 1985), fashion brands have been explained to rely much on its implicit values and messages, sometimes even the brand alone, when communicating meaning to consumers (Yan et al., 2012).

Niinimäki (2010) continues to explain that the first impression of a person is important and that

appearance in form of style and body language therefore become important aspects in the creation of one's narrative. Fashion is not only a way of building our identities, it is also a way of expressing one's inner individuality through external marks and symbols, brands and status items (Niinimäki, 2010). Kaiser (1997) continues to explain that fashion is a symbolic production and that clothing can be seen as a fundamental part of personal communication and social interaction. Also Thompson and Haytko (1997) argue that fashion serves as salient markers in people's ongoing narratives. At the same time, fashion is a fast changing industry where new styles swiftly supersede old ones and the trends of today will be outdated by tomorrow (Joy et al., 2012), which, in turn, forces consumers to continuously define and redefine their personal narratives and identities by constantly consuming new clothing (Thompson & Haytko, 1997; Niinimäki, 2010). This unsustainable fast fashion concept is termed planned obsolescence and means that changes within the industry are planned to make present products obsolete due to, for example, design changes or non-durable materials (Joy et al., 2012).

Brands, Marketing Practice and Consumer Agency

Within the CCT logic, it is commonly understood that there is a relationship between identity projects and the structural power of the marketplace and that the market constructs certain consumer positions that consumers can choose to indwell (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Also, the marketplace is viewed as a preeminent source of symbolic and cultural resources that are used to construct narratives of the self (Belk, 1988, Holt, 2002). Branding and advertising are marketing activities that build and affect the identity positions that are available to consumers in the marketplace and such activities are attempts to affect consumers into moving in directions that are favourable to the brand (Arvidsson, 2005; Caruana & Crane, 2008; Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody, 2008). Brands therefore exert power over fashion consumers' freedom to take interest in and acknowledge sustainable fashion (Arvidsson, 2005; Markkula & Moisander, 2012; Solér et al., 2015). Hence, brands can be explained as a programmatic device (Lury, 2004), which creates an environment, a 'mediatic space', that can anticipate the agency of the consumer (Arvidsson, 2005) and situate the consumer within

a number of more or less precise coordinates for consumer action (Marshall, 2002). Within these brand-controlled coordinates, consumers are free to create the shared meanings and social relations that the brand can help them create in consumers' individual lives (Arvidsson, 2005). With this freedom (although controlled), Arvidsson (2005) emphasizes consumers' important role in creating a surplus value of a brand, i.e. "a social relation, a shared meaning, an emotional involvement that was not there before" (p. 237) through the way the brand is used. Taking all this to the case of sustainable fashion branding, we see that brands exercise performative power over the possibilities to consume their brand in a sustainable way, since they determine the coordinates within which consumers are allowed and enabled to act, but also to create shared and social meaning from consuming sustainable fashion (Arvidsson, 2005; Marshall, 2002).

Sustainable Brands and their Use

As shown, brands constitute an important element on any market, but the successfulness of a brand lies in its ability to enable consumers to bond and identify with the brand (Weilbacher, 1993), and by the uniqueness and relevance it yields (De Chernatony & McDonald, 1998). The brand promise should capture the essence of the benefits of a consumer experience when interacting with the brand, and it should reflect the true nature of the brand (Knapp, 2000). Following this logic, Stuart (2011) state that a brand can be considered as sustainable only if it holds issues of sustainability as its core promise. Grace and O'Cass (2002) argue that organisations use brands as a tool to integrate its business within the social surroundings by creating links between the company and its consumers. Consumers then utilize the meaning they derive from the brand in order to understand the company's position in society (Grace & O'Cass, 2002). These associations, or meanings, are, to some extent, available for the organisation to manipulate and maintain, and the sum of the associations becomes the promise given to customers (Arvidsson, 2005; Kornberger, 2010). If these associations reflect the genuine sustainability intentions of the company, this is found to influence consumers to act in a more sustainable fashion (Chatterjee, 2009). Through brand communication, consumer beliefs regarding the true sustainability intention of the company can be enhanced, and it can develop consumers' confidence in that the brand will act

favourably in the long run (Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2009). As explained by Martin and Schouten (2012), sustainable brands are those that help their customers live better and more fulfilling lives by engaging their deeper needs and desires and by providing a platform that enables more sustainable action. In pointing out key rules for sustainable branding, Ottman (2011) suggests that this only can be done by committing to a dual marketing focus. Thus, sustainable branding needs to communicate a balance of conventional marketing aspects, such as aesthetics, quality and performance, as well as build on credible value-laden benefits that promote meaningful ways in which the consumer can engage with sustainability issues (Ottman, 2011).

Literature on branding presents a shift from product to corporate branding and describes how this is related to increasing globalization and how its subsequent problems of homogenization and imitation brings challenges to brand differentiation (De Chernatony, 2002; Aaker & Joachimstahler, 2000). Product branding has been described to have a greater focus on the present than corporate branding does, i.e. product branding has a more short-term orientation towards sales and marketing-related branding efforts (De Chernatony, 2002). Hatch and Schultz (2003) explain that corporate branding relates to more strategic importance than product branding since corporate branding comes with a greater reach, partly because of its temporal focus on both the past and the future, but also because it targets a larger number of stakeholders with a value-based meaning. Taking this to a sustainability branding context, Solér et al. (2015) explain that this shift from product branding towards more core-value-based fashion meanings "has implications for consumers' ability to recognise eco-fashion on a product level" (p. 223). Well-functioning corporate branding encourages the stakeholders of the organisation to feel a sense of belonging by expressing attractive values and sources of desire (Hatch & Schultz, 2003). Also, corporate branding helps stakeholders to express and experience the brand-values and keep them active (Hatch & Schultz, 2003). The corporate brand values are therefore important in shaping the symbolic values of brands, which, in turn have been described as important in consumers' ongoing identity projects (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Belk, 1988; Gabriel & Lang, 2006; McCracken, 1986). For such brand symbolism to be effective in sustainable fashion, Solér et al.

(2015) argue that “only if consumers react emotionally to sustainability core values will they perceive eco-fashion as meaningful” (p. 225).

Sustainable Consumption

Within present fashion consumption culture, which is characterized by unsustainable consumer behaviour (Joy et al., 2012), there are people who try to adopt more sustainable ways of navigating and operating in this consumption culture (Moisander, 2007).

“In modern consumer society, an ecological and ethical consumer ethos has emerged as a counter-discourse to the current romantic, hedonistic consumer ethos” (Autio et al., 2009, p. 41).

These sustainability-aware consumers can be referred to as ‘green consumers’ and are described as consumers with ‘pro-social’ consumer behaviour (Wiener & Doeshler, 1991; Moisander, 2007). These consumers are characterised by socially conscious (Anderson & Cunningham, 1972) and socially responsible (Antil, 1984) consumer behaviour, which is paired with an environmental perspective and concern (Scheffer, 1991; Henion, 1976). Consumers with this awareness for issues of sustainability typically display consistent and conscious awareness about environmental consequences related to their purchases, the ownership and the use or disposal of what they consume (Henion, 1976). Also, green consumers are socially conscious and therefore concerned with the wider societal consequences of their private consumption and even attempt to use their individual purchasing power to generate social change (Moisander, 2007).

Moisander (2007) argues that there can be divergent views on the foundational strategies and motives behind green consumers’ consumption logic. One view is that a true environmental concern means significantly decreasing one’s consumption by reducing purchases to a bare minimum (Elkington, Hailes & Makower, 1990; Autio et al., 2009), basically meaning that nothing unnecessary is bought (Moisander, 2007). Another, more liberal, view is to acknowledge that it is hard to adopt such minimal consumption pattern in a consumption- and convenience-oriented society, and instead see green consumerism as favouring green products and adopting cleaner technologies and to thereby have a less harmful impact on the environment without significantly compromising one’s ordinary way of life (Moisander, 2007).

Through the use of fashion brands, green consumers have the ability to link consumption patterns with their inner personal identity, using brands to lower the discrepancy between the perceived self and actual self (Moisander, 2007; Niinimäki, 2010). Following this logic, a belief has emerged that consumers can and will drive change by connecting more environmentally conscious desires to their consumption choices, (Autio et al., 2009, Markkula & Moisander, 2012). This has led to a ‘politicization’ and ‘moralization’ of consumption and to that consumers in identity- and market-driven societies are forced to create their personal narratives using an array of confusing choices, conflicting logics, competing responsibilities and ambivalence (Beck, 2000; Hirschman, 1992; Markkula & Moisander, 2012; Thompson, 1996). According to Arnould and Thompson (2005), these identity conflicts commonly provoke the use of various coping strategies and juxtapositions of contradictory ideals and meanings. This kind of identity conflict is prominent in the case where sustainability-concerned consumers are trying to uphold their ideals in a marketplace where over-consumption and other unsustainable ways of consuming are strong forces to fight (Sorou, 2010). Consumers are therefore faced with the displeasing task of, in a market filled with barriers for acting sustainably, finding biographical solutions to systemic problems that are beyond their direct power to resolve (Beck, 1992).

Fashion Market Culture as a Barrier to Sustainable Fashion Consumption

“Framing sustainable consumption in relation to the problem of creating and expressing self-identity forces us to confront not only the psycho-cultural factors that maintain and expand demand for material goods and services, but also the contradictions faced by ordinary people as they try to understand and respond ethically to large-scale social and ecological problems within the ambit of an everyday environment that is highly commodified and individualized.” (Sorou, 2010, p. 174)

In general, fashion is a socially accepted way of distinguishing oneself from others (Gronow, 1997) but the consumption culture where new styles quickly supersede ‘old’ ones leaves us with unsustainable consumption patterns (Joy et al., 2012; Niinimäki, 2010). Holt (2002) explains how our consumption is affected by strong cultural mechanism by stating that marketers are “cultural

engineers, organizing how people think and feel through branded communication” (p. 71). Horkheimer and Adorno ([1944] 1996) further explain the system of mass cultural production as a set of techniques that together rationalize culture into commodities. In terms of fashion, consumers’ quest and desire for social acceptance is therefore closely linked to cultural standards, and expressions such as ‘proper’, ‘in good taste’ and ‘appropriate’ reflect cultural approval of the fashion apparel one wears (Niinimäki, 2010). Since consumers are affected much by social mores, which are based on the central values of the culture (Tischler, 2004), the unsustainable fast fashion market constitutes a complex barrier to a more sustainable development of the industry since it is very much affected by cultural norms and values (Niinimäki, 2010).

In more concrete terms, research on sustainable consumption suggest several different reasons to why people rarely adopt more sustainable ways of consuming. It is, for example, argued that factors such as price, product and convenience (Bhaduri & Ha-Brookshire, 2011) as well as fit and aesthetic preferences (Connell, 2010; Gam, 2011) are used as more important cues when making apparel purchase decisions. Another common explanation to this is that privileged customers have become accustomed to unsustainable ways of consuming and are unwilling to alter their lifestyles (Soron, 2010) and Joergens (2006) argues that consumers fashion purchases simply are not affected by ethical issues. Contrary, other researchers mean that the unsustainable consumer behaviour of western consumer culture is related to insufficient sustainability knowledge among consumers (Connell, 2010; Gam, 2011) and that increased knowledge therefore would lead to more sustainable consumption (Birtwistle & Moore, 2007; Hill & Lee, 2012). Further, research show that consumers who are highly concerned with ethical and social issues express a desire to also translate these concerns into action (Carrigan et al., 2004).

Following the above theoretical reasoning, we see how previous research present a scattered image of different concepts and dimension when attempting to explain sustainable fashion consumption. We also see how our focus on branding and culture-focused marketing forces allow for capturing a more holistic perspective of sustainable fashion consumption.

Methodology

The Case

Nudie Jeans Co is a medium-size Swedish fashion company specialized in manufacturing and sales of jeans. Since the company’s start in 2001 Nudie has expanded globally with both flagship stores and retail dealers in, for example, the US, Japan, Australia and across Europe. All Nudie-jeans are made from 100% organic cotton and the company has always incorporated and addressed issues of sustainability as a central part of its operations and they are genuinely interested in knowing that those who work for them, in the whole value chain, are treated fairly (Egels-Zandén & Hansson, 2015). This is reflected in the company’s external communications and the way they brand themselves towards their consumers, for example in forms of sustainability-focused visual merchandising and easy access to their ‘production guide’, which is offered as part of their vision to become “the world’s most transparent company” (Egels-Zandén & Hansson, 2015, p. 10). Also, as part of the circular consumption culture that Nudie promotes as “repair-reuse-recycle”, they offer free repairs on all their jeans, offer discount on new jeans when returning your old pair, and they also sell second-hand Nudie jeans. At the same time, however, Nudie communicate their brand as a fashionable and cool jeans brand (Nudie Jeans, 2016) with a ‘rock ’n’ roll’-attitude. Based on the above-described sustainability focus and its similarities to how a sustainable brand is constructed (Stuart, 2011), Nudie is considered and analysed as a sustainable brand in the scope of this study. The company’s simultaneous focus on being both a sustainable brand also a cool ‘rock ’n’ roll’ brand situates Nudie in the nexus of the dual market focus described in the literature on sustainable branding (e.g. Ottman, 2011). This makes Nudie a unique fashion brand and an especially interesting case for this study.

Interview Design

To gain a detailed, in-depth understanding of the research topic, it is important to understand consumers’ thoughts on the concept of sustainability within fashion in large and to hear their personal experiences of shopping sustainable fashion, i.e. understand the issue from a consumer-perspective. To reach such understanding, this study adopts a qualitative and

phenomenological approach since it “seeks to describe experience as it emerges in some context(s), or, to use phenomenological terms, as it is ‘lived’” (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989, p. 135). Given the exploratory nature and the qualitative approach of this study, one should be careful making generalizations based on the results (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). However, the purpose of this qualitative study is not to make statistical generalizations but to gain insights on sustainable branding and its role among contemporary fashion consumers, and, thus, focus lies on understanding social and cultural constructions (Silverman, 2001). Furthermore, according to Thompson et al. (1989), phenomenological interviews is the best way of developing an understanding of another person’s experience by gaining first-hand descriptions of the experiences of interest. Here, the world is seen as co-constitutive and individuals are not studied as separate from the environment they live in, rather, a totality of human-being-in-the-world is studied (Thompson et al., 1989). The aims of our study give this paper an interpretative nature, since part of the required in-depth understanding comes from understanding the language the interviewees use to describe their experiences of the Nudie brand and since it aims to grasp and understand a phenomenon from these descriptions (van Manen, 1990).

Data Collection

The study builds on a total of 15 phenomenological in-depth interviews (see table 1 for an overview of respondents), which can be considered a sufficient number as it exceeds the quantity of interviews typically seen in phenomenological research (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). The interviews lasted between 25-45 minutes, which was sufficient to cover the topics relevant for this study and to reach informational saturation. Point is, instead of focusing on number of respondents and/or the length of each interview we followed the recommendation of Patton (1990) who argues that qualitative research obtains meaningfulness, and insights based on the informational richness from its respondents rather than certain sample sizes.

We used a purposeful sampling method (Patton, 1990) as we wanted our participants to fulfil the criteria of being active Nudie users who recently had visited a Nudie store. Compared to randomized sampling-methods, this type of convenience sampling can be seen as biased

(Kalton, 1983). However, the interviewed consumers of this study provided detailed information and rich descriptions of their experiences and the potential methodological bias will therefore not cause negative effects on the results. With the aim of finding a spectrum of Nudie consumers, ranging from being relatively low-involved to being high-involved in the brand, this study followed the rules of maximum variation sampling (Patton, 1990). The nature of the research focus necessitated the use of a spectrum of varying brand engagement since we believed that various levels of engagement in the brand would lead consumers to use the brand differently in their identity creation and to consume the brand differently. Patton (1990) explains that a maximum variation sampling is suitable when the objective is to cut across a larger population, which holds large variations, and when looking for global themes, since “any common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared aspects” (p. 172). This sampling technique also lead us to conduct interviews in both Sweden and the US to further yield maximum sample variation. Practically, we found our interviewees by standing outside a Nudie store asking people who came out if they had time to sit down at a nearby café for an interview, with the criteria that they had made use of Nudie’s retail service in some way (e.g. purchase or use of the repair service). Whereas this sampling naturally covered almost the whole spectrum of Nudie consumers, it needed, however, to be complemented with some referral sampling to find consumers who were highly involved in the Nudie brand.

After presenting a brief summary of our study, each respondent was assured about their anonymity, and agreed on the interview being tape-recorded to facilitate correct transcription of the conversation (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). During each interview, the semi-structured interview guide was used as a tool to ensure coverage of all important themes, but, other than that, the interviews were held in a dialogical fashion, using questions and probes to facilitate a normal conversation (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008; Thompson et al., 1989). All interviews started with the participants being asked to describe the jeans they were currently wearing, which facilitated further dialogue as this question is easy to understand. This was followed by a dialogue regarding experiences of buying and

consuming jeans in general and Nudie in particular. Towards the end of each interview, unless the respondent had already addressed this themselves, we presented the facts regarding Nudie's sustainability efforts. This enabled further dialogue regarding issues of sustainability and the meaning of such sustainability efforts for the respondent while also reassuring that we got their honest perspective of jeans and jeans consumption by not initially leading them to talk about issues of sustainability.

Analysing the Material

As analysis of phenomenological material is considered to be a process of writing and rewriting, two autonomous summaries were written instantly after each interview (van Manen, 1990). Later, when the whole data collection process was done, all tape-recordings were listened through by both researchers, and all relevant parts of the interviews were subjected to verbatim transcription in order to enhance the trustworthiness of this study. As phenomenological interviews seek to attain descriptions of consumer experiences using a first-hand perspective, these texts were treated as autonomous bodies (Thompson et al., 1989). To maintain high trustworthiness and decrease the probability of attaining doubtful results, all of the

remaining analysis of the texts were conducted in a setting similar to 'the interpretive group' where the findings were cross-checked between the two researchers. Looking for idiographic (individual) meaning of the individual interviews, each interview was viewed as a whole, and separate passages of the interviews were related to the overall context. As a next step in this process, the interviews were bracketed and individual interviews were then analysed based on how they related to each other. This resulted in categorising respondents into groups based on which perspective they have of the sustainable brand of Nudie (see, figure/ground metaphor in Thompson et al., 1989). Three distinct consumer perspectives of the Nudie brand were found, we call these; the denim nerds, the green consumers and the self-rationalizing consumers. These perspectives were then used in order to better understand the common patterns across the interviews, i.e. the global themes, with the underlying logic that any phenomenon may be experienced differently (Thompson et al., 1989), for example, how the meaning of high quality proved to differ depending on what perspective the respondent had of Nudie as a sustainable brand. The final step of this analysis was to combine what respondents experienced with how they experienced it.

Table 1 Overview of Respondents

NAME*	GENDER	AGE	OCCUPATION	NATIONALITY	PERSPECTIVE
HAMPUS	M	22	Student	Sweden	Self-rationalizing consumer
JENNY	F	30	Psychologist	Sweden	Self-rationalizing consumer
BEATRICE	F	28	Architect	Switzerland	Self-rationalizing consumer
BEN	M	26	Sales associate	USA	Denim Nerd
NILS	M	33	Artist	Sweden	Self-rationalizing consumer
KEVIN	M	30	Barista	USA	Denim Nerd / Green Consumer
FILIP	M	35	Consultant	Sweden	Green Consumer
LEONARD	M	26	Chef	USA	Denim Nerd
INGRID	F	35	Writer	Sweden	Green Consumer
ANTONIO	M	40	IT-consultant	Sweden	Self-rationalizing consumer
OLOF	M	25	Engineer	Sweden	Self-rationalizing consumer
JONATHAN	M	25	Engineer	Sweden	Self-rationalizing consumer
WILLIAM	M	29	Barista/Chef	USA	Denim Nerd
MATTIAS	M	42	Consultant	Sweden	Green Consumer
LARS	M	34	Sales Manager	Sweden	Self-rationalizing consumer

*All names are fabricated in order to keep interviewees anonymous

Empirical Results

From our set of interviews, we have identified three perspectives of how consumers experience and understand Nudie as a sustainable brand. These perspectives capture the ways consumers look upon Nudie as a brand, which is essential in order to understand how they make use of various aspects of the brand when consuming it, and thereby allowing it to contribute to their consumer identities. The three perspectives that we have identified in this study are:

- *Denim nerds*: Nudie is first and foremost a cool and genuine denim brand
- *Green consumers*: Nudie is first and foremost a sustainable jeans brand
- *Self-rationalizing consumers*: Nudie is a fashionable and high quality jeans brand

To give the best possible overview and understanding for these consumer perspectives we list common constructs in all three perspectives, but they are individually structured since the constructs interrelates differently in the different perspectives.

The Denim Nerds

Consumers of this perspective do not see jeans as a mere piece of clothing but as a piece of craftsmanship and as a ‘project’ to wear their raw denim jeans for a long period of time. These consumers’ view on Nudies jeans can be explained as a piece of denim canvas upon which their personal stories can be written in forms of individual fades and repairs by simply wearing and repairing their jeans until they are completely worn out. Nudie’s high-quality denim and the way they are used reflect these consumers’ overall style. Secondary to this focus on the denim fabric and the personal fading, Nudie is also perceived as a very cool jeans brand with an inherent genuine denim heritage and focus.

Style and Quality

Being a consumer of this perspective, a major part of consuming Nudie is about wearing high-quality, raw (unwashed) denim intensely for a relatively long period of time with limited number of washes. This allows the denim to fade naturally and create a personal style that reflects the wearing and tearing of one’s everyday life. Among these consumers, this process of using their jeans is seen as a long-term project (typically lasting 2-4 years) where the jeans are repaired

continuously to prolong the life of the jeans and to further build their personal attributes. As explained by William:

“Like, I can wear these jeans everyday for years and years, and they look great and they hold up, and they look even better when they break down and I can fix them. I just... I have a pair of jeans that are, from thigh to chin have been patched up by different people and they have been worn out. They are super comfy. Because they are yours, they are unique. They look great!” (William)

Also Kevin highlights the wearing and the importance of creating a personal narrative around the jeans, but more in relation to the brand. By promoting a certain way of using the product and by emphasizing the importance of individuality in fashion, Nudie reaches these consumers with a certain way of consuming the jeans.

“I like the fact that they [Nudie] are like ‘wear them’ and the whole emphasis is on your jeans, you can wear them, they are tough and it’s about your story.” (Kevin)

One way of recognizing this kind of high-quality jeans is through the selvedge-edge of the denim fabric. This is a quality mark that is important to the consumers of this perspective since it not only reflects the high-quality denim but also mirrors their personal awareness about, and interest in, this type of premium denim. It also reflects the jeans/denim style that this group of consumers like:

“Hands down, my favourite part of selvedge denim is just the selvedge stripe! Finding that stripe at the bottom of the jeans makes the whole thing!” (William)

Sustainability

It is prominent how the respondents of this perspective rarely address the sustainability element of Nudie’s brand. Here, sustainability efforts are considered to be secondary to other aspects of the brand, such as style or quality of the fabric:

“Sustainability... It’s an add on, at least for me. It’s below the surface, because the best selling point in fashion is still if it makes you look better” (William)

Among these consumers, it is all about the product and how the features of it enables for continuously expressing denim-knowledge through the style of the jeans. Evidently,

sustainability efforts are not looked upon as primary as these respondents first and foremost identify themselves with other aspects of Nudie's brand. Instead, these respondents see Nudie's jeans in the light of the product, focusing on how the jeans enables them to maintain a denim-focused lifestyle where repairing and washing is not considered as sustainability measures but as enablers for canalizing their denim interest.

"I try not to wash my jeans very much. They loose the colour and I want them to keep their true colours for as long as possible. They should break-in naturally, such as these [points to the jeans he is wearing], you can see in which pocket my smartphone has been". (Leonard)

Even when these consumers talk about sustainability-related issues and try to express themselves as sensible consumers who care about sustainability, they tend to relate sustainability efforts back to the product.

"I would not say it [sustainability] is a deciding factor but I would say it helps me with the decision as it also gives you a better product." (Ben)

The Green Consumers

Consumers of this perspective have a view on their consumption of Nudie that reflects an overall sustainability-conscious way of living and consuming. To these consumers, buying Nudie means that they can reflect their larger care for issues of sustainability also in their consumption of jeans by choosing a brand that is relatively less harmful than other brands to the environment and the people who produce them. Also, these consumers identify themselves with more sustainable ways of consuming and living also in other aspects such as food and transportation.

Sustainability and Quality

These consumers tend to primarily mention the elements of Nudie that most obviously are sustainable. Since they most commonly focus their attention on what causes less damage on the environment they typically express that:

"It goes beyond a pair of pants. It affects so many others, agriculture and farming and everything. ... I try to exist pretty sustainably in day-to-day life, like riding my bike and taking public transportation. And I just think about that stuff." (Kevin)

Also, the green consumers explain how Nudie fits into their larger perspective of consumption and consumer responsibility:

"It builds on the idea that all people are of equal value, and if we all are of equal value, then my choices cannot contribute to shitty conditions for other people just because I want to buy cheap things." (Ingrid)

Having this sustainability-oriented perspective of consumption, these consumers talk not only about a more responsible production of jeans but also about a more sustainable way of consuming what one owns, i.e. slow fashion. Given Nudie's high-quality denim and holistic "repair-reuse-recycle"-concept that they promote, Nudie fits into these customers' equation on how clothing should be used. First, this is reflected in how these consumers explicitly talk about an unsustainable fast fashion consumer culture:

"I think what they [Nudie] are doing is really good, because there are a lot of things we all could do better. This whole throwaway culture that we have is a bit crazy. Even though I understand that that is the way it works, you want to do what you can to improve that." (Filip)

Second, this aspect of the green consumers' perspective is also reflected in how they talk about quality as an enabler for making smarter, more long-term purchases:

"I'm a very quality-oriented person. In everything I buy I try to like make long-term purchases, smart purchases. Things that will last a long time..." (Kevin)

Trust in the Brand

Another central aspect of the meaning that consumers of this perspective experience is trust in the brand. They express understanding for how a sustainable fashion brand allows them to consume sustainable products in a convenient way. Hence, the Nudie brand is understood as a trustworthy and safe tool for maintaining responsible consumption behaviour and the brand is therefore used to save time and effort in finding the more responsible alternatives they are looking for.

"I also try to make choices so I don't have to study all the time, I do a lot of other stuff with my life as well. So... I search for responsible alternatives that feel trustworthy and that I think can provide me with a long-term relationship, which allows me to not say next year; ok, now I

have to find a new pair of jeans and what do I need to do now? Instead I know that, okay, these are fair... this way I prevent myself from facing a moral dilemma in each situation, as these choices takes a lot of time. And it is really nice to have an ethical dimension and moral dimension with you without working too hard.” (Ingrid)

As such, these consumers extract meaning of trust and safety from consuming the Nudie brand. The way Nudie is perceived to conduct its business is relatable to these consumers and therefore enables them to feel a reduced distance between the brand and themselves.

“Yes, it sort of felt like, this is not someone who just wants to make money and achieve instant wealth, but instead they have a fundamental idea with this. I believe that if you have a business you should also have a vision of how to make all things better. And then you would like to support that.” (Filip)

Style

Unlike the consumers of the other perspectives, the sustainability-oriented Nudie consumers offer us a slightly different perspective of style. These consumers have all built up a loyalty to Nudie, where sustainability is the key aspect in this loyalty. However, given that they also ascribe importance to style, such brand loyalty would probably not be possible if they did not find Nudie to be aesthetically appealing. This phenomenon appears evident listening to how these consumers emphasize style and fit when choosing Nudie jeans:

“With the jeans I just bought I felt right away that I want these ones, it was not even a matter of trying other models, which I normally do, because I felt that they fitted well in the waist, they were not too tight nor too short” (Filip)

“They are both stylish and comfortable. You feel stylish and comfortable.” (Mattias)

Also, even though consumers of this perspective clearly prioritize sustainability in their jeans consumption, they can disregard other brands due to the style of the jeans:

“When I started to look for ecological jeans, there were not that many, and the only other company I found [except Nudie] only had ugly washes.” (Ingrid)

The Self-Rationalizing Consumers

Respondents who have this perspective of Nudie typically try to see their consumption of Nudie in the light of rational parameters such as quality, style and an overall trust in the brand. Among these consumers, Nudie is viewed and talked about as a brand that can be trusted to consistently provide them with a well-fitting and good looking pair of jeans of high quality.

Style

The self-rationalising consumers typically discuss style and fit in comparison to other brands and styles. What is important is the fact that they have chosen Nudie Jeans over other competing brands and use logical reasoning and rational comparisons to explain this. They, for example, talk about experiences where they have switched to nudie from another fashion brand. Here, Nudie is understood as a more stylish alternative:

“The back pockets on Nudie are much nicer, they are bigger and located at a better position. It became a matter of appearance.” (Jenny)

Style is not only examined in comparison to other competing brands, the meaning of style is also derived from how well Nudie correlates with the perceived self.

“The brand is relevant and modern, it is, like, neutral, a bit abstract but still modern, not like in-your-face, and that is what suits me really well.” (Antonio)

Quality

As consumers of this perspective see themselves as rational consumers they defend their consumer behaviour by creating equations where soft values are more or less withdrawn from their purchase equation. Instead they argue that their behaviour builds on the relation between price and durability. Quality becomes an aspect from which these consumers can extract meaning and find a rational parameter to evaluate their jeans consumption. Nudie’s jeans are considered and understood as durable and priceworthy, and although they are perceived as expensive these consumers feel like they get good value for their money:

“I had a pair of black Nudie jeans that I bought four or five years ago, they lasted for four years without any trouble... If you take into account such a long lifespan it leads to their jeans being priceworthy. This is how you need to reason when

you buy more expensive garments, to use them a lot and get a lot of use out of them. Then it is worth to invest extra money for a more durable product.“ (Jonathan)

Also, these consumers, describe how quality is an important part in building their overall image of Nudie:

“It is a quite straightforward thing, they have a nice looking, durable product as well as great service, good price. It is a golden balance of all these aspects.” (Nils)

Others describe how Nudie’s quality can be seen as a part of their larger product and service offering and how Nudie’s circular business model increases the price-worthiness of their jeans:

“That is what I like about Nudie, their concept with buy them, use them, repair them, reuse them, buy new ones. There is a concept of reuse, and the customer service when it comes to warranty and repairs... They do it for free and I just think it is a really great service.” (Lars)

Sustainability

With this primary focus on creating a rational logic around style and quality, the sustainability aspects of the brand rarely affect these consumers’ view of the brand, nor is it a consideration when purchasing the jeans. Several of these self-rationalizing respondents state that they have used some of the sustainability-related efforts that Nudie offers (e.g. the free repairs), but emphasize how it increases the value of the product rather than how it relates to more sustainable fashion consumption. Consequently, they tend to acknowledge that they appreciate, for example, free repairs, however only second to having jeans that are stylish and feels right.

“That’s great service [free repairs] in my opinion. But still, it’s ultimately a question of what jeans I feel like wearing today. Which style and the feel of the jeans is more important, obviously.” (Lars)

Even when knowing that the product they are using is manufactured in a sustainable manner, these consumers tend to lack emotional attachment to such efforts. When asked to describe the feeling of shopping sustainably produced jeans, Jenny, for example, initially explains how the sustainability aspect of the product leaves her with an unaltered emotional experience, stating that the important part is that the jeans last longer.

“I do not feel any different, it is more of a bonus. It is more that the quality is better, more durable fabric and such.” (Jenny)

However, Jenny also explains that the sustainability aspects of the Nudie brand motivates her to stay loyal to the brand, but that such loyalty would not exist if the jeans did not look good in the first place:

“It makes it easier for me to be loyal to the brand, because they fit well, they look good and on top of that, they are responsible. They are not jeans that primarily are made to be an organic alternative, but they are jeans that first off are made as good looking jeans and not as some sort of alternative to fashionable clothing.” (Jenny)

Similarly, other consumers of this perspective primarily also talk about their jeans mostly in terms of style, quality and price, but they also explain how they can relate to the core values of the Nudie brand:

“I usually shop at Nudie, I like their products and I think they do good stuff. I can relate to their mission.” (Hampus)

Discussion

Looking at how our respondents experience the Nudie brand, and how it is used in building their consumer identities, we clearly see that this varies much depending on which of the three consumer perspectives they have. This section begins with a discussion on how sustainability is situated in consumers’ ongoing identity projects, and we do so by separating the cases where sustainability is a primary aspect in how they look upon the Nudie brand and the cases when it is not a primary aspect of the brand. With this, the first aim of this study is addressed. This is followed by a discussion on how Nudie as a sustainable brand further contributes to a more sustainable way of consuming jeans, thereby addressing the second aim.

Sustainable Branding as a Consumer Identity-Creator

When Sustainability is a Primary Concern

The importance of sustainability

With a general and often deeply rooted concern for issues of social and environmental sustainability, the green consumers primarily see

Nudie as a jeans brand that enables them to purchase sustainably sourced and produced jeans, and consume them within the coordinates for sustainable fashion. These consumers express, for example, how the desire to consume responsibly produced goods is based on a belief that all people are of equal value, and if all people are of equal value, then the consumption choices of a person in the affluent West should not contribute to bad working conditions for distant, less fortunate, cotton producers and manufacturing employees. Here, Nudie fits in as a brand that is trusted not to contribute to such inequalities. Hence, these consumers appear to relate to the core values of the Nudie brand, and we see how this strong corporate brand offers a symbolism that help respondents of this perspective to express their values and keep these values active (Hatch & Schultz, 2003). Nudie therefore helps green consumers to canalize their general attitude and strive towards living in a more sustainable way in day-to-day life, and the brand fits into their larger perspective where jeans consumption relates to more than just a piece of clothing. The sustainable brand is therefore used as a tool for these consumers to take agency over the role that they have been given in the marketplace in their pursuit for more sustainable fashion consumption (Autio et al., 2009; Markkula & Moisander, 2012). With this kind of larger perspective of their private consumption that the green consumers demonstrate, Nudie is used as a moral and political standing point in expressing their understanding for distant events and risks (Beck, 2000; Giddens, 1991).

What is further evident among the green consumers is how they tend to talk about themselves as people who adopt their sustainability-awareness also in other contexts of their lives, i.e. they identify themselves as people with a larger perspective on their overall consumption. Looking upon their consumer-selves this way, shopping Nudie helps these consumers to reflect their sustainable consumer identities and show their relatively large sustainability awareness compared to other people (Clarke & Miller, 2002; McRobbie, 2008; Woodward, 2006). Just as Belk (1988) explains how brands as symbolic resources are used to construct narratives of the self, we further see how Nudie fits into the green consumers' images of themselves as responsible consumers and that they use the Nudie brand and its core values as a way to actively categorise themselves as responsible

consumers of present consumption society. Thus, Nudie's corporate branding expresses values and sources of desire that encourages green consumers to feel a sense of belonging with like-minded consumers (Hatch & Schultz, 2003).

Shopping fashion with sustainability as a primary concern requires much active engagement and can have time-consuming consequences for the green consumers. But in accordance with how Martin and Schouten (2012) explain that a sustainable brand should help consumers to live better lives, green consumers use the Nudie brand as a platform that enables and facilitates more sustainable fashion consumption behaviour, and thereby helps this group of consumers to live better and more fulfilling lives. The green consumers express how they use the Nudie brand and its core values as an indicator of good sustainable behaviour, putting trust in the brand (Yan et al., 2012) to maintain good behaviour and act in a favourable way (Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2009), which ultimately saves them time and effort in their search for sustainable jeans.

The role of quality and style

Having sustainability as a primary concern when shopping fashion also affects how the notion of quality is understood and used. From the perspective of the green consumers, using Nudie's high quality jeans provides the possibility to maintain a slower consumption pace and therefore assists these consumers in their ambition to minimize their consumer impact on the environment and other people. They address this in various ways, for example, Nudie gives the possibility to maintain a quality-oriented lifestyle by offering the combined value of durable jeans and free repairs, which ultimately means that they can reduce their consumption. This resonates well with their strive to live sustainably, and Nudie therefore serves as a brand that allows them to be, and feel like, responsible consumers even when purchasing jeans (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Gabriel & Lang, 2006; Thompson, 1995). This finding is much in line with other researchers who suggests that an individual's perceived or desired identity impacts the consumption pattern one chooses (e.g. Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Holt, 2002; Niinimäki, 2010; Thompson, 1995).

Whereas quality serves as an aspect of Nudie jeans that enables better durability and slower fashion, style is instead completely separate from issues of sustainability. With a primary interest in the sustainability aspects of Nudie jeans, these

consumers partly express that they really like the style of Nudie's jeans, that they are rather straightforward and elegant. But style is also described in terms of simply being 'good enough'. Falling in the shadow of the sustainability-related elements, it is evident how style does not serve a significant role in defining their consumer identities and narratives when shopping Nudie (e.g. Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Holt, 2002; Niinimäki, 2010; Thompson, 1995). Contrary to the findings of Bhaduri and Ha-Brookshire (2011), we thus see how factors such as style are not necessarily dominating features in the apparel market when considering this consumer perspective. Furthermore, this also opposes Niinimäki's (2010) theory that even the environmentally concerned consumers use factors such as style and price as equally dominating cues as sustainability in the apparel market.

When Sustainability is not a Primary Concern

The role of sustainability

Consumers who instead see the sustainability aspects of Nudie as a secondary element of the brand presents not only a different perspective on issues of sustainability, but also on how quality and style are perceived as more important aspects of the Nudie brand. The denim nerds and the self-rationalizing consumers present a somewhat scattered picture of how Nudie as a sustainable brand fits into their consumption and identity-creation. Several people from both of these perspectives admit that the sustainability efforts are not important to them when looking to buy new jeans, rather, the sustainability attributes of the Nudie brand are explained in terms of 'a great bonus' or as an 'add-on' and they are rarely aware of Nudie's sustainability efforts at all. In line with much other research on apparel consumption, we see how these consumers instead use other cues, such as price and convenience (Bhaduri & Ha-Brookshire, 2011), as well as fit and aesthetic preferences (Connell, 2010; Gam, 2011) in making their purchasing decisions.

At the same time, there are consumers within these two perspectives who describe an appreciation for Nudie's sustainability efforts and their mission. However, this appreciation is rational rather than emotional to the character, wherefore the sustainability efforts do not provide them with true meaning. This goes in line with how Solér et al (2015) explain that the perception of eco-fashion as meaningful requires an

emotional reaction to a brand's sustainability core values. Hence, these consumers' lack of emotional response to the sustainable corporate branding efforts could explain why they do not express a deeper attachment to the brand (Solér et al, 2015). So, when these respondents point to how Nudie's sustainability is important when purchasing Nudie jeans, while simultaneously stating that style is more important, we see how a non-emotional commitment towards sustainability issues affect how the Nudie brand is experienced.

The importance of quality

Among the denim nerds and the self-rationalizing consumers, quality is, together with style, the most prominent cue in choosing Nudie. Although being a denim nerd or self-rationalizing consumer results in valuing quality highly, some idiosyncrasy between the two groups can be detected since quality carries different meaning depending on which perspective the consumer has. For self-rationalizing consumers, quality basically means priceworthy, i.e. quality is an equation of price and durability. When these consumers talk about how they have been able to use their Nudie jeans over a long period of time, they state that they experience feelings of satisfaction, and feel like their jeans are a priceworthy investment. Although the denim nerds also see quality as a more important element of the brand than sustainability, they do not share the self-rationalizers' view on price-worthiness. For the denim nerds, quality has more to do with the characteristics of the fabric and how it is sewn together, and it is seen as an important enabler in allowing them to wear their jeans for a long period of time and thereby get the aesthetically pleasing break-in features they seek. Thus, quality becomes a way for the denim nerds to show that they are part of a smaller group of people who can tell the difference in quality of denim fabric, -a form of quality understanding that allows them to distinguish themselves from other jeans consumers (Banister & Hogg, 2004; Belk, 1988). In a similar way, self-rationalizing consumers use quality as a way to convince themselves that they are not as superficial as other consumers who build their identity only on 'shallow features' such as style using high-fashion brands. They thereby feel like they position themselves as more rational than other consumers on the fashion market (Clarke & Miller, 2002; McRobbie, 2008; Woodward, 2006). Regardless if quality is used for identification or distinction, both groups use

quality in order to lower the discrepancy between the ideal and actual self (Kaiser, 1997).

The importance of style

For the denim nerds, the style of their raw-denim Nudie jeans, with the personal repairs and fadings of the jeans, is an important way of communicating their awareness of, and passion for, the denim culture. Emphasizing how their personal wearing and the resulting fadings on the denim fabric is an essential part of wearing Nudie jeans, it is not only a matter of style in terms of actual looks but also a matter of how this unique look tells a story about the owner of the jeans. This kind of wearing allows this group of consumers to distinguish themselves from other jeans consumers (Belk, 1988; Rutherford, 1990). Such ongoing project of distinguishing oneself from others using symbolic resources eventually adds to define one's final identity (Niinimäki, 2010). Further, by explaining Nudie as a large, cool and renown jeans brand that a lot of cool people are wearing, it appears as if these consumers want to be part of 'the people who wear Nudie'. Just in line with how e.g. Thompson (1995) explains that the self is an ongoing identity project building on the consumption of various symbolic resources, these consumers buy and wear Nudie as a symbol for their their interest in high-quality denim and it further appears as if the Nudie brand is used as a way of categorizing themselves in society (Belk, 1988; Clarke & Miller, 2002; McRobbie, 2008; Woodward, 2006) as these denim-knowledgeable people who wear jeans with unique fades and styles.

Style is important also to the *self-rational* consumers who weigh this aesthetic attribute together with factors such as quality and price to determine the value a pair of Nudie jeans. Style as a cue is, however, not as clear as among the denim nerds, instead it is mainly about how aesthetically appealing the jeans are in terms of their off-the-shelf fit and style. Emphasizing the more general aesthetic aspects of their jeans, these consumers appear to use Nudie jeans as any piece of fashion that is part of their personal communication and social interaction (Kaiser, 1997). They also exhibit a trust in the Nudie brand to always provide good looking jeans that are stylish enough to be part of their personal narratives and expressions of the self (Niinimäki, 2010).

From all this, we see that it is only the green consumers, i.e. those who primarily see Nudie as a sustainable brand, who use the brand and its

sustainability related core-values in building their identities as sustainability aware consumers. By being able to set their individual consumption in a larger perspective and see how it relates to events and risks beyond their direct control, and by wearing their jeans for a longer time, they are able to distinguish themselves as conscious consumers. Among consumers who do not have sustainability as a primary concern we see that Nudie instead is used and looked upon as a stylish and high-quality fashion brand, whereas the sustainability elements of the brand only are talked about in terms of being a 'bonus' or 'add on'.

Sustainable Branding Performing Sustainable Consumption

Even though Nudie as a sustainable brand is used differently by consumers of the different perspectives in their consumer-identity creation, this study shows how Nudie constantly reaches their consumers with a more sustainable way of consuming jeans. Since the promoted way of using jeans, i.e. to repair, reuse and recycle, is a great part of Nudie's brand image, it is interesting to see how consumers of different perspectives adopt similar ways of consuming Nudie jeans more sustainably, although there are different logics behind such consumption.

Green Consumers

The green consumers' perspective of Nudie jeans leads them to see Nudie as an enabler of maintaining a more sustainable, slower, consumption pace. Given the high quality and the free repairs, they can wear their jeans for a longer period of time and thereby reduce their consumption, which ultimately means that they can minimize their contribution to environmental degradation and social injustice. Hence, we see how the green consumers, who are highly concerned about social and environmental issues, in line with the findings of Carrigan et al. (2004), use Nudie jeans also in a more practical sense in their strive for adopting a slower fashion practice and that an individual's perceived or desired self can impact the actual consumption pattern that one chooses to adopt (e.g. Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Holt, 2002; Niinimäki, 2010; Thompson, 1995).

This identification with Nudie as a sustainable brand is not only a matter of how these green consumers chose to identify with the sustainable brand, it is also the result of how the Nudie brand

enables them to consume jeans more sustainably by providing a framework, a mediatic space, for consuming the brand (Arvidsson, 2005; Marshall, 2002) that matches a more sustainable lifestyle. Unlike consumers of the other two perspectives, the green consumers, with a common desire and ambition to act sustainably, appear to *see and understand* the sustainable mediatic space of Nudie. These consumers therefore choose to be a part of, and act within, this mediatic space since it matches their image of how sustainable consumption works. Looking at how green consumers explain an awareness of sustainability issues in their general consumption and life, we see how Nudie further allows them to create shared meanings and social relations by allowing them to act freely within the sustainability-oriented mediatic space of the Nudie brand (Arvidsson, 2005). In the case of the denim nerds and the self-rationalizing consumers, however, we see how these consumers instead are *lead into* acting within this sustainable mediatic space of the Nudie brand, even though they initially started to consume the brand for other reasons.

Denim Nerds & Self-Rationalizing Consumers

The denim nerds and the self-rationalizing consumers do not typically use sustainability as a cue in building their consumer identities, but they do adopt to more sustainable ways of consuming jeans when consuming Nudie. In line with how Nudie promotes a repair-reuse-recycle concept of their jeans, these consumers wear and tear their jeans for a longer period of time and use the free repair service to do so. Regardless of the objectives behind using their jeans longer and using the repair service, either because it creates an aesthetically pleasing look or because it increases the perceived value of the jeans, these consumers inevitably adopt the slower consumption pace promoted by Nudie.

Through Nudie's way of promoting a slower pace for consuming jeans, Nudie influence consumers' understanding of how the brand and its products can and should be used. Through their efforts to induce their brand with certain values, such as the repair-reuse-recycle concept, Nudie is able to shape the space for consumer action and direct consumers to act accordingly (Lury, 2004). Hence, since even consumers who do not primarily see Nudie as a sustainable brand adapt to the promoted, more sustainable, way of wearing and consuming jeans, it is evident how

Nudie as a sustainable fashion brand, still influences their consumers' way of acting through setting the boundaries for how to consume the brand and the products (Arvidsson, 2005). Finding that consumers who previously turned their torn jeans into jeans shorts now instead repair them and use them for a longer period of time, suggest that Nudie exercise performative power over its consumers as they are found to change their consumption patterns in accordance with the brand-provided mediatic space (Arvidsson, 2005). With this, these branding activities and its practical implications for consumers also shape the fashion brand discourse (Solér et al., 2015), which is important in order to further drive more sustainable fashion consumption.

From contrasting the different perspectives, we see how the green consumers consciously choose to situate themselves within the sustainable mediatic space that the Nudie brand offers, whereas the denim nerds and the self-rationalizing consumers instead are lead into this sustainable mediatic space, and thereby more sustainable consumption, even though they originally consume the brand for other reasons than sustainability.

Conclusions

This article contributes to existing research on consumption of sustainable fashion (e.g. Egels-Zandén & Hansson, 2015; Markkula & Moisander, 2012; Niinimäki, 2010; Solér et al., 2015) by studying how sustainable fashion branding can drive more sustainable fashion consumption. Our approach and qualitative phenomenological method allows us to extend previous research in the area of how sustainable branding efforts affect consumers' consumption behaviour (Egels-Zandén & Hansson, 2015). This study also contributes to the literature on sustainable fashion consumption by analysing how the mediatic brand space (Arvidsson, 2005; Marshall, 2002) available to fashion consumers affects fashion consumption.

We show that a sustainable fashion brand will be experienced and looked upon differently depending on what importance consumers ascribe to issues of sustainability since this, in turn, affects how they perceive and consume the brand. In the case when sustainability is a primary concern when shopping jeans, we find that Nudie as a sustainable brand is used as a building block

in these consumers' ongoing process of defining their consumer identities and that Nudie enables them to canalize their general and genuine care for social and environmental sustainability also in their jeans consumption (Martin & Schouten, 2012). This is found to build on an identification with the core-values of the Nudie brand, derived from emotionally relating to them (Hatch & Schultz, 2003; Solér et al., 2015). In the cases where sustainability is not a primary concern when looking at the Nudie brand, we see that consumers instead turn to other elements of the brand, such as style and quality, that allows them to communicate their consumer identities as either denim-knowledgeable or 'rational consumers'. Thus, we show that it is not the sustainability-related brand aspects of consuming fashion that provide these consumers with a sense of true meaning as they do not react emotionally to such core-values of the brand (Solér et al., 2015). This typically brings these consumers to talk about sustainability in terms of being a 'bonus' or an 'add-on-value'. As we highlight the role of the brand within sustainable fashion consumption, we expand previous research, which suggests that sustainable fashion products need to become more reflective of consumers needs, desires and values in order to capture a larger target group (Niinimäki, 2010), by showing that these needs, desires and values already can be efficiently communicated via, and extracted from, a sustainable fashion brand. Also, by focusing our study on the branding-side of sustainable fashion, we see that consumers' ability to recognize the sustainability efforts of a brand depend much upon the perspective the consumer has of the brand in question. Building on this insight, our findings further suggest that it can be problematic to interpret earlier research on sustainable fashion consumption (e.g. Bhaduri & Ha-Brookshire, 2011; Carrigan et al., 2004; Egels-Zandén & Hansson, 2015; Joergens, 2006; Moisander, 2007; Niinimäki, 2010; Soron, 2010) without considering consumers' varying and different perspectives of a particular brand, since different perspectives leads the brand to be both viewed and consumed differently.

We also show how sustainable fashion brands can drive all consumers towards more sustainable consumption by providing them with a sustainable mediatic space, in which the brand sets the rules for consumer action (Arvidsson, 2005; Marshall, 2002). Our findings show how Nudie's brand-building repair-reuse-recycle concept (a part of

Nudie's mediatic space), where long-term use and free repairs are key elements, enables consumers to consume their jeans at a slower pace than before, thus driving more sustainable consumption among all consumers regardless of how they look upon and use the Nudie brand. Green consumers, who value the sustainability efforts of the sustainable brand, and who identify with the core values of the brand (Solér et al., 2015), choose to situate themselves within the sustainability-oriented mediatic space in order to facilitate a more sustainable consumption pattern in an otherwise unsustainable fashion industry. This study further finds that even consumers who do not have sustainability as a primary concern are lead to adopt a more sustainable way of consuming when consuming the sustainable brand since it is always consumed within the brand-provided coordinates for consumer action. With this, our study extends research on brand-controlled consumer performativity (Arvidsson, 2005; Marshall, 2002) by showing how consumers' ongoing identity creation projects (e.g. Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Gabriel & Lang, 2006; Holt, 2002; Thompson 1995), with their varying ability to identify with the core values of the brand, dictates the basic reasons for entering into the brand-provided mediatic space. With this, our study also contributes to the literature on consumers' ability to act sustainably on a fashion market characterised by confusing logics (Beck 2000; Markkula & Moisander, 2012) as we show that branding efficiently can control the sustainable behaviour of its consumers (Lury, 2004) by creating a mediatic space for consumer action (Arvidsson, 2005) while simultaneously competing on more classic fashion market dimensions. More specifically, a successful sustainable brand will help consumers to consume more sustainably, regardless of their perspective of issues of sustainability, thus reducing the discursive confusion of the fashion market (Markkula & Moisander, 2012).

Future Research

This study finds that a sustainable brand exercises performative power over consumers' consumption behaviour, but since the impact of representational and exchange practices on normalising certain market behaviour falls outside the scope of our study, we suggest that future research should investigate how the performative power of a sustainable brand can generate more and wider sustainable fashion consumption through

normalised marketing practices, using theories of market performativity (Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2007). Also, previous research has pointed out that the fashion market as a whole is characterised by a silence on issues of sustainability (Solér et al., 2015) and we see how consumers tend to translate the sustainability efforts of a brand into more common fashion market terms such as style and quality. We therefore suggest that future research could further examine how this silence of the fashion market takes shape on a consumer-level.

Although Nudie as a case offers a unique setting for studying sustainable fashion branding, we suggest that the findings of our research are further studied in other contexts of the fashion market, and across a larger population, in order to provide our results with greater generalizability.

Managerial Implications

The recommendations presented here are directed towards companies who want their fashion brand to contribute to more sustainable fashion consumption, and thereby contribute to more sustainable consumption development.

- When reaching sustainability-concerned consumers, ensure that the core-values of the brand are emotionally appealing, since this gives these consumers a feeling of meaningfulness when consuming the brand. This can be achieved by having a clear and

holistic approach to issues of sustainability, by, for example, emphasizing how employees throughout the entire supply chain are treated as equals.

- To gain sustainability-concerned consumers' loyalty, ensure that the brand can be trusted and that it is worth to be emotionally invested in. For example, highlight that sustainable efforts are monitored and developed continuously.
- Fashion brands can use the power of the brand-controlled mediatic space to anticipate the sustainable behaviour of their consumers, and thereby help their consumers to act in more sustainable ways. This can, for example, be done by repairing clothes for free, and by encouraging and adopting more circular business models that partly build on re-using and recycling.
- By setting coordinates for sustainable consumer action, the mediatic space can allow a sustainable fashion brand to successfully compete on both traditional fashion market dimensions (e.g. style and quality), as well as contribute to more sustainable fashion consumption. Hence, fashion brands will contribute to more sustainable fashion consumption development by offering consumers a sustainable mediatic space while simultaneously focusing on more traditional fashion market dimensions in order to stay competitive.

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